

Final Fantasy VII

The Maiden Who Travels The Planet

Benny Matsuyama

On the Way to a Smile

Kazushige Nojima

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Preface

On a Way to a Smile is a collection of seven short stories written by Kazushige Nojima the scenario writer for the RPG Final Fantasy VII and its spin-off movie Advent Children. Each story takes a look at how the characters have been doing in the two year gap between the end of the original FFVII story and the beginning of the movie Advent Children.

The collection started off on the internet where the very first story Case of Denzel was initially split into four chapters, the first being published onto the official Japanese FFVII: Advent Children website on September 5th 2005, a week before the release of the long anticipated CG movie. Over the two weeks that followed up until the movie's release, the remaining chapters were also uploaded.

Later, a second story Case of Tifa followed but was not uploaded onto the web. Instead, it was published in print in a book entitled "Final Fantasy VII: Advent Children - Prologue" on the same release date as the movie. This story mainly focuses on the relationship between Cloud and Tifa.

Eventually, over two years later, a third story "Case of Barret" was released with the North American Limited Edition package of the movie on February 20th 2007. Picking up from the start of the the "Case of Tifa" story, we see how Barret is off to settle with his past and go in search of a new energy source for Planet, leading neatly into his entry in the movie itself.

On the very same day of Advent Children Complete's release on Blu-ray on April 16th 2009, a hardback copy of the On the Way to a Smile stories was also released containing revised copies of all three stories released so far as well as four new ones Case of Nanaki, Case of Yuffie, Case of Shinra and Case of Lifestream.

Not long after the first chapter of Case of Denzel appeared on the movie website, a complete guidebook to FFVII was also published by Studio Bentstuff named Final Fantasy VII: Ultimania Omega. Besides an in-depth guide to the game, it also contained a short story (not related to "On a Way to a Smile") named Hoshi wo Meguru Otome , "The Maiden who Travels the Planet".

This story written by Benny Matsuyama focuses on Aerith as she travels the Lifestream and is set about midway through the original FFVII game. Although not written by the original FFVII scenario writer Nojima himself, the work was under the supervision of Square-Enix. Before the release of FFVII:AC, Nomura had approached the staff of Bentstudio and said he wanted a new book made for FFVII so that fans can enjoy the game once again. As the original game is now obsolete (unless you check some old second hand stores), this was probably the best thing to do. Besides an in-depth walkthrough of the game, this 592 paged book contains huge amount of details about FFVII such as detailed analysis of the story and locations, original concept art along with an introduction to the recent Compilation of FFVII series.

The Maiden Who Travels The Planet

Prologue

Underwater...

Aerith was sinking. Lying stretched out with an expression as if she was asleep, she quietly sank into the cold and tranquil lake. The net of light scattered by the ripples of the surface danced upon her motionless body. It was as if it was trying to tie onto her.

Her kind face could no longer have those expressions that were full of energy. The feelings of joy and fun that would spread to everyone around her, the anger she had towards the weak, and the endless tears she had in sorrow... None of them were going to appear again.

Her body was going to be silenced for eternity.

However, that didn't mean the end of Aerith. She was watching. She wasn't watching through her beautiful green eyes but through her soul... She watched within a discarnate body filled with the energy of life, as it overlapped her physical body. She watched as the surface of the lake drew further away. She watched as the human shapes gazed at her from the hazy other world (the world where things were alive was another world to her). She watched Cloud's face which looked as if his heart was going to fall apart from the sadness of losing her, the anger and hate he had for her being taken from him.

"Don't blame yourself. There's nothing to worry about anymore. It's going to be all right even if Meteor falls. So don't let yourself be dragged down by those feelings. Just think about how you can be yourself."

She tried to say it but her lips wouldn't move. There was no magic that would let her thoughts reach Cloud from her spiritual body as Cloud disappeared fast into the distance. The light that twinkled on the lake's surface became weak and distant as she sank. She fell smoothly into the depths of the Cetra ruins, The Forgotten City. Aerith, the last remaining survivor of the Cetra had fulfilled her mission to protect the Planet. The final place where she was supposed to reach had no boundaries no matter where she went...

Chapter 1

Yes. No matter where she went.

She had reached the bottom of the lake. But even now Aerith continued to sink.

Her physical body after many years of losing its life was now held deep underwater, covered in plantation that was like powdered snow. It told of how she was now separated from her short twenty-two years of live for eternity. The vessel that had been separated from the soul was going to return slowly to the Great Earth in the pure water.

Aerith's consciousness was moving to the next lower level.

Nothing changed as she breathed lightly in the dust that floated around her. Aerith continued to sink through the heavy layer of precipitation. The only thing she could see was darkness... But it was a warm, tender lightless world where she didn't feel lonely.

She soon realized that it wasn't dust or mud that she was feeling. Her senses had adjusted so that she could feel the things around her. Her five senses were at a higher level that let her feel the true nature of the objects.

The world she could see now was not of darkness.

She was inside some faint green light that wrapped around her. At the same time, she recognised what she saw. Energy that was split into thousands no, millions of streams were flowing and circulating around every nook of the Planet. The flood of light that engulfed her was one of the streams that separated from the rest. The amount of Mako energy that the Planet had was far beyond human expectation and could not be presented by mere figures.

Aerith watched as if the Planet was beating with life. She watched the brilliance of the Lifestream that drifted around. She recognized the source of life of which everything returns to.

It was a place full of energy where countless souls were merged together along with their knowledge and experiences. Even their memories were unbound from them. But Aerith was "whole". She remained herself in the place where the consciousness of the dead flowed and swirled about, keeping the character she had when she was alive. She retained the consciousness of the Aerith Gainsborough she once was and she was now drifting with the Lifestream.

She didn't know that she would become this way.

As the last surviving Cetra, she had the role of maintaining the Great Earth's richness during her life's journey. Aerith talked to the Planet. Talked to the consciousness that was part of the Lifestream, that is. She was told that death was not the demise of life.

Most humans thought death meant that they would become nothing. Having their consciousness engulfed by darkness, never waking again, a nothingness that can't be comprehended ? they thought death meant to be totally annihilated. That's why humans feared death. They were afraid of losing their existence. Even if they themselves realized that they were a race that had a short lifespan, there were many that wanted to avoid it. Even those that had reached an old age after a fulfilling life.

Aerith knew that death didn't mean to be annihilated. She even knew about the world that a Cetra would reach in the end once they had fulfilled the mission they had on the Planet. That was why she accepted death fearlessly even when she had a strong feeling that it was going to happen to her soon one day. She fulfilled her mission the way she should have without any fear. Her heart was at peace even though the humans, who lost their power to speak with Planet long ago, said that she died an unnatural death. She had no regrets such as wishing she was still alive or because she avoided her mission.

Even so, she was sad. Her heart was in pain.

All the companions that she had journeyed with, the people she grew close to for the first time, the mother that raised her and looked after her for fifteen years Elmyra, the people that she didn't know too well, the people who she might have met in the future, people she hadn't met yet... It was a fact that she could no longer be with the "living".

Aerith also knew that the sadness was also with those who she left behind. They didn't know that she still existed as her soul. They didn't need to know. Even if she wished they did, the sadness wouldn't be healed if they knew the truth. The thought of everyone's sorrow made the pain in her even worst.

Aerith was in even greater pain when she thought about Cloud.

She also had good feelings towards him. At first, she thought he somehow had some similarities to her first love. Even so, his looks, voice and personality weren't similar and he also made her think of him as a mysterious person... But it soon didn't matter. She loved him much more than her first love. Cloud was her hero and he couldn't get away from danger. She saw him as someone full of confidence, cool and had the impression that he would disappear in an instant if she took her eyes off him. She wanted to stay by his side forever if she could. She really wanted to.

When she left her companions and headed for the Forgotten City, Cloud's heart was like an egg that was on the verge of cracking open. It wasn't going to crack open like the way an egg hatched but, as if only the yolk was going to seep out of it. It was as if his mind was going to shatter. She wanted to comfort him. If she wasn't the last survivor of the Cetra she probably would have done so without a doubt.

However...

The pale black and silver white man, who was once a hero, had taken over the will of the "disaster that fell from the skies", Jenova and was in a state of madness. He was going to summon the most powerful destructive magic, Meteor using the Black Materia. Having been passed the mission from her Cetra ancestors, she had no choice but to carry it out. Sooner or later Sephiroth was going to summon the giant meteor that will surely inflict an enormous amount of damage to the Planet. It would cause a wound that could destroy the very Planet itself. Without doubt, the Planet would then concentrate a large amount of the Lifestream to heal itself. It was Sephiroth's intention to make all that power his. After that, he would become one with the Planet and become something equal to a God. He would probably then burn all the humans he hates to death. The future of the Planet and the cycle of all life would all end as she knew it.

Aerith could sense from the whispers of the Planet that something could be done to prevent the worst from happening. She also knew that it was something that only she, the last remaining Cetra, could do. She could only obtain the indepth knowledge from the Forgotten City. But heading there also meant that she would become the greatest obstruction to Sephiroth's plans.

That was where Aerith hesitated. Will she let all humans die or was she going to avoid such a disaster in exchange for her life... But she never did think about it and was already prepared. When she did hesitate about leaving Cloud in sorrow, she would think about how it wouldn't save her companions or the people of the world. She had already made up her mind. There was no other choice. It was all for Cloud too.

And so alone, she set off to the altar that was in the Forgotten City to find out what she had to do. Indeed, the key was the last of the Cetra. It was the White Materia that was passed down by the Cetra... As if it held the fate of the last remaining Cetra, this tool could summon the ultimate White Magic Holy needed to counter Meteor. It was the Materia that was entrusted to Aerith by her mother, Ifalna. She had never used it before and had always hid it inside her ribbon, never leaving her. She had the White Materia. Finding out that she had it on her, she prayed with all her heart. Through the Materia, she talked to the Planet trying to summon the White Magic Holy that would destroy Meteor.

Even the slightest hesitance may have meant that her prayers wouldn't reach the Planet. But she done it. The requirements were fulfilled before Sephiroth struck her, after realizing her intentions. She accepted the death that she had felt long ago as the sword pierced through her. She looked at peace.

But a cry came through to her.

It wasn't the sound of her cry. If it was then she would have felt the blood gushing up through her throat and the fury that forced its way out from the depths of her soul - It was the sound of Cloud's heart cracking. It was the cry of his heart that could never be healed of the grief he had towards Aerith's death, the blame towards himself and the hatred he had for Sephiroth.

She was surprised at the great sorrow he had for her. She was a little happy that he thought so much of her but she also felt the pain that was many times greater. There was nothing she could do about Cloud's suffering and the pain ached in her heart.

The pain continued even though she was in the Lifestream.

Although she had lost her body, she recognized the pain by creating an image of herself in her mind. Aerith looked down as she put her hands to her throbbing heart... Before long, she realized something.

All around her was the existence of countless number of consciousnesses. There were lots of voices and an abundance of memories. Everyone around her was something that she never felt when she was in the church in Midgar. Like her, the souls of those that had died had returned to the Planet and were all here.

Even so, she couldn't see anyone nearby that had a form like she did. From what she saw, only she retained the image of her past self in the mist of the flowing energy full of different consciousnesses.

"I wonder... If it's because I'm a Cetra?"

The words came out as a murmur from Aerith. Here, words and thoughts were the same. As an entity of consciousness, her thoughts and feelings were only expressed as waves she emitted. Similarly, the huge number of memories in the Lifestream also reached her as all sorts of waves. All around her she heard whispers of how if you didn't retain a strong ego, you would soon no longer know which consciousness belonged to you.

"I was hoping my words would reach Cloud..."

She puffed out her cheeks a little looking displeased. She was not affected by the confusion of the various consciousnesses that existed in the sea of memories and knowledge inside the Mako energy. Because of her experience of hearing the voice of the Planet when she was young, she had built up a lot of patience. Aerith was raised so that she could retain her own consciousness and not lose her personality.

But she understood returning to the Planet depended on how she was separated as a "whole". Even when water droplets fall into a river, they blend in and can't be seen anymore. No matter how used to things she was, she thought it was odd how her soul could still remain unique in the vast sea of conscious energy.

"But the Lifestream must be a Cetra too, just like me. My mother died and she was also a Cetra... It's been fifteen years. In that time, maybe I'll disappear and become one with the Planet too."

Slanting her head to the side, she thought more about it.

"Will I be able to talk to Cloud somewhere? So that I can tell him I'm fine... It's kind of odd saying I'm fine but maybe I can be "clearer" about myself here."

Maybe she could be clear about her affections towards Cloud here. Then maybe they would be seen as family or lovers... During her lifetime in Midgar, she felt many souls of the ones that tried to confess their love. Those that still had those feelings or had those feelings left behind them could strongly retain their consciousness as a "whole".

"But does that mean I'll disappear as soon as I meet Cloud? I wonder if that's what's happening or... Is there still something else I've still to do...?"

At that instant, Aerith felt something like an electric shock surge through her. She clenched one of her hands into a fist and hit the palm of her other hand, as it struck her. It was only her imagining her phantom self hitting her hands together but, she could clearly heard the "bang".

"It makes sense. There's a meaning to all this. There must be some reason why I haven't merged with the Lifestream yet and why I am still here as the way I am. Like how I was the only one in the world that could summon Holy from the Planet... There might still be something left that I have to do."

Just when the thought crossed her mind, she felt a little commotion from the Planet. It wasn't from the individual consciousnesses but the Planet as a whole as if to confirm what she was thinking.

"...I see. I wonder what it is."

Her question was answered with silence. The Planet too had yet to know what it was.

She smiled like the flowers that she used to sell in the slums. In the gentle fluorescent light, the smile that was loved by everyone bloomed sweetly.

"It's OK. There are still people I don't want to be separated from. I can't sleep yet. Until that time comes, I'll wander around here for a while. I'll spend my time here in the Planet... In our Promised Land..."

Wishing she could send away her thoughts, Aerith looked up at the sky... She looked beyond the shell of the Planet above her head. The particles of Mako that floated and shot around looked like the night sky to her.

She looked up into the sky like the time she sat beside Cloud around the kindling fire in Cosmo Canyon.

Chapter 2

In the world of Mako - Aerith knew that the concept of time and distance here was different from the surface. Time seemed to flow by slowly and if she wanted, it could also flash by in the blink of an eye. The passing of time in the Mako held no meaning in the first place. The Planet's history was made up of accumulated memories, all merged together and were always by her side. There were memories of the present and also of the past. There was no way that Aerith could have seen all of them but, the events that were inscribed into the memories had surpassed time and were all linked together as a whole. It hinted that time was moving into the future in the world of the living. As those new memories from the surface merge together with the Planet, new life would be brought into the world as the energy from the Planet is delivered. That cycle told her how time flowed by one period after another.

Everything was linked to the insides of the Planet through the Lifestream. Even on the surface, in the most distant places, the flow of conscious energy would be delivered. On the other hand, there were places that were so close but yet, the energy couldn't reach. There were areas that existed where even the winding flow of Mako can't get to. Aerith thought it must be the fault of all the Mako reactors. The energy was never meant to be used that way and if they continued to draw it out by force, it will eventually upset the balance. If the Planet could help humans live a easier life then it probably would have done so. But Shinra Inc. was going too far. If their greed was to continue, then the equilibrium of the Planet's life would collapse... Aerith remembered how flowers would only bloom in the church and how the city of Midgar was drenched in Mako.

"And that's why the people of Shinra wanted to know where the Promised Land was. A land abundant in Mako energy, where only the Cetra knew how to get to... But that place was here. It's the place where everyone would reach in the end as they returned to the Planet. The land where the Shinra could obtain all the energy they wanted didn't really exist, did it? It was all just a mistake."

She murmured as she let herself drift with the Lifestream. She gazed at the moving Mako world that had very little change.

"The Promised Land that Sephiroth had in mind was much different. He was trying to create it all by force. He was going to wound the Planet on purpose so that almost all the energy would gather in one place. So that he himself could control it all alone. That was the Promised Land Sephiroth wanted..."

Aerith shivered as she imagined what the Planet would be like if that happened.

"I wonder if Cloud and the others are all right... I hope Tifa and Cloud aren't pushing themselves too hard going after Sephiroth..."

"...Cloud? Tifa? Barret?"

The waves of one of the consciousnesses right beside her expanded as it reacted to her words. She rushed to leave the current she was in because it was the first time she came across another firm conscious other than herself. When she reached the place where it came from, a shadow rose from the Mako. It wasn't as clear an image as Aerith but she knew it was the remnant of a female.

"You know them? Who are you?"

"I'm..."

It seemed her memory was muddled. It was probably because most of her soul had already merged with the Mako. But her core hadn't decomposed and was still drifting there as a whole.

"Oh, I have to introduce myself first. I'm Aerith. Could you be one of Avalanche's members?"

"Avalanche... Yes, yes that's right."

The memories she had was being reconstructed from the Sea of Mako. Realizing who she was once again, her transparent figure rapidly returned to the form she had when she was on the surface. As if Aerith had some influence on her, the colours also came back to her.

Compared to Aerith, she still looked faint but she looked human now and the clothing she had worn also reappeared. Her hair was tied back in a pony tail so that it wouldn't get in her way and her clothing looked like that of a soldier. She too had arrived here too early and she was about Aerith's age.

"How stupid of me to forget... I'm Jessie from Avalanche. Hey... Are you Miss Aerith?"

"You can just call me Aerith."

"Thanks, Aerith. You know Cloud, Tifa and Barret don't you? How is everyone? Are they still fighting Shinra? Oh..."

Jessie shook her head as if to apologize. "You must be like me now that you've come here."

"Don't worry. I'm sure they're all fine."

She changed her thoughts as she tried not to think about Cloud. Here, she couldn't lie so she had to not think about it.

"There was something that bothered Barret for a long time. So you died that time... You were one of the people who were trying to protect the Sector Seven pillar as a member of Avalanche back then. I've only met Mr. Wedge so far..."

"Wedge?!"

Jessie's eyes widened. "Yes, Biggs too! All three of us arrived here together but lost sight of each other... Yes, until just a moment ago, I couldn't remember anything. Until I met you, Aerith."

As if guided by Jessie's memories, two more figures appeared. The forms of a man with a thin beard and another that was stout bodied rapidly formed together.

"Wo- Woah."

The bearded man, Biggs stared at the palms of his hands. "I'm still me. I thought I was going to disappear."

"I'm so happy I can see the two of you again. And... You're the one that nursed me that time, Miss... Aerith? Did you die too?"

Instead of giving the obvious answer, Aerith nodded with a smile.

"It's been a long time, Mr. Wedge. It's nice to meet you, Mr. Biggs. After that time, I became a member of Avalanche too so that kind of makes me a junior to all of you, doesn't it?"

"Hmmm, that kind of shows how dangerously high the death rate for Avalanche is, doesn't it?"

"Is Barret still the swagger of a guy he is? Well, he is quite a likeable guy."

"Junior? I'm too happy! It's always been my aspirations to be a senior!"

After that, Aerith told all three of them what Avalanche was fighting for now. It wasn't just Shinra Inc. anymore but also with the much more dangerous existence known as Sephiroth... They had left Midgar to stop his evil ambitions of making the Planet his.

"So Cloud's become one of us now... I'm so happy."

"Heheh... He's a cold guy but I knew he would join us."

"Does that mean Mr. Cloud is a junior too? He's going to be tough to deal with."

There was a lot of commotion among the phantoms of the Avalanche members as they laughed and smiled. But in the end, Aerith noticed their sadness. Some deep remorse bound the three of them together.

"What's wrong? All of you look like you're in pain..."

"Well... It's because of the way our lives ended. We can't redeem ourselves now."

Jessie looked down sadly as Biggs continued.

"We fought with Avalanche because we had the same sympathy and thoughts. We thought that it couldn't be helped to have a few sacrifices if we were to stop Shinra. But we were completely wrong. We understood that when we came here... You know about it too don't you, Aerith? About the explosion of the First Sector Mako Reactor."

"Yes... The First Sector was a little distance opposite from the slums I lived in. We weren't told much about it but, we heard quite a lot of people died..."

"At that time, we only thought that they were getting what they deserved if they got caught in the explosion, since they were all people that worked for Shinra on the upper plate. But in the end, all of us ended up here whether we worked for Shinra or not. So we've been thinking about why we did it. All we were really doing was raising our voices and shouting out our opinions like drunks. We were just over-exaggerating about how we were saving the Planet..."

"...I too didn't think about it that much. I didn't want a minor role in life. I wanted to shine. So I thought by joining Avalanche, I could be a hero who could save the future of the Planet and that's all I thought about... I never imagined that it would get others involved. It's just so foolish..."

Wedge lowered his head in embarrassment.

"The whole plan was actually drafted by the old Avalanche which no longer exists anymore."

Jessie went on regretfully, "There were many more members in Avalanche and they were a much more extreme group. We only inherited the name of their resistance group, "Avalanche" from those people who are no longer around. But details of how to make a bomb and the plans of where to set it were left on a computer. Since I was good with machinery and bombs, I decided to try it... But I'm sure that plan was never intended to be used to just disable Mako Reactor One. The people that came up with the horrific plan hated the Shinra. They hated them so much that they would go as far as sacrificing lots of people... I should have realized it. Barret knew nothing about it."

"That's why we..."

Dejected, Biggs looked up to the sky. "Why we wanted to merge with the Planet right away. We wanted to disappear. I remember now. But it was impossible. Barret's fighting to save even more people. We can't do any of that to atone for our sins. We can only be here and continue to suffer."

"In the end, it was all too easy for us to forget who we were because we wanted to be at ease here."

"It just didn't work. When we had the chance, we would revert the way we were. Even then we're not as clear an entity as you are. It's somewhat like a curse."

They all laughed with self-derision until it all ended with a sigh.

"But... But."

Aerith tried to comfort them with her words.

"Everyone's been wrong before. Even I have been selling flowers thoughtlessly for money..."

"Hmmm... I really can't compare my stupidity to that."

"But all of you have been suffering all this time..."

"Thanks, Aerith. But as a senior in Avalanche, it's such a shameful story. All that big talk feels like it's backfired on me."

"I really can't forgive myself. That's why this is the only way I can be here."

"Someday, the day may come when we can return to the Planet but right now, we can't. Now go, Aerith. You must be in that form because there's a role you must fulfil. We're worried our sinful memories will transfer over to you."

"No..."

"And then we'll suffer even more. So go, please?"

Jessie was lying. Aerith knew that she was trying to get far away from her so that she wouldn't have to share their pain.

The phantoms of the three people were fading. Aerith bit her bottom lip as tears welled up.

"Please let me say this at least. That day, many people managed to escape because the three of you worked hard to protect the Seventh Sector pillar. I'm sure the number of people that managed to escape was more than the people who died in Sector One... And I also managed to save Marlene because of that. Maybe that isn't enough to free you all... I know that people's lives aren't something you add and subtract with but... Please remember that it's not only sins that you carry."

"...Thank you. Thank you, Aerith."

The voice of someone that no longer knew who they were echoed and they were taken back to the prison that they had decided for themselves. They sank into the sea of memories.

Aerith wiped away her tears and started walking again. She prayed that the souls of the Avalance members would be able to rest in peace soon.

Chapter 3

Aerith didn't know how much time had passed on the surface. Has it been days since she met Jessie and the others, or was it just moments ago?

She wondered if their pain could be healed by themselves. As she asked herself that question, she continued to travel the underground world. She drifted in the Lifestream in the Planet's Sea of Mako.

When she saw the next phantom, she held her breathe.

The point of a steel tube rose from a swirl of faint light. When she realized that it was an artificial hand linked to an arm, she thought that Barret too had left the world of the living. Aerith was sure that she had escaped Midgar with her mother Elmyra. Her heart tightened as she thought of Marlene.

"Marlene!"

Aerith's waves of thoughts expanded and they reached the phantom. The full figure of a man with a gun attached to his arm rose from the Mako. The weapon emitted a cold glow from it but it was from his left arm. The gun was fearsome as if it was physically real and the man's faint figure was stained in red.

"You're..."

"A woman... Where have I seen you before? You even know Marlene's name."

"We've met haven't we, Mr. Dyne."

He was Dyne, the governor of Corel Prison, an exile land full of sand and scrap. He was also once Barret's close friend. After what Shinra done to his hometown, his despair made him irrational and falling into a state of madness, he slaughtered many people.

"Ah, I see. You're the girl that was with Barret. Then that means you must be dead too. What a pity."

Not believing what he saw, Dyne laughed. "I can't believe that after killing so many people, I would end up in the same place as an innocent girl like you after I die. This world truly is absurd. What a boring thing this Planet is. Everything really should be destroyed."

"Is that what you still say?"

Aerith's figure stood in contrast to Dyne's. She raised her slender eyebrows.

"Even though you really care about Marlene."

"Who cares. Girl, you-"

"I'm Aerith."

"Heheh... You're a strong one. My left arm is all that remains of my past life. Fine. I'll call you by that name. You heard what I said that time, didn't you? The words I had with Barret. When I was trying to destroy everything, I was going to take Marlene with me here too."

"You're lying. You were just bluffing."

"I can't lie here, right? I was seriously thinking about it at that time to say the least. Then I challenged Barret to a deathmatch and became enlightened."

For a while, Dyne laughed out loudly because of how he had to pay it all back with his right arm and his body. "And I thank Barret for that. After all, I've been swallowed up by the very "world" I wanted to destroy. I didn't want to end my own life. So instead, I wasted all those useless people that were scared in the exile land to free them and make them happy."

"...."

"Do you see now, Aerith? Before you is the helpless, broken apparition of a man that even the Planet won't accept. The Planet that my wife Eleanor has already returned to. And I've already entrusted Marlene to Barret. Whatever happens to the Planet afterwards has nothing to do with me."

"...."

Looking at how silent Aerith had become, he laughed again at how he managed to make the cheeky little girl back down. Then he realized that it wasn't funny and noticed that Aerith never took her eyes off him. He realized he didn't manage to make her back down at all. There was a glow in the gaze of her jade green eyes that made the madness in him back down.

"...You have no guts."

"What did you say?"

"I'll say it again. You have no guts. You don't have the courage to go back and start over. You've only been tumbling round and round where it's the easiest going for you."

As Aerith stared at Dyne, she took a step forward. Under the pressure of her powerful eyes, he hid his face with his gun and unconsciously stepped back.

"Barret also exchanged one of his arms for a gun. He said he would destroy the Shinra with his feelings of regret and hatred. That's why he too had his hands stained with the blood of many people. But he didn't fall apart. Besides taking on the burden, he's really trying to save the Planet this time. He's trying to protect the world that Marlene will live in without running away."

"...Being able to change like that is that simpleton's strength."

"Is Barret special and you're different?"

Dyne moaned at her question. He was waking from his intoxication. It was the thing he hated most of all... He had been intoxicated all this time so that he could forget about himself but, Aerith's direct gaze scattered the mist of madness around him. The armour around his heart shattered.

"I reek of the blood of those I killed with my bare hands right to the very depths of my soul. Can't you see? They've all been clinging onto me all this time. If I go back at all, I'll be dragged back by them."

The red mist that clouded around Dyne's figure suddenly changed into a sticky substance. In the four years since Corel Town got destroyed, he didn't care about how much hatred built up with his metal left arm and because of that, it was now drenched in blood. It was the lock of sin that made Dyne give up.

"Just how am I supposed to start over? All I could do was stay intoxicated. All I could do was hate everything and drown myself in madness! Was I wrong?"

"You're wrong."

She didn't use coercion but instead, she approached Dyne gently. Extending out her hands, she touched the layer of blood that covered him.

"The blood bound to you is something that your feeling of guilt is making. The lives you took away returned to the Lifestream long ago. You can't forget about what you've done but, there is no reason why you can't start over. I guarantee it."

"...."

From the point where Aerith touched, the blood dried up into tissue, detached from Dyne and wore away. Then, Dyne's left arm started to fade away.

"...Will I be able to join the Planet someday?"

"I'm sure you will."

"When Marlene's reaches the end of her lifespan and comes here, will I be able to come out and greet her as part of the Planet...?"

Aerith looked up at Dyne's face and nodded smiling.

"Because you're starting all over again. It will be all right."

Dyne's faint face could now be seen clearly. It was different from the person she met in Corel Prison. It was the true face of someone who sincerely loved his family and hometown more than anyone else.

He could not return to the peaceful times when he would sweat in the mines of Corel before the tragedy happened. Both Dyne and Aerith knew that. Even so, the hearts of people can be rebuilt. They can stand up and face those sad painful memories. If they couldn't then the absurdity would truly spread throughout the world.

"What can I do in this Sea of Mako? No, it's what I must do... I'll continue thinking about the ones I killed for a while. Until the day I can merge with the Planet."

"Yes, I think that's a good idea."

"Aerith, I'm sorry how I treated you. I'm glad I met you."

"You didn't treat me bad at all."

"You really are a stout-hearted one."

For the first time, Dyne smiled from the bottom of his heart and quietly, his image faded away. The tip of the gun on his left arm disappeared.

"After dying and experiencing all that, I can finally stop turning my back against Barret and Marlene. Let me say my thanks..."

Just before he sunk into the Lifestream, Aerith saw it.

She saw Mako particles make their way towards Dyne and huddle together on him as if they had a will of their own. Dyne's faint, surprised voice could be heard.

"Eleanor?"

And so, Aerith went back to her journey.

Chapter 4

Until now, Aerith thought the Lifestream had no scent. The way her soul perceived was sort of done with five spiritual senses - Hearing was how she felt the remnants around her and, sight was how faint or weak energy was perceived as images. It was true she could touch things too but in this world, you could say it was just an extension of sight.

There was no need to eat so clearly, there was no taste. She just knew when her sense of smell was working, even when there really was no scent. Even the blood that was on Dyne was only symbolical so there was no smell in this world. Aerith thought briefly about how sad it was that even flowers wouldn't have had any scent here.

She came across another soul.

It had the smell of something rotting. It was as if it wasn't completely decomposed but yet, released a strong unpleasant smell as if it was starting to rot away. It was the kind of stench that made you frown.

It was the only spot that the Mako was weak. It was an area where the Mako was distorted as it flowed past it, unable to reform because of getting stuck there. An old man was there.

"Well well, that's a face I remember."

Just like his past life, the man wore an expensive suit that was tailored to fit his character. At a glance, Aerith could feel that he too retained an image that was almost as solid as hers. But the only things clear were his expensive clothing, shoes and ornaments. His face was very faint. He had chubby cheeks, a moustache that had been tidied up and he talked with a shaky voice just like that of an old man.

"Your name was... Doesn't matter. You're the girl that has the Ancients' blood flowing inside you. Am I right?"

"It does matter."

But Aerith had no intentions of telling him her name. The person before her was the former leader of Shinra Inc, President Shinra, the absolute authority of a corporation that surpassed and dictated the nations.

"I see, so you fell down here too. You're dead like me? In the same place?"

The President continued unable to hold back the joy in his tone. "We're reunited in the end as if we've been sent to another life together. The Planet really knows how to make arrangements. I really feel like I've gained something out of this."

"Gained something?"

It meant the same thing that Dyne said at first. But in Dyne's case it was mostly only cynicism towards himself. The old man was completely different. Aerith sensed from his thoughts that President Shinra was seriously thinking the way he was.

"You don't understand do you? The Ancients are more stupid than I thought. Well, that's why you refused cooperating with Shinra Inc so much. My my, what a pitiful and miserable life."

"How rude. I don't remember being miserable at all."

The old man let out a chuckle at how angry Aerith was as if he just made a fool of her.

"Not knowing one's gains and losses is happiness in a way. But try to think about it. After escaping from Hojo's facility together with your mother, your life has been in the garbage dump slums for fifteen years. When the Turks found you, you could have lived a luxurious life on the upper levels of the plate if you came back to us. At that time, Hojo was dreaming of some other experiment and so I gave the instructions to keep an eye on you. But if you took the initiative of deciding to cooperate with us then I would have welcomed you and given you special treatment. So what do you think now? After living in the slums, crawling around like a bug, getting involved with Avalanche and dying without knowing what luxury is, can you still say that your life wasn't miserable?"

"...That's really a conceited point of view, weighing how fortunate and how unfortunate others are."

"I'm a self-righteous person. If you look at it fairly I'm sure there is no human being that gained more than me."

A sneer came to his face and the President continued to remonstrate.

"With my wits, I managed to expand Shinra, a company that only started off by producing weapons, to the size it is today. Discovering the possibilities of the uses of Mako energy and developing the Mako reactors that drew the energy out was the turning point. The Mako provided power to the public, raising their standards of life and also made them my slaves. After getting their hands on such a life of convenience, it became something like an addictive drug to the ignorant people and took over their minds. And we, the Shinra that controlled that energy expanded the scale of our company in an instant. With some simple advertising we could gather all the top talents we wanted. Dreams of planning the construction of a Metropolis, a space exploration programme... They would all do it all for me. I could use them. They served me like servants to a king. The public couldn't see what was happening. Even the media that drove the public could only follow Shinra's command as we monopolized the Mako energy. Shinra had taken over the country and I had ascended on a throne in which no one would ever criticize me no matter what I done. I could trample all the fools, have unlimited wealth and dictate as the ruler of the world! I wouldn't mind living a longer life but, never mind that. So, what do you think Ancient? Do you understand which of our lives gained more now? Or rather, how miserable your life was?"

"Hmmm... Maybe?"

What Aerith did understand was that the happiness the old man before her had was far different from what she was thinking. The happiness he spoke of was all relative things. He wanted to be in a position where he had more gain than anyone else. As a result of that, the Shinra Inc's thoughts of absorbing the Planet's life remained with him even now. He was like a helpless soul that couldn't feel happiness anymore than those that were less fortunate than him could.

She had no intentions of pointing that out. If that was the end point of his satisfaction then it couldn't be helped. He couldn't take his hands off the wealth he had scraped together and like rubbish, it was rotting away releasing a stench. As if stuck in a drain - the ugly old man didn't know that he wasn't freed from the misery of his ambitions even after dying.

Always seeking for someone to compare himself with, the President was dissatisfied seeing how responseless Aerith was.

"It was so foolish of me to compare myself to such a stupid human. I'm not in a good mood. I'm pretty annoyed. Leave quickly if you don't understand what I'm saying."

"I'll do that."

This old man couldn't be saved. On the throne where his desires rotted drifting away, he was going to remain there until he reached the end of his long years and his ego disappeared.

Just when Aerith turned her back towards President Shinra and was about to return on her journey...

Something strange happened. A strange wave separate from the Lifestream, rushed into the Sea of Mako shaking it violently. It was an ominous wave like a great pulse.

"What is this?"

Hearing the screams of the old man, Aerith spun round.

All she could see was the figure of the President being drawn away into the distance. Gradually, the speed picked up extremely fast.

He wasn't on a current. The old man was dragged away as if he was caught by gravity, picking up speed as he dropped. He was heading somewhere in the Sea of Mako, drawn away.

Leaving a long trailing scream of terror behind, President Shinra disappeared.

Aerith felt the pulse again. She knew what it was clearly this time. It was the same wave of the one who ended her life in the Forgotten City.

That man was lurking somewhere in the Lifestream.

"Sephiroth..."

The silver haired apostate angel smiled thinly as if taking away the wicked souls to hell. This time Aerith knew the danger wasn't over.

The Holy she had summoned was being suppressed just as it was about to work. The Planet's scar from long ago... Sephiroth was in the Northern Crater that was Jenova's "Promised Land", waiting for the moment when he would be reborn as his original self.

The Ultimate Destructive Black Magic Meteor was on the move. The devil's hammer that would descend from the distant heavens to smash the Planet was summoned.

Chapter 5

Cloud was falling into the Lifestream. He wasn't falling into it as the dead or as a soul. He was falling into the Sea of Mako alive, in his living body. He was going to pass out.

In the Northern Crater, he found out that his memories were false. He was just a doll who the mad scientist Hojo had transplanted Jenova cells into. A being made to merge with Sephiroth for his resurrection. But as a failure, he was an inferior clone that wasn't even given a number.

He was thrown out like trash in Midgar. Then he met Tifa. He met his "real" childhood friend, Tifa Lockhart. That time, with Jenova's power to duplicate memories, the memories that Tifa had of Cloud was instantly transferred to him. The missing parts were then filled with his own memories of being in Soldier to complete it all. That was how the patched up personality of Cloud Strife, based on the young man that existed in Tifa's conscious, was born. While that "Cloud" held many contradictions about himself, he built up a fictitious character so that he wouldn't be doubtful of himself. That character was himself.

However, the disguise was going to be stripped away.

It started to fail a long time ago. After coming into contact with many Sephiroth clones, the resonance inside Cloud's conscious uncovered many suspicions. Before long after Aerith's death, the dam he had built holding back his suspicions started to overflow. Using the anger he had towards Sephiroth and the goals he had in mind he somehow managed to suppress it but, that only lasted until he met the original Sephiroth.

In the Northern Crater before Sephiroth who had Jenova at his core, Cloud's brittle character fell apart. Right after that, even his conscious came under his control as Cloud himself handed over the key to summoning Meteor, the Black Materia.

Cooperating with the one enemy he hated and being made to turn against his own goal of stopping Meteor, Cloud's character completely collapsed. His false mosaic ego shattered into pieces and in his empty conscious, only the despair of how he was no one but a failed Sephiroth clone remained.

And so...

Now no longer of use, Cloud crossed into the Planet through the Northern Crater, - abandoned into the Lifestream.

With his ego lost, what was going to happen if the highly concentrated Mako, containing the aggregated memories of the Planet, entered his system?

He was equal to a dried up sponge soaking up a liquid. His blank conscious and vast nonsensical memories were all going to be buried away. This state in which someone was expected to be extremely intoxicated was commonly referred to as "Mako poisoning."

With his mind being infringed beyond the point of recovery, Cloud floated within the Lifestream. Before long, his living body that shouldn't be in the Lifestream, was ejected through one of the natural Mako energy geysers into the nearby coasts of Mideel. With his character lost, he was now a crippled person in confusion.

* * *

Aerith knew one of the reasons why there was a place that the Lifestream couldn't approach. That place had a barrier that Sephiroth setup. The disaster that would fall from the skies, Jenova, brought with it a meteor that created an enormous scar on the Planet due to its impact. Now that place, where lots of energy was gathering to heal the scar, had become a cradle for Sephiroth's resurrection. The flows of life all around were drawn into the unnatural swirl, preventing a discarnate entity like Aerith from approaching it.

Aerith was eager to talk to Cloud as his living body flowed out of the swirl. She had been trying to while his body was being carried to Mideel. But with his mind shattered and filled with despair, Cloud couldn't hear Aerith's voice. No matter how much she cried out, her voice wouldn't reach Cloud just like the time when they were separated in the Forgotten City.

Helplessly watching Cloud's body return to the surface, Aerith stood in the sea of Mako in dismay.

* * *

"How can I save Cloud? How can I stop Meteor? I didn't think that Holy would be held back. At this rate, the Planet's going to end up the way Sephiroth wants it... What can I do? Tell me, Cloud..."

Aerith cried as she thought about the shattered Cloud that even her prayers wouldn't reach. His wrecked character could no longer be fixed. If he wasn't Cloud in the first place then, who was he? Knowing him only as a former member of Soldier, there was no way she could guess. She embraced the feeling of helplessness that she couldn't put into words.

"Cloud... I miss you. I miss the real you..."

Her whispers and thoughts became expanded into waves and spread out in the Mako.

Her memories of being with Cloud came to mind again. Her impression was that even though he wasn't very social, there was some cheerfulness about him.

"I felt something odd about him but, was everything really just made up and part of his false character? Cloud wasn't real at all? ...No, that can't be true. There were things that only Cloud could think of. Things that he done because he was Cloud. He was never an empty vessel to begin with!"

But she couldn't figure out the truth. Her thoughts just went in circles. Aerith delved into her memories again. Memories that showed Cloud's individuality. The way he walked. She remembered all his actions one by one...

Most of those thoughts merged into the Sea of Mako and awakened a character. The character recognized the image she recalled and "he" woke up.

"Aerith... Is that you?"

At first, Aerith couldn't remember whose voice it was because it was so sudden. Panicking, she turned round and saw a nostalgic face she hadn't seen for five years. He was her light taste of first love. He was also now a very dear friend who she hadn't seen ever since she heard nothing from him.

He had the same character she saw in Cloud. Zack who had blue eyes that proofed he was in Soldier appeared before her. He had an image inferior to Aerith's solid image.

"Zack! Does that mean you're dead too?"

Although usually Aerith wasn't the one to ask obvious questions, it was the first thought that came to mind and she spoke out as if it was a reflex. Besides that, it was odd that such a seasoned and highly skilled Soldier would die. Even though she didn't know his whereabouts, she was sure that he was safe and living peacefully somewhere... She blamed herself for blindly believing in such a thing. This cruel reality was a strong shock for her.

""You too?" ... Does that mean you're dead too, Aerith? Well, I was going to say the same thing anyway and then... How should I put this... Give my condolences?"

"You haven't changed one bit."

No matter what happened, Zack never lost his cheerfulness. As if saved by his cheerful personality, Aerith smiled weakly. Even though she knew that he was a member of Shinra's Soldier, it was that part of him that was charming to her.

"Lots of things happened. All terrible things. It all started when I was dispatched on a mission to the rural Nibelheim."

"Nibelheim?"

"Yes, do you know about it? That time, I was together with a very famous Soldier that was known as a hero. He suddenly went mad..."

"You mean Sephiroth, don't you?"

Aerith swallowed her breathe. She believed that there was a meaning to why Zack appeared. She had a feeling it was linked to something.

"That bastard really is famous. Or was it because you read about the huge Nibelheim massacre in the news?"

"You were there at the time, Zack? Then what about Cloud...?"

"Woah woah, hold it there! How do you know about Cloud too? And is he safe?!"

"You know Cloud too. There really is a Cloud, isn't there?"

The two of them quickly exchanged what they knew. And then Aerith knew. She knew that Cloud wasn't just a cloned doll made for Sephiroth. She also knew why she saw Zack in him now.

Zack also knew. He knew the current state his close friend was in now. The friend who got involved together with him in the incident as they got hunted down by the Shinra. He also knew that Sephiroth was going to be resurrected and become a threat not just to Nibelheim but to everything on the Planet.

"Zack... What should I do so that Cloud will know about the truth about himself? Can you tell him that he's real?"

"It's impossible for us to do it. The only one who can do it is that girl that was there with us in Nibelheim, Tifa. If the memories she has could draw out the memories in Cloud then maybe..."

"That's going to be hard. But I won't give up. I'm sure there's a chance."

Aerith's face brightened now that there was hope. "When that's done, Cloud and the others will be able to do something about Sephiroth. They'll be able to remove the obstacle that's suppressing Holy.

Before long, the chance came.

* * *

Under pressure with the Meteor drawing near, the Planet released its massive biological destructive Weapons and the flow of the Lifestream was disrupted by their activities. The amount of energy that surged up onto the surface was never seen before. Gushing out into Mideel, Cloud who was peacefully resting there with Tifa nursing him by his side, both of them get swallowed up into the Lifestream.

Both of them were engulfed by Mako as they fell into the Planet. For Cloud, it was the second time but for Tifa, it was her first experience.

Aerith risked everything she had in this golden opportunity.

She desperately tried to talk to Tifa who was about to get intoxicated by the highly concentrated Mako. Guiding her conscious, Aerith took her into Cloud's closed heart.

In truth, Aerith really wanted to do it herself. But she couldn't carry out the task. That's why she entrusted Tifa with it. She entrusted Tifa with all the feelings she had for Cloud in her heart. She entrusted them to the one that was going to "live" together with Cloud...

"You did it, Tifa. Thank you... I'm a little jealous of you but, do take care of Cloud and the upper world."

Tifa embraced Cloud tightly as he returned to his senses. Aerith watched as both of them returned to the surface while smiling like an affectionate mother.

It was a dazzling sight for Zack.

"Man, you know Aerith. Out of all the girls I've gotten along with, you truly are the best. After that mission, we could have stayed the way we were and might have been able to continue to go out with each other after I returned home. I hate Sephiroth. And I hate Shinra who's been hiding all the stuff they've been doing."

"Someone who's gotten along with so many girls can never become a lover."

"How mean. I'm nice to everyone."

"And that's your bad point. You're not simplistic and awkward like Cloud."

"Is that what you liked, Aerith?"

"Who knows. Things might have changed after five years."

"Heh."

Zack put on sad face as if he was sulking but then smiled carefree. It was the unchanged smile that Aerith knew from when they were young. When she was seventeen, it was what attracted her to him.

"It's not over yet but, I'm going to sleep for a while. It seems there's nothing I can do just now. But whenever you feel lonely, call me Aerith."

"Only if I get really lonely. Goodnight, Zack."

Giving a wave, the First Rank Soldier sank into the Mako. Believing that his role was not yet over, Zack settled down to sleep to save up his energy.

Aerith wasn't going to sleep. Because she was Cetra, she didn't seem tired at all.

She was happy. She was happy that she now knew the real Cloud and was able to watch over him, even though it was just for a short while.

And so, Tifa accomplished the task. Collating her own memories with that of Cloud's, she looked for the things that only the real Cloud could know. Proofing it all, the closed door was opened. Not leaving Soldier allowed Jenova's power that was implanted in Cloud to copy the Soldier traits of his close friend, Zacks. Drawing out the deep memories that were firmly clammed up inside all of that, she reconstructed his original character instead of the fake character he created to protect himself.

Chapter 6

"Hahaha..."

Aerith stopped in her tracks as she heard laughter that sent chills down her spine.

Even as Cloud and the others fought to find a way to break into the Northern Crater on the surface, she continued to travel through the Lifestream, trying to find some tear in Sephiroth's barrier or some opening that would let her free the suppressed Holy. But she found none. Having fully unveiled Jenova's powers, Sephiroth was firmly protecting the Crater that was going to become his cocoon, especially from any forms of approach by the Lifestream. By doing so, he could avoid the will of the Planet that had grown wary of Jenova for all these years and, hide from the eyes of the Weapons that were born to expel any foreign bodies from the Planet.

If Holy didn't work in time then... Just as Aerith began thinking about the situation, the laughter echoed again.

A new soul had just fallen into the Sea of Mako. It was a hunchbacked man in a lab coat who had a face filled with thin nervous veins and a deranged laughter - Originally under the authority of Shinra, he was a mad scientist that performed unethical human experiments repeatedly. Hojo slowly turned his attention to Aerith.

"Professor Hojo..."

"Ah, the daughter of the Ancients. I see. As long as the Cetra has the will power they can exist in the Lifestream without letting their conscious be scattered. They only lose their ability to be human... Hahaha, very much like Jenova and Sephiroth you could say."

"Don't put me together with them. And you still don't remember my name."

"That doesn't matter. It's far more appropriate to call you the last remaining Ancient than any other name so that it reflects your true unique nature. Oh yes, your difference in my samples coupled with my numbering would have been sufficient enough to distinguish you..."

"Are humans and all living things just test subjects to you? You still can't change even you're here as a soul?"

"Hahaha... Kyahaha!"

As if he was told a funny joke, Hojo laughed out loudly as if he was possessed.

"...Heehee, heeheehee. No, I have changed. I've changed a lot long before I fell into this Lifestream. You don't understand do you? Ah, this lab coat is in the way."

Hojo wrapped his fingers on the lab coat he was wrapped in and tore it off vigorously. The image of his lab coat was torn into thousands of pieces, flying away wildly like feathers, exposing the body of flesh that was hidden underneath.

"...!"

Aerith gasped. The body before her was not human but was composed of Jenova's cells, a sight that she had seen many times. Hojo had grown tired of experimenting on the bodies of others and had turned himself into a subject for his corrupted experiments.

"Heeheehee. In other words, I'm no different from a sample now. Even you never imagined that had changed this much, did you?"

The thoughts that Hojo emitted was pure madness and it wasn't like the madness that Dyne needed to be intoxicated. Unlike President Shinra's ambitions, the end point of his goals was of certain destruction. Hojo was like a living corpse. He had become a slave to knowledge, possessed by his own madness for science, with no regard of life or his future.

"Now this proves I have far surpassed Gast who was recognized for his talent, even though he tried to flee from science like the coward he was. If Gast was in charge of the Jenova Project now, he surely would never have reached this stage... Haha, yes. Professor Gast was your father, was he not?"

"...Father realized that the Planet was more important than science."

Aerith found out when Tifa and Cloud's memories merged with the Lifestream when they fell. She also found out that it was Hojo who shot her father when he tried to stop him from taking her as a newborn sample.

"Ha, that was the limits of Gast. Stopping and not doing what remained to be done was blasphemy to science... Heh, it's time for our talk to end."

Without showing the least bit of guilt, Hojo turned his head in the direction of the Northern Crater in the distance.

"My son- Jenova's ruler is calling. He's asking for more life energy. Hahaha, I shall offer myself. Then he will become one with me, the one who he hated the most and looked down upon. This will be our reunion."

Hojo, who had merged with Jenova was drawn away just like President Shinra that time. Laughing happily with madness, he was sucked towards the bottom of the gravity well.

"Let me give you one last piece of advice, Ancient. No matter what you do, it's futile. It's all part of this Planet's system. Many foreign entities from the skies fall into the Planet's life cycle unknowingly and now Jenova's in there. So where does its soul go? Even if you try to destroy it, it will never disappear. It has merged with the Sea of Mako, drifting through every part of the Planet through the Lifestream. One day, you will all have to live as part of Jenova. Hahaha... It's only a matter of how soon that will happen."

"I will never let that happen!"

"You too will understand someday. Hahahaha-!"

Leaving only his sneering laughter, the thing that was Hojo disappeared outside Aerith's conscious. And then Hojo became a sacrifice to Sephiroth with an expression dyed with joy and madness. Until the last moment before his soul was worn away, he showed no regrets or shame.

Aerith knew that Hojo's death meant the end of Shinra. In that case, Cloud's decisive battle drew near.

She started to run. If Hojo could die to support Sephiroth then there must be something that they could do to save the Planet.

That's what she believed.

Chapter 7

Cloud and his companions defeated Sephiroth. Sinking into the Planet's scar and absorbing the Mako energy, the original Sephiroth was revived with his wounds fully healed. In the battle that unfolded afterwards, the will he inherited from Jenova, his own ambitions and the strong thoughts he had inside him granted him formidable power but, the humans still managed to crush him in the end. Sephiroth's physical body was destroyed and full of wounds, he retreated.

But only Cloud knew about his retreat. Having been exposed to Jenova's cells, there were traces of Sephiroth's conscious in him - Part of his conscious resonated with it. Cloud could feel the existence of his remnant somewhere inside the Lifestream, continuing to obstruct Holy even now.

Letting only his conscious enter the Sea of Mako, Cloud went in pursuit of him. Riding through the currents, his old enemy was waiting for him. Sephiroth's soul was not yet destroyed and was still a threat to the Planet.

In the world of conscious energy, their swords clashed with each other as they confronted. Sephiroth, the strongest Soldier and the most admired person, tore his long sword across Cloud like a beam of light. But Cloud wasn't afraid. Believing that he had won, Sephiroth raised his long sword for his next strike and at that instant, Cloud struck out at him unleashing all the strength he had. His large blade slashed into Sephiroth's body during that brief opening. His attack opened up another opportunity for him as he struck out at Sephiroth again. It was an unstoppable storm of slashes - fifteen unavoidable attacks one after the other, cut through Sephiroth.

The mad apostate angel smiled boldly. But the damage he had taken was far beyond what he could endure and his spiritual body started to fall apart as he laughed. Beams of light blasted out from inside his body as if they were cutting him apart. Sephiroth was destroyed. Cloud's nightmare that had been continuing since five years ago in Nibelheim finally came to an end.

The Holy that was no longer obstructed immediately came into action.

This time, Cloud had separated from his body and was now in an absentminded state but, in the abyss of the Mako world, he saw a hand there to guide him. It was white and delicate - it reminded him of the hand that gave him a flower in Midgar. Unconsciously, he stretched out his hand...

His conscious returned to his body. Tifa's hand grasped his as the ground below him collapsed away.

If the hand hadn't been there to guide him then he would have been at the bottom of Hades right now. It was good timing. Cloud realized that he had been saved.

But it was all too late.

Midgar was about to become the impact point for the Meteor from the skies and it was already too close to the ground. The gravitational force between the Planet and the giant meteor stirred up whirlwinds that mercilessly revolved on the plate of the upper city. As a result, the Holy energy that stretched in between the Planet and the meteor only increased the destructive power between the two instead of having the effect it was supposed to have.

At this rate, not only will the residents of Midgar taking refuge in the slums get involved but, the Planet would be damaged so badly that it would be beyond recovery. Sephiroth's plan was crushed now but, everyone knew that the worst was yet to come.

The Planet was meeting its demise.

"Lend me your power, everyone!"

Aerith cried out. Her waves of thoughts expanded through the Sea of Mako. Carried by the Lifestream, it spread throughout the Planet.

"I can't do this alone. Lets all protect the Planet!"

The cry of the last Cetra shook the countless consciousnesses that she had awakened during her journey. The entire Planet's conscious was awakened. Of course, among them was also the consciousness of those that were suspended for their atonements. With their strong wills combined together, they managed to control the enormous energy of the Planet.

"I've been waiting for this! Lets light the fuse and blow that meteor away with a bang!"

"It's the Avalanche Lifestream Division's turn! Now that Barret isn't here, I'm the leader!"

"Nooo! I wanted to try being a leader too! That's so unfair, Mr. Wedge!"

"You guys are never serious even though you're Barret's companions. Lets take this seriously and do it for Marlene."

Under their command, countless streams of light appeared on the surface, intertwining together with the Lifestream. Then covering the Planet protecting it like a net, it slipped beneath Meteor and pushed the battering ram from outer space back. The movement of light was like a valkyrie leading her immortal army, riding across the heavens.

"Hey Aerith, did you see Cloud's finishing?"

Zack guided his energy into the second wave as Meteor was thrown back losing its force. "That was one my sword techniques too. Doesn't it make you fall in love again?"

With enough space, Holy now started to take effect. Acting as a barrier, the parts of Meteor that came into contact with it was eroded into dust and was released into space. The Meteor was no longer a threat to the Planet and was now just helplessly waiting to be destroyed.

The Planet had avoided its destruction.

Aerith's thoughts were freed.

Aboard the Highwind, Cloud saw it. So did Tifa, Barret and the others. They saw Aerith's smile that never left their memories, appear in the Lifestream and gently, it faded away as it returned into the Planet.

As time started moving again, their sadness was healed a little.

And so, the records of life that the Planet created continued.

Continued into the birth of a new era...

Fin

Case of Denzel

1

Midgar was once divided into two different worlds. One was an upper city known as a plate, a land of steel high up supported by pillars below. Then there were the areas of the ground that never saw daylight because of the plate. The slums were full of life even though it was a chaotic place. Due to the planning of the company known as Shinra, this scene of light and shadow prospering separately seemed it was here to stay forever.

Four years ago, when the Lifestream came flowing out from the earth, many residents believed that it was the downfall of the Midgar. Those who tried to flee from the city with their possessions couldn't leave the city. Maybe they had thought that they could once again dream of its prosperity once again if they stayed close. Before long, a city named Edge was built adjacent to the city of Midgar.

The main street of Edge stretched from the outskirts of Midgar's Third and Fourth Sectors all the way to the East. The city itself was formed on this main street and expanded to the northwest. From a distance it seemed a magnificent city but, most of the buildings are actually built from Midgar's scrap material. The city smelled of iron and rust.

Johnny ran a cafe in the main street. It was a humble establishment in a patch of open ground with a stall, some tables and a few chairs where he could do some simple cooking. The name of the shop was called Johnny's Heaven. It was a name that was similar to the diner that once existed in the slums of the Seventh Sector. That diner's name was "Seventh Heaven" which had a hostess that Johnny fell in love with. That girl's name was Tifa.

Months after the incident when the Seventh Sector collapsed, Tifa reopened up a new Seventh Heaven in Edge. At the time, Johnny was moved by how Tifa could decide what she should be doing while the rest of the crowd was still indecisive. And so, with those thoughts in mind, she became a respected figure in Johnny's heart.

I'm going to live just like Tifa. But how? I know! I'll run a business too. I'll give hope to those who have lost their way.

This was the beginning of Johnny's Heaven. Customers who came to the shop were told the story of "Johnny Reborn" many times.

As a result of that, many of the public who wanted to see Tifa went to the new Seventh Heaven and became her regular customers. Without knowing anything about it, Johnny continued to open 6 days a week waiting for an audience who would come hear his story full of love and hope.

A customer arrived. It was a kid. It's pretty rare for a child to be alone around these parts. It was Denzel, a young boy who was special to Johnny. He's one of the people who respected Tifa. Johnny was going to give all his heart into his service for Denzel.

"Good day, Denzel.", said Johnny who bowed deeply lowering his head. But Denzel only glimpsed at him for an instant before heading to the farthest table away from the stall.

"Come closer and sit over here."

"No. I'm here to meet someone."

He's here to meet someone? He's dating already? But he's still a kid... Well, whatever. I'll watch over him. This is all part of my special service.

"Is it a date? Good luck."

"Coffee please."

Is he ignoring me? Ah, he must be shy.

"Give me a shout if you're stuck about what to talk about. I've got some interesting bits of news to tell you. You know just now..."

Suddenly, Denzel stood up from his seat. Was he angry? Johnny was watching Denzel but the young boy's gaze was at the entrance.

A man in a plain suit was standing there. "Welcome", Johnny greeted the customer as he turned his eyes towards him. It was Reeve. He was one of the original staffs of Shinra. It was the first time Johnny saw the man, who was now leading the WRO, at close range. He was famed for the smell of death around him.

What business does a guy like him have in my shop?

Reeve walked over while surveying his surroundings cautiously until he finally sat down at Denzel's table. It seemed a habit of his. Something struck Johnny's mind.

Reeve was inviting Denzel to join the army. I have to stop them somehow. If someone like that was to happen in my cafe then I wouldn't be able to face Tifa again.

With that in mind, his expression remained calm as he glared at Reeve.

"Give me some coffee", Reeve said with a sense dignity about him.

"Yes, right away." Johnny answered firmly before running off back to the stall. Not an easy person to deal with.

Denzel was surprised that the head of WRO himself would come interview him and stood there unable to greet him.

"Sit."

That pulled Denzel back to reality again before he sat down nervously.

"So, Denzel. I don't have much time so lets get straight to business", said Reeve in a gentle tone as he began to speak.

"First, know that we are different from long ago. The time when we would welcome any recruit is long passed. If you just want to be a volunteer to help revive this place then just go contact the leader of this area. The WRO is now an army."

"Yes, sir. I'm prepared for the dangers."

"Prepared huh... Alright. Lets hear your background first."

"My background? I'm only 10 years old so..."

"I know that. But even 10 year olds have some background right?"

Denzel was the only son of Eber, who worked hard in Shinra's Third Business Department and Chloe, very social person and who was good at tending to the house. The three of them lived in a Shinra owned residence in the Seventh Sector, The Plate. Eber was satisfied that even though he was brought up in a poor village, he was able to have a family in the upper levels. However, he always thought that it's important to have a goal in life so he aimed to live in the more superior residence areas of the Third Sector. When Denzel reached the age of seven, Eber was promoted to head of department. That meant that he had the qualities to live in the residence of the Fifth Sector. Hearing the news, both Chloe and Denzel prepared a party. With children-like decorations and extravagant food at the ready, they were going to welcome Eber home. It was a happy evening meal. While exchanging jokes with his good humored father, Denzel listened to his father's stories about life.

"Denzel. You're lucky that you're born as my child. If you were born in the Slums then instead of chicken you would be eating rats."

"They don't have chicken?"

"They do but because everyone is so poor, they can't afford it. Since there's nothing else they can do, they catch rats with spears. Dirty grey rats."

"Ewww... Sounds disgusting."

"What does it... taste like hmmm?", Eber said winking at Chloe. Chloe pointed her finger at Denzel's plate.

"Well, Denzel?", she questioned him. Denzel was worried and compared his own dish with his parents. His father was looking down, trying not to laugh. Just then Denzel remembered something that his mother Chloe said. There was no meaning to life without smiles.

They're both trying to scare me again. "That's why I don't believe any of you!"

* * *

"What mean parents."

"They just liked to joke. I didn't mind being teased."

"I'll tell you this but, as far as I know rats weren't eaten in the slums. The rats in the slums at that time were..."

"I know. I know about it well."

"Oh? Did something happen?"

"...It's a long story."

* * *

When Denzel was looking after the house, the phone rang. It was Eber.

"Where's your mother?" He seemed angry.

"She went shopping."

"When she gets back, tell her to call me back right away. Never mind, I'll call her."

Knowing that something was wrong, I was worried. Since there was nothing I could do, I watched TV while waiting for mum to come back. It was showing how a group going by the name of Avalanche bombed the Mako Reactor the other day. That's why I was nervous. It wasn't because of me or my mum.

Just then, someone came back but it wasn't mum. It was Eber.

"Where's your mum?"

"She's not back yet."

"I'm going to look for her."

Without finishing what he was saying, Eber left the house. Panicking, Denzel went after him. When they got to the shopping district, they found Chloe right away. She seemed to be talking with the butcher happily. Freezing there for a moment, Eber approached the butchers shop. Without a word, he grabbed his wife's wrist and brought her back.

When Denzel heard his mother protesting, he felt the sound of his heart go thump.

"Let go of me! What's this about?"

Eber looked around him and lowered his voice.

"The Seventh Sector is going to be destroyed. We're going to evacuate to the Fifth Sector. There's a new company residence for us there."

"They're going to destroy this place?"

"The ones who destroyed the first Mako Reactor is aiming for the Seventh Sector next."

Denzel looked at both his parents' face. They weren't smiling.

"Is it true?"

With both of his hands, he grabbed hold of his parents and said "Come on, lets hurry and go."

But they weren't going to move.

"We can't just run away. We need to let our neighbors and friends know too."

"There's no time, Chloe. Besides, this is classified information from Shinra. I've broken the rules even though I've become the head of one of their departments."

Irritated, Chloe shook her wrist free and said to Denzel, "Go with your father. I'll come soon. It'll be alright."

After giving Denzel's hand a tight squeeze, Chloe left and started to run.

"Hey!" Eber ran a few steps after his wife but stopped. Seeing how much his father was suffering, Denzel's heart ached.

He wants to chase after her but I'm being a burden.

"Denzel, lets go to the Fifth Sector."

"No! We have to go after her!"

"Mum will be alright. We are a nice family after all."

A tall man was dragging a suitcase along as he walked at the borders of the Seventh Sector and Sixth Sector. Eber called out to him. When the man realized who was calling out to him, he panicked and ran over.

"You're still here, sir? The Turks are already making their move. They're nearly done planting the bombs. My colleagues have organised some transportation."

Denzel had heard from his father about this organisation that belonged to the Shinra. All their dirty work was done by the Turks.

What did he mean that the Turks had planted the bombs? Are the Turks the Avalanche? Just when Denzel was wondering about what they were talking about, he felt his father's gaze and looked up.

"Could you take this child to the Fifth Sector? He won't be much trouble." Eber said as he looked at his son.

"No!", Denzel cried.

"Daddy's going to bring mummy back. Now you go with Mr. Arkham."

"We'll go together."

"Is it alright with you, Mr. Arkham?"

"Of course it is, sir."

"It's the company residence in the Fifth Sector, number thirty-eight. Here's the key. I'll leave my son with it."

Taking a key out of his inner shirt pocket, he forced Denzel to have it.

"Dad..."

"I bought a new big TV. Watch that while you're waiting for us."

After giving Denzel's hair a quick ruffle, he gently pushed Denzel over to Arkham and started running in the direction of the Seventh Sector. Arkham helped Denzel balance himself.

"Come, lets go. I'm Arkham. I'm one of your father's workers. Pleased to meet you."

Denzel was about to run off but Arkham stopped him.

"I understand how you feel. But I can't go against what your father's orders. For now, lets go to the Fifth Sector. After that, you can do whatever you like. OK?"

In the new company residence, nothing was there besides a big box with the TV. Arkham took the TV out and turned it on after connecting the cable.

The two of them watched the news. Once again, the explosion of the Mako Reactor in the First Sector was on. Denzel was wondering if Arkham would leave anytime soon.

"I'm hungry."

"OK, I'll go get something for us to eat."

At that time, the house shook. They heard the sound of missiles somewhere. When Arkham opened the door, the cry of metal grinding together could be heard.

"Wait here.", said Arkham as he left the house. Just as Denzel was about to follow, the TV announced something.

"An urgent news bulletin."

A screen showed a collapsing town. Even though I knew it was the Seventh Sector we were in a few hours ago, it took a while before I realised it.

When the picture changed, the announcer said, "This is the current state of the Seventh Sector." The Seventh Sector was no more. Denzel burst out the house. The streets were in chaos. People were running all over the place shouting that Fifth Sector will be next.

I wonder how long I ran for. Out of breathe, I reached the edge of the Sixth Sector. The soldiers were setting up barriers. I rushed on over to the barriers to look at the Seventh Sector. As if it had always been like it was, there was nothing there. Straining my eyes, I could see the Eighth Sector. The part that linked the Seventh Sector, could be seen.

"Hey, it's dangerous over here." a soldier said.

"Where's your home?"

Denzel pointed out at the empty space.

"I see... That's unfortunate." The soldier's voice was gentle.

"And your parents?"

Once again, Denzel pointed out at the space where the Seventh Sector used to stand.

The soldier let out a loud sigh and said, "It's the work of Avalanche. Don't forget that. Once you're older, take revenge for them."

The soldier turned Denzel towards the Sixth Sector and urged him away. Denzel walked away absentmindedly taking no notice of the people jeering and taking refuge around him.

Which place was going to be next? Dad! Will it be alright here? Mum! I won't forgive those Avalanche scoundrels! What are the Shinra doing! Dad! Mum, where are you?

The miserable voice of one child wasn't going to disappear. When I realised it was my own voice, I could walk no further. I was overflowed with tears.

"Did Shinra do it?"

"Yeah."

Reeve looked away from him. It seemed he was determined not to show any signs of emotion.

"If you hate me then you can do whatever you like to me."

Denzel shook his head.

* * *

It was Sunday. When I woke up, I was in my new home in the Fifth Sector. There was a mattress that I was sure wasn't there yesterday. Denzel went to sleep on it. Next to his pillow was a memo and a piece of sweet bread.

"I'm at the office. I'll come to see how you're doing once in a while. Don't go too far. Everyone is very nerve-racked just now so it's dangerous. More importantly, it would be very hard to find you. You're a pretty important boy. P.S. I borrowed the mattress from the neighbour so please make sure to return it. - Arkham."

The imagery of the Seventh Sector falling down was shown on the TV many times. The announcement from Shinra that Midgar was safe now could also be heard repeatedly. My parents might be dead so even though they say it's safe, I couldn't agree with them. I really wonder if everyone will be able to live in happiness together because it's safe. Will I be able to blend in with them? Just as Denzel was about to eat his bread, he noticed the cream jutting out of it. Anger surged in him. He smashed the bread onto the TV then flew out of his house.

It was quiet. In the centre of Midgar he could see the highrise building of Shinra. Mother and father might be alive and have gone to work together there.

During this hour, Denzel's parents must be busy. That's why they can't come out. Since this area is Shinra residence then maybe some of their friends are around. Denzel wasn't very good talking with grownup strangers but, he was going to pull up his courage and try.

First he made for the house to the right and rang the doorbell. There was no answer. He tried opening the door.

The house wasn't locked so he peered in and said, "Hello?"

He waited for a little while but no answer came. It seemed Arkham borrowed the mattress from this house. Denzel was wondering if they're no different from a thief since they just borrowed it at will. Are they going to be forced to live on as thieves or something?

Denzel moved onto the left house. The house opposite. A house further in. Everyone was on the lookout there. He went to go have a look at another house further away. Most of the houses had a piece of paper on their door with a contact address written on it if anyone was looking for shelter.

No one was there. It didn't seem possible that his parents were at their office. If they were, they would have come here. Even if it was impossible for Denzel's father to come, his mother would certainly have.

The hope he held onto was shattered as he walked away. Before he knew it, Denzel noticed he had lost his way. He couldn't remember how he got here. Tears fell from his face but anger stood out more than his sorrow.

He stopped and sat on the road. His bottom hit something hard. It was the small model of one of Shinra's airships. Some kid must have dropped it.

He threw away the model as he thought out loud.

"I hate everyone!"

The sound of glass breaking in a residential area echoed as a girl's voice followed.

"Who did that!"

Before he realized what he had done, an old lady from a house in front of him came out. She wasn't really an old lady but to Denzel, he couldn't tell the age of any lady.

"Did you do this?!", the old lady said holding onto the model Shinra airship.

Denzel nodded with a guilty face.

"Why..." the old lady was about to ask.

"Are you crying?"

Denzel shook his head to deny it but he couldn't hide his tears.

"Where's your home?"

He was angry that he couldn't answer her. More tears came flowing down his face.

"Come inside."

The inside of Ruvy's home was very different to Denzel's and felt very comfortable. The wallpaper was a pattern full of flowers while the cushions and sofa also had the same pattern. There were some artificial flowers for decoration but it was a room that gave a sense of warmth and tranquility. Denzel looked at Ruvy who was now sitting on the sofa. She was struggling to patch up the shattered glass window with a vinyl bag.

"When my son is back, I'll make him fix it properly. This should do for now."

"Miss Ruvi, I'm sorry..."

"If it wasn't for such times I would have had a hold of your neck shouting and taken you to see your parents."

"My mum and dad, they're..."

"Don't tell me they just left you behind and ran away."

"They were in the Seventh Sector."

Ruvi stopped what she was doing, squatted down and held Denzel.

After he calmed down, she told him they were going out.

They were going to look for his house. The two of them walked holding hands. When Denzel reached the age of six, he had stopped holding hands with his parents. It didn't look cool. But now, he didn't want to let go no matter what happened he thought to himself.

At headquarters, the Shinra was dealing with the matters of giving residents a place to stay. Families were given shelter in Junon or Costa Del Sol. Ruvi remained behind explaining that if she was going to be alone where she went then it would be best if she stayed at her own home. Eventually, they found Denzel's house.

"Thank you very much. And about the glass... I'm sorry."

Ruvi nodded silently. Denzel opened the door and went inside as Ruvi peered in.

"What are you planning to do with a house that doesn't have anything? Come to my house, OK?"

And that was how Denzel came to live with Ruvi.

When the No. 1 Mako Reactor was destroyed, Ruvi knew that times were going to be hard so she bought lots of food. The storage shed in her back garden was full of canned food.

"There's no need to worry when you're prepared."

Ruvi was busy everyday. Cleaning the inside of the house, cleaning the outside surrounding areas, preparing food and sewing. Besides sewing, Denzel helped with everything. Before he went to sleep, he read a book. Ruvi on the other hand, read a thick book that looked difficult to read. When she was asked if it was good or not he wouldn't answer. He was told it belonged to her son. Ruvi had been reading the book for over five years now thinking that she might be able to understand what her son's work was like. She laughed when she realized the book was like something she read it so that she could fall asleep.

Ruvi leant Denzel a monster encyclopedia which she said would be useful for him to read. It was another thing that belonged to her son and he seemed to have read it when he was Denzel's age. All the monsters that was illustrated in full colour had a description next to them. All pages had the same thing written on them. If you come across a monster, run away then let an adult know. Denzel

wondered if, that's if, he met a monster just now would all he have to do is let Ruvi know. But Ruvi didn't seem like she could fight. He wondered if he'll end up fighting it himself. Could he do it? Could he win?

He thought that he wasn't any use. That's why his parents left him and went away.

* * *

The sunlight grew strong and Denzel was soaked with sweat.

"Man... It's so hot." Reeve said to Johnny.

Denzel took out a handkerchief to wipe away his sweat.

"That's quite a cute pattern. Like a girl's."

"It is. " Denzel said staring at his handkerchief.

* * *

One morning when Denzel woke up, Ruvi was there holding a shirt by the collar.

"Wear this. I made this for you but I didn't have many patterns to make use of."

On the white shirt were patterns with lots of small pink flowers. It was something that Denzel would usually not be too keen to wear but he happily changed into it.

"This is something I made because I had too much cloth. Have it." Ruvi said holding out a handkerchief that had the same pattern.

It seemed she had lots of extra cloth because there were many of the same handkerchief. Denzel took one and folded it neatly into his rear pocket.

"And...", Ruvi's smile disappeared, "How should I say this..."

Denzel wondered what she was going to say. The words that he didn't want to hear the most came floating to his mind. Get out. His body shook with anxiety at the thought.

"Lets go outside."

Ruvi went outside into the back garden. Denzel hesitated but followed. Walking over the thickly spread out earth, Denzel went over to stand next to Ruvi. Ruvi stood gazing at the sky.

Denzel too gazed up at the sky. There was a great black spot in the sky. It was a very bad omen. During the day, the sky was white and blue. Everything besides that was no different from the gloom or worries.

"I don't know anything about it but, it seems it's called Meteo. It's said that once it impacts with this planet, everything will be over."

Ruvi went over to the storage shed and took out two cans of food handing them to Denzel.

"Just how are we going to prepare ourselves with these things."

That day, Ruvi didn't clean, sew or do anything else. She just sat on the sofa thinking.

When something came to mind, she went on the phone. It seems no one answered. Denzel thought she must have been calling her son as he cleaned the interiors and outside. He also wanted to ask about the impact of Meteo but he couldn't bring himself to ask about it. As night fell, Ruvi began to clean as if to say she was back to reality. Denzel, the way you clean isn't any good. What on earth have you been looking at? It was the usual Ruvi again.

It was night and the two of them sat side by side on the sofa reading the same book they always did.

Keeping her eyes on the book, Ruvi said, "Denzel. I plan to wait for the end here. If the planet is to die then it doesn't matter where I am. Everywhere is the same. What are you going to do? If you're going to go somewhere then I don't mind if you take the food from the house and go. You're still a child so I think you should decide where you want to be in the end."

Denzel thought about what Ruvi said deeply. Then he asked the question he had been longing to ask during the day.

"Is it all right if I stayed here?"

Ruvi looked up from the book and smiled at Denzel.

Ever since then, Ruvi went about as she always did except she didn't clean the outside. Cleaning the outside became Denzel's job now.

He saw that construction had began on top of the Shinra building. Before long, a giant cannon was built on the top of the roof. Ruvi was told that Shinra was going to exterminate Meteo.

"That company is always wrong about something," said Ruvi shaking her head sadly.

Eventually, the cannon was fired once in some odd direction and broke down, collapsing to the grounds. Not long after that, Shinra itself was attacked and was destroyed. Denzel was thinking to himself what on earth could the monster have been. He couldn't imagine any monster that could destroy a building but decided against asking Ruvi. Meteo was in the sky as usual. In other areas, there was some huge disturbance but Denzel's daily life remained peaceful.

There were times when he couldn't suppress his thoughts about his parents and cried but, Ruvi always calmed him down by holding him.

If the end was to come while he slept with Ruvi then he didn't mind.

What took Denzel's peace was not the Meteo but the white waters that filled him with anger. As a result of the Life Stream that the planet released, it became the righteous power that destroyed the Meteo but that thick energy of life also brought destruction to mankind.

One fated day, Denzel was about to go to sleep with Ruvi. The sound of a strong wind blowing outside could be heard but it was too much of a noise to be just the wind. Before long, the whole house began shaking vigorously.

The end was here. It would be good if it was over quickly, thought Denzel to himself but time went by and the shaking grew even more vicious. The sound grew quieter down and changed as if a train was speeding pass their house. Denzel held on tightly to Ruvi shutting his eyes trying to bear it but five minutes was too much.

"Miss Ruvi, I'm scared."

Just as Ruvi was getting up and was about to put the light on, the flower patterned curtains turned bright white. It was as if the whole house was engulfed in light.

"Cover yourself with the blanket."

As Ruvi left the bedroom, the shaking grew very violent and the flowers on top of the chest of drawers fell to the ground. Denzel flew out of the bed and went after Ruvi.

Ruvi stood there staring at the living room window. It was the window that Denzel broke, patched up with vinyl. The vinyl was being inflated as if it was going to break apart. Ruvi ran over to the window and tried to suppress it with her two hands.

"Denzel! Go back to your room!"

Denzel was shaking. He couldn't move as if his feet were stuck to the floor. It was me who broke the window. It must be my fault that something bad is happening. Ruvi left the window and rushed over to Denzel. He was violently pushed back into the bedroom. Just then, the vinyl shattered and bright rays of light came flooding into the house. Screaming, Ruvi closed the door.

"Miss Ruvi!", Denzel cried as he grabbed the doorknob and tried to open the door.

"Denzel, stop it!"

"But-!" Denzel tried at the doorknob again.

Ruvi stood there with her back towards the door. Feet apart, she was using both her hands to keep the door closed.

"Keep it closed!"

Around Ruvi, many beams of light burst through the walls and reflected everywhere. It was as if a glowing snake was running wild in the room.

I didn't think it was a monster from the monster encyclopedia. Run and tell an adult about it. No, in this house, I must stand and fight.

"Miss Ruv! he cried as the light attacked Ruv. A short moan could be heard. The light changed its shape into what looked like a thin piece of rope, forcing its way through the gap between the wall and Ruv into the bedroom.

Ruv collapsed onto the floor as Denzel got thrust away unconscious.

"I don't know how long I passed out for. When I came to, the whole house was in shambles.

Mrs. Ruvi laid there. When I called out to her she opened her eyes a little and told me she was glad that I was all right. Then she asked me to let her hold my hand. I held out my hand to her. Ruvi held onto my hand but I couldn't feel any strength in it at all. She told she couldn't hold her son's hand anymore because it's grown so big. I was glad I was still a kid. She asked what was happening outside. I was a bit worried but I went outside. It was morning. Everywhere around us was also a complete mess just like the inside of her house."

Denzel continued talking with his head hanging down while Reeve closed his eyes and listened.

* * *

After heading outside, Denzel looked back at Ruvi's home. He could see that all the windows were broken. It was the same with all the other houses that lied within the area. There were also houses that lost their roofs and houses that had big gaping holes in the walls. Everything ends in the same way after all. I came to think that even if I don't break things, they still end up that way. But I was mad at myself for thinking such a thing.

Ruvi went through such a horrible ordeal just to protect me and here I am acting as if I had nothing to do with it.

When I went back into the house, Ruvi seemed to be sleeping. She had such a peaceful look on her. I was worried though so I gave her shoulders a little nudge.

"Mrs Ruvi."

It didn't seem like she was going to open her eyes.

"Mrs Ruvi!", he shouted nudging harder this time.

A stream of black fluid came out of Ruvi's mouth. Thinking it was a sign of death, I panicked and wiped it away. There was even some flowing out of her hair. I felt sick. Denzel burst out of the house, fear gripping onto him.

"Dad! Mum! Help me!", he shouted loudly. He continued shouting out until he ran out of names. Now he could only cry.

"Hey, don't cry", someone's loud voice boomed as Denzel got his hair ruffled. A giant man with a deep black moustache stood before him. Behind the man was a small truck with around 10 people sitting in the back.

"What are you doing here? I thought the announcement on TV made it clear that everyone was to take shelter in the Slums."

It felt as if he was going to give me a bad scolding if I didn't give him a good answer. Quivering, I told him, "I didn't watch TV."

"Man! Everyone either thinks it'll be all right here or they say something like they didn't know!"

Everyone on the truck just looked like they made the wrong decision.

"And where's your family?"

"Mrs Ruvy is inside."

* * *

"The person's name was Gaskin. He buried Mrs. Ruvy for me. The people on the truck also helped. They buried her together with her son's book and her sewing kit in the back garden. The earth there was so thick there that it had everyone mystified. Usually you would hit the Plate in no time."

"I wonder if she was planning to grow vegetables or something. Since she came from the countryside, she would do a lot of that sort of thing."

"...I think she wanted to grow flowers.", Denzel answered as he looked at the pattern of flowers on his handkerchief.

"There's lots of flower patterned covers in the house and lots of artificial flowers too. I think she really wanted real flowers."

Her son worked for Shinra so he lived in Midgar. I'm sure he wanted to nurture some flowers here where there's some earth... I'm sorry. I said too much."

Reeve nodded as he listened.

* * *

Soon, the truck that Denzel and the others were on arrived at the station where a train was parked.

Gaskin said, "The train's not running. There really is no hope of restoring this place. But fortunately, the track is still linked to the ground's surface. If we follow the track we should be able to descend our way there."

"Is Midgar dangerous?", someone asked.

"Who knows. For now, we'll be much more relieved if we head downwards right?"

He continued and said to Denzel, "Don't slip on your feet now. No one has the time to look after you. You'll just have to do it yourself somehow."

The truck did a U-turn and left. A large crowd was gathered at the station. That white light affected the whole of Midgar. Those who had their homes destroyed and those who thought the town would collapse soon all ran here. Even so, there was a lot of people who hesitated about following the track to the ground. Instead of hearing the voices of joy now that Meteor is gone, disatisfied shouts could be heard about the incomplete shelter advice they were given. Denzel thought himself that he was

glad his father wasn't here. The crowds were dispersed and split into groups heading to the homes, blending in with the flow on the track. We didn't know what lied ahead but the only person leading was Gaskin. It was obvious that we had no other choice but to obey him.

On the track that was laid out on steel struts with wooden planks in between, I could see the ground's surface in the distance. We were so high up that no one could be saved if they fell down so everyone took the utmost care descending. The track was so long it was like it spiraled all the way round Midgar but we were concentrating so hard walking down, we couldn't really wonder about anything.

Suddenly, we stopped. The adults stood still. It seemed there was some kind of delay. Slipping through the crowd, I saw a boy that was about three years old sitting at a dangerous position in between the rails with his legs dangling.

If he was the cause of our delay then I thought we could have just gone round him. Just then, someone spoke to the boy.

"Where's your mama?"

The kid suddenly started crying, shouting out for his mother and peered the gap between the planks. It looked as if he was going to lose balance so Denzel rushed out and grabbed his arm. I could hear the adults chattering.

Someone said, "Hey, that kid's infected."

"Don't touch him, he's contagious."

Denzel had no idea what they were saying.

"Hey, make way!", someone shouted angrily. Denzel looked like he wanted to protest against the one who said that but he didn't know who it was. There was nothing he could do about it so he put his hands around the boy's waist and lifted him onto an iron plate where it was safer. I was wondering why no one helped but I soon realized the reason why. The boy's back was soaked in a black substance.

Now that the path was free again, people started to resume walking. The little boy continued to cry repeating the words "it hurts" and "mama". I remembered how someone said "he's contagious." I felt like I wanted to cry. As I helped the boy stand up, I remembered about Ruvi. I remembered how I felt sick when I saw that black liquid coming out of Ruvi even though she was so kind to me. The me who got scared and ran away.

That was why I planned to wipe that sin away by helping the boy. I wanted to Ruvi to forgive me. I squatted down and asked him, "Where does it hurt?"

"My back hurts."

"Your back hurts huh?"

"Yeah."

I lightly touched the boy's back with my hand. When I had a sore stomach, mum would rub it for me and the pain would go away. She done the same if I bumped into things. I might be able to use some of mum's magic too.

Denzel started to rub the boy's back while trying to ignore the sticky black substance. Although it was painful at first, the boy soon fell asleep.

Three hours went by. He continued rubbing the little boy for a little longer taking a little break in between. The people around Denzel continued descending while ignoring Denzel and the boy.

"He's dead."

Looking up, he saw the tired face of a woman.

A baby was fastened around the woman's breast and a girl about the age of Denzel was holding her hand.

"That shirt looks like a girl's. It's so weird. Isn't it, mama? Lets hurry and go."

The woman the little girl called "mama" silently took off her daughter's blue jacket and handed it to Denzel.

"Wear this."

The sweating little girl was relieved. It looked as though she was wearing three layers of clothes.

"You can have it. It belongs to my big sister. That's why it's so big.", said the little girl but it didn't seem so at all.

Denzel looked at the boy curled up asleep next to him. He couldn't hear his breathing.

Denzel was completely out of strength. The little girl quickly took the jacket from her mother and wrapped it around the little boy. His body was now hidden away from sight.

"He will be with my big sister.", the little girl said.

"Thank you", I said with all my heart. The mother started walking again and the little girl followed her. Hand in hand with her mother. Both their hands were dyed pitch black.

Gazing at the Chocobo on the bag the little girl was carrying, Denzel was thinking.

Were they all going to die crying in pain with that sticky black stuff flowing out? Was everyone going to die because they were ill?

* * *

"At the time, we knew nothing about Geostigma. Those who bathed their bodies in the Lifestream would go out to "sea" and die. People said that you would get infected if you touched them. In truth, it's really because the thoughts of Jenova were mixed in with the Lifestream and that's what... It doesn't matter now. Even if we knew about it then, the situation wouldn't have changed.

"You're right. Especially with children."

"Yeah."

"When I was on the railway, I thought I wanted to become an adult soon. I want to decrease the number of things I can't understand even if I put my thoughts into them."

* * *

Denzel absentmindedly watched the people that fled to the station in the Slums. One after the other they were descending from the upper levels. There were people who thought it would all be over if they stopped. I had to do the same too but I couldn't abandon the hope that I would see a familiar face by staying. It was hard for Denzel to forget about his hunger with that half-hearted effort.

As he walked about the station looking for food, he found a place a little further away stacked with baggage. Nearby, a lot of men were working. It seemed they were digging a hole. With a gush of wind, the stench of rotting flesh came floating by. A man carrying a young woman on his shoulders came over and lightly put her in the hole. It was a temporary graveyard. Just as Denzel was about to run away panicking, he found a familiar bag amongst the baggage. It had a picture of a chocobo. Even I didn't know why I rushed over and opened the bag. Inside was some cookies and chocolate. Denzel thought about the little girl who the bag belonged to. She was no longer here.

"Eat", a voice said. It belonged to Gaskin.

He wasn't someone Denzel really wanted to see.

"You worried you'll catch the illness? It's just a rumour. It might be true but at the moment, they're only rumours. Besides, you'll die anyway if you don't eat anything. If you're going to die anyway, don't you want to die with a full stomach?", he said putting his hand in the bag and eating the cookies.

"Yum! They're still edible. If you're just going to leave them here they're just going to rot. That would be a waste. Here, have some."

Denzel ate some cookies too. He was glad at how good the sweetness of the cookies felt.

He turned to the bag and said, "thanks".

Gaskin gave Denzel's head a good ruffle.

He was a different type of person compared to dad but the way he ruffled my hair was the same. About a year later, Denzel was living at that very spot. His first job was to find food amongst the baggage.

He also made friends quick. They were all children who had lost their parents. Gaskin's friends also increased in number. He called them good-for-nothings who weren't very good at thinking and who didn't feel right if they didn't exercise. They were the first group to start doing burials. Denzel sometimes noticed himself laughing. He felt he could be himself again. However, about two weeks

later, the number of people coming from Midgar to take refuge was decreasing while there were no more people being forced to go to their area. Their role at the station was closing to an end. Denzel went through many sleepless nights worried about the future.

A man was walking alone and he seemed to be looking for something. He approached Denzel and his friends.

"I want a steel pipe. It would be great if I can get as many as I could."

Denzel and his friends went to look for steel pipes. They found lots of them in the ruins of the Seventh Sector.

The man said his thanks then left. Ever since then, he came back many times. After the third visit, he brought friends with him too to look for things.

It turned out a new town was being built in the east side of Midgar and so they were looking for materials. The children were offered food in return for any material they helped find.

Denzel and his friends soon went by the name of the Seventh Sector Search Team and received many requests. Everyday was fun for them. They were proud of themselves leading a life where they worked like adults. There were nights when they cried and thought about their parents but they always cheered each other up. The words "the group with a joint fate" was soon stuck amongst them. However, they never would have thought that the strong power of fate wasn't going to keep things together.

One morning, Gaskin gathered his friends along with the adults and children of the so called search team together. He told them that they were going to take part in building the new town and were going to move home. Just when it seemed everything was settled and no one had any objections, one of the children asked something. The kid had been rubbing his chest many times during Gaskin's speech.

"Mr. Gaskin, do you feel unwell?"

"Just a bit", said Gaskin as he took off his top. A black substance flowed out.

* * *

"A month later, Mr. Gaskin died. I buried everyone in a special place. All the good people die, don't they?"

Reeve nodded silently to Denzel's words. Denzel took a sip of coffee. It was bitter and it was the drink he hated the most. But, he wanted to be able to enjoy the taste one day just like the adults did.

All the adults were gone now and only around twenty children remained in the Seventh Sector Search Team.

They knew about the new town that was known as Edge and how it was developing very well. They also knew that there was a facility there for orphans. But in the town they built, they didn't need to rely on adults to survive. There was no reason for them to leave. They also thought how bad it would look being treated as orphans who needed protection. But that didn't stop the town from reaching a new level. Large machinery was transported there from different areas and they soon concentrated on manufacturing. The work that could be achieved was much greater than what Denzel and the children could do working together. Members were started leaving the Search Team in ones and twos. Before long, only six members remained. They were all going hungry. Eventually even the last girl in the team also said she would go to Edge.

* * *

Denzel laughed with a smile.

"What's wrong?", Reeve asked looking at him puzzled.

"I hated that girl. I let her join even though all the boys said girls would just be a burden. Work was hard since only around ten or less people were left."

Reeve laughed.

"But I know now. About why I, how should I put it... Why I could get frustrated or angry about normal things."

"You should be grateful to her."

"She's not around anymore."

* * *

When I woke up, all that remained of the search team was only I and a boy named Rix.

"Now there's plenty of bulbs and screws for us," Denzel said and laughed.

"Not much profit in those you know," Rick grinned.

"I'll go buy us some breakfast and look for some jobs."

"Hey, wait a sec."

Rix went over to where they hid their safe and opened it.

"Hey, Denzel! We're in trouble!"

Inside the safe was money that wasn't even enough to buy a slice of bread. The two of them sat silently for a while. It was Rix who was the first to say something.

"We don't have any choice but to live in Edge. We'll get free food."

"Yeah, we've lost. I don't want to starve to death."

Suddenly, Denzel remembered something his father said.

"Shall we catch rats to eat?"

"Rats?"

"Yeah. I heard that in the slums everyone was so poor they ate rats. Dirty grey rats. This is the slums after all and we're poor."

"You serious?"

"Yeah, I'm going to eat rats. I'm going to become a real kid in the slums."

Rix slowly stood up and dusted off his trousers. Denzel stood up too and looked around them.

"We'll catch them with spears."

"Do it yourself. I was a slum kid from the moment I was born."

Denzel realized his mistake and was going to try smoothing things out again.

"...I didn't know."

"And what if you did know? We wouldn't have become friends?"

"No way!"

"Who knows. You were a kid who lived on the wealthy Plate after all."

"Rix..."

"Remember this. All the rats around here are all contaminated by horrible bacteria thanks to the polluted waters you all ditched out. There is no one here who would be stupid enough to eat them."

Saying that, Rix left Denzel behind.

* * *

Denzel sighed.

"I didn't go after him. I thought he couldn't have forgiven me..."

"And why was that?"

"I really was a kid from the upper levels after all. I was fine being used to the surroundings of the station and all the rubble in the Seventh Sector but, I never thought I would go to other slums. I didn't go to Edge because I thought it would be another place like the slums. A poor and filthy place."

"And Rix?"

"He's fine. But I still haven't heard anything from him."

"That's good. You still have a chance to makeup with him."

* * *

Denzel sharpened the ends of the steel rods he gathered and using them as spears, he went looking for rats. He was planning to eat them once he caught them. Dad. The people in the slums never did eat rats. But I plan to eat them. I have no money and I have no job. This is worse than the slums. I'm a Seventh Sector kid and I can't grow up.

Loneliness took away Denzel's will to live. He was now like the way he was when the Seventh Sector was no more. But what was different this time was he remembered of all the people that he met and who had supported him - his parents, Arkham, Ruvi, Gaskin and the search team. Nothing else could ever happen.

He felt that he couldn't smile anymore. There was no meaning to life without smiles. Isn't that right, mum. I'm sure I saved a lot of rats that had horrible bacteria in them.

* * *

"Hey, now hold on a sec there!", Johnny interrupted. Without them noticing, he was standing next to them and listening to Denzel's story.

"That's what I thought at the time. But I was wrong. That's why I'm here now."

"Yeah, you're right."

"It was because of those great memories you had."

"But I was in the worst state I could be in."

* * *

There were no rats anywhere. Before long, he was looking in the areas of the Sector Five slums. There was a church in ruins. A bike was parked outside in front of the door. It was the first time Denzel saw something like that. But what really caught his attention was the mobile phone that hung on the handle.

A smile came to Denzel's face. I'll borrow it for a while. It would be fun if it worked. He got near the bike and took the phone. As he dialed the number to his home in Sector Seven, he imagined the phone in the rubble ringing.

"All phones in Sector Seven are offline."

During the time he worked together with the search team, he also looked for his parents but they couldn't reunite. They must both be lying in the rubble he thought. He didn't think they were alive anywhere anymore.

"All phones in Sector Seven are offline."

With the phone still to his ear, he looked up. He could see the bottom of Sector Five's plate. He realized that on top of that place, Mrs Ruvy was asleep. He was beneath a grave. That's why it was so lonely.

"All phones in Sector Seven are offline."

I hung up the phone and gave up the thought of stamping on the ground. Please let me borrow it again. He was going to dial Ruvy's number but he never knew it in the first place. He looked at the phone's list of calls.

He called the first number on the list. The tone of the line ringing could be heard. Someone picked up immediately.

"Cloud, it's so rare for you to call me. Has something happened?"

Denzel listened to the woman's voice silently.

"Cloud?" the woman asked suspiciously.

"...No, I'm not."

"...Who are you? This is Cloud's phone isn't it?"

"I don't know. I don't know what I should do." His voice was trembled.

"...Are you crying?"

He felt the tears flowing down his face. He closed his eyes to clear them away but a moment of pain struck his forehead. The pain made his body stiffen as he dropped the phone. He crouched there as the pain throbbed in his forehead. He noticed some sticky substance in the palm of his hands. He felt like shouting out he didn't want to die. But the pain wasn't going to go away as he prayed in his heart with all this strength. Don't let it be black. Don't let it be black. As he endured the throbbing pain, he opened his eyes. It was pure black.

* * *

"I don't remember what happened next. When I came to, I was in a bed. Tifa and Marlene was looking at me. Then after that... You know what happened, sir."

"Sort of."

"I'm alive thanks to all sorts of people. My parents, Mrs. Ruvi, Mr. Gaskin and everyone from the search team. People that are alive, people that are now dead, Tifa, Cloud, Marlene and..."

Reeve understood and nodded.

"I want to become someone like them. This time, I will be the one on the lookout."

Reeve was silent.

"Please let me join," Denzel said leaning forward.

"No. No no!" said Johnny.

"You keep quiet!"

"You're still just a kid!"

"That has nothing to do with it!"

"No," Reeve began to say, "The truth is... WRO no longer lets children in."

"You see!"

"Then why didn't you let me know from the start?" Denzel blurted out.

"Well, I just decided that now. While I was listening to your story. There are things that only children can do. That's what I want you to do."

"...What do you mean?"

"Draw out the power in adults."

Denzel waited for him to continue but Reeve stood up like he was finished.

"Oh, and..."

Denzel looked at Reeve hopefully.

"And thank you for taking good care of my mum."

Reeve took a handkerchief out of his rear pocket and waved it about. It had a pattern full of flowers.

Once Reeve was gone, Johnny started clearing away the table. Denzel looked at his own handkerchief that was on the table.

"You know..." Johnny stopped and said, "You can fight whenever you feel like. There's no need to join WRO. What are you so concerned about?"

"Cloud he..."

"What about him?"

"Long ago when he was in the military, he was strong. I too want to be strong."

"Times... Have changed you know."

"In what way?"

"Well, those who can soothe someone's pain are popular in these times are more popular than those who yield weapons."

"It's not like they want to be popular, though." Denzel coldly said to Johnny as remembered everyone who gave him encouragement. All those men, women, adults and children who had supported him greatly.

Fin

Lifestream Black 1

The man could sense the Lifestream trying to erode his spirit- the memories of his former experiences, thoughts and emotions. If he allowed himself be taken into the current, the being he once was would soon disseminate and disappear amongst the spirit energy cycling around the planet. The man thought this unacceptable. The planet was to be his to rule, and to become a part of that system would be nothing short of defeat.

The man sensed a large flux in the Lifestream. A sign of another, different defeat. When the Lifestream erupted onto the surface of the planet, the man thought that Cloud was no doubt certain of his victory. Cloud was the one who had twice sent the man into the Lifestream. The man knew that if one could hold onto some core of their spirit, then one could remain a separate entity, independent from the planet's system. Cloud. The man decided to make Cloud that core. And he wanted to let Cloud know of that. I'm still thinking of you. And I'll show you the proof of that as well.

Case of Tifa

Tifa walked the last customer out of her store Seventh Heaven before returning inside to clean up in the galley. The room was dimly lit with minimal but adequate lighting. No one else was there besides Tifa. Just days ago work didn't seem that long. She enjoyed working along side her family, forgetting all her worries but now, the water had gotten cold and she wasn't getting anywhere with all the dirty tableware. Tifa tried turning on all the lights that illuminated the store in an effort to change the atmosphere. For a brief moment, the store lit up but the unstable electricity supply didn't keep it that way for long. The store was dimly lit again. A surge of uneasiness came over her. She wondered if she was all alone in the house. She couldn't stand it as the thought crossed her mind, and called out a girl's name.

"Marlene!"

Before long, soft footsteps could be heard coming from the children's room, deep inside the store and Marlene appeared.

"Ssssh," she frowned, putting a finger to her lips. Tifa apologized but was relieved.

"Denzel finally fell asleep."

"Was he in pain?"

"Yeah."

"You could have gave me a shout."

"Denzel didn't let me."

"I see..."

Tifa blamed herself for letting the children worry about her.

"What's wrong?"

"Hmmm... What do you mean?" Tifa answered meaninglessly, trying to hide her feelings. Marlene looked around the store where only Tifa stood.

"Did you feel lonely?" The little girl saw through everything. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Thanks. You should sleep soon too."

"I was just about to sleep!"

"Sorry."

She's my daughter. That's how I introduced her to people. Her parents died not too long ago and she was brought up by her father's closest friend, Barret.

Tifa learned a lot about Marlene ever since she met Barret and travelled around with him. It was only natural that Barret entrusted Marlene to Tifa when he decided to go on a journey to settle his past.

Tifa stopped washing and followed Marlene inside. In the children's room were two beds lined up next to one another. There, Denzel laid sound asleep. The Geostigma scar on the eight year old's forehead was a painful sight. Nothing could be done to ease the symptoms as the boy suffered and his conditions wasn't improving at all either. Denzel grimaced a little as Tifa wiped away the pus from the scar on his soaked forehead, but he continued to sleep. Marlene who had watched over Denzel, called out Tifa's name after she tucked herself up in her own bed.

"You still feel lonely even with us here, don't you?"

"...I'm sorry," Tifa answered honestly.

"It's OK. We're the same."

"I see."

"I wonder where Cloud is."

Tifa hung her head, unable to answer. Cloud was in Midgar somewhere. At first, she imagined how the worse could have happened. Maybe he had an accident when he went out on one of his jobs or he was attacked by some monster.

She soon found out that he was still out there doing jobs. There were people who had seen him. He just left the house that's all. Tifa had tried to convince the children that there were no problems but she lost her composure. Before long, the children realized something had happened.

"Why did he leave?"

I didn't know. Maybe all kinds of problems had cropped up between us.

But Tifa remembered that smile on Cloud's face when she last saw him. It had that kindness that made her think everything was all right.

I wonder if I was mistaken.

* * *

One fated day, Meteor came shooting down from outer space. Flowing out from the seams of the Planet, the Lifestream merged together and destroyed it. Tifa had watched the scene together with her companions from the sky.

I wished everything was just washed away. Wash away my past. Our past. Maybe I too felt the inevitable terror that was going to come with the relief brought by the end of the battle.

I wondered if I could continue living the way I was.

When someone was faced with the same question, then she would tell them that they should live on no matter what happened. But now that it was about her, she was unsure.

Thanks to Shinra Inc's development of Mako energy, the world was prospering. Light overflowed the ground's surface but at the same time, something much darker was happening. The anti-Shinra group, "Avalanche" took action to let the world know what that darkness was.

Mako energy was leading Planet to its destruction. Despite Avalanche's underground activity, little was achieved and the world remained unchanged. Once you understood the benefits of Mako, it was hard to turn your back against it. In an effort to change the situation, Avalanche chose to take more extreme action. In the Mako city of Midgar where large amounts of Mako energy was consumed and lots of people lived, they blew up one of the reactors.

Due to a miscalculation in the bomb they made, the area that got destroyed was greater than they had planned. The surrounding areas of the Mako reactor was also destroyed. In response to the incident, Shinra Inc was on the move to eliminate Avalanche. An entire sector of Midgar where Avalanche's hideout resided and many residents were was completely destroyed. It was a brutal act by Shinra in order to destroy the small rebel group Avalanche. In the end after the incident, Avalanche became the reason why countless innocent lives were lost.

That Avalanche was the group Tifa joined.

She had thought that sacrifices were more or less inevitable for their great goal. They were always ready to throw their lives away too. But after the catastrophe, Tifa and the others lost their stance on their original purpose. Amidst their struggle with Shinra Inc, they soon found themselves fighting the powerful Sephiroth. Tifa along with her childhood friend Cloud, the other remaining survivor of Avalanche Barret, Aeris who they met during all the chaos and Red XIII, they set out on their journey. After going through some more events, Cid, Cait Sith, Yuffie and Vincent also became her companions.

It seemed a new friendship was blooming but as if there was a price to pay, Aerith's life was taken away.

Even so, the journey was not over. Looking back at the course of their journey, Tifa could feel that their fight, whether it was a win or loss, was coming to a close.

It all started when I was still a young girl. There was some trouble in the Mako reactor that was built near my hometown of Nibelheim that threatened our safety.

Sephiroth was dispatched by Shinra to resolve the problem but he killed my father. I couldn't bear the hatred I had for Shinra and Sephiroth. Then I joined Avalanche. Yes. That was the start of the resentment I had for them inside me. The slogans Avalanche used about how they were anti-Shinra and anti-Mako was just what I needed to hide my true motive. But too many lives were sacrificed while we tried to save the Planet. If all that was just for my personal revenge then...

The sin held a role deep in Tifa's heart.

She wondered if she could live on with those feelings. Tifa was afraid of her future. She looked down from the sky towards the ground.

Meanwhile, Cloud was sitting next to her gazing at the same scenery but was smiling peacefully. It was a smile that she hadn't seen before during their journey. Cloud noticed her gaze and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Cloud, you're smiling."

"I am?"

"Yeah."

"Everything starts now. A new..." Cloud looked for the right words, "A new life."

"I'm going to live. I think that's the only way I can be forgiven. We've been through... all sorts of things."

"I guess you're right..."

"But when I think about how many times I've thought about starting a new life, it's funny."

"Why?"

"I've always failed to do it."

"That's not funny."

"...I think it will be all right this time."

Cloud became very quiet for a moment. Then he said, "Because you're always with me."

"I haven't always been with you."

"That's how it will be starting from tomorrow," Cloud replied smiling again.

* * *

Tifa went to see Aerith together with her companions. Aerith who was now at the bottom of the Forgotten City's spring. The world she wanted to save in exchange for her life would surely be all right now. That's what they were told. Tifa heard a voice asking if she was all right. She didn't know if it was Aerith's voice or her own. She couldn't help it but started crying. Right after Sephiroth took Aerith's life, Tifa felt no grief towards her death. There was sadness but that sadness was made into more anger and hatred she had towards the enemy. At least now she understood the sadness and pain she felt, tearing her heart apart as she visited the place. Being a member of Avalanche and being with a large group of people gave her these feelings. The tears wouldn't stop.

"I'm sorry, I'm really sorry."

She felt Cloud's hand on her shoulder. He held onto her firmly so that she wouldn't go anywhere. For now, she was just going to let herself cry as much as she felt like. Then she was going to leave the rest to him.

Alone, she just didn't know what she could do.

* * *

Tifa and the companions that she was with for the whole trial of the journey seperated just as easily as they joined. Vincent left just like one of those passengers that would sit next to you on a train. Yuffie protested. It just wasn't right for them to split up this way after all they've been through as friends. Barret was the one who said to her that they could see each other whenever they wanted if they all lived. Or maybe it was Cid. After promising to reunite one day, Tifa, Cloud and Barret seperated from the others leaving for Corel Town. It was Barret's hometown. The tragedies that occurred there because of Mako was what started everything for him. Standing silently for a moment, he told the others not to follow him. He too had to go on living bearing sins.

They also went to Nilbeim, Tifa and Cloud's hometown. They didn't feel any nostalgia. They were reminded clearly of the incident that took place in the town.

"I shouldn't have come, " said Cloud. "It draws me back to the past."

Cloud's words spokeout for the way Tifa felt too.

* * *

They then went to Kalm. There waiting for them was Aerith's foster mother Elmyra and the girl that was left in her care, Marlene. Two of Elmyra's relatives had a house in Kalm and that was where they stayed. Barret and Marlene were happy to see each other again. Cloud told Elmyra what had happened to Aerith.

There were no signs how they accepted what had happened but Tifa, Cloud and Barret apologized for not being able to save Aerith.

"You all done what you could. There's no need for you to apologize," said Elmyra.

Tifa and the others couldn't say anything in reply.

Did we really do all we could?

There were many people who arrived in Kalm to take refuge. The normal houses became emergency shelters. The residents of Kalm didn't charge them even though they could. Even the inn provided rooms for the people in need for free. It was like everyone was cooperating to rebuild the world.

"Come on, lets go home," said Cloud.

"Where to?" Barret asked.

"Our suspended reality."

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

"Our normal lives."

"And where do we have something like that?"

"We'll find one." Cloud looked at Tifa and said, "Right?"

"Yeah!" cried the cheerful Marlene. Tifa too nodded but just like Barret, she wondered where they had a normal life.

The four of them arrived back at Midgar. The city had recovered from all the shock and chaos that took place right after Meteor was destroyed. People were on the move again looking towards their future... No, their present lives for the time being. Seeing this made Tifa blame herself again. When she looked at Midgar from the sky she wished everything was just got washed away. She didn't know there were still so many lives here. Tifa couldn't forgive herself for being so selfish. She told Cloud and Barret what she was thinking when they were on the airship. Barret and Cloud understood how she felt and agreed. But they reminded her that no matter where they were or what they were doing, they wouldn't be able to get away from the sins in their consciousness.

"Since that's the case, we'll live on. We'll live on until we pay back for our sins. It's the only way," said Barret.

When Tifa and Cloud were alone, Cloud said to her, "It's not like you to be troubled by your thoughts."

"It's... Just the way I am."

"No. You're much more cheerful and strong. If you've forgotten the way you were then, I'll be there to remind you."

"You really will?"

"Probably," Cloud said blushing.

* * *

The first thing they done was gather information in and around Midgar. There was a lack of materials but importantly, there wasn't any information being passed around about where to get things. The three of them split up and went around sharing the information they gathered with those who were in need, about where they could get the things they wanted. They helped the people that couldn't move on their own. At night, they slept under a plate in Midgar where rumours had it that it could fall anytime.

One day, Barret came back with a wine jar, a heater and various fruits. They were given to him as thanks for helping someone dismantle a house.

"Just watch," Barret told them as he skilfully started working on some cooking that they've never seen before. The wine had been left to stand for two weeks since then. They found out that it was some special wine made in the town of Corel. Tifa and Cloud sipped their wine slowly. Barret literally drowned himself in wine. He looked like he was enjoying it as he talked about his memories of the peaceful times. He told them how he once drank too much and fell into a well. He also mentioned how he had forgotten why he had proposed to his now deceased wife, to marry him while he was drunk. It's been a long time since Tifa and Cloud burst out laughing.

The next day, Barret said in a serious tone, "How about we started a business and sold this wine?"

"We?" Cloud asked, surprised.

"Of course, you idiot! We can't draw customers! Tifa will have to do it."

"Me?"

"You're good at it."

Not long ago, Avalanche's hideout was at a bar named Seventh Heaven. It was what funded the members lives and activities. Tifa was the barmaid there or more accurately, the bar's manager. Barret continued.

"From my point of view, the people of Midgar can be split into two types. Those dilly dallying around who still can't accept what's happened to the city and those who are working to live on. I understand how both types of people are feeling. Everyone is facing their problems but they're just coping with it in different ways right? The solution to everyone's problem is wine."

"Why is that?"

"I dunno. But when we were half drunk yesterday, we laughed. We forgot all sorts of things right? That's the moment we're after."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

"Times like that are important ain't they? Hey Tifa, what do you think?"

Tifa couldn't answer right away. She understood what Barret was saying but, opening up a bar felt like going back to the times of Avalanche again. Cloud spoke up.

"Tifa, lets give it a go. If it gets too tough, we can just stop."

"It won't be tough. If Tifa doesn't work she'll end up thinkin' about all sorts of things. Then she'll end up not being able to do anything."

That might have been true.

The three of them made preparations. They decided to build their new business in the new city of Edge that was north of Midgar.

All the people that Barret and Cloud had helped before gathered together. They all transported all the materials that would be used to build parts of the store such as the walls and pillars.

Barret shouted out his orders while Cloud went around correcting them in a low voice. Tifa on the other hand learned how to make Corel's wine and improved it so that it was better to drink. She also thought of the food she could put on their menu using the steady supply of ingredients they could use. Marlene was like a mascot to the people who helped build their bar. It was as if she was emphasizing at how she was going to be the new barmaid. It was hardwork solving problems that arised everyday but it was some fulfilment for them. Sometimes Tifa would find herself feeling guilty for her sins when she smiled but, she would always get interrupted as someone calls her over to ask about something.

A few days more and they might be able to open the new bar, Cloud said. Barret asked what they were going to do about the name. There were a few suggestions but Cloud's ones were all meaningless and boring while Barret's ones made them think of monsters. In the end, it was Tifa who had to decide. The two men promised her that they wouldn't complain no matter what the name was. But it was nearing opening day and Tifa didn't have the time to think about it with all the work she had to do. One day, Marlene came and asked them what they were going to do about the bar's name.

"We're still thinking about it."

"I wish it was Seventh Heaven," said Marlene. It was a name Tifa wanted to avoid.

Just having the past in me was enough. There was no need to go to the trouble of making a name that would remind me of it.

"Why?"

"Because it was fun. If we make it Seventh Heaven we'll have fun again."

We had forgotten how adults had ambitions but, Marlene had nothing to do with them. To her, Seventh Heaven was a happy home where Barret, Tifa and her friends were.

"Hmmm, Seventh Heaven..."

I couldn't erase my past. I could only compromise and live on.

Tifa decided she was ready.

The first day of Seventh Heaven's opening was a great success. The Corel wine was something that you could make yourself when you felt like it so the price was nothing special. Because of the limited ingredients they had, they couldn't make any special dishes. Even so, people seeked places like this. A place where they could be with friends while drinking. A place where you could get over the sadness of reality or maybe forget about reality and think about the future. People who didn't have money were allowed to trade items to get a drink. A variety of juice were prepared too so that children could also go inside. They only served the ones that Marlene tried and liked. She was

someone who couldn't be missing out on anything. Marlene was the waitress who served until not too late into the night. Those who drank too much were ordered to go home without any hesitation.

Barret was sipping his wine in a corner. Maybe he was planning to be the bouncer. Cloud's job was to obtain the ingredients they needed for their food and wine. He didn't know most of the names of the fruit and vegetables. At first, Tifa was surprised but when she thought about the life that Cloud had, it couldn't be helped. It was funny when she thought about how Cloud's new life was going to start by remembering the names of vegetables. No, I musn't laugh, Tifa thought to herself.

Cloud wasn't good at socializing. He wasn't good at communicating but yet, he would go negotiate somewhere to obtain the ingredients they needed. The ingredients had a value greater than what they were worth. Cloud was moving on too.

After the first week of opening, Barret told the others that he was going to leave on a journey seeing how well the business was going now. He was going to leave Marlene behind.

"I wanna go on a journey to settle my past."

Cloud nodded as if he understood.

"Settle your past...? But I want to do that too."

"You guys can do that here. Don't just take. Try proving that you can give too."

Marlene who had always slept with Tifa, slept with her foster father Barret the night before he left. Their conversations could be heard late into the night.

Early next morning, Barret set off.

Behind him Marlene shouted, "Send me some letters! Phone too!"

Barret raised his artificial right arm up that had a machine gun attached to it. He kept walking without looking back. It was the back of a figure who had no other way to live than to fight.

I wonder just what kind of life he will find. I prayed that he would be able to stay far away from war. Not just take. I prayed he would be able to prove that he could give too.

"Make sure you be a "nice" kid!"

Cloud and Tifa glanced at each other, as they heard Barret's words. Be a "nice" kid?

"I'll take care of Cloud and Tifa!"

Barret turned round and shouted, "Take care!" His voice was a little shaky.

"Keep the family together and keep at it!"

* * *

Friends were a necessity to me so that I could live on without being suppressed by the sins in my consciousness. Even if they were fellow companions that had the same wounds. Even if they were fellow companions who were burdened with the same sins. We couldn't live without comforting each other and encouraging each other.

Maybe you could call that family. We just had to keep the family together and do our best.

Tifa thought she could get over anything being with friends that she could call family.

* * *

It's been several months since they opened the bar. There was a call from Cloud who went to collect their supply of ingredients. He wanted to discuss the privilege of how much one person could eat and drink for free during their lifetime at Seventh Heaven. Tifa knew what he wanted to say without listening to his story. She was sure there was something Cloud wanted to exchange that odd privilege for no matter what.

It was night and Cloud came back on a bike. It was a model that they had never seen before. Since then, he had been adjusting it whenever he could spare the time in between his job. He brought an engineer that he knew from somewhere to discuss about modifying his bike. It seemed a few other people came to help Cloud complete the modifications. Marlene and her young neighbourhood friends also watched. The scene reassured Tifa that they were really becoming a family in the world.

There were many times when Cloud had to leave Midgar for their supplies. The destination was mainly Kalm. He had to rent a bike or a truck or sometimes a chocobo but now, he had his own bike. Occasionally it seemed he would travel very far and manage to get some rare goods.

One night, there was a call for Cloud. After talking on the phone for a while, Cloud said he had to go out for a while.

"Where are you going?"

"How should I tell you this..."

Cloud told Tifa how there had many times when he was asked to deliver something while returning with supplies. The caller was one of the store owners who shared some of his vegetables with them. It seemed there was something that he wanted Cloud to deliver before the night was over by all means. Cloud gazed at Tifa like a kid who just had his secrets revealed.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Well... I'm sorry I kept quiet about it."

"About what?"

"Doing what I wanted."

Tifa burst out laughing. Cloud went on about how he got paid a little for delivering items. He felt guilty spending it all on the modifications for his bike. Tifa thought he was just like a kid. It may have been a little sad that Cloud had found another world that she didn't know about but, the fact that his world was expanding was a welcoming thought. Yes, it was similar to the feelings a mother would have. Tifa walked Cloud outside and was enjoying the new feeling that was blooming in her.

* * *

Tifa was able to live along with the sins in her conscience now but, she hadn't forgotten about them. Someday, the day may come when she will be punished. Until that day comes, Tifa was going to look ahead and live on. She was going to live not just taking but, proving that she herself can give too.

* * *

Tifa seriously encouraged Cloud to run a delivery service. They could just take requests at the bar. As for dealing with calls, Marlene or herself could do it. Cloud hesitated but, after thinking about it for one night, he accepted the suggestion. He was just being hesitant again after all.

And so, that was the beginning of the Strife Delivery Service. Midgar was the centre of their business but they also delivered all over the world. Only to the areas that Cloud could reach by bike, though. Cloud smiled at how he was like a big advertisement. His job was also a big success. It was a time when sending things weren't so easy for people who wanted to. Monsters were still lurking around and there were roads that were built in areas that could breakup due to the Lifestream bursting out. This job of travelling around the world wasn't something that anyone could do. It was a job he had been wanting. Tifa thought it was wonderful how Cloud, who wasn't very sociable, was doing a job that connected people through his delivery service.

After Cloud started his delivery service, their "family" life was affected greatly. It wasn't too good. Cloud was usually not at home apart from mornings and late night. And of course, that meant there were less chances for the three of them to have conversations together. Tifa tried closing the bar for a day every week but it didn't stop Cloud from doing his job. Cloud couldn't turn down requests. Although Tifa wanted everyone to be able to take some time off together now and then, she decided that it was too selfish of her. During that time, it was Marlene who noticed a change in Cloud. She told Tifa how Cloud would sometimes look up at the sky and not pay attention to her.

Cloud never really approached Marlene to talk in the first place but, I'm sure he never ignored her before when she talked to him. I knew that Cloud had his own ways of getting along with Marlene. I thought about how there were people everywhere that weren't good with children but had their own ways of coping with them.

I told her that Cloud was probably just tired but it bothered me. Marlene was a child who was sensitive about the changes in adults.

During their holiday, Tifa and Marlene were cleaning the room that was now Cloud's office. There were many papers that laid scattered about unsorted. One of them caught Tifa's eye.

Client Name - Elmyra Gainsborough

Delivery Item – Bouquet

Destination - The Forgotten City

Tifa put the paper away with the others as if nothing happened. But she was trembling severely. Transporting mail around the world meant Cloud was travelling around his past too. She knew that Cloud was in great pain because he couldn't protect Aerith. Cloud was on the verge of overcoming it but now, going back to the place where he and Aerith got seperated meant that his sorrow and regret was going to tear his heart apart once again.

It was night and they had closed the bar. Cloud was drinking wine even though he rarely does. He drained his glass. Tifa hesitated before going over and filling his glass.

"Shall I join you?" There was something she wanted to talk to him about.

"I want to drink alone."

Hearing that, Tifa lost control and said, "Then drink in your room."

Barret had called a few times. Most of the time, he wouldn't talk about himself but instead, asked more about how Marlene was doing. Then everytime he would end the call by having a little chat with Marlene. Marlene wondered if Tifa was listening or not before she told Barret in a sad voice, "Cloud and Tifa aren't getting along very well."

No matter what feelings Cloud and Tifa had between them, they couldn't drag Marlene into it Tifa thought to herself.

Tifa forced herself to talk to Cloud. When Marlene was near, she would pick something positive, something that wouldn't turn the conversation into a serious matter. Cloud was bewildered at the way Tifa changed but guessing at what she was trying to do, he went along with the mood and talked to her. Even Marlene joined in with their conversations.

I thought it went pretty well. But I couldn't talk about what I really wanted to talk about. I didn't know what to say.

One morning, Tifa shared a story she heard from a customer that seemed funny.

"That's really something that can't be done," Cloud thought aloud.

"It can't be done!" Marlene cried out.

All the adults were surprised and looked at Marlene.

"You've told us that story before! Cloud just gives the same answer everytime!"

It didn't go well but we were together. We were family. We lived in the same house and we were lived by keeping the family together. Maybe there wasn't much conversation or smiles. But we were family, Tifa thought to herself. No, it was what she made herself think.

After making certain that Cloud was asleep, she said to him.

"We'll be all right, won't we?"

Of course, there was no answer. Only the sound of Cloud sleeping could be heard. Tifa wondered if the fact that he was sleeping here meant that he was part of the family.

"Do you love me?"

Cloud woke up, a dubious look on his face.

"Hey, Cloud. Do you love Marlene?"

"Yeah. But sometimes I don't know how to approach her."

"Even though we've been together for sometime?"

"Maybe that just isn't enough."

"Even we aren't enough for you?"

Cloud didn't answer.

"Sorry for asking some strange things."

"Don't apologize. It's my problem."

Cloud closed his eyes.

"Lets work hard together."

Cloud didn't answer.

Not long after that, Cloud brought Denzel home with him. Denzel was already unconscious when he was brought into the bar. It was Geostigma. Cloud said the syndromes looked like they just started not long ago. As Tifa nursed Denzel, she thought of how there many children who were also infected with the same disease. There were many facilities setup for children who had lost their parents. Yet, why did Cloud bring Denzel here? Just when Tifa was going to ask him, Cloud muttered something.

"This kid came to my place."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean..."

* * *

After Denzel recovered, she listened to Denzel's story about everything that happened to him before he arrived here. Then she thought to herself that he was meant to come here. He was one of the victims when Sector Seven was destroyed.

Sector Seven was destroyed was because of us. That's why I had to take responsibility and raise him. He didn't go to Cloud's place. He met Cloud so that he could come to my place.

Tifa discussed with Cloud and Marlene about how she wanted to welcome Denzel into their family. Cloud nodded silently but Marlene was full of joy.

At first, Denzel was persistent in helping them as thanks for taking care of him but, his heart began opening to them as he helped Cloud with his job and around the bar.

It was night and the bar was closed. While cleaning up in the galley, Tifa looked up towards the centre table. There sat the manager of Strife Delivery Service, Cloud and his two assistants, Marlene and Denzel. Denzel often suffered because of Geostigma but on the days when he didn't have a fever or any pain, he would hang around with Cloud. Everyday, Cloud would spend half his day out. So once he was home, it was Denzel's precious time to spend with his hero. Yes, Cloud was a hero to Denzel. Riding on his bike, saving Denzel as he fought with terrors of death when the symptoms of Geostigma erupted... It was everything that Denzel had been yearning for. Denzel wanted to know ask Cloud about everything. He would keep asking Tifa questions that she could answer until Cloud returned home. Once, Tifa half jokingly said to Denzel that she was the one cooking their meals everyday. Denzel also said in an grown up manner that he cleaned the house and the bar everyday too.

It was true and he done a very thorough job of cleaning. When he was asked if it was his passed away mother who taught him how to clean, he answered no. The following day, Tifa asked Cloud who Denzel's cleaning teacher was. He had told Cloud about it. Tifa was a little hurt.

I was troubled at why Denzel told Cloud and didn't tell me. One day I tried asking a customer that was about the same age as Denzel about it. His answer was that boys were just like that. So there really weren't any problems. We were just a normal family.

The answer didn't make her understand them more but, the words "normal family" relieved Tifa.

After the bar was closed, the usual three people sat around the table. It wouldn't be a surprise if someone said it was a young father with his two children. If Tifa felt like it, she could go over to that table and be welcomed with smiles.

Cloud laid out a map on the table. He was making sure of the routes that he was going to take to do deliveries the next day. Denzel and Marlene was sorting out the papers. When there were any words that Marlene couldn't read, she asked Denzel. Denzel would then teach Marlene like an older brother. When there were words that even Denzel couldn't read, he would ask Cloud. Cloud had the habit of handing them a pen after telling them how to read them. He told them that if they couldn't write the words then they wouldn't be able to remember them either. The various names of places on the papers made the children curious and they asked Cloud what they were like. Cloud's descriptions were simple. There are lots of people. There are very little people. There's lots of monsters so it's dangerous. Taking the north route is safer... They were descriptions that would

make you ask, "is that all?" but the children seemed content. Soon, Tifa wanted to talk a little about the places too. When she added in more detail, Denzel would ask Cloud if it was true. It annoyed Tifa a little. But she also thought it was all right. That's probably what normal families were like.

Maybe they became a real family after Denzel arrived. Cloud was clearly taking less jobs. At night, he would always make sure he had time to spend with the children. The silly little conversations he had with Tifa were also back.

* * *

"So the problem was resolved?"

"What problem?"

"Your problem."

"Yeah..."

Cloud thought about it.

"It's OK if you don't want to tell me."

"I can't really explain it well..." Cloud warned before starting to talk.

"The problem isn't resolved. Well, I don't think it will be resolved for a long time to come. You can't retrieve lives that have been lost."

Tifa nodded silently.

"But maybe we can still save those lives that are endangered just now. Maybe even I can do it."

"You mean Denzel?"

"Yeah."

"Hey, do you remember what you said when you brought Denzel here?"

"What did I say?"

"You said Denzel came to your place."

"Well..." Cloud looked like a kid that about to be scolded as usual.

"Tell me. I'll decide whether I'm angry or not after I listen."

Cloud nodded and continued.

"Denzel had collapsed in front of the church where Aerith used to be. That's why I thought Aerith lead him to "my place"."

Saying all that in one breathe, Cloud looked away.

"You went to the church."

"I wasn't planning to hide there."

"You were hiding."

"I'm sorry."

"I didn't say you couldn't go. But next time, I'll go together with you."

"I understand."

"And you're wrong, Cloud."

Cloud looked dubiously at Tifa.

"Aerith didn't bring Denzel to you."

"Yeah, that's what I thought too."

"Aerith brought that child to us, didn't she?"

Cloud gazed at Tifa and finally smiled. It had that kindness that made her think everything was all right.

* * *

Days after having that conversation, Cloud left. Tifa wondered if the smile she saw was just an illusion. After kissing the sleeping children on the face, she went into Cloud's office. Brushing away the dust on the family photo they took, she tried calling him. After several rings, the messaging service took over.

Fin

Lifestream White 1

The woman was an Ancient. Which explained how she was able to maintain her individuality even within the Lifestream. If she so wished she could become part of the planet at any time, but the woman thought it too early for that just yet.

The woman had sensed a different presence within the Lifestream cycling around the planet. It was the vehemence of a strong will, one that would never join with the planet. She knew this consciousness. It was the man who had taken her life. A merciless spirit hidden behind a beautiful wall. That spirit was now operating from within the Lifestream. The woman sensed that he was planning to exert his influence to the surface of the planet. She wondered what she could do.

Because it would be dangerous for her to come in contact with him, the woman tried to keep away from the man's consciousness. Because of this, she couldn't learn much of the man's plot. However, just once, when the man's spirit had suddenly appeared near her, she discovered that he had made his memories of Cloud the core of his being.

Cloud was her friend, her beloved — a symbol of what was important to her, and someone to be protected.

Case of Barret

1

It had been several months since that day—the chosen day. After helping Tifa and Cloud build their home, Barret entrusted his best friend Dyne's orphaned daughter Marlene to the two of them and embarked on a journey. It was a journey to settle the sins of his past. Before departing, he offered several words to Tifa, who shouldered the same guilt. Don't just take. Prove you know how to give. He thought doing that would lead her, at the very least, to redemption. But his own words brought him no solace, and Barret remained unsure of what he was supposed to do. Being with Marlene gave him peace of mind; he felt guilty for putting off action just one more day. He knew he had to leave, even if he had no purpose. Put some space between him and his heart's crutch, bear himself to the wilds. This was a "quick-fix" departure.

For half a year he roamed the world. Other than the geostigma problem, life outside of Midgar had turned to some semblance of normal. The only difference was that hardly anyone used mako—not a single reactor was operating. At one time, this would have been considered a victory for Barret and the anti-Shinra movement, but the feeling of being lost overcame any sense of satisfaction. There was no place for a man with a gun attached to his right arm except amidst battle and chaos. Take those away, and where do I get to pay for my sins? He felt panicked, even.

Sometimes he wandered the forests looking for a fight, taking down any monsters that attacked, but all the feverish battles would bring was self-loathing. All I'm killing is stress. And every time, Barret would let out a roar.

"Rrraaahhhhhh!"

It happened when he was walking among the crowds in Junon. Something had bumped into his weapon arm, and when he looked down, a young child was crying, blood running from his forehead. When Barret hastened to tend the wound, a woman who was surely the boy's mother came running and said:

"Please! Please forgive my boy. I beg of you, I'll do anything!"

The mother's eyes were trained on the machine gun installed on Barret's right arm. In peacetime, I'm the same as a monster, he thought. Times were changing. He had to think of a new way to atone that benefited the new age. He couldn't exactly grasp what that was, but he knew he was supposed to change first.

Barret went to visit Old Man Sakaki, an artisan who once crafted prosthetic arms for him. The first model was a simple design, fashioned with a hook at the end. Barret was dissatisfied. He had wanted to do more. Like dig in the dirt—the old man had made him a shovel arm—or drive wooden posts—a custom-built hammer arm did nicely. But Barret wasn't satisfied by any of these. One day, the old man had told a visibly displeased Barret, "Your head's filled with revenge against Shinra. You'll never be satisfied by anything you stick on that arm of yours. Just take this and don't come back again."

What the old man had passed on to him was an adaptor that let him attach implements to his arm. By using it, Barret could attach various prostheses—or weapons—to his right arm.

"What you attach is entirely up to you. I suggest you give it some thought."

Despite the old man's warnings, Barret didn't do much thinking at all. The days that ensued were filled with him trying out any weapon he could get his hands on and boosting his firepower. For the next several years, all Barret attached to his arm adaptor were weapons.

When Barret returned to the workshop, he told the old man to make him a new arm—one with a softer texture, with a hand at one end. One that nobody would fear, one that would let him melt into ordinary life. Old Man Sakaki only gave a snort and stared at Barret.

"I'm not just about fightin'. I don't want people 'fraid of me no more."

"So? Who are you trying to be?"

"Like I said..." Barret started to respond, and searched within himself only to find he had no answer. What the hell am I gonna do melting into a world where people are learning how to get all smiley again?

"Shit! Th' hell should I know."

"I'll need a week. All right?"

"Fine. While you're doin' that, I—"

"If you've got no other plans," the old man interrupted, "why don't you help my nephew out with his work? And in return...hmm."

"Forget it. I don't need no reward."

"Well, I'll think of something."

The next day, Barret rode along in the truck. Old Man Sakaki's nephew was driving, and Barret recognized the machine as the same type that took him all over the place as a kid. Its engine ran on steam from burning coal and heating up water in the boiler.

It took four men working together to run it: one driver at the handle, one engineer to keep tabs on engine output, and two boilermen to pump coal into the chamber. At the rear of the truck's massive body, a bed was attached that could carry about ten people. The coal occupied about five men's worth of space, and Barret commanded about two men's worth of the space that was left.

He was sprawled out face up, gazing at the sky. Man, this is slow going, he thought. It was nobody's fault. Large steam-powered trucks had always plodded along like this. The men were dripping sweat and working as hard as they could. Everything was running at full power. A middle-aged boilerman came out onto the bed for a break.

"Sorry to barge in while your pissed, but I gotta take a seat."

"I ain't pissed, so don't be sorry."

"Yer only pissed enough that the anger's jumpin' off your skin."

Barret sat up and glared at the man. "Th' f—k's your problem?"

"There you go—I'm right, see?"

The two fell silent for a while. Eventually the boilerman opened his mouth again.

"You plannin' to be our bodyguard forever?"

"I'm just doin' the old man a favor. I dunno what comes after that."

"You're not cut out for it?"

"Bein' a bodyguard? Ain't nobody more cut out for that than me."

"Dunno about that." The boilerman fell silent. Barret waited for him to continue. What do I look like to this fool?

"Hey, say what you're gonna say, man." Maybe the guy can gimme a clue about what to do with my life. "What type do I look like to you?"

"The type that, instead of just takin' out the monsters that come along, goes out lookin' for monster dens to smash."

Whaddaya know. Maybe I do.

"Even if you don't know where those dens are," said the boilerman with a smile.

"You make me sound like an idiot."

"It's not easy, what you do. Maybe you oughta be proud, eh?"

Barret looked the other man in the eye and laughed, heh heh heh. The boilerman returned a puzzled look.

"Can I hit you up for some advice?"

"Depends on the advice."

"I want to make up for my sins. That's why I'm on the road. But no matter how much time goes on, I can't figure out the way to do it. I'm prob'ly just the man you say. Whaddaya think a guy like that's gotta do to atone?"

"I'd say it depends on the sins."

"Countless people died...because of me."

Barret recalled the time he blew up Mako Reactor One with his comrades in Avalanche. Damage far beyond what they'd expected. The city in panic. How his friends kept dying. Citizens he never knew.

The boilerman saw Barret had fallen silent and said, "You just gotta stand tall and live, that's all. Just keep on tryin' whatever you think it takes to make amends."

"I was afraid you'd say that."

"So what if you don't know where the monster dens are. You get out there and smash 'em. Maybe one day you'll get rid of the monsters for—Hey, over there!"

The boilerman pointed behind the truck. A small but threatening monster was giving chase. Barret pointed the end of his right arm at the monster and fired without bothering to get a bead. The creature's body shattered to the ratta-tatta of rapid-fire bullets.

"Sucks to be a monster today," commented Barret.

When Barret turned to tell the boilerman not to worry, he noticed that the boilerman's gaze was fixed on his right arm. It was the same look as the woman from Junon. Maybe I'm the monster.

"You know, man, the monsters' den might be somewhere inside me."

The boilerman wasn't kind enough to answer.

2

The truck's destination was a small village that made its collective living growing potatoes in the fields. One after another, hemp sacks full of potatoes were packed onto the truck bed, which had gone through half the coal since their departure. As he helped with the work, Barret wondered, When they sell these potatoes in town, how much do they go for? No question the truck team's wages were tacked on to the village's asking price for the potatoes. Food prices were a problem in Midgar. Too high, even for a time of crisis. But seeing so many folks hard at work, he started to realize there wasn't any way around it. Once the mako supply stopped, most engine-powered farming equipment was rendered useless. Raising potatoes without it had to be more than arduous.

Barret soon found himself deep in thought. If they can't use machinery, people have no choice but to move their bodies. Well, we got plenty of people. In Midgar, there are all kinds of folks with no jobs, struggling just to find food, right? Sure, they could just gobble up whatever's growing at their feet, but then they'd just run out of food. Yeah, they gotta sow some seeds, or get some plants in the ground and take care of 'em. For that matter, they gotta raise some livestock.

Ah, bingo, he thought. If we all had a mind for it, the day is bound to come when we can live without want—at least not for food. When we need machines, we can use coal, like with the truck. All we gotta do from now on is go back to the way things were before mako. Times might be a little tight. Things might move kinda slow. For someone impatient like me, it might even be unbearable. But that's how it's gotta be. More like, that's how times change.

Barret smiled, pleased with how quickly he'd arrived at his own idea. Then he got to pondering what he could do. First, he'd attach a hoe to his right arm and start plowing the fields. He'd make the best of his powerful body and do the work of five men. But wait—new times call for a new leader. Is that my role? Barret's thoughts picked up speed. He imagined himself firing off orders, his friends straining to catch each and every one.

"On it, Barret!" Jessie would say as she flew out of the room, with Wedge and Biggs close behind. But then scenes from his days as Avalanche's leader came to mind, and for a moment his vision of a bright future changed to deep regret.

"Grrrrraaaaaahhh!" cried Barret.

Damn, there I go again, he thought, and glanced around. But no one was looking at him. The whole lot was gathered in front of a house, watching as Old Man Sakaki's nephew spoke with a middle-aged man who must have been from the village. Barret stepped forward to listen to the conversation.

"I haven't got any problem taking your daughter to Midgar. But she looks awful weak... We might not make it in time."

"But..." The middle-aged man carried a young girl upon his back, who slumped lifelessly. She was a beautiful girl. But from one arm dribbled a black liquid—the horrid geostigma, and an awful case at that. Barret had walked into the kind of moment he hated most: Right now, there's a crisis in front of you and you can't do a damn thing about it.

Barret knew that even if she went to Midgar, she wouldn't find any decent treatment. Maybe it would be best to tell her that. Shouldn't you spend your last days quietly, in the village? But saying that would rob father and child of their hope. Is this all I can do? Shut up and let matters take their course? Barret wanted to scream.

"Wouldn't goin' to Midgar just be a waste of time?" asked a voice. Barret looked beside him and saw the familiar face of the boilerman, scowling.

"Prob'ly," replied Barret.

"Then I better tell 'em," said the boilerman, and he started to walk toward the man and his daughter.

"Hold up," Barret called.

But the man wouldn't listen. Barret went after him, hoping to stop him before his words brought despair to the man and his daughter. The boilerman sighed, turned around, and said to Barret, "You think we should just let her go to Midgar, so long as it makes her happy, right? Even if there's no point?"

"Yeah."

"Well, that's all well and good if you got an airship, but all we got ourselves is a truck. The bed gets hot. It's a hard ride. You know that. What do you do if she ends up dyin' even sooner 'cause of that?"

"Still, come on, man..."

"Don't worry, I'll be the one to tell 'em. Maybe I kill her pop's hope. But the girl should be at home for the end."

Barret didn't know if he or the boilerman had the right. He had to think. His mind started to whirl. Again he wanted to scream, but held it in.

After a time, the boilerman came back without even joining the conversation.

"She just drew her last breath."

"What!?"

"You... wanna hear what her last words were?"

No, he thought, but the boilerman continued.

" 'Please, take me to Midgar.' "

The boilerman clenched his fists. He knew he had been wrong.

"Rrrrrraaaaaahhhhhh!" cried Barret. "Nobody's wrong!" He gave in to rage, lifted his right arm to the skies, and fired the gun.

The ratta-tatta echoed throughout the quiet village.

Barret stayed in the village to witness the girl's burial. He asked her haggard father if there was anything he could do.

"If only we'd had an airship," the man muttered. "I used to be a crewman aboard the Gelnica. If she was still flying, maybe my baby girl wouldn't have had to die. It's just a short hop from here to Midgar."

"Listen, man." He knew he had to say something. "I know how you feel, but they can't cure the stigma, not even in Midgar."

If only this. If only that. As soon as you started thinking about what the world of what-ifs had over reality, tomorrow became hard to ascertain. Barret had experienced that himself. And lamenting what you never had any control over in the first place—the way this father was—was even worse. While Barret searched for the right words, the man started to speak.

"It doesn't have to be Midgar. Anyplace. The moment we heard they could fix the stigma there, we could be en route with the sick. If we had an airship, we'd be ready."

"Ready?"

"My daughter's not the only one suffering from geostigma." Though he'd only just lost his child, the father's eyes were fixed on what was ahead.

The future Barret had painted in his mind while packing potatoes onto the truck had faded entirely. Why can't we run just a few of the airships and the other useful machinery? Hell, in Midgar they use work vehicles and other machines. Why not an airship, then? So long as we don't waste the mako. Times have changed, and I'm gonna do the same.

Not far to the east of Rocket Town stretched a desert region where hardly any vegetation grew. Situated there was an oil derrick about fifty meters high, and a small, aging refinery built next to it.

Several men and women stood beneath the weathered derrick. One of them was Shera, dressed in a white lab coat.

The engineer standing next to her shook his head. "It's down seventy percent compared to last month. Bad news, that's what this is. So how are things goin' on your end?"

"We're done. I can't say it compares to mako, but we've managed to take the refining process quite a ways."

"Knew you'd pull it off. Now we just need the stuff to refine, huh?" The engineer directed his stare toward the ground. Shera couldn't help but follow his gaze. She thought of the milling drill pipe, whirring away to dig up any oil left underground.

"Just a little more." Shera clapped her hands together in prayer, but the stain on the back of her left hand wasn't oil. It was the stigma.

3

Rocket Town was once the base for the Shinra Electric Power Company's space program. The engineers had eventually settled down there, turning it into a bustling village.

When Barret arrived in the town, he saw children playing. Some were the same age as Marlene. His eyes lit up immediately.

"What you kids playin'?" he asked. The children looked up, their eyes slowly taking in the sight. "How 'bout you let an old guy join in?"

The children bolted. Barret clicked his tongue and looked at his right hand.

"Just gotta put up with this till my hand's done."

"You're scary even without the gun," someone called out from behind him.

"Wait a minute, you're—" He couldn't put a name to the face.

"I doubt you'd remember me. I'm from the Highwind crew." The Highwind was the name of the airship Barret and the others wound up boarding during their journey to save the planet.

"Oh, I gotcha. Well, thanks for helpin' out back then."

"You're very welcome."

Barret wasted no time in asking the man to take him to Cid. As they walked, he heard a dull metal pounding.

"Break time's over, y'know. We better get a move on."

"Whatcha all up to?"

"What do you think? This is where Cid's gang comes home to roost, after all."

"An airship?"

"See for yourself!"

Past the long line of houses, a large area opened up, and Barret could see an enormous airship—yeah, just like the old Highwind!—under construction.

"Well, shit! Wouldja lookit that."

The airship was girdled by a crude scaffold. On top of the scaffold—which didn't look like it would earn any applause for its safety precautions—worked about twenty townsfolk. All Barret could hear was the shrill retort from the metal armor plating being hammered into place. The airship looked all but finished.

"Hey, she's all done!"

"Yeah, but just the trimmings. Take a gander." The man pointed to an empty engine bay. "It's because we can't use mako anymore. The engine is gonna take some time."

From out of nowhere came the earth-shaking crash of an explosion. Barret panicked and hit the dirt.

"Cap'n's over there," laughed the old comrade, pointing to a garage behind the airship.

Inside the garage, a single engine that looked like it would fit an airship sat upon a massive workbench.

Several men peered at it from a safe distance, and all of them wore goggles. Again, the sound of an explosion. Barret flinched. One of the men shucked off his goggles and ran up to the engine.

"Sonufabitch!"

Cid leaned in to examine the engine, gnashing his teeth as if he were about to tear off a piece.

"Goddamn piecea shit! I'm gonna flatten you into last week's scrap!"

Barret grinned. He hadn't heard such foul language in ages. He ain't changed one bit, this one. Cid sauntered over to Barret, spouting profanity with every step.

Barret greeted Cid with a laugh. "Talk like that and God's gonna get on your case!"

"God? You haul his ass down here," snapped Cid, not missing a beat. "I gotta have words with him."

The two quickly filled each other in on recent events.

"I left Marlene with Tifa. Since she's taken to her and all."

"Good for you. Whole world's clappin' you on the back. So Cloud's with Tifa?"

"Yeah. Tifa opened a bar, just like the old days. Cloud was helpin' out, but it sounds like he's got his own business keepin' him tied up now. A delivery service."

"Cloud? Run a business?"

"You can bet it's Tifa kickin' his ass into shape."

"I see. In the end, it's the women wear the pants."

"How's Shera?"

"Meh, she's about the same," dodged Cid.

After that he steered the conversation away by talking about how Red XIII kept dropping by, how Yuffie was teaching the wushu fighting style to the kids of Wutai, and how Vincent had stayed completely out of touch.

"So whatcha need? I'm a busy man."

"You're buildin' an airship, right?"

"That I am."

"Would you let me help out?"

"You? What's a tenderfoot like you gonna do?"

Normally Barret would offer an enraged retort, but he let it bounce off and told Cid about what he'd been through.

"If you had an airship, man, you'd have all kinds of saved lives on your hands. Like folk with the stigma. If they found a cure somewhere, you could bring 'em there in a flash. You could even fly guys in from all over the place who could treat it. Deliver loads of food. Anything people needed to live, ya know?"

"Well, now, you like to lay it all out." Cid brought his face closer to Barret's. "We're talking about using mako. Mako! You know how much mako energy it takes to make one short hop with an airship?"

"Hell no. But listen." Barret recounted what he'd been thinking about on his way there. Just can't be greedy. Use mako and you shorten the planet's life. True enough. But I'm not talkin' enough to change things down the line. Just a little. The planet oughta forgive us takin' just what we need to stay alive.

Cid's reaction: "Hooey. What happened to Avalanche's leader?"

Barret had nothing to say to that. As far as coming to terms with his past, he thought he'd had his own answer. But now that someone was calling him on it, he searched for the right words. The gloom took over deep inside, and he raised his right arm. He was ready to open fire, then realized he was indoors and stopped short. But he did scream.

"Grrraaaaaahhh!"

Everyone in the room turned to stare at Barret.

"Sorry. Uhh, as you were," he said to the people around him, faking his best smile. Then he hung his head, searching for the words to explain himself. Instead of words, tableaux from his past sprung to mind. That way-too-serious look on Biggs', Wedge's, and Jessie's faces. C'mon, say something. Go on, guys, blame me.

He shook his head as if to shoo the three figures away, then glanced up. Cid looked blurry.

"What the hell's with you? Cid asked, surprised.

"Cid, you gotta tell me. I dunno what to do. My past's like a minefield full of mistakes. But there had to have been things that were right. But what, which of 'em was right? Which was wrong? Which me am I supposed to be from now on? No, I wanna change. Am I not allowed, 'cause of my past? Huh? Am I supposed to keep this gun stuck on my arm, scarin' kids? Is that how I make up for my sins? I don't know anymore. Help me, Cid... What am I supposed to do?"

And in the end, Barret did open fire at the ceiling, tearing several holes in it. Cid looked up at the ceiling and said:

"Well, for starters, you can fix that."

Cid sauntered over as Barret was working up a sweat fixing the holes in the ceiling. Out of embarrassment, Barret chose to ignore him and continued the repairs. Cid sat himself down a short distance away.

"You all calmed down now?"

"Scuse me."

Cid shook his head to say no worries. "I want your help with somethin'."

Barret stopped working and peered at Cid.

"First, mako. You hit the nail on the head. We'll take just a little from the planet, just what we need. We had the same idea. Truth is, airships are useful. 'Specially when the world's in the middle a' tryin' to pick itself up. If someday they tell me they don't need mine anymore, I guess I can just find me a spot with a nice view to set her down, and turn her into my house."

Cid went on to tell him about the current energy situation. As things stood, mako reactors around the world were at a halt. And that was by no means because the general public felt remorseful for mako usage shortening the planet's life. There was a more practical problem: upkeep was difficult without Shinra, who had run the mako reactors.

But the real reason no one restarted the reactors?

"By now, everybody knows that mako energy sucked out the Lifestream and consumed it," said Cid. "And that day, they all experienced firsthand how terrible the Lifestream could be. They're scared. Scared of pissin' the planet off."

Barret remembered the sight of it vaporizing Meteor closing in on Midgar, just moments before it would destroy the planet. The Lifestream's power was overwhelming, surely far beyond anything man could ever produce.

"Ain't nobody wants to touch mako with a ten-foot pole."

"So you're sayin' there's no way to make mako energy now?" asked Barret.

"Ayup. Prob'ly not. There's still some mako left that got sucked into Midgar's reactors and never got used. Right now, those mako reserves power every mako engine worldwide. Area leaders are managin' it, divvyin' it up to the people they figure need it. Mainly it's to get machinery runnin' that'll help with reconstruction."

"Yeah, I know. I was in Midgar. But c'mon, what's wrong with spinnin' just one of them reactors now and then? Forget how scary it is." Forgive me, Biggs, Wedge, Jessie.

"Won't get another drop of Mako outta the ground there. The flow of the Lifestream's changed."

"You checked it out?"

"Red told me. If he says so, it must be true enough."

Barret was at a loss for words. Was the planet telling them not to use mako anymore?

"Now, if we were to throw together a mako reactor in some other place, that's a whole 'nother story. But first we gotta find that place, transport all the materials... No tellin' when we'd finish. Then there's the matter of how to transport those materials in the first place."

"That's no good at all!"

"Ayup, once those mako reserves run out, it's all over. The world'll revert back to the age of coal. We'll just have to poke along in the good ol' steam trucks again. Go back to chocobos-are-the-fastest-form-a'-ground-transportation-thank-you-ma'am. Not that that's so bad, really."

"So you wanna live as a quitter? You say we gotta go through life facin' backwards? Yeah, we effed up big time, I know. Maybe it is best we don't go walkin' down the same path. So what? We just gonna tread water? Why can't we search for another way?"

"Which brings us to oil," Cid said with a grin.

"Oil? That useless goop?"

To Barret, who worked in coal mines, the mention of oil was a surprise. All it was ever good for was burning in lamps.

"It's only been useless since mako came along. Truth is, oil was supposed to usher in a new era. We even had us some respectable technology to produce different fuels from oil. But once mako showed up, the technology was carried over to mako applications. And so oil had up an' vanished from history."

But Cid continued, explaining how he and his team had pulled out old records and located an oil field. Luckily, it wasn't too far from Rocket Town. On site, they'd found facilities to drill for oil and refine it into gasoline—half-collapsed, maybe, but there nonetheless. Cid and his companions had restored the facilities to an operational status. But gasoline didn't yield enough power.

They needed a more potent fuel. They had persisted in efforts to that end, and at last prospects for making jet fuel were looking bright. In tandem with that, work was underway to revamp the engines to run on the new fuel. But that work wasn't going quite as well.

"When did you fools ever find the time—"

"After it happened. Right after."

"Well, damn, Cid! That's incredible!"

"Like I said, we had the records. There ain't a speck a' new technology. All we did was bring the old tech back to life."

"Whatever you did, this means the end of coal, don't it?" Barret, having grown up in a coal miners' town, had mixed feelings about that.

"Times change. We just happened to be born on the cusp, that's all."

"Can't say I feel one way or the other about that."

"Then how 'bout you feel lucky? The comin' age is our chance to try all kinds a' things."

"True that."

"The only unlucky part is..."

"What?"

"With so much to try, we're all gonna run outta time. Ain't that a bitch?"

Cid and Barret set out east from Rocket Town. They walked a full day before reaching their destination. Shera came out to greet the two of them.

"Yo!" called Barret, who was happy to see her again after so long. Shera looked like she hadn't changed at all. But Barret noticed the stigma on her hand right away. She must've sensed it, as she made an attempt to hide her hand beneath her coat.

"Well, does it hurt?" Cid asked gruffly. "Don't push yourself."

We're all gonna run out of time, thought Barret.

Cid looked up at the oil derrick. It showed no signs of operation.

"Why the hell isn't this—"

Shera quickly explained the situation.

"We shut it down this morning. We might have gotten more, but output had dropped all the way to ten percent of when we started drilling, so we had to shut down the pump."

Cid slumped his shoulders and muttered, "The first day it came spurtin' out even without the damned pump. We turned jet black from all the oil rainin' down. Laughed our asses off."

Barret let out a great sigh.

"The planet ain't gonna give us nothin' else, huh."

"That's not true," Shera said in a firm voice. "The planet has all kinds of things in store for us. Like coal, oil, mako, you might say. There might even be things we don't know about yet. We'll be okay, as long as we don't misuse them.

As long as we don't get greedy. If we're resourceful. The planet must be concerned about us. After all, the Lifestream that courses through it was once the lives of people who lived right here where we stand."

Cid and Barret ruminated on those words.

Shera—she'll always be concerned about Cid, whether she lives, or returns to the planet, thought Barret. Same goes for Cid. And the same for me.

"Shera..." was all Cid said before falling silent.

After a short time passed, he opened his mouth again. "Shera. How's the fuel?"

"Fine. It partly depends on your engine efficiency, but you should be able to fly once around the planet. More than enough for a test flight, I'd say, but what do you think?"

"The engine's not ready. Nothin's workin'. The end's nowhere in sight. Listen, Shera..."

"What is it?"

Cid had fallen silent. Barret chimed in despite himself.

"Cid just wants you to, to help out with the engine development. Kick his ass into shape, ya know? Just 'cause the fuel's all done—there's still heaps of work to do."

"I know." Shera looked at Cid. "I can't throw in the towel yet."

Barret needed to say more.

"And after you build the engine, there's still lots for you to do!"

Shera answered only with a smile.

The three of them looked up at the derrick in silence.

"Barret," said Cid. "Know about any oil fields?"

"You just leave it to me!" Barret had no more doubts. Hey, planet. Hey, all you lives that course through it. If you wanna punish me, you go ahead and do it. But I'm gonna fight back with all I got. The only ones who get to punish me are the folk who are still living. I'm gonna live, so the living have a tomorrow.

When Barret returned to his workshop, Old Man Sakaki held out a new prosthesis made just the way he'd ordered it. The hand was made of wood, and had a warm feel to it. It wasn't meant to fit an adaptor, but attached directly to the arm instead. Barret looked at the hand, then at the old man and said, "I still got journeyin' to do. I gotta find some land that yields oil. I may end up goin' places nobody else would dare enter, dangerous places. There's no tellin' what monsters I'll find. So I still need a weapon. And not just to defend myself. I'm not allowed to stop fightin'. If my fightin' means somebody else doesn't have to, then that's my calling. No, my penance."

After listening to Barret's uncharacteristically coherent words, Old Man Sakaki went into the back, and then returned with some sort of parcel. When he opened it, Barret saw a prosthesis inside with traces of rust upon it. It was an exquisitely made steel hand. Even the fingers looked like they moved.

"With practice, you could even write with it. How well you do depends entirely upon you."

"This..."

"...was to be a payment of sorts for helping my nephew. But since you don't seem to need it, I'll hold on to it."

"I'm sorry. You went through so much trouble to make it."

"No trouble. I made it for you years ago."

"Come pick it up when everything's over," the old man said. "I'll have the rust all polished off."

After leaving the workshop and walking a while, Barret thought, I shoulda written a letter to Marlene. Maybe I oughta call her, too. No. Once it's all over I'll come back here and write it with that hand the old guy made me. And I'll take that letter to Marlene myself. Barret wanted to scream. So, at his heart's behest, he did.

"I'm comin'!"

Fin

Lifestream Black 2

When the Lifestream erupted onto the surface of the planet, the man had already surrendered his inconsequential memories to the planet. Memories from when he was a boy, of his few friends, of the battles when he was still unaware, of his life in bygone days- all these became a part of the inundation, encased around Meteor, and finally receded. At the same time, the core of his spirit, and those memories deeply related to it, moved from torrent to torrent, and traveled around the land, from city to city. When the people who were trying to escape, or those left unable to do anything but stand still, were enveloped by those streams, he decided to leave them with his stigma. If Cloud noticed that stigma, the man was certain that he would never disappear. As long as Cloud remembers me, I can continue to exist. Within the Lifestream, and on the surface. Even if my spirit disseminates, even if just one fragment of a memory courses around the planet, in the end I can count on Cloud's consciousness to bring me back, the man thought.

Case of Nanaki

Oh, Gilligan please begone. Just who are you? Nanaki who was also known as Red XIII faced the moon and howled as he tried to spit out the pitch black monster that had nested itself inside him. His howl echoed across the cold plateau of the night. The burning flame at the tip of his elastic tail lit up the red fur that covered his entire body as he shook and howled.

There was nothing around to answer Nanaki's distant howl. It had always been the same but just this time, he thought there was a sign. It was one that told him he will most likely have to resolve this problem alone. Gilligan was inside him and was his enemy alone.

It was just a few days ago that he realised its existence. Gilligan was born after Nanaki was— Or so that was the order it happened as he thought back.

* * *

After the journey with Cloud and the others to defeat Sephiroth and save the planet ended, Nanaki returned to Cosmo Canyon. The people of the valley warmly welcomed the return of Nanaki who helped end the battle and listened to the story of his travels with deep interest. Nanaki was filled with pride.

Then Nanaki went to see his father, the brave warrior who fought the Gi Tribe and now stood petrified watching over the valley.

"Father, you and mother were fine warriors who watched over this valley. That's why I tried to protect it just like you did. And I think I managed to do it. That's why I will be travelling again, father. This time it won't be about fighting. I will look at life around the world. Chocobos being born, trees withering and hmmm— I don't know what else but, I'll look at all sorts of things, everything. Grandpa told me. He told me that it's my errand to continue watching such things, remember it all and tell my descendants all about it. Oh and—" Nanaki's gaze ran over his father looking at his petrified eyes and ears as he thought, "And I will tell you everything too, father. Yes, I'll do that."

Nanaki then told the people of the valley the very same things. That he was going to obey the last words of his deceased grandfather Bugenhagen—And make "the journey to record the world" his new errand. They all encouraged him saying it will be very meaningful. And reassuring him that they will always be here for him, they saw him off.

Leaving the village through the plateau, Nanaki looked back after going down a steep path. The people of the valley were still waving to him. In answer, he sat back and raised his front legs, head high in the air and howled. Farewell. I will be back. Take care. With that, he ran down the rest of the path in a single breathe. Before long he arrived at a crag. It was the spot he would always stop to look back whenever he left the village. After he leaves it, the village will be out of sight. Just like those times he looked back up—but he couldn't see it. A giant boulder that he was sure wasn't there before blocked his view. Ah yes, Nanaki thought to himself. The lifestream passed through here. That must have caused the boulder to fall down from somewhere. When I made my way back here, I noticed the geography has changed in many places. At the very least when he went to check nearby, he found layers of rocks and parts that had once protruded out of ledges had all collapsed. It can't be

helped, thought Nanaki. The changes weren't troubling anyone. When compared to say Midgar's reconstruction and its destroyed cities, this was nothing. Nanaki leapt off a small boulder and moved on. He took care as he walked on his feet. He took one step. Then another. Then he realised something was wrong. It had nothing to do with his surroundings but his body—No, inside his heart. Nanaki stood still and closed his eyes. He looked deep into his heart. There it is. This must be it. How to describe it, thought Nanaki. This was the way Nanaki looked at and tried to understand matters. This was—pitch black. It was as if a hole had opened up in his heart. No it wasn't a hole. It was like a black "soul of memories" sitting there. Something was attached to his heart very firmly. Before long he could feel it starting to vibrate violently. He believed it was changing shape. I wonder what's it changing into—Just as the thought came to mind, Nanaki trembled all over with fear.

"—" He shuddered so much he couldn't even make a sound. Nanaki grit his teeth and tried to endure it. No, he couldn't endure it. Letting out a deep breathe he turned round and ran back towards the village, leaping over the cliff.

The people of the valley who had just saw Nanaki off were surprised to see him again and gathered together.

"What's wrong, Nanaki?"

"Hmmm—" he started. He knew the black soul had disappeared.

"Don't tell us you were already missing your home," someone jeered. The others laughed.

"Yes, that maybe so."

"Nanaki, you have to be firm with yourself! It's not like a brave warrior at all!"

"Yes, you're right."

For a while, Nanaki exchanged words with the people of the village. Then once again, he said his goodbyes and started his journey. He could have went a different way but he challenged himself to go down the same path again. He thought it was necessary to ascertain whether the reason for the fear he had felt was because of that very place. However, nothing happened.

Nanaki named the "something" that suddenly appeared and struck him with fear, "Gilligan". There was no meaning to the name but by giving it a name, he won't forget about it at the very least. Names were what reminded him of various matters. And so it was, Nanaki continued to raise this Gilligan as he travelled. Sometimes when he remembered about it he would think about finding out what it truly was but every time he did, he would be gripped with fear. Until he could deal with it calmly, he thought he will leave it for the time being.

Leaving Cosmo Canyon, Nanaki made a rough plan of his journey. First he will go west where Yuffie's hometown Wutai is and then he will travel around and see the long narrow islands to the north south. After that, he will go east. On a big island there was Rocket Town where Cid is, Barret's

hometown Corel and, Tifa and Cloud's hometown Nibelheim. Then he will try going north. He's also thought about visiting the uninhabited borders as well as every nook and corner which was going to take a lot of time but, Nanaki wasn't worried about that at all. To Nanaki whose tribe has a lifespan of five hundred or even a thousand years that no human could ever have, what meaning could it have?

"Being rash is forbidden. I will be living on much longer than everyone else after all."

Wutai was Nanaki's destination . If it was possible, he planned to go see Yuffie. Yuffie would always come to him and treat him as if he was her pet but, Nanaki accepted it thinking it was Yuffie's way of being friendly with him.

"It's easy to understand what Yuffie's thinking," thought Nanaki. Surrounded by comrades who were older than her, Yuffie would always be challenging them. Outside of being in the same battle together, she would insist the difference in age didn't matter. Nanaki understood those feelings very well. She was probably referring to one's psychological age. However, he had very mixed feelings when it came to not understanding the fifteen or sixteen year old Yuffie's behavior very well even though he has lived for close to fifty years but, because humans matured in a different way than he did, he just had to give up in understanding her better.

As Nanaki reached close to Wutai, he found Yuffie by coincidence. Mischievously he was planning to give her a fright and pretend she was being attacked but, looking at Yuffie from the plateau, it didn't seem like a good time for that. Her back was facing Wutai as she dragged a young boy around her age by his ankles. She's probably been doing that for a long time. A long trail was made behind the boy in the grassy field. He didn't know whether the boy was still alive but Yuffie was desperately speaking to him. Before long, Yuffie stopped. Just as Nanaki thought she was taking a break, Yuffie lifted up the boy and was somehow trying to get him on her back. However, Yuffie wasn't strong and it looked like she was having some difficulty.

"Guess it can't be helped," said Nanaki to no one in particular and headed towards Yuffie. The feeling of going to help someone who wasn't expecting any help didn't feel too bad. Nanaki quietly crept towards Yuffie who didn't notice him at all and asked:

"Need some help?"

Yuffie's friend was a young boy named "Yuri" who had suddenly caught an illness in Midgar. It was a horrifying illness that had a black substance running down his legs as if he was going to die. Apart from repairing the damages in Midgar's towns, the illness was a much bigger problem. Nanaki heard that it was infectious but Yuffie was in contact with Yuri as if she didn't care. He started to worry. Maybe she should have thought about that. However, while talking to her about it, he learned that Yuffie already knew that the illness was possibly infectious. What's with this carelessness? No wait, realised Nanaki. It's not carelessness. It's kindness. Yuffie—I don't know how close they are but—she couldn't just give up on her friend. His thoughts turned to hate towards Yuri. He just couldn't understand how Yuffie could be kind when she knew she could get infected. Somehow, it makes me

angry. However, there was nothing Nanaki could do. It was Yuffie's friend after all. But as if to get revenge, when Yuffie talked about using materia to heal the illness, he told her bluntly there wasn't such a thing. Yuffie was angry. He was expecting that. However, he never expected the sadness he saw in her eyes. Nanaki deeply repented and regretted what he just said to her.

Soon, they reached Wutai and stayed there for several days. Yuffie began to look after the patients that were quarantined there. Nanaki would help whenever he was ordered to but usually he would just be observing the illness. He thought he should keep it within his memories too. It was part of life.

"Hey you. Is it true you can really speak?" asked one of the patients.

"That's odd. Why would Shinra create something like him? They must have made a mistake and gave him a heart. Don't you think it would have been better if they created something for humans?"

"Hmmm—" At that moment, Nanaki realised it. He realised that being able to have the same feelings and thoughts as most humans was surely to allow him to understand them. It was his errand to let his people know in the future how humans have evolved. Now I've learned another thing, thought Nanaki.

Nanaki wanted to stay with Yuffie longer in Wutai so that he could watch over the situation in Wutai and its patients but, Yuffie ordered him to go gather information regarding the illness and so it was he left Wutai behind him. As he was about to enter a hollow from which Wutai would be out of his view, Nanaki turned back and gazed at the town. He was sure he'll be able to see Yuffie's little figure working at the small hut built before the town. It looks like he had gone further into the hollow than he had expected.

"Oh well. I'll just have to come again sometime," thought Nanaki but at that instant he could feel a sudden shock inside his heart. Gilligan. It appeared again. This time Nanaki concentrated on Gilligan to ascertain its true identity. The black soul vibrated and before long something floated to its surface. It was the faces of the people from Cosmo Canyon. Their faces looked at peace but before long, they disappeared as if they were sucked back inside the black surface. Those faces just now—huh? When he realised he couldn't remember their names, he started to tremble all over. The trembling was so severe he couldn't stand and had to lie down. Remember, remember their names. Nanaki encouraged himself. Not long afterwards, Yuffie's face floated to the surface of the black soul. She looked calm but her expression was of one he had never seen before. Then her face too disappeared as if it sunk back into the black sea. Suddenly, the image of death floated to the surface. Were the people of the valley going to die? Fear attacked him.

"Help me!" cowered Nanaki on the ground, his body trembled as he called out to the stars for support. Just as he was going to call out to Yuffie, Gilligan disappeared. Nanaki struggled to get up and stood looking around him. He ran up the sides of the hollow and saw Wutai. He saw Yuffie working away there too.

One day, Yuffie will grow old and die. And there are many elders amongst the people of the valley so they too will disappear even earlier than her. It was sad just thinking about it. As he shed tears, there

was no doubt it was going to take him a long time to calm down. But why did Gilligan release fear inside him when it made him think of death?

Was Gilligan's true form the fear he felt when everyone dies? Nanaki shook his head and forced the misfortunate idea from his mind. One day the time will come but even so, I don't want to think about my friend's deaths, he thought.

Nanaki changed the plans for his journey and decided to investigate the "Midgar illness" Yuffie and the others had mentioned.

The best place to gather information about it was Midgar itself. The more information he had, the more confused he will probably get. However, Cloud who thought about everything deeply and the intelligent Tifa were there so if he was to spend some time there, he had no doubts that he may learn something.

Making his way round Mount Nibel, Nanaki entered a forest that he didn't know existed and ended up lost. At first, he continued through on foot relying on his animal instincts but the forest appeared to be deeper than he had imagined. Even so, he continued to search for an exit thinking it was nothing to be worried about. It maybe a deep forest but, just by looking up he could tell which direction he was going in from the movements of the sun. Nanaki walked on using the knowledge about directions he acquired from humans. He should be exiting from the east of the forest soon.

A gunshot was heard. Nanaki couldn't tell which direction it was coming from because of the echoes from the woods but he ran in the direction that he guessed it came from. He found a ten year old boy being attacked by a monster. The monster was in the shape of a bear with a long tail. No, perhaps it was a bear. Its body was covered in a grey rusted metal colour and its front legs were bleeding.

It must have been shot. The wounded monster circled around the boy who had fallen back sitting scared. It appeared it was thinking what it should do with the boy. Before long, it went berserk, its eyes burning red with rage as it slowly approached him. Nanaki leapt out from the undergrowth he was hiding under and biting onto the boy's clothes, they left the area together. After taking the boy to a safe thicket, he stood facing the bear. As if the bear didn't care about who his new enemy was, it naturally ran towards Nanaki. The claws on its two paws could be seen under its fur. I'm going to be in trouble if I get slashed by those, thought Nanaki.

"Nibel bear's throats are their weak points! Go, Red!" The boy suddenly said. Nanaki was perplexed by the command but, it was true that many beast's weakness was their throat so he focused his attacks on the Nibel bear's throat. It's been a long time since Nanaki roared, raising his voice as he intimidated his opponent. The Nibel bear froze in its tracks and for the first time, was trying to gauge its enemy's strength. They glared at each other.

"What are you doing! Go Red!"

Stop saying whatever you please, thought Nanaki. Humans shouldn't say anything in battles where the beasts have no weapons but their own bodies. The forest is a beast's place.

That moment, he heard another gunshot. At the same time, blood burst out from the Nibel bear's throat as its massive body fell to the ground. Immediately out of the thicket came a human—it looked as if he was a hunter—jumping towards the fallen Nibel bear and firing a finishing shot. The Nibel bear stopped breathing.

The hunter then turned round and aimed his gun at Nanaki. It looked as if he was just on his guard and didn't intend to shoot yet.

"Dad, don't shoot. It saved me. It's fate. God has granted him to me. I want to bring Red back home with me," said the boy as he cut in between Nanaki and the hunter.

"Red' you say?" the hunter asked back.

"Yeah. He's red so he's 'Red'."

What a disgraceful name, thought Nanaki. It reminded him of the mad man who once gave him the same name. He raised his voice and gave out a roar to show his dissatisfaction. The father and son backed off a few steps cautiously.

"You can talk, can't you?" the hunter said with his gun still aimed at Nanaki. "Long ago the Shinra Company put a load of prize money on your kind. A giant wolf-like appearance. Red fur and a tail that burns. Damn! If I had caught you one year earlier I would have been rich!"

"Red can talk?"

Yeah, it's true that I can talk. And I am most likely more wiser than you two too. But I don't want to open my mouth to the likes of you. Those that leave their guns poised and say whatever they feel like can't be friends. Nanaki turned round and made a little jump into the thickets.

"Damn it!"

Gunfire. The round bullet grazed pass Nanaki's ear. See, you fired in the end. You're the kind of humans that would throw me in a cage if you caught me. Then you would try to force me to talk. And you thought you could get along with me.

After putting some distance between himself and where the hunters were, Nanaki checked and found they didn't pursue him any more. He returned to where the father and son had been. They were still there and had started to dissect the Nibel bear's corpse.

"Dad, I want Red."

"Yeah—Looks like he would make some money. Shinra maybe over but we can put on an exhibit with him. Might be best if we took him to the Golden Saucer."

"No, I want to be friends with him."

"Don't be silly," the hunter said as he used his knife to cut off the Nibel bear's tail. "It's not a cat or a dog. You won't be able to tame it."

You can't tame me either, thought Nanaki.

"Right, now to get some people here."

"What are you going to do?"

"The only things that's been of use to us are the Nibel bear's tails right? The Shinra bought it from us at high prices because they used them as stimulants for the soldiers. But from now on, the bear's meat will be of use too. It's not tasty but it doesn't really taste horrible either. Depending on how you cook it, it can be pretty good."

"Oh! So we're going to eat it!"

"Yeah. The world's going to be lacking food. I don't know it will go on forever or end soon but I'm sure we can make money from this opportunity."

The father and son left the Nibel bear's corpse as it was and went away. That hunter wasn't a bad person. He was just staying strong so that he could survive in these times. If Nibel bears can be mankind's food then it can't be helped. All living things had to eat or they would starve.

Once Bugenhagen had told Nanaki something. What differentiates between animals and monsters is the way they treat their opponent's corpse. Animals kill others to eat but, monsters only kill. Then they find their next prey. When you think about this difference, humans are close to monsters. If the Nibel bear's tail was all that hunter was after then you could probably call him a monster. But it's a different story if he must eat it to survive. It's kind of unfair that he possessed a gun but, this was how the food chain worked. Even the father and son shouldn't be allowed to do as they please but I can't get involved in the problem, thought Nanaki. Nanaki has spent much of his time with humans since he was very young and for that very reason he didn't hunt much. So little that he had tried it when he thought about hunting. When he thought about how he was going to take his prey's life not because he wanted to eat it, he had thought of himself as a monster. Yes, thought Nanaki. I'm not one to judge them. Many humans are unconsciously taking the lives of other animals and eating them to live. Even if they were conscious about it, they would avoid thinking too deeply about it besides the ones that made a living hunting for food. Nanaki too was the same. There no point puzzling over matters here. Even if there was a correct definite form of behaviour, he probably wouldn't be able to arrive at that answer just now.

"Geeeeeee!" An ear deafening high pitched sound came from two small Nibel bears as they came running to the dead corpse. All the smaller animals ran away panicking. The small Nibel bears snuggled up to the corpse—most likely their mother—and nuzzled their nose and paws against it. They're probably trying to wake her up. Nanaki just gazed at them helplessly. Then he remembered. That hunter said he was going to get some people here. If those cubs stay here they will be in danger too. The idea to just watch over the situation suddenly disappeared from Nanaki's mind. He left the thickets and appeared before the cubs.

"I understand how you feel but it's dangerous here. Come, this way."

Nanaki jumped back into the thicket as he tried to lead the cubs away. However, his words didn't get through and the cubs stared at him with an expression that he couldn't understand.

"This isn't good. The humans are coming you know."

After taking some time to think, he leapt towards one of the cubs and picked it up, carrying it in between his teeth..

"Geeeeee!" As the cub Nanaki held cried out, the other cub howled in answer, "Geeeeee!"

Good, thought Nanaki as he turned round to make his way into the thickets with one of the cubs still in his mouth. The other one followed.

"Yes, that's right."

Nanaki continued deep into the forest. Sometimes he would stop so that he waited for the other cub to catch up, pursuing all its strength. Once their distance closed, he would run off again. And so as he repeated those same movements, he eventually arrived at an open area. There were old stones laid out and Nanaki clearly knew it was the work of humans. Surveying the surroundings, Nanaki could see that many stone materials were piled up without any order around the place. Was someone trying to build something here? However, that was the only signs that humans had been here. The air lingered as if it had all been abandoned long ago.

Nanaki laid down the cub he held in his mouth. He was surprised it wasn't moving but when he listened closely he could hear the sound of it fast asleep. Such carefree little creatures, Nanaki thought. The brother cub arrived too, letting out a single cry "Geeee!"—and without any suspicions—came running to them. It sniffed. Perhaps it was curious about the familiar smell that Nanaki had. It then sniffed about its younger brother. Soon as if it was satisfied or had enough of sniffing, it let out a huge yawn and slept, cuddling up to its brother.

"How cute," thought Nanaki. But then he was troubled. What should I do now? I have some responsibility towards these cubs. Nanaki laid down and gazed at the brothers. Will they be able to survive without their mother? What do these Nibel bears eat? At a glance they may look like ferocious canivores but these kind of beasts have a varied diet much like Nanaki. If that was the case then the forest should be filled with food— Nanaki reached a decision. He will gather some food for them before leaving the forest. He was concerned about the brothers' future but he can't care for them forever. It was best they parted before they got too attached to one another. But before that—Nanaki too let out a big yawn and closed his eyes.

Moments later, Nanaki opened his eyes again. There were no signs of the cubs before him. So they've gone off somewhere. Live well. But just as he thought so, he noticed an odd feeling at his side. Looking there he found the brothers had buried themselves between Nanaki's side and the ground, sleeping soundly.

"This isn't good—Not good at all."

At that moment, Nanaki noticed his heart was filled with feelings that he had never had before. They were feelings that forced out all reason from his mind. He was determined to look after them until they became independent.

Nanaki taught the brothers—that he named "Pazu" and "Rin"—how to hunt. He himself wasn't that good at hunting but he made them listen carefully, acting as if the skill was of great use. He had no guilt taking the lives of other creatures. This was a fair fight to survive. Sometimes they would meet encounter other Nibel bears. Nanaki would try to convey to them that he wasn't hostile but was always just ignored. Everytime that happened, the thought that he really shouldn't have got involved pierced through his heart. No, perhaps he's been accepted as a friend in this forest. All sorts of thoughts came and left his mind. Everyday he would discover something new and even though he had his worries, the days were generally peaceful. Sometimes he would question if perhaps such a life might be good. Everytime he thought that way, he would tell himself that it was part of his errand but at the same time, he was aware that he enjoyed it.

Before long, many humans could be seen coming into the forest to hunt almost everyday. It appeared Nibel bear hunting was becoming regularised. They had accepted the bear's meat as food. Nanaki thought to himself that he can't just teach Pazu and Rin how to hunt but also how to flee from humans.

Nanaki no longer knew how many days and months he had spent in the forest. Keeping track of time is a characteristic of humans, thought Nanaki. I can live with humans or beasts but as of now, I live in an age of beasts. I'm concerned over the promise I made with Yuffie but that's about an illness. It has nothing to do with beasts. At first, it hurt Nanaki to say something like that but he could now think about it firmly. I will talk about this story once the times have returned to the human world. I spent my time in a forest as a beast. It was necessary to have the emotions of a beast to survive. That's what I'll tell.

Gilligan appeared many times inside Nanaki. Amongst the faces he knew, Pazu and Rin's were also added. The faces of the brothers would appear in the soul filled with dark emotions before sinking back into it as if they were disappearing, making Nanaki tremble with fear. However, his fear would disappear immediately as he ascertained Pazu and Rin were cuddled up against him. Nanaki now understood what Gilligan truly was. It was the fear of loss. It was the fear of losing loved ones that made Nanaki tremble. Now that he knew, he no longer feared Gilligan. Nothing can be achieved through fear of loss.

The days in the forest suddenly ended. Pazu and Rin who had grown to the point where they could stand shoulder to shoulder by Nanaki, had established a place to stay and were living together. There was nothing particular that triggered it but one night, the two Nibel bears had started to sleep away from Nanaki. Something has ended, thought Nanaki. He was sad but he thought as it as part of growing up. The next day, the brothers were no where to be seen when Nanaki woke up. He guessed they had gone off to hunt for food on their own just like they had decided to sleep away from him. At that moment, he heard gunfire. The roar of Nibel bears followed. That was Pazu. Nanaki who could now walk through the forest blindfolded, headed in the direction where Pazu stayed. Before long he saw something that he had once seen before.

That day, the boy had fallen back, sitting down scared. A Nibel bear was loitering around nearby. It was Pazu. He had taken an interest in the thickets nearby. It looked like he was waiting for Rin. Pazu stood up on his hind legs and raised his paws towards the sky as if making an offering then roared. Rin's voice could be heard in reply. The boy was scared as he searched for an escape route. When he saw Nanaki, his eyes glowed with hope.

"Red! It's me! You remember me, right? You saved me here long ago."

That day, Nanaki couldn't just watch him get killed. However, he knew what he had to say this time.

"This is the forest. You will have to abide by its rules."

Hearing Nanaki's voice, the boy's face was filled with joy. It appeared he was happy to find out Nanaki really could talk. He has some courage, thought Nanaki.

"I understand, Red," the boy said as he immediately got up quickly on his feet, running towards his gun that Pazu seemed to have retreated from. I didn't come to cheer you on, thought Nanaki. Unexpectedly, the boy was reaching towards his gun. Just as Nanaki thought Pazu was going to get shot and was going to leave the thickets, Rin appeared. With a single swoop of his front paws, the boy was knocked away. He lay there limp, motionless. Nanaki never watched but he told himself that the boy had fought by the forest's rules and it couldn't be helped that he lost. Pazu and Rin started to circle around the boy. Moments later they once again stood up on their hind legs and roared into the sky. That's enough. Nanaki leapt out of the thickets and stood before the boy's body, hiding it.

The two Nibel bears swung their claws down towards the boy but ended up cutting into Nanaki's back, ripping through his skin.

"Geee!" "Geee!" Pazu and Rin made the same pitiable sounds when they first met Nanaki and withdrew their paws.

"Don't worry about it. Go."

He turned the two Nibel bears round and they disappeared into the forest.

"Ugh—" The boy could be heard groaning below Nanaki.

"Hey, where the hell did that kid go? He shouldn't get ahead of himself like that when he's still inexperienced."

It must be that hunter's voice, thought Nanaki. He left his spot and hid in the thickets.

"Hey, Goddy! What happened!"

Sure enough, the hunter came running. But the figure that followed behind surprised Nanaki.

"A Nibel bear did this to him, right?"

It was a young woman dressed in the Turks uniform—Elena took out from her suit some kind of small bottle and with what was most likely a potion, she began to nurse the boy.

What is going on, thought Nanaki. Does it mean Shina Company was still active? Nanaki regretted that he didn't pay more attention to gathering information about the humans. Elena watched the hunter carry the boy out of the forest on his back before she was heard contacting somewhere on her mobile.

"I found one. I will try again tomorrow."

When Nanaki returned to the home made of stone in the forest, he found Pazu and Rin walking round in circles there. Then when they saw Nanaki, they hid themselves in the thicket.

"I'm not angry."

Nanaki said lying down. He wasn't angry but the wound hurt. He'll take a rest before concentrating on recovering. Tomorrow, Shinra will be in the forest again. It seems the Nibel bears are their target. It will be a busy day tomorrow. Nanaki could sense Pazu and Rin closing in towards him but he remained quiet, eyes closed. Soon, he could feel the brothers licking his wounds. Thank you, Pazu, Rin.

He woke up again in the middle of the night. The pain from his wound had lightened quite a bit. Filled with the recovery abilities of a beast, Nanaki got up. As he looked around him, he couldn't see any signs of the brothers. Usually they would be sleeping somewhere within his line of sight. Thinking something was odd, he searched in the thickets but couldn't sense their presence anywhere. It was unlikely that non-nocturnal Nibel bears would be active at night. Nanaki began to panick and began his search in the forest.

He felt he heard gunfire somewhere far away. It was outside of the forest. Nanaki began to tremble all over. It's been a long time since Gilligan appeared. He cowered as he trembled with fear. It's been so long that he's forgotten how to deal with it. What was I supposed to do again? I know. Pazu and Rin. Those brothers stopped the trembling for me. But neither of them were around. Clenching his teeth, Nanaki stood up and headed out of the forest. Staring down at the ground as he walked, Nanaki endured the trembling. He knew he was out of the forest because the air felt different. He looked up. A grass plain sloped downwards. The grass was trampled where the hunters made their path. As Nanaki followed the path with his eyes, he could see a number of lights in the distance. It was a small village. One of the lights, the biggest of them all was swaying with a crackling sound. That must be fire, thought Nanaki. Was it being used for cooking? He took in everything in sight and thought to himself, trying to force Gilligan out of his mind. But there was no effect. Nanaki walked on with determination towards the lights.

It is , thought Nanaki. The lights lit up Pazu and Rin. The two of them were hanging downwards from a pole. They didn't look good. Their arms were stretched up into the sky, a sight that Nanaki have been used to seeing. Their tails had been cut off. Nanaki could feel himself calm. Gilligan had disappeared. He didn't have the courage to look at the Nibel bears closely so he surveyed the surroundings instead. There were three mountain huts. They were lit individually. Listening closely,

he could hear the laughter of men and women. Perhaps they were having a toast. It appeared there was no lookout. Nanaki still couldn't look directly over at the brothers.

Did I come to avenge the brothers? Such emotion didn't belong to beasts. Humans and Nibel bears may have long been enemies but that was in general, nothing personal, thought Nanaki. Humans are the only ones that can possess hostility and grudge.

Perhaps it was the air outside the forest but Nanaki became aware that in his heart, he wanted revenge. This wasn't a beast's feeling. It's human.

"Geee" Nanaki heard the brother's voice. He was surprised. It sounded as if they were telling him they were in pain. Even though they were big in size, they were still children who were only just born a few years ago. Deep black emotions expanded inside Nanaki. It wasn't Gilligan but they were gradually devouring his senses. They were taking over his mind as much as he wanted to suppress his desire for vengeance.

The sound of a baby crying could be heard from one of the huts. I see. There's a baby here. It must be very cute. A baby— Babies have no sin. Maybe it means you should bear with it, Nanaki.

Nanaki's heart was being torn between being human or beast.

Pching!

A bullet hit the ground right next to Nanaki. He realised that he was so enraged he couldn't even recognise the sound of gunfire. He looked at Pazu and Rin again. Their voice had only been his imagination earlier. They had died a while ago. He looked at their eyes. He could see their eyes were bright red underneath the eyelids of their closed eyes. The lights were being reflected in them. He could feel the flames in his own eyes spreading as they burned. His eyes were growing hot. The scenery around him was dyed in bright red so much that he couldn't see any more.

He heard another gunshot ringing through the air. He followed the sound the enemy made and burst into one of the huts. The broken glass from the window scattered inside. There were a number of armed men. What moved me was human emotion but in here right now, I have the instincts of a beast.

He could no longer distinguish humans.

The sound of gunfire is heard and a sharp pain ran across his cheek. It was the sign. Nanaki leapt onto the closest man.

He couldn't remember what happened afterwards. All that he could remember was the pain of a bullet piercing his body and the cry of a boy.

"I wanted to become friends with you!"

Nanaki woke up. It looked like he had collapsed on a bloodstained wooden floor. He turned his head to look around him. At the side of a room sat a familiar man dressed in red, looking at him.

"Can you get up?"

Asked Vincent who sounded as if he had little concern.

"Vincent? Vincent! What are you doing here?"

"That's what I want to ask you."

Vincent replied as if he wasn't really interested.

Vincent didn't talk much but, it seems he has been living a life travelling where he felt appropriate. He said he was waiting for something to happen as if it was self-derision. During his travels, he coincidentally saw the Turk's helicopter and followed it, arriving at the village afterwards. It was where the helicopter stopped too. Elena from the Turks was seeking something and had gone into the forest with the hunters. Not long afterwards, she returned carrying a wounded boy and at night, two Nibel bears appeared. There was a lot panic amongst the hunters but they shot and killed the bears. After obtaining what she was after, Elena left in the helicopter. Just when Vincent was about to leave for some place he didn't know, Nanaki arrived. He heard the hunters firing their guns and Nanaki breaking into one of the huts. When he came to see what was happening—

"You had a hunter pressed down and was about to bite into his throat. A boy was crying and saying something about being friends. I don't know what happened to you. But when I looked at you, you weren't the Nanaki I know. You were like a beast attacking humans. That's why I fired."

After shooting Nanaki, there was confusion and knowing that it was a dangerous situation for the hunters to possess guns, he forced them out of the hut. He then bid them goodbye.

"I gave them a little scare. I transformed."

After that, Vincent treated the unconscious Nanaki and waited.

Nanaki looked around the inside of the room. There was blood all over the floor here and there.

"Did I kill someone?"

"No."

"I see. I'm glad."

There was a moment of silence between them. Nanaki tried to get up to look outside. He struggled but he managed to stand up somehow. Vincent began talking again as if he remembered something.

"They took away the bears that were outside. Maybe I should have stopped them?"

"No. They will probably be of use. It's the rules of the forest. No, perhaps it's the rules outside the forest? Vincent. I just don't understand any more. I just don't."

"I don't mind listening."

Hearing those words, Nanaki began to talk as Vincent remained silent. He told him all about what happened from the ear piercing "Geee! Geee!" baby bears to the point he reunited with Vincent.

"What should I have done?"

Vincent stayed silent. Just as Nanaki thought he wouldn't get an answer, he said.

"In my opinion. When you recall these past events again—You'll have an answer. But when you think about them again, the answer maybe different. There is an answer but there isn't only one. You should just continue living to think about it."

What's important is that you don't forget about these events, said Vincent.

"Hmmm—"

Nanaki felt as if he half understood and half didn't. His feelings were half and half.

"Maybe you will understand if I told you this," Vincent added as if he saw right through Nanaki's mind. "What you thought was good that time was one hundred percent wrong. All wrong."

"That doesn't tell me what I should do. No matter how much I think about it, I just can't decide what the correct course of action should be."

"That's just it," Vincent said standing up as if that was all he had to say. He then went on as if he remembered, "You can also choose not to do anything. I have chosen that way once."

"How did it turn out?"

"It may have been best for my retribution."

Vincent's mantle flailed dramatically as he turned and left the hut. Nanaki hastily got up and followed.

It appeared Vincent was going east. But before long he entered a secluded wasteland that was just off the road.

"Where are you going?"

"What are you going to do if I told you?"

"Can't I come with you?"

"Why."

"Because—" I long for the company of others, thought Nanaki. I want to be with someone. They were at the end of the wasteland—the two of them were walking underneath a cliff that was about the height of a small building—and he didn't want to be left alone.

"Your answer is one hundred percent wrong."

Vincent casually made his way up as if he was going to jump.

"Vincent!"

But it was too late. He could no longer see the red mantle or hear an answer.

"—You maybe wrong too, Vincent."

As he shouted that after Vincent, he realised something. No matter who was right or whether you think about what you should have done or not, worrying yourself was meaningless. The past can't be changed and what lies before you is only the future. What was important was that you never forget and keep thinking about it. If you do that, perhaps you will find an answer. And once you find it, it maybe of use to you. That was all there is to it. It's a very small matter compared to the days of life. Neither I, Pazu or Rin had any worries when we were in the forest. The days there were fun.

Nanaki lay down as if he was trying to get closer to the cliff and thought back over everything that happened in the forest. He remembered how bad the brothers' sleeping posture were even though they were beasts. Then the time when Pazu was drowning in the spring. Rin who fell from a tree. The first fish the two brothers caught. They ate it all in an instant. Nanaki smiled. But his tears wouldn't stop. Farewell. Beast world. Nanaki got up and began to walk east. After walking for a moment, he changed his mind and turned north.

Cid seemed to be busy developing a new airship in Rocket Town. Even so, he told the wound covered Nanaki that he should rest well and heal up. Nanaki spent his time gazing at the airship that was close to completion from afar so that he wouldn't get in the way of others. Nanaki was surprised that it has almost been two years since he lived with the Nibel bears in the forest. Even Cid too was surprised that it's been two years since they last met. Living a fulfilling life makes you forget about the flow of time.

Nanaki heard about Barret's recent visit. I wish we could have caught up with each other, thought Nanaki. He was sure Barret was going to visit Cid again the day they all separated.

One day, Cid was in a very good mood because the airship had been completed and he invited Nanaki for a test flight. Nanaki happily went for the ride.

"If it falls then that'll be that. Don't hate me for it ya hear," said Cid.

That'll be that. That's a good saying, thought Nanaki.

When flying in the sky, everyone will realise what a small place the world is. To Nanaki who travelled around the land, it was even more so. I must thank Cid for giving me the chance of this special privilege to see the world from this point of view, thought Nanaki. This is the world that I will be spending a few hundred years in or even more. There are still many things about life that I don't know about yet. I'm sure there are many things that I should see and know. It was an everyday thing that he would lose his way in the vast lands and feel bewildered. But he knew the world wasn't such a big place now. That little piece of knowledge gave him the courage to know that it wasn't impossible to learn about everything.

"The world's waiting for me."

"What did ya say? Quit exaggerating— Huh? Hey, hey! Look over there— "

"What's wrong?"

"Look. It's Yuffie. What the hell is she doing out here?"

Nanaki was a little guilty reuniting with Yuffie. After Yuffie had told him to go gather information regarding the illness, he hasn't done anything. He tried to hide his guilt by acting cheerfully. Soon, Cid flew off leaving Yuffie and Nanaki alone. Of course, Yuffie said what she would always say and that was to go look for materia together. She hasn't changed since the last time he met her. That time, he was angry at the friend named Yuri she was carrying and had told her the materia she wanted didn't exist out of anger. But he felt different about it this time. He felt fully confident that there was no materia to cure the Midgar illness—Or "Geostigma" which he learned it was called in Rocket Town.

If Yuffie's been searching during all that time he was in the forest and never found any cure then, it really doesn't exist. When he told Yuffie that's what he believed, she looked at him sadly.

"I'm sorry. I'll help you look," promised Nanaki.

Yuffie and Nanaki went into a cave in the northern snow fields where materia could be found. Their efforts returned fruitless in the frozen cave.

"Ah... There really isn't any here! I'm done!" said Yuffie.

"Are you giving up?"

"No, we're going to keep looking. Their hopes rest with me."

"What do you mean?"

"This is the last cave we know that has materia in it. But, lets go through them one more time because we might have missed a spot—You know. There's something I understand now. While we're here, lots of time is passing by over there, right?" Yuffie said as she looked into the distance.

Yuffie taught the patients in Wutai martial arts. At first, there were only children but now, there were a lot more patients and they were all consulting and exercising their bodies under Yuffie's guidance.

"You see. That illness really is contagious. But it doesn't spread to just anyone. It enters the space in people's heart that are worrying, suffering or have given up on their own lives. So if they study martial arts and exercise their bodies, they wouldn't think about such things would they? Just by being busy everyday, they'll fall asleep in an instant at night and won't be able to trouble themselves with strange thoughts. That's why I want us to do our best here too."

Yuffie looked at Nanaki and smiled.

"What do you think?"

"I agree. I agree very much."

"Of course you do!"

Yuffie wrapped her arms around Nanaki's neck and rubbed them roughly against him.

"Stop it!"

"Huh? I never noticed all these wounds on you. What have you been doing?"

Nanaki thought about how he was going to explain before he answered.

"I've been on a journey to record the world."

It was different from the way he had imagined but in the end, he was caught up in life and lived it to his fullest. And he memorised it all. He has experienced things that he no doubt wouldn't have understood just by watching from the sides.

"Stop acting cool, you silly thing~"

Yuffie wrapped her arms around his neck again and gave him a strangle. But she stopped almost immediately and said, "Keep at it, Nanaki."

Separating with Yuffie, Nanaki wandered around the world just as he said. When he encountered other beasts, he would wonder if he could live with them somehow. And when he met humans, he would take the initiative to talk to them. He felt that he should learn the truth from everything—whether it was right or wrong. With that, the number of names within Nanaki's memories increased. Kira Kira, Dolly Thief, Kai, Kumo Nagare, Love, Cries of the Trees—he gave every precious experience that would sometimes bring pain with them a name.

Within those fulfilling days, there was one thing that worried him. Gilligan reappeared as he spent the days alone. It seemed it was growing bigger as the days passed by. Surely it was because the more you experience, the more you had to lose. That was why Gilligan was growing bigger, thought Nanaki.

Gilligan's true identity was the fear of loss. Nanaki was sure he wouldn't be afraid of it if he knew what it was. Regardless, he still found himself trembling and it took a longer time than he did before to recover.

Why? thought Nanaki. Soon, he began to think whether he had mistaken Gilligan's true nature. He began to think over what Gilligan was again. It was fear that spread and froze his heart. There was no doubt about that. But he didn't know what was the true cause of that fear.

"Gilligan huh."

After a long time, Nanaki had reunited with Vincent again near the small lake in the Forgotten City who murmured as he talked.

"I know something about it."

"What? Can you tell me more?"

Nanaki pressed Vincent on.

"One day you will most certainly experience loss. You will be sad and imagining that moment is because of fear. However—it's something you can laugh at —you'll get used to it."

"Hmmm—You maybe right."

"Gilligan came from the far distant future. The future you are unconsciously afraid of."

"Huh?"

"It knows everything about you. Imagine the moment that you will lose everything that only you have experienced, seen and named. There is nothing else that shares all that with you."

"Hmmm—"

Nanaki imagined. That moment, Gilligan began to appear again. Nanaki endured the trembling and recalled everything. Then he imagined himself running up the high grounds that overlooked Midgar. Beyond that, he saw Midgar covered by plants that he didn't even know the name of. There was the presence of humans.

However, there was no one he knew. Maybe if he went there and talked to people they would show concern and listen to him. But no one would say, "Ah yes, so that's how it's been for you."

"I'm all alone."

Nanaki said as he trembled.

"I have such a long lifespan that one day I will experience loneliness—It's my fear of being lonely. Is that what Gilligan is?"

"I call it exhaustion from over-anxiety."

"Don't make fun of it!"

Smiling at the anger Nanaki showed, Vincent replied back.

"Then imagine this. You won't become lonely. You may even have children."

"Me have children? I just can't imagine that. I can only imagine the Nibel bears."

"Then how about this? Every year you visit Midgar once. There, I will be waiting. And I will be listening to your worthless stories as if I have no interest in them at all."

Nanaki thought of that. Vincent's solemn face appeared. And the trembling stopped. It seemed Gilligan had disappeared.

"Looks like you've stopped trembling."

"Yes. But one day, even you Vincent will—"

"That day will never come. I am immortal. Whether that is fortunate or misfortunate for me."

"I—"

Nanaki thought about the loneliness that wrapped itself around Vincent. Even though he may have a long lifespan, one day he will die. But Vincent he—

"Hey. While I'm still alive, be sure to meet every so often so we can talk."

Vincent looked at Nanaki as if troubled and began to speak.

"Just once a year. You'll have to pardon me if you want to meet any more often than that."

Saying that, Vincent hung his head and buried his face in his mantle. His shoulders were shaking a bit. It was the first time Nanaki saw Vincent laughing.

"Gilligan. Gilligan did you say?"

"Heh. Laugh all you want."

"If you'll excuse me."

Vincent raised his voice and laughed. At first, Nanaki stayed quiet but before long he too laughed.

The last time laughter filled the Forgotten City was during the Cetra Age but now, it rang throughout the air once again.

Fin

Lifestream White 2

The woman discovered that there was a growing number of spirits within the Lifestream who refused to be absorbed by it. While they were different from the man's spirit, they rejected the Lifestream due to the same emotion. Hatred. Their feelings towards the planet were steeped in hatred, just like that man's. This is the result of his influence reaching the surface, she thought.

The woman drew closer to the souls that had just entered the Lifestream, spirits filled with hate, and tried to heal them. Beneath the surface of enmity were hidden memories. Memories from their lives as normal people. While unremarkable, they had many joyous memories as well. She released those thoughts and dissolved them into the Lifestream. Having lost the core of their emotions, the surface animosity disappeared. The woman had found a solution, however more and more spirits steeped in spite appeared, and it was too much for her to bear. She rushed through the Lifestream in search of other souls to help her. Ancients, on the verge of diffusing. These fragments of consciousness accepted her undertaking. When she found fragments of consciousness of people she had once known- pitifully few in number- she infused them with her own memories and sought their assistance. She had more spirits on her side now, but even so the hatred borne by that man did not decrease.

She then thought of Cloud, living in his reality up on the surface. In order to reduce the hatred lingering in the Lifestream, she would have to remove the hatred flooding the real world. The woman wondered if Cloud could help her. However, that might lead to Cloud getting hurt as well. The Cloud she knew had a very fragile heart.

Case of Yuffie

The Forgotten City. At a small lake where Aerith had lost her life and saw everyone off, Yuffie and the others had returned once again to let her know that the fight against

Sephiroth was over. They all stood silently around the lake's altar. None of them spoke but each of them were speaking to Aerith with their own words.

"Bye."

It was Vincent's low voice. By the time Yuffie turned round to face him, his red mantle was already flailing behind him. What was with him, thought Yuffie. Is that the way he was going to part with us?

"Hold it- Hooold it!!"

She cried out hurrying after him.

"How can you part with us just like that? We're all war buddies you know."

Her protesting didn't stop him. She ran ahead and the two of them stood face to face. He looked as if he was staring at a point far into the distance. Yuffie didn't know what he was thinking or what was going through his mind but his gaze was very powerful. She stepped back immediately knowing that she couldn't stop him.

"Take care," Vincent said as he passed her. Yuffie never expected such words from him and let go of what just happened as she felt his heart for the first time.

Cloud, Tifa, Barret, Cid and Red XIII were watching them.

"Looks like he has somewhere to go," reported Yuffie as she returned to her comrades.

"To his woman probably. Time I got going too," said Cid.

"Yeah, you're right. Same for me," agreed Barret.

Everyone has someone they want to go see, thought Yuffie. She understood but couldn't hold her feelings in.

"You know... You guys sure are taking this lightly."

"It just means we know we can always meet again," said Cid as he started to walk off. Cloud and Tifa nodded. Even Red XIII agreed too. Red XIII's just forcing himself along, thought Yuffie.

"Yeah."

As she began to feel the same way they did, she accepted what was about to happen.

"Lets go."

Cloud and Tifa began to walk off. Yeah. Once we leave this place, it really is goodbye for us all, thought Yuffie. But that's fine. I'll enjoy our parting with all the energy I have.

"Hey wait!"

Barret suddenly raised his voice. Man, this parting's ruined. That's why I don't like the old man. She looked over at him and saw him removing the materia from his prosthetic arm, handing it over to Cloud.

"What do we do with this?"

"Hey wait!"

Realising she had forgotten something very important, Yuffie raised her voice. She had almost forgotten the whole purpose of her journey.

"Can I have all the- No, I mean can I just have half of all the materia? I'll bring them back to Wutai with me and keep them in safe custody. Well, I'll use them too maybe. Just a little."

The eyes of all her comrades gathered on her. She loved to be the centre of attention but this time she felt a little guilty. She continued to speak in an effort to hide that guiltiness.

"I was in the middle of hunting for materia you know. I got close to you all because I was following my instincts as a materia hunter. The materia you all had was just too tempting."

Shinra's research, technology and knowledge of the planet's life allowed them to bestow "powers" into the materia Cloud and his party possessed that wasn't possible to produce naturally.

"To be honest with you all, I didn't really know what you were all after or know much about your past. Even now, I think it's the same. But I fought with you all didn't I? And it wasn't because of the materia. I just wanted to be of use, even if I wasn't much. We're friends now. Come on, think about it. How many times have I saved you all from pinches?"

After she finished, Yuffie thought, Damn. There's no truth to that part.

"Yeah, you helped us many times," said Tifa.

Yuffie was confused.

"You're an ideal child, so cheery and strong."

"Huh!?"

Yuffie was surprised and waited for Tifa to continue. But Tifa just smiled and stayed silent.

"Are you serious?" Yuffie asked without thinking.

"Mhmm," nodded Tifa immediately.

"Eheheh."

Yuffie thought about what she just heard as she blushed. She was surprised that she just might be getting the materia with no objections.

"What do you think, Barret."

Cloud had suddenly turned round to ask him. Why the hell are you asking Barret for? Yuffie thought but remained silent.

"Hmmm—" mused Barret. "It's true that Yuffie's a good friend of ours. But it's a whole different matter when it comes to materia, isn't it?"

"No it isn't! It's the same. The same! I know it maybe all over now that we've defeated Sephiroth but, I have a great dream and that's to restore Wutai. To do that, having materia is crucial."

"Restoration eh—"

This time it was Cid who piped in. Shut up old man! Yuffie glared at him.

"If that's what you need it for, isn't Midgar much worse off?"

"You're right."

After agreeing with Cid, Cloud fell in thought.

"Hey, Yuffie. How about this? We'll give you all the materia."

"Alright!"

"But I keep it in safe custody."

"Er— Are you trying to trick a child here! "

Thinking she was being made a fool, she stood up tall in protest.

"You got it all wrong. Most of our materia are used for battle right? It really won't be of much use for Wutai. So we'll just share the ones that will be of use in healing and I'll keep the rest. I think I'm the one that's the most experienced when it comes to dangerous materia."

"It's true we don't need any equipment for battles any more but—"

"Yeah?"

"Even if we can't use them, we'll feel much more at ease with them won't we?"

"Then lets do this. You return to Wutai but if you feel uneasy without materia then contact me. We'll think about it again then."

Cloud was speaking in a gentle tone but in the end, his decision to keep the materia was clear to Yuffie. And just as he said, even if Wutai had a lot of materia with immeasurable destructive power, they may not be of much use. Times have changed. Even Yuffie understood that.

"Fine. You be sure to take good care of my materia."

"And so, now I'm the one with the most materia in the world. What do you think of that?"

Yuffie was on her way back to her hometown of Wutai and had been talking to the chocobo she was riding the whole time.

"Do you think I should buy some new clothes somewhere? These clothes got all worn during that long journey."

Yuffie thought about the people of Wutai who she expected will be welcoming her home. She was sure they already knew the planet managed to avoid the catastrophic Meteor because of them. That's why they will surely gather together to hear her stories.

"Oh wait. These worn clothes will help show how much hardship I've been through. Yes, this is what I'll do. I'll keep these clothes as they are. But more importantly, I better prepare my stories!"

However, Yuffie realised that she didn't know how a lot of the important things had happened and in what order just before the world was close to its end.

"This isn't good—"

What had everyone been thinking? What happened as a result of their thinking? There was a lot of things Yuffie, who only joined them some point during their journey, didn't know.

"I wish I asked them about it— But whatever. I'll just have to improvise. The former Soldier Sephiroth that the evil Shinra Company created was thinking of great evil deeds. As Cloud and his friends fought Shinra Company, they pursued Sephiroth. When Sephiroth was cornered, he tried to use the Black Materia to summon a small meteor to crash into the planet. We risked our lives and stopped him. Yes, perfect. Easy for them to understand."

What Yuffie didn't know was that a lot of the details she didn't know about had already reached Wutai. With the exception that she was involved.

"Hey."

Wutai was in sight. Yuffie had returned to visit a number of times during her journey but the feeling was different after finishing something. She stopped the chocobo and gazed at her home in the distance.

"Huh? Why am I...?"

Yuffie didn't understand why she was wiping away tears.

It was early morning. After releasing her chocobo, she ran down the familiar paths without looking up. She ran at full speed towards the house where she expected her father Godo to be. She didn't

want anyone in town to know she was back yet. Even though she had decided she wanted to keep her worn clothes on, she wanted to give her face a wash at least.

Godo was standing by the door, hammering at a post.

"What are you doing?"

Godoh turned round when he heard Yuffie's voice.

"I'm back. It's all over."

Godo nodded with dignity—

"I'm glad you're back safe, Yuffie. But listen my daughter, the town is in much trouble. Help me. Wutai is in need of assistance from young people like you."

He lifted up a bag full of tools onto his back and started to walk towards the centre of town.

"Hey wait!"

Yuffie hastily followed. Her father seemed to be in a hurry and was walking briskly along.

"You've heard of what I've been involved in right? What happened to the welcoming party? Where is everyone?"

As Yuffie protested, she briefly talked about how she and her friends summoned the Lifestream and saved the planet. Godo stopped and turned round, looking at her with a dubious face.

"I know nothing about what you've done. What I know is that the world got dragged into a mess that the foolish Shinra and crazy Soldiers caused. In the end, the universe's will was to end that dispute and it summoned Meteor but, our planet defended itself by releasing the Lifestream and destroyed it—That is the way I understand it."

Godo spoke with a serious face.

"The universe's will? Who came up with that stupid story?"

"That is my interpretation. Perhaps the truth is different but, what I know is enough. And Yuffie. Don't go about saying you were involved. The effects of the Lifestream is vast. Even though people understand it saved the planet, there is still some who are unhappy at what has happened."

"What!"

Yuffie raised her fist, punching the air in protest.

"What's happened to the town—"

Yuffie looked around her as she talked, displeased with what she was hearing. She had never noticed it when she arrived but, many of the buildings were damaged. Amongst them was the ancient red roofed training hall which now had a large hole in its wall. She could see many of the tiles from the roof had fallen down too—

"What happened?"

"The Lifestream passed through here. It was a horrifying night when the buildings shook. Perhaps it's nothing compared to the victims in Midgar but, there are many old buildings here. You might not see much damage outside the structures but the posts and beams are probably broken. I won't be surprised if the buildings collapse some day. That's why I'm using this hammer to—What's wrong, Yuffie?"

Yuffie gazed at the people who were gathering around her and there repairing the buildings. Many of them were bandaged.

"Is everyone alright? Anyone badly wounded?"

"There's quite a number of people wounded. But not many of them are that severe."

"So they're few in number."

"You're right—But what can you do about it? Now come help me fix the buildings."

Godo took out a new hammer out of the toolbox and handed it to Yuffie.

"I don't mind. This will help, right?"

Yuffie took out her healing materia and showed it to her father.

"Ah—" Godo looked at Yuffie warily. "Do you have any more?"

"No. There were a few more of this type of this materia. I was really planning to bring more back but you know, the attack type would be too dangerous, wouldn't it?"

"That is good. A wise decision."

Godo walked over to the red roofed training hall and began to examine its condition.

"It looks like we can fix this easily."

He then called out around him.

"Hey, give me some help everyone! We'll turn this place into a hospital."

Yuffie was sure her life as a materia hunter was at an end and was going to start a new page as the magnificent "Doctor Yuffie". Everyone that came to the hospital thanked Yuffie. She still wanted to tell someone about what happened during her journey but, faced with those who were injured by the Lifestream, the idea never came to mind.

Some of the people possessed wounds that even the materia Yuffie had couldn't heal but, she was sure they would heal gradually if cared for well. The problem was Yuffie herself didn't have the mind power. Materia was the crystallisation of the Lifestream. To withdraw the power from the stabilised

crystal, some form of shock is required and this is triggered by the mind waves of the user. As a result of that, the materia user's mind is significantly weakened.

The exhaustion was difficult to bear and assaulted by drowsiness, Yuffie stored away her "Dr. Yuffie" sign by evening, immediately curling up in her futon and was going to sleep.

"Ugh..."

Tomorrow I'll take a break from healing for the day and go somewhere to find a supply of ethers or something similar, thought Yuffie. Wait. I wonder did Cloud and everyone else stop travelling after they used up all their ethers?

Thump thump—

Bang bang—

Someone was banging on the wall.

"Shut uuuuuup!"

Yuffie cried out and jumped up from her futon. Was there an emergency?

Thump thump—

Bang bang—

No, something's weird. It sounds like— Yes. It sounds like someone's banging on a nail.

"This should do it. This should keep Yuffie locked in, " she heard her father say.

"Huh?"

Yuffie rushed over to the door. She tried to open it but it wouldn't budge.

"Hey dad! What did you do!? I can't open the door!"

"Ask your conscience. How can you try to hide something so important? Stay in there and reflect on what you've done!"

Yuffie thought there was nothing she had to reflect on at all. She tried putting her hand to her chest but besides letting her know she was alive, it told her nothing else.

"Dad!"

But there was no one there to answer her any more.

"Is anyone there?"

Her voice sounded so helpless that even she was surprised at herself. And what surprised her more was that her drowsiness still wasn't going to let her off even in this situation.

"Stupid dad. After I get some sleep I'll— I'll get you."

Boom.

It sounded like someone kicked the wall. Yuffie woke up. It felt like she's been sleeping for several hours.

"What is it now—"

"You stupid Yuffie!"

It was the sound of a girl's voice who was around the same age as she was. It was an unfamiliar voice. It annoyed her even more that a stranger was calling her stupid.

"Why am I stupid!"

"It's your fault Yuri's mother is ill!"

"Ill? What are you talking about? What does that have to do with me?"

"You brought it here with you from Midgar, didn't you!!"

"What!?"

But there was no answer. Instead, she heard the muttering of adults. They're probably telling her not to talk to me, thought Yuffie.

Gon!

There would be some noise from the wall now and then. It sounded like someone was throwing stones at the training hall. The training hall was an important structure. When Yuffie thought about how the people hated her so much that they didn't care about damaging such an important building, her heart ached.

"What did I do."

Yuffie repeated those words to herself many times until the morning light seeped in through the gaps in the wall.

"Yuffie? Yuffie, are you alive?"

What kind of question is that? thought Yuffie. But she noticed how worried the voice sounded and got closer to the wall.

"Who are you?"

"It's me. Yuri. You don't remember me? We used to play together a lot when we were children."

She heard the unfamiliar voice again. Even if she remembered what her childhood friend looked like, she couldn't see him. But she could remember his name. It was Yuffie's fault his mother had fallen ill— It was that Yuri.

"How is your mother? She's ill, isn't she? It's not my fault though."

"My mum? Yes, it's true she's ill. It's an illness we don't know about. There's some black pus that won't stop coming out from her ears. It seems she's in pain too. It hurts just to look at her."

"I see—Must be terrible."

Yuffie said to him as she imagined how horrible the symptoms must be, hanging her head.

"Yeah. But I don't think it's your fault, Yuffie."

"Huh?"

She looked up without thinking.

"Wait there. I'll get you out."

Eeeeeek. Eeeeeek. The sound of pins being pulled away could be heard.

Soon, the door opened and Yuri appeared.

"Hey."

"Hello."

He had a beautiful nose. His hair was tied up in a pony tail behind him. But Yuffie didn't recognise him.

"It's been so long, Yuri!"

"You remembered!"

"Of course I did."

Her heart was aching but she was unaware of the current situation so it was best to play along.

"This is bad. Mr. Godo and the others are coming. Lets run for it."

Yuffie grabbed Yuri's inviting hand without knowing why. They both ran out of the training hall immediately, holding hands.

"Yuffie! Yuffie! Wait! Hey Yuri! You're going to spread the disease!"

The two of them ran for the village's gate as Yuffie heard her father's voice behind her. She was very angry.

They ran, hands still holding. It seemed no one was pursuing them any more. Yuri suddenly stopped and Yuffie bumped into him from behind.

"This way."

Yuri turned to a path on the left and began running. It was then Yuffie understood why he stopped. A monster was eyeing them making hostile sounds. It was the kind that were just known as "small fries" to veteran fighters. As long as one took care to avoid their poison, they would hardly be of much bother. Yuffie pulled her hand away from Yuri's and stood ready for battle. She didn't have a weapon but she'll manage somehow with these kind of monsters.

"Yuffie, it's got poison."

"I know."

Yes, remembered Yuffie. This happened before too long ago. Yes. I played together with Yuri a lot. It happened when we were playing near the Da Chao Statue. A small furry insect-like monster jumped at us and when Yuri recognised its features, he ran off. I was left behind and after being stung by the monster, I slept for three days.

"Don't worry. I've got materia."

The monster leapt from the ground at Yuffie with a swoosh. Just as she was about to knock it down to the ground, a small knife flew through the air and pierced the monster. It fell to the ground and died after some convulsion.

Yuffie watched Yuri. He collected the knife from the monster and concealed it within the palm of his left hand. She knew that he was fully prepared for their journey ahead at least.

"I'm not the weakling you knew from long ago."

"Then you should have fought it earlier."

"If something happened to me, mother would be left all alone. Come on, lets go."

"Where are we going? Are you sure it's alright to leave your mother behind?"

"It's just for a while."

Yuri took out a medium sized Shuriken from the leather bag on his back. In comparison to the giant version Yuffie was accustomed to, it might not be very stable but, it was a traditional Wutai weapon that she's been familiar with since she was a child.

"Use this."

"Sure."

Yuffie threw it immediately. The Shuriken flew into the air, drawing a huge arc before returning.

"There."

She caught it like an experienced user.

"Just what I expected of you."

Yes. It was expected. This is how I fought and saved the planet. I summoned the planet. Really—

"I was looking forward to a treat from everyone."

"I'll treat you to something next time. At Turtle Paradise."

"That's not a treat."

Yuffie and Yuri sat together on some high ground where the wavering lights of Wutai could be seen far off in the distance. Yuffie was thinking about how and what she should ask Yuri while he was scouting for any pursuers. The two of them were quiet for a moment.

"How's Midgar?"

Yuri asked her as he continued scouting around him.

"It was in a mess. The Lifestream came through there, then right next to it Meteor came crashing and not long before that there were explosions— And then there were lots of fighting too. But I haven't been walking around that area for long so—"

Yes. Just like everything else. I don't really know about it much.

"What about the disease?"

"Well about that—What was with them? I know nothing about the disease. I don't even know why they locked me in."

"Mr. Godo didn't tell you anything?"

"Yeah. He probably didn't tell me anything because he thinks I'm still just a kid and wouldn't understand."

"I see. But I think you're wrong. I think Mr. Godo just didn't know what he should say to you. I too didn't know what I should have said to my mother."

Yuri tried to explain.

"It looks like a terrible disease."

"Yeah. According to what I heard from Midgar, the infected usually die."

"I see—"

Without any sympathy towards Yuri, Yuffie asked.

"Why is it my fault?"

"Yesterday we received information that a terrible disease was rampant in Midgar. Then they learned my mother and a number of others caught it too. In other words, it meant you must have brought the disease with you from Midgar. You're the only one that returned from there lately."

Yuri looked at Yuffie apologetically but she didn't notice.

"Wait a minute! It's true I came back from Midgar. But why is it my fault? I never went to see your mother and I don't know any of the other people either! And I'm not even ill!"

Yuffie stood up in protest without thinking. Her fighting spirit was burning up from the inside.

"Rats carry diseases but they're not ill themselves."

"Rats!?"

"Oh, it's just something the adults said. Besides, my mother and the rest of the patients were wounded and they all received treatment from you. In the training hall, you know."

"It's all false accusations!"

"After that, the disease spread."

"I have nothing to do with it!"

Yuffie grabbed Yuri without thinking. She knew he hasn't done anything wrong but she just couldn't hold back.

"We'll clear your name. "

Yuri calmly said. Yuffie eased off.

"Yeah. Yeah, that's what we'll do! There must be someone else who came back from Midgar. We'll find and expose them! I'll show those people suspecting me like this! Who do they think I am!"

Yuffie shouted out all around her.

"You haven't changed. Me, me, me."

"What do you mean."

"Why can't you think about finding a cure instead of looking for the culprit? Let's go look for one. Together."

"—But."

That maybe true. But Yuffie was dissatisfied with the idea..

"If you heal them, the people will change their view about you. They won't be suspicious of you any more and will be grateful."

"Hmmm—"

Yuffie thought about it. What Yuri said was right. It would be for everyone's sake. But will she be content?

"Yuffie? My mother doesn't have much time left. I want you to help me."

"OK."

Yes. I'll have plenty of time to find the culprit afterwards.

Having escaped from Wutai, the two of them headed south to the place known as the Materia Caves. The area was where the Shinra Company had once planned to set up a Mako Reactor and it was what triggered the battle. Mako Reactor Construction Area. To put it simply, you could say it was a fertile land filled with the Lifestream. Long ago, it was a place that you could only be reached by chocobos that were raised and obtained special powers. However, after the Lifestream burst onto the surface, the geography has changed and you could now get close by foot.

The reason why Yuri wanted Yuffie's help wasn't just because she had been around to witness the change. It was also because he had a glimpse of how abnormally attached to materia she was since she was young.

"There should be materia that can heal the Midgar disease too, right?" said Yuri. "Midgar disease" was the name he gave to the illness his mother had.

"I've never heard about any, though."

"I see—Isn't there anyone that might know?"

Yuri asked as he took out his latest mobile phone. Yuffie had an idea.

"Wait a minute."

Yuffie took out the PHS she had been using for her entire journey and put it to her ear. There was no answer. She had no choice and double checked the number saved inside the memory. Then she took Yuri's phone and entered it. Someone picked up not long afterwards.

"Hello? Tifa? It's Yuffie-chan."

Afterwards, Tifa could be heard asking Cloud whether any materia that could heal the Midgar disease existed but he didn't know if there was any. They only knew how horrifying the disease was. Even in Midgar they had yet to find an effective cure. Quite a large number of people have died because of it and people were afraid. First the Meteor and now this disease.

"They don't know."

"I see—Any other cures?"

"—Look, there's a cave. It wasn't there before. Lets go look for some materia!"

Yuffie returned Yuri's mobile without looking at him and ran towards the hole that was probably created when the Lifestream burst out.

Together they looked about inside the cave for any sparkling signs of materia for about an hour.

"What is going on here!" said Yuffie without any attempt to hide her irritation.

"There's probably none here because it's a new cave. Why did you choose this one?"

Yuri looked worried. Yuffie had no reason.

"If the Lifestream flowed around the planet then it must have moved the materia with it you know!" Yuffie said but in the end, she didn't know if that ever happened in reality.

"—Sorry. I believe in you."

His voice was shaking. Yuffie didn't like how they had to fight monsters as they walked their way around inside the dimly lit cave either.

"Come on! We'll find that materia!" She said as she tried to get rid of their fear. She was a little scared too so it couldn't be helped when Yuri was in these caves for the first time. I'll be nice to him, just a little.

"Lets go outside for now and re-think our strategy."

She could sense Yuri's relief in the darkness.

Before long, they reached the cave's exit but were faced with another monster. At a glance, it looked like a mole but its whole body was covered in needles.

"Piece of cake!" Yuffie cried out to encourage herself and Yuri as she attacked. The shuriken she threw with all her strength hurt the monster. It retaliated, a fireball flying out of its mouth. Yuffie just manages to dodge it as it skims pass her. Yuri who had been standing behind her, also made a dramatic jump to dodge out of the way. The fireball hit the ground between them and exploded.

"Come on, Yuri!" Yuffie shouted at her friend whose attention had been caught by the explosion. Yuri cried out, panicking.

"Sokuhenka Shourai!"

That moment, Yuffie's shuriken returned to her like a boomerang and she threw it at the monster again. Its blades cut through the monster dead on and the two of them won the battle.

"Come on Yuffie. That was mine."

"You're way too slow. Slow and scared. But it looks like you've been training yourself."

"My movements might be slow but I can do something when it comes to techniques."

"No no. You mustn't think like that. Speed is fundamental. OK?"

Just as Yuffie was posing with pride about her speed—

"Look, Yuffie" Yuri's face was gripped in fear. "Look at that!"

At the spot where the monster's fireball had exploded, a liquid was flowing out of it. Inside the dimly lit cave, they couldn't tell what it was but it didn't feel like water. Yuffie ran, her whole body shaking. She could sense an evil presence from the liquid.

"Run."

Yuffie sped up.

Behind them, the liquid that had started to flow out to the surface slowly, suddenly burst out rapidly. It was hitting the walls of the caves and the ceiling too. Soon, it caught up with them and the liquid was falling down over their heads from the ceiling. They sheltered themselves with their hands and kept running. Yuffie screamed as they reached the exit where she had placed a marker so that they wouldn't get lost.

Their vision adjusted. They were outside of the cave now. It was bright underneath the moonlight. Yuffie turned round to look. The liquid with the horrifying presense had slowed down now but it was flowing out of the cave they had been in. As Yuffie watched, she noticed something. The water was black.

"Yuri, the water's black."

But there was no answer.

"Yuri!?"

Yuffie hesitated for a moment but ran back to the cave. Near the cave's entrance, she found Yuri lying on the ground. She tried to help him up but even with all her strength, lifting him up by the torso alone was too much for her.

"Get up, Yuri! Get up!"

"I can't. Yuffie, go. If you stay here you'll—"

"Idiot! I can't look after your mother for you, you know."

Yuffie turned Yuri round so that he was facing upwards and tried to pull him along by his sides with all the strength her arms could muster.

"Just go—"

A black liquid came bubbling out of his mouth.

Yuffie sat in a place somewhere between the cave and Wutai.

"Come on, Yuri. Walk. If you die, it's going to be my fault too. They'll say you died with the Midgar disease because you escaped with someone who just came back from Midgar - Me. They'll all be accusing me."

"So you dragged me all the way here..." Yuri spluttered as if he was enduring the pain or having difficulty breathing, "because of a reason like that."

"That's right."

"—That's not the real reason, is it—"

Yuri was cut short. Panicking, Yuffie looked at him. It's alright. He's still alive. I have to bring him back to his mother somehow. Yuffie stood up and once again stretched out her arms around Yuri.

"Need some help?"

She turned round and saw Red XIII.

"Red!?"

"Can't you call me Nanaki?" said Nanaki, displeased at the name.

"What are you doing here?"

"I'm on a journey to see the world. I've just started, though."

Nanaki walked on easily with Yuri on his back. He lay there face down on his back like some washing hung out to dry and Yuffie had her hand on him so that he wouldn't fall off. Nanaki told her how he had planned to go to Wutai as his starting point and then go east from there. He chose Wutai because it was at the borders of the Western region. Yuffie had told him that Wutai was the centre of the world, isolated by the seas and stretched out to the east and west - Just the kind of world view one would expect of someone raised in Wutai. Yuri's back was shaking. Yuffie was afraid that he was having convulsions. But when she looked at his face, he was smiling. The black liquid from his mouth had eased.

"Tell me something interesting, Nanaki," Yuffie began to speak in a small voice.

"Hmmm—" Nanaki thought. "Oh yeah. I got a new mobile phone. I was told the PHS was really dated. When I returned to Midgar with Cloud and the others, they gave me one. It should have been paid for but the manager at a phone shop was giving out all the ones he could for free. He thought people would be too worried if they couldn't contact anyone during these hard times. He's a nice person."

"Hmmm. But can you use a phone?"

"Of course. It takes a while but I can if I put it to the ground and use my claws. I can use it with a bit of effort," replied Nanaki as he looked at Yuffie with a worried face. "I'm not giving it to you."

"Give it over!"

Yuffie went round in front of Nanaki and he stopped.

"It's better if I had it. Now where is it?"

She was looking all over Nanaki.

"You're serious, aren't you."

As Nanaki said that, Yuffie noticed the belt around his neck, hidden away by his fur. It seemed the belt was only long enough to circle around his body once—She squatted down and peeped close to Nanaki's throat. There she found what looked like a hard wearing small pouch made from some kind of skin.

"Heheheh, I found it."

"Yuffie, I'll remember this."

"Sure. Don't ever forget me."

Nanaki looked like he had given up as Yuffie stretched out her hand towards the pouch on his side.

"Yuffie, I'll give you mine." It was Yuri. "I got one too. From Midgar."

"What do you mean you got one too?"

"Well—"

Blood was boiling inside Yuffie's head as she learned what happened.

"You scumbag!"

"I'm sorry. I think I'm the one who brought the disease to Wutai. Then it immediately spread to my mother. Then from my mother to all my friends—I thought maybe we could find a cure—Let me down a moment. Thanks, Nanaki."

Together they sat in the grassy plains as the wind blew by—Nanaki lay sprawled out—when he listened to Yuri's story.

Yuri had learned that his mother was ill many months ago. It was an illness that was common amongst the adults. His mother became very weak-willed and always said she was going to die soon. He wanted to help her somehow. Remembering Yuffie who he had used to play together with, he decided to do what she did and leave to find materia. However, Yuri didn't have the courage to explore the borders for materia and went to Midgar to ask for Shinra's help. It was just around the time when Meteor appeared in the skies. He visited the Shinra building many times but at the tip of

all the chaos there, they wouldn't listen to him. Some of the staff had pity for him but in the end, the materia he needed wasn't for sale because it was equipment for Shinra soldiers.

"And then that day came. I waited at a cheap hotel in the slums for the Lifestream to finish passing by. Everyone was taking refuge from the upper plates but I went against the crowd and travelled upwards. There were many people that had caught the illness there."

After that, Yuri rushed back to Wutai. When his mother asked where he went, he replied that he had been having fun at the Golden Saucer.

"I couldn't tell her that I tried to bring back materia to heal her but failed."

"Well, I do understand how you feel."

Of course, it was needless to say he became a refugee himself but nothing could be done about it now.

"Hey, you know," interrupted Nanaki. "Materia is also said to be the crystallisation of the Ancient's knowledge."

"Yeah, I heard about that."

"Maybe the Ancients didn't manage to heal the illness your mother has either. Maybe it never existed during the Ancients Era. So maybe there is no materia to heal it," said Nanaki.

"Hey, Nanaki! You can't say that. Maybe we just haven't found any yet."

"But think about it. If that kind of materia really existed, there wouldn't be so many people infected—Ouch!"

Yuffie pinged Nanaki's nose with her fingers. She thought he maybe right. And that made her angry. Nanaki's reasoning meant that there was no materia in existence to counter the disease that was making people suffer, pushing them to their deaths as black liquids flowed from their bodies.

"I hate you, Nanaki."

"What!?"

It had only been two days since they left Wutai. But outside of the town, they saw a small hut had been built. It was small but it had room to accomodate ten people.

"I wonder what that's for. Alright! Go investigate, Nanaki!"

"What? Why me?"

Nanaki looked at Yuffie displeased but turned and hastily sprinted over when she pretended she was about to ping his nose again.

"It must have really hurt," Yuri said laughing. He seemed well other than his way of thinking. We might be able to heal the Midgar disease if Nanaki and I can keep this up and make him laugh.

Not long afterwards, Nanaki returned.

"Four people with the Midgar disease are gathered in there."

Yuffie and Yuri looked at each other as they heard his words.

"Yuri, get on," urged Nanaki. Without waiting for Yuri to struggle onto Nanaki's back, Yuffie ran off.

As she reached the small hut, she tried to find a window. When she finally found a small one, she peeked inside and saw four patients inside just as Nanaki said.

"What's going on here?" Yuffie turned round to ask Nanaki.

"I think they were forced out of the village because they have the disease—"

"And that's why they took the time to build a small hut like this?"

She ran off again, circling around the hut and found the entrance.

"Wait, Yuffie!"

Yuffie ignored Nanaki who tried to stop her and went inside.

"This is horrible! Horrible!" said Yuffie to no one in particular.

"Oh, it's you Yuffie. It's been so long. But what are you angry about?" One of the patients said in a calm voice. She immediately knew who it was because it sounded like Yuri's mother.

"You all got forced out of the village because you're ill. That's horrible!"

She understood the reasoning behind such actions but she couldn't accept it.

"But it can't be helped. The diseased have to be quarantined, " replied Yuri's mother still with her calm voice.

"But—but!"

"But" was the only word Yuffie could say.

"I'm glad they made a place for me," said Yuri as if putting on an act.

"Are you sure? Are you really sure?"

"For now. I'll just have to bear with it until you find a cure, Yuffie."

What if I can't find a cure?—She just couldn't bring herself to say it.

"Ah—, the grave responsibility!"

Yuffie spent around two weeks looking after the patients. The number increased even though the new patients hadn't been in contact with those that were quarantined.

"It appears the disease isn't contagious. Even though a quarantine's been set up, the number of patients are still increasing. In other words, well—I'm sorry, my daughter."

Even when Godo apologised, Yuffie still didn't feel any more at ease. She didn't care about what happened any more. She just wanted to know the cause of it all. She had forced Nanaki to leave the village, ordering him to gather information about the disease. It was possible he would get infected too if he stayed.

"Hey, Yuffie. There's something I noticed—" said Yuri, "I've been thinking about why some people are infected and why others aren't."

"You learned something?"

"Yeah. The people here are those who have suffered from another kind of illness before and those who were heavily wounded by the overflowing Lifestream. In other words, they're all people that think they're going to die."

"Really?"

"Yeah, and it's not just my imagination. It's the truth. Even I—"

Yuri prevaricated.

"You thought you were going to die? When?"

"At the cave we went to. When I was soaked by that strange water and passed out—Hey!"

Yuri and Yuffie looked at each other.

"That water!?"

Perhaps the water was the cause of all this. Yuffie immediately went around asking the patients. She asked if they had drunk or were soaked in some strange water.

However in the end, a clear conclusion couldn't be made. Everyone noticed the water's taste had changed after the Lifestream erupted and passed by. They had thought nothing of it because to the people of Wutai who pumped up underground water to use, the taste always changed whenever there was an earthquake. Apart from being soaked in the Lifestream being the cause, they felt they couldn't eliminate the possibility that the disease was somehow linked to the water and the condition the people were in at the time.

They reported their opinions to Godo.

Take care when using water. It is unknown if boiling the water will have any effect but make sure you do so before use.

Do not think you are going to die.

* * *

About a year afterwards, Yuffie kept to a routine - Spending two weeks taking care of the patients and two weeks travelling to look for a cure. Taking care of the patients made her feel the rush that she had to find a cure soon and whenever she left the village, she would be worried about them. It was what lead to her routine.

The number of huts had increased to two now. And three children had also caught the disease. They were brothers aged eight, six and four. Yuffie was surprised that children at this age were already thinking they were going to die. However, when she heard that they thought they were all going to be washed away together when they tried to rescue their older brother drowning in the river, she was confident the thoughts she and Yuri had about the disease were correct. Geostigma—that was what it was called around world now—spreading through a suspicious looking kind of water. It enters into the bodies of those who have given up on life or are faint-hearted.

Yuri's mother was gone. Even so, Yuri swore that he will always smile before Yuffie.

Almost another year had passed. As Geostigma continued to spread, a cure was still yet to be found. Quite a number of people had the same opinions about the disease as Yuffie and Yuri did but, there were far more people that believed they will get infected as soon as they got into contact with the diseased and because of that, many of those unfortunate victims and their family lived in a life of despair. This increased the chances of the family members gaining the disease too and as a result, gave the people the proof they needed to believe the rumours of infection.

They were soon going to arrive at Corel. Yuffie noticed the sound of an explosion in the distance. She looked around to find out where it came from and soon looked up to find an enormous airship closing in. Yuffie waved. It was a model she's never seen before but she was sure it was Cid's airship.

"Heeey!" She continued waving, jumping many times. But the airship flew overhead. She had heard Cid was building an airship. It wasn't easy using oil as its fuel instead of mako energy but, perhaps he's solved the problem now. If she headed west from her current location, she was sure she'll reach Rocket Town.

Maybe I should go there , she thought but she changed her mind immediately. The airship had turned round. It was a new model that was hovering in the distance so that Yuffie wouldn't be caught in its thrusters as it slowly landed. Yuffie ran over waving.

"Heeey!"

The hatch on its body opened up and a red beast jumped out. Nanaki started running at a powerful pace towards her. Yuffie opened up her arms as if she was ready to greet him with a hug. Nanaki jumped with all his strength. But Yuffie jumped to the side almost immediately and avoided him. Landing on the ground, Nanaki protested.

"Why did you dodge?"

"You've grown bigger. I don't want to be slammed into."

"I haven't changed that much."

"Whatever. You're not cute either way."

"Mean."

"Hey, Yuffie!"

Cid caught up with them. He looked exhausted. Or maybe he's grown thinner.

"Is that a new model?"

"Damn right it is! I completed it somehow. We're in the middle of a test flight."

"Looks like it's going well."

"You could say that. But there ain't much fuel left. Just enough to go round half the planet."

"It doesn't look like it's going well."

"I'm just going to have to place my hopes on that rush-headed Barret. He's out looking for another place where there's oil. I already have all the materials and the staff ready to go when he calls but, where on the planet could he be, eh?"

Contrary to what he just said, Cid's hope seemed to be lower.

"So you met Barret!"

"Yeah. Seems he's been through quite a bit but he's well now. So, you want a ride?"

"No."

"What the hell? You still haven't cured your motion sickness yet?"

Can it be cured? thought Yuffie but she decided it was best if she retorted.

"Why should I get it cured? It's Yuffie-chan's only weak point. A girl won't be loved if she has no weakpoints."

"You are nothing but weaknesses so don't you worry, missy."

"What is that supposed to mean!"

"Well anyway, I'm not gonna force ya on. Take care on your trip."

Just as Cid was turning round to return to his airship, Yuffie called out to him as if she remembered something.

"Hey, Cid."

"What."

"There's materia that can heal Geostigma right?"

Hearing those words, Nanaki looked off into the distance.

"You think there is, don't you?" said Cid as he looked Yuffie in the eyes.

"Of course!"

Cid gave her the thumb's up as he heard Yuffie answer him back in a loud voice.

"Then there is!" he nodded.

Yuffie began to think as she watched Cid return to his airship. How troublesome. That's why the old man's weird. He knows there's no proof that any exists. But it was the words I was hoping for.

Soon, the idle sound of the airship's engines changed to an explosive sound and it was rising high into the air. Its nose turned towards the direction of Rocket Town before it dashed off, no longer visible.

"Haa..." murmured Nanaki, "I got left behind."

"I'm still here."

"Where are you going?"

"The materia cave in the north!"

She couldn't tell what Nanaki was thinking from his expression. But from his downcast look, she knew there was something he wanted to say. Yuffie leapt quickly onto his back and leaned forward, stretching out her arms around his neck. Letting her wrists cross over together, she gave him a tight squeeze. Nanaki's front legs gave in.

"It hurts, Yuffie."

"Tell me! Tell me what you're thinking!"

"I will. Just let go."

Yuffie loosened her hold.

"I was just thinking the same thing I did before. Perhaps there is no materia that can heal Geostigma."

Yuffie stayed quiet and tightened her grip again.

"I said it hurts!"

"Geostigma hurts even more."

"Yeah."

Nanaki nodded slightly and began walking north, letting Yuffie stay on his back.

As Yuffie swayed from side to side, she thought to herself. I've become Yuri and all the patient's hope by continuing my search for materia. That's why I can't quit being a Materia Hunter.

Fin

Lifestream Black 3

Despite mankind's troubles, life on the planet had returned to normal. The man became aware of the increase in spirits— they could be called the darkness of the heart— melding with the Lifestream. He cherished that lingering darkness. Even more so when he considered that the stigma he had left on the surface was what created it. He thought that he could possibly enjoy himself with that. Filling the Lifestream with this darkness.

The man hid himself within the life on the planet and traveled around the world, branding even more people with his stigma. On the surface there were many people who no longer had their normal lives, and at the man's temptation the dark parts of their hearts grew even larger.

Soon the man thought to himself; I want Cloud to know this is my doing. I want the humans to know this is my doing. For that he needed a body. There were things he wanted to say in his own voice. Things he wanted to shatter by his own hand.

He had decided he would use his Mother's power. With a fragment of Mother's body, I too can get a body again, the man thought. And so firstly, he tried to manifest on the surface as just a spirit, but his attempt failed. He had already returned the memories of his own appearance to the planet, and so he was not able to produce an image of himself. So the man found memories of a suitable appearance from the Lifestream, and with that form produced an image. It was the form of a boy. Soon the man remembered that being on the surface was incomparably more limited than the freedom of being a spirit. He created two more agents to do his work. These three were separate entities, and at the same time he himself. These three, created by the strength of the man's will and detached from the system of the planet, were both at once a part of reality and monsters out of fantasy.

The man thought of the future. As my servants are looking for Mother, if they come across someone who knows me, then from that spirit I can learn of who I once was. And with Mother's further assistance, I can become fully real. Even if there's something lacking, it doesn't matter. Cloud will make me complete.

— That will be the beginning, the man thought.

Case of Shinra

At the Ancient Ruins —

The mission assigned to Tseng, leader of the Shinra Company's Department of Administrative Research which was also known as the "Turks", was to obtain the ancient stone known as the "Black Materia". However just moments before that, Sephiroth appeared and severely wounded him, leaving him leaning against the wall close to the verge of death. The bleeding never stopped and he was passing out. Just when he was already prepared to die, Aerith and her friends appeared. They too had arrived at the ruins in pursuit of Sephiroth.

Keeping surveillance over a descendant of the Ancients and looking for opportunities to assist his company at his own discretion has been his duties for a long period of time. Sometimes he would be under pressure by the violent ways of his subordinates but within Shinra Company, they were considered very gentle operations. Once he had tried to control Aerith's mother by force and lost her as a consequence. This affected Tseng's principles and made him reflect on his actions.

Aerith was the last descendant of the Ancients in this world. Tseng thought that someone who represented the darker side of his company like him, shouldn't be getting close to such a majestic existence like her and because of that, the days when he would just watch over her continued.

The first time Aerith spoke to him was when she was still just a child.

"Thank you for your hardwork as always."

Tseng was suspicious of the words he just heard from the young girl. Seeing how silent he stayed, Aerith continued.

"You're protecting me, aren't you?"

When Tseng thought about his mission, it was probably best to take advantage of this moment. But Tseng went ahead and told her the truth. That very instance in his life was the time he's been the most honest.

"I'm Tseng from Shinra Company. I have something to speak to you about."

"I hate Shinra!"

As he watched the back of the young figure run off, Tseng thought it was best this way and was relieved. He thought to himself that even when the day he has to take her away by force, he still won't be able to lie to her.

Before long after many years and certain events passed, Aerith came into contact with the anti-Shinra group Avalanche and the situation took a sudden change. Tseng became agitated as he couldn't get a grasp of the situation at hand and because of that he treated Aerith with an attitude of such pretense evil that even his subordinates turned cold towards him. He would always think of what to say to them.

This isn't pretense evil. To Aerith, Shinra itself is evil. That's why evil should act like evil—

As a result, even though he was aware his death was approaching, he chose to approach Aerith as a Turk.

"Damn it. Letting Aerith go was the start of my mistakes."

Even so, Aerith shed tears for such a Tseng. She didn't see him as one of the enemies but a friend who she had known since her childhood. Tseng thought to himself that dying through such an unexpected event wasn't such a bad end but, he could barely make a joke about it.

"I'm not dead yet."

After Aerith left, Tseng quietly awaited for his death. But it never came. As he started to feel faint, he still couldn't feel his mind merge with the Lifestream.

It was Reeve who saved Tseng. He controlled an odd little robot cat - riding on a Giant Mog - and appeared before Tseng. Reeve was assigned the mission to spy on Aerith and her party using this robot cat.

"That was close, Mr. Tseng."

"Where's the Black Materia?"

"..."

There was no answer. The robot stood still as if it had stopped working. However, before long it began speaking again, "Excuse me. I'm controlling both No.1 and No. 2 at the same time - it can be a little difficult."

"I see."

Tseng couldn't understand just how difficult it was but, he waited for Reeve to speak again so that he wasn't causing any interruptions.

"I've handed the Black Materia over to Cloud for the time being. That is a wiser choice than letting Sephiroth have it, yes?"

Cloud. He was linked to everything that has happened so far and was one of the great mysteries that remains to be solved but at the same time, he was a necessity. He's just a kid, Tseng felt but no matter how much he thought about it, he didn't know what the outcome will be. In any case, it was best Cloud had the Black Materia to prevent the Ultimate Black Magic, Meteor from being used.

"Cloud has the Black Materia — I see."

"As for yourself, Mr Tseng — I'll contact Shinra for you."

"—Right."

"One more thing— My identity as a spy has been found out but I will be staying with them. They're quite an interesting bunch. I'm very interested in what they will do. Right, lets get you moved somewhere."

There was a number of things Tseng wanted to ask but as he was lifted up by the Giant Mog, the pain that struck him knocked him unconscious. He couldn't remember what happened afterwards.

Three men carried Tseng onto a boat. They were his subordinates once. Why did Reeve contact these people and not the company directly? He never managed to get into contact with these three men. Question after question came to mind but Tseng didn't have the strength to say anything. A lot of time passed as he blanked out. Eventually he woke up in a small room. Inhaling the distinct air that was mixed with the smell of the tides and rusted metal, he knew he had been taken to Junon. A doctor appeared almost immediately and began his treatment.

* * *

After Tseng left, Aerith died and the Black Materia was handed over to Sephiroth from Cloud. Using the Black Materia, the Ultimate Black Magic Meteor was cast.

It was said that upon impact, everything on the Planet would be gone in three to seven days. The actual results may not have been different but, no one had ever expected it to really happen.

* * *

Midgar, Sector Zero, somewhere close to the Shinra Building—

Constructed rapidly on iron pillars in Sector Eight, was a dangerous canon that was barely transported by air from Junon and was a last resort against Sephiroth. The "Sister Ray", connected to the dedicated pipelines in Midgar in which Mako energy surged through, was expected to wipe out all enemies including Sephiroth by boosting the power output with a Huge Materia. They aimed it towards him in the distant Northern Crater where he slept. They thought if Sephiroth died, the nightmare that he had summoned in the skies with the Black Materia, would also disappear. If the Planet was no longer threatened, the Weapons would surely return to where they came.

"Theoretically, it's perfect," Rude said looking up at the Sister Ray.

"Theoretically? What about non-theoretically?" Reno asked with a serious tone he didn't usually have.

"It leaves me concerned."

"Then I'm relieved."

"What do you mean?" Rude questioned.

"I thought I was the only one worried. Are we seriously going to fire this thing? Don't we have to test it out first? Will Midgar be alright?"

"Would you be reassured if I said it'll be alright?" Rude replied to the torrent of questions with a stern tone in his voice.

"Hey, don't get mad."

In the end, the Sister Ray never fulfilled their expectations and was turned into a giant piece of scrap. At the same time, the executive floor of the Shinra Building was destroyed under the Weapon's attack. As a member of the Turks, Rude and Reno were used to seeing the ruins of buildings during their work. However, they felt differently for the Shinra Building. They had little office work and their missions mainly involved travelling around outside so, the Shinra Building was very much like a home they could return to after work. All the tough times they've been through together with their comrades, the times when they got scolded by their superior, the times when they would tease the girls while they had nothing to do and get teased back. When they're out, their "switch" is on and when they're in the office their switch is "off". It was the complete opposite of the other office workers but even so, they had some strong feelings for the Shinra Building.

The unrest that lay with Rude and Reno grew stronger after they learned their President had gone missing.

There were many witnesses that saw how the Weapon's fire struck the executive's office so they didn't know if he had really simply gone missing. On top of that, they couldn't confirm the safety of the rest of the staff because the Shinra Company's management system was a mess. There were many who had already given up their positions a number of days before the expected day of the Meteor's impact.

Rude and Reno felt they should confirm the well being of their President and waited for the elevator. The elevators to the executive floors weren't working so they had to try the regular staff's elevators.

"This thing isn't moving."

"It looks like the emergency lock system was activated."

"They managed to get that working pretty well."

"Reno, Rude. Take the stairs."

The two looked at each other at the sound of the new voice before trying to find out who it was. Before long, they spotted a familiar man with long hair who they hadn't expected to be here.

"Chief!"

They had received reports that Tseng had died several days ago. Elena had acted on her own, pursuing Cloud and his party to the Northern Crater to take revenge. However, she failed and returned to Midgar in a bad state and they remembered how she repeated the word "revenge" like she was under a spell afterwards. In short, every member of the Turks thought Tseng had died.

"What's wrong?" Tseng asked, looking at the dumbfounded Rude and Reno.

"You're alive, Chief."

"As you can see for yourselves. But now isn't the time to explain."

"Yeah," Reno nodded a number of times to show they didn't need to hear any explanations.

"Chief!"

Suddenly, they heard the voice of a young woman. The three turned round and found Elena standing there. The youngest member of the Turks didn't try to hide how happy she was to find the Chief who she had thought was dead still alive. She suddenly jumped up and gave Tseng a hug.

"Oh come on, Elena. You know I want to hug too," said Reno.

"Don't mind me, Senpai. Go on!"

"I'll pass."

Tseng placed a firm hand on Elena's shoulder and had a good look at his three subordinates.

"—Come on. Time to get to work."

Darkness—

After being hit directly by the Weapon's attack, Rufus Shinra laughed as he began to slip away in the darkness.

The Weapon was a monster that lay dormant within the Planet. After its attack hit close towards the President's office, the blast had knocked Rufus to the floor. An explosion followed within the Shinra Building afterwards and the metal materials that formed the ceiling fell crashing through the floor next to him. He rolled his body underneath a desk to avoid all the falling debris. He was prepared for death the moment he saw the Weapon's fire heading directly towards him. However, the moment the impact knocked him to the floor, anger welled inside him. He was angry at himself for accepting death. What does it mean? Why didn't he want to die? His anger calmed him down. The Weapon might attack again. He had to escape quickly.

As Rufus looked for some means of escape, his eye caught sight of a small switch engraved with the letter, 'L'.

It was located underneath the desk so that it was hidden away from view. It must be for some emergency use if it's placed here. Perhaps it will be of use in this situation. Rufus pressed it without hesitation. The part of the floor he was lying back on disappeared with a "Gatan" and he found himself falling about one metre downwards. He lands on a hard sloping floor and began sliding down it. In the end, I still think I'm going to die. And not only that, it looks like I'm going to die inside an air duct that runs around the building's walls and floors. It's ridiculous. What would everyone think once

they found my corpse? Right in the middle of a battle in which the Planet's life was at stake, the President of the very Shinra Company that had the power to fight with the enemy dies. Inside an air duct. Ha. Such a jest. It's a pity I can't see myself now. But what is it with this air duct? There's no reason why it should be built at such an abrupt angle. And that L switch— Rufus suddenly remembered a conversation he had with his father twenty years ago. He finally raised his voice and laughed.

It was when he was only five years old. Young Rufus had woken up in the middle of the night and noticed his father was back home - which was rare. Knowing he might get scolded and be made to go back to bed he went out but to his surprise, his father seemed to be in a very good mood and showed him a blueprint. It was a blueprint of the the President's Office at the top floor and how it was to be modified.

"What do you think? This is the room where I give out orders to the world."

"Amazing."

Rufus pretended to show his interest while he did his best to read something from the plans. He had to make his father praise how clever he was. But he couldn't read anything and only said what was on his mind.

"Father, where's the escape route?"

His father couldn't understand what Rufus was thinking.

"Escape route? What?"

"If the enemy attacked, you need someway to escape."

"Ah—"

Realizing what his son meant, the father continued, "Shinra Company has no enemies. Even if there were, the President's Office is on the seventeenth floor. No one would be able to attack there."

"Mr. Palmer said the enemy can attack from space."

"Palmer said that?"

The father's eyebrows frowned deeply. It was a sign he was angry. Palmer, who lead the Space Development Division, could be in for some trouble later. But Palmer told him that being scolded was part of his job so all will be fine. As long as I haven't made him angry at me, I don't care. But it looks like I have.

"Father, I'm sorry. I'm kind of sleepy."

"Listen, Rufus. It's as you say—" continued President Shinra, ignoring his son. "I will have an escape route built in case the enemy attacks. But let me make this clear, Rufus. I won't use it. It will be for you once you become president. Of course, there's no guarantee you will take my place."

"Father—"

"Ha. Escape? Me?"

"Father, I'm sorry."

"Why do you apologise? Are you admitting your idea was wrong?"

"Yeah."

"You're such a simple-minded one!"

There was nothing else that Rufus could think off when he looked at the plan apart from an escape route.

"We will mark out the escape route with something that really stands out. 'L'. Don't forget it now. 'L' for 'Loser.'"

And Rufus was thankful. Thankful for what he did when he was five years old.

The seemingly never ending long chute that lead all the way down to the ground floor from the President's Office gave enough time to think back through one's life. All the trivial memories that had been forgotten were revived one after the other. When Rufus realised that they were all linked to his father, he realised that he too was just another male— Another boy. A boy that just wanted to surpass his father and be praised but didn't know how to express his feelings and in the end, all he got from his father was being scolded and ignored. However, the fact that such an experience lead him to the now seemed to be more hilarious than any other joke he's heard in his life. In the darkness he laughed wholeheartedly.

The escape chute ended abruptly and Rufus found himself sliding into a bright room surrounded by white walls. It wasn't a very big room but Rufus didn't stop until he hit the wall opposite the chute.

"Yikes!"

Rufus laughed again at the pitiful sound he made. He noticed some of his rib bones had broken but he couldn't stop laughing. He continued to laugh, remaining in a pose that he would have found too disgraceful to show anyone when he hit the wall. However, his fractures eventually pulled him back to reality.

With his body still aching slightly from the escape route, Rufus turned to survey the room. It was approximately five square metres in size with white walls. Next to the chute's exit was a plain bed that reminded one of the hospital. The linen was high quality but clearly it hasn't been used for a very long time. The whole wall on the right was used as a closet. To the left was what looked like a door made from steel. While bearing the pain, Rufus tried to get crawl closer to it and looked over its structure. There wasn't a handle or signs of any traps. It had a small panel which seemed to be where the door was controlled from. But Rufus had no idea what the passkey could be and neither

did he have the strength for trial and error. He gave up opening the door and turned to face the closet, getting up and dragging his feet towards it.

I'm in such a state I just can't bear to be seen by anyone. The closet doors opened easily. Inside were sterilised boxes made by Shinra. He reached for the bottom shelf—that was as far as he could reach—and pulled a box out. Engraved on the lid were the words, "For L".

"Ha."

Seeing the engraving made Rufus laugh with his nose up. Again, he couldn't suppress the laughter that welled up from within him but laughing made his ribs hurt. He managed to open the lid by keeping his laughter down. As he expected, inside were potions and other medicines from the pharmacy. Avoiding the deteriorated magical items that may have turned into poison, he took some of the painkillers and waited for it to take effect to relief his body. His eyes were focused on the giant 'L' on the ceiling.

"Don't make me laugh any more, dad."

After absorbing the painkillers, he waited for the haziness to go away. He was right in choosing to use a Shelter while using the medicines from the pharmacy. But at the same time, he felt extremely irritated. Soon, Rufus went to the control panel on the door and supporting himself against the wall, he tried entering a number of passkeys. It all ended up in nothing. It was the medicine's fault that he couldn't concentrate on cracking the passkey but, it was also he himself who decided to take the medicine in the first place.

Rude and Reno were in the wrecked President's Office.

"No one's here."

"Yeah."

"You've checked carefully three times?"

"Everywhere."

"So he's alive."

"But where could he be?"

There were a few girders that seemed to have fallen from the ceiling onto the floor. They focused on searching under them carefully, making sure Rufus wasn't under them.

"So— where else?"

With the Meteo closing in, a powerful storm was blowing. The Turks ignored the Meteo and continued their search for Rufus. The rescue party had made their rounds but they never received any reports of Rufus being found.

Rude and Reno went through an inconspicuous door located further in from the entrance on the first floor of the Shinra building and checked the Executives Only Emergency Room that lead half way into the ground. The previous President Shinra's habits meant it was built very simple. It was sturdy but had no decorations at all - not even a single painting. Exposed steel girders can be seen on the ceiling, walls, floor - everywhere.

"Nothing here. Lets go, Rude."

"Wait."

Rude stopped Reno and pointed to part of a wall.

"The colour's different."

Rufus stood next to the control panel and stared at the keys numbered zero to nine. He knew all he had to do was try every combination possible but it was an impractical thought. He will probably lose track half way through his trial and error. He had to think of a more efficient way of cracking it. The passkey may have a certain meaning linked to it. But then he thought that his father would never do something like that because to him, it was meaningless. He had already tried the meaningful numbers that both he and his father knew—his mother's birthday and the day she died—none of them unlocked the door.

He didn't know how long he's been in the room. All that mattered to him was that he was still alive and Meteor was still in the skies. In other words, their operation to use the Sister Ray had failed and Sephiroth was still in the Northern Crater. In that case, sooner or later Meteor will impact with the Planet and he will die.

Rufus thought about death. So my spirit will become one with the Lifestream that courses through this Planet. I wonder if father will be there too. Does consciousness have a shape? No, such a powerful flow of energy would shatter the consciousness of any single human being easily.

"Ah, I see now."

He smiled as he came to realise what it would mean if the Planet was going to disappear. A moment later he took the small bottle of painkillers from his white suit's pocket. He put three pills in his mouth, grinded them with his teeth and stared at the control panel.

"Ha."

Even if he was going to die, he didn't want to die in such a room. He entered the combinations that never came to mind when he had first entered the room and gazed the control panel. He knew by entering such numbers in anticipation, he was admitting defeat to his father. But this was no time for pride.

Rude and Reno examined the area of the wall that had a different colour.

"It's just a wall, Rude."

Before Reno could finish the wall shook a little. A panel approximately one metre squared sank into the floor and disappeared. Rude and Reno looked at each other before they rushed over to it. They could see a white wall deep inside through the hole. It looked like a small room.

"Anyone there?" Reno asked but just as he was about to peep in, Rufus' face appeared.

"Good work," the young Shinra Company President said before collapsing to the floor.

"Boss!"

Rude walked into the white room and passing Reno who was looking over Rufus. He knew immediately that the room was a shelter.

Taking a quick glance around, Rude saw four of the buttons on the keypad were still lit up but were quickly dimming again. Never did he know that it was a habit of the late President to set the same passkey on any equipment that he might be using. It was made up of numbers that the late President would never forget and that was the birthday of his son.

"Rude, go find a doctor. And check outside while you're at it."

"How's the Boss?"

"He's sound asleep."

Just as Reno said, the soft breathing of the sleeping President could be heard.

"Looks like he's relieved to find us again," Reno tried to joke but failed.

"I'm glad," Rude said with a serious tone before going outside.

Rude stood in the darkness with the rain and harsh winds blasting against him. They were at the Shinra Building's back door. Rubble that looked as if it was broken off from the upper plates or the building itself were scattered everywhere. A spotlight was set up on the ground to aid the rescue groups and the powerful search light from the helicopter hovering above glistened over the shattered glass. Rude took a good look around but remained calm. Finding out Rufus was still alive gave him courage. Rufus himself was Shinra Company. Whether for the good or bad, Shinra was going to live on. If Shinra was going to live on, so will the Turks. Just thinking about life outside of being a Turk was painful.

The helicopter descended and the powerful wind from it sent a palm-sized splinter of wood bouncing off Rude's forehead. Rude smirked. Rude loved thrills. And Rufus always guaranteed some for him.

Taking care where he was stepping, Rude made his way towards the main entrance of the building. A group of people were squatted over there. Rubble were flying all over the place as they used their hands and feet to move it away. He tried calling out to them to see how many were alive. Most of them looked scared the moment they saw Rude. For someone with a skinhead and dark sunglasses on, he just reeked of violence. Rude was satisfied with the reaction he was used to getting.

Busily rushing about at work were the rescue team that was made up of hospital staff funded by the Shinra Company. He grabbed one of them and told them where he needed help. He didn't know how they would react if they heard Rufus' name so he made no mention of it.

"Is he a member of Shinra?"

"Yeah."

"Then he has priority."

"I'm counting on you."

The man nodded and called over to his colleagues who were carrying a stretcher then headed towards the back door. Rude followed afterwards thinking he should lead them there. At that moment, a young woman speaking over a radio caught his eye.

She was one of Cloud's friend named "Tifa". She was also one of Shinra's enemies but for the time being, there was no reason to fight with her. The Turks only had to fight when they were given the order or if someone or something was in their way.

Rude quickly hid out of sight and watched the frantic Tifa rushing about.

As the rescue team moved Rufus onto a stretcher Reno asked, "Where are you going to take him?"

"We'll take him to the hospital first but we can't say what happens afterwards."

"Can't say? What the hell does that mean?"

"I mean Meteor is on its way. What can we do when the planet's about to be destroyed?"

"Well, that's true. Come on, this way."

Reno lead the rescue team through the lobby and then a small door.

"This place is really messed up. That skinhead could have told us about this shortcut."

"It's a passageway for executives only. Don't tell anyone."

"—Yes, sir."

Reno nodded, satisfied with the answer and lead them towards the main entrance. He continued walking through towards the outside until he saw the back of a familiar figure, Yuffie. He stopped.

"Could I leave the rest to you guys? Something just come up," he said turning round to the rescue team.

"Of course. He'll be in good hands. By the way, what is the patient's name?"

"He'll tell you himself once he wakes up. Put him inside a good hospital room like you should."

"Could he be— Rufus Shinra?" one of the people carrying the stretcher from the back muttered.

"Shh!"

Not long after the rescue Rufus experienced a miraculous moment in Kalm, a town near Midgar, which he refers to as "The Fated Day" or simply as "that day". The Turks couldn't guarantee Rufus' safety at Midgar's hospital because it was filled with all sorts of people therefore after Rufus woke up, Reno reported their situation to him and they moved to a small house in Kalm that Shinra owned. They could have travelled further away because they had access to a helicopter but, Rufus chose Kalm. Rufus had moved respecting his subordinate's advice but he didn't believe in the aesthetics of running away when the planet was going to be destroyed.

Meteor was so close that you would think you could touch it just by reaching out your hand. With such a surreal situation before them the four Turks patrolled Midgar. The Meteor's impact was imminent and the Turks may not be able to ease Rufus' mind but, they chose to ensure the President's safety and carry out their job to the very end.

"There is no point in thinking about what happens after the Meteor impacts. We will keep working and assume the planet will overcome this disaster," said Tseng before he ordered his subordinates to help with rescue efforts while taking everyone else to shelters. The town was already feeling the effects of the Meteor in close proximity. Soon the powerful storms and earthquakes rocked Midgar, bringing down the buildings. The city of steel screamed as if it was caught in surprise.

"It's just like the chief to use his last orders for good deeds," muttered Rude.

"What about it?"

"Atonement."

"I see."

Not long later, the original head of the Turks, Veld and their other colleagues gathered together in Midgar. Reno thought it was a dream - just another effect of Meteor.

Once long ago, the Turks had done something that wasn't in the interests of their company. Now that Reno thought about it, they probably never made such great efforts to keep a promise than that time. As he helped the citizens of Midgar back at that moment, Reno pushed himself beyond his limits and never stopped to take a break.

After the incident, President Shinra and the executives ordered the Turks to be disbanded and killed but rescuing them from such a grave situation was Rufus who was the Vice President at the time. Rufus was their patron and now that Reno has helped secure his safety and reunited with the colleagues who he never thought he would see again, Reno was glad that he will have no regrets to leave behind any more.

* * *

Meteor was destroyed directly above Midgar and the Planet escaped destruction. It was the power of the Lifestream bursting out of the Planet that saved it. That very moment when the powerful Ultimate White Magic "Holy" won against the equally powerful Ultimate Black Magic "Meteor", people could only think of it as the Planet protecting itself and didn't know how much effort Cloud and his party had put in to help.

At that very moment when the two magics were battling against each other, Reno and Rude had split up with the rest of their colleagues and were heading towards the Shinra Building located directly underneath Meteor.

"Why does it have to happen now?"

The building shook violently as the Lifestream burst out of the ground. It burst through the window, its light almost like a monster destroying everything in its path as it rushed inside. The two of them ran to safety— talking to each other over the cubicle walls in a toilet.

"This is my fault."

"What is?"

"If I didn't suggest we come back to collect the tool box then— " Rude began with a sorry face.

"Forget it, man. Now's not the time to feel sorry."

Noticing Reno's voice was different from usual, Rude quietened down.

"Rude?"

As if he couldn't stand the silence any longer Reno called out to him, "What is it?"

"We've been together for a long time."

"Yeah."

"Partners right?"

"Yeah."

"The best partners."

Rude noticed that Reno was back to his usual self and could hear him leaving his cubicle. Almost immediately afterwards, the door on Rude's cubicle gets kicked down. Rude catches it and kicks it back.

"What the hell!"

"My last present to my best partner."

"A door?"

"A thrill. The sort of thing you like."

"—Not enough," Rude replied as he got out of his cubicle."

"Then why don't we take a look outside? I bet it's exciting."

"It's a festival."

The two of them sprinted towards the front entrance of the building as the wind picked up and grew stronger around the Lifestream. Beams of light bundled together, whipped their way pass before their eyes.

"Woah!! That was the Lifestream wasn't it?"

"Reno."

"What?"

"This is the best."

* * *

"Tseng, Reno, Rude, Elena," Rufus began talking to the four Turks that remained the next morning after the Lifestream had burst out of the Planet. "What do you all plan to do from here?"

"I don't remember being fired."

Tseng and the others agreed with Reno.

Rufus went on to give the Turks two orders. One was to return to Midgar and find out the situation there and the second was to gather friends.

"Just because people maybe our staff doesn't mean they're friends. Understood?"

"I know that. But what use will it be gathering friends now? What are you going to do?"

"I want information for now no matter how little or how much."

Rufus already knew he had fractured ribs and a broken right heel and the pain they were causing him meant he needed the assistance of a wheelchair but, he still hadn't lost his dignity.

"Tseng."

"Yes, sir."

"I'm sure you've been reprimanded—"

"There are still many things that only Shinra can accomplish."

Rufus nodded satisfied at his response.

"I'm sure this will be fun."

The Turks split up into two groups as they made their way to Midgar practically without resting. Tseng and Elena were responsible for gathering intelligence while Reno and Rude were responsible in finding friends. All the friends they had managed to gather yesterday night were already spread out gathering information and sending it all back to Kalm.

"Avalanche once said Shinra was the Planet's enemy," Reno suddenly said as if it suddenly came to mind.

"Yeah."

"Looks like they were right."

"Why's that?"

"Look."

The Lifestream had saved the Planet but it had also punished Midgar. The town wasn't completely destroyed but rebuilding it was going to be very difficult. It was as if it they were sentenced to suffer between life and death - and it wasn't going to end. On top of that, those who found out it wasn't Shinra who saved the Planet from Meteor were already hostile towards them. Many people mentioned Shinra's name as if they had to lay the blame for these difficult times on someone.

The two of them arrived near the Shinra Building in Sector Zero. A large crowd of people were gathering there even though there weren't many wounded around. It seems they were all wanting to know something or were here to seek help.

"How ironic," Reno grunted as he listened to the conversations amongst the evacuees. They had all considered the Shinra Company to be the root of all evil yet, they all hoped Shinra will also be the ones that will change the dire situation they're currently in.

"I want to gag their mouths with my socks."

"Do it. I won't stop you."

"I don't have any spares."

* * *

Meanwhile, Tseng and Elena were in the lower sectors of Midgar, the Wall Markets in the Sector Six Slums. It wasn't a very sophisticated place but long ago, the Turks would occasionally go there because it was easy to gather information. It was now a mess, covered with the fallen rubble from the Plates and pillars. If someone was told that's what the place was already like, they might believe it. That was the impression people had of the Slums. There were few remaining that could say how it's changed - a result of people spreading rumours that Midgar will soon be destroyed and evacuated themselves from the umbrella Plate.

On their way here, Tseng and Elena too had heard people criticising the Shinra Company. There were even people who threw stones at them the moment they saw their Turks uniform.

"It's kind of hard to go about our job. Why don't we change our clothes?"

They found a store and chose some more appropriate clothing— Tseng wore a flashy t-shirt resembling those from Costa Del Sol and Elena wore a petite one piece dress. The two of them entered a bar where they presumed most people would gather at. Most of the tables were already taken. Finding empty seats, the two of them sat down and immediately began observing the crowd. Tseng's eyes were trained on a man wearing a black shirt who took up an entire table that should have had room for four.

"He's sleeping, isn't he?"

"He could be—"

"Mr. Tseng?"

"What is it?"

"I decided to stay with the team partly because of my pride as a Turk but, the most important reason was because of—"

Elena had never tried to hide her own attraction towards her superior but when faced with the man right before her, even she couldn't put her feelings into words.

"Continue."

"Hmm?"

"It's unnatural for you to be silent. I don't care if you're just going to talk nonsense. Just talk."

"Nonsense...?" Elena said sighing slightly, looking up at Tseng's face. Tseng seemed to be concerned about the sleeping man ever since he entered the bar.

"Strange."

Tseng got up and went over to the man, calling out to him.

"Are you alright?"

But there was no answer. Tseng put a hand on his shoulder and shook him a bit but, almost immediately withdrew his hand when he felt some stickiness in his palm. Turning his hand round he found a black sticky substance. Tseng started inspecting the man again. He wore a black shirt which made it difficult for them to realise the entire top half of his body was covered in the substance.

"What's the matter?" Elena asked walking over next to Tseng.

"He's dead."

Rude and Reno were in the lobby of the Shinra Building. Reno was writing a message on a large advertising space that was roughly the size of a man.

"Anyone who wishes to escape follow the railway at the station upwards and get down from there. No trains are in operation. Date of resuming services undetermined. There are no provisions here. Shinra Company is temporarily closed down."

The house in Kalm had two floors - On the first floor there was a living room, a dining room, a small kitchen, bathroom and a toilet. The second floor had three bedrooms and Rufus was in one of them. His heel was in a cast and his neck, chest and waist were bandaged heavily so it was still difficult for him to move around without his wheel chair.

Rufus gazed over the town from the window. The closed curtains had a small gap he could peep through and people can be seen hurrying about in the streets. Kalm was also damaged by the Lifestream but there weren't any houses damaged to the point where they uninhabitable. For that very reason, there were so many refugees from Midgar who were all here seeking for such a home that it surprised Rufus. However, he had to be discrete and with no bodyguards present he couldn't risk getting into contact with any of these people. He felt very uneasy when he realised that only a single wall partitioned him from the anxious and irritated crowds outside. And it was just the average wall too, not the thick reinforced walls that the Shinra Building had. Tseng had insisted someone stayed to guard him but Rufus declined. He smiled bitterly at the sense of uselessness he felt and thought over things again. The Shinra Building was a fortress his father built. It could be said that it was a symbol of his father. A son must leave his father's house one day and work his own way up starting from scratch. It was normal. Now that time has come for him. It was no time to fear the public. He had to dive in and accomplish whatever that he must— And that could only be the reconstruction of the world.

The door bell suddenly rang. It rang once then paused. Another ring. Just as Rufus was going to ignore it, it rang again. It was rang the wrong way. It wasn't someone he knew. Soon afterwards, he could hear someone trying to break their way in through the door. Rufus wheeled himself towards the bed, taking out a pistol from underneath the pillow and hoped nothing dangerous was about to

happen. He hid it away inside the sleeve of his opposite arm and struggled to drag a chair over to the door from the window.

Rude did a good job in reinforcing the door and it seemed to force the visitors to give up. But almost immediately afterwards, glass could be heard being broken and a number of intruders had broken their way inside.

"My my," Rufus said to himself as he removed the safety lock on his pistol.

It was evening. Elena and Tseng were walking back to Kalm. They were talking about the disease they came across in the Slums. It seems there were many people who had the same symptoms as the man that died in the bar.

"Did you learn anything about it while I was resting?"

"No. It's the first time I've seen anything like it Mr. Tseng."

In other words, those symptoms have only started to become widespread today and we don't know much about the disease, Tseng thought to himself. Is there anything different about today and yesterday? I see — The Lifestream. So the Lifestream didn't just destroy the city. It must be punishing the people of this Planet too.

"I hope everyone can remain calm."

"Who knows."

Elena remembered how all the customers panicked at the bar when they found out the man was dead. Everyone had looked at the man out of curiosity at first but after someone said, "It's contagious!" panic broke out and everyone was pushing and shoving, trying to get out first.

Rude and Reno were already walking back to Kalm ahead of Elena and Tseng. They had wanted to use the helicopter or a car but they didn't know what the current situation with fuel was so it probably wouldn't be easy getting them to run.

"We going to Sector Five tomorrow?"

"And what are we going to do at the company residential area? Ah wait, you think there might be some of our staff there."

"There is a warehouse there. I'd like to secure some vehicles— and weapons."

"Weapons huh. Yeah, we'll need some."

Reno sighed as he thought about the exhausted people of Midgar and the people who couldn't conceal their discontent from them.

Rufus was surrounded by a number of men.

"Looks like you've gotten yourself in quite a mess, Mr. President, " said the unshaven man as he pointed his hunting rifle at Rufus.

"Indeed. But now's the time that I fear most. There is nothing more frightening than a foolish mob," Rufus said as he looked into the red-stricken eyes of the man before him. He could see the hatred in them and was sure he was going to be killed. He could take out one or two of them with his hidden pistol but— There were three of them in his bedroom and he could hear a few more downstairs— It was impossible to kill them all.

"We might be foolish but at least we know who should be taking the responsibility for everything that's happened."

"Oh? Then let me ask you this. What will you do after you leave this house? Have you thought about your futures?"

"What do you mean."

"There are two kinds of people in this world. People who give orders and people who take orders. It is a question of one's abilities, not a trick question. Often when an incident occurs, it is the ones who give orders that are made to take responsibility. As a result, those who remain lose their direction and panic arises. Then everything comes to a grinding halt."

"You don't plead for your life very well," the assailant sneered at Rufus.

"You might be leading a number of people here but how long will it last? What kind of future can you give them?"

"We're a foolish mob. As long as we can live for today, that's all that counts."

"No, not "we". It's just you," Rufus said and was aware the others were looking over at their leader now.

"You have some sort of plan?" asked one of the other men.

Rufus turned to look at that man. He was in his thirties. He seemed to be a relatively wealthier man wearing an expensive looking but worn navy blue jacket and had a sturdy build.

"Why of course. First I would secure my home. Kalm can't shelter all the Midgar refugees. It looks like you're one of the locals here—"

"Yeah."

"Do you want this town to become like Midgar?"

"—" The man was clearly imagining to himself what would happen.

"It's only natural we help the people who need refuge!" the man with the gun cut in as he was being ignored.

Rufus answered, "Take this for an example. What do you do when it rains? Where would the overwhelming number of people go? Perhaps anyone would provide them shelter out of good will but think about how big Midgar's population is. It may not be very big but you can't shelter them all. Can you lay their discontent and anxiety to rest? What can you tell them when all you care about is living for another day?"

"Shut up!" the man raised his voice. Rufus stayed calm and thought to himself he was right about the man. A military captain of a small team would try to carry out flashy jobs but on the other hand when it was one of a middle-sized team like this, it wasn't so easy to do.

"Well, you maybe right. What would your plan be?" The man in the blue jacket said with an understanding tone. Rufus changed his mind and thought perhaps this man was the real leader.

"It would cost my life to tell you."

When Rude and Reno arrived back in Kalm, they noticed there was a big change since they left in the morning.

"That is a hell lot of people."

The sudden increase in people was no different even when they arrived back "home". There were some strangers coming and leaving from it.

"Boss!"

They broke into a run but couldn't get inside. Peeking through the open door they saw men and women lying limp on the floor.

"They're ill."

Rude was right. The two had the same symptoms as the people they saw in Midgar — their clothes and bandages were soaked in a black liquid — Many of them were gathered together.

"Rude, you check the first floor."

Reno made his way up to the second floor careful not to step on the ill. However, it was the same on the second floor. Perplexed that there were no signs of Rufus, Reno gave up and returned downstairs where Rude was.

"He's not down here."

"Seriously. Lets go outside, partner. If we stay here we're going to get—"

Reno noticed one of the ill glaring at him and smiling back insincerely, he urged Rude out.

Elena and Tseng had just returned.

"Chief, our house has been overtaken," Reno tried to summarise the situation.

"We must find the President. He may have been taken away. We have to confirm if anyone knows what happened."

"I'll ask the people inside the house. They're less likely to threaten me," Elena said just as she was about to go inside.

"Elena, be careful. They've got the disease in there."

"If it was contagious then I would have been infected already," she replied and Reno didn't disagree.

"Well then."

"Go find any witnesses," ordered Tseng. Rude and Reno nodded silently and split up into town.

The two of them returned together and reported back to Tseng how the people they met were only filled with discontent and hatred towards Shinra. There were no witnesses.

"It can't be helped in this situation," Tseng said looking over at the ill and wounded who couldn't even walk on their own.

Even if there were witnesses none of them would tell us anything, thought Tseng.

Rufus estimated that it's been two weeks since he was taken away from the house. After he was disarmed, they knocked him out with a drug before taking him away so he didn't know where he was. However, the man wearing the blue jacket had given his name as "Muttin" — it might not be his real name but Rufus guessed he might be at his villa. He was probably locked inside the basement. A large number of people can be heard walking around on the floor above. If those people were refugees then this might not be a villa after all. But it could also just be Muttin's friends gathering together. Without a plan, it was best he patiently waited for the Turks to rescue him. Well, thought Rufus as he looked around the strange room. An interior completely in red. It looks high class but he has some bad tastes — There were some furniture that were in the form of men and woman that were half monster. There was a heavy chain around Rufus' foot which was attached firmly onto a hook on the wall. Thinking about what kind of man Muttin maybe possessing such a room to confine people gave Rufus the shivers and the chain that kept him from moving freely around unsettled him.

Rufus was robbed of his freedom but it seemed Muttin also considered him a guest. A well mannered middle-aged woman who seemed to live in the house would come feed and take care of him. However, it seemed she was ordered not to answer anything.

An old doctor came to have a look at him once. After giving him a simple inspection, the doctor prescribed some medicine and left. Rufus couldn't ask if he knew he was the Shinra President. He had thought about raising his voice when someone entered the room but he couldn't imagine what would happen afterwards.

Every few days Muttien would appear. He was trying to learn the development plans Rufus for Midgar. Rufus had thought about saying his plans were entirely dependant on the information the Turks gathered but even if he did, he probably wouldn't be permitted to contact them. Claiming that he didn't have enough information at hand, Rufus only let Muttien hear a small portion of his plan. First he will build a town on the east side of Midgar. The land was level there and work would be easier. They could use the scrap from Midgar as resources. All the machinery or tools they needed to cut and join everything together can be retrieved from the warehouse in Sector Five.

Rufus thought he could only drag out time this way. If Muttien learned everything from him, he would be killed. He smiled bitterly as he thought of himself as a bard that had to weave a new story to entertain the king every night or be sentenced to death.

"Tell me everything. I won't kill you."

"Then remove the chain from me. I won't run away."

The day we trust each other will never come, thought Rufus to himself.

The Turks had managed to gather information but it wasn't enough for them to investigate and learn the whereabouts of their President. Tseng didn't give up the search. They abandoned the house in Kalm that was now occupied by refugees and turned one of the company residential houses in Sector Five into their office. Following Elena's suggestion, they spread rumours that Midgar was going to collapse. Many people left believing the rumours. Even without rumours it wouldn't be long before Midgar, now a nest for disease filled with debris, is deserted. However, Tseng wanted the place deserted as quickly as possible. There were many of Shinra's secrets in Midgar and he wanted to avoid the refugees getting their hands on the weapons.

"We've got trouble," reported Reno. "Some of the remaining army from Junon have taken over the head office. I think there are about a hundred of them. Some guy named, "Gate" something from military school is leading them."

"What's he after?"

"I don't know. Looks like they're making preparations for some kind of assembly."

And so Tseng and Elena went to understand the situation themselves while Reno and Rude left to secure the weapons they wanted.

Sector Five was the Shinra Residential Area filled with a number of houses built next to one another but, only those with a pass could enter the warehouse built next to the Mako reactor. It was surrounded by a high wall and there was only one entrance. There was a large solid gate that won't open without the right passkey. However, there was also an emergency passkey that only staff of certain high status knew that allowed them to bypass and change the main keys too. Rude and Reno stood outside the gate and quickly entered the passkey that Tseng told them and arrived at the main warehouse door but it was already open.

"The army did this?"

"Possibly."

Cautiously the two of them made their way to Sector Eight's warehouse that also stored some weapons. On their way through Sector Four they noticed the door for warehouse dispatchments there was also open. They hid themselves in the shadows to investigate.

"Hey, they're just average civilians."

There were people that were young and old, women and men going in and out of the warehouse. Even children.

"Sector Four's warehouse holds construction tools and machinery."

Just as Rude said, the people were carrying away medium-sized machinery while the children were carrying smaller tools such as drills.

"What are they going to do with it all?"

Just as Reno began to wonder, they heard cheers from Sector Five. It seems they managed to open the door there too.

"This is bad, Reno. The emergency fuel supplies are in the Sector Five warehouse."

"Mako?"

"No. It's gasoline that we made for emergencies. We'll need it."

"Well, this is great."

Wanting to settle the situation in a peaceful way, Rude and Reno went to stand before the crowd and spoke in a non-threatening voice, "We're personnel from Shinra Company — Who's in charge here?"

"I am," said a well-dressed young woman. You could say she was still in her teens.

"Oh?" Reno looked at her. "And what are you doing?" he continued with a low voice. The woman suddenly looked anxious.

"We were told to collect the machinery we needed to build a town from—"

"By who?"

"A Mr. Kylegate from the army."

"So it's this Kylegate that told you the passkey to open the gate and warehouse door?"

"Yes, that's right. Sorry, did we do something wrong? We heard that the Shinra Army are now independent and were starting to rebuild the town so we came here as volunteers."

Rude and Reno looked at each other as the girl continued to look at them anxiously. They were curious what the army was up to but the girl and the rest of the people really did seem to be simply volunteers.

"Well, if you're just taking what those tools then there won't be any problems," said Reno nodding at Rude slightly.

Quickly Rude added, "But only take the fuel you need for the time being. It must be rationed."

"Yes, sir."

The girl went back to work. Rude and Reno stood watching over them until they finished. They watched the last person carrying a small electric generator leave the gates. The volunteers were very happy and gave their thanks to the two.

"Midgar has a bright future."

"We can't say that yet. Come on."

"What?"

"We must secure transport, weapons and fuel. Then we have to change all the passkeys. The doors and gates - everything."

By late night, Tseng and Elena who came to check on them helped with the work but it wasn't until morning before they finished. Returning home, the four of them decided they should take a nap but they were woken up before it was even daylight by Veld.

"You gave me quite a surprise for an old man who's supposed to be dead."

"I should be the one surprised that Turks are sleeping for this long."

"We're just happy we could see you again."

"—" Veld replied to Reno's smile with silence and began his report on Junon's Lieutenant Kylegate. "The lieutenant was supposed to be on vacation but he summoned his troops here to Midgar. This morning he organised an assembly at the east side of Midgar to perform a speech. He proposed to build a new city on these grounds and had people gather tools that belongs to Shinra—"

"Veld... Sir," Tseng began unsure how to address his former superior. "Your information conforms to what we have gathered but please tell me. On what grounds do you come to us with this information?"

Rude and Reno looked at each other, unsure of what Tseng's intentions were. Veld was like a father who raised the Turks.

"A reason—" Veld's eyes narrowed. "Retribution or perhaps paying back a favour?"

"—I thank you for your information but there is no need for retribution and you don't owe any favours."

"What the hell, " cut in Reno with an irritated voice, "What's all this about needing a reason for information and retribution? Who cares about that? I'm just simply—"

"Simply what?" Tseng invited him to continue but Reno fell silent.

Seeing Reno's reaction, Veld began speaking again, "Reno. You Turks are like my—"But he too couldn't speak out the last few words and swallowing them, the room fell into silence. A moment later, Reno opened his mouth again as if he had repented on how he had acted earlier like a young boy.

"The tools were taken away by volunteers from the warehouse yesterday," he said in his formal tone as if to hide the embarrassment of letting his emotions take over earlier.

"But a lieutenant shouldn't know the passkey," mused Rude.

"That's the key point to all of this. While on vacation the lieutenant stayed in Kalm. He found out the passkey that he shouldn't know. Who could he have learned it from? Where did the President disappear from?"

Hearing Veld's words, they all suddenly stood up together but Tseng calmed them down and asked, "What kind of man is Kylegate?"

Veld shared all the information he had regarding Kylegate. He was born in a wealthy family but after losing both his parents, he became head of the family. With his status there was never a need for him to join the army but it appears his will was to defeat Shinra's enemies and bring peace to the world. He has talent as a soldier but was criticised about his character.

"Torture. Cruelty. Whether it was training or on the battlefield he always overdid things and stood out. There are rumours that he joined the army to legally satisfy those desires."

"I see—Then do you have any idea where the President may be?"

"—In Kalm. At Kylegate's mansion."

Before Veld could finish, Rude, Reno and Elena rushed out of the room but Reno paused to look back—

"Where are the other Turks? It would be much more reassuring if they were all here."

"They are spread out around the world gathering information— But they're also leading their own lives now. We all gathered together under Meteor because we all felt the same way that day. We can't force any of them to come along with us now."

Hearing Veld's words, Reno looked discontent but he turned and left in silence.

"What do you plan to do now, Sir?" asked Tseng as he made his way to the door to follow his subordinates.

"I will go to Junon again. Reeve is headed there."

"That is curious."

"Yes. It's not just Reeve. Just this once it doesn't look like I can read the minds of everyone involved this time."

"The Turks are different. Perhaps the same could be said of everyone that gathered that night. They are all loyal to your teachings."

"In other words— They're a bunch of people whose minds I can't read," said Veld as he walked past Tseng through the door first. "Look after the President."

As Tseng watched Veld leaving he muttered, "I wish you could have watched me leave like you did in the past, Sir—"

Mutten Kylegate hit Rufus three times.

"I can't tell you something I don't know."

"Tell me the new passkey!"

"Someone must have changed it. I only know the emergency—"

Mutten hit him again without waiting for him to finish. He was well-trained in his punches.

"I see. So you're from the army—"

"You've passed by me many times before. But to you, I'm just another one of your troops."

"—I'm sorry," Rufus sincerely apologised. However at the same time he thought to himself, If everything in this house belongs to him then he must be the son of a rich or famous family. In that case, he must have been born quite early and should be older than he looks. There was a rule within the company that prohibited certain kinds of people from being recruited for the army but it was often ignored. In this case— Mutten must have some problems that prevented him from being promoted. This room filled with its horrific decorations maybe proof of that.

"You have lapdogs don't you?"

Mutten suddenly changed the subject. He must have a very unrefined mind if he can refer to people as lapdogs, thought Rufus.

"Where are they?"

"I was taken away when my subordinates weren't present. They don't know my whereabouts."

"I see," Mutten said convinced but he hit out at Rufus again. Someone came in.

"What is it?"

"We have a guest," replied one of the maids.

"A guest? Who could— Never mind. I'll be right there."

Just as Mutton was about to leave the room he turned back round to look at Rufus.

"The construction of the new city has started this morning. I've gathered plenty of volunteers and lapdogs together. You should have seen the crowd that gathered on the east side of Midgar. I'm really looking forward to it, Mr. President. They're building my city. I'd love to show you it but you leave me no choice but to leave you here."

He left after letting Rufus know the new city will be called, "Edge". Not long afterwards, Rufus could hear the angry voice of a man. It was familiar voice. Gunshots could be heard and the maid screamed. He could then smell something burning and heard a lot of people screaming trying to escape.

Rufus tried to get up from the chair he was forced to sit on but his body wouldn't obey and the slightest movement caused him to fall over. He could feel a scream surging inside his ribs but he tried to stay calm and surveyed his surroundings. I had the feeling this would be where the fight would be. He heard a vulgar voice outside.

"Mr. President, where are you!"

Rufus believed it was the voice of the man that pointed a gun at him. He didn't know what the situation was but most likely they had some dispute amongst themselves. In any case, it didn't seem like help had come. Now then, what should I do? I'll crawl my way underneath the bed and hide myself there.

"_"

His fractured bones were aching and he wanted to cry out in pain but he bit his lower lip and persevered. What do I do now? If he sees the chain on my foot he'll know where I'm hiding. Rufus rolled onto his back and looked at the bottom of the bed. There were metal hooks and a number of whips were hanging from there— Just thinking about what they were used for disgusted Rufus. He took one of them and gripped onto the handle tightly.

"Mr. President!"

The door was kicked down brutally and a man entered. Rufus could only see his boots from where he was hiding. As he walked over to the bed, his foot hit the chain that was locked to Rufus' foot.

"Heh, hiding under the bed huh."

Come on. Closer. Just as Rufus expected, the man was cautiously getting closer to the bed. Come on, peek down. Lets see your face.

But it was the end of a silver gun that he saw extending underneath the bed. Immediately he grabbed the gun with his left hand and pushed against the bed hard.

"What are you doing!"

A gunshot is heard. Pain ran through Rufus' left hand. Letting go of the gun, Rufus slid out from under the bed. He couldn't feel the pain on his flank. He rolled over and kicked the man with the cast on his foot. "Urgh!" cried the man staggering back a few steps. Getting up quickly, Rufus swung the

whip hard. Fortunately for him, the gun dropped close by. He quickly rushed over to pick it up and pointed it at the man.

"I win."

But smoke suddenly filled the room.

"You stupid President! Come on! Fire! You'll be burned to death in the fire too anyway! How's that gun going to help you?"

Rufus had no choice but to let the man live for now. He quickly tried to find a good reason to make the man listen to him.

"You killed Mutton?"

"Yeah, I did. He's been treating me like s***! We grew up together damn it!"

"I see. And that's what caused his fall."

"Don't try to make me one of your men. I haven't forgotten how you made a fool out of me back in that house."

This must be karma, thought Rufus. He never thought things would end this way. That moment, he heard another gunshot and the man fell. He thought he had unconsciously fired the gun but he found someone else had entered the room.

"Boss!"

The refugees from Midgar who had made their way to Kalm were now rushing out of the Kylegate Mansion. Four of the Turks arrived just in time to see the mansion burst out in flames and collapse before their eyes.

"Boss!"

The Turks frantically looked for Rufus amongst the refugees and finally found out what they wanted to hear.

"Someone saw a middle aged man carrying out a man in a white suit that had his head and feet in bandages," said Elena looking worried.

"That must be the President," Tseng said.

"Who could the middle aged man be?" asked Reno.

"I'm sure we know him," said Rude.

"Could be the Chief," Reno said, eyes narrowing. "Should we do this the Turks' way? They all hate Shinra anyway."

"You have my permission. But do not harm the volunteers."

"Why?"

"The plan to rebuild the city is most likely the President's idea."

Just moments ago underneath the burning Mutton's mansion, a middle aged man was pointing a gun at Rufus.

"How are you Mr. Rufus Shinra?"

The man was the doctor that had inspected Rufus.

"Not very well."

"Then you should throw away your gun. It'll just make things worse for you."

Rufus felt uneasy at the doctor's words.

"Doctor. If you throw yours away then I will do the same."

The doctor smirked and pointed the gun at Rufus' face firmly. Rufus knew he was ready to pull the trigger. Quickly he aimed his own at the doctor's heart and fired. The gun clicked with an empty sound.

"Mr. Shinra. You don't know the man who possessed that gun. He hated Mutton. All Mutton did was make him do all the dirty work and take all the good stuff for himself. That's why he used all the bullets to relieve his own hatred on Mutton. I believe the last shot was used in this room—"

Rufus let out a sigh as he watched the corpse being kicked over before him. He never did think about the consequences did he?

"I am Kilmister. I worked for the Shinra Company since I was young. I was a little lower down than Dr. Hojo's assistant in terms of status.

He's one of Hojo's staff — I have a bad feeling about this.

"Now throw away that gun."

Rufus had no choice but to obey and threw the gun at Kilmister's feet. Kilmister took out a glass bottle from his pocket and held it out before Rufus.

"Take a sniff of this. I need you to pass out for a moment. If you don't do it, I'll shoot. I'm going to need some of your help so I won't kill you but — I will make you suffer," said Kilmister handing the bottle over. Rufus took it and opening it, he recognised the smell right away. It was the same smell he noticed that Mutton had when they were still in the house in Kalm.

Waking up, Rufus found himself on the back of a truck. There were nine others besides himself. There were five young men and four women who were around the same age. They were all bandaged. But there was one other similar thing they all had. He had thought they were all just

covered in dirt but looking closely, he noticed a black liquid was flowing out of their body. Even their hair were covered by the sticky substance. He knew they were suffering judging from the occasional moans he could hear from them. One of the young woman next to Rufus lost her balance and fell on him.

"I'm sorry."

"Don't worry about it."

"You— You don't have the disease," she said in a sorrowful voice. "I'm really sorry if you get infected."

Rufus broke his bones sliding down from the top floor of the Shinra Building. Then he was locked up and tortured before being faced with a gun. Now he was facing a fatal disease. He smiled bitterly thinking about everything he's been through. He didn't want to get dragged into anything else but right now at the back of the truck, there was nothing he could do.

It was a rough ride. The road was bumpy and Kilmister was driving at an insane speed. Rufus had thought about pretending he fell off the truck but remembered how Kilmister said his help was needed. I doubt my life's in danger. Wherever it is he's taking me it will probably be better passing out in the wild here.

Kilmister stopped the truck in front of a cave by the coast in a rocky area. Just like the time Rufus was taken to Muttien's basement, he had lost consciousness for most of the trip so he had no idea how far away he was from Kalm. Looking at the coast, Rufus tried to map out where he was and judged he was around a three to four hours car journey away. As injured as he maybe, it was possible for him to walk back on foot.

Kilmister pointed his gun at the patients and gave out orders. Even if he didn't, it didn't look like they had the strength to fight back. Rufus got off with the help of the woman who he had talked to earlier. He didn't have a walking stick for support so he held onto the woman's shoulder until they reached the cave.

"I hope we both get better soon," said the woman. Indeed I hope so too, thought Rufus.

There was a steep drop the moment they entered the cave. Rufus had a harsh time climbing down the ninety degrees ladder for five metres. He forced himself to look up, his neck cracking with pain. If they removed this ladder, it would be impossible to climb back up. As if expected, Kilmister removed the ladder.

"There's a number of passageways further in. Each of them leads to a dead end. Go find one you like. It'll be your room."

"What about our treatment?" asked a young man.

"Come to me when I call you. No harm will come to you," answered Kilmister in a calming tone and disappeared.

Surprisingly enough, some simple bedding and pyjamas were prepared for them in the cave. Each of the patients took their share and went away to the "one they liked" and claimed their beds.

Rufus chose the one furthest in as part of his habit. Not long afterwards, a boy whose symptoms had calmed down came round with his meal which was some bread and cheese.

"Was everyone threatened with a gun to come here?" asked Rufus.

"No. We've been Mr. Kilmister's patients since we were children. He's the local doctor in Kalm. That's why when he said he could heal our disease we believed him and a number of others helped carry things to this hospital here."

"Hospital?"

"Yeah. We have to be quarantined. He told us even if we stayed in the village we would eventually be chased out-" The boy said, suddenly looking troubled. He continued, "He says that he only decided to use a gun now to make sure you won't try to escape."

"I'm a patient too but... It looks like he doesn't trust me. By the way, where are we?"

"He told us not to tell you."

Looks like it won't be a fun stay here either, thought Rufus.

One day, Rufus received some treatment from Kilmister. Near the entrance there was an isolated examination room, roughly built into the cave. While Kilmister was changing Rufus' cast, the boy who had brought Rufus' meal was standing in the back with a gun in his hand.

"Doctor. Is there any progress being made towards the cure for this disease?"

"Of course."

Rufus caught Kilmister's gaze as he looked over at the boy.

"What are you after."

"Why, I'm a doctor. I simply want to rid the world of all diseases."

"That is commendable. But why did you bring me here?"

"Jenova."

"What?" asked Rufus in a loud voice, hearing the unexpected name.

"After examining the patients I found that a number of their cells resemble those found in Soldiers."

"Please explain," urged Rufus who saw Kilmister glancing over at the boy again.

"I will in due time," he replied and became quiet.

"At least tell me this - Is it contagious?"

"I will tell you that due time too."

It can't be contagious, thought Rufus.

Three months have passed. The bandages around Rufus' ribs had been removed and the day that he could remove the cast around his heel had arrived. Kilmister handed him a walking stick.

"It's a pipe found somewhere from the Shinra Building."

"What's the situation in Midgar now?"

"The disease remains widespread. The number of people infected maybe rising but there's still a lot of people working hard in the new city to the east."

"Who is leading them?"

"Who knows. It seems there's a number of different groups. By the way, Mr. President - Do you know anything about the Shinra Company's assassins?"

Rufus shook his head firmly.

"It seems letters have reached the people who managed to sneak into the Shinra Building and warehouses, threatening them not to try it again if they wish to stay alive. They're all so scared that they've been found now that they've decided not to do it again."

Those foolish Turks, Rufus smiled to himself without thinking.

"Mr President. I'm not talking about right away but I want some of the machinery that Shinra possesses. Could you let your assassins know?"

"What do you want?" asked Rufus no longer trying to hide his caution.

"Dr. Hojo's equipment."

"And you'll be using it for our treatment I presume."

"Of course. I will also be needing-"

"Jenova."

"Yes. Where is it now?"

"I don't know. I was going to look for it after I leave this place-"

Kilmister suddenly looked at Rufus as if evaluating his worth.

"Then we must find a new place. This place isn't suitable for any research."

Research...

"Dr. Kilmister. Are you a doctor or are you a scientist?"

Silence.

"Your treatment's over," said Kilmister as he pulled out a gun hidden underneath his lab coat and pointed it at Rufus.

Afterwards, Rufus spent some time slowly practicing walking. Having just recovered, he could still feel the pain now and then but eventually he was able to walk around the cave freely on his own. Enough to let him peek into the "rooms". A number of them were empty. He found out the boy that had brought him his meal was dead. There were now three men and two women left. Four people had died in total.

He saw a woman groaning with pain in one of the rooms. She was the one that had spoken to him on their way to the cave. A man was watching over her, worried. Spotting Rufus, he said, "The doctor said there isn't much medicine left so he's cutting down our doses. I gave her mine too but it looks like it's wearing off."

It didn't look like Rufus could do anything for them. No wait- Rufus went out and called to Kilmister. Not long afterwards, a man in a white lab coat with a face full of melancholy appeared.

"They tell me there's not much medicine left."

"Yes. All that I have left will soon be gone."

"You had medicine?"

Does that mean he's had a cure for this disease all along?

"Wait there," said Kilmister who disappeared and came back with a ladder. "Can you climb up?"

Rufus grabbed hold of the ladder thinking it was his chance to escape. He climbed up carefully and finally reached the top but he found the end of Kilmister's gun pointing in his face.

"Hold it right there. We'll talk here."

Looking closely at Kilmister, Rufus could see his face was pale white and sweating. "You don't look too well, Doctor."

"I want medicine."

"What medicine?"

"I want my share of the medicine at the very least."

It seems Kilmister have been giving the patients a slightly diluted version of the stimulant that Shinra's troops used.

"It can't cure the disease but it can suppress the pain."

"So that's what their treatment is."

"I haven't been tricking them. I had to find out the source of the disease first and until then, I had to control it somehow."

"And you've been infected too?"

"No," replied Kilmister and explained that by taking a diluted version of the stimulant, he could work overnight too.

"But it's possible that you can become addicted too," thought Rufus smiling, thinking that he maybe able to gain control over Kilmister. "Do you have a phone? Or a pen and some paper."

"Who are you going to contact?"

"Shinra's assassins. They know where the stimulants are stored."

Kilmister's eyes glowed but he still tried to handle the situation with the utmost caution. He ordered Rufus to go back down the ladder and before long, threw down a pen and some paper to him.

Rufus didn't write anything else on the note apart from asking for a supply of the stimulants. It was more important he earned Kilmister's trust right now. The He can rely on the Turks to take care of the rest.

However, after leaving for Midgar with the note for some time, Kilmister did not return. The Turks did not come either. There wasn't much food supplies left. He had told Kilmister to go the Shinra Building and call out to the assassins - The Turks, and pass them the note. He was expected to be back with the medicine within three days - With the Turks tailing the good doctor of course. It's now been over a week.

Rufus had now grown accustomed to the cave and was going around inspecting it to pass time. The condition of the woman was getting very serious and was losing her senses. The man who was watching over her was also groaning with pain now but he held her hand, hoping a miracle would happen.

"I'm sure Kilmister will be back soon," said Rufus to them even though he had no proof to show it. Why did I say that to them?

It had been raining outside for days and suddenly Rufus realised the water was getting into the cave too. It wasn't just at the entrance either. The water was starting to leak through the roof where Rufus has been staying. It appears there were many holes and water was now streaming its way in like the taps were turned on. After so many days of rain why does this suddenly happen now? The water must have accumulated somewhere, thought Rufus. We have to evacuate somehow. Rufus warned the others as he made his way towards the cave entrance.

His neck hadn't fully recovered but he looked up and found no signs of anyone around. He could only hear the loud pattering of the rain. He looked around. If the rainwater was to fill up the hole they were in - and he could somehow swim then he might be able to make it up.

"This is the least I can do..."

Rufus returned inside and went to the others to tell them to prepare to evacuate. He received no answer. The patients who had been taking the stimulants instead of the painkillers were too focused on persevering the pain.

"Five people huh..." Rufus muttered to himself and made up his mind. Determined, he went to where the furthest patient was and carried him as close to the entrance as he could. They had lost so much weight they were looking very fragile so even though Rufus hadn't recovered his full strength, he was able to carry them.

The water was now up their ankles. Rufus went around looking for something that he could use as a buoy. A few wooden beds floated by. He removed the metal parts that held the beds together and pushed the wooden frames towards the entrance. They moved surprisingly fast while afloat on the water. Rufus returned to where the patients were.

"Those of you who can swim, swim. If you can't then hold onto these frames. One person per frame."

A few hours later, the water level had risen to Rufus' jaw. All the patients were holding onto the wood. I've done all I can now - Rufus gazed upwards, his mind a complete blank. He grabbed onto the wood himself as the water continued to rise. Not long later, he was only one metre away from pulling himself out of the hole but the situation changed. The water had stopped leaking into the cave. Did the rain stop or did it have something to do with the geography of the cave? Rufus bit his lip. We'll just have to wait for help. He looked back and found there were fewer patients remaining. Two men and one woman. The woman was the one who had talked to him. She was grasping onto one of the frames that had floated together with another that a man was holding onto. Just when Rufus thought she was dead, she moved groaning in pain. For some reason, Rufus found himself breathing a sign of relief.

Hours later, nothing changed. The water level didn't rise or fall. Rufus could feel his body temperature dropping having been submerged in the water for so long. We don't have long left, he thought.

"What?"

He felt as if someone had called out to him but there was no one around that could have had the strength left to do so. He looked around the water, his attention heightened and thought he saw something moving. A black shape slowly made its way towards Rufus. He couldn't make out whether it was the black ooze coming from the patients.

The shape moved as if it was alive. Frightened, Rufus started to splash the water in an effort to force it away. The waves Rufus created had no effect on it and it closed in. Soon, he found his white suit dyed in black. It was so dirty it could no longer be described as white but he had kept it on knowing that he will need it when he managed to escape. He looked at his sleeve which was now dyed in black and thought, This is the end.

The black ooze crept its way up Rufus' neck towards his face. He knew it was trying to get into his mouth but he held it shut firmly. It tried his nose next. He covered his nose with his hand. He wasn't

going to be able to breathe now but he would rather suffocate than let the ooze win. However, the ooze soon made its way into his ears and with a cry, Rufus lost consciousness.

"Mr. President! Mr. President!"

Rufus woke up to the sound of someone calling to him.

"The flood was most unfortunate. I'm sorry I'm late," said Kilmister as he lowered a ladder. Rufus was surprised he was still alive as he slowly grabbed onto the ladder. Turning round to look behind him, he found only the man and the woman were left.

"Hey, are you two alright?"

The man looked up.

"Help has arrived!"

The man looked at him blankly but soon understood. Anxiously, he called out to the woman next to him and she weakly moved her head in reply. Rufus offered a hand but just as the woman was about to reach out towards it, a gunshot rang out above their heads. She fell off the wooden frame as if she was repelled off it and sunk into the water.

"Pamela!"

The man cried out in horror and dived into the water after her but he didn't have the strength to swim. Rufus reached out to grab his arm while holding onto the wooden frame for support.

"Pamela..."

The man wailed but couldn't find the strength to cry out any louder. Rufus dragged him along by the arm towards the ladder.

"Get up."

"But-"

"You must think of nothing but survival."

The man paused for a moment, looking back sadly at the spot where Pamela had sank into the water before he looked up at Kilmister with hatred - Rufus never knew the man had known her name.

"Nothing could have been done. I was simply easing her pain. Pamela won't hold a grudge against me for it."

Indeed, nothing can be done for her now. But what about this man? thought Rufus. The man started to climb up the ladder full of determination.

"What's your name?" asked Rufus.

"Judd."

"Judd, now isn't the time. Leave Kilmister to me."

Judd climbed all the way up without answering. Rufus followed up but just as he was going to see the surface he had long missed again, he felt a sudden surge of pain tear through his entire body. Something was flowing out of his mouth.

He used his hand to wipe it away and found it was the same black substance that had been oozing out of Pamela and Judd.

"My, my. You will have to take some of the stimulant too, Mr. President," said Kilmister as if enjoying the sight.

"Ugh-"

Suddenly, Kilmister's angry voice could be heard and a gun fell pass Rufus into the water. Rufus looked up, persevering the pain. He could see Kilmister suffocating and someone grasping his neck from behind. You fool, Judd! I told you this isn't the time!

"Argh!"

Judd's own angry voice followed but it was a short one. Rufus cried out furiously, his body trembling as he gripped onto the ladder.

"You're late!"

"Oh, I'm sorry," smiled Reno.

Cliff Resort was a place created as a sanatorium at the dawn of Shinra Company for its staff. However, people enjoyed spending their time by the sea more than the mountains so it was eventually abandoned. A number of lodges remained as they were from that time. Splitting themselves into two cars, Rufus, Tseng, Elena, Reno, Rude together with Kilmister and Judd made their way there. A large crowd of infected people had already gathered. Most of them were patients of Kilmister that the Turks had transported from Kalm. Rufus was uneasy at what he saw and so, Tseng explained.

About a week ago, Kilmister arrived at the Shinra Building and had shouted out to them. Only Reno and Rude were the ones on the lookout at the time. Kilmister had said that he had a note from Rufus Shinra and having been a while since they heard any news of the President, both of them came out from their hiding place to meet him. The letter said, "Give all the stimulant you can to this doctor" but because they didn't know what it meant, they were suspicious if it really was from Rufus himself. They told him to come back the next day. After that, Rude returned to their "office" in the Fifth Sector to discuss the matter with Tseng while Rude tailed Kilmister.

Tseng somehow felt it was the President's handwriting but he wasn't completely certain. He decided to give the doctor some stimulants so that they could follow him.

Reno followed Kilmister all the way to Kalm. There, a small hospital had become home to refugees because there had been no doctors around for over half a year. Kilmister was the doctor of that hospital. The patients in Kalm were happy to see the doctor's return and immediately they sought help from him. As Kilmister examined the patients unhappily, Reno thought to himself that he himself must have been ill too.

The next day, Kilmister returned to the Shinra Building's entrance and found a box stacked full of stimulants. After confirming they were what he was seeking he opened one of them and diluting it with some water from his flask that he prepared, he drank it. Ignoring the Turks who looked at him dumbfounded, he sat down on the ground then laid on his side, telling them to wait until the medicine took effect. The Turks had no choice but to wait as told because he was the only man that had information about their President.

Soon after recovering and looking better, Kilmister asked the Turks to carry the box of stimulants out of Midgar. Clearly he was taking advantage of the situation - after that, he even went ahead to ask Tseng if there was a suitable facility he could make use of. He wanted an isolated place that was away from the human habitats but also wasn't too far away to get to and was big enough to accommodate a large number of patients. He told them that he wanted to make a contribution to history by spending his time studying the disease there. As if he suddenly realised the Turks didn't trust him, he began telling them about Rufus and his current condition. When he managed to tell them the exact details of his injuries, the Turks believed what he said. He continued about how he had protected Rufus by leading him out of Muttens' mansion and that they should be grateful to him. When asked why he kept quiet about all this, Kilmister answered that he had wanted to get on the President's good side.

Tseng soon remembered about Cliff Resort and decided to lead Kilmister there. Kilmister appeared to be satisfied with the location and ordered the Turks to bring the patients. It angered the Turks that they were being ordered around as if they were one of his stimulant addicted patients but he wasn't going to tell them where the President was until all preparations were complete so they had no choice but to obey. They made many trips to and fro between Kalm and Cliff Resort, fulfilling the doctor's wishes. As if he was satisfied using the Turks as his own subordinates, he finally agreed to lead them to where the President was.

They arrived a little later than the doctor because Reno had lost sight of the doctor's truck in the heavy rain and floods. Reno later insisted it was his great senses that lead them to the cave afterwards without any guidance as if to cover up his failure.

Rufus spent his time at Cliff Resort as one of the patients. He was given some stimulants, although it was referred to as medicine and it certainly cured the pain the disease caused. When he didn't have a fever and was in good condition, he would be updated by one of the Turks finishing their shifts and re-think his plans for the future.

"What's at the centre of the new city?" Rufus asked Reno as the thought suddenly came to mind.

"Hmmm, a plaza. A big round plaza with nothing there. There's a road extending straight to Midgar from it and surrounding it are other streets. That's why we call it the centre of the city."

"In that case, build something there. Yes, build a monument there."

"What kind of monument?"

"An ostensible kind- A monument to commemorate how the planet repelled the Meteor."

"An ostensible kind? Then what's its true purpose?"

"To claim our place."

"Ah! Having it in the centre of the city means Shinra owns the place! You come up with the best ideas, Boss!" replied Reno.

As usual, Shinra Company was asked to take responsibility for the aftermath of the Meteor but by providing resources such as machinery, fuel and medicine they managed to gain some trust amongst the people. One of Shinra's former employees Reeve brought many machinery and human resources from Junon, making a great contribution towards the construction of the city. It was clear that Reeve was now anti-Shinra but as long as the activities of the Turks and the former Shinra employees they gathered together made contributions towards society, he did not interfere with them.

Reno, with the help of some volunteers, began to construct the monument. People were happy to help thinking it was some kind of symbol being built at the centre of the plaza. Amongst them, there were also those who protested, knowing Shinra's true intentions but such problems were resolved using as Reno liked to call it, "the Turks' way of doing things".

The number of patients at Cliff Resort fluctuated but the quiet days at the sanatorium continued. However, one day there was some commotion. Kilmister was making a fuss about how their supply of stimulants were running low. Elena who had become very close with the local residents of the city suggested that they should share the stimulants with them and Rufus permitted her to do so. For that very reason very little of the stimulants remained in the warehouses. Rufus orders the Turks to gather together the people who knew the stimulant's formula to make the preparations necessary in making more - but they were going to have to think of a new name. He had thought of using Shinra's facilities and if necessary, contact Reeve too but Kilmister didn't agree. He insisted that they should secure the amount necessary for Cliff Resort first. Tseng and the others weren't happy about the addict's request but for some reason, Rufus tolerated him. The raw materials required to produce the stimulant were the tails of Nibel bears and after learning that they maybe able to produce more than a single stimulant from each tail if the chemicals they extracted were highly concentrated, Elena immediately set off to gather supplies.

"Hey Rude," Reno called to him, looking unusually troubled. "Why is the Boss being so kind to that Kilmister?"

"He's waiting for the results of his research. That's what I think."

"What research? If he's just going to waste money to kill a little pain then even I can do it," Reno grunted.

"I've provided some of my cells as one of the healthy people. He should find out something soon enough."

"I want to do some investigating of my own. We're surrounded by so many of these patients yet nothing's happened to us. Weird, isn't it?"

"The Boss said it isn't contagious," said Rude punching Reno in the stomach lightly because he still looked half doubtful. "How about little training, partner? Been a while."

"Why?"

"To train our body and mind. If we are strong in both then we won't fall ill."

"Stop talking like an old geezer," said Reno but moving into a fighting stance, the two of them began their training.

The little devils - That is what the elderly patients referred to Rufus and his followers staying at Cliff Resort. Someone once said they didn't understand how they could stay so well united.

Even the President and his subordinates themselves didn't understand how their relationship never deteriorated or how they could still continue working together as an organisation under such dire circumstances. Strangers saw their behaviour as little children playing make-believe, pretending they had a company. Little children that had nothing good waiting for them if they returned home and in a way, it was as if they were homeless little children out playing to their heart's content.

One day, two years after that fated day, Rufus dropped by Kilmister's room.

"Well, doctor? Shouldn't it be about time you revealed the results of your research to me? I am very intrigued to learn what the relation between the disease I have and Jenova is."

"Very well. First of all, there has been no progress towards a cure even over these two years," Kilmister said as if he was joking even though he had managed to improve the effectiveness of the stimulant. Rufus listened without any change in expression. "But I very much know the source of the disease now."

Kilmister began by telling Rufus how the very first patient had directly been washed over by the Lifestream. He knew this the moment he examined the first patient infected and seemed to be pleased he did.

"There is another common symptom I found in the patients. Whenever the disease's symptoms grew worse, I found they were all troubled and were ready to accept their deaths - You know that yourself don't you, Mr. President?"

Indeed, thought Rufus.

"After that day I'm sure many have thought to themselves there is no future for them and that death was near. It was then that there was a sudden increase in the number of infected people. Also..."

Kilmister began talking about the black water. Rufus remembered the water that seemed to have its own mind during the flood in the cave.

"...Amongst the ones with post-symptoms of the disease, we have seen many who appears to be stained with black water. I believe they have either submerged or drank the water themselves without knowing it. It is water after all. When you think of it like that then they could have absorbed it from anywhere."

"What do you mean when you say if you think of it like that?" Rufus asked, curious in the doctor's choice of words.

"The pain and fever the patients experience is proof that their bodies are fighting a foreign substance. Compared to other illnesses, it is perhaps too much for them to endure. However, the one who brought about this substance is powerful. Nothing can be done to ease their suffering."

"Have you found out the true source of this disease?"

"...They are Sephiroth's genes, you could say they are Jenova's genes in a way - No, you should say they are remnants of his genes. It is as I have once told you. They resemble the distinct characteristics that Soldiers had."

Rufus' memory of being surrounded by black water suddenly came to mind again and his body froze at the sound of Sephiroth's name.

"Mr President. I would like to have a look at Jenova. Where is it?" asked Kilmister showing no concern towards how Rufus was feeling.

"Unfortunately, I do not know of its whereabouts either."

"Order your subordinates to find it."

"Let me think about it."

"I hope you make a decision soon."

Rufus nodded and turned his back towards Kilmister. Just as he was about to leave the room, Kilmister said in his usual tone, "Long ago Professor Hojo rejected a project I proposed. Even now I am itching to give it a try. I think we might be able to create something beyond Sephiroth."

"What about the cure?" asked Rufus without turning round.

"We must give up on those who already show symptoms of the disease. However, as long as those who are still healthy don't cloud their hearts with darkness they will remain fine. You can tell the public about that but do not let them know about the water. It will cause a panic."

Rufus who was also one those patients already showing the symptoms left the room in silence.

The next morning, Kilmister was found dead. He was shot. When Tseng examined his corpse, Judd appeared to confess he had killed him.

"Where did you get the gun?"

"I can't tell you - I wasn't told to keep quiet about it but the person who gave me it had saved my life once."

Tseng went to report to Rufus about what happened between Judd and Kilmister but Rufus didn't seem surprised.

"Tseng, listen to me."

"Yes, Sir."

"Shinra Company will find Jenova and secure it."

"...Yes, Sir."

"Our goal is to keep it safe and not let anyone get their hands on it be it mad scientists or-" Rufus remembered Kilmister's words, "Or remnants loitering about the Lifestream."

"Yes, sir. I will make the necessary preparations at once."

Rude and Reno were repainting the sign to Cliff Resort.

"What does 'Healing' mean?"

"It means to heal the world." The two of them turned round to find Rufus who had suddenly appeared behind them.

"Our methods maybe a bit reckless but- We are Shinra Company. It won't surprise anyone."

Rufus's voice tingled with excitement.

Fin

Lifestream White 3

The woman considered ways of telling Cloud of the crisis. As she thought, all the feelings she couldn't tell him about came back to her vividly. There were many things she wanted to tell Cloud. However, she did not know what she should tell him or how she should tell him. It had been a while since she had worried. In the end, the woman decided she would see Cloud first and then think about what to do.

Eventually the woman discovered that the man, spreading hatred around the world, was trying to manifest on the surface. She wondered how he was planning to do that. Summoning up all her courage she approached the man's spirit. However, he spotted her and chased her off, but soon gave up chase. She knew the man was laughing at her. You can't do anything. However, she had caught what he was planning. He was apparently going to use separate entities to be his agents. The woman asked herself if she could do the same. However, she soon changed her mind. Even if it were possible, I want to meet Cloud the way he knows me.