In This Cage

by The_Ocean_Deep

Summary

As children, they connected. As teens, they married. After four years of separation, Cloud and Tifa reunite when he shows up injured at Sector Seven's train station. Can husband and wife mend their shaken marriage and fight against ShinRA, Sephiroth and meteor? Takes place during the events of FF7. Direct sequel to 'What It Means To Be Living' by The_Ocean_Deep.
The light from the candle flickered every time Cloud paced past it.

Crimson orbs watched as he retraced the same path again and again, like an agitated animal. Tifa curled in upon herself on her bed: chin on her knees and eyes on her bare toes. She’d spent days nursing him back to health in the dim light of her bedroom, crying with the relief that he was somehow back in her arms and the fear that he wouldn’t heal. Tifa tirelessly devoted herself to the recovery of her sick husband, under the weight of her love for him and the bonds of their marital promise. After five years her closest childhood companion, her best friend and lover, was in her life once again. When Cloud did regain his strength, his revival was sudden, like flicking on a power switch. And while he still looked sick, he moved with precision in an almost robotic manner that was foreign to her. Days passed and it was easy to see that while he was functioning physically, there was still something very wrong with Cloud.

After ShinRA had declared him dead mere months after their marriage, Tifa spent countless desperate nights dreaming of reuniting with her husband. Young and alone in the oppressive Midgar slums, she fantasized about the feel of his arms around her and how at home she’d finally feel when she’d gaze into those familiar, gentle eyes. But there was nothing soft about the way he stared at her now, pulsing blue piercing her like knife in the gut. Like a prey animal, she froze under his gaze.

His gentle, timid nature had been replaced by prideful confidence. Somewhere, he had traded cautious optimism for arrogant apathy, and Tifa was frightened to see how his temper would flare under his unstable emotions. By flesh, it was obvious that this was the man she had married when she was barely fifteen. By persona, she could not be entirely sure. Obviously, he had been through a terrible ordeal, but he hung onto the details of his trauma with powerful fists. The more she begged for his story, the more closed off about it he seemed. She just couldn't help herself and periodically asked Cloud about it, but obviously, it was only working him up. But she needed to know. She needed to be certain that he hadn’t chosen to leave her side for so long purposefully. Cloud would’ve never willingly left her, right? Tifa had been quite sure of this until he began to act this way. Did he always possess this attitude underneath his gentle exterior? It was frightening to see just how little she knew of Cloud in the end. But nothing in their many years as close companions had ever given her a hint that this demeanor could in any way be normal, and it left her unsettled to her core.

"Cloud, come sit," she offered gently, stroking the worn comforter. "Please...let’s talk about what happened."

Tension lingered in the spaces between their breaths. Sadness and disappointment were coiling, twisting, burrowing into the softest part of her heart as Tifa waited for his response. How foolish she had been to assume that if Cloud ever came back, that he'd be the same as he once was. She wasn't the same wife he'd left behind, either, having gone through the most harrowing and frightening experiences of her life without her husband by her side. Cloud looked like he had been through hell—of course he wasn't her wide eyed, innocent teenage boy anymore. He was a grown man, with new height and muscles to prove it.

The ceiling fan turned slowly overhead as he moved his head to look at her.

His lips were pressed into a tight line as he stared at her face. It was inconceivable to think that Cloud would have abandoned her without any word to endure some long, intense training in the SOLDIER program, but his mako eyes and ragged uniform told another story. When she pressed,
he would deny it all, saying he had been in SOLDIER since before they were married. If he was lying, it was obviously false. And if he really believed he was telling the truth, he must have suffered more severe trauma than she originally thought. Her arms ached to hold him. During his week of recovery, Tifa had cradled his head against his chest whenever she wasn't feeding him or keeping him clean or changing his clothes. But in his agitated state, she knew he'd never be still long enough to let her comfort him.

"I told you, Tifa. I don't know what happened." Brilliant blue watched her closely, and he chose to lean against the wall instead of sitting beside her. Arms folded over his chest, he sighed. "I had to leave you. Don't you remember what I told you about SOLDIERs and their wives? Sometimes we'll be gone for long stretches of time for training and missions. I didn't expect it to be that long, though."

She didn't remember him saying that. They'd never had this conversation because he had never made it into SOLDIER. Was she blacking out important events in their lives or was she losing her mind? It was hard enough to deal with the emotional whiplash of the relief of his return and the realization that what had come back to her was not her beloved childhood friend. Tifa closed her eyes against the rising disappointment and frustration building inside her.


The way he said it, as if he'd done her a favor, made grief spread like frost in her belly.

He had recounted the demise of Nibelheim, their families and the townspeople they had grown up with. He'd explained how he found Sephiroth in Mt. Nibel's reactor after he murdered every last familiar face, and how he'd confronted him with the intent of revenge. But Tifa was deeply disturbed by the fact that he could not tell her anything beyond that. At some point afterward, he had to have undergone the mako therapy required of those ethereal eyes and the unnatural strength he now possessed. When she pressed for details he couldn't recount, he got angry and short with her. The Cloud she had known would never have lied to her. If he had left her for training in the SOLDIER program, why had ShinRA reported him dead? Nothing made sense. Tifa stared at his heavy boots and thick belt.

It must be his illness, she reasoned. He'll regain more of his memory as he recovered, wouldn't he? Maybe then, he'd be able to tell her why he was such a mess when she had found him. And maybe then, he'd start acting like himself. In all of her fantasies where they had somehow been reunited, it had never been anything like this.

"That's alright. We'll just take one day at a time." Flicking her eyes up toward his face, she swallowed back unease. "Cloud, please come sit with me."

Holding him always seemed to soothe him, if only he'd let her. Tifa put on her best smile and held out her arms to him, beckoning him to her. Slowly, he sauntered over to the bed, sitting a few feet away from her. Holding her breath, she gingerly reached to rest her fingers atop his knuckle. It was a gesture that had once been so familiar. Now it felt strange and forced, like he didn't want to be there and she didn't want to make him uncomfortable. Tifa slowly released the air in her lungs when he didn't remove his hand from resting underneath hers.

"It's just a bit of amnesia, I'm sure. You looked like you'd been in quite a scuffle. It'll all come back to you, I know it will."

"What if it's not worth remembering? ShinRA screwed up, they've lost a first class SOLDIER, and now I've finally made it back to you." He turned to look at her once again and shrugged one
nonchalant shoulder. "We're together now. What does it matter?"

It mattered a lot.

“I just…” she began. “A lot has happened since you left.”

“Apparently.” Cloud scoffed, withdrawing his hand to cross his arms over his chest as he leaned forward. “You moved out of our apartment and moved in with another man.”

Crimson eyes widened at the hidden accusation. “Cloud! It’s not like that! He’s a friend who helped me find a place to live.”

“We had a place to live,” he snapped, sitting up and turning to face her properly. “Our apartment was adequate, wasn’t it? Everything was fine when I left. I’d finished building that table and was starting to build a…” He blinked slowly, staring numbly at the loose threads on the blanket beneath them. “A…crib.”

Blue eyes flashed, as if he had suddenly remembered something.

"Where is it?" He demanded. The street light through the blinds painted him in stripes of orange. "Where is the baby?"

She flinched, shocked by the way his speech pulsed with accusation and contempt. His anger was palpable. It oozed from his voice, his posture, and his words, curling into the air between them like suffocating smoke. Cloud's voice was as cold as a winter’s dawn and unwavering as a stone. He grasped her arms and she felt the restrained, inhuman strength in the press of his fingers into her skin. It didn’t hurt, but a whimpers tore from her throat anyway. There was something very, very wrong with Cloud, and she was frightened. Tifa could feel the heat of his breath from their proximity. Glowing blue pierced her wine colored eyes and she fought the urge to cry. Nowadays, her tears were the result of disappointment and confusion. Was her quiet, kind friend since childhood lost forever?

She was tempted to draw back, to dismiss this whole conversation in order to avoid the torrent of emotion it would churn up, but that was the old Tifa. Post-Aria Tifa knew better. Denying the past never helped; it was more like putting off the pain than burying it. There was also the fact that Cloud's behavior was unpredictable at the moment. How would he react to the death of his daughter? Maybe it would be alright, and he'd hold her and they'd comfort each other like she had always fantasized. But she wouldn’t expect such mercies.

“S-she…s-she—” Tifa limbs began to shake and she shriveled under his grasp. Her breath quivered as she recoiled from her own memories. “Cloud, the baby didn’t make it. She d-died.”

His arms went slack as his eyes softened, and for a moment Tifa thought she could see the love of her life in there somewhere. Her lips trembled as the overwhelming desire for his comfort washed over her. She circled her fingers gently around his wrists, as if to hold onto that softness she had found. Purposely, she let her thumb glide over the cold metal of Cloud’s wedding band. That glimpse of her old friend had encouraged her to summon back that bravery that had dissolved into the air.

After a long silence, he lifted his head to ask, “Why?”

“I don’t know,” Tifa whispered, hiding beneath her bangs. “I gave birth to her before it was time, and she never took a breath.”

Tifa breathed a long, shuttering sigh and began to tell Cloud everything, beginning with her work
as a waitress while pregnant, and how her contractions had come on suddenly that day. She recounted her frightening labor, the empty feeling of leaving the hospital alone, and how she was fired for sneaking milk to Barret for baby Marlene. Cloud listened quietly as he learned how she survived in the slums without him, and how she ended up running a bar in Sector Seven and working for an eco-terrorist organization. She longed for his comforting touch, for him to encircle her with his arms, for him to mourn with her over the loss of their daughter. But he didn’t move to hold her. Instead, she listened as the air hissed out of his nostrils in an audible rush as he leaned away from her.

“Do you want to know more about her?” Tifa asked, hopeful that talking about it might help lessen the sting of this news.

Perhaps hearing the details of her perfect, round cheeks and beautiful, light hair would be of some comfort to him. Cloud slumped forward on the mattress, putting a hand to his head as though he could push out the memories that he couldn’t recall. Tifa was about to reach over to rub his back when he spoke.

“I want to be alone.”

His voice sliced the air, and Tifa felt the strength leave her limbs. So much pain had gathered into a knot in her chest, making it hard to breathe. Startled by his cold response, all she could do was stare at the way the candle light illuminated his beautiful, flaxen hair. In that moment, Tifa felt abandoned in her sadness by the man who pledged to commit himself to her happiness on their wedding day. Eventually, she had to force her feet to carry her to the doorway. Her earlier confidence had fled, and unease was only too eager to take its place. As she pulled the door shut, a weight settled upon Tifa’s shoulders, and her heart felt numb and empty.

She walked a few staggering steps down the hallway before leaning against the wall and choking back a sob that wracked her body. Fingertips slid along wallpaper as she leaned her head back, letting her trembling knees give way to slip gracefully to the hardwood floor. As long as both of them were alive, they were bound together. She recalled their marriage ceremony, and the finality of the line: ‘Til death do you part’. But in some way, it seemed as though death had already parted them. The man in her bed was both her lover and not, a foreigner inhabiting the shell of her beloved.

Their childhood selves had died, lost to the years like leaves in the wind. The hopeful, joyful marriage they once shared had dissolved into dust. Tifa played with the wedding ring on her finger, staring at the delicate, pale band. She couldn’t give up; she wouldn’t.

Cloud Strife was worth pursuing, and her marriage was worth mending.
It was with a strange sort of nostalgia that Tifa followed Cloud through the busy streets of the Sector Eight slums. The world blurred past them, mixing grey and black and brown like blended paints on an endless canvas. Darkness always blanketed the world under the plate, but the pair flew by unhindered: past people on sidewalks standing under puddles of yellow light and the occasional sputtering automobile.

They’d taken this position many times: he’d forge the way while she allowed herself to be led forward by the hand. In the past, it had been his way of protecting his young country-girl of a wife, who wasn’t yet wise to the ways of the city. As a wide-eyed fifteen year old, the firmness in the grip of his fingers made her feel secure in her frightening, foreign new world. But it was different now; everything had changed. Tifa was no longer fearful of the large, bustling crowds or the gruff men who would lash out with their hands or tongues. Years of experience had taught her how to handle herself in this environment, while Cloud had been off somewhere, doing who knows what. It seemed almost silly to let her husband lead her, since she knew much more about the area than he. The gesture might have been flattering, if under different circumstances. His grip on her hand seemed more possessive than protective. Tifa hated that following this shadow of her lover, with his new uniform and enormous weapon, filled her with a strange sort of unease. However, it was his new attitude that unsettled her to the bone.

Things had been going well today. Jessie, Biggs, and Wedge were doing their best to welcome Cloud over a card game and some snacks while Tifa was busy prepping food in the kitchen. They seemed to be too impressed with Cloud’s claim that he was in SOLDIER to be bothered by his behavior, but one person had been very upset since Tifa had dragged him home from the train station. Concerned, Barret had come in and initiated a hushed conversation.

…”Tifa, I don’ like it.” His mouth twisted in restlessly. “He’s unstable...he’s got that wild look in his eyes.”

She laid her knife on the cutting board carefully before tying up her hair. Tifa knew that Barret was only worried about her wellbeing, but he was reminding her of all the things she wanted to forget and it hurt. All she had wanted was to temporarily escape from her troubles in the mundane task of chopping vegetables.

Flicking her ponytail over her shoulder, she sighed. “He hasn’t been himself. He isn’t well, Barret.”

“Anyone could tell ya that. What if he hurts you?”

“He won’t hurt me, he loves me.” Tifa said, a small amount of defiance in her tone. “There’s something wrong. Something bad happened and he needs time to heal, okay?”

Both of them jumped when the door to the kitchen burst open, revealing an angry pair of blue eyes. Clearly, they had underestimated Cloud’s mako-enhanced senses.

…”

He had stormed out with her after an explosive argument with Barret, turning her brain into a tempest of garbled thoughts and feelings. Cloud barked at her to put on her shoes, and she didn’t
have the voice to ask where they were going. Tifa had obeyed and followed him out into the street after shooting an apologetic look in Barret’s direction. Now, she followed like a tamed pet on her leash, watching Cloud’s shadow float over the concrete walls. The wind whipped past them, but wasn't the cold that made her shiver.

"Cloud..." "Cloud! Please, stop."

If she could just look in his eyes, maybe she could analyze his behavior a little better. Growing up together, they’d shown each other their secret sides: their fear and their insecurity and the ugly parts of their hearts. While Cloud was weak to criticism and easily discouraged, he never reacted to those shortcomings with anger or gruffness. Somehow, through the murmur of the crowd and noise of the traffic, all she could hear was the chaffing of his fatigues and the shifting of the leather as he rushed forward. Her boots scraped the pavement as she hurried along behind him.

She smelled the odor of grease and filth wrapping itself around her like smoke. Tifa had long been accustomed to the dirtiness of the city, but the sight of Cloud’s golden hair reminded her how she had once traded the scent of pine trees for the exhaust of the city, a terrible emptiness settled upon her. At that time, it had only been Cloud that had made it easy for her to transition from one world to another. Life had taken such incredible twists and turns since she had been her mother's treasured child in a sleepy mountain village. In order to survive the mangled path of her fate, she had to become fluid and compliant, like water. But water isn't weak because it shifts and bends to its circumstances. Water was one of the mightiest forces of nature.

Frustration quickly replaced the fear that curled in her belly and she yanked hard on his arm, pulling him into an alley. She took hold of his other wrist as she whirled him to face her.

"What is it, Cloud?" She asked, voice firm and steady. "Why won't you talk to me about all this?"

Glass shards and gravel crunched beneath his heavy boots as he shifted his stance. The wildness in his eyes startled her, but crimson eyes held their gaze. Cloud exhaled loudly through his nose.

"I'm looking for a job—for a place to live...I don't know." He softened, if only for a moment. "I don't want you living in a bar. I want you living with me. Tifa, don't you want to be together? Aren't we husband and wife?"

She counted her heartbeats as the seconds fell slowly beside them. The headlights of a passing car momentarily illuminated the confusion upon his face as he studied her features. Tifa swallowed as she tried to collect her thoughts, but they were like bits of paper scattered in the wind.

“Yes, we are.” She moved her hands from his wrists to gently hold his fingers.

He was her only legal family, bound together by marriage. But weren’t Marlene and Barret her family, too? Didn’t she have an obligation to them? An attachment to them? But Tifa knew that he was her first priority and yearned to reassure Cloud that he was important to her in every way. She respected his place in their marriage and his ability to make decisions. But at the moment, she was concerned about his mental state. Not only was he acting strangely, Cloud seemed to have been in a constant state of agitation since he had been able to stand again. Tifa remembered that Cloud always felt most loved with her physical touch. Running her fingers through his hair or rubbing large circles on his back soothed him, and he'd usually slump into her embrace. But for now, she settled on rubbing her thumbs over his broad palms. The subtle way his hands sagged down into hers indicated a brief surrender of his defenses.

“I need to get a job. I’m sure anyone would hire an ex-SOLDIER.”
What kind of job he meant, Tifa wasn’t sure. Could she really afford to let Cloud out of her sight at this point? He wasn’t ready to be out on his own and it felt irresponsible to let him go. What if he injured himself? Or got picked up by ShinRA? If the mega-corporation was looking for him, she’d want to keep him as hidden as possible until she figured out his complete story. He needed to be close to her so that she could protect him as he recovered. He needed to be under supervision…

“Listen, Cloud.” She held her breath for a moment before continuing, peeking up at glowing sapphire. “I know you aren’t fond of Barret, but why don’t we stick around with him for a while? I mean, AVALANCHE needs a man like you—an ex-SOLDIER with a wealth of fighting skill and ShinRA knowledge. Barret will pay you to help, and you can earn some money until you find a new job and we make arrangements to move. What do you think?”

Tifa knew she was making a dangerous gamble. If this plan she was proposing came to fruition, she’d be separated from the others when she wasn’t working in the bar. Would Cloud even want her working those late hours? She wasn’t sure, but giving Cloud this choice was the only way she could think of to postpone her time with Barret and little Marlene. Those two had saved her life when she was on the brink of hopelessness and despair, and they all depended upon one another. What would life be like if that delicate balance was disrupted? The bar was technically hers, but she wouldn’t hesitate to hand the deed over to the Barret if she needed to.

Cloud’s arrival had stirred the pot, but if he calmed down and became more compliant, perhaps they could all stay together. Maybe if he had the chance to work alongside Barret, he’d see how wonderful the older man was. Maybe if he spent some time with Marlene, the little girl would earn more than a passing glance from the blonde stranger. But most of all, Tifa wanted them to see the real Cloud: her Cloud. She ached for them to know the sweet, gentle man she had married, who was good and just and so very sweet. Would it take more than time for him to return to the way that he was? There was no way of knowing, but she had to try.

Giving his fingers a tiny squeeze, she looked up into his eyes with hope. He closed his in response.

“No.”

“Oh, please! Cloud, it would be for the best,” she entreated, heart fluttering as she stifled rising panic. Everything had become tangled up in knots where it should have been simple. “Barret saved my life, and he needs your help. Please, consider working for him for a little while! Just for now. It would mean everything to me.”

Tifa held her breath, but could not hold his gaze. She counted the beats of her pulse that hammered in her ears as she stared at his wedding band that glistened in the dim glow of the street light. Surprise parted her lips as he brought his hand to cup her cheek. Daring to flick her eyes upward, she was met with his softened expression.

“Only until I find a job, okay?” he said, fingers curling downward to cup her chin and turn her face up closer to his own. “For you, Tifa...”

Confused, she was frozen as he leaned in to place his lips upon hers. Hadn’t he been so angry? This emotional whiplash was strange to navigate and she wasn’t sure what to expect next. They hadn’t kissed again since their reunion, and she struggled to put herself in the correct state of heart to return his affections. Tifa had kissed Cloud hundreds of times. The fumbled, shy pecks of their courtship had made her tremble with giddiness. Marital kisses, both passionate and chaste, made her feel as if nothing were more natural. He had felt like home to her: peace and comfort, shelter and familiarity. But there was nothing familiar about the way his mouth now covered hers greedily. There was a slight aggression in his ministrations, and she tried not to shiver when his hands moved to brush the hem of her tank top.
Tifa felt panicked, guilty for panicking, and disoriented. Quickly, she pressed into his kiss before parting their lips. Cloud seemed satisfied enough, if his smile was any indicator. She would have breathed a silent sigh of relief if she had felt any in that moment. But a great unease had begun to expand in her throat, and unbidden moisture stung at the edges of her eyes. She didn’t want Cloud to see her crying, but the tears welled up in her eyes before she could think of how to stop them. Vision glazed, the sharp features of Cloud’s face became softer and softer, blurring into a muddled mess. Then he moved to turn away, and they disappeared completely.
She’d been impressed; he was sure of it

Fighting the ShinRA bot, Airbuster, alongside Tifa and Barret had given Cloud the opportunity he needed to show Tifa just what a man he had become. Here they were, on a catwalk just under the upper plate, enduring another mission organized by Barret. The lights of the Sector Five slums twinkled far below, like fireflies on the dark carpet of the sky. Tifa seemed unsettled, and he knew that if she looked down, she’d be woozy: after her childhood fall from the bridge near Mt. Nibel, Tifa could never stand heights very well. He felt her eyes on him as he swung the buster sword, slicing wiring and buckling metal. Barret had said it looked impractical, but the blonde knew better. The broadsword was very practical. Not only for deflecting bullets and slicing through enemies like tissue paper, but for attracting a certain someone’s attention as well. Tifa’s gaze was never far from him as he wielded that weapon, and it made Cloud’s chest swell with pride. He was a natural, and she could finally have the chance to see that.

She’d been acting strangely, and he wasn’t quite sure why. Although Tifa was kind and gentle hearted toward him, Cloud knew his wife was holding him an arm’s breadth away and it bothered him to the core. He wanted all of her attention. The distraction of these anti-ShinRA missions and the frequent inability to find any time to be alone together irritated him. Here he was: her knight in shining armor returned to her after such a long time, and he could barely get close to her. Tifa didn't react to his presence in the way he had hoped she would. Instead of being glued to his side and finding any spare moment to hide away with him in a private place, she had been treating him like a guest of sorts. She was formal and polite, seeming almost uncomfortable at times, when she interacted with him. Cloud wanted to feel her fingers through his hair and hear his name tumble freely from her lips. He wanted to feel connected with her, like he knew they had once been. Why was she giving him such a problem? Did it really have to be this hard?

Cloud cried out with effort as he heaved his sword up and into the front panel of the Airbuster, making sure to dodge the shower of Barrett's ricocheted bullets. The machine ceased its attack, twitching as it began to smoke and sputter. He landed on the opposite side of the machine from his comrades, but barely had time to turn around before it exploded. Bits of metal, wires and other shrapnel burst through the air and the force of the explosion blew out the section of catwalk underneath him. Cloud’s heart skipped a beat as he flew through the air, arms flailing in an attempt to grab something—anything. A grunt escaped his throat as his fingers closed around a broken pipe that was now exposed where the walkway had been blown straight through. Somewhere, Tifa screamed. The creaking of metal and pinging of hard boots off of the iron flooring drowned out the pounding of his heart in his ears as Cloud dangled high above the slums below.

“It’s gonna blow, Tifa!” Barret’s gruff voice boomed sharply. The timer on the bomb they had set in the nearby mako reactor should be running out any moment now. “Let’s go!”

“Cloud!”

Her voice rang out through the air. Turning his head, he could see where she leaned over the chasm with her arm uselessly stretched out toward him. Ruby eyes glistened and her face was pale with fear. The pipe Cloud hung onto groaned under his weight; he knew he only had a matter of seconds before the tremors of the oncoming explosion broke the mangled piece of metal and sent him plummeting. Tifa was whimpering and Cloud could hear her feet scuffling against the walkway as she tried to find a way closer to him. It was a shame, really, to have to worry her like this. But he was a super soldier—had she forgotten? He’d fall for sure, but he’d be alright. Years of training
had prepared him for this.

“Tifa!” he barked, his speech laced with strain. “Don’t worry about me! I’ll be alright. Barret, take care of her!”

Then, it happened. With a deafening blast, the bomb detonated. Cloud swore he could hear his wife’s voice crying out through the sound of the explosion and the deafening screeching of metal giving way. But there wasn’t enough time to focus on that as he sped toward the earth far below. Falling, falling…he’d felt this once before.

Long ago...

Ashen gravel had broken his fall that time. He had let her fall; he didn’t save her. He had been too weak to save her back then. But Cloud turned away from that memory, as his body fell through the air. Escaping the pain of remembrance seemed more important than worrying about his current physical state. He scrambled away from his former self more desperately than his arms flailed outward, looking for purchase.

But the vivid memory flashed before his eyes, regardless. He could see the black lace of Tifa’s mourning dress and the dark puddle of blood that had formed under her little head. The world flew by him in a dark pallet of color streaks, but all he could focus on was how she had looked, lying so very still with dust caked upon her skin and eyelashes. He had failed to protect her back then. Was he failing to protect her now? Cloud clenched his eyes shut, trying to rid visions of the past from their ceaseless torment. It wasn't easy to be escape something that lived inside him, but he had to try. Blackness swallowed him, and Cloud willingly let it take him.

... ... ...

"Hello...?"

A voice? Where am I?

"Sir? Are you alright?"

"Sir? Are you alright?"

I know that voice...

Slowly, consciousness flooded back to Cloud as a groan tumbled unbidden from his throat. Pain wracked his back and limbs as he tried to move, reminding him that he had fallen farther than any normal man was likely to survive. But Cloud wasn't a normal man. He could feel the tingling of the mako pumping through his blood as it worked furiously to repair the damage his body had sustained. The feminine voice snapped him to attention, clearing his muddled brain as a strong wind clears away smoke. Something deep inside him stirred awake when she called out to him and Cloud struggled to respond. Too weak to will his arms and legs to work, he resigned to lying still for now. Eventually, he managed to open his eyes and turn his head toward the woman speaking to him.

Cloud was instantly captivated. He pressed his lips together to keep from gasping as he stared, unblinking, at the beauty before him. A young woman with long brown hair neatly tied back with a cheerful pink ribbon. What is this feeling? Familiarity? Just being beside her made him feel as if he was coming home from a long, harrowing journey. Relief and fondness flooded through him as he took in the features of her face and lost himself in the richness of her green eyes. His brain scrambled to decide whether this was the elation and peace of being reunited with a long lost loved one or the excitement of meeting someone new. Regardless, the feeling of her fingers on his skin made his heart race wildly in his chest. Why couldn’t he form the words to speak?
"Uh…"

"Oh, you're hurt!" she said, her soft eyes landing upon the trickle of blood seeping from his arm where the shingles had scratched him upon his decent. She reached out to hold his bicep as she pulled a handkerchief from the pocket of her red jacket. Cloud stared at the buttons of her plain pink dress.

"You really gave me quite a scare when you came crashing down! I thought I could get a little peace coming here to tend the blossoms, but I wound up having to tend to a stranger’s wounds instead." She laughed at her own little joke as she wiped fresh blood away. Cloud’s mind whirled.

Strangers?

"Really—it’s nothing." Cloud tried to pull his arm from her, but she resisted, yanking his wrist back toward her as she finished tying and tightening her makeshift bandage. He submitted to her attentions, trying with all his might to still the storm of emotion that she was stirring up inside his heart.

"Thanks."

She smiled as patted his arm to signal that she was finished and stood, offering her hand to help him up. “The name’s Aerith.”

Embarrassed, he took it, and let her pretend that she helped him to heave his body weight off the ground. Aerith. Aerith. Didn’t he know that name? Frantically, he searched and searched for any memory of that name, of her face, of her voice. Cloud was certain that he knew her, but it seemed that her relation to him would choose to remain elusive. It was like trying to locate a treasure chest hidden deep within the labyrinth of his mind, and he wasn’t sure what he’d find when he finally managed to open it. To his surprise, she held onto him a moment longer than necessary, as if they were shaking hands.

Where were his manners? Determined to focus his eyes anywhere but on her face, they landed upon the bed of white lilies that lay crushed beneath him.

"Cloud." He shook her hand mechanically. “Nice to meet you. And, uh…sorry about your flowers, Miss.”

The gentle smile remained on her lips as she took in his SOLDIER uniform from pauldron to boots. Her green eyes held both fascination and melancholy, and Cloud found it hard to read her true emotion. Aerith only shook her head at his apology. Dropping his hand, she moved away to walk slowly around the perimeter of the flower bed.

"You’ve fallen into a church in the Sector Five slums. This is a sacred place,” she said. His blue eyes watched the skirt of her dress flutter as she twirled around to face him. “They say you can’t grow flowers in Midgar, but they don’t seem to have any trouble growing here! I love this place.”

Cloud knew by the way she gazed upon him without restraint that she was bold and confident, and it piqued his interest. The way her eyes analyzed him caused him feel exposed, making his face heat up and his ears pink. He felt an immediate connection, like he’d known her for years. Had he? Aerith had called him a stranger, but her tone hadn’t been serious with anything that she had said, like a teasing child on the playground. It left him feeling insecure and yearning for more of her to satiate the burning in his chest. The brunette seemed foreign and mysterious, but at the same time familiar, as if from a half forgotten dream. Who was this girl? Not even the heavy smell of freshly turned soil and the earthy scent of the lilies relaxed him.

Gracefully, Aerith knelt once more to tend to the flowers. Cloud leaned against a nearby pew as
she chattered happily, talking so much and yet telling him so little. Something told him that this beauty, with her radiant smile and playful demeanor, hid something dark at her core. The way she spoke reminded him of one who was desperately lonesome, yet wanted to keep it from being known. Long ago, he’d been a child like that: ostracized and alone in a small community, wanting to be part of people’s lives and praying silently to be let in. That was before he’d gone away and showed all of them that he had more worth than they’d ever dreamed. It wasn’t easy to make first class, but he’d done it and now everyone would know the mistake they’d made in underestimating him and brushing him to the side. Was she asking him to let her in?

Lost in thought, Cloud realized that he wasn’t really listening to Aerith, absently staring at where her wrists disappeared into the foliage. Her hands were so pale and delicate compared to Tifa’s bruised knuckles and calloused palms.

_Tifa…_

His wife must be worried sick! Cloud knew he should reunite with her immediately. But as much as his feet wanted to go, his heart wanted to stay. A thousand curious questions about this flower girl surfaced in his brain, foaming like the bubbles on an ocean wave. Something about her drew him in, and it was almost impossible for him to resist raking his eyes over her form and features. A great heaviness in his heart seemed to hold him in place long after he planned to thank her and be on his way.

“What’s wrong? Am I talking too much?” Emerald orbs held him under their spell. “You seem upset.”

Cloud snapped back to attention. Was he that easy to read?

“No, not at all. It’s just that my wife will be wondering what happened to me. Could you tell me the fastest way to get to Sector Seven?”

“You’re married? But you look so young!” she balked, before giggling. “I should’ve known! All the good ones are taken.”

He tried to chuckle, but his mouth only half twitched into a smile.

“Come on. I’ll do better than show you, I’ll take you there!”

She was about to say something more when a figure looming in the doorway caught her attention. Cloud would recognize the blue suit of a Turk anywhere: the uniform of a seedy division of ShinRA employees who worked for the Investigations Department. Noticing the man’s presence, Aerith casually moved to stand beside Cloud. Her earlier confidence seemed to have shriveled and his ego swelled as he sensed that she had come near him for protection from this intruder. She wanted to be near him; she needed the company and safety he could offer. Mako enhanced senses picked up her scent and it ignited something in his blood, activating his mind and making it tumble over and over on itself. Having her positive attention came easy, without any effort on his part. Aerith was a comfort and Tifa was a challenge. Where his longtime lover had once given love freely, she now hid away behind a shroud of trepidation and timidity. What had he done to breech her trust?

“Cloud…”

Her voice begged for his attention, but guilt panged with each heartbeat. Why didn't Tifa elicit this extreme reaction? Aerith took a half step behind him. Her display of weakness reminded him of his strength, and he relished the thought of being someone’s hero. Cloud wasn't sure if it was her
proximity or his shame that made heat pool in his face, but electricity and excitement gathered in his blood anyway. His battling brain screaming: ‘No, Tifa is your wife!’ and ‘Yes, Aerith is the love of your life, remember? REMEMBER? You kept her waiting!’

A cart with a broken wheel.

That bright pink ribbon…

Dozens of letters on yellowing paper…

What had their history been, and why couldn’t he remember it? Where did this girl fit into the timeline of his life? Trying to recall these specifics was like chasing leaves in the wind: no matter how much he struggled, Cloud could not get any closer. He didn’t realize he’d been staring blankly until Aerith nudged his arm gently. A cluster of ShinRA troopers had appeared behind the Turk.

“Say, Cloud…have you ever been a bodyguard. You do do everything, don’t you?”

“…Yeah, that’s right.”

He’d bring her to safety, no matter what it took. As they raced away from danger, fending off soldiers and monsters, Cloud felt more free and jovial than he’d felt in a long time. Adrenaline racing, he grinned, pride blooming in his chest like a lily in the sun.
With a shaky sigh, Tifa gripped the sides of the bathroom sink. She had done her makeup only to have smudged it with her tears and was forced to finish her little cry before starting over again. The bare bulb overhead flickered overhead. With a glance into the mirror, she began to reapply cheap eyeliner with unsteady hands.

Cloud had said he would be alright. The tone his voice made him seem so sure of that, even as he dangled over the slums far below. But Tifa was convinced that those were the last words she’d ever hear him say after watching him plummet down into the darkness. That was eight hours ago. After the explosion, she and Barret had scrambled back underneath the plate and combed Sector Five to the best of their ability. They searched frantically for a familiar blonde head amongst the crowds and listened for any gossip about a man who had tumbled from high above, but had turned up empty handed. The pair had combed every street until late into the evening. If Tifa’s heart wasn’t numb with fear and grief it would have been warmed by Barret’s unwavering companionship, despite his apparent disdain for Cloud. Not once did he encourage her to give up and go home, no matter how late it got. It was only when Jessie called to say she needed to get home did Barret pull her away so they could reunite with Marlene.

However, their search hadn’t been completely fruitless. Tifa had caught word of a pimp in Sector Six as chatter spread about AVALANCHE’s latest strike. Don Corneo was the wealthy owner of a well-known brothel in the seedy chaos of Wall Market. He had ties to ShinRA, as it seemed anyone with money did, and had blabbed some information regarding AVALANCHE earlier in the day to one of his mistresses. What the man had in gel, he lacked in sense, for he seemed to underestimate how fast whispers traveled in the tangled network of the slums. If there was any chance he’d know about Cloud’s whereabouts, or if he had been recovered by ShinRA, Tifa would do anything to get to the Don.

It was one of the longest nights of her life. Though she felt her eyes drooping, she couldn’t dare to think of sleeping. How could she rest if she didn’t know if her husband was safe? Tifa patted concealer and liquid foundation onto her face to try to hide the bags under her eyes. This was all her fault. Maybe if she had just let Cloud find another job, he’d still be with her now. If she hadn’t pressed that he work for AVALANCHE, would her Cloud still be alive? She couldn’t do anything right, could she? No matter how much she tried to protect him, it had all backfired.

She wasn't telling Barret about any of this. He’d lock her in her room if he knew that she was planning on seducing her way into Don Corneo’s mansion with the hopes of threatening information out of him. Tifa knew it was dangerous: she could be discovered as a member of AVALANCHE or put in the way of physical harm, not to mention making herself vulnerable to the most powerful pervert in the slums. But her confidence in her self-defense skills and her concern for Cloud trumped any of that, and there just simply wasn’t a way to make Barret understand it. Tifa loved Barret, and hated to be dishonest with him, but this was something she needed to do. She worked quickly, hoping to get out into the night before she could change her mind or lose her nerve.

Her wedding band was slipped from her ring finger and secured around her neck with a thin silver chain to make her seem unmarried when presenting herself to the Don. Carefully, Tifa curled her lashes and applied lipstick of a deep shade of red. Pressing the cap back onto the tiny tube with a little more force than necessary, she exhaled through her nostrils. It would be the first time that she ever carried out a mission completely on her own. Though it was mostly a personal goal to find Cloud, it was very likely that she’d be able to find out what ShinRA knew about AVALANCHE through this blabbermouth. Perhaps, she could gain information to help Barret and the rest of their...
friends. Wouldn’t they be proud of her if all went well? Not only did she hope all this would lead to finding Cloud, but perhaps she’d gain a little respect as the newest (and youngest) member of AVALANCHE. Tifa liked to hope that she had more value than cooking and babysitting, but her fragile self-confidence refused to allow her that comfort.

The stairs groaned softly in protest as she crept down toward the front door, feeling uneasy in her skin tight dress. She held her breath as she stepped into an ill-fitting pair of thrift store heels and turned the doorknob. As Barret slept beside little Marlene, Tifa slipped silently out into the night.

With an irritated grunt, Cloud shoved past the endless stream of people crowded in the streets. He’d seen Tifa being taken away on the back of a carriage, looking trapped and afraid. After yesterday’s mako reactor bombing, he’d been able to avoid capture by ShinRA, but perhaps his wife hadn’t been so fortunate. Aerith raced along behind him, somehow weaving gracefully around pedestrians he had shoved out of his way. Desperate though he was, he had to admit that after he lost sight of the chocobo-drawn carriage, he hadn’t the slightest idea of where to go. Luckily, his companion seemed to be a wealth of local information.

“Cloud!” she called, grasping his arm. “Wait! You can’t keep going that way and expect to get to her!”

Whirling around to face her, he tried to keep his temper in check. Stifling a frustrated growl from rising out of his throat, Cloud grimaced as he struggled for words. “Tifa’s in trouble! You’d better tell me what you know.”

“The cart that was taking her away was one of Don Corneo’s. Didn’t you see the logo on the side?”

“So what?”

“Soxxx,” Aerith met his scowl with one of her own. “You can’t just go rushing in after her! They won’t let a man into a brothel easy, you know.”

A brothel? Whomever it was that had captured Tifa was ready to exploit her for her beauty in the worst way possible. His protective instinct burned on inside him since he saw her being taken away, but learning where she was headed only fanned those flames. It seemed like an odd punishment by ShinRA for capturing a member of AVALANCHE; was this situation entirely unrelated? What was going on? Aerith easily read the confusion hiding beneath the frustration on his features and spoke in a soothing tone.

“Look, we’ll get her out of there. It would be best if we did it without causing a ruckus.” A touch of humor still lurked in her eyes. “Got any espionage experience to add to your body guard resume?”

Cloud closed his eyes with a quiet sigh and rubbed the bridge of his nose. This girl both frustrated him and charmed him at the same time. Hard as he tried to focus on the task at hand, something about her continuously begged for his attention. If he wasn’t careful, he’d find himself giving in to the draw of his eyes to the curve of her hip or getting lost in the earthy green of her eyes. Cloud was wracked with guilt whether he gave into these urges or chose to ignore them. “What do you have in mind?”

The mischievous smile she gave almost made him regret asking that question.

“Oh, you’ll see.”
The stillness of the warm, humid basement did nothing to quell her nervousness. A bead of perspiration rolled down her temple and she wiped it off with the back of her shaking hand. Tifa looked for something to distract herself; but the best she could do was stand from time to time to catch a glimpse of her face in a mirror hanging upon the wall. A sick feeling twisted in her stomach at the thought of the Don’s thick, stubby fingers on her skin. It’d be worth it, wouldn’t it? What if he didn’t know anything about Cloud?

In the handful of times where she had needed to go to Wall Market for some reason or another, Barret had always been with her. It was a dangerous place for a young woman. She could defend herself, but the environment of the slums made a country-raised girl like herself extremely uncomfortable. In Nibelheim there were thick lines drawn in regards to appropriate and inappropriate behavior. Tifa used to find it suffocating, but now she found the thought of it comforting. Here in the slums, things she was taught were unacceptable were the norm, and morality seemed to be twisted and warped. Back when she had moved to Midgar with Cloud, she’d briefly learned about the sad girls being rented by the hour in the nearby Honeybee Inn, and the depressing red light district that smelled like sweat and misery. Never did she ever imagine that she, a married woman, would end up waiting to be seen by the man who owned the most extensive prostitution ring in Midgar.

Was she doing the right thing? Tifa’s plan was simple: charm the Don into thinking she wanted to be with him until his defenses were down, then beat the information he knew about Cloud and AVALANCHE out of him. Easy, right?

Her confidence waned as the clock ticked ceaselessly. Silence always drew out old ghosts. Tifa leaned against the wall, forcing herself to keep her breathing steady. Center your mind, she thought. Like Master Zangan taught you. The door to the staircase clicked open and she jumped, anxiety blooming in her chest despite her attempts to keep it at bay. Two pairs of high heels clacked as they descended the staircase. More women? Did she have competition?

The hard wall felt cold against her back and she shivered, from fear and dread over this whole situation. When it came to interacting with other women, Tifa always felt awkward and unsure of herself. Growing up, there were no other girls in Nibelheim within ten years of her age, and so she had always played with the boys. Losing her mother at a young age most likely added to this problem. Even now, all of her friends were male except for Jessie (and little Marlene, who was more like a daughter than anything). There was just a certain etiquette to bonding with girls that she knew she was clueless about. Men were generally easier and more transparent. Except for Cloud. Once upon a time, she could read him like a book, but now…

Out of the corner of her eye, two whisps of fabric floated down the steps. A brunette in red and a blonde in lavender. Tifa made sure not to look at them head on, afraid of seeming rude and wanting more than anything not to be noticed. Wish though she might, purple fabric rushed toward the corner at which she stood.

“Tifa!”

Startled by the masculine voice, ruby eyes flew upward to meet the intruder’s sapphire ones as she felt a familiar set of hands gently grip her wrists. All of the air rushed out of her lungs.

“Cloud?”

He nodded and her eyes briefly darted over the carefully applied make up on his face, the twinkling of the little tiara upon his head, the wig, the dress…
Under different circumstances, this would have been the most hilarious thing she’d ever seen. Years ago, she would’ve succumbed to a fit of giggles and teased him endlessly over how ridiculous his masculine body looked in a dress and how his Adam’s apple was so strange to see among satin and lace trim. The Cloud and Tifa of years ago may have hooted and cackled until their sides were sore over such a silly situation, but now, Tifa didn’t dare laugh. Not that she wanted to, anyway. Sheer relief flooded over through her veins. *He’s alive! He’s okay!* 

Tifa rushed in and held him. She breathed in his scent and slowly ran her fingers over the skin on the his biceps, as if she was confirming that he was indeed real as he stood before her. Cradling the back of his head like a mother, her face found its favorite place: tucked away to hide in the crook of his neck. In that moment she didn’t care about how different he’d been or that he’d been gone for years without explanation. It didn’t matter that they had so much to fix between them or that there were still so many unfamiliar things about the man she used to know like the back of her hand. All that mattered was that he was here and safe in her arms, not where they were or what he happened to be dressed in at the moment.

Her voice trembled as she spoke. “Oh, Cloud. You’re okay…I was so frightened.”

“Of course I’m alright.” His chest vibrated with the hum of his deep voice. “Didn’t I tell you I would be?”

The small world she had built around the two of them crumbled when Aerith cooed. Self-conscious, Tifa released Cloud from her hold, her head dipping shyly. She had forgotten there was another person in the room. Another girl…

Wait, why had he shown up with this woman? Her heart fluttered anxiously before dropping to the pit of her belly.

“Oh, you two! How cute!” the brunette piped, fearlessly joining them where they stood. “So this is your wife?”

“That’s right,” Cloud replied before Tifa could, but she smiled anyway. His bright eyes raked over the way her blue dress hugged the swell of her chest. “Isn’t she something?”

The smile fell from her face as quickly as a lightning’s flash. That sort of behavior wasn’t like him; it disturbed and embarrassed her. “Cloud…”

“It’s just a compliment.”

Aerith reached out her hand, bangles jingling against her delicate wrist. Tifa watched as her red lipstick parted into a sweet smile. “Nice to meet you—the name’s Aerith!”

Tifa reached out as well, taking in her appearance as she shook her hand. She was beautiful. Her shiny, long locks spilled down her back in a graceful auburn ponytail. She looked so confident and comfortable with her high slit and plunging neckline while Tifa felt ridiculous and exposed in her dress, awkward and fumbling in her too-tight heels. Tifa felt terribly insecure as she stood there, feeling like a piece of worn out leather beside a shiny string of pearls. She had teased her ebony hair up in a flirty way, but it was now flattening against her head. The cheap lipstick she wore made her feel ashamed, along with the eye shadow that she didn’t quite know how to apply. Tifa had been perspiring so much from the humid air of the basement and her constant pacing that she was certain she must look like a melted candle.

“Glad you’re alright,” Cloud said, “Now let’s get out of here please.”
Aerith giggled, a merry melody that echoed throughout the dark, dank basement. “What’s the rush? Getting blisters already from you heels?”

Despite Cloud’s temper flaring and sending a heated scowl in her direction, the brunette chuckled at his expense. Tifa could only watch their interaction, wondering how it was that this stranger was so confident around her ornery husband while she found herself desperately trying to avoid his moods. The three of them all turned their heads as the door at the top of the stairs opened again and a man’s voice echoed down the corridor.

“Ladies, the Don will see you now.”
Tifa is crying.

There are no tears, but her whole body is crying and it's plain for him to see. It's in the sag of her shoulders and the hunch of her back. It's in the way her boots scrape against the gravel and the way she breathes, shallowly and sharply. But the most expressive part of her, Cloud knew, was always her eyes. Deep crimson throbbed with pain and it made him angry that he could do nothing to take it away. Frustration was vented by hot breaths through his nostrils as Cloud fought to understand all that had happened. He grunted as he kicked a stray aluminum can, squinting to see a path through the air that was cloudy and heavy with dust from the collapse.

Sector Seven was gone. In an instant, AVALANCHE, Seventh Heaven, and thousands of people disappeared as the plate above their heads came crashing down. ShinRA had had the Turks destroy the support cables holding a section of the upper city destroyed and planned to blame AVALANCHE for the destruction and loss of life. But Cloud didn’t have time to get upset over being framed or the loss of Biggs, Wedge and Jessie, for there were far too many things to distract him. It was difficult for his sensitive nose to stand the overwhelming scent of smoke and burning rubber. Like walking against a monsoon, his eyes were blinded by the stinging rain of the painful memories trying to penetrate his consciousness.

Raging flames against a night sky. Hot soot caking his throat, burning him from the inside out. Mom’s blood crusted under his fingernails. Trying to scream, but choking instead.

Cloud constantly tried not to dwell on the fact that he was confused by his own mind. He was certain that, if he fully realized the oddity of his thoughts and the conflicting blooms of emotions, something horrible would happen. Panic would tighten up his chest if he began to acknowledge that it felt like he wasn’t alone in his own consciousness, so he did his best to preoccupy himself. Sometimes, the voices at war in his head screamed so loudly that it was hard to keep himself in the moment and focus on the task at hand. But for now, all was quiet. The solemn status of his current party made the absence of the battle in his subconscious more noticeable. Pale eyes searched for his spouse, who lingered a few paces behind him and Barret.

Dust stung Tifa's eyes. Even her mouth tasted of it. She didn’t care that her face and limbs were dotted with dark soot and dirt or that her hair was knotted and streaked with sweat and filth. Barret reacted in anger, Cloud reacted in silence, but Tifa wasn’t sure of how she wanted to react to all of this. She wished she could feel rage burning within her. She yearned to be able to let it out like Barret’s roars or internalize it like Cloud with his blank stare. But she couldn’t do either of these things. Fear spread from her very core, making her legs shake and her hands tremble uncontrollably. Her eyes were wide, but unseeing, as she replayed the horror in her head again and again and again. For the second time, a home of hers had been destroyed. For the second time, she had been displaced and made homeless. And for the thousandth time, people that she loved had left her life and dug the void in her heart even deeper.

Everyone always leaves her before she could leave them.

The three of them walk on in their gloomy parade, following Cloud’s confident stride. Thoughts of little Marlene were what kept her knees from buckling, even when she tripped on a chunk of rubble. She was alive—Aerith said she had brought her somewhere safe, and Cloud seemed to know where that place was. Often, her husband’s new foreign qualities and strange behavior made her trust in him falter. But she had to have faith that he was taking them to the right place. Tifa wasn’t sure if her trembling heart had the strength to withstand even the smallest disappointment at
the moment.

Sector Five was quiet as they passed through its gate. Most people were shut up in their homes, if they had them, and others were whispering in disbelief of the news of Sector Seven’s demise.

“Could you believe AVALANCHE would do such a thing?” “I don’t care what they stand for, those terrorists have gone too far this time!” “They’re saying the death toll is close to 3,000! And that’s only the people from the upper plate.”

It was too much. Gently, Tifa reached out to hold the fabric of Cloud’s shirt between her fingers as she followed along behind him, desperately searching for even a small bit of solace. To her relief, she felt him reach back and curl his fingers into her palm.

“Almost there.”

Barret huffed at Cloud’s calm demeanor, but Tifa didn’t notice. All she could focus on was the comforting press of Cloud’s hand in hers and the subtle change in the scent of the air as they rounded yet another corner. Tucked away in a secluded nook was a house far more beautiful than any slum dwelling that Tifa had ever seen. Many people under the plate lived in large, abandoned pipes and ramshackle tin sheds. Even Seventh Heaven, with its drooping eaves and rotting siding, had been considered a fine establishment among the locals. But this house, completely intact and free of even chipping paint, was quite a luxury. Of course the flower girl lived here. It was every bit as elegant and enchanting as she was: beauty amongst the debris and rubble and filth. Dozens of lily beds lined the spacious property, spreading their rich color and scent. Until now, Tifa never knew that this much vacant space existed anywhere in their crowded mess of the slums.

Elmyra, Aerith’s mother, was kind. She welcomed the trio into her home and showed no ill feelings toward them, even after they reported that Aerith had been captured by ShinRA and that her wellbeing was currently unknown. The aging woman even offered to let them stay the night after the three of them expressed their intention to return her daughter home safely. Tifa couldn’t help but wonder if her own mother would have been so calm in the same situation. One time, when she and Cloud had gotten lost in the woods and returned home after dark, Papa had been so angry while Mama had just held her quietly in her lap. At that time, Tifa didn’t know how fortunate she was. Now, at age twenty, she would have given anything to once again know the pacifying feel of her mother’s touch or to hear her father’s gruff voice. She did her best to stifle these thoughts before they grew, like smothering a flame. It was too dangerous to let them smolder on, and pointless to yearn for ghosts. Rushing up the stairs behind Barret, Tifa let her heart leap at the thought of being reunited with Marlene. Something inside her burst when she heard the little girl’s excited shout when her two favorite adults stepped into the doorway of the bedroom she was in. In moments, she covered the little girl in kisses and crushed her little head to her chest. Barret’s booming laugh and the way he embraced them both made it seem like maybe, things would be alright somehow.

Cloud wandered upstairs after them, feeling out of place and discouraged – not that he’d let it show. Peeking in the room as he crept past, his chest tightened at the sight of Tifa cuddling Marlene against her and he didn’t know how to stifle this particular ache. Standing in the hallway, empty hands clenching and unclenching, he tried to turn away from the rising melancholy and loneliness that threatened to consume him.

“Tifa!” a small voice chirped. “Your face is all dirty!”

His wife responded in a voice that trembled with emotion. “Y-yeah…I guess it is.”

Where did he fit in this equation? Tifa and Marlene looked like mother and child. Barret was the
girl’s legal adoptive father. Cloud had little interest in bonding with Marlene, and it seemed that she returned that feeling. Fathers were always mysterious to Cloud. How was it that such an unpredictable and temperamental man such as Barret could play a paternal role in this kid’s life? How was Barret any more suited than Cloud to be a father? Sure, it wasn’t his biological kid, but fate had given her to him while it had taken Cloud’s daughter away. Surely it couldn’t have been a mistake. Growing up without a father had left him ill-suited to parent anyone; he probably would have screwed up his baby’s life.

Hell, he’d already screwed up Tifa’s.

Before he knew what he was doing, Cloud peeked around the doorway. “Tifa?”

“Yes?”

The fatigue and sadness in her eyes made something scream inside him, though he couldn’t be certain why. Was he angry with himself for bringing Tifa to Midgar in the first place? Was she so upset because after all this time—even with his promotion to SOLDIER, first class—he wasn’t good enough for her? Was the pain in her eyes just from losing her bar and some of their team, or was it stemming from something deeper? Whatever it was, he was sure that she wouldn’t tell him; not with the way she’d been acting lately.

“Elmyra says we can stay in the bedroom down the hall. She left us some soap and towels.”

“Thank you.” Tifa turned back to Marlene and ruffled her short brown hair before rising off the bed. “I guess I’d better get washed up, huh?”

“You’re staying here.”

“Huh?”

Cloud was finishing up a shave while Tifa showered, separated only by the thin shower curtain in the cramped bathroom. “Stay here with Marlene. Barret and I will get Aerith, then you and me can get out of Midgar.”

Rinsing ash and dirt out of her hair, she basked in the steaming hot spray of water and tried to burn away the memory of Wedge, Jessie and Biggs. Tifa wanted to focus on anything else aside from the fact that she’d never see their beautiful faces again. The brown water swirling around the drain reminded her of how her life and hope and happiness was continuously sucked away from her, no matter how hard she tried to fight it. Biting her lip helped to reign in any audible sounds of her grief. They had suffered and died, and there was nothing she could’ve done to stop it. Like her mother, like her father, like Nibelheim. She had been helpless when labor pains had ripped through her core months before it was time; she was powerless to keep her baby alive. The memory of her helplessness as she watched her lifeless daughter’s perfect features was overwhelming. The strength evaporated from her body like the steam rising from the shower. Was there anything left for her?

Cloud waited quietly for a response.

Tifa needed to do something or she’d go crazy. Cloud was her husband, and it made her chest ache to want to defy him, but she couldn’t sit and twiddle her thumbs while the most important people in her life took off to face so much danger. Marriage was tricky in this manner. Her relationship with Cloud had never been a dictatorship of any sort, but she respected his decisions and would follow
his leadership closely. They’d work together to navigate life and analyze situations, and Tifa trusted Cloud to make the final decisions on important matters. It is what she had seen with her own mother and father. She’d felt completely comfortable in this routine until her world was turned upside down and she wasn’t sure exactly who her husband was anymore. Still, he seemed to have her best interest and safety at heart. Tifa wanted to obey him, but it wasn’t an option. With a deep breath, Tifa shut off the water and reached for the towel just outside the curtain.

“I can’t do that,” she almost whispered.

She could give up, but people’s lives were in danger. Aerith needed them, and she wouldn’t back down. Tifa felt guilty that they hadn’t been more insistent that the flower girl stay behind, and now she was in great danger because they’d dragged her into it. It was easy to see that the same guilt plagued Cloud as well, though he tried to hide it under his irritated exterior.

“You didn’t listen to me before and look where we ended up? I’m your husband and yet you haven’t listened to me or showed me that you trust me since I came back.” She heard the soft clack as he set the razor down on the sink ledge. “I love you, Tifa. Why won’t you let me keep you safe?”

Eyes on the ground, she stepped out of the shower. “Because it isn’t that simple, Cloud! I have a responsibility to set things right. It was me who joined AVALANCHE, who chose to bomb the Sector Five reactor, to push you to help us. You can’t let me just sit here, I can’t take it.”

“And don’t you have a responsibility to ME?”

She shut her mouth quickly. He had a point.

“I do. I want to be with you, Cloud. I don’t want to be separated from you after all that’s happened. Please let me help. I promise I won’t be a burden to you and Barret!”

“I don’t care about you being a burden—I care about my wife’s safety. Why do you have to argue with me?”

“What do you want me to do? Sit here and wait as my friend and husband willingly walk into a dangerous situation?”

“Yes!”

“Yes?”

“Because I asked you to!”

Tifa’s chest swelled as she sucked in a frustrated breath, scowl meeting his cold blue stare. He wasn’t being unreasonable, and perhaps that was what made her so angry. Current circumstances were incredibly dangerous, and Cloud was just trying to protect her. Would it be selfish of her to continue insisting that she tag along? Surely her husband would be on edge if she continued to make herself part of these perilous circumstances; wouldn’t giving him peace of mind be worth staying behind with Marlene? Her desire to defy him startled her, and Tifa couldn’t be sure if it was really the troubled state of her heart and not her lack of trust in him that made this so difficult. Guilt gnawed at her as she tried to deny how far her trust in him had fallen.

But she couldn’t obey him; it would drive her mad. Tifa had practically worn holes in the floor in the past when she paced and paced while waiting for AVALANCHE members to return to the bar from a mission, or waiting for Cloud to get home from work. ShinRA was the reason they were suffering so much. ShinRA had taken her husband, Claudia, Papa. They took Master Zangan, the
families she’d grown up with, her innocence and her youth—buried everything under ashes and smoke. How could Tifa smother the smoldering anger inside her if she sat idly by?

Hot tears welled up and burned in her eyes, but she held his gaze for a few moments longer before curtly excusing herself and rushing out into the hallway. Biting her lip, Tifa reigned in a whimper until she had shut herself in the spare bedroom where Marlene lay sound asleep. Gently, she eased herself into the bed next to the little girl and tried to breathe deeply. Away from him now, emotions welled up inside her and for a while, Tifa could do nothing but curl into a ball and clutch her knees tight to her chest.

This wasn’t her Cloud. The Cloud she knew was gentle and shy, the man she had left in the bathroom was angry and sullen with a foul temper and fouler moods. Perhaps in her youth, she had been mistaken. Memories of his fights with the other boys in Nibelheim made her think that maybe all this time those demons had been lurking just beneath the surface of his skin. Childhood and the early days of their marriage seemed so far away, like a dream long buried under years of tears and dust and debris. Like Sector Seven, like Seventh Heaven. Was this new Cloud really the same boy she’d grown up with? Even the blinding light of their brightest memories could not bleach away the darkness that had seeped into their union.

The sound of Marlene’s steady breathing helped to calm her own. Her little back gently rose and fell where it pressed against Tifa’s, setting a smooth rhythm for the young woman’s shaky breaths to follow.

*Everything would be alright, wouldn’t it?*

When she finally settled down, Tifa realized that she still had so many questions. Why couldn’t she swallow her feelings and obey Cloud? He was just being concerned for his safety. But why was he so different? His personality had become almost unrecognizable and his body, well, Tifa wasn’t sure how he could have such pronounced muscles of his wiry, small frame. He looked emaciated and pale, but still somehow possessed the strength of at least two men. It had to be the mako. Where and when had he been exposed to it? Where in the world was he during his disappearance? The frequent times that she’d thought about all this, she’d ended up chasing all of these questions in circles again and again until she grew sad and fatigued. But Tifa had never arrived at an answer, and Cloud wouldn’t give her one. Would things be like this for the rest of her life?

A dreamy sigh from behind her made a small smile tug at the corner of Tifa’s lips. Despite the dozens of times that Marlene had clung to Tifa for comfort in the night, this time, it was the older girl seeking security from the younger one. It was always times like these where she’d close her eyes and swear she felt the warmth of a second little girl lying beside them. One with feathery light hair and red eyes. Tifa knew that Aria was dead. Her daughter’s life had been taken before she even knew what her little voice sounded like. There was nothing in the physical world to suggest that there was a benign little spirit curled against her mother’s stomach.

But in the dead of the night, Tifa would always peek, just to be sure.

*… … …*

Cloud wandered the halls like a living apparition.

As usual, he was struggling, drowning, with only the silence to accompany him. Tifa had responded to his request with a look of disbelief before, and he kept analyzing again and again what it was that baffled her. It was like she was constantly surprised by his actions and it left Cloud feeling insecure and upset. Wasn’t he how he always was? They’d been in each other’s lives since Tifa’s birth. But it was as though a dark veil had fallen between now and then, concealing his past from the present. Her words of defiance and uncertainty were tangled in his mind, and Cloud
desperately searched for their deeper meaning. He stretched out the arms of his mind, fumbling in the dark and trying to uncover memories that lay buried in the shadows. How satisfying it would be to pull them out, drag them into the light. Yet he was afraid of what he might find. He wanted to get Tifa out of here, to take her hand and run far, far away. But everything was too complicated now. They were in too deep. She was drowning, Cloud knew. But as hard as he tried to throw her a life ring, he was struggling immensely as his own head continually dipped beneath the waves.

He stopped outside her door, yearning to lie beside her and forget everything, to get lost in her eyes like he used to. Being in SOLIER used to be a tough job as a married man. Her remembered how he’d come back to find her after a particularly hard mission or stressful day and she’d hold him as he told her everything—auburn hair cascading down his shoulder as she laced her arms around him from behind, swallowing him in warmth and peace and the feeling that he’d never have to be alone. He remembered the smell of lilies and the way the light filtering through the church rafters felt warm on his face. Comfort would flood over him as she pressed her chest into his back and told him it would be alright.

Wait…no.

Wasn’t there a cramped apartment in the slums? A pair of welcoming arms when he’d slump home from work, feeling inadequate and ill-equipped to be a husband, a father...
Lying together with her in a bed meant for one, ebony tresses fanned out against their pillows. Looking into the ruby depths of her eyes, he could see that everything would be alright, that it didn’t matter that he didn’t feel like he’d accomplished enough to be worthy of her. Though no one could have envied their living situation, and neither of them could know for sure if they’d ever be able to meet their goals to find happiness outside of Midgar, Tifa’s presence used to soothe his worries with just the touch of her hand or sight of her smile.

So what had happened between then and now? His wife had a completely different air about her now, and no matter how hard he tried, there was no longer any comfort to be found in her gaze. Tifa couldn’t always still the screaming in his mind, couldn’t submit to his touch, and couldn’t be what he needed. But oh, how her brokenness made his heart bleed. Looking at her should draw anger from his heart, but it cut him and ripped him up instead. He didn't know what to do. She had shut the bedroom door to let him know he wasn’t welcome, and it was uncertainty more than pride that kept him from reaching for the doorknob. Swelling within his chest, his heart ached terribly. Something inside Cloud whispered that he was weak to feel such things, and even weaker if he expressed them. He couldn't let them know: not Tifa, not Barret, no one.
He’d rather them think it was his pride than his broken heart.

… … …

After her tiff with Cloud the night before, Tifa had lain in bed sleepless, consumed by her thoughts. She struggled with Cloud’s suffering and the love that remained in her heart for him. In the short time that Aerith had been with them, Cloud had perked up and even seemed a bit hopeful for the first time since his return. He tried to be intimidating in response to the brunette’s constant playful teasing, but his wife knew him well enough to see the amusement underneath his downturned lips. Aerith put color inside of their grey world of the slums, and Tifa would be lying if she denied that her heart was envious of this talent. Maybe she needed to change her behavior to help Cloud readjust to their relationship. Perhaps it wasn’t his attitude that was the problem, but hers. If Tifa could obtain the ability to be as optimistic and confident as Aerith, maybe she could bring comfort to Cloud once again. But in the wake of all that had happened, how could she possibly summon the strength to do anything but keep trudging forward? Her new home was gone, her friends were dead, her marriage was compromised and her life was threatened by the largest mega-corporation on the planet.
After kissing Marlene goodbye and thanking their gracious host, Tifa quietly followed Barret and Cloud out into the dirty street. They were heading to ShinRA tower to free Aerith, but neither one of her companions vocalized any feelings on the matter—good or bad. Guilt weighed down her limbs and she dragged two steps behind them, constantly questioning her decision to disregard her husband’s request. He had been quiet, but not cruel, when they were preparing to leave that morning. Cloud’s blue eyes were constantly averted from hers and it summoned a deep, horrible ache within her chest. She followed the path he forged through the crowd, barely lifting her gaze from the ground out of shame. Was she making the right decision? His back seemed cold and hard: a barrier that none of her explanations or pleas could hope to pass. Tifa assumed that her act of defiance had wedged even more space between them, and tried to distract herself by tightening the straps of her fighting gloves.

It was then that Cloud’s outstretched hand caught her eye. He was still facing forward, but his arm reached behind his back with his fingers outstretched. Tifa swallowed the growing lump in her throat and slowly, tentatively, reached out to lace her fingers with his.
Light from the hallway shone dimly between the bars of their prison cell. The leather of Cloud’s gloves creaked as he squeezed them around the slats of metal on the door’s small window, peeking out into the hallway. His enhanced strength combined with his irritation allowed him to bend the bars, but it wasn’t enough to break them. Footsteps approached unhurriedly as the guard moved down the corridor and Cloud glared at him as he passed. He didn’t break his gaze upon the soldier until he had once again disappeared out of sight down the hallway.

Cloud was agitated and angry that they had been captured by ShinRA personnel and that their plan had been dismantled so easily. Since he had started working with AVALANCHE, there was hardship at every turn and something inside him whispered that this was only the beginning of their troubles. This whole thing was a huge mess and Cloud wasn’t sure how they were going to get out of it. It hadn’t taken him long to clock the timing of the guard’s passes: it usually took him between twenty one and twenty three minutes to come back around again. It was enough time to fiddle about and try to discover a method of escape, but so far, he hadn’t been successful in the least. He had tried every trick he knew: picking the lock, checking the ventilation ducts, and half a dozen other things, but had come up empty.

Desperate, Cloud tried grabbing hold of the bars and shaking the door, hoping to use his superior strength to either snap the bars or shake the door loose on its hinges. It didn’t budge.

“Damn!” he cursed, turning quickly on his heel to pace the length of the cell.

Against the wall was a small cot where his cell mate sat, curled with her knees drawn up to her chest. Her dark eyes watched him for a moment and the concern on her features was genuine. It was easy to tell that she was full of unease, and realizing this only spurred his irritation further. Cloud was certain that she’d just cower there silently unless he addressed her, like he was some sort of feral creature instead of her spouse. But to his surprise, Tifa spoke softly.

“It’ll be alright, Cloud. We’ll figure something out. You’ll see.”

Though meant to soothe, the words made his heart bristle with anger and he whipped his head around to glower at her from his place near the corner.

“I know!” he snapped, countenance fierce with contained ire. The startled look on her face sobered him some. The silence between them cut like a knife and shame burned in his chest as a handful of seconds ticked by. Cloud lowered his head and let out a breath. “Sorry.”

He paced for a few minutes more before stopping to sit and lean against the wall opposite of Tifa. Chancing a peek at his wife, he took in the sight of her: cheek resting upon her knees and eyes closed against the dim light of the room. It was dark, but he could make out the worried furrow of her brow and the slight pout of her lips. Cloud often forgot that he could see better than most in the dark—a blessing of his heightened senses from his SOLDIER mako treatments. It was hard to remember what having a normal man’s eyesight was like. In fact, it was hard to remember a lot of things lately and it left him feeling empty and troubled.

Fidgeting uncomfortably, Cloud looked at his empty hands. He’d been angry and hostile. Seeing Hojo triggered something primal and terrible inside of him: an instinctual fear that stirred up anger and rage and other feelings that he didn’t have the clarity of mind to identify. It wasn’t just that this man had put Aerith in harm’s way. Something else about him made Cloud want to get as far away from the scientist as possible. There was a dark feeling surrounding that name, that voice, and it made him shiver at his very core. Barret and Aerith may have missed it, but Cloud knew that his
wife had seen the thinly veiled rage lurking just below the surface as they confronted Aerith’s captor. Now that the dangerous cocktail of mako, testosterone and adrenaline had begun to settle, Cloud could finally see their situation a little more clearly.

Aerith was taken out of trouble just to be moved into another sort of trouble. They’d met a sentient creature that had been imprisoned here as well—a four legged animal with a mane and flaming tail—who they had broken out of the same enclosure in which Aerith had been held. Now, they all awaited their trial in the morning in separate cells. Aerith was in a cell of her own; Barret and the creature (named Red XIII, apparently) were being held together in a cell on the other side. Tifa and Cloud’s cell was sandwiched in the middle. The only way they could communicate with each other was through a tiny vent at the bottom of each wall, but there really wasn’t anything to talk about, anyway. Oh, how he hated waiting. Waiting gave him too much time to let frothing thoughts spiral out of control and allow anxiety to creep in.

Cloud sighed, jiggling his knee as an outlet for his restlessness.

Why did anyone trust him to lead them in the first place? After a short, heated argument between the two men (which Tifa had to intervene), Barret had thrown up his hands and called him the ShinRA expert, referencing Cloud’s career and his distaste for it. Cloud didn’t want to have any more responsibility heaped on his shoulders. He couldn’t keep Aerith out of trouble, couldn’t get his wife to run off with him, and couldn’t remember the layout of ShinRA tower with the precision that he probably should have. Why couldn’t Barret man up and figure out what to do? It was his AVALANCHE group, anyway. He didn’t even want to be here. Tifa had pushed him to help; what a mistake that had been. All Cloud could think about was how he should’ve taken her away while he had the chance, no matter how she protested. Protecting her was his job. Not protecting the environment. Dealing with Barret was hardly worth the trouble of sparing the planet from the ShinRA Company and to be honest, he wasn’t the least bit interested in the state of Gaia. Cloud didn’t want to be taking on an insurmountable issue that had nothing to do with him. What he wanted was Tifa’s trusting hand in his, her warm smile, and her unrestrained heart. He didn’t think he’d ever have that again.

In the stillness, he could hear Aerith humming in her cell and stilled his movements in order to listen more closely. The sound lulled his mind into a brief, calm state, and he stared blankly at the opposite wall. He couldn’t leave her. Everytime Cloud thought of his wife, his something in his brain screamed for him to turn his attention to the flower girl. If he was honest with himself, Aerith’s well-being was just as important at Tifa’s, right? Their bond from the years they had spent together had woven her deep within his heart and he’d die before he left her unhappy or insecure. The delicate feel of her touch on his skin was so dear and familiar. Her jovial voice soothed him like few things in this world could, even when his life seemed to be spiraling out of control. She was soft all over: soft curves of her body, soft auburn tresses, and soft shades of pink in her clothing. Involuntarily, Cloud would recall the gentle press of her lips upon his when she’d give him a playful peck when he came to visit her after work most days.

Wait…

Hadn’t he just met Aerith days ago? Wasn’t it Tifa whom he had come home to every day? What was wrong with him? The noise in his head was rising again. Conflicting trains of thought were colliding and the trauma of the resulting crash made restlessness spread throughout his veins like a raging fire. Cloud fought hard to shut it all out, but it seemed that there were very few coping methods that eased this swelling anxiety. What made matters worse was that the number of effective strategies to numb these feelings seemed to dwindle further each day. What was happening to him? Why couldn’t he remember things that he knew he should be able to recall with ease? Was it the mako treatments?
Floating in a glass cylinder of starling green. The pads of his fingertips pressed against the glass. Trying to scream, but choking instead. Desperate, silent pleas for help.

His entire body trembled.

… … …

At six years old, Tifa Lockhart could run the length of Main Street three whole times before she got tired. She’d climb the big stone wall by the inn with ease, like the group of boys she played with, and could fearlessly jump the stepping stones across the rushing brook at the base of the mountainside. It wasn’t a surprise to her parents when Tifa decided to climb the big oak tree in the backyard without considering how she’d descend safely, for their little girl’s personality only seemed to allow her to live in the moment. Her father had come out of the house when she’d realized her miscalculation and called for help.

“Papa! I can’t do it!”

Little fingers were curled tighter around the rough bark of the tree limb as Papa stood on the ground below, holding his arms skyward.

“Come on, Tifa. You’re going to have to let go.” He smiled and his rising cheeks seemed to draw his short beard upward. “I’ll catch you, I promise.”

Defiantly, the girl squeezed her little legs tighter around the branch and let out a frustrated whimper. He’d been trying to convince her to jump for what seemed like ages. Couldn’t he just climb up and carry her down? Why couldn’t he see that she was too afraid to let go? Angry tears welled up in her wine colored eyes.

“No, I won’t! Come and get me! Please!” He shook his head and chuckled, the sound making her heart spill over with irritation. A small growl rumbled in her chest and she scowled. “You don’t love me anymore, do you?”

“Oh, don’t be silly,” he said before sighing loudly. “Come now, let me catch you so we can go inside and join Mama for lunch.”

She peered down to look towards his outstretched hands. Papa’s arms had always been her source of comfort and protection. Not once had any harm come to her when her father was around; why would this time be any different? But it was a very long way from her perch to the ground, and Tifa couldn’t seem to still the trembling of her body. With reluctance, she decided that on the count of three, she’d let go and leap into Papa’s waiting arms.

One…

Everything would be alright. Papa would make sure of it.

Two…

The wind would rush against her face for just a moment before she’d be safely in his grasp. He wouldn’t let her fall. He’d never let her fall.

Three!

… … …

Something made Tifa open her eyes. It wasn’t her sore back or the sound of the guard’s boot falls
as he passed their cells once again. Her gaze immediately fell upon Cloud, who sat on the cold floor with his back to the concrete, and her heart sunk painfully. When it came to their marriage, Tifa felt as if she had no control at all. She was falling and this time, Papa’s arms wouldn’t be waiting for her. No one was here to catch her anymore. So many years ago, she had felt the wind whipping against her face as she plummeted toward the ground. She had been so frightened that tears had blurred her vision, but before she knew it, strong arms had held her tight. How blissful that had felt: to be safe and happy with a trusted source of comfort.

Cloud had always been a source of security in her life. Since she first laid eyes upon him as a toddler, Tifa had been fascinated by every aspect of him. He had always been so different from her early childhood self: fair haired, painfully shy and reclusive. But as she grew, Tifa became hopelessly attracted to his gentle spirit, kind heart, and open arms. Throughout the uncertain, emotionally perilous days of her youth, Cloud had been her constant source of solace as she tried to find her footing on the increasingly uneven ground of her earlier years. And now, in the dim light, she could make out that familiar head of golden spikes and wondered what had become of him. Since his return, she had never felt at ease around him, and it made her feel terribly guilty. Instead, she’d sat on the cot and pined for the old Cloud: the one who had gently held her hand through life in Nibelheim, the loving young man who had married her, and the caring soul who had fathered her baby. Tifa wanted that Cloud to come and save her from this mess; to remind her once again that she had value—something she had forgotten in the past handful of dark years.

Cloud was awake, but his mind seemed miles from here. He was looking intently at the buster sword that sat in the corner, concern on his face, like he could sense something tugging at his memory there. She watched him silently, waiting for him to blink, but he never did. Cloud’s emotions had always been reflected in his eyes. Even when they were small children, Tifa could determine his distinct moods or feelings in his expressive, beautiful blues. But now, she could never read them for long. Sometimes, they’d glow with sadness and desperation only to be hidden again under a blank mask of apathy. What she longed for was the openness with which they once communicated and thrived, but her husband was either choosing to close himself off or had forgotten how to be transparent with her.

But if she were to be honest with herself, was she really any different?

A small, shuttering breath from Cloud made her heart leap into her throat. Was he frightened? Perhaps, like her, he was waiting to be saved. He’d allowed Tifa to drag him into this mess and was now in prison, thanks to his pushy wife. Cloud ignored her when he was stressed or angry, and watched her closely when she kept her distance from him. Maybe he felt like he being pushed off the edge and had lashed out at her in fear, like she had done to her father. And so, they had two options: to let their relationship continue to tumble downhill until it disintegrated completely, neither of them any freer from their heartache, or to take heart and work tirelessly to reclaim what time and absence had taken from them. And while Tifa felt like she was too emotionally exhausted to try to get near him or to try to get this marriage back on its feet, she knew that was the only way to reach any sort of happiness.

“Cloud?”

Only his eyes moved as he turned his gaze toward his wife. They were filled with uncertainty and heavy with sadness, and it was then that Tifa was able to see his vulnerability. Everything was so different than it was before. Her hope and peace had always been in Cloud. Now that she felt as if there were a million miles of distance between them it was hard not to wallow around in despair. Nothing could ever be as it was; it was something that Tifa had to accept. Wouldn’t the gap only get larger if she didn’t do something about it? Sucking in a quiet breath, she slowly slid off of the cot and crouched in front of her husband.
“It’s alright, Cloud.” Tifa paused, wondering whether or not her words would have any effect. “We don’t have to be afraid because we’re with each other, right?”

She reached down to grasp his hands, holding them tightly until they stopped shaking. For a moment, Tifa was afraid that his foul demeanor from earlier might cause him to snap at her or pull away. But she needed to try to chase him. How wonderful would it feel if she could protect and shield him from his own haunting thoughts, even for a moment? Floods of memories washed through Tifa’s mind: of all the times he had soothed Tifa as she cried, held her hand through the countless struggles of her childhood and stood beside her as she faced her fears. Even after they left Nibelheim behind, rings on their fingers and a mixture of joy and fear in their hearts, Cloud had always been her rock as they struggled to live on his meager salary in the Midgar slums. And now, he needed her. But reaching him in his current state could prove to be difficult. Would he accept her efforts and affections?

Ruby eyes watched intently as he rose his head to look at her. Cloud gave her a tiny, worn smile, and Tifa had trouble interpreting how genuine it was. He seemed to be more calm, at least. The trembling in his hands had subsided but all Tifa could think about was how much she missed that shy smile. Oh, how she longed for the boy she had married. Where had he gone? She squeezed his hands to try to reassure him, but she was certain her true emotions shone through her gaze.

_I need you right now._

Cloud drew in a slow breath before looking away. He saw the concern and sadness in her eyes and was filled with the overwhelming desire to chase it away. But it seemed that, no matter how hard he tried, all he brought her was anxiety and fear. She’d be happier with Barret, wouldn’t she? During his absence, the older man seemed to take better care of her than he could. With Barret, she had friends and an income and a properly stocked pantry. With Barret, she had a little girl upon which to direct the overflowing love that she had to give. With Barret, Tifa had hope for a future. With a friend like that, what did Tifa need him for? Had he ever been able to give her any of those things?

But here she was, staring straight into the core of him, as if there was no room in her heart to give to anybody else. Those eyes were always so captivating; he’d memorized their unique hue for his entire life. Right now, they were telling him that he was her only concern. But then again, why wouldn’t he be? He was a SOLDIER, for crying out loud—first class! Wasn’t being with him like being with a celebrity? He’d have to stop moping and make her proud; this was no conduct for a man of his status! What sort of hero showed vulnerability? He was Cloud Strife, after all. He saved people from their problems, not burdened people with them. His eyes caught the way the light from the corridor spilled through the bars on their cell door, leaving a striped, illuminated patch on the far wall. Holding up his hands in the path of the light, he hooked his fingers together in such a way that they created the silhouette of a bird.

“Look—it’s a Midgar pigeon,” he said, voice hoarse from a few hours of disuse.

Tifa smiled and it made his heart feel light, even if just in that moment, but it was enough. Flashes of fragmented memories bubbled up in his mind: memories of being sick and confined to the house, of sleepless, lonesome nights where he’d have trouble breathing or resting through the fog of a fever. Snowy midnights. A single lantern in his room. The smell of oil burning. Mom used to make shadow puppets to tell him stories. But if he focused too long, or he tried to picture her face or voice, he’d almost lose the memory completely. Tifa moved to sit beside him and chuckled, the soft sound spreading warmth throughout his limbs.

“They were the only wildlife we saw in the slums.” She said, tucking a wayward black strand of
hair behind her ear. Her hands rose up into the light and she maneuvered her fingers to create a canine silhouette. “Remember the wolves that used to come down to the village from Mt. Nibel?”

He made a snail. She made a cow. He made a rabbit. She made a duck.

The next time the guard passed by there was no one threatening him from the small window of the cell, only whispers and a hushed chuckle or two. On his final pass on his patrol route, before he turned in his keys at shift change, all was silent. Curious, he peeked in at his prisoners. They were sitting side by side against the wall: her head upon his shoulder, his head resting upon hers, both sets of eyes closed against the world.

“Hmph,” the soldier grunted. “Why do captives always choose to behave at the end of my shift?”
Tucked Away

It had been hours since their exhilarating escape from ShinRA headquarters, but adrenaline still pulsed through Tifa’s veins.

So much had happened that her mind was left reeling, but it wasn’t because of Sephiroth’s appearance and the murder of president ShinRA. It wasn’t the excitement of escaping from their prison cells, nor the thrill of speeding down the freeway in a van to escape Midgar and the soldiers trying to recapture them. Now, as they walked through the lush plains past the dry outskirts of city limits, what had her heart pounding was the sky. The sky! Oh, how she’d missed it! It was such a distraction that Tifa barely noticed anything else as they marched along. Their party had split up temporarily, hoping to look less conspicuous as they traveled out in the open. With the goal or reuniting in the nearby village of Kalm, Barret and Red XIII were traveling separately from Aerith, Cloud and Tifa.

“Ah!” Tifa gasped, tripping momentarily over a small rock. Her fascination with the wide blue expanse had already caused her to take several missteps.

Cheeks pinkened from embarrassment, she glanced at her companions and readied herself for light-hearted teasing from the flower girl. Luckily, she hadn’t seen. Aerith was too busy skipping to and fro, holding onto her boots and letting her bare feet be tickled by the green grass. In that moment, Tifa wasn’t sure whether it was more breathtaking to watch the sky or the twirling brunette enjoying her first taste of freedom from Midgar’s looming expanse. Elmyra had revealed the sad story of Aerith’s past on the night Sector Seven’s upper plate crashed and turned Tifa’s new life and livelihood into dust. The last remaining Cetra had lived in the Midgar slums since a very young age, and had likely not seen the sky for over twenty years. What joy and freedom she must be feeling—finally free after being unable to escape her oppressive home. She danced and spun, humming a little tune in such a manner that reminded her of Marlene’s childish grace and innocent play.

Oh, Marlene. How wonderful it would be to get that little girl out here into nature: to experience the renewing smell of the prairie air and dirt, the sight of the clouds, and the simple. She deserved to experience the irreplaceable childhood right of climbing a tree and running freely to play without the dangers that slum life presented. Once this is all over, Tifa swore she’d expose her to the magic of an outdoor world free of debris and filth.

Aerith was obviously enjoying herself. But Tifa, too, felt like she was shedding a layer of dead skin under the gentle caress of the midday sun. The sky made her finally able to breathe. It was as if she had been holding in a claustrophobic breath for the five years she spent confined to the slums. Those years, which seemed like a blur of pain and loneliness, had passed. She clung to the faith that the worst was behind her now. Today, all she wanted to do was let herself anticipate nothing but happiness and brightness in her future after living in fear of what was around the next corner for so long. Closing her eyes for a moment, Tifa took a long inhale the fresh, brisk air. The sky stretched out endlessly and it offered her hope. She remembered the brilliant blue sky of her wedding day, and how it had filled her with optimism and excitement. That day, the sun had filtered through the delicate lace of Mama’s wedding dress and illuminated the stark white underlay, making Tifa literally glow as her shining countenance reflected the dreams blossoming in her heart.

Oh, how naive she had been. But what reason did she have at the time to doubt her happy ending with Cloud? How was she supposed to know how drastically everything would change within the span of a few short years?
Tifa could feel anxiety pass over her heart as a cloud blocks out the brilliance of the sun. When she was a fifteen year old newlywed, she had truly believed that the hardest part of her life was over. Surviving in her father’s house after her mother died had been perilous and sad, and she believed that her marriage and escape from Nibelheim would heal all of the gaping wounds in her heart. That hadn’t been so. So why would this escape from Midgar ensure a better life than she’d had in the slums? Tifa tried to rid her mind of these thoughts with the flick of her wrist across her sweaty brow. It was useless to dwell on it now. Looking heavenward for comfort once again, she was amused to think that although so much had changed about herself since the day she and Cloud had exchanged their vows and the circumstances in her life had been flipped completely upside down, the sky somehow remained the same. All this time, it had been shining just as brightly, despite her not being there to see it. During some of the darkest days of her life, the world outside had gone on without missing a beat.

Out of the corner of her eye, Tifa saw Cloud trudging a dozen paces ahead of them. He seemed more like a hero than ever when they had escaped ShinRA headquarters and fled Midgar, and she was proud of him and his confidence.

But he was so distant. He didn’t seem to take in the surrounding beauty or relax, even momentarily, to walk beside her or Aerith. Having been so conditioned to the personality of his youth, Tifa found herself continuously scrambling to unravel his new repertoire of moods and speech and behavior. It was harder than she thought to be accepting of this new man who had replaced her dear, familiar spouse, and her heart was constantly soaring and diving on this strange roller coaster. But today, the sky didn’t cry with her over the loss of Cloud. Large, billowing clouds cast their shadows upon the open plains as they walked along, floating merrily across their clear blue backdrop. The calm breeze tickled playfully at their skin. Aerith's reaction to the lush grass continuously supplied Tifa with hope and filled her with new energy. But were they really any more liberated than they were before? They were out of Midgar, but on the run nonetheless. Why did she feel like this could be the beginning of a refreshing new chapter in all of their lives?

Perhaps the crisp, pollutant-free air made her able to think clearly for the first time in a long time. Maybe it was the distance between her eyes and the sun and the sky above that made her feel free. She couldn’t tell for sure, but decided to cautiously embrace this fledgling hope.

“Can we stop for a moment? I’ve got a pebble in my boot.”

“Alright.” Cloud halted and turned to face them, taking the heavy buster sword off of his back and spiking it into the ground so that it stood upright. “Let’s take a breather for a few minutes.”

Aerith stopped spinning, the momentum of her long braid causing it to gracefully wrap around her shoulder. “You should probably just take them off, like me!”

Jubilance radiated from the sing-song of her voice, from her skin, from the youthful luster in her eyes. Aerith reminded her of spring: all beauty and merriment that chased away the biting frost of a bleak winter. But Tifa felt like a tree that had begun to lose its leaves. She’d once been a starry-eyed child herself—fascinated with love and life and eagerly searching out the small splendor in each day. That was before Mama died and her world had morphed into a dark, frightening place. That was before Cloud had vanished and left her pregnant and alone in the alien Midgar slums. That was before she’d given birth to a baby girl who never had the chance to take a breath.

Breathing in, Tifa closed her eyes. She couldn’t let those thoughts swallow her now. Opening them once again, squinting against the blinding light of the sun, she exhaled her hidden sadness into the prairie wind.

*Be positive, Tifa. Be positive!*
Cloud leaned on the hilt of the buster sword, watching as Aerith floated over towards his wife. They’d come upon a water way and Tifa stopped to sit upon the crumbling stone wall at its edge. He watched with disconnection as she untied her boot, gaze wandering to where the sun casted the girls’ shadows upon the rushing brook. They seemed complacent, and for that he was grateful, since it was quite a long way to Kalm and none of them had had the chance to properly prepare for a journey without any foreseen end. In his mind, there was one goal: destroy Sephiroth once and for all. Cloud could care less about Gaia and ShinRA’s destruction of the planet’s resources.

What he wanted was revenge. Revenge for his mother, revenge for his hometown, revenge for the loss of his innocence and youth. There was no doubt in his mind what that menace had done. He remembered the blistering heat of the flames as Nibelheim disappeared into pillars of smoke. He remembered finding his mother’s lifeless body. He remembered how the blood gurgled out of Brian Lockhart’s throat as he begged him to take care of Tifa. He’d never forget that, along with so much else, his dreams had died that day. Sephiroth, the greatest hero he’d ever known, had betrayed his trust and made Cloud question the arduous path he’d taken in his own young life. It just wasn’t fair. He’d given up everything to try and make SOLDIER. He’d sacrificed his dignity to the bullies at the military academy, left his mother alone in a place where she wasn’t appreciated or loved, and even dragged Tifa away from everything she’d ever known. And for what? A dream that had washed through his fingers like water.

He had to be stopped. Before he could cause more people the same pain that Sephiroth had borne upon his own heart. Before he could get away with all that he had done. If Cloud had something to say about it, the great Sephiroth would regret ever crossing SOLDIER, first class Strife.

The wind ruffled golden spikes and sent a chill up Cloud’s spine. There were whispers in the air, pulling at his consciousness and demanding his attention. They were the same sorts of whispers he had heard so loudly in ShinRA headquarters.

Weak, you are weak. You are incomplete, Cloud. Come, come to me, and the emptiness in your chest will disappear. I will make you whole.

Without warning, they’d come. They’d start quietly before rushing forth like an ocean’s wave and overwhelming his senses. Even his vision would fade for a moment or two—longer if he let it—as the sensation passed over him. Blue eyes wide open, all he saw was blackness as voices hissed into his ears, into his mind, into his very core. Cloud’s heart began to thrum wildly in his chest and he longed for the comfort of a familiar pair of arms to hold him and rescue him from these lapses in sanity. He wanted to cry out for help, but his voice would not come when he summoned it. Frightened, he fought against the dark, managing to free his mind from the tangled ropes weaving around it. Restored to the present, Cloud gasped for breath. It was as though he had been under water for a very long time and only barely made it to the surface. Like his heart had sunk into a different place for a single, long moment, and only now returned. Had it been only a minute that had gone by? Or was it longer than that? Confused and upset, he looked around wildly and withdrew his sword from its place in the earth.

Both girls were still near the water, bending slightly forward and tossing rocks into the stream. He could hear Tifa’s soft voice, and Aerith answering with a hearty laugh, and the sound drew him back to reality like an anchor. With a dry throat, he called out to his comrades.

Tifa’s head whipped around to face him. “Coming!”

Boot now re-secured on her foot, she smiled and bounded over toward her husband. She was happy to respond, thinking that maybe he was looking for her comradery and attention. But instead he turned and continued forging ahead, redirecting them back toward the dirt path. Fearless, Aerith ran
ahead to walk at his side, somehow engaging him in lighthearted conversation. How did she do that? How was it so effortless for this almost-stranger to bring out a friendly side of Cloud? His swirling moods made Tifa hesitant to talk with him about anything that wasn’t prudent to surviving their current situation and escape from Midgar. Cloud had never truly lashed out at her; it was her own cowardice that held her back. She hated herself for her cautious nature, for her hesitation and lack of confidence that prevented her from pulling her spouse back from the edge of whatever it was that was threatening to consume him.

No. Instead of summoning courage, she couldn’t open her mouth to stop any of this. She was willingly giving up her role to someone else and there was no one she could blame but herself. Heart sinking, Tifa’s feet slowed as ugly feelings coiled inside her. Frustration made her fingers curl into loose fists as she marched forward. She tried and failed to push a handful of memories back down to the usually tightly locked corners of her mind: childhood memories when her problems were so small, but seemed like mountains at the time. Mama had taught her piano since she was very small, but she didn’t possess natural talent with the instrument like her mentor did. Tifa had had to work at it for hours a day to reach her goals, while it seemed like her mother could learn a song simply by hearing it once. One hot September day, cicadas calling loudly in the trees, she had been trying all morning to master a difficult song without success. All it took was one teasing remark from her father to send her little hands flying down to bang the keys in frustration, but Mama always reacted with grace. She had scooped the young girl onto her lap and placed her hands over Tifa’s as she slowly showed her how to play what was giving her trouble.

That day, she’d learned that patience combined with trial and error yield success. Perhaps that was what it would take with Cloud? It was okay to keep failing—as long as she kept trying, right? Maybe her finger placement was wrong, or the combination of keys needed adjusting before they found their harmony. Maybe all they needed was some practice: to find their rhythm and balance. Choosing to walk a pace or two behind the others, Tifa grimaced inwardly when Aerith made a lighthearted joke and Cloud actually smiled. Envy bubbled up inside her. Tifa thought about trying to make him as jealous as he made her. Maybe it would draw his attention back to her and away from the jovial, carefree, fascinating Cetra. She wanted it to take his focus away from the road ahead, away from the distraction of chasing Sephiroth, and back to her.

But Tifa knew herself better than that. She’d yield to his needs because she loved him, but also because of her own fear of facing the fact that maybe he no longer needed her as much as she needed him.

… … …

One rainy afternoon as kids, Cloud had showed Tifa a detailed photo of Sephiroth’s legendary sword, the masamune. Kneeling together on the wooden floor of the Strife’s front porch, their soft young faces gazed in wonder at the newspaper clipping. The metal had a full grey sheen, and its curves were smooth and perfect. Even the metal handle was beautifully detailed. But upon realizing its true purpose as she listened to Cloud’s stories, it ceased to be beautiful at all and became something monstrous instead.

Like that sword, Cloud’s dream to be a SOLDIER had been beautiful, but the ugliness in trying to achieve it was evident. Whilst he was a floundering trooper, the pressure had made him anxious and despairing. Many a night he’d come home to their shoebox apartment from his patrols, exhausted and defeated from facing torment from his fellow soldiers and the long hours on his feet. It had discouraged her, as his wife, to watch him struggle so much, but Tifa knew that her quiet support would help him believe that he could still be the hero he strove to be one day—SOLDIER operative or not. But now that he’d apparently made it as a first class SOLDIER, it seemed to have
sucked the heart and soul and compassion from him. But it certainly seemed to have pumped a certain amount of pompousness and a strange brand of confidence into him, leaving Tifa to analyze this strange behavior endlessly.

It had been raining since they arrived in Kalm: exhausted physically and emotionally after all that had happened in Midgar. After their brief rendezvous at the town’s inn, they all decided to grab a well-deserved meal at the tavern. But while everyone else’s minds were on filling their stomachs, all Tifa could focus on was how confused she was. While they had met in their rented room, Cloud had told them all about how he had worked with Sephiroth and how Nibelheim had burned to the ground. He told them about his confrontation with his crazed fellow first class SOLDIER in the mako reactor, and how only his skill and strength had allowed him to somehow survive. At first, she concluded that he was simply lying. After all, he had never been anything more prestigious than a trooper within ShinRA’s military system to her knowledge. It seemed that Tifa wasn’t the only one having trouble believing Cloud’s story.

“Come on, Teef! Tell the waitress your order,” Barret called, breaking her out of her reverie. “I’m starving!”

She snapped back to attention when Cloud took her hand from across the table. Now self-conscious, Tifa stuttered out an order of an omelet and toast before returning her gaze to her lap. As hard as she tried to shrug it off for now, her mind wouldn’t rest as it tried to untangle the scrambled mess that was her husband. Was he telling such tales to try to impress the others? He sounded like a child making up a story: twisting the parts that wouldn’t have portrayed him in a good light, like how friendly he made the other villagers seem when he came there with Sephiroth to inspect the reactor. Tifa hadn’t been there, but she had observed the way people treated Cloud and his mother in Nibelheim during childhood, and it was always with avoidance or detached politeness at best. If he wasn’t honest about even details such as these, could she trust him to tell her what was really going on? Could she trust him with anything?

The smell of smoke and fried food reminded her of Seventh Heaven and a tiny wave of nausea rolled in Tifa’s stomach. She felt Cloud’s eyes upon her, but she couldn’t bring herself to meet them. There were so many things she wanted to ask him about Nibelheim, about his mother (who had been her dear friend), and about her father when he saw them before they supposedly died in the fire. But she lacked the privacy and the nerve to make such inquiries, and chose to swirl the straw in her glass of water instead.

“So ya’ll got in a fight with the great Sephiroth and you actually lived to tell about it?” Barret huffed in amusement. “That’s a likely story for a little waif like you.”

Cloud’s eyes darkened at the comment, and he let go of Tifa’s hand to crush his napkin in a frustrated fist.

“I’ve got the scar to prove it,” he said, tone as grim as his countenance. “But I…I don’t remember the specifics is all. It’s hard to recall what happened after that.”

Red XIII cut Barret off before he could make any further irksome comments, speaking up from his seat on the floor beside Aerith’s chair. “You’re the only one here who has known Sephiroth personally. Do you have any idea where he may have gone?”

“Not a clue,” Cloud admitted, blonde head dipping forward slightly.

He hated feeling this way: like a criminal being interrogated. Barret was relentless with his unspoken accusations and vocalized criticisms, and it wasn’t what he needed right now. Tifa’s eyes were glued to the lacquered wooden table top when he needed her to back him up. Isn’t that what
“Someone like that can’t travel around unnoticed,” Aerith piped in. She took a hunk of bread out of the basket at the center of the table and began to butter it calmly, like a guest at a tea party instead of a fugitive on the run from the most powerful corporation on the planet. “I mean, he doesn’t exactly have a low profile, does he? If we ask around, we’re bound to get a lead.”

Cloud was grateful to have Aerith beside him. It felt like his delicate mind was always a bit jumbled, and she somehow this girl made it both better and worse. But she always seemed to have unwavering confidence in him and pushed him forward with eagerness and cheer. It didn’t seem like he could get that from anyone else these days, and the tired ex-SOLDIER drank in that attention like a sponge.

At the bar, a group of patrons had broken out into drunken song: merrily clapping and slurring out-of-tune lyrics. Aerith giggled as Barret sighed and rubbed his temples in response, and Cloud watched the singers out of the corner of his eye. Within a few minutes, most of the tavern’s patrons had joined in the jaunty tune, including the flower girl beside him. Barret finally broke into a grin and elbowed Tifa, prompting a small smile to grace her lips as well. It was what they all needed after the stress of the previous day’s events: a little senseless cheer to lift their spirits. But surrounded by others, happily shouting and swaying, Cloud felt as lonely as if he were wandering through a wasteland. It was so hard to find contentment or happiness anymore.

As he sat there, watching, he began to think about the forms that human happiness, and unhappiness, might take, and where they might beckon. Here were groups of people with a myriad of different backgrounds and problems, yet most everyone had joined in this rowdy and senseless display. How did they all abandon the things that plagued them in order to take part in such a light hearted thing? Even Aerith, after all that had happened in her life, somehow put it all behind her to join in when an opportunity for silliness presented itself. He studied woman beside him, who was made rich at heart by the hopes and peace of mind she could look forward to when by finding all the tiny pleasures in life. How was it so easy for her to find happiness when it eluded him constantly? What was her secret?

The singing came to an unorganized end shortly after their food arrived, and the group dissolved into choppy conversations between stretches of exhausted silence as they filled their rumbling bellies. They were waiting for the waitress to bring their bill when it happened. The unmistakable wail of an infant broke through the air. A few tables down, a mother gently rocked her baby, cradling its tiny head to her chest. The man next to her—whom Cloud assumed was the father—stroked at the child’s sparse hair. He was transfixed: staring at the small family with electric blue. That noise. It made something wretched and painful spread through his chest, yet he couldn’t pry his sight from the shrieking little red face. He pressed his lips tightly together to avoid grimacing as Tifa’s small voice echoed through his memory.

“S-she died…”

There was a jarring clink and he snapped out of his momentary reverie. Across the table, Tifa had spilled what was left of her glass of water and was trying to clean it up with shaking hands. It was without question that the same trigger had brought about Tifa’s characteristic nervous clumsiness. Cloud fought to see her eyes, which she kept carefully shrouded by her bangs, but her reddening face told him all he needed to know. Why couldn’t he have protected her from this? His blood began to boil, surprising even him. He could feel the mako tingling under his skin: reserved energy waiting for the chance to strike out into action, like an animal loosely chained. This superhuman strength was helpful for battling foes, but completely useless in every other aspect of his life, and it was this one that needed the most attention at this point. But he couldn’t bear to address it. And the
way his wife looked, neither could she.

There was such a distance between them now. Did he still feel the same affection for her that he did when they were married? Why was it so hard to remember how he had felt back then? Come to think of it, why was it so hard to recall the majority of the smaller details of their relationship? It was worrisome, and he tried to avoid thinking about it.

For a second, they locked eyes, and he tried to analyze what he saw in those deep, crimson pools. But these days, she may as well be a stranger to him and he loathed that thought. But Cloud knew that relationships based on feelings alone were ephemeral and transitory. The only real stability in marriage is produced by firm commitments that hold two people steady when emotions are fluctuating wildly. It had all been so simple before, this union that they had. Now it had spiraled into a complicated mess, and Cloud wasn’t sure how to sort it all out. The blonde stood suddenly, slapping some gil onto the table.

“Let’s go.”

Barret seemed about to protest, but Aerith started to push him out of his chair before he could open his mouth. Tifa, guilt ridden, slid out of her seat to follow obediently with Red XIII at her side. As the exhausted crew weaved through the smoke and bodies crowding the tavern, a pair of green eyes was watching two of her comrades, analyzing the tension that had risen suddenly between them.

It seemed to the Cetra that ShinRA and Sephiroth and the fate of the planet weren’t the only issues they were facing.
“Barret! Red! Look out!”

The shrill trumpeting of the enormous elphadunk sounded as it charged. Hunks of dirt and grass flew into the air as its feet thundered across the earth, closing in on the gunman and Red XIII. Breath ragged from exertion, Tifa sprinted toward them to intercept the aggressor. They had been in this particular battle for nearly fifteen minutes, taking out a small herd of elphadunk that had attacked them with no further provocation than the scent of Red XIII on the wind. Dispatching half a dozen large, aggressive animals had proven difficult and each member of their crew was growing tired and sloppy. Unfortunately, the one remaining creature happened to be the largest and most troublesome of all.

With a grunt, the brawler leapt, hurtling toward the elphadunk in a flying side kick. The sound of bullets peppered the air, mixing strangely with an exclamation from Aerith as the heel of Tifa’s boot collided with the side of the animal’s head. Thankfully, it was knocked off balance, stumbling to the side and away from her comrades. She tried her best to keep her eyes on the shining metal of Barret’s gun arm and the blur of red fur before she hit the ground, gracelessly falling on her rear. Meters away, Aerith stood clutching her staff, awareness of her combative shortcomings making her hesitant to enter the fray. Cloud, glistening with sweat and smudged with dirt, desperately tried to help Red XIII free his paw from where it had become wedged in a split rock when he’d fled the charge.

Trembling with fatigue and adrenaline, Tifa moved to stand. Someone yelled her name before she felt the sandpaper skin of the elphadunk’s trunk strike the side of her face, sending her tumbling through grass, stone and dirt.

Cloud’s head whirled around so fast it made his neck hurt. He ran, mind and sword whirling, and struck the beast along the belly with a blind swing. His arm tingled with the impact. With a bellow, the animal turned to acknowledge the blonde as the heel of Tifa’s boot collided with the side of the animal’s head. Thankfully, it was knocked off balance, stumbling to the side and away from her comrades. She tried her best to keep her eyes on the shining metal of Barret’s gun arm and the blur of red fur before she hit the ground, gracelessly falling on her rear. Meters away, Aerith stood clutching her staff, awareness of her combative shortcomings making her hesitant to enter the fray. Cloud, glistening with sweat and smudged with dirt, desperately tried to help Red XIII free his paw from where it had become wedged in a split rock when he’d fled the charge.

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There was a kind of intimate fear Cloud felt from the word ‘death’ and the understanding that it could happen to him. He was a SOLDIER. He’d seen many deaths: of fellow militia men, of innocent civilians, of people whom he’d foolishly thought would always be around. In fact, he had brushed with death quite a few times himself, and had always wondered how his luck had somehow become good after the unlucky existence he seemed to have been born into. Was it about to run out here, of all places?

Tifa’s breath caught in her throat as she watched Cloud stumble to the ground, knee mangled and strength fleeting. A metallic taste was filling her mouth, and red and black tinted the edges of her vision. Shaking terribly, she rose to her feet with fists clenched and chest heaving as she spat out a mouthful of blood. Lacking judgement, she ran toward her husband, brain buzzing with fear and anger and frustration. She’d almost lost Cloud once before; she wasn’t about to let it happen again.
The beast moaned as it turned to face her with its back hunched, poised to attack. Jarred by her heavy footfalls, Tifa’s voice shook as she flew forward, prepared to meet the elphadunk’s next move. To her surprise, the animal crumpled to the ground before her, felled by a barrage of well-aimed bullets. She awkwardly continued to stumble forward to where Cloud crouched and kneeled in front of him.


Mind foggy, Tifa looked up at her friend. “I, uh…”

Slender fingers rested atop one of her fighting gloves, and she looked up to meet green eyes. Aerith’s face was fraught with concern, her lips pressed together in such a way that Tifa didn’t think was possible on her pretty face. She’d never seen the Cetra wear anything but benevolence and charm on her features. Seeing worry in her countenance made anxiety rise up in Tifa’s chest.

“You were hit in the face?” Aerith asked, eyes searching. “Cloud, let me see your leg.”

“No,” he answered sternly. “Take care of her first.”

“Please. I’m alright,” Tifa protested. “What about Red? He and Cloud are worse off than I am.”

“You’re droolin’ blood,” Barret frowned.

Voices of protest rose battled until Aerith interrupted. “Alright, enough! Let me take care of it, okay?”

Her chiding silenced everyone’s opinions. The flower girl seemed to be less than effective when it came to fighting, but brilliant at mending wounds and spirits. Red XIII, who endured his pain silently, was first. Once it was her turn, Tifa closed her eyes as the warm rush of the restore materia washed over her body and dulled the pain of her injuries. It was a familiar feeling. Jessie had owned such a materia and had had to use when she’d been injured on a ShinRA raid shortly after joining AVALANCHE. For some reason, she felt more than just physical relief as the materia did its work. Something else flowed in her blood as she relaxed into the plush grass beneath her, soft blades tickling her neck and ears.

Perhaps she relaxed a bit too much. Perhaps her boggled brain was hallucinating and drawing up long dead memories. Perhaps she was desperate for things that she hadn’t had in years and years. But in her placid state, Tifa almost felt her mother’s comforting arms wrapped around her. She could almost smell the dull scent of Mama’s perfume and her ears strained to hear her soft voice once again. True comfort and peace were something that had evaded Tifa since her mother had left her alone with Papa what seemed like a lifetime ago. It had been the event that started spinning her life out of control all those years ago. But now, it was as if she was once again a young girl upon Mama’s lap; cheek against her mother’s bosom, absorbing the simple pleasure of security. Had it really been so long since Tifa had known the touch of her mother’s palm against the crown of her head?

“Tifa?”

Wine colored eyes snapped open against the afternoon sunlight. Aerith’s concerned face hovered above her. Momentarily confused, Tifa quickly plummeted back toward reality.

“How does that feel? Any better?”
Moving to sit up, Tifa averted her eyes to fixate on her dirty knees. What was it about Aerith that made her thoughts turn in such a dangerous direction? “Yeah. Much better, thank you.”

She flicked her auburn waves over her shoulder with a satisfied smile. “Good. Just sit tight, okay? Cloud, you’re last.”

Tifa watched as she knelt beside him gracefully to examine Cloud’s wounds. Aerith had an elegant curve to her neck. Her voice was gentle as she spoke to Cloud, easing his body to relax and playfully chastising his resistant scowl. Aerith heals him and it’s the first time in many years that Tifa has seen his face so calm, though brief as it was. Her eyes were back on the Cetra, but Cloud’s were on his wife.

“We’ll set up camp here.”

He needed her and she obliged; more like a strict formality than anything.

Cloud usually hung back, focus trained acutely on the missions ahead. Tifa needed her space, it seemed, but he couldn’t help drawing near when he felt lost—insecure—though it was hard to admit to these feelings. Instead, he chose to blame tonight’s actions on his physical need for her after so long. He loved her, yet he had never been as frustrated with his wife as he was now. He’d discreetly pulled her away from the campfire and into the darkness to steal thirsty kisses and let his hands wander her curves as if he’d never felt them before. Sadness and desperation could change anyone, he knew. But Cloud wasn’t sure what he’d ever do if Tifa continued to act in this manner. Didn’t she want to put all this behind her as badly as he did? He’d held out his hand and she’d crossed over to him gingerly, like someone wading in the shallows of a stream, and her apprehension had blown at the hot coals of his temper.

But her skin felt like silk and his body reacted immediately. Cloud needed her. He needed to get lost in her and forget everything—seeking solace, even if just for a short time. The pads of Cloud’s fingers tingled as they smoothed over her cheek, her neck, shoulders and arms until they intertwined with her own. The twilight hid her countenance from his scrutiny, but he didn’t need to see her features to sense her reluctance and discomfort.

Frustrated, Cloud wracked his brain for the memory of what made her shudder and turn to putty in his hands. He yearned to feel her respond to his advances, sensing for anything that might betray that she needed him as much as he did her. Daring to place a deep, drawn out kiss at the nape of her neck, Cloud expected to have her breathing his name and clutching at wayward blonde spikes. But Tifa only trembled in response. Air impatiently flew out of his nostrils as she began to pull away, head dipping downward to hide her face. Gently, Cloud let go of her fingers. He drew back—but not too far—hoping for some sort of explanation. It was no surprise that words didn’t form on her tongue.

Everything about Tifa so different from the young woman he remembered, yet she constantly accused him of that very crime. It wasn’t fair and resentment over it had taken root inside him. Cloud knew that it was wrong, but he’d often choose to let his mind submit to the constant draw it felt toward Aerith. His fascination with her was more than frivolous lust of the eyes or spite of a wounded heart. It lay deep within him, coiled inside his very being and he didn’t know why. There was something at his core that constantly called her name: screaming at him to get closer to her, to love her, to hold her close. As tempting as it was to follow that voice that led him to Aerith’s open arms, to her easy companionship and jolly presence, Cloud knew better than to follow through. After so much bad had happened, it would be such a relief to get lost in the Cetra’s effortless smiles and friendly company than deal with the tatters of his broken marriage. But he’d made a
promise to Tifa, after all, and he never took those lightly. Still, he yearned for his wife to show similar light-heartedness and wondered what it would take to restore that disposition to her spirit. Cloud loved her, had always loved her. Things couldn’t stay this way.

For better or worse, they were tethered together.

“Tifa.”

Her name rolled off of his tongue, husky and unbidden. Swallowing, he tried to calm the testosterone surging through his blood and stilled his hands at his side. Swirling blue eyes searched for hers as the crickets chorused in the thicket.

“I’m sorry, Cloud,” Tifa whispered. She peeked up at him through her bangs, her way of facing him while hiding at the same time. She reached up to rub his arms and summoned the courage to plant a chaste peck on his cheek. “I’m just…I’m not ready.”

She pulled him into a hug, trying to diffuse the tension, and it took all his willpower to keep his body from arching into hers. There was a suspicion that he kept hidden away in his heart purposely, because it was more difficult to face than any other reason he could fathom for Tifa’s behavior.

Was she acting like this because he disappointed her?

Lately, when he thought of his relationship with Tifa, Cloud seemed to float endlessly between guilt and anger. Had he really abandoned her like she claimed? Tifa was here, holding him, with her familiar face and scent and warmth that stirred up the painful clench of nostalgia in his heart. So why didn’t he feel comfort in her arms? That unrelenting static in his brain was hissing again—churning forth scattered bits of memory that reminded Cloud how he’d dreamt of feeling safe in her embrace for so long. Now that he was here, all he felt was disappointment. Whether it was with her or with himself, he wasn’t sure. His wife used to listen to his problems with open ears and an open heart, accepting him as he was without question. Now it felt as if she had closed her heart to him. Cloud used this as an excuse to keep himself partially closed off from her as well. But he knew sensed there was something deeper—and darker—that had him putting up his walls.

Almost mechanically, he responded to her embrace, wrapping his arms around her. His fingers traced the goosebumps on her shoulders, pale skin lit by the first light of the moon. Cloud noticed people’s ticks and habits; he had always been perceptive but his mako enhanced senses only heightened this. The way Tifa subtly shifted her weight from foot to foot and the shallowness of her breathes screamed her uncertainty. What could he do to reassure her? Wasn’t that his job? Gently, Cloud reached up to place one palm on her cheek, thumb ghosting over the bruise from the battle earlier that day. The mako in his system healed him quickly, so there was no longer any evidence of his injuries. Blonde eyebrows knitted together as his gaze wandered over the scabs on her left shoulder and arm that were left behind by the restore materia. The feel of her skin was like a drug, giving him a high he hadn’t had since he had first known her body as newlyweds. Sensual memories threatened to carry him away, but Cloud did his best to stifle his libido.

“It’s alright.” He closed his eyes and that world slipped away from him, that world where he could find beauty and hope and comfort in the woman whom he’d pledged himself to. “Come on, let’s go back. You’ve got goose bumps. Why didn’t you tell me you were cold?”

Tifa pulled back, only enough to look into his face before shyly lowering her gaze.

“Because they aren’t from the cold.”
The crunching of Tifa’s boots on the pebble beach drifted up through the air. She could sense the elation in the wind that blew against her cheek and she took a deep breath. There were cliffs overlooking the sea, the salt wind sweeping them year round and painting them with layers of brine. The hunt for Sephiroth had them trekking toward Junon Harbor, and it was only logical to follow the coastline. The others were occupied by the hot persuit of the ‘man with the black cape’ (that always seemed just mere steps ahead of them) and the addition of a teenage girl to their strange crew. The girl named Yuffie claimed to be a ‘ninja’, boasting of her skill in battle, but no one seemed to believe her. Her hair, black as Tifa’s, was cut short and made her seem even younger than her sixteen years. Cloud had reluctantly allowed her to join their party, and the rest seemed hung up on her age or possible ulterior motives, but for some reason all Tifa could focus upon was the fact that she was from Wutai.

Her mother was Wutaian, born and bred. She’d told Tifa countless stories of her childhood, explaining that before she’d married Papa, she lived all her life at the coast. Wine colored eyes drifted up to the overcast sky, and Tifa wondered how in the world Mama had ever been able to bear leaving the beauty of the sea and the adventure of endless shoreline for the isolation of a remote mountain village? How did she ever end up falling in love with her father, who was gruff and mean spirited? But Tifa had to remind herself that in those days before Mama’s death, her father had been far kinder. Brian Lockhart was an entirely different person before he had been warped by alcohol and grief, leaving Tifa to navigate his moods and to grow up more quickly than any little girl ever should.

Would the smell of the sea air have made Mama feel like she was truly home? As a child who had rarely set foot outside her mountain village, it was something that Tifa could not understand. She had never known a wind that carried the scent of the sea.

Up ahead, the team seemed to have decided that it was time to set up camp. Aerith and Nanaki had plopped themselves on a salt-bleached log wedged between two boulders meters above the high tide line. Yuffie bounced around nearby, chattering on about something or other as Cloud and Barret worked to set up the tent. The water in the small inlet was calm, only leaving small rippling waves that reminded Tifa of those of the small lake in the woods near her childhood home. Hoping she’d be left alone for a while, Tifa meandered around by the water’s edge, wetting the toes of her boots. She peered into the shallow water, only to see the outline of her body against the grey sky above.

Tifa had never been vain, but these days she didn't like to look at her reflection.

Everyone had always said she looked just like her mother. As a child, she’d never thought much about the compliment and always assumed people thought so because her hair was black and her eyes were red. But now, she knew, how mistaken they’d all been. In truth, Mama was more beautiful than Tifa could ever hope to be. Her mother had delicate wrists and smooth palms, while Tifa had calloused fingers and split knuckles from fighting for her life. Mama was confident in her own, quiet way, while Tifa was here, hiding out in the open from the only handful of people on this earth who knew her well enough to call her a friend. A small voice in her cried out that it wasn’t her fault: life had tossed her about like the pebbles in the surf beneath her feet, and she’d been helpless to fight against the tide. But it didn’t matter much who or what was at fault, did it?

Would her Aria have been stronger than her cowardly mother if she’d been able to experience life outside the womb? She liked to think so.

Tifa turned from the water to climb atop a nearby rock and sit, letting the breeze tangle her hair
about her neck. The ghosts were back again, circling around her like vultures around a kill, and she
silently chastised herself for this weakness. Her husband made fighting these haunting thoughts
harder, and as much as she hated to admit it, she felt more relaxed when she was away from him.
The thought made her feel guilty, but it was the truth. When he spoke, Tifa would find herself
hanging onto every frivolous, bold word that tumbled from his mouth, hoping his speech would
somehow become reminiscent of her Cloud. She was searching for something that didn’t exist
anymore and she needed to stop. Something in her heart nudged her to share these feelings with her
spouse, but could she hope to gain by telling him?

A cold raindrop landed on the back of her hand and she blinked down at it. Scattered droplets
spread slowly over the water’s surface. Every tiny rain drop left ripples that expanded, covering
such a large space for their small size. The spreading rings would meet and intermingle as they
bobbed up and down on the small waves. So often in her life, Tifa had felt insignificant—just a
tiny drop on the surface. Her life had stretched forward and impacted so many others in a negative
way: her father's, Clouds, her mother, her daughter...

Even Biggs, Jessie and Wedge’s precious lives had ended prematurely—tragically—after they’d
come into her life. She shuttered to think of anything happening to Barret or Marlene after her bad
luck rubbed off on them as well. Was it only a matter of time?

Tifa groaned aloud and threw back her head as a humid breeze washed over her. Did she deserve to
be free beneath this sky, listening to the lazy water wash over the gravel? Her parents, infant, and
friends had died and here she was, free to admire life’s subtle beauties. Why her? She didn’t
deserve these small treasures. A shock of yellow amongst the greyscape caught her attention,
visible from the corner of her vision. Thoughts of what had almost happened the night before
flooded her mind and she blushed automatically before fear drew itself into a tight ball in her
stomach. For a moment Tifa found herself wondering whether or not it would've been better if she
had somehow missed him at the train station that day. She would've lived the rest of her life with
the fond memories of him preserved and untainted by his current strange self. Quickly, she shook
her head free of such an awful thought, throwing a rock into the water. She loved him, and that was
one of the only things she could be sure of in the present.

But did he still know that?

She’d never known much about birth control, not that there were many options in her backwater
hometown. Mama’s death and Papa’s subsequent detachment left her without many options to
receive any sexual education or information about her growing body. In the end, she’d turned to
Cloud’s mother when faced with the shock and fear surrounding her first menstruation. When she
had married Cloud at fifteen and left for Midgar, she was aware of how a baby came to be in its
mother's womb. Luckily, Tifa had been largely isolated from the corruption of the slums in the
sheltered world of their little apartment. It wasn't until Cloud had disappeared and she was forced to
work that Tifa was exposed to a sexual culture that was so radically different from her strict,
traditional home. Although she had known that sex leads to babies, her pregnancy with her
daughter had been a surprise. Tifa wasn't sure if she could handle that kind of surprise at this time.
So when Cloud had peppered her neck with thirsty kisses and let his hands rub up and down her
sides, she’d all but frozen in fear. The painful memories of her pregnancy and the stillbirth that
followed had immobilized her limbs and made her body rigid against his. She couldn’t bear it
again! Still, Tifa couldn’t help but feel like she had let him down.

The wind was becoming more wild against the stone and the incoming storm shrouded the cliff
face in a deeper shade of grey. Tiny waves rose across the water as white flocks of seabirds
wheeled overhead like flecks of paint against the sky's canvas. Briefly, Tifa wondered if they ever
got lonely, flying so high above the ground. The song of the waves as they swept up and down the
shore endured in its endless lullaby. Covering her face with her hands, Tifa intertwined her fingers and touched them to her forehead. She wanted to pray, or maybe ask for forgiveness, but wasn’t sure how to start.

“I don’t know what else to do,” she whispered, the breeze taking her voice to the heavens. Her voice was hoarse. Perhaps she had spent too much time in silence in the wind.

Her eyes snapped open when she thought she heard someone call her name. It was no trick of the wind or the crying of sea birds—it was Aerith’s voice. Tifa turned her head to see her approaching, merry pink bow whipping about in the restless air. She summoned a small smile to greet the Cetra.

“Tifa! The tent is set up, “ Aerith said, stopping to admire the water beside her. “Want to get out of the rain?”

Aerith was slender and graceful, like a shadow cast on the night of a full moon. Without meaning to, Tifa had developed the habit of comparing herself to the brunette since they’d first met—constantly feeling inferior to the older girl. Her demeanor was calm as a windless sea while Tifa constantly felt like a tornado of insecurity and hopelessness. She didn’t want to be cooped up in the tent with the others right now. For some reason, the presence of her companions made her feel more uneasy than ever. There was so much happening and Tifa liked to try and pretend that she was strong. Lifting up the others made her feel like she had a positive purpose in the current mess of their lives, but it wasn’t what she really wanted. She wanted to feel like she belonged. She wanted security and peace. She wanted to be able to rest in the knowledge that she wouldn’t have to worry about every little thing for the rest of her life.

“I want to go home,” she blurted out, almost covering her mouth in embarrassment when she realized she’d said it out loud.

The words had just popped into her head. She didn’t know exactly what home it was that she wanted to go to—certainly not the one she’d just left. Midgar wasn’t home. Seventh Heaven had almost felt like home, but it wasn’t there anymore. Where did she want to go? It was more a time than a place that was ‘home’, it seemed. She felt lost. Aerith paused briefly before leaning her hip against the rock that Tifa sat upon. A small silence stretched out between them. Tifa chastised herself silently for always being so awkward around someone as pretty and composed as the Cetra.

“Me too,” she replied, crossing her arms to hold her red jacket close against her chest as the wind threatened to tug it loose. “I mean, I love it out here. Seeing the sun and the sky, the grass and the sea has been so magical. But I miss Mom, my house, the comfort of my routine…”

“Yeah,” Tifa agreed, trying not to sound as numb as she felt. It must be nice to have a mother worrying about you. To chase away bitter thoughts, she let out a small laugh. “I’m sorry you got caught up in all of this. What a misfortune to have gotten tangled up in our mess!”

“Are you kidding? This was the most excitement I’ve had in years! I should be thanking you guys.” Green eyes suddenly grew stern as Aerith sighed with disappointment. “You still have a nasty bruise on your cheek! Let’s try again with the restore materia.”

“Oh—no reason to fuss, please. I’ll be fine.”

“Nonsense!” Aerith said, fishing the green orb out of her jacket pocket with a mischievous smile. “Cloud forgot that I never gave it back to him. He gets so protective over the materia but he’s getting a bit careless these days.”

Tifa held still as Aerith worked her magic, letting the healing tingle of the materia’s glow wash
over her skin. When the warmth faded away, she opened her eyes once again.

“You got pretty roughed up yesterday. I’m sorry I’m not much help in battle,” Aerith apologized, replacing the materia in its hiding place and sweeping her long locks over her shoulder. “I can’t help but feel partially responsible.”

Tifa shook her head, bangs starting to stick together from collecting raindrops. “Without you, we’d all be in serious trouble. You’re a fantastic healer.”

“I have no idea what I’m doing,” she admitted. “All of this is new to me. But when I watch you and Cloud work together in battle, it’s obvious that you’re husband and wife.”

Tifa chaffed her hands together, both in an attempt to warm them and to still the rising nervousness inside of her. It always felt like Aerith was looking right through her. Was she fishing for information? She knew something was terribly wrong between them, didn’t she?

“He was in ShinRA’s military—hence the uniform. Isn’t he something?”

She gave a small nod, smoothing her pink dress over her thighs. “So what’s your secret? How did you learn how to fight like that?”

“I’ve been training since my childhood.” Tifa said, memories of a much smaller Cloud being bullied by their peers surfacing in her head. “Fighting was a strange hobby for a girl to pick up and my dad wasn’t happy about it. It sounds cliché, but I really wanted to learn to protect the people I love. Besides, there was a lot of hostile wildlife where Cloud and I grew up.”

“So you grew up together? You guys are so young to be married! It’s not every day I meet a couple our age.”

“Oh, we got married at fifteen,” Tifa chuckled. “We grew up in the middle of nowhere. It’s typical to marry at that age in Nibelheim and the surrounding areas. I had no idea it’s almost unheard of out here in the real world.”

“The real world…” Aerith looked up at the sky. “It sounds silly, but Midgar is all I’ve known for so long that I forgot that there was a ‘real world’ out here.”

“Midgar is so big that it’s its own little world.” Tifa drew her knees to her chest, wrapping her arms around them. “I was so scared to even venture outside our apartment when I first moved there with Cloud.”

“Why? If you could fight like that, you had nothing to be afraid of!”

“I guess I was just so far out of my element that everything terrified me. Besides, at that point I’d never been in a real fight with another person. Sparring with my mentor or beating up monsters never seemed to completely prepare me for that.”

“But you always had Cloud to protect you, right?”

Tifa flinched inwardly. “Yeah.”

Green eyes were upon her again, silently analyzing. Tifa could sense that she knew more than she let on. Was she one of those people with the talent of perception or was this part of her abilities as a Cetra? She wasn’t sure, but she hated feeling exposed and vulnerable. Almost as much as she hated feeling lost. This feeling of aimlessness was almost unbearable; was it that obvious for others to see? She felt lost without her home, lost without her connection to Cloud and lost within the
uncertainty which shrouded every aspect of her life.

When Tifa realized that several minutes of silence had passed between them, she looked up toward her companion’s face. Something in Aerith’s countenance betrayed a hint of longing as she stared out at where the water met the sky. Tifa felt that Aerith was somehow blocked, closed off, like a thick cloud obscuring the stars in the night sky. Perhaps she wasn’t the only one who harbored painful thoughts.

“Tifa?” Aerith said, eyes never leaving the horizon. “Is Marlene your daughter?”

“You’re not the first to think that.” Tifa smiled wistfully as she thought of the little girl who’d saved her life by giving her hope and an outlet for her need to mother. “I wish she was, but she’s Barret’s adopted daughter.”

“The way she talked about you, you’d think you were a superhero! And after watching you fight, I’d have to agree.” Turning back to face her companion, Aerith smiled brilliantly. “You’d make a great mom. Do you and Cloud have any children?”

Somehow, she knew exactly what to say and ask to make her heart sting and her throat tighten. Panic flooded her chest and Tifa held her breath, frantically trying to piece together a response. Aria was a subject that she rarely brought up with anyone. The little girl was a memory. She was dead, it was her fault and the universe never seemed to want to let her forget it. Not that she ever wanted to forget her baby—Tifa would frequently imagine the little girl’s features and soft skin as she would lie awake in the middle of the night. Technically, she and Cloud had no living children, but saying she wasn’t a mother would make her feel like she was betraying Aria. But she couldn’t talk about it right now. She just couldn’t.

“Maybe one day,” Tifa said, eyes lowering. She caught herself withdrawing and tried to appear lighthearted. “I bet every baby we have would inherit Cloud’s crazy hair!”

Aerith smiled the sort of smile that Tifa imagined she reserved for those she pitied. While it was a kind expression, it made Tifa feel exposed and transparent, like the other girl knew everything about her without needing to ask. Had Cloud said something? Did Aerith know she wasn’t being completely honest with her? Guilt pooled in her gut, heavy like a stone. The rain was beginning to fall in fat drops, hissing as they pounded the water’s surface.

“Surely not all of them,” the Cetra replied with mirth, an amused glint in her eye.

Tifa tilted her head and Aerith giggled, offering her hand to help her off the rock and beckoning her back to camp. Head buzzing, heart thumping, Tifa followed the pink ribbon bouncing ahead as the rain stung her eyes.
Confidences

His heart was still pounding from the fight, blood coursing through his body at a frenzied pace.

Cloud worked to quiet his breathing, which was elevated due to both physical exertion and wounded pride. They’d just seen Sephiroth—the glorious, silver haired SOLDIER legend. All this time, they’d been chasing snippets of rumors, pursuing this man on little more than a wing and a prayer. But Sephiroth was declared dead years ago, right? Had there been a mistake? Fear spread in his heart.

The air was thick with the smell of blood, both from the ship’s crew members that Sephiroth had murdered, and from that—thing—they’d just defeated. A monster? An alien? He was relieved when it wasn’t Sephiroth they’d fought, though he could never admit it out loud. Just how strong was Sephiroth? Did they have a chance against a killing machine like that? There were hissing voices in his head, crawling and shivering through his brain. They whispered and whispered: Jenova. The creature had disappeared after it had lost its battle with one well aimed slice of Yuffie’s shuriken, leaving behind a less than humanlike appendage on the floor of the ship.

“The arm of Jenova…” Cloud mused, staring blankly at the limb.

“Ew, ew, eww!!” Yuffie shouted, pretending to dry heave before hiding behind Barret’s broad frame. “That’s the most disgusting thing I’ve ever seen!”

Barret side stepped, silently refusing to be the teen’s hiding place. “So her body is the ShinRA buildin’, and her arm is here. Where’s her damn head?”

Running a hand through blonde spikes, Cloud frowned. He supposed he should be trying to figure out what all this meant, but all he could think about was the brief, broken conversation he’d had with Sephiroth. He’d introduced himself and Sephiroth had the gall to say that he had no idea who Cloud was! They’d worked together, been on missions together…it wasn’t like there were that many first class SOLDIERs, right? He was every bit as much of a hero as Sephiroth had been. How could he have forgotten about him? Perhaps he was lying; he had to be. After their altercation in the reactor on Mt. Nibel, he couldn’t blame Sephiroth for wanting to aggravate him.

Tifa curiously nudged the arm with the side of her boot, earning another squeal from Yuffie. Red XIII closed his eyes at the shrill sound.

“Sephiroth is alive, after all. We’ve seen him with our own eyes,” Cloud said, mako simmering in his eyes. “He was talking about the promised land. Does it really exist?”

Aerith was leaning her back against the wall with her arms crossed; her gaze distant as she stared at the floor. Tifa watched her, wondering if the Cetra really had the power to guide them to the ‘promised land’ as ShinRA believed. They wanted to exploit her for the endless mako that supposedly existed in this special place that only someone as special as Aerith could find. Could this girl really speak with the planet, like everyone thought she could? Standing there, watching the brunette stewing in thought, Tifa suddenly realized how little she knew about their companion. Not for lack of asking, but more from the girl’s incredible ability to respond to a question without really answering it. Tifa thought she’d been skilled in this way, for she hated to open up to people, but now she knew she had quite a lot to learn.

“If it does, do you think that’s where he’s headed?” Red XIII asked, rising from his place near the doorway.
Cloud shrugged, suddenly annoyed by the entire situation. He’d wanted to run away from all this. Maybe he should’ve been more firm with Tifa about leaving Midgar when they reunited. If he hadn’t been so soft, neither of them would’ve been caught up in this nightmare with ShinRA. But now that Sephiroth was back and he’d seen him first hand, Cloud had to be involved. He hadn’t really been sure why all of this had been his problem until now. It wasn’t his business what ShinRA was doing to the planet or what AVALANCHE stood for. But Sephiroth…

Cloud had to finish what he started. This maniac was still on the loose after burning his home to the ground and he’d die before he allowed Sephiroth to run free. The sudden crackle of the loudspeaker startled their small group, followed by a man’s voice telling the ship’s crew to prepare for docking. Their rag-tag team scrambled to their hiding places to wait for the perfect time to sneak off of the boat.

… … …

She’d wanted so badly to go swimming. The shock of the cold water would clear her head and numb her battle worn body, and the gentle exercise would be good for her tired muscles.

Shortly after they’d slinked off of the ship and onto the dock in Costa Del Sol, the thought had lodged itself in her brain. Cloud had said they could take a break, after all, and Aerith had begun to chatter excitedly after Tifa’s suggestion of taking to the waves. The brunette had taken Tifa’s arm and pulled her away from the others, claiming that they needed to do some shopping. She followed Aerith’s lead through sand-colored buildings with their red roofs and stone archways, wondering how she seemed to know where she was going. It was a small, sea-side village. The tourist town was incredibly charming in the glorious daylight, with brightly colored tropical plants and tiny little souvenir shops lining the stone streets. Everything seemed so lively. There were pink flowers coiled around each dark lamp post, lining the streets in their brilliant beauty.

People were coming and going everywhere, with tanned skin and bikini-clad bodies floating through the streets, making Tifa wonder what the conservative residents of her childhood home would have thought of so much exposed skin? Funny, she’d thought the same exact thing when she’d first came to Midgar. A strange sadness burned in her chest when she remembered being a wide eyed fifteen-year-old, holding onto Cloud’s hand for dear life as he lead her through the crowded Midgar train stations. Tifa could scarcely remember the girl she used to be before Cloud disappeared, before she was completely alone in the terrifying world of the slums, before her little girl died and took her heart with her.

But with a bar on every corner and a few questionable places for ‘evening entertainment’, it was easy to see that it could be an entirely different place once night fell. Aerith skipped forward, leading her through dozens of souvenir shops that all seemed to sell the same assortment of sunglasses, beach towels, sunscreen and trinkets. Tifa’s sharp eyes caught a glimpse of Red XIII peripherally, hiding from the harsh sunlight under the porch of one such shop.

“Let’s check out that little boutique!” Aerith piped. “I bet it’s just what we’re looking for.”

Tifa followed, eyeing the mannequins in the window clad in beach-worthy attire.

It only took her a few moments of browsing among the swimwear for Tifa to realize that she’d never worn a proper bathing suit in her life. Because of its remoteness and isolation deep in the mountains, Nibelheim’s culture had not been very progressive. Ironically, most of its buildings still lacked electrical power, despite the village’s ironic proximity to the mako reactor on Mt. Nibel. She supposed that most people would label her childhood home as ‘old timey’, for outside influence was scarce. The appropriate garment for women to swim in was a modest bathing dress: a sleeveless garment that draped to her knees. Looking through the tiny bikinis made her
uncomfortable, for most had even less fabric than her undergarments!

Curious, she glanced at Aerith, who had a small armful of bathing suits to try on of varying colors—pink and yellow and white. The Cetra looked happy as a clam, searching through each rack, while Tifa felt out of place. She could do her bar’s inventory and find the best deals on liquor and supplies with practiced ease, but had never been much of a shopper when it came to clothing.

“Oh, Tifa!” she cried, only her pink bow visible over the rows of clothing. “This would look breathtaking on you!”

She held up a red bikini up above her head and Tifa inwardly cringed. It was so tiny! The thin straps on the top barely seemed adequate to support her ample chest and she was certain the bottom piece wasn’t meant to completely cover her rear.

“Thanks, I’ll have to try it on.”

Without thinking too much, she grabbed a few suits off their displays and let Aerith hand her the bikini before tucking herself into the tiny fitting room. Taking a deep breath, she stared at the red bikini for a moment before hurriedly undressing to try it on before she could decide against it. The bottom hugged her hips perfectly, but the top was too small and its ill fit only embarrassed her. While Tifa was accustomed to showing a bit of midriff, she’d never exposed her entire abdomen in public! Besides, the flashy bathing suit seemed to be something that would attract roaming eyes, and she had no interest in any sort of attention from the opposite sex. If she was honest, she didn’t even want that sort of physical from her own husband at the moment! Just above the waistband of the bikini sat the single, tiny stretch mark that pregnancy had left behind and her gaze was instantly drawn to it. Though only a very careful eye could ever see the small discoloration, to Tifa the scar was all she could focus on. For this reason, she was glad that there hadn’t been any full length mirrors in the living space of Seventh Heaven. She wished that it could serve as a reminder of the angel that waited for her in heaven, but instead it only served to remind her of her most spectacular failure.

Staring at her reflection in the ill-fitting bikini made her remember being in a similar situation many years ago, when her girlish body was first starting to show signs of womanly transformation. Tifa had agonized over the way she looked in front of the mirror, worrying about the way her budding chest and the new softness of her hips would look awkward and strange. Most of all, she remembered fretting over how Cloud would perceive the changes. He’d always been her best friend; would he notice her morphing appearance? Would it disgust him?

Thinking back on her childish perspective with her adult mind, she was certain that Cloud had noticed back then, but now had the understanding to know what a trivial thing her ‘ordeal’ had been. The pair had enjoyed their summer days all the same; her insecurities briefly forgotten once they’d begun to swim in their favorite pond. Cloud’s eyes had been so honest and clear, as he’d led her into the water—vulnerable and open. Would he ever be that way again? Would she? In those days, Tifa had thought her problems were enormous and insurmountable. How trivial were the issues of yesterday when compared to all that she faced today? Sephiroth, ShinRA, Gaia, Cloud…

How ironic. Almost a decade had passed since she’d first gazed at her own insecurity in the mirror. After all that had happened since then, Tifa thought that she’d matured enough to escape her anxiety about such things. Yet here she was—a myriad of experiences between her girlhood and her present self—still agonizing over something as insignificant as her appearance. She hadn’t grown at all.

Frowning, Tifa tugged off the garment with a huff.
“So? How does it look?” Aerith questioned outside the curtain, resisting the urge to peek.

“I don’t think it’s for me,” Tifa sighed. She immediately moved Aerith into the spotlight of their conversation to avoid her inevitable prying. “Did you try that white one on? You’ll turn heads up and down the beach.”

“Think so? I’ll try it on.” She stepped into the fitting room as Tifa stepped out, excitement twinkling in her eyes. She called out from behind the curtain a moment after she shut it. “Tifa?”

“Hm?”

“Is ocean water really salty? I thought I heard that once.”

Memories of her own amazement over the same detail made a smile tug at her lips. Her mother’s stories of her hometown—a small fishing village in Wutai—had more than immersed a young Tifa in a rudimentary knowledge of the sea. When she finally had seen the ocean for herself as she travelled to Midgar with Cloud, Mama’s words and scattered bits of her own imagination had prepared her for the magnificent sight of endless water stretching toward the horizon. Her childish romp with Cloud through the surf had been so freeing and exciting. Surely Aerith deserved the same sort of glee after being deprived of such pleasures in the Midgar slums. Perhaps watching her discover the pleasure of the waves would awaken the same spirit in herself. Maybe somehow, she could drag Cloud into the water as well—just like old times. Did he remember how precious that experience had been to them? Did he recall how the boundless, wild ocean represented their vindication from their oppressive childhood in Nibelheim? Did he remember their dreams of owning a little house by the sea? Forcing her attention back to the present, she used her merriest voice.

“Well let’s hurry and choose a suit so you can see for yourself!”

… … …

The sun was wicked as it beat down upon him, his black clothes and leather boots drinking in the intense heat. The buster sword caught the rays of light and blinked like a beacon in the midday sun. Out on the beach, there was nothing to shield his fair skin. Colorful umbrellas dotted the sand, but he kept his distance from any people enjoying their vacations.

Cloud had no idea why anyone considered him the leader of their strange crew; he didn’t feel more qualified than anyone else to lead this wild goose chase. Often, he felt lost and wasn’t really comfortable to be responsible for the well-being of their growing crew. Perhaps the others felt like he had some well-constructed plan that had led them here, but honestly their ability to track Sephiroth had mostly been good fortune and lucky coincidences. Even now, when they were supposed to be taking a break, Cloud didn’t know what to do with himself.

Costa Del Sol was a pleasant place; it was the complete opposite of Midgar in every way. He’d become so accustomed to living in that dirty, sad place that it was hard to imagine a life under constant sunlight. People meandered along, taking their time as they made their way from place to place, as opposed to the constant rushing around in the slums. There were smiles everywhere he looked. Sand lined the brick of the streets where kids played ball together. The warm breeze made the palm trees sway lazily, bringing with it the scent of coconut, sun screen and fried food from the vendor’s carts and restaurants. Normal people were doing normal things. Even Barret and Red XIII were relaxing, taking refuge from the heat in separate places. Why wasn’t he able to let himself relax, too?

At first, he’d followed Tifa around like a spectre as Aerith led her around the town. If he was being
honest with himself, he wanted to be around Aerith, too. She made him feel light and free while his wife made him feel heavy and uncomfortable. Something inside him screamed that he was a coward and that this wasn't right, but facing the brokenness of his marriage seemed impossible and frightening. Cloud knew his eyes were always following her long brown plaits and pink skirt. Like a magnet, his gaze always found its way back, unintentionally it seemed. His head was swimming with fractured memories—splinters of hopes and scattered pieces of past events and dreams for a future. But he wasn’t sure if it was his past, or if those visions that appeared in his head really were what he strove for. Being tossed aside for ‘girl time’ bruised his ego and stirred up some hurt feelings, but he was careful not to let them see. Cloud suspected that Tifa was avoiding being alone with him, but maybe Aerith just makes her feel as good as she made him feel.

He’d searched the shops for materia (how irritating to have Yuffie of all people sell it to him) and stocked up on curatives, trying to be useful before eventually wandering down to the seaside. Away from tourists, he plopped himself down on the sand to stare out at the sea. But when he sat alone with the waves, it was only sadness that weighed him down into the sand. He was lost, yet unsure why, struggling to understand the warring voices in his head. Why was he so uncomfortable in his own skin? It was like being followed by someone else’s shadow. Desperate for help, he wanted to reach out, but was unsure of how to ask or whom to ask for it. The wind caressed his sweaty brow like a loving hand, but it did not comfort him.

“Cloud!”

Tifa’s voice rang out across the dry air, almost swallowed by the crash of the surf. He lifted his head in her direction to see her and Aerith hustling over to him: his wife in a navy colored one-piece and the Cetra in a modest white bikini. The way their damp hair stuck to their necks and backs made it obvious that Tifa had gotten her wish to swim and Aerith followed her into the water. Swimming…did he like to swim? When was the last time he’d enjoyed such a recreation? Why couldn’t he remember? It wasn’t until the girls had gotten a bit closer that he realized the seriousness on their faces, prompting him to stand in mild alarm. He made his way toward them to close the distance quickly.

Aerith paused to catch her breath as Tifa locked her gaze with his.

“We just saw Hojo!” she said, eyes bright with this new chance to find their next lead. “He’s on a lounge chair over that way! Should we question him?”

Hojo. The name made his blood curdle and his temper threaten to boil over. It was easy to react with anger when it so easily hid the fearful feelings that man stirred up in his heart, sweeping them under a rug of controlled ire. Cloud didn’t know why those feelings were there, but it was easier to just avoid thinking about it than to try and figure it out. There were too many things wrong with him; too many things that he no longer understood about himself. Searching for the truth was something he feared to do alone. What if he discovered something terrible? Sometimes he’d try to follow the timeline of his life’s events in his head, but there were large lapses of time without recollection and it made him afraid. Focusing on the task at hand always seemed to distract him.

It was as if his vision was partially veiled, obscuring important truths from his understanding. If this darkness ever lifted, would these things weigh impossibly heavy upon him? Cloud decided to act before he could continue along the track of this twisted train of thought.

“Come on, let’s corner him before he can get away.”

Cloud knew that there was no way the girls could’ve mistaken another man for Hojo, but it was hard for him to believe that someone like that could actually be doing something like taking a vacation? But there he was, lounging in a beach chair as if he hadn’t just previously toyed with the
lives of Aerith, Red XIII, and countless others with his twisted experiments. The scientist seemed so out of place there, like a raven among colorful peafowl as he sat among a small group of beautiful young women who showered him with attention. Cloud marched over with words hot on his tongue, but slowed to a stop at the bizarre sight, lips glued shut with bewilderment. One of the women shot him an irritated look.

“What do you want?”

Her insulting tone shook him out of his stupor and his expression darkened further. “Move aside. I need to speak with Hojo.”

“Professor!” she whined. “This scary man wants to talk to you.”

“What is it? I’m busy,” Hojo moaned.

“Hojo! Get up,” Cloud growled. The scientist barely moved his head to acknowledge the blonde, but slowly sat upright when he caught sight of the girls behind him. He was still wearing his lab coat, even in the oppressive heat and direct sunlight.

“Oh, it’s you.” His glasses glinted in the sunlight as he slowly looked Cloud up and down. Then, a wicked grin spread across Hojo’s face. “Hello, Cloud. It’s been a long time, hasn’t it?”

Being under the older man’s analytical gaze unnerved the ex-SOLDIER, sending a panicked shiver down his spine. He clenched his fists to keep his nerve. What did he mean by that? They’d just seen him two weeks ago when they’d taken Red XIII and Aerith from his custody? They hadn’t crossed paths before then, Cloud was sure of it. Weren’t they enemies? Why wasn’t this man afraid of them now that he’d been cornered? Taken aback his blasé attitude, Cloud swallowed and spoke, false bravado bristling.

“Yes, it’s me. Tell me what you know about Sephiroth!”

“Why? Are you looking for him?” Hojo eagerly asked, a maniacal glint in his eye. “Maybe my theory is correct, after all.”

Cloud could only stare, heart quivering with trepidation and dread. Why did the professor have this sort of effect on him? At least they had his attention now. Suppressing the urge to reach for the handle of the buster sword, mako eyes watched with an unwavering stare as the man continued.

“Have you ever felt like something is calling you? Or that you had to visit some place?”

Tifa carefully watched Cloud’s countenance as Hojo spoke, recognizing his subtle cues of fear. His lips were drawn taut as a bow string and his brows were fiercely furrowed, mako green swirling within his sapphire gaze. Even the tips of his fingers twitched with anxiety, ready to act if he willed them to. The professor moved to stand beside his beach chair and one of the young women tending to him handed him his drink.

The blonde straightened his back, stance aggressive, as he answered. “I’ll go anywhere Sephiroth is to confront him and put an end to all this.”

“I see. This should be interesting.”

With a snarl, Cloud reached over his shoulder for the handle of his weapon. Tifa wasn’t sure if it was Hojo’s nonchalant attitude, his taunting tone or the curl of his lip that set Cloud off, but the whole situation made her uncomfortable. Her husband had always exhibited an incredible amount of patience and control as far back as she could recall. She understood that the current
circumstances put him on edge, but did it really warrant this sort of aggression?

“Don’t!” Aerith intervened. She gently touched her fingers to where Cloud’s rested upon the sword’s grip. Puzzled, he stopped, looking her in the face. “If you kill him, we won’t find out anything! There’s so much we need to ask—”

“Say, aren’t you the Ancient?” the professor interrupted.

He attempted to step closer to Aerith, trying to get a better look at her, but Cloud stepped into the space between them. But she had her own idea of how she wanted this exchange to happen, and boldly stepped around him with a frown on her face. Tifa wished she had the same ability to be brazen and brave, standing up for herself and the things that were important to her.

“My name is Aerith! The least you can do is remember my name.” The young woman looked almost sad for a moment, but she quickly replaced that expression with one of determination. “I want you to tell me something, Professor Hojo. I know I’m an Ancient. My mother told me.”

Hojo’s eyes brightened for a brief moment before he looked squarely at the brunette, who held her head up proudly. It was a tense exchange to watch, and it made Tifa almost sorry that she’d spotted Hojo in the first place. All this time, she had wished that she had something special about her. Aerith was the last of a race, the sole survivor of a beautiful lifestyle of harmony and connection with the planet. Every detail of her existence—her physical beauty, her playful personality, her emotional depth—shone like a candle in the night. Since they’d met, Tifa wished again and again that there was something about herself that stood out, even a little bit. If she had such a feature, would she have the confidence to confront the things that held her back from fixing herself and her marriage?

But hearing how Aerith responded to being called an Ancient made her wonder if all she wanted was to be ‘normal’? Could she be spending her nights dreaming of a life where she wasn’t hunted down by ShinRA for something she couldn’t control? Was she haunted by the weight of her ancestors’ legacy? As hard as Tifa wished to be special in some way, did Aerith crave just as much to be seen as an ordinary person?

“You mean Ifalna? How is she?”

Offended, Aerith’s frowned deepened. "You didn’t know? She died years ago!"

“I see…” Hojo said. He turned his back to them then, but it didn’t stop the Cetra.

“Is Jenova an Ancient?” she asked, and urgent nature to her voice. “Is Sephiroth an ancient, too? Do we all have the same blood?”

There was a thinly veiled desperation in her eyes that Tifa had never seen before. Aerith had always seemed to be someone who was strong and sure of herself, much to the envy of the younger woman. Before her mother had died and sent her world spinning out of control, Tifa had always been happy, confident and secure of herself and her place in the world. In her early childhood, there had been no reason to doubt her value or significance. As an adult she could only pine for the strength that her former naiveté held, constantly longing for all that fear and disappointment and loneliness had stolen with greedy hands. On the surface, Aerith seemed to be the embodiment of her childhood boldness, but here she was vocalizing things that made Tifa ponder her character. Perhaps she wasn’t the only one hiding dark thoughts behind a cheerful demeanor.

Aerith was searching. But Hojo defied the determination in her features, shutting down and keeping his body turned away. Strangely, he began muttering to himself and all of their ears
strained eagerly to hear. Luckily, Cloud’s mako enhanced senses did the job. The Cetra tried
protesting Hojo’s rude behavior, calling his name and moving to touch his shoulder.

“No,” Cloud said, annoyance and defeat in his voice. He gently caught her wrist before she could
shake the professor, her bangles clinking as he lowered her arm to her side. “Forget it. He won’t
indulge us any further.”

Aerith huffed, puffing her up one cheek with air like an angry child. Cloud began to walk away,
and the girls followed, exchanging puzzled glances. After a few moments, their leader spoke.

“He was telling us to head west past Mt. Corel.”

Tifa blinked against the sunlight on the white sand. “Is that what he was mumbling about?”

Cloud slowed his steps, then, letting the girls catch up. Aerith was frowning at her boots and it
bothered him to see her be anything less than light of heart.

“Yes. Let’s tell the others as soon as we can and leave in the morning. We don’t want Sephiroth to
get too far ahead.”

She nodded, sweeping her black hair away from her face where the ocean breeze had blown it.
Linking an arm over Aerith’s shoulders, the pair followed Cloud off the beach and back to the
sandy streets.

… … …

“Have you ever felt like something is calling you? Or that you had to visit some place?”

The ocean had beckoned him back to it once again. Cloud sat on a rock beside the jetty, his gaze
unrelenting as he watched the sunset burn red. It painted the water and shoreline in warmth as the
chill of evening began to drift in upon the wind, the contrasting sensations leaving a strange feeling
of emptiness in his chest. He took a handful of sand from where high tide had left it, gathered in a
crevice between dark stones. Squeezing it in his fist, he inhaled slowly.

Damn that Hojo. Hours later and here he was, still puzzling over the man’s words. Initially, Cloud
had tried to dismiss them as rambling nonsense from a madman posing as a scientist. But they
whispered incessantly inside him now, stirring up a sense of panic and unease that had long ago
settled beneath the surface of his heart. All he wanted was peace, even just for a short while. No
matter how hard Cloud fought to deny it, he had felt like he’d been pulled forward on a certain
path. Is that how they’d ended up here? Was it really good fortune that allowed them to meet with
the right people that led them to Sephiroth on the ship? Was it a coincidence that they were able to
gain the exact information they needed to find him, or was it somehow destined? It seemed they
had gotten this far on a wing and a prayer, along with his gut feelings. But were those ‘gut
feelings’ actually a calling? Was something directing his steps? Why was all this so frightening to
him? Surely, he was overthinking everything.

Cloud turned his fist over and slowly let the sand filter out between his fingers.

He should be grateful, shouldn’t he? He had direction and the means to pull his team onward
toward their goal. Could he really trust the man who made his core shiver with an icy terror? Why
did Hojo make him feel that way, anyway? As usual, it seemed he ended up with more questions
than answers. If he chose to trust Hojo’s directions for Sephiroth’s path, then how could he
disregard his questions about being called?

“Mind if I join you?”
Her voice was soft, momentarily calming the rising tension of his musings. Tifa carefully approached from behind. Cloud knew that she was only trying to respect his possible desire for privacy, but he still loathed her timidity. He supposed she might always be this way if he couldn’t figure out how to fix it, but he didn’t know where to start or what was really wrong in the first place. Currently, he lacked the energy to confront such an issue. There was too much going on to concentrate on his personal matters with his wife and give them the attention they deserved.

He didn’t turn to look at her, but patted the smooth stone beside him. “Of course.”

It was only after she’d settled on his right side that he stole a sideways glance at her. The heavy air of Costa Del Sol was laden with moisture and salt, making her compliant, pin straight hair curl at the ends. Her body had been kissed by the sun during their travels the past few weeks, tanning her arms, shoulders and long legs. Cloud assumed the small strip of midriff that her crop top revealed had become tan as well, but it was currently hidden under her bathing suit.

“I’m surprised you came back out here,” Tifa thought aloud. “You didn’t tell anyone where you went and this was the last place I looked.”

She’d been disappointed when Cloud didn’t show up at the inn to wash up for dinner. The memories that the seaside location resurrected had settled heavily upon her consciousness, making Tifa decide to try to make a move. For over an hour, she hung around the room waiting for him. Her plan was to ask him if he wanted to go somewhere to eat alone and she felt her confidence slowly deflating with each minute that ticked by without him. Eventually, she gave up and set out to find her husband and ended up here. He looked so ethereal there, watching the sun gracefully bow out for the evening. Tifa wondered if he’d separated himself from her and the others for a reason and hesitated before going out on the sand to join him. But she was helpless against his magnetic pull, and her feet moved before her brain told them to.

His silence made her heart sink, but she quickly decided to gather up her courage and chase after him.

“Long day, huh?”

“It’s been a long couple of weeks,” he answered, fatigue laced in each syllable.

His eyes wandered over to her and Tifa suddenly felt self-conscious—her hair gently frizzing in the humidity and knees scraped from the fight earlier that day. She shivered, unsure of whether or not it was from the wind or something else. When was the last time she felt this way? She wanted to feel beautiful for him: a wife worthy of his attention and affection. But in her navy one-piece bathing suit, wind-tangled hair and sunburnt cheeks, she doubted she was very attractive.

“It has been,” Tifa agreed, turning her head up to look him in the face for a moment. “But I think we’ve all been handling it well, especially you. I’m proud of how you’ve grown, Cloud.”

He let out a half-hearted chuckle. “I don’t feel like I’ve grown. I just feel like I’m being pushed along.”

“Oh, but you have! Even in little ways,” Tifa countered, closing her eyes against the wind. The salt air provided another memory, one where two newlyweds were embarking on their journey to the eastern continent. “Remember when we took that ship across the ocean when we were traveling to Midgar? You were so seasick that we had to stay below deck the whole time. Look how much you’ve changed—you weren’t queasy at all!”

Cloud wracked his brain, but didn’t remember such an incident. He decided it was easiest just to play along.
“I guess I grew out of it,” he replied, scratching his head. “But in all fairness, we were below deck most of the time, too.”

She smiled, a gentle hum escaping into the air. Maybe bringing up easier times would help him relax? Her gaze landed upon his heavy boots, weighted down into sand and dark stone next to her own bare feet. Cloud had always been reluctant to take off his shoes, once he had them. When they were children, he and his mother had been so poor that she couldn’t afford shoes for him until after some time after they both started school. Tifa had been fortunate enough to never know what it was like to not have anything to wear on her feet, even in the destitution she faced in Midgar. She remembered the barefoot, deathly shy little boy who used to occasionally hide from her invitations to play in her backyard. Mama had explained to her that it didn’t necessarily mean he didn’t want to be around her, but that Cloud was just afraid sometimes. She didn’t take his occasional reluctance to heart after learning that, and the pair ended up being incredibly bonded and close. Back then, Tifa learned the fruit that patience and persistence had brought about when it came to Cloud Strife.

And now, here he was, hiding around hypothetical corners. Maybe he was still the shy little boy who needed kind medicine and persistent encouragement to be lured out of his shell. If this is what he required, Tifa would try her best to provide it if she could. It wouldn’t be easy, but maybe she wasn’t trying hard enough.

“That’s true. And the ocean was really calm; I’m sure that helped. Most of the time we were too distracted trying to avoid detection to be thinking about churning stomachs!”

An amused noise sounded from Cloud’s throat. “All of us except for Yuffie. She was on the floor moaning and whining.”

They shared a quiet chuckle, the moment passing slowly into silence.

Tifa’s eyes drifted to the expanse of water before them, automatically scanning for dorsal fins breaking the surface. Ever since they’d met that dolphin in Junon Harbor before boarding the ship, all Tifa could think of was how enchanted Marlene would’ve been to see it! The little girl had always been so happy to see the pigeons in Midgar, and it made Tifa’s heart sink to her stomach to realize that was the only exposure she’d had to ‘wildlife’. She wanted nothing more than to change that. But there was no way of telling when they’d be reunited once again. How long would it take to catch Sephiroth and end this once and for all?

As relieved as they all were for the confirmation that they’d been on the right trail behind the ‘man with the black cape’, Tifa had almost wished that they hadn’t run into him. She’d never seen Sephiroth with her own eyes. Anything that she’d ever known about him was from the dozens of stories that Cloud had shared with her over many years. The countless newspaper clippings he’d saved as a child had painted the SOLDIER as a charismatic, heroic young man who won the war with Wutai almost singlehandedly. Black and white photographs usually accompanied the articles, showing a young face and determined eyes. The Sephiroth she had seen on the ship was devoid of emotion: silent and cold and empty. Fear prickled in her heart, like a million tiny needles screaming that his presence was a deadly one.

Cloud’s story of his descent into madness was a tragic one. The silver-haired nightmare had once been a normal person, working hard for his honor. And then he’d snapped. Anger briefly bristled inside her at the thought of him setting Nibelheim ablaze. Was Cloud telling the truth? Had this man really reduced their hometown to ash? Discomfort swam in her chest when she realized that maybe she wasn’t that different from Sephiroth. Her life had taken so many dark turns that pushed her to her very limit. Tifa feared that, if anything else happened, perhaps she’d end up snapping,
too. She shook the thoughts away with a flick of her hair over her shoulder.

“So what was that thing that we fought?” Tifa asked, watching her toes as they curled inward.

“Jenova?”

She almost regretted asking when Cloud’s spine stiffened slightly at the inquiry. Resting his elbow on his knee, he sighed as he tried to put together any pieces to this puzzle. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw that alien. It had haunted him since they’d fought it. That battle had been difficult: not because of the strength of their opponent but because the whispers in his head had grown louder and louder until they turned into screams, clawing their way through his brain.

“I…don’t know.” Cloud’s eyes joined hers on the horizon. “That’s the same name that was on that holding pod in the ShinRA building. Did it…somehow escape? Why did it show up when Sephiroth came? Maybe Aerith was onto something.”

“I wouldn’t doubt it. She’s sharp as a tack.”

What a mystery this all was. Were Sephiroth and Jenova linked somehow? What made Aerith wonder if Jenova was a Cetra? Cloud was starting to realize that the scale of this was so much bigger than him, than SOLDIER, than ShinRA, and he couldn’t escape. His circumstances since his birth had proven that there would be no peaceful life for someone like him. He might as well face his demons, but he was frightened. Tifa sat quietly beside him, and he lifted blue eyes to search for her cinnamon colored ones. Something inside him brushed aside his pride and quietly begged for her to say something—anything—that would save him from his torment. Why couldn’t he voice this need? What was holding him back?

Tifa felt him looking at her and turned her face toward his once again, slowly recognizing the pleading look on his face. She remembered this face: his vulnerable face. It was the face he’d given her after a villager’s hurtful words had carved scars on his young heart, after he’d returned from overseas to ask for her hand in marriage and was denied by her father, after countless hard days working as a ShinRA grunt. It was Cloud, her Cloud, lost and frightened somewhere within this brusque man who led them toward an ever changing goal. He was wordlessly asking for her help and she’d never abandon him. She’d promised! She wanted so badly to hear him voice this need. They used to trade secrets so easily, and it occurred to Tifa that she wasn’t the only one reluctant to lean on her spouse in her pain. Desperate to keep him close, she reached her hand out to grasp his, as if it could keep his heart there with hers. These little talks were frustrating in the way that they’d drift toward one another only to float apart again. She squeezed her fingers around his, hoping that maybe she could pull him just a little bit closer this time.

“I’m not sure what any of this means, or where we’ll end up. It’s like trying to put together a jigsaw puzzle in the dark,” he admitted, sad eyes lowering to their joined hands.

It was always startling to Tifa how quickly his confidence would evaporate before her eyes, leaving behind a mess of confusion and reluctance. But as soon as he let his guard down, he’d throw it right back up, chasing her away from the sensitive parts of him.

“Listen,” Tifa said, bleeding heart filling up her mouth with the words to say. “Everything will be okay, don’t worry. We’ve been through some crazy times but have somehow survived it all. What’s one more adventure before we can go back to a boring, normal life?”

He looked at her then with a troubled countenance and she thought for a moment that he’d tell her what was really on his mind. He was lost in the dark somewhere, she was sure of it, dreaming of the warmth he used to find in her companionship. Why hadn’t he reached out for her heart? So far, she felt he had only reached out for her body.
Cloud’s expression hardened into a soft scowl. “The only thing I know for certain is that I want Sephiroth gone. I want this all to end.”

The sky was clear, but her eyes turned stormy then. Tifa felt as if she was running toward him without getting any closer. It was like chasing after the moon. She had been so close. Almost huffing in frustration, she refused to let go of his fingers and gave them a loving squeeze. She was nothing more than Cloud’s satellite, drawn in by his unrelenting gravitational pull. Every part of her life (and her future) revolved around him and there wasn’t a thing she could do about it. And so, around him she hovered, constantly present but never close enough to touch. It was almost like trying to swim against the current: exhausting and futile. But she couldn’t give up. Closing her eyes, she exhaled slowly.

“I know,” Tifa breathed. “Since you were young, you’ve always been fighting against something or struggling toward some sort of elusive goal. But when this is all over, we should go on a vacation to a place like this. Just like our little honeymoon.”

He looked up at her then, mako eyes dimly glowing as the sky quickly dimmed into twilight. The gentle shush of the waves almost sounded like the wind in the trees the day Cloud first told her he loved her, two teenagers hidden deep in the forest groves. Their love had once been giddy and passionate and true. Now they struggled to even hold a meaningful conversation and it wounded her deeply. But instead of receding, Tifa pressed on.

“That day that I first saw the ocean with you was one of my three favorite memories with you,” she said, a gentle smile spreading over her features. She forced herself to watch his face as she presented him with a little game. “Can you guess the other two?”

His expression changed to one of surprise, his furrowed brows rising.

“Uh…”

Cloud fell into silence, eyes narrowed as he thought. He was trying hard to stay calm, knowing well that it wasn’t always easy for him to recall past events. Some things were clear as crystal, others were hazy and obscure. What if he forgot something critical to their relationship and it hurt her? What did it mean about his mental state if he’d forgotten some of the most important moments of their lives? He didn’t want to face any of this. He wasn’t ready, but Tifa was looking at him expectantly.

“Our wedding? Um…and our first kiss?” he guessed, figuring both answers were vague enough to work, even if he didn’t remember all the details. Cloud tried hard to recall each of these things, but only received chopped bits and pieces of those times and it troubled him.

“Those are nice memories, but not my favorites!” Tifa smiled encouragingly. “Try again!”

Cloud inwardly winced. What was she really fishing for here? He didn’t like this game at all. Turning to look toward the water once again, his jaw tightened.

“Can we do this another time, Tifa?”

It felt as if he had struck her, but she did her best to keep her expression gentle. How hard this was! She was pulling and pulling at his heart, trying to hold him closely once again. But his back was to her and he was drawing away, sinking deeper inside himself.

“Sure.”

He saw her pull her knees to her chest out of the corner of his eye and she quieted then. Guilt and
shame bloomed inside him, warming his cheeks and curling his shoulders inward. For a long while, they listened to the waves as they watched the light spin out of the lighthouse. Cloud hated her silence and wished she’d talk about something trivial that would distract him from this sinking feeling. There was something in the way that she stared up at sky that told him that she was tired. She was tired of the dark turns that life had taken them since birth and he felt powerless to help her fight against it. All of his life, Cloud had never been eloquent with words and rarely managed say the things he needed to. There was a small space that felt like chasms between them now. He wanted to hold her, touch her, but his hands held fast to where they rested on stone and sand. He wanted to express himself, his aches, his anguish, and his own emptiness, but the seal upon his mouth wouldn't break.

A figure in the distance caught Cloud’s eye, thanks to his enhanced vision. The flower girl walked along the sea alone, listening to the whispers of the waves. Bare feet being kissed by the waves and bubbles of the surf, she floated about in the silvery glow of the moon. She seemed transfixed by the sight of the boundless sea and sky, her long hair tossing wildly in the sea breeze.

He could swear she was speaking, but the wind carried her voice away into the crash of the waves.
“Hold still! Honestly…” Tifa sighed, holding a cool cloth to the right side of Barret’s face.

The hulking man sat hunched over on a stone, a scowl attempting to hide the defeat that lurked just underneath his angry exterior. The tiny village of North Corel, which turned out to be no more than a few dilapidated shacks and haphazard tents, had been less than welcoming to Barret when they’d found themselves in the gunman’s old hometown. Before Tifa had even been aware of where they were, a small group of men had surrounded them, their colorful language every bit as gruff as their looks. It took their frazzled group a moment to realize that it was just Barret they were jeering at.

“Stop fussin’, Teef.”

“Just let me get some of the swelling down, okay?” she asked softly, dipping the cloth back into the cool water of the brook before wringing it out and replacing it on his purpling cheek.

Barret had refused any offers for healing from Aerith or materia, and his temper had swelled when the Cetra insisted, so Tifa decided to take matters into her own hands. No one present knew Barret better than she did and he trusted her most of all. No one else could tell that he’d been on edge for quite a while before they’d arrived in North Corel, and now the reason was clear. Tifa was surprised how much she still didn’t know about him after how close they’d become. He appeared into her life at her most desperate time, giving her terrified, defeated spirit a reason to hope again after Cloud and Aria had evaporated from her life and she’d found herself destitute, empty and alone.

The pair had had an unspoken agreement not to talk much about their pasts, since it was a sore subject for both of them, so instead they focused on the many needs of the moment and building a solid future as best as they could. Co-parenting Marlene, running Seventh Heaven and participating in AVALANCHE had built an unbreakable bond of complete trust between them, so Tifa wasn’t surprised when he didn’t cuss her out for invading his private sulk by the stream.

“Just leave it,” Barret grumbled, tilting his face away from her. “I deserve it.”

The men who came to ‘greet’ their party had bellowed at Barret: throwing punches, shouting and even spitting. Tifa had inwardly cringed, waiting for his volcanic temper to erupt and send even more hatred into the air between them. But to her great surprise, he fell silent, submitting to the humiliation. Hearing his confession after his harassers left almost brought sympathetic tears to her eyes. ShinRA had tricked the impoverished coal mining town into letting them build a mako reactor nearby, filling their heads with hopes of a better life. Everyone had been against it except for Barret’s best friend, Dyne, who he revealed to be Marlene’s biological father. After an attack on the reactor, ShinRA blamed Corel’s residents and burned the town to the ground. This attack killed most of the residents, including Barret’s wife and Marlene’s mother. Barret and Dyne were attacked by ShinRA soldiers along a cliffside outside Corel, injuring Barret’s right hand and causing Dyne to fall to his death. The survivors blamed Barret for everything, saying that it was his decision to override Dyne’s trepidation regarding the building of the reactor. Barret accepted the blame, and it weighed heavily upon his shoulders.

“That’s not true and you know it. They have no right blaming you. We were all fooled by ShinRA back then; we didn’t know any better.” She patted his shoulder gently with her free hand. “You were just doing what you thought was right.”

“Jes’ like everything else.” He snorted bitterly, eyes distant as they stared ahead. “I found Marlene among the flames an’ thought I could care fo’ her. A way to respect Dyne an’ a way to justify survivin’. Now look—she’s on a whole ‘nother continent, wonderin’ where I went an’ what
happened to her home. She doesn’t need me. All I bring is chaos into her life.”

“Are you kidding? You’re like superman to her!”

Tifa smiled at the thought of the little girl who waited for them in Elmyra’s care. Carefully, she caressed Barret’s cheek through the cloth and hoped he’d smile, too. Corel’s air was warm and dry with a gentle wind that comforted their perspiring skin. The daytime heat was intense and uncomfortable, but temperatures plummeted at night in this desert-like climate. Relief from the sun came as the afternoon waned, a few stars starting to emerge in the early twilight.

“Yeah, sure. Then one day she’ll find out who I really am and hate me, jes’ like they do.”

“She does know who you are. You’re her daddy! You’re the one who knows her favorite stories, who lets her ride on his shoulders no matter how tired he is from work and gives her baths before bedtime.” Tifa lowered her hand, letting the cool wind blow soothingly over Barret’s wound. “Marlene is too smart to ever think that you’re anything less than what you are—a big hearted man who saved her life by risking his own!”

A quiet moment passed with only the peaceful lull of the brook in the air. It may have been a trick of the light or her own imagination, but she almost thought she could see a hint of a smile pulling at the corner of his lips.

“Guys! Hurry up, it’s getting dark!” Yuffie called, bouncing over toward them. “We want to get to the Gold Saucer while we can still see where we’re going!”

“Okay, we’re coming,” Tifa answered before standing and wringing excess water out of the cloth. She offered a hand out to help Barret up and wasn’t surprised when he didn’t take it. The others were waiting near the dirt road, the yellow shock of Cloud’s hair a stark contrast against their drab surroundings. Tifa watched as her husband took his great sword from where it’d been resting against a rock, returning it to its place on his back. Yuffie had stolen Aerith’s hair bow and a mock argument was underway. Red XIII yawned before rising to his feet, making Tifa smile with the way he—though technically an animal—seemed more civilized and reserved than the rest of them. Beside her, Barret moved to stand.

“You’re too sweet t’have married a guy like that, you know,” Barret said. His gaze was locked on Cloud, who appeared to be trying to ignore the squabbling girls. “He don’t deserve you.”

“He’s…the most wonderful person I’ve ever met.”

One of Barret’s dark eyebrows rose skeptically. “Girl, you’re either not as smart as I thought y’were, or you got problems.”

She sighed, taking his wrist and leading him back toward the others.

“He’s the one with the problems…I think. I mean, I have issues too. But he’s been through something terrible—I know it! I think once we can get him all sorted out, he’ll be back to his old self.” Tifa heard the words coming out of her mouth, but wasn’t quite sure she really believed them. “The Cloud you see isn’t the one I grew up with and gave my heart to. He’s hiding somewhere underneath. I just haven’t found him yet.”

Her words hung in the air for a moment, heavy and still, and she wondered how Barret would respond. As a young girl, Tifa had always been a cheerful optimist. The harshness of life had since molded her into a very cautious realist, but Barret was different. The handful of years they’d spent together had taught her that her friend was a bit of a cloaked dreamer, with giant dreams hidden
under layers of determination and bitterness. They grounded each other: Tifa keeping his head from ascending too high into the clouds and Barret preventing her from sinking too far under the surface of her fears and insecurities. Without his companionship, Tifa knew that her heart would’ve been swallowed up by desperation and despair years ago, when she truly believed she was alone and that there was nothing in this world left to live for. For that, she’d be eternally grateful.

The scowl was back on his face, his posture rigid and uninviting as he stood and began to walk beside her. His mouth was twisted into a half grimace that Tifa knew she had worn many times in her life, a face only brought about by the bitter taste of stale hopes in one’s mouth.

“You still believe that, huh?” he grumbled, halting his steps and looking at her head on. “How am I supposed to believe that after what he did t’you? I’ll never forget how y’looked when we first met—half starved and terrified. You had nothin’ because he disappeared and never even gave an explanation, even now!”

“Barret—“

“An’ you want me to just trust ‘im? Hell, you’re still hurtin’ ‘cause he can’t even be honest with his girl.”

Tifa opened her mouth to speak, paused, and shut it again. She broke eye contact with him to focus on where her fingers loosely held onto his wrist. What could she say? Barret was right: Cloud hadn’t been clear about why he’d disappeared or where he’d gone that handful of years ago. He’d left her alone to fend for herself and their unborn baby without any sort of emotional, social or financial support. The worst part about all this was that he’d clam up immediately when she tried to get some clarity over his disappearance. It was all so terribly frustrating. But no matter how badly she wanted answers, his lips were sealed and she didn’t know what to do.

“I’m asking you to trust me, Barret.” Tifa let go of his wrist and let her arms fall to her sides. The words slipped out of her mouth unbidden, before she could decide whether or she was worthy of his confidence when it came to this situation. “He’s struggling, but he’ll come around. I’m going to help him work through this and you’ll see what he’s really like.”

“Yeah? Well I can’t imagine him being anything more than his distant, cocky self.”

She swallowed and closed her eyes against the cool breeze. Was that really what everyone thought of Cloud? Barret tended to exaggerate things; that was no secret. But if their other companions felt the same way, they hadn’t complained about it. Perhaps that was because no one else had ever known the Cloud of the past. They had no idea that her sweet, shy boy had changed into the hardened man who they looked to as their leader. She wouldn’t say he was ill tempered or angry. Even Barret’s claim that he was arrogant seemed a little dramatic when one considered the confidence Cloud seemed to have in himself. But the word 'distant' certainly did seem to describe him and it bothered her.

“I’m trying, okay?” She said, exasperation leaking into her tone. “What do you want me to do? I can’t control him.”

“I want you to be happy.” He huffed and started walking forward again, Tifa following with wide strides to try to keep up. “Since I met you, you’ve been broken an’ miserable. He should be doin’ what he can t’make you smile.”

To think that her friend could be implying that she should separate from Cloud offended her. While it was only out of his benevolence and care for her, Tifa took her marriage vows seriously. That sacred promise she made to him didn’t change because of her husband’s strange behavior. If
anything, it should serve as her motivation to help Cloud through whatever hardships he was enduring. Even if she did consider leaving him, the knots of their past were so tangle together that she didn’t think she could ever break free.

Tifa had forgotten that Barret was a widower before he’d confided in their crew earlier that day. At one time, she believed she was a widow herself when ShinRA had sent her a letter stating that Cloud was killed in action. In a way, she understood this particular sort of grief. Lifting her eyes to the back of his head, Tifa let his words sink in. She was sure that being here in Corel was painful for Barret in all sorts of ways, but reading between the lines of his tone made her think of all the memories of his wife the location stirred up. Becoming so close to Barret had shown her clearly just how enormous his heart was, despite his rough outward appearance. She’d never pried much into Barret’s past, simply out of respect and empathy for how hard it could be to disclose the details of one’s wounded past. But maybe she could bring some healing through the medicine of kind words.

Gathering up some courage, she spoke in a gentle voice. “If you have always been the way you are with me and Marlene, I’m sure your wife must’ve been the happiest lady around.”

Barret’s pace didn’t falter, nor did he turn his head back toward her. His voice crackled like the gravel beneath their boots.

“It didn’t save her, did it?”

… … …

The Gold Saucer was unlike anything Tifa had ever seen. She supposed that, if she’d never been exposed to the mammoth buildings and mass use of electricity in Midgar, that a place like this would’ve been startling and overwhelming to a little girl from the isolation of the mountains. Masses of people crowded the plaza as they walked about and their group tried hard to stick together. Tifa held onto Cloud’s hand as he led the way, Red XIII pressed against her leg. Behind her, Aerith and Yuffie linked arms and used Barret’s tall figure as an easy target to follow.

There was jaunty music and bright colors all around. Blinking lights beckoned guests to different game booths or food stands. The smell of fried treats and the sound of laughter dusted off old memories from the far corners of her mind and made her feel almost light hearted. Nibelheim’s annual harvest festival was an enormous highlight of the year for the people of her village, bringing friends, visitors and vendors from miles around to celebrate and enjoy the pleasures of dance, delicious food and time with one’s family. It seemed like visions of another life when Tifa used to bounce around the festival between her father and mother, holding one of their hands in each of her little ones.

Mama was from Wutai. She was her father’s beautiful, foreign bride in a town where people rarely came and went. The traditional dress of the townsfolk was far different than that of her mother’s culture, and while little Tifa was always dressed like any other young lady in Nibelheim, Mama chose to wear her finest traditional garment to an exciting event like the harvest festival. Her mother’s crimson kimono stood out like a candle in the dark among the rest, clashing horribly with the plain dress of the other festival goers. Even if it was strange, Mama did what she wanted, and Tifa thought she was both brave and exquisitely lovely. Maybe it was beautiful to be different. Cloud had always been different; even her earliest memories of her husband were of his soft voice and deep sense of understanding that couldn’t be fathomed by any of the other young boys. The other kids (and even the adults) had shunned him for reasons beyond his control, the main one being that he lived in a fatherless household in a very conservative place. It made his life, and his mother’s life, so much harder than necessary.
And now, Cloud was still different. He was still a man of few words, but was more brash and assertive that she’d ever known him to be. Barret had called him ‘cocky’, but was he just trying to act the way he thought he should as their leader and as a man who was fed up of being pushed around by people? Maybe he had finally snapped and had had enough of being the submissive victim of injustice. Was he acting on the offensive now instead of defaulting to the defensive position he’d been taught to take? It was the only way that Tifa could justify this change in Cloud with the lack of information that she had about what he’d been through these four years past.

Like her mother’s kimono, he can be bold and different and it was still okay, right?

His fingers gripped her palm tightly as they weaved through the crowd. Tifa felt like a toddler, distracted by all the sights and sounds and neglecting to pay attention to where Cloud was leading them. When they finally stopped against the side wall of a restaurant in the Gold Saucer’s main plaza, she snapped out of the intoxication from the cheerful environment.

“Ugh, we’ve been walking forever!” Yuffie groaned, slumping dramatically against the wall. “Can’t we sit and eat or something?”

Cloud regarded her with a blank expression. “No.”

“What’s your problem! I mean, we’ve already blown a ridiculous amount of gil just to get into this place. We might as well make the best of it,” the ninja rebutted, fearlessly staring their blonde leader right in the eye.

Tifa’s gaze wandered over to Barret, who had been seething with quiet hostility since they’d left Corel. He looked just about ready to snap with impatience, but stayed silent for the moment.

“Look, we’re not here to have fun. We’re here because we are tracking Sephiroth and are looking for clues to his whereabouts,” Cloud said, glaring right back at her. “We don’t have time to indulge.”

“You are the worst!” Yuffie whined. “We’re all starving! Right, Red?”

Red XIII looked uncomfortable being put on the spot. He seemed torn between his usual quiet compliance to Cloud’s leadership and his own needs. “We have been traveling for quite some time. Perhaps it would be in our best interest to have a little rest?”

“He’s right. Let’s have some fun!” Aerith jumped in. “We can finally get some decent food! I’m tired of eating out of cans by the fireside.”

Tifa looked to her husband, then, who closed his eyes in defeat. She attempted to reward his patience by putting an encouraging hand to his back. He was a driven leader, but wasn’t insensitive when it came to the requests of the others. It was obvious to her that the man cared about all of them, even if he never verbalized it. Surely he loved her as much as he always did and just had trouble saying so, right?

“Fine,” Cloud said. “Take some time and recharge. Do what you want and we’ll meet up at the hotel by midnight. Does that sound reasonable?”

“Alright!” Yuffie cheered, bending down to pull Red XIII into a squeezing hug.

Barret, who was leaning his back against the wall, crossed his arms and huffed. Aerith looked over to him, a big smile on her face. Inwardly, Tifa cringed, knowing what was about to happen but was powerless to stop it.
“Aww, come on.” Aerith cooed, walking up to Barret and leaning in toward him. “Cheer up, Barret!”

His scowling face didn’t change. “I ain’t in no cheery mood. So jes’ leave me alone.”

“Really? That’s too bad,” she replied with a ‘tsk’. To Tifa’s horror, the Cetra reached out to grab his bicep, giving it a gentle tug in an attempt to try and free his arm. “You should join us, we’re going to go play!”

That did it.

“So, PLAY!” Barret exploded, ripping his arm away from Aerith. “Y’all wastin’ time, messin’ around! I’m outta here. Don’t forget we’re after Sephiroth!”

Yuffie’s eyes were wide as saucers from the sudden outburst and Red XIII’s were squinted shut from the volume of Barret’s voice. Aerith didn’t seem bothered or the least bit surprised and just placed her hands on her hips with a frown of her own. Cloud raised his eyebrows as Barret turned and stormed away into the crowd. Tifa almost called after him, but thought better of it. He’d be more reasonable after he cooled off from such an emotional day. Until then, being alone may be the best thing for him.

“Well then,” Aerith said, replacing the smile on her face. “Let’s go eat. You were hungry, right Yuffie?”

“I’m starving!”

Being with their group was a strange comfort to Tifa when she wanted to hide from her problems. If she was always around the others, she didn’t have to be alone with Cloud and try to think of ways to address the issues between them. It was so much easier to hide in the pressing matter of their pursuit of Sephiroth (which is what seemed to be what Cloud was doing), and she’d been guilty of that behavior. But no more. Summoning courage wasn’t always an easy thing for her, but if it would help her marriage then she couldn’t turn away from this challenge. Shyly, Tifa peeked up at her husband’s face and decided to take a risk.

“Hey, Cloud… Would you want to take a walk together?”

His attention turned to her and she was instantly sucked into the vacuum of his gaze. Cloud had always had striking eyes, long before he’d ever been exposed to mako. They were always large with a unique shade of blue, and the combination had given him a constantly startled look as a child. But as an adult, they gave him a sharp appearance that became unnerving when he was angry. But they were always mirrors of his heart and his mood, making it easy for her to understand his feelings in the often times that he couldn’t find the words to express them. Growing up together and being best friends and lovers had given her the gift of understanding him in many intricate ways. But lately, he had made himself unreadable: eyes blank of emotion and mouth always pressed into a straight line. His thoughts were veiled and it made her feel lonesome.

“Yeah, let’s do it. Yuffie is giving me a headache.”

The teenager frowned instantly. “Hey!”

“Never mind him! Yuffie, Red, let’s go!” Aerith said with a smile as she tugged the ninja’s arm. “Let’s eat already and leave these love birds alone.”

With the promise of food, Red XIII and Yuffie readily followed Aerith’s lead. Tifa smiled as Cloud took her hand, grateful for this small gesture that needed no prompting, and followed him
back out into the crowd. They strolled along together, pace unhurried and destination uncertain. As they walked along, they’d exchange small smiles and speak little. Tifa couldn’t help but examine him, eyes taking in the new healthy tint of his skin and reveling in the fact that Cloud no longer looked emaciated and sick. He’d finally begun to fill out and seemed much better and physically stable than he ever had since she’d found him clinging to life at Sector Seven’s train station.

The colorful sights and jovial bustle around them served as a fine distraction from the weight of their troubled connection, slowly suffocating them. The breath of trust and joy and hope that had brought them together during their perilous childhoods was quickly escaping, and Tifa knew that it would be impossible to draw in another. Something had to be done, and if he wouldn’t take the lead than she would. She had to rebuild their bridge before it was too late, reconnecting their bridge of loving memories to the boundless future could still hold so much promise. A wave of screams sounded from a nearby coaster as Tifa tugged at Cloud’s hand, pulling him in the direction of the chocobo races with forced bravado on her face. He followed without resistance. They passed food carts and dozens of rides, the twinkling lights of a carousel catching Tifa’s eye as they hurried past. Until now, they’d been like a broken merry-go-round, revolving endlessly around bristling emotions and hidden truths without the option to get off.

She was trying so hard to be brave. All those years of pushing away the pain of her past had only made things worse, and Tifa had promised herself that she’d try to confront things head on in the future. But this was so hard. All Tifa wanted was the Cloud that had left her to on a routine mission a handful of years ago. She wanted to run into the arms of the sweet young man who showed her with every word and action that she was his most precious companion. After so many lonesome nights laying alone, thinking he was dead and dreaming about his gentle embrace, Tifa thought that maybe it was too hard for her to accept that although Cloud was here, he really wasn’t. He had come back from the dead but was still dead somehow. The couple arrived that the racing arena, bet a few gil on birds of their choice and settled into their stadium seats. Sometimes, when Cloud said something or expressed gestures familiar that he had since childhood—such as clearing his throat when things had been quiet for too long or the way he’d run fingers through his unruly hair when unsettled—made Tifa believe that maybe her beloved wasn’t really gone for good. Perhaps he was just sleeping somewhere deep inside his heart.

Happy memories of their childhood were so precious to Tifa. She kept them neatly organized in her brain, like a meticulously kept scrapbook, preserving even trivial details of their experiences. It hurt to remember how they’d find such joy in even the mundane things, like weeding their parents’ gardens or collecting firewood. Now, as they sat watching races in the world’s largest amusement park, they fought to find the right words to exchange. Tifa wasn’t certain what hurt more: her many attempts at conversation falling flat or the fact that she couldn’t even get him to smile when they were alone. Eventually she turned her attention to the races and hugged herself with her arms, ignoring the stray bits of popcorn that crunched under her boots as she moved.

When she inquired about their past, Cloud seemed to close himself off. Originally, she felt that bringing up fond memories they shared would serve two purposes: put Cloud at ease and help him relax by stirring up happiness inside him and help her evaluate her husband’s mental state. He seemed to express discomfort with recalling the past. Most times he’d remember things accurately, but it seemed to be quite difficult for him. All of this time, Tifa’s plan to help him heal revolved around their lengthy and intricate history, but it didn’t seem to be working. But she had no plan B, and didn’t know where to start when it came to considering other options for Cloud’s healing. How could they step forward if their past wasn’t acknowledged and mended? Often times, as she searched her past for pleasant memories to share with Cloud, she’d think of holidays and special occasions spent with her parents before death had ripped her Mama from their lives. She and Cloud had barely had the time to make many happy memories together as a married couple, and they certainly never had the chance to make family memories with their baby girl.
Perhaps, she should focus on what lay ahead instead. But like making a risky bet on an underdog bird, she knew that asking about the future could be dicey. She blindly watched the races for a while, trying to piece together the best way to express this to him.

Conflict must have shown on her face because before she knew it, she felt Cloud’s warm hand on her shoulder. She turned her face upward to look at him, startled out of her concentration.

“Hey,” Cloud asked, brows furrowed. “Are you okay? Your bird won and you didn’t react.”

The way he was looking at her and the discomfort in her heart had weakened her and she unintentionally let her guard down. Before she could think better of it or use some of her carefully constructed inquiries, her mouth blurted her worries out into the air.

“What’s going to happen to us, Cloud? Are we going to be alright?”

Blonde eyebrows rose as she resisted the urge to clap her hands over her mouth in shock. Great job, Tifa. Real smooth.

“We’re going to be alright. We’ll bring Sephiroth to justice and put all of this to rest, I promise.”

But it wasn’t Sephiroth that she was truly worried about. Somehow, her concern for their troubled marriage trumped her fears for the planet or her anger at ShinRA. Did Cloud know what she was talking about and artfully avoided it or did he truly think that she was referencing their current pursuit of the silver-haired menace? Either way, she didn’t quite know how to respond. Her husband always seemed unsettled to a varying degree—like he could flee at any time. Would specifying the meaning of her question push him over the edge? If he did run, would he take her with him or vanish from her life as quickly as he did last time? Was it too risky to find out? There was so much at stake. Tifa swallowed hard.

“No—I mean…after all of this. When we finish this crazy journey, what comes next?” her eyes lowered as she rested her hands in her lap, studying the worn leather of her fighting gloves. “Do you think things could ever go back to the way they were?”

“Were you happy with the way things were?”

Tifa nodded, voice soft as she answered. “Yes. I mean, we had no money and lived in some less than ideal circumstances, but we were happy. All we needed was each other. But now, I feel like things have changed and maybe just having one another isn’t enough anymore.”

Her voice had begun to waver and she felt her face growing hot as her heart beat furiously in her chest. *What was she saying?!* It was the truth, but Tifa was certain that she should have expressed it more gently or in a more appropriate place. She closed her carmine eyes, waiting for Cloud to shut down and lock her out of his thoughts now that the conversation had become emotional. She felt his hand leave her shoulder, his fingers moving underneath the hair at the back of her neck.

“Tifa…” he said, palm gently cradling the base of her skull.

She couldn’t resist gazing up at him when he said her name. There was something in his eyes that made her unable to look away. Something familiar, something dear… her heart began to bleed. There was sincerity on his features and everything inside her began to reach toward it, praying that *her* Cloud was back, even for just a few moments.

*Please…please, stay.*

“Everything is all mixed up now. We’re all stressed and tired; pushing ourselves to the limit every
day wears on us.” He licked his lips before continuing. “I know it’s been hard. We’ve—I’ve been struggling. But I want to make it all better; I just don’t know how.”

Tifa could only stare dumbly, shocked by his admission that something was indeed wrong. She was surprised by his soft tone and by the tender way he held her chin between his index finger and thumb. Had it really been so long since she had felt his heart? It was close to her now, but it would probably only be moments before something dark inside him snatched it back to hide away behind the walls he’d erected since they’d been reunited. She wanted to say something—anything to hold onto that dear familiarity as long as she could. What would it take to shake him out of his strange new self to permanently return him to the gentle hearted man he was before he disappeared?

She’d felt this way before, long ago. Tifa remembered thinking these same desperate thoughts when her father’s shouts made her ears ring and the iron grip of his fingers left tiny bruises on her forearms. Mama’s death had chased away her doting Papa and led him down a crooked path of misery and madness. Many a dark, still night, Tifa would lay awake: nursing her bruised spirit and praying for the answer to what would return Brian Lockhart to his former self. She’d never found an answer. Grief consumed him like a fire and it was hard learning that one cannot help those who do not wish to be helped. Sometimes, despite all your efforts, you cannot save a drowning soul. And now, Cloud was in front of her, doing something that her father had never done: he was asking her for help.

And she was going to try everything she could to pull him out of his storm into the safety of her harbor.

“We’ll figure it out, it’ll just take some time,” Tifa said, summoning her biggest smile. “We just have to work together, especially when it’s hard. You taught me that.”

“I did?”

“Of course you did. You helped me through so many difficult things that I doubt I would’ve survived on my own.”

Mama’s death, her father’s furies, and the lonesome late years of her childhood were only a handful of the endless things Cloud had helped her through. He’d overcome so many of his own fears to marry her, rescuing her from the oppression of living under Papa’s roof, and build a life for the two of them. Her beloved held so many dreams in that head of his, pushing past the doubt that the circumstances of his existence had drilled into him. Growing up in a fatherless household had made him and his mother social outcasts since they’d arrived in conservative Nibelheim when Cloud was just a toddler. But enduring the hardships he had since babyhood had shaped Cloud into a strong, determined young man by the time he’d asked for her hand in marriage. He put his all into providing for her once they’d moved to Midgar. His long days as a ShinRA grunt may have worn down his body, but they only fanned the flames of his spirit and dream to join SOLDIER.

Tifa hadn’t known it at the time, but those nights spent cuddled together in their shoebox of an apartment were some of the best memories she’d ever made. Bellies full from whatever meal she’d scraped together, the couple would share their dreams for the future while Cloud passively stroked her stomach where their tiny baby was growing. Were these days really so far behind them? It seemed like visions of another life.

Did Cloud still dream like he used to?

Blue eyes blinked, considering her words. “I guess it was kind of like the blind leading the blind. Helping people through their problems is never easy for me. I can’t even help myself.”
“You can,” Tifa said, shyly tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “And when you can’t, I’ll be there to lend a hand. That’s what spouses do, right?”

“That’s right.”

He’d lost faith in himself. It wasn’t his words that told her, but his body language. It was easy for her to see that he was bending under the weight of their current circumstances: the strange state of their marriage, the responsibility of leading their party safely, and pursuing Sephiroth (who rarely left any clues or direction to his whereabouts).

“When all this is over, we’ll start new. We’ll try our best to reach for that dream we shared when we were living in Midgar.”

Panic pulsed in Cloud’s heart when she said it, and he immediately began searching his brain for any trace of a memory that would explain what she was referring to. Their dream? What was it that they’d wanted? Why couldn’t he remember? She’d be so upset if he didn’t remember! Swallowing hard, he let his eyes drift from hers. He didn’t want to see the disappointment wash over her pretty face.

… … …

He’d brought her back to the inn only to take off again, saying he just needed some time alone. Tifa smiled through his departure only to let herself sag with disappointment when he rounded the corner of the corridor. The cup of hot tea in her hands warmed her palms, but the stillness in the air made her shiver. Pulling herself back into the room, she let the door gently click shut and tossed her small pack on the bed.

The room was large enough to accommodate their group of six, with three beds and ample space. Tifa took a minute to look around and wondered if any of their friends were there to keep her company, but the silence answered her unvoiced query. It seemed as if the others had been there already, since their belongings were lying haphazardly on the beds and floor and the small desk in the corner. It was only eight o’clock and Tifa really didn’t want to be alone right now. She supposed she could go out and try to find the others, but fatigue pulled at her muscles and her heart. A hot shower seemed like an attractive idea after so many days out on the road and she relished in the simple pleasure of the steam and the floral smell of shampoo. But her concern over the emotional states of Cloud and Barret stole away her placid state of mind.

Barret would cool off, she knew. But Cloud seemed so troubled these days and it hurt that whenever he was feeling overwhelmed, he chose to run off instead of drawing near to her. She’d let him go, because attempting to force him to talk to her about it would only make it worse. He was a grown man; surely he would come to her when he was ready. Besides, what was the point of making him share with her? It didn’t show any trust on his side or any understanding on hers to nag him into submission. And so, she watched him wander away.

Using her palm, Tifa wiped away the condensation on the bathroom mirror before combing out her long hair. Her bangs were beginning to look a little shaggy, obscuring her right eye if she didn’t brush them back. There were bags under her eyes and her skin was beginning to lack its usual healthy luster. It was easy to blame these things on the stress of traveling, but underneath she knew that there was more to it than that. What did Cloud see when he looked at her?

She dug to the bottom of her pack for the dull pair of scissors she’d been keeping for miscellaneous things like cutting rags for haphazard bandages. Putting her fingers through the holes, she took a deep breath and carefully snipped a half inch of black hair away from her eyes. Crimson eyes stared back at her, unobscured. A sad smile tugged at her lips as she remembered
Looking into Mama’s wine colored eyes and wondering what everyone meant when they said Tifa ‘stole’ them from her. According to her birth certificate, Aria had had red eyes, too.

After cleaning her hair from the sink and changing into her sleep clothes, Tifa submitted to the heaviness in her limbs and soul. The stiff mattress felt like heaven after so many nights sleeping on the ground and she buried herself under the comforter, begging sleep to find her.

… … …

The mountain air always held a chill in the evenings, even during the summer months.

Cloud hugged himself with his arms, his threadbare sweater barely providing comfort from the breeze. It had become a ritual of sorts: on rare occasions where her father wasn’t home at night, Tifa would risk his wrath by sneaking out to meet Cloud in the meadow outside Nibelheim’s village gate. As the pair blossomed into their teenage years, they felt that this was one of the few places where they could safely meet. Without the silent judgement of their fellow villagers, they could have the privacy they had recently begun to seek. She sat next to him now, in the rough, tall grass. They weren’t children anymore. Their bodies and minds were maturing and it was all a bit overwhelming for Cloud.

But Mom always had a way of making everything a little bit better, of making the mountains he faced seem a little bit smaller. The mounting pressure to find his place in a world that didn’t seem to want him would periodically rise into his throat and threaten to choke him, but his mother was always there to loosen reality’s harsh grip and make everything feel like it would work out. Tifa didn’t have that. He didn’t remember the moment he realized that he was in love with her, but even at the tender age of thirteen, Cloud knew that this affection was laced with a sort of melancholy. She was no longer the bright eyed, giggling girl of their childhood. The smell of liquor on her breath mixed with the crisp evening air and he didn’t quite know what to say.

Her dark head was bent forward and it squeezed at his heart, so Cloud moved to sit behind her. Wrapping his arms around her, he gently pulled her towards him until her back was flush against his chest. He felt helpless to save her from her struggles and anger prickled in his heart as he ran his thumbs over the bruises on her wrists. It wasn’t fair. Crickets chirped and the wind sent whispers from the timberline. Watching Tifa’s life crumble underneath her feet without being able to help was the hardest thing he had ever faced. He just wanted to save her, no matter what it took. Joining ShinRA and becoming a SOLDIER was sure to impress her father, right? Then he could marry her and take her far away from all the things that have ever hurt her. But what if he couldn’t? What if everything went wrong?

"Cloud?" She asked, pulling him from his thoughts. Her voice quivered with her query. "What's going to happen to us?"

… … …

It’s funny how the same problems plagued him even now. Cloud had let his feet carry him through the crowds, both heart and thoughts racing. The realization of the responsibility he had for Tifa’s welfare and the direction of her life shook him to the core and he didn’t know how to cope. And so, he’d ended up sitting at the bar of one of dozens of restaurants in the amusement park, perched on the stool closest to the wall.

He hated when their party stopped to fool around because it gave him too much time to think. He liked to work himself to exhaustion so it would be easy to fall asleep at night and not be kept awake by incessant whispers and nightmares. Here, surrounded by merry chatter, Cloud felt like he was a prisoner in the cramped enclosure of his brain—looking through the bars to the world of freedom.
outside. He felt like he was tapping on the glass of an impassible window and watching people go by, living their normal lives, enjoying the night and the lights and the intoxication of it all.

“Gin on the rocks,” Cloud croaked when the bartender came to take his order. She was blonde and young and pretty, with ruby lipstick and glossy curls. He anticipated she would try to chat with him and was annoyed at the thought, but she filled his glass with a smile and let him be alone with his thoughts for the moment.

He wanted to run.

Cloud felt like a cornered animal, bristling and snarling and frightened. His muscles pulsed with adrenaline, urging him to flee from all that made him anxious. But where would he go? He couldn’t run from her presence, couldn’t run from his ghosts, and couldn’t run from the guilt and inadequacy that threatened to smother him. It was impossible to run from things that lived inside him. How Cloud wished that he could somehow ask his mother how to make mole hills out of these mountains. She always knew how to face hardship with a smile. Why couldn’t he possess that same bravery? Despite her kind encouragement, he had never felt confident to leave home. But his fourteen year old self had managed to gather enough courage to leap recklessly out of his comfort zone and join ShinRA. His twenty-one year old self wasn’t even brave enough to confront his best friend about his issues.

Absently, he swirled the amber liquid, staring as the ice clinked against the glass. The music was loud with a happy beat that pulsed through the busy eatery. Cloud was grateful for the dim light of the bar area, just wanting to blend in with the background.

Would his younger self even recognize him? He used to have the ambition to face the things that scared him even when they were hard. But he didn’t feel connected to the young Cloud that sometimes screamed in the back of his mind. It was as if he was adrift in the timeline of his life: without true emotional connection to the past or tangible connection to the future. He felt lost, like he was holding a tiny lantern on a dark path where he couldn’t see what was ahead or behind. Cloud supposed that his former self might be ashamed of his behavior. But he’s broken—supposedly older and wiser, but trying to hide behind alcohol and the chip in his shoulder. It wasn’t right, and although he felt like he was losing his mind he still had enough sense to know it.

Frowning, he took a long sip of the alcohol and tried not to grimace as it burned all the way down. How had he known what to order, anyway? Cloud used to stare judgmentally at Seventh Heaven’s patrons: bleary eyed and emotional. They were weak, he’d once thought. His pride splintered as fire spread in his throat.

Cloud had never had alcohol before, but he knew that it made some people loose and happy and able to shed fears and anxieties for a time: living in a bar for a short while had taught him that. But Cloud wasn’t drinking to forget; he was drinking to feel. The ‘game’ Tifa tried to play with him in Costa Del Sol burned in his brain, making him frantically try to recall small details of his life and his relationship with her. Some things he remembered clearly, but the large gaps in his memory were terrifying. What scared him more than his inability to recall intimacies was the realization that the memories he could remember were more factual than anything. There was no emotion laced with the events of his past and it was unsettling, at best. Cloud could clearly imagine his wedding day, down to the detail of the lace on Tifa’s dress. But why were these memories devoid of feeling? Had he been nervous to marry her? Had he been excited to take her away from Nibelheim? Why couldn’t he remember how he’d felt? Fear nestled itself inside him like a disease wridden tick.

Exhaling, Cloud could smell the alcohol on his breath and the scent churned up visions from his
early teenage years. There had been a handful of times he’d been around Tifa and she’d smelled of whiskey from experimenting with Mr. Lockhart’s liquor. The girl suffered terribly under the weight of grief and the abusive way it manifested in her father’s behavior, trying to ease it the same way he did: with this burning substance that lit his throat on fire with each swig. His father-in-law was a rough man, full of bitterness and anger from the untimely death of his wife and subsequent disappointments. His increasingly uncontrolled drinking unchained his fury and released it upon Tifa, who was frightened and vulnerable. Both father and daughter had followed the siren’s song of liquor: hoping to find escape and ease their hearts. It never seemed to bring any comfort to either of them, but could it be different for Cloud?

To his annoyance, the bartender began attempting to make small talk. Ignoring his wedding band, she’d bat her eyelashes and flirt and giggle. He never indulged her, but she didn’t seem to notice.

Four refills later, Cloud was getting impatient. More than half an hour had passed and he didn’t even feel tipsy! Deep inside, he was aware of the mako’s incredible effects on his metabolism and that his enhancements were probably to blame for his inability to get drunk. Squeezing the glass angrily—though careful not to break it—Cloud tried to swallow this disappointment. He couldn’t even get drunk! What was there left for people like him?

Back then, all he’d wanted was to be her hero. But he’d left her behind.

What if he wasn’t enough? Earlier, he had wanted to tell her he’d protect her and that she didn’t need to worry, but his tongue felt swollen and the words stuck in his throat. Lies. Now, he was glad he’d never promised her happiness. All he could think about was how he’d abandoned her and his unborn baby in the most crime filled and dirty city on the planet. If he’d have been there, maybe his daughter would still be alive. Maybe he would’ve gotten the chance to feel her little body in his arms. He wouldn’t have to wonder what her face looked like or how he could’ve been there to help Tifa through her physical and emotional anguish.

Being ex-SOLDIER gave him the opportunity to be a hero with his superhuman abilities. He thought she’d be so proud of him, but it wasn’t enough to make her smile. When he was a boy, Cloud thought that adults always knew what they were doing since they were all older and wiser than he. But it seemed that he felt more lost than he ever had before. Did everyone grow up and keep the same insecurities that they had when they were young? Was he not the only one that felt this way? Try as he might to make progress, his feet were bound to the ground by gravity and insecurity.

The bartender had scrawled her PHS number with a heart on his receipt and his fist crumbled the paper in annoyance. A glance at the clock on the wall told him he was late in meeting the others at their rented room, but there were so many things weighing heavily on his heart that being punctual wasn’t really a high priority. They’d be aggravated with him, but it didn’t hurt his heart. Cloud kept his emotions hidden away in a seldom visited place inside him, where dust piled up like snow, veiling his genuine self from the outside. As far as he was concerned, it was his only defense against all that raged within. If the others saw the weakness lurking deep within him, surely they’d abandon him as their leader and companion. If Tifa knew just how broken he was, would she drift away from him, too?

Head lowered, Cloud shuffled out of the restaurant and disappeared into the crowd.
“Ain’t surprised you was duped by this ugly monstrosity. But what would you know ‘bout trustworthy people?”

“It’s nice to be lectured by the pinnacle of human character. It must get lonely up there on that pedestal of yours.”

The environment was harsh, even without the hostile air sparking between Cloud and Barret. Barret snapped at Cloud for recruiting, Cait Sith, another ‘useless’ party member. Cloud, defensive and irritated, fired back about ditching them to throw himself a pity party. Low blows were thrown back and forth and the rest of their group remained silent against the assault on their ears.

It was like listening to a pair of squabbling children. Tifa wasn’t sure if her two favorite boys would ever get along.

Everyone was annoyed and it wasn’t only due to the irritation surrounding the bickering. After being blamed for a string of murders in the Gold Saucer, their party had been banished to Corel Prison: a wasteland in the desert underneath the theme park. Apparently, witnesses described the murder as a ‘man with a gun arm’, and they’d all been in disbelief that Barret—even in his foul mood—could have done such a thing. Upon running into him near a hollowed out shack, he’d set them straight and let them know he was innocent. Apparently, Barret had heard the name Dyne floating from the mouths of the degenerate residents of the prison. If Dyne was alive and had received the same operation on his injured hand that Barret did, it didn’t look good for his friend. Hardship and grief could cause a man to do many things, but murder of blameless people was not something any sane person did, no matter their strife.

And so, Tifa kept a close eye on Barret. His eyes were distant: glazed with a sort of pain and longing she’d never seen in them before. Walking along the parched earth, they searched endlessly for Dyne. But she understood from Barret’s expression that although he’d found out his friend was still alive, that he understood that Dyne most likely was as dead inside as the handful of animal skeletons they’d passed. She couldn’t understand how people become so twisted by adversity that they could resort to meaningless violence. But then again, her own rage against the injustice of her life had led her to AVALANCHE and she had the blood of casualties upon her hands, too. But it wasn’t as terrible as Dyne’s murders, right? There was a purpose for the losses they caused and the crimes they committed. In the end, Tifa had always ended up wondering if the end would ever justify the means, even if they were rid of ShinRA. Perhaps an answer to such a question would always elude a small person like herself unless she was willing to admit that she may have been wrong.

Being reminded of Barret’s past, Tifa understood that she was far from the only one who’d been set adrift in life. Why couldn’t she just get a grip?

“Hey, Barret,” Tifa said, hoping to settle some of the electricity in the air. “Say we find Dyne and he isn’t responsible for the murders. Do you think he’d want to join us?”

He didn’t turn his head to look at her before growling his response. “Fat chance.”

“Who else could it be?” Yuffie asked, taking a moment’s break from her own complaints regarding the heat.

“What if it’s Sephiroth?” asked Red XIII. The arid air had made his nose dry and he licked it
“I recognized his scent back there—it was the same one that I smelled in the ShinRA building.”

“That’s why we’re here,” Cloud said in a clipped tone. “We’re looking for Sephiroth, not chasing after one of Barret’s buddies.”

Tifa sighed, trying to breathe through the irritation of the prickly heat rash that had broken out across her skin. A particularly strong gust of wind blew sand at their backs and it stung. Yuffie screeched and Barret cursed, fearful of sand messing with the interworkings of his gun attachment.

Aerith shook the sand from her red jacket before speaking up. “Dio was asking about something called the Black Materia. Anyone know what he was talking about?”

“I’m not sure,” Tifa answered. “He said something about Sephiroth having a tattoo of the number one, which we haven’t heard before.”

“Is it like Red’s tattoo?” Yuffie questioned. “Why does it say thirteen?”

Red XIII shrugged his shoulder and it amused Tifa how humanlike some of his gestures were.

Corel Prison was a rough place, both in climate and social temperament. She supposed that she would’ve been afraid to be walking around so plainly if she hadn’t been desensitized by living in Midgar. Muscles sore from endless monster fights and confrontations with thugs, Tifa hoped that they’d find Dyne soon. Observing the environment unsettled something deep in her, sending her heart fluttering. There weren’t many people in this run down area, but all of them were desperate and poor. There were mostly men, few women and hardly any children that she could see. Whole walls were missing from houses, leaving them subject to the harsh desert elements. A few haphazard belongings were strewn about, but it was clear that these people had next to nothing. Unwelcome memories pushed forward: memories of being pregnant and cold and alone, with a single candle burning to warm her hands after she stopped being able to afford electricity. Tifa recalled getting by on sneaking table scraps to eat from the patrons at her waitressing job and using the little gil she had to spend buying cheap sacks of rice and oats.

She understood desperation. She understood sadness and isolation.

But back in those days, Tifa had felt stagnant in the hustle and bustle of the slums: like a lone stone in the middle of a rushing river. Though misery had halted her steps forward, the active world of Midgar had still flowed on without her. Here, the desert was just as dry and hopeless as the people who lived within it. Signs of former prosperity littered the wild, open space. Broken down vehicles and large rusted pipework baked in the intensity of the sun. Rows of tiny, abandoned houses and trailers stood vacant against the dust clouds that blew in the dry wind. Roofless wooden shacks were covered in graffiti. She wondered what this place looked like before the Gold Saucer had robbed it of its identity. ShinRA’s destructive reaches went far beyond harming the earth. Tifa believed that in at least a small way, the company may have damaged the lives of everyone on Gaia—human or otherwise.

The sand gave way to course gravel that crunched under everyone’s boots as they neared a dirt road dotted with tire tracks. For the first time in a long time, Tifa wasn’t paying much attention to where they were going, letting herself be led along blindly. Instead, she let herself be absorbed in her thoughts. It was easy to see the places where the sun had baked the earth into hard clay and her feet felt solid underneath her when she stood upon such spots. Walking upon the clay was so much easier than walking on the sand. She knew that the adversity she’d faced in her past had toughened her up and molded her into a person that her five year old self would never have recognized. All along, Tifa had looked upon this transformation as a unfortunate side effect of circumstances.
beyond her control. She may no longer be soft like sand, but perhaps it was just what she needed to be able to walk through the current events of her life with any stability.

Day by day, it was becoming more apparent to her that even the worst things in this life may have something positive about them.

… … …

There was something very wrong with Dyne.

Tifa’s heart bled for Barret as he pleaded with the man who used to be his closest friend. Dyne had the same dead eyes her father had after Mama died and he’d slammed the door shut upon his relationship with his daughter. His voice held the same bitterness and venom that had seeped from Papa’s tongue so often. It was easy for anyone to tell that this was a man on the edge, but not a single one of them knew what to do. Not that Barret would let them interfere, anyway. Even Cloud had attempted to intervene on Barret’s behalf, unnerved by the way flippant way Dyne would shoot at their party member’s feet. They all seemed to sense that the man wasn’t messing around. Even Yuffie was spooked into silence, watching with wide brown eyes that never seemed to blink.

It was plain to see that Barret may not have been shocked by this transformation, but watching this broken man shattered something inside him. The words spitting from Dyne’s mouth stung like acid, further corroding the already strained relationship between them.

One sad thing about it all was how obvious some of Dyne’s physical features matched with Marlene’s. She saw the gentle shade of Marlene’s brown eyes in Dyne’s angry ones. The little girl and her father shared the same roundness of their ears, and even the setting of her eyebrows was the same. But the twisted things he was saying made heat rise in her chest. How could such a man deserve a precious little soul like Marlene? Something in her heart shouted a long-hidden inquiry: had Papa deserved her? He’d misguided her thoughts for so many years, taking advantage of her impressionable self-image and wounded heart. How many years had she spent thinking his grief was solely her fault? How many sleepless nights had she blamed herself for his rage, convinced it was all a result of her disobedience and worthlessness?

Dyne’s voice cut through her thoughts and turned her attention back to the argument in front of her.

“I want to destroy everything,” he hissed through gritted teeth. Punctuating his words with gunshots, he continued. “The people of this city, the city itself…the whole ugly world!”

Barret was silent as Dyne turned away from him. Tifa could almost hear his heart breaking in the quiet of the moment.

“I’ve got nothing left in this world. Corel, Eleanor, Marlene…everything has been taken from me.” Bitterness seeped from each syllable and the man’s shoulders slumped forward as he leered down into the canyon in front of him.

Tifa hadn’t realized the tears that had pooled in her eyes. Dyne wanted to die. He hated the world and everything in it. His wife was dead and he’d believed Marlene was gone, too. These thoughts had driven him to madness and violence. This man may have descended to this state because he believed Marlene was gone, but that wasn’t her fault. Papa had let himself be absorbed by his own grief. But while she had been a factor in his downward spiral, maybe it really wasn’t of her doing, either. Tears dripped down her cheeks, pooling at her chin. For the first time, maybe Tifa was finally starting to let herself be free of the heavy burdens of her childhood.

Overwhelmed by the situation and her own emotions, she shifted her gaze to Cloud, who seemed
ready to jump into action. His boots were planted to the earth in a wide stance and his hand was poised to draw the buster sword from its place upon his back if need be. His blue eyes held the confrontation in an unwavering stare, focused like a predator observing its prey. As the stale years of her late childhood had progressed, Papa’s previously good heart had rotted at the core. It seemed that Cloud, who had been through an unknown trauma in the past handful of years, was different. He may have a rougher exterior than ever before, but at his center, Cloud Strife was still good. No matter how much he quarreled with Barret or disliked him, here he was, ready to jump in at a moment’s notice to defend his life.

“Dyne,” Barret began, looking as if he wanted to reach out and touch his friend on the shoulder. He was wise enough to keep his distance. “Marlene…she’s still alive.”

Dyne turned to look over his shoulder, surprise breaking through his despair for a moment. A small panic rose inside her: that this man might come and claim her precious little girl, taking her beautiful Marlene out of her life forever. This moment was humbling. Tifa knew that technically, she had less of a rightful place in her life than Dyne and it was hard to admit. She’d met an infant Marlene shortly after the stillbirth of her daughter and it felt like it was meant to be: the baby had breathed life back into Tifa’s soul after Aria’s death and Cloud’s disappearance left her without hope. The vast desert around them reminded her of how dry and barren her heart had felt before the little girl swept in like a summer storm. But in the end, she wasn’t hers. Tifa had always known that. Barret had legally adopted Marlene before rumors of another man with a gun arm had ever reached his ears. He loved that baby fiercely, and it was hard for Tifa to imagine him giving her up to this madman.

“I found her in the flames,” Barret continued. “But she’s in Midgar now. Let’s go see her together, alright?”

“So, she’s still alive after all. Yes, take me there. Eleanor’s all alone in the Lifestream; I’ll take Marlene to her.”

Barret’s eyes widened, his mouth twisting with anger and disbelief. “Are you insane?!”

Turning to face Barret once again, Dyne held up his gun arm into firing position. “Marlene wants to see her mother, doesn’t she?”

He fired one shot, then another. Barret clenched his fist, heart aching as he came to understand that there was no way this could end well. Though he stood before him, his dear friend was long gone and nothing he could do or say could bring him back.

“Stop it, Dyne! I can’t die yet!”

“Oh yeah? Well, my life’s been over since then. Don’t you want to know how it feels?”

“Please, stop! I don’t want to fight you!”

But it was inevitable. The gunfight broke out and sent the rest of them ducking for cover in fear of a stray bullet. Cloud grabbed Tifa with one hand and Yuffie with the other, pulling them behind a crumbling brick wall. Aerith, Red XIII and Cait Sith joined them, ducking low and holding their breaths.

Dyne was a broken man. The circumstances of her tumultuous childhood had shattered and bruised her over and over, but until Cloud disappeared from her life, he had always been there to pick her up again. Somehow, he’d always been able to see the beauty in her broken place and help her stitch together the pieces of herself that had unraveled under the injustices she’d endured. After all, he
was the expert on such things. While Tifa had once been the treasured daughter of a well-to-
family, Cloud had always been a misfit. With her mother’s death, life had gone spiraling out of
control, but his existence had always been laden with sadness and suffering. The harshness that
humbled her had been a part of him since birth, and thus he’d always been able to handle hardship
better than she. But now, it was Cloud who was torn asunder. Could she sift through it all to find
the beauty hidden underneath?

As the gunfire rang out, Tifa’s heart pounded in her chest out of concern for her dear friend. They
had to do something!

“Cloud!” she cried, hoping he’d move to assist Barret. But instead, he mistook her concern for fear,
and held her close, shielding her further from any danger. Cloud moved to carefully peek over the
wall at the situation and she could hear his own heart thudding against the wall of his chest. At any
other time, she would have found his behavior encouraging, but with Barret in trouble all she could
think of was how unbearable life would be without him.

A male voice cried out, echoing in the nearby chasm, and the sound of bullet fire ceased. Everyone
carefully peered from their hiding places, desperate to see if Barret was still standing. Dyne had
fallen to his knees, with two visible wounds: one on his right shoulder and one on his left leg.
Panting, he raised himself up. Barret was shaking, but Tifa couldn’t tell whether it was from his
nerves or his emotions. He took a step forward to try once again to console his friend, but he froze
when Dyne’s voice ripped through the stillness.

“Back! Stay away from me!” he cried, limping toward the gorge. Breathing heavily, Dyne steadied
himself on a low stone wall. “…Where did I go wrong back then? I lost everything.”

Barret’s voice cracked with emotion, his shoulders squared and tense. “Is this the only way we can
resolve this, Dyne? Can’t we just—”

“I told you! I want to destroy everything, even myself.”

“An’ what ‘bout Marlene? What’s gonna happen to her?”

“She was so little back then; she wouldn’t know me if I came to see her. What difference does it
make? These hands are too stained to carry Marlene anymore, anyway.”

Those words pricked at Tifa’s heart like a rose’s thorn. Was she really any different? How many
injuries and deaths had she been responsible as a member of AVALANCHE? How foolish she had
been—blinded by rage and thirsty for justice. If Marlene knew the crimes that Tifa was guilty of,
what would she think? She didn’t know if she could handle such thoughts. All eyes were on Dyne
as he pulled off his necklace and tossed it to Barret.

“Give that pendant to Marlene. It was my wife’s. She should have her mother’s memento.”
Turning away, Dyne limped toward the cliffside. “She’s already four, huh? Listen…don’t ever
make Marlene cry, alright?”

“Dyne?”

He turned to face Barret once more, his heels on the very edge of the chasm. The ravine was so
deep, none of them could see the bottom from where they stood.

“Dyne, don’t!”

Raising his arms into a T pose, Dyne closed his eyes. Barret raced forward, hand outstretched in an
attempt to grab him, but it was too late. Dyne leaned backward, letting himself fall over the edge.
Screaming his friend’s name, Barret collapsed to his knees. Tifa ran from her hiding place to wrap her arms around him from behind, resting her head between his shoulder blades. Why was life so cruel?

“Dyne…me an’ you were the same.” He clenched his fist, squeezing a palm full of dirt and sand. “My hands ain’t any cleaner than yours. I shouldn’t be able t’carry Marlene, either.”

… … …

Cloud’s cry was muffled as he fell forward, snow filling his mouth. Behind him, the other boys jeered, words like needles in his tender flesh. He tried to push himself to his knees with wet, cold hands, but another shove sent him flying forward again. He tried not to panic, but Cloud was afraid they’d bloody his nose again and make his mother upset. He didn’t know where his books or lunch pail had gone, and it wouldn’t do well to flee for home before the school day even started. Blue eyes wild with fear, he tried to rise out of the snow bank once again, hot tears streaming down his round cheeks.

“Weakling!”

It was Jason’s voice, not the winter’s cold, that turned Cloud’s insides to ice.

Thomas joined next. “You’re pathetic! That’s probably why your Pop ain’t around. He was probably too ashamed of your ugly face to raise you!”

All he wanted was to be left alone. Cloud tried hard not to bother the other children, keeping his eyes on the ground and staying quiet, but it never seemed to change their opinion of him. At six years of age, he’d come to understand that there was something wrong with him. He was different from the others and so he deserved to be tortured. The only thing that saved him from this sort of suffering daily was his friendship with Tifa. When she held his hand as they walked to and from school, the bullies never bothered him. Why did she have to be sick today?!

Cloud couldn’t stifle the whimper that tore from his throat as he felt himself being lifted by the back of his shirt collar. The snow on his eyelashes melted quickly from the heat of his tears and he felt his limbs trembling, anticipating pain in some form or another. Cloud’s premature birth had left him with weak lungs. Physical activity, stress and cold weather were a recipe for trouble, and the boy found himself quietly gasping for air as he endured his assault. Though close in age to his assailants, Cloud had always been smaller in stature, which only encouraged his bullies. Jim laughed as he pulled Cloud upright so that he could watch as Thomas opened his lunch pail, stealing his bread and cheese. The older boy took a bite of the bread before making a face and spitting it onto the frosted cobblestone of town square.

“Gross!” he cried, wiping his mouth. “It doesn’t even taste like bread! What is this?”

Cloud knew better than to answer. Mom made bread out of oat flour rather than wheat flour, since it was all they could afford. It hurt to watch the food she worked tirelessly to prepare and provide for him be tossed to the ground. He doubted his bullies knew what it was like to go hungry, but there was nothing Cloud could do about it. Eyes pooled with tears, he could barely see where his lunch pail lay sideways on the ground.

“Poor mama Strife can’t even get you anything decent to eat! Where’d you get those shoes? You didn’t steal them, did you?” Jason tittered.

“Ain’t so tough without little Tifa watching over you, huh?”

… … …
The sandstorm had come upon them quickly and without warning. Covering mouths and noses, the crew hastily had taken shelter inside one of the enormous discarded pipes that lay strewn about the area. The wind had felt like sandpaper on their skin, so no one complained when Cloud had led them to their makeshift shelter. But it wasn’t just the desperation of their current situation that kept his team subdued and quiet.

Witnessing a man take his own life had shaken each one of them to the core and they all seemed to be stunned into somber silence. Fortunately, the particular pipe in which they were staying was at least thirty meters long and had a diameter wide enough for him to stand at full height, preventing them from being packed tightly together. Red XIII chose to stay close to the mouth of the pipe and watch the storm surge on with a powered down Cait Sith at his side. Yuffie had her legs drawn up to her chest and rested her head upon her knees, eyes distant. The Cetra seemed serene as she combed the sand out of her long hair, but Cloud could tell by even the subtlest of her movements that she was disturbed as well. His wife was curled into his side with her head slumped against his bicep, limp like an uprooted weed. Barret was furthest away from the rest, sitting cross-legged and hunched over. He held Eleanor’s pendant in his hand, occasionally running his thumb over its smooth surface.

What a coward Dyne had been, giving up like that while Marlene was still alive.

He was scum, and Cloud couldn’t understand how Barret could be so grief-stricken over his departure. Didn’t he see that he had nothing to do with that man’s madness? Wouldn’t the world be better off without someone as pathetic and weak as Dyne? He felt like snorting in disgust, but something inside Cloud held him back. That irritating, chilling little voice that called him a hypocrite for thinking the way he did. Blinded by his own insecurity, Cloud refused to face the fact that he was just as broken as Dyne, wrapped up in grief and fear after losing something dear to him. His inner turmoil prevented him from being able to summon the empathy needed to justify Dyne’s actions. But slowly, this truth came seeping into Cloud’s hyper-sensitive core.

Sometimes, in the stillness of the night, Cloud would fret over his situation. He felt frightened and frail, but he’d die before he’d ever let anyone know. It was only a temporary thing. He was strong; he was a SOLDIER, first class! If he was weak, he was worthless. Childhood peers had taught him that by inflicting both physical and emotional anguish. He’d left home and joined SOLDIER to prove he was strong and that he had a purpose. He’d impressed Tifa’s father enough to convince him to marry her, right? It was all thanks to his own strength that she was beside him now. He supposed he should be thankful, but the thought dried up inside him like puddle in the sun.

“I never want to see anything like that again,” Tifa whispered into his skin. “I wish there was something we could’ve done to help him.”

“Barret tried his best, but there was no convincing him. At least his example can keep us all in check with our own behavior.” Cloud leaned slightly into Tifa, shifting into a more comfortable position. “I mean, here we all are, bent on some sort of revenge against ShinRA. It’s best to reign ourselves in before we end up like that guy.”

For all the problems Cloud thought he had, he could shamefully admit that he was relieved to see a man more far gone than himself. It wasn’t that he wanted anyone to suffer. Most of the time, Cloud had so much conflict raging inside him that thinking anything through clearly had often been as difficult as finding one’s way through a labyrinth in the dark. The discovery that there was someone more hopeless than he was gave Cloud confidence that maybe he could still heal from his strange state of being. With the right guide, perhaps there was hope for him yet.

“I always wondered about Marlene’s real parents. I guess it was mostly because I didn’t know
what I would say if one day, she asked me if I was her mother and I had to tell her the truth. Barret always planned on being honest with her about not being her real dad.”

“As if it wasn’t obvious.”

“Cloud!” she chided in a whisper.

A smirk was his only response. The wind howled as the sandstorm raged outside and Tifa thought that she’d probably be frightened if she had been waiting out the storm alone. She smiled as Red XIII sneezed when a gust blew a sand cloud against his muzzle.

“There was something Dyne and Barret said that bothered me,” Tifa said, lowering her eyes to study her worn boots. “Do you think my hands are too dirty to hold Marlene, too?”

… … …

_The little girl was miserable._

_She’d woken up at three in the morning, as Tifa was finally retiring for the night. He could hear her whining in discomfort before vomiting onto the bedroom floor. Barret had tried consoling her, but Marlene cried for Tifa until her little chest shook with the force of her hiccoughs. Cloud knew that his wife had had a particularly stressful day, yet she abandoned the comfort of her bed to walk the girl slowly around the bar space, cooing softly into her ear. Something altruistic in Cloud tore him from their bed to provide his silent company._

_He watched Tifa pace slowly around, rocking her shoulders in a swaying motion as she rubbed soothing circles on Marlene’s back. Taking care of a child seemed like exhausting, thankless, endless work. He supposed the four year old was a typical kid, since he’d never really been around many children since he was one himself. As the weeks went by and Cloud became accustomed to watching Barret and Tifa give so much of themselves to the many needs of this tiny person, he wasn’t sure why people ever wanted to have children in the first place. They never seemed to get a moment’s peace and any freedom they’d once enjoyed seemed to be tethered in place by a ball and chain in a little pink dress._

Eventually, Marlene began to settle against her caregiver. Her round little cheek was flattened against Tifa’s shoulder, eyes heavy with fatigue. Dark lashes closed against her pale skin as Tifa hummed a tune he’d heard her play on the piano dozens of times when they were small. Watching from the shadows, Cloud studied the way Marlene’s little arms wrapped around Tifa’s neck as if she was the only thing that mattered in this world. Maybe there was something he’d been missing. Maybe all the trouble and selflessness of raising a child was the point of it all.

_It was apparent there, in the dim light of the bar, that the peace upon Marlene’s face was justification for Tifa’s sacrifice. The concept that one person could mean the entire world to a child made Cloud wonder if his own daughter would’ve cried for him the way Marlene cried for Tifa._

… … …

“No,” Cloud said softly, looking down to meet Tifa’s inquiring eyes. “No other hands deserve to hold her more than yours.”

A gentle smile smoothed across her features, but that gnawing feeling returned to his chest again. Tifa was a wonderful surrogate mother to a child who needed her, but Cloud couldn’t help thinking that he was way too messed up to deserve holding his own baby. He was certain that was why fate had taken her from him before he could even steal a glance of her little face to remember her by.
“Good,” she said, closing her eyes. “Because my arms ache to feel her again.”

Cloud wrapped his arm around her shoulder. It had unnerved him to hear Dyne speak so easily about taking his daughter’s life, even if he knew the man was unstable. He imagine Dyne had been a decent guy until Corel burned and it was sad to see what he’d become. Cloud had always known his father died defending him and his mother. Would they one day have to tell Marlene that they watched her father willingly depart from this world, even though he knew she was still alive? When he’d first met Marlene and her adoptive father, he’d always wondered how a brute like that ended up with that lighthearted little one. Why would the universe trust a person like him with an innocent little life? But now, he understood. Barret deserved that joy because he had risked his own life to rescue her and continued to make her care a priority in his life. Every time he’d seen Barret interact with her, he’d always seemed so confident as her parental figure. Thinking of having a child himself made him feel at a loss of how to behave, since he’d never had a father around to raise him. He didn’t think he would have made a good father; maybe that’s why he no longer was one. Cloud was sure that the death of his baby had been fate’s way of punishing him for abandoning her and her mother almost five years ago. Happiness seems to be something one earned instead of a gift one was given by no merit of their own.

There was a crackle of static that echoed through the wide pipe. Cloud looked over to see Aerith fiddling with the small crank-up radio they’d been using each night to see if they could pick up any broadcasts regarding ShinRA’s actions or Sephiroth’s whereabouts. They all sat in silence for a while and listened as she tried to tune the radio, but only white noise came through.

“Barret?” Tifa called softly. “I’m sure Marlene will be happy to have her mother’s pendant.”

“Yeah…” he answered in a distracted tone. “‘Gonna give it t’her next time we see her. I know she’s young and all, but she deserves to know ‘bout her mama.”

There was silence for a moment, aside from the howling of the wind and the crackling of radio static. Cloud could see the question waiting on Tifa’s lips, but he never thought she’d ask it.

“Are you going to tell her about Dyne, too? You’ll have to explain that you’re not really her papa, and it’ll flip her world upside down.”

They were all surprised by what happened next. Barret held up the pendant as it dangled on its chain, grin plastered across his face. It wasn’t forced or fake, but the most genuine smile Tifa had seen on him in the handful of years they’d spent together.

“You kiddin’?” he answered with a small laugh. “Marlene’s tougher than nails and smart as a whip. She’d figure it all out and never forgive me if I didn’t tell ‘er. She’ll take it in stride, because she’ll know that her father and mother loved her as much as you an’ I do. I’ll tell her to let the pendant remind her of that she’s lucky enough to have parents who love her both in heaven and on Gaia. Dyne may have been her father, but she calls me Papa and that’s who I am.”

“Are you going to tell her that her real dad was a psycho?” Yuffie asked, cheek still resting upon her knee.

It was Cloud’s turn to remark. “He should. It would make her feel better knowing her adoptive dad is slightly less messed up than her biological father.”

Barret’s hearty laugh echoed through the pipe. “Hell, Spikey’s actually right for once!”

“Dyne was suffering, but at least he’s at peace now,” Aerith said.

The sound of her voice made Cloud realize how uncharacteristically quiet she’d been since they’d
left the scene of Dyne’s suicide. Giving up on the radio, she placed it down before rising to move to Barret’s side. She took the pendant from him, turning it over in her hands.

“The design in the metal looks like the sun,” she said quietly. “It’s pretty.”

“Yeah, ‘cause the sun is comin’ out on ol’ Barret now! After so much rain, I’m startin’ to see the light.”

Tifa rolled her eyes playfully, readying herself for another one of Barret’s lopsided inspirational speeches. They were always entertaining because of they’d show the depth of his heart and highlight the revelations of his mind. The man was always sort of clumsy about expressing himself, as Cloud was, but the difference between them was that it never stopped Barret from trying. He could care less whether he sounded ridiculous.

“I feel it stronger than ever, now! We gonna take down ShinRA fer good—it’s my destiny! Rage and bitterness seemed to eat Dyne from th’inside, but that ain’t gonna happen to me. I’m doing this for Corel. For Myrna, Eleanor, Marlene, an’ the Dyne I used to know back then. For Jessie and Biggs and Wedge…for their honor!”

Aerith clapped her hands together, bangles jingling. “For the planet!”

“For Wutai!” cheered Yuffie.

Nanaki joined with a smile. “For freedom!”

“For happiness,” Tifa said softly, reaching up to gently cup Cloud’s cheek.

“You got it!” Barret bellowed, his giddiness spreading among his comrades like warmth from the sun. “What happened t’ Dyne was bad, but it jus’ made me more determined than ever. There’s a reason I survived that day an’ I’m gonna set things right! No more doubts weighing me down, I’m breakin’ these shackles!”

Their leader hadn’t realized that a small smile had formed upon his features.

Maybe it didn’t matter what weighted his heart like a stone. Maybe the problems Cloud faced would be insignificant if he could find a way to move on. Was Barret overcoming his emotional baggage with apathy over his failures or was bravery needed to reach such a state of vindication? Barret had received closure and was finally ready to move forward from things of the past that clung to him like a tattered garment. As much as he resented the man for a handful of things, Cloud found himself envying his ability to break his own chains instead of waiting for someone to come along and free him. He couldn’t stand the thought that he was weaker than someone like Barret.

Was Cloud capable of tearing himself free from his demons?

“For our future,” Cloud said, placing his hand over Tifa’s.
Fragmenting

Nibelheim normally enjoyed mostly temperate summers. The cool, dry breeze from the mountains made the heat bearable and the warm season wholly enjoyable. But sometimes, the winds blew from the south, bringing stifling humidity with them. The heat seemed to multiply then, climbing alongside the barometer. When this happened, thunderstorms always followed to break the trend of oppressive heat and sweep away the murky air. Today was one of those days.

Tifa cried out as a boot collided with the small of her back, sending her hurtling forward toward the grass. She attempted to let the momentum carry her into a front handspring, but her palms slid along the dewy blades and she crashed into the earth chin first. Master Zangan’s voice sounded, most likely asking if she was alright, but she barely heard it over her heart beating in her ears. Everything was wrong. Cloud had left their village a handful of weeks ago, traveling to Midgar and join SOLDIER and fulfill his dreams while she had no choice but to endure life under her father’s brutal reign. She supposed she should’ve been happy for him and felt wicked for wishing he was back in this dead end place, but it was hard to see past her own crippling loneliness and the hopelessness that threatened to swallow her. Cloud promised he’d come back for her, but whether that was months or years or decades from now, she had no way of knowing. Climbing to her shaky feet, Tifa gasped for air before trying to swallow back a frustrated sob. Hopping back into fighting stance, she took in the sight of her opponent. Master Zangan was always solid as a stone when he fought, and not only in the strong positioning of his limbs and neck. His aging face, usually so full of expression, was utterly unreadable during battle. It reminded her of the faded letters carved into the stone on ancient tombstones at the rear of the little village cemetery where Mama was buried.

Still catching her breath, Tifa lunged forward into a series of punches and her heart leapt as her fist brushed the sleeve of her teacher’s sparring tunic. Without meaning to, she made the mistake of flicking her eyes upward toward his face in that moment. She wasn’t sure what she’d expected to find there: perhaps praying that she’d find excitement and approval on his features, for never before had she come so close to landing a hit on him. His eyes, almost as pale as her best friend’s, were startling against the backdrop of grey storm clouds. Was the love of her life really going to come back for her after living such an exciting life in the largest city on Gaia? Would he forget about her?

Would she ever see his blue, blue eyes again?

Her teacher continued to block her advances, eyes boring down into her wine-colored ones. Tifa knew he was intimidating her, but she couldn’t help but succumb to his oppressive glare. In half a second, Master Zangan caught her fist in his palm and whirled her around, pinning her right arm against her back while restraining her left arm with his own. Her mind scrambled to recall the proper technique to escape such a hold, but visions of a freckled smile from a certain blonde kept her mind from focusing upon anything but how impossible it would be to carry on if she never saw him again. Without him, she’d have to endure Papa’s drunken aggressions and harsh words forever. While the angry press of his fingers into her skin left marks that usually disappeared in a week or two, the bruises his words left on her heart never healed. Instead of struggling, Tifa let herself fall limp in her teacher’s arms. Zangan gently released his hold, keeping a supportive arm on her shoulder.

Hanging her head, she chuckled softly. “I almost got you.”

“You may have landed a hit if you weren’t so upset.”
Turning her face up toward his, her eyebrows pressed themselves together. “How did you know? I didn’t say anything.”

“You say more with your face than you ever do with your words.” It was Zangan’s turn to let out a quiet laugh, his smile spreading his grey beard outwards in a way that Tifa was so familiar with. “Don’t trust your opponent to know that you’re feeling anything but confidence.”

Somehow, Zangan always seemed to know what she was thinking. Aside from Cloud and his mother, her teacher was the only person who ever was willing to listen to the struggles of her heart. But the older man was different than Cloud and Claudia—and even different than Mama had been—in the method with which he came to understand his student. The man seemed to listen to the silent expressions of her feelings: in the movement of her arms, perhaps, or in the way she’d breathe. Occasionally, she’d indulge Zangan with her personal matters, but it always felt strange because her father had treated this sort of thing as irritating—an unnecessary. Sharing the details of her day with an adult man was something Tifa had come to feel ashamed to do, even though Master was always patient and kind. Thankfully, he had come to be able to read her like a book and understood her better than most people in her life. Vocalizing the heaviness of her heart was never something she’d been proficient at, but with him, she didn’t need to be.

Unfortunately, this was proving not to be very convenient in the context of sparring.

“How do I do that?”

“By exercising two things: faith in your skills and perfecting your mask.”

“My mask?”

“That’s right,” he said.

Turning to walk the quarter mile back to the village, he beckoned her with a smile and the flick of his wrist. Sweat beaded along his hairline, threatening to drip down into his bushy, grey eyebrows. The low rumble of thunder turned her eyes upward, watching the lightning flash within the cloud cover as she walked forward. The violent beauty of the brewing storm above the timberline may have made her gasp with pleasure if her heart hadn’t already begun to sink with the knowledge that her session with Zangan was drawing to a close.

“Watching your body language—not just your expression—told me everything I needed to know about how you were feeling. Your distraction, frustration, and sadness are like giant bullseyes to your opponent. If your confidence is shaken, it will be almost impossible to win a fight, no matter your skill level.”

Tifa looked down at her feet as she shuffled along beside him, face pink from the exertion of their spar and the suffocating wet heat in the air. “But how can I just make those feelings go away?”

“You can’t, for your emotions are as much a part of you as your skin or your hair. A knight wears heavy armor not in an attempt to replace his flesh with steel, but to protect his sensitive, vulnerable body. Learning to erect a mask of serenity allows you to cover your face, which reflects the soft parts of your hear. Your mask makes you impenetrable to your foe. Let your face, your limbs, and your core put forth the appearance of a stone, featureless and blank. It’s the best way to protect your heart and body from your enemies.”

At home, Tifa had sprawled out on the back porch, listening to the cicadas drone as the storm slowly rolled in. It was hard to breathe since the air was so heavy. The sweat that dotted her entire body was cooled instantly by the rising wind that shook the tops of the trees, making their hiss join
that of the cicadas. A shiver ran over her body from head to toe and she closed her eyes, trying to imagine how to construct a mask that would thwart her father’s most foul accusations.

… … …

They’d been walking southward through the jungle for over a day, and the heat (and insects) were starting to take a toll on AVALANCHE. The air was hazy with humidity: the morning fog leaving midday only to return with the setting of the sun. Exhausted from over a dozen battles with monsters that morning, there wasn’t much in the way of conversation. Even Aerith, who usually worked with Tifa to brighten up the crew’s spirits with some light hearted banter, was trying not to pant from exertion and overheating. Tifa liked to wear her hair down. Taking up a ‘boyish’ hobby like martial arts had made her feel empowered, but also insecure, and leaving her long locks free made her feel like she could maintain her femininity. Thus, it was rare for her to tie back her ebony tresses. But now, it was pulled into a ponytail to keep as many strands as possible from sticking to the sweat on her face and neck. She didn’t feel beautiful in the slightest.

But Aerith still looked lovely, somehow. Tifa could feel the beads of sweat dripping down the small of her back and there was blood crusted under her fighting gloves where her knuckles had split during their last fight. There was dirt on her knees and smudged across one shoulder and the bust of her tank top. The pink wasn’t marred or damp at all, nor did auburn hair look frizzy or disheveled. If Tifa didn’t believe there was something otherworldly about Aerith before, she surely would now. Since Mama died before she was old enough to inherit the secrets of feminine grace and mystique, she always felt a bit inadequate and disadvantaged when it came to having womanly wisdom and etiquette. Aria would’ve been lost! Maybe Aerith could help her out with Marlene when she was old enough.

Tifa was so exhausted it was all she could do to keep from groaning as she walked along. Everyone had become clumsy with fatigue, but not all decided to hold their tongue.

“Where th’hell is this place? An’ why did we get outta the car?” Barret bellowed.

Of course, Yuffie could never pass up the chance to complain. “Yeah! At least it had air conditioning.”

“And zero frogs,” Cait Sith interjected.

Ahead of them, Cloud paused and pulled a worn map from the pocket of his fatigues. Tifa stepped beside him to glance down at where he was tracking their path with his pointer finger. His eyes were focused, expression taut with concern. As much as he tried to hide the way the team’s criticisms shook his confidence, his wife could see it. As hard as he tried to wear his ‘mask’, it didn’t fool her.

“We can’t drive the buggy through the jungle, guys,” Cloud sighed. A drop of sweat slid down the bridge of his nose and he wiped it away with the back of his hand. “The map says we’re within a mile of Gongaga. It looks like there’s a stream nearby. Let’s take a break there.”

The brook wasn’t too far off the path. Red XIII almost ran to the water, lapping up greedy mouthfuls while the others plopped themselves to rest on a log or take out their canteens. Tifa made her way to the water’s edge, her reflection wavering in the slow-moving current. After removing her gloves, she stooped to wash the blood off her knuckles and fingers. It was disorienting, and she had to stop and stare at her hands because she could scarcely believe that this person fighting monsters in the middle of a tropical jungle was actually her. Her fourteen year old self had imagined being married to Cloud, living a quiet life raising their children in their modest seaside home by the time she was twenty. At eighteen, she’d prayed that she would be able to
make enough money in the next few years with her new business to help Barret raise enough money to put Marlene into pre-school. Never once did she imagine she’d be running around the planet on a dangerous wild goose chase.

Cupping water in her palms, she splashed her face and gasped with the relief of the coolness on her skin. Turning her face upward, Tifa realized she’d almost forgotten to take in the beauty of her surroundings. The songs of the tropical birds were as beautiful and diverse as the exotic flowers that dotted the trees and canopy. It was as if she had been on auto pilot and had suddenly woken up to the opportunity she had been presented with. Escaping Midgar and seeing the world had been dreams of hers, but so was understanding herself better. Maybe this messy situation would give her some insight into how to fix the broken parts of her—and hopefully Cloud, too.

She supposed that she must have looked silly there, squatting at the side of the stream and staring up at the dappled light that trickled through the thick tree cover. But the realization dawned upon her that perhaps she had strayed a bit from her master’s teachings. Instead of erecting a mask in front of her enemies alone, she seemed to have one permanently hiding her true face. Tifa was so practiced at wearing a mask as a shield that it made her easily able to identify the masks of others. The flower girl was a mystery, though. She was one person that baffled Tifa because it seemed impossible to tell whether or not she was being genuine in her happiness or if it was a cover for something deeper.

Standing up, Tifa turned her head in search of Aerith. She stood near the pathway, eyes bright with what seemed to be wonder at the beauty of the world around them. But the way she bit her lip made Tifa’s chest constrict with a strange tightness.

… … …

There was a faint scent of ash in the air, infiltrating the pleasant odor of damp earth and foliage that the dense jungle had offered. Cloud doubted that anyone else, except for Red XIII perhaps, could smell it. A shiver ran up his spine and tingled down his limbs before it weaved into his core. His instincts were set on edge. The scent of charred wood and earth summoned terrors of his home being devoured by smoke and flame, his mother limp and lifeless, feelings of helplessness and paralyzing fear…

The whispers inside him seemed excited, despite his solemn reminiscing. If Cloud was honest with himself, he’d admit that it wasn’t truly the map that kept him on the correct path to their destination, but he’d check it occasionally to be sure. There was something inside his being that remembered these obscure dirt paths through the high grasses and tropical woodlands. Something was filling his chest with a sort of positive anxiety as they approached what seemed to be a clearing. Why did his feet know which path to walk? Why was his heart yearning to reach Gongaga? He didn’t recall ever being there before. Was this what Hojo had been talking about? Maybe something really was calling him. But what?

Upon reaching the large clearing, the team gasped at the sight before them. A looming structure stood in the middle of the flat expanse, trembling in the heart of the midday sun. The building seemed as if it had once had a rounded top, but the ceiling had been blown out, like a broken egg with half of its shell missing. Scattered around the large, flat space were over a dozen destroyed buildings. Some had a wall or two standing, but most of them were little more than their cement foundations. Cloud led the way and AVALANCHE followed the path, which was now gravel, into what was left of the enormous building. Broken pipework was exposed, along with metal twisted by heat and force. Some of the floor grating was still intact, but most of it had been blown into a hundred pieces scattered amongst the towering piles of debris. There were large toppled cylinders of steel, thick rubber hoses, and metal coils scattered about. Wiring of all colors and thicknesses
was strung about like haphazard party décor, swinging lazily in the occasional breeze.

Cloud knew right away that it had been a mako reactor. He’d certainly been in enough of them to know what they looked like. The smell of raw mako, which made his insides curdle and stomach lurch, still lingered in the air. There was something so eerie about this place, and he knew that each one of them felt unnerved by the way they kept crowded together. Cloud had assumed that Yuffie would’ve taken this opportunity to scavenge the area for material, but even she hung close to Tifa while loosely gripping Red XIII’s mane. It was a rare moment of relative silence among the six of them. Two pieces of metal clanged softly together as the wind made them sway, almost sounding like a solemn little bell in the quiet.

Before long, the sound of a helicopter approached. The red ShinRA logo painted on the side had them scrambling for cover among the rubble. After it landed in the clearing outside, Cloud closed his eyes and tried to focus all his attention upon hearing the conversation being had by the approaching voices. It wasn’t the easiest thing to do with Cait Sith’s enormous belly swelling into his back and Barret’s sweaty shoulder pushing into his cheek. He recognized both voices immediately: Tseng and Scarlet. They had come to the reactor searching for something called a ‘huge materia’. After a brief glance at the state of the facility, Scarlet knew they wouldn’t find it here. She told Tseng that finding such a materia would give them the capacity to construct grand weaponry, which was disturbing to team AVALANCHE. If their enemies were to find it, what exactly would they be up against? Cloud had to make sure that they located this huge materia before ShinRA did.

They were gone almost as quickly as they came, to everyone’s relief. Cloud winced at the sudden sound of Tifa, Aerith and Red XIII crashing out of their hiding place behind a thick metal sheet Tifa had been holding up in front of them.

“Oops, sorry,” she said, flashing a sheepish smile. “It slipped out of my fingers.”

Aerith looked alarmed. “Did you hear that? What could they be making a weapon for?”

“To fashion a weapon against Sephiroth?”

“Th’hell would that do?”

“What kind of weapon could they make that would be able to withstand that guy? Did you see what he did to that Midgar Zolom?!”

Cloud quietly listened, pondering the same thoughts, before speaking. “We heard that Sephiroth was searching for the ‘black materia’. Is it possible that both he and ShinRA looking for the same thing?”

“You think the black materia could be the ‘huge’ materia?” Tifa asked, brushing the dirt from her knees. “It must be really powerful.”

Yuffie puffed out her cheeks as she looked skyward in thought. “No, I think they’re different. The black materia sounds specific, a huge materia can be any materia, as long as it’s big.”

“If th’huge materia is just powerful ‘cause of its size an’ the black materia is of a normal size, what would Sephiroth want with it? What’s it do?”

Cloud narrowed his eyes as he glanced at the destruction around them. “Whatever it does, it can’t be good if he wants it.”

………
She had stopped where a narrow footpath branched off from the dirt road to Gongaga Village. It led to a small cemetery—grey grave markers nestled between overgrowing grasses and ferns. Tifa apologized for slowing their progress, but there was something about the cluster of graves that called her to them with a sort of magnetic sadness, heavy and deep. Cloud had met her eyes and agreed at once, deciding to wander about the small space by her side.

Seeing the neat writing on each of the stones reminded her of the only one she’d ever spent any time in front of: her mother’s. Though she had long come to terms with Lia’s passing, guilt grazed over her heart. On her wedding day, she’d knelt in front of Mama’s grave and promised to come back and visit. It had been five years since she’d made that vow, and she had never had the means to return to Nibelheim. Part of her realized that while her mother’s body lay underneath her marble grave stone, her spirit was not there. But Tifa wanted to keep that promise, just in case. She supposed it couldn’t hurt; but if her mother really was there, then she probably wouldn’t recognize her daughter in the slightest. Leaving with Cloud for Midgar and having to survive there on her own had changed her so dramatically, both on the inside and out.

“Cloud, look,” Tifa said, gently reaching to wrap her fingers around his forearm and tug him closer. “They all died on the same day.”

Tilting his head, Cloud inspected the stones. Each one passed away on the same date three years ago and the discovery left him feeling unnerved. “There must’ve been some sort of accident.”

Tifa squatted beside one particular stone, running her fingers along the letters of an epitaph. In a solemn voice, she read it out loud. “Noa Dorough. Twenty eight years old. The explosion took you from our lives, but nothing can take you from our hearts.”

“The explosion? Do you think it’s referring to the mako reactor?”

“It must be.”

The couple spent a few quiet minutes reading the names of the victims of the reactor accident, reflecting on the harrowing fact that ShinRA’s reaches destroyed lives in even a remote place such as Gongaga.

“Do you think Nibelheim has a section of the graveyard like this now?” Tifa asked quietly, reaching to brush a stray branch of a fern away from the face of a stone. “You said Sephiroth killed everyone when our home burned. Your mom, my dad…everyone. All bearing the same death date on their grave stones.”

Swallowing hard, Cloud blinked back visions of flames licking the sky and tried to suppress memories of the sounds of screaming that were drowned out by the crackling of the fire and the hissing of burning wood. “I suppose it might, now, if anyone bothered to erect grave markers for them.”

Mom.

He frowned, images flooding forth without order or reason. Brain tingling, he pictured his mother, her jet black hair pulled back with twine at the base of her neck. She’d fuss over his scraped knees and chin, but always cut up melon cubes for him to snack on while she cleaned and bandaged his cuts. While she’d mildly scold him for his horseplay, there was always boundless love in her deep brown eyes. He made sure to hug her with his sticky fingers before running off to play again.

Wait. His mind was trying to reason that something was wrong, but his heart told him otherwise. His mother…
“I know it’s selfish,” Tifa began, unaware of Cloud’s internal chaos. “But if we get the chance, do you think we can visit home? I want to make gravestones for Brian and Claudia if no one had any made. I’d like to pay my respects to my parents’ graves and I’m sure you would, too.”

Cloud blinked at his wife as the names of her father and his mother rolled off her tongue. Claudia? He remembered her long, blonde ponytail swinging as she hung washed wool to dry on the laundry line. Mom’s vibrant blue eyes reminded him of the sky on the summer days that they’d spent walking together, gathering wildflowers in the meadow. The hands that worked tirelessly making clothing and chopping firewood had always held his with tenderness, especially when he suffered from illness. His heart began to thud in his chest, thoughts becoming murky and turbid with doubt. Stifling the overwhelming sense of isolation and loneliness that came with such uncertainty, Cloud tried his best to pull himself back into the present.

“Yes, of course.”

He took her hand and she gave it a little squeeze, enjoying his attention. In a spontaneous bout of playfulness, she raised herself on her toes to plant a lightning-fast kiss on the bridge of his nose. The resulting momentary smile that tugged at his lips gave her hope.

“It’ll be hard to see Nibelheim leveled to the ground when we get there,” Tifa said, eyes lowering to study the exposed screws on Cloud’s pauldron. “I honestly don’t know how I’ll react or what way my grief will manifest itself. But I think that it’ll all be alright in the end, since I have you with me. No one else can understand the loss of our home like you and I can.”

“It’s still so fresh in my mind. Maybe it would give us some closure to say goodbye to Nibelheim together.”

“I feel like that’s the only way I could possibly bear it.”

“Yeah.” Cloud absentmindedly raised his palm to cup the back of her head. “Don’t worry. After all we’ve been through, I’m sure we can take something like that on together.”

Tifa let her forehead rest against his chest for a moment, letting the idea creep into her heart that maybe she could start to lower her mask around Cloud. She wanted so badly to trust him completely once more. It would take such strength to do so—trusting anyone with all of the vulnerable parts of her had always been hard for her, but never with her husband. It was easy to feel caught between the guilt of hiding the tender areas of her heart and the fear of exposing those wounds to more possible trauma. His scent, familiar and at the same time a little foreign, relaxed her.

Cloud led her back to the road and the team followed the crude wooden signs for Gongaga, continuing their trek north. There was no village gate or even a town square, just a cluster of sad little huts and tents, crudely constructed, almost as if they were temporary structures instead of people’s homes. Tifa was reminded instantly of the slums, where people lived in squalor and poverty and had become nasty and spiteful as a result. But the residents of Gongaga were exactly the opposite. They smiled at their party as they walked past. Women waved from where they were stringing laundry across a line to dry and men called out in greeting from their sawing table or garden. A small gaggle of children shuffled along to their ‘classroom’ in a large lean-to with a thatched roof where their teacher waited for them to return from their lunch break.

According to the dates on the grave stones, the reactor exploded three years ago. It seemed that Gongaga had actually been located down the hill, where the reactor was. At least that’s what the map said. But it looked like after the tragedy occurred, the remaining population had fled up the hill to resettle in a haphazard community that seemed more like a camp than a little town. Tifa
couldn’t help but wonder how many people lived in the village before the explosion.

“I wonder if they have a shop,” Red XIII wondered aloud.

“Yeah, we need to restock our Maiden’s Kiss potions after Tifa kept letting herself get turned into a frog!”

“Hey!” Tifa objected. “I gave you my ribbon to keep you from that, Yuffie! If you didn’t have that, you’d have been ‘frogged’ just as many times as Aerith and I.”

Deciding to ask, Aerith called out to a woman who was laying fresh herbs and lavender upon a flat stone to be dried by the sun. She pointed in the direction of a tiny wooden structure a little ways down the path and the Cetra smiled in thanks. But before the party could get very far, a man called out in their direction, waving an arm and hustling toward them. His grey hair was slicked back behind his ears and there were lines from age around his eyes and in the corners of his mouth.

"Excuse me, young man!"

Cloud stopped and turned to acknowledge him. It was strange to watch someone refer to her husband in such a manner. Even though Tifa had known him since she was scarcely a year old (and he only two), Cloud had never seemed like a young man. The way he’d carried himself, approached problems, and planned for his future made him seem like an old man in a child’s body. While Tifa had always admired his responsible nature, she had always wished he’d been a little less solemn and more playful in the years before mother died. It was only after that that she came to understand how hardship can strip one of their frivolousness.

“Mako eyes! A black uniform! By any chance, are you in SOLDIER?” the man asked with a smile. Moving to stand at his full height in front of Cloud, Tifa was impressed with how he was a full head’s length above her husband, even though he was aging.

“Yeah,” Cloud nodded, looking a bit startled. “Former SOLDIER, actually.”

“Please, won’t you come in for just a moment? I won’t take up much of your time, I’d just like to ask you something.”

“Sure.”

The team split up, then, Aerith and Tifa accompanied Cloud while the others headed off toward the shop. The trio was escorted into a tiny round brick hut with a wooden door. Inside was a two-room dwelling with minimal furnishing—the only décor being a worn area rug underneath a small table, a futon and a potted plant on a chest of drawers in front of a solitary window. There was a woman of late middle age bent over a small clay oven that stood when they entered. Her brown eyes widened in surprise at the sight of three guests.

“Oh—welcome!” she said, hastily wiping her hands on her apron. “Shaun, who did you bring to visit?”

“A SOLDIER, Ella! This is…”

“Cloud.”

“I’m Tifa, nice to meet you.”

“Name’s Aerith!”
“They’re travelers passing through. When I saw those mako eyes, I just had to stop him!”

Ella seemed torn between trying to be hospitable and asking a question that seemed ready to leap from her tongue. She had grabbed a teapot, meaning to fill it with water to prepare some refreshments for their guests, but ended up studying Cloud instead. There was a sparkle in her eyes when she smiled at him, and the blonde couldn’t turn his gaze away from her own. There was something achingly familiar about her, a sense of strange nostalgia and indistinct sadness rushing over him like an icy wind.

“Oh, you’re right! You wouldn’t happen to know anything about our son, would you? His name is Zack Fair.” She ran a hand over her grey hair that was smoothed back into a neat bun. “It’s been close to ten years since he left for the city, saying that he didn’t want to live in the country. He left saying he’s going to join SOLDIER. You ever hear of him?”

Something was screaming so loudly inside him that it was difficult for Cloud to pay complete attention to the conversation at hand. *Zack Fair…Zack Fair…* The name wasn’t ringing any bells, but there was something that gnawed inside him for a reason that Cloud couldn’t determine. To his left, Tifa looked at her husband expectantly, wanting an explanation as much as Mr. and Mrs. Fair did. She was embarrassed to realize that since Cloud had disappeared after leaving on his mission to Nibelheim, the subject of Zack’s wellbeing and whereabouts had only entered her mind a scant handful of times. At the time, she’d been so grieved and paralyzed with fear over giving birth and raising her baby alone in the slums to exhaust herself over wondering what had happened to her husband’s best friend. Zack had always been a pillar of strength for Cloud, giving him hope when he had none and a filling in the gaping hole in his heart where he’d always craved benign male companionship. If it wasn’t for his friend, Tifa doubted that their transition to Midgar would have been half as smooth as it had been. Although her shyness and muted fear of SOLDIERs had kept her from forming a strong bond with Zack at the time, he’d always been a joy to have over for dinner or join for short excursions on Midgar’s upper plate.

What had happened to him? He had been with Cloud on that fateful mission to Nibelheim. Perhaps hearing her husband explain would provide some insight into the mystery of where he’d been for the past five years.

“Hmm. I don’t know,” Cloud said with a shrug.

Tifa’s jaw dropped. She almost spoke in objection, but closed her mouth again. What was he talking about? How can he act so nonchalant about all of this? These were his parents, after all. They deserved to know what happened to their son. Tifa was certain that she would’ve lived each day in misery if she hadn’t known what had happened to her daughter, and her heart broke on the spot for Ella and Shaun. Shock and anger threatened to spill out of her lips, but her respect for her husband and her lack of knowledge on the subject held her back. Maybe there was a good reason why Cloud was pretending not to know their son that she didn’t know of, but it was hard to think of leaving the Fair family in the dark. A dark thought wormed its way into her heart: how could Cloud empathize with these desperate parents if he himself didn’t want to discuss his own daughter or learn more about her? He’d never even asked her name.

“There were quite a few members of SOLDIER, especially of second and third class ranks,” Cloud continued. “It would’ve been easy for us to have missed one another.”

“Ah,” sighed Ella, shoulders slumping as her hope deflated. “I see.”

From her place beside Tifa, Aerith folded her hands together in front of her. Her head hung like a dying flower, and her whisper was almost inaudible. “Zack…”
Noticing her reaction, Shaun clung to hope. “Young lady, do you know him? I remember he wrote us six or seven years ago saying that he had a girlfriend. Could that have been you?”

Both Cloud and Tifa looked at her, eyes wide with wonder at the revelation. Her green eyes were glued to the floor, haunted and full of emotion.

“I… I can’t…” she stuttered, voice wavering uncharacteristically. “Excuse me.”

She exited the tiny home quickly, shutting the door swiftly and quietly behind her.

… … …

The new spring grass was plush and the thawed earth soft beneath his bare feet. Cloud’s body tingled with excitement as he pranced through his front yard, fists clenched tightly around a precious treasure. There was a loose cobblestone at the edge of the street in front of his home, hidden in the thick grass near a post of the fence that separated his yard from Tifa’s. He’d discovered his hiding place the autumn before, a hole deeper underneath it with his mother’s gardening trowel so that he could fit a small, tin coffee can beneath the stone. How clever he had been to think of such a thing!

Grin splitting his face, Cloud crouched to pick up the stone, pulled out the metal container and brushed the loose dirt off with his free hand. Plump cheeks rosy with glee and the chill of the early morning air, he pulled the top off of his treasure tin. It was something only he knew about—not even Tifa or Mom! He took a moment to admire the contents at the bottom of the coffee tin.

“Good morning, Cloud. What do you have there?”

Cloud nearly jumped out of his skin! The voice was gentle and familiar, but it had startled him nonetheless. Lia Lockhart leaned gracefully over the fence, carrying a carton of eggs. Her merry red eyes were exactly like her daughter’s and they made Cloud feel instantly calmed. Tifa’s mom was a nice lady who told him he was handsome and dear, and gave him sweets when she baked them. Tifa’s father had never seemed very friendly toward him or his mother. But ever since Cloud and Tifa had gotten lost in the woods one evening, Mr. Lockhart always seemed to scowl at him or scold him for one thing or another (even after apologizing for bringing Tifa home after sunset). The cool breeze blew Lia’s long black hair as she smiled down at him, and Cloud felt both a sense of relief at knowing he was safe and disappointment that someone had discovered his secret.

“Good morning, Mrs. Lockhart. Uh, it’s where I keep my treasures.”

“How special! May I see some of them?”

Now that his secret was no longer his own, Cloud supposed it would be fun to share. He nodded up at her with a smile and she came around the fence to kneel neatly at his side, setting her eggs down beside her. Lia rubbed her palm over his wild blonde hair and he handed her the tin. Cloud watched with pride as she carefully spilled the contents onto the apron across her lap and smiled when she gasped with wonder. He thought that she must think he was quite grown-up and clever for only being six years old, and soaked in her attention like a sponge. Most adults looked away from him and his mom as they walked about the town and tended to their errands, but never Mrs. Lockhart. Cloud could count on one hand the number of adults he trusted, and Lia was one of them. She smelled like something sweet as he leaned into her shoulder, blue eyes watching her turn his collection over in her hands.

“Look at these! What remarkable treasures. Surely there is a story to go along with each one.” She selected a smooth, red rock and held it flat on her palm. “What about this one?”
“I found it when I went walking with Mom by the river. It was a happy day!”

Lia hummed in appreciation before choosing a clear marble. “And this?”

“Tifa gave it to me for my birthday last year after we ate my birthday cake and played at the stream.”

She held up a handsome little blue ribbon and smiled at the instant grin that formed between his round cheeks. Cloud reached out to take it in a rush of excitement.

“This was from the day I won the spelling competition at school!”

“Is this a cinnamon candy?”

“Yes. Miss Carrie gave it to me when I felt sick.”

“May I ask what are you adding to it, today?”

Cloud blinked in surprise, for he had almost forgotten that he was been holding something. He stuck out his hand toward her and slowly opened his fingers to reveal a small pine cone. It was from the tree in his back yard, and he had selected it quite carefully. Lia gasped and told him that it was lovely, inspecting it and turning it over in her fingers before asking him why he was adding it to his collection.

“Today was the first day ever that I tried to climb the tree and made it to the first branch. All the kids at school say that I’m too small and weak to do it, but I proved them wrong today.”

“Of course you did,” she said with a smile, and his heart felt so joyous at her confidence in him.

Together, they carefully placed the handfuls of stickers and coins and objects back in their tin, along with the newest addition of the pinecone. Lia pulled Cloud onto her lap and let him hold the container. Mom’s voice was kind and cheery and energetic, but Tifa’s mother sounded as peaceful and a lullaby and just as comforting.

“What made that pinecone more special that all of the ones that had fallen on the ground, Cloud?”

“Because it came from th’branch I climbed to.”

“That’s right. And every time you look at that, you’ll remember that you are brave and strong and can do things others don’t think is possible,” she cooed, handing him the lid to the can. “It seems that your memories are what make your marble or pebble or pine cone different from any other. They aren’t your real treasures are they?”

“What do you mean?” Cloud asked. He looked up at her, confusion swimming in his eyes, but she reassured him with a smile.

“Moments, people, feelings…those are the real treasures. The things in your can are simply reminders of the things your heart loves. And life is about collecting them.”

… … …

The crickets chirped loudly as the sun began to set over the tree line. Cloud had been working hard all afternoon, climbing trees and collecting tropical fruit for his team as a token of thanks for the hospitality of some of the locals. Most seemed to old or too young to gather food efficiently, since many of Gongaga’s working age citizens seemed to have perished in the accident. It was difficult
labor, but Cloud didn’t mind. His mako enhanced body was more than able to handle it and the
distraction and time away from his team had been what he needed for a little bit. Both Aerith and
Tifa had been acting so strangely since their encounter with the couple who asked them about their
son.

Zack… Cloud had dismissed them, but the name burned on in his mind like a persistent ember.

He’d chased her after she’d fled the conversation with Zack’s parents. Aerith had tried to hide
between the back of a hut and a large boulder, but her pink bow attracted his eyes like a magnet.
Seeing her there so distressed made all sorts of emotions ebb and flow inside his chest. Cloud knew
he was never the best at consoling others, but he couldn’t stop himself from trying. When he had
reached out to touch her shoulder, there was stillness and chaos all at once in his brain and he’d
almost recoiled from the shock of it all. Visions and voices struck him almost violently, and he’d
shivered.

A pair of slender arms draped over his shoulders, the tinkling of her bangles as they passed over
his collarbone. Sitting and despairing on the church floor.

When Aerith turned to face him at last, Cloud tried his best to pull himself together. There was
only hollowness and sadness in her eyes, where he’d expected to find tears. She had answered his
questions with a solemn sort of calm, but never gave a clear explanation for her behavior earlier.
Instead, Aerith told him that she’d been overwhelmed by all the death she’d sensed as they
approached Gongaga. Discovering the ruined reactor explained the source of the suffering that
she’d detected, and seeing the poor parents searching for their son had been enough to break her.
Cloud could understand how all that could be emotionally overwhelming, but there was still
something strange about it. In retrospect, he should have pressed the issue for Aerith’s emotional
sake. It might have been better to suggest she talk it out with one of their teammates if she hadn’t
been comfortable expressing herself to him.

But he hadn’t been thinking of these things. Cloud supposed that he wasn’t truly processing much
at all, so much as attempting to put his thoughts into some kind of order, but they felt like sand
pouring from a sack.

He tried to discuss Aerith’s strange state with Tifa, for his wife had also seemed to be acting
strangely. But she had been helping Yuffie pick burrs out of her hair (after an unsuccessful materia
hunt) and told him that she’d meet up with him as soon as she was done. So here he was, perched
on the highest branch of a mango tree, wondering about all of the strange things that had happened
that day. Wiping the back of his hand across his forehead, Cloud paused to admire the pink and
orange hues of the sky as the sun set on the horizon. He was so lonesome. Something about the
environment and the circumstances had disturbed something deep inside him but he couldn’t
understand it and didn’t know where to find solace.

The sound of footsteps and rustling leaves caught his attention and he looked down toward the dirt
pathway.

“Cloud? Is that you?” Tifa approached, looking upward through the foliage.

The buster sword was leaning against the tree trunk, surrounded by a collection of mangoes,
marking his whereabouts. He looked down at her, taking a moment to admire how sweet her face
looked when she was confused and how pretty her eyes looked in the orange glow of late
afternoon.

“Yeah, I’m here.”
Maneuvering himself to the lowest branch, Cloud reached out a hand to pull her up. Amusement glinted in her eyes as she played along, taking his hand and letting him hoist her up into the tree. Tifa’s giggle made his chest feel warm and full; the feel of her palm against his awakening some sort of long lost sense of refuge. Secured between him and the tree trunk, Tifa let Cloud put his arm across her shoulders and rest his hand on the bark.

“Are you finished rescuing Yuffie?”

She chuckled and smiled at her lap. “Yes, she’s free now. But you know that she never stays out of trouble for long.”

“Did Aerith come back to camp?”

“No,” she answered. Lifting her gaze to the horizon, she drew in a quiet breath. “I tried to ask her what was going on, but she didn’t seem willing to discuss it. Maybe she doesn’t feel comfortable enough with me—I don’t know. I’m sure she’ll come back after she’s had some time to herself.”

Cloud looked at her then, seeing her more with his heart than with his eyes. Tifa had always been a sensitive person. Her personal failures or shortcomings had always frustrated her and Cloud hated to watch her despair over hopelessness or circumstances that were beyond her control. His wife’s heart would bleed when others were hurting, and she’d bow her head to her enemies before she’d ever let any of her loved ones know harm. And so, he knew that his return into her life and this trek across the globe had been taking a significant toll upon her emotions. Watching the people she’d come to admire endure their own struggles was hard for her; Tifa always wanted to lift those she cared about out of negativity and discontent. But now, he seemed as powerless as she was.

All he could do was nod sympathetically. “I’m sure she’ll be alright. She told me that she was overwhelmed when we first reached the reactor—something about sensing all the death that happened there.”

Tifa was certain that Aerith’s sudden disappearance had more to do with the discussion with Mr. and Mrs. Fair than the accident three years ago. “An unfortunate perk of being a Cetra, huh?”

He nodded, making a low humming noise in his throat. Beside him, Tifa bent her head forward. Employing her old trick of obscuring her eyes with her bangs, she tried her best to hide her expression as her mind frantically searched for the words to say. She wanted so badly to ask why Cloud had denied knowing Zack, but wasn’t sure how she should inquire about it. Was it even a good idea? Each day, she’d watched her husband carefully, trying to make sense of his strange behavior and even stranger recollection of past events (or lack thereof). It was clear that he wasn’t always being truthful, though he seemed genuine enough as he spoke. But if she was being honest with herself, she had to face the fact that she was uncertain what was truth and what was posturing on his part. Had he really been training to become a member of SOLDIER for all those lost years? Why hadn’t he ever contacted her? When she asked him about it, he was always defensive and grew irritable, but could never provide her with a concrete answer.

She wanted to trust him so badly, but it came down to two possibilities: he was either deliberately lying or he was deeply psychologically distressed.

If the latter was the case, how could she possibly ask him about Zack? Tifa was reluctant to shake things up after enjoying what seemed to be the slow repair of their bond over the past few weeks. What if she inquired about Zack and it made him defensive and angry again? The last thing she wanted was for Cloud to start pushing himself away from her again. But even more frightening was the possibility of shattering his fragile mental state. He seemed so delicate, and she was determined to handle him with care. But what was the right thing to do? Was it really morally
acceptable to lie to Zack’s parents? Either option made her frightened and unsettled.

Since their reunion, it seemed to Tifa that their relationship had become like the tide: rising and falling, never staying constant. Before he’d disappeared, they’d both worked together to meet their goals, like two horses pulling the same cart. But now, Tifa wasn’t even sure of what their goals were aside from tracking down Sephiroth and destroying ShinRA before the company could hurt anyone else. Being separated so long had not only thrown off the way they connected, but they’d lost their sense of purpose along the way. It made her insecure and she didn’t know how to fix it.

“Are you alright?” he asked. “You looked pretty spooked after Aerith walked out of the conversation with that couple.”

She knew she could be with him forever, mold herself to be what he wanted or needed. But the thought was so deeply unsatisfying because once upon a time, he’d loved her so deeply for who she was? Wasn’t it all those childhood days spent in each other's company that made him fall in love with the person she’d always been at her core? She’d worn so many masks since Cloud had disappeared, her baby died, and her life had crashed down around her. Poverty and loneliness had shaped her into a chameleon of sorts, forcing her to morph into whatever she needed to be to please the right people and ward off the ever growing number of ghosts that always lingered at the borders of her consciousness.

In principle, she would’ve never wanted to replace her true self with whatever might please Cloud, because she should feel safe enough in her marriage to let her guard down. But she shouldn’t have to change, because Cloud had loved her. The problem was, she wasn’t sure who her true self was anymore. She’d wandered so far from the little bright eyed girl he’d known in their babyhood. She didn't know how to cope with the thought of having to cover up her true self daily and wear whatever mask he fancied. If he didn't change, it would be a hard road. But she was loyal to him. Tifa wasn’t sure if she'd ever be able to open herself up again and make herself vulnerable to him.

If he took off his mask, then so would she. Until then, was it wise to continue to hide like this?

She frowned in thought, tightening her fingers around the branch on which she sat. “I think so. Seeing the faces of those poor parents sort of broke my heart a little. When you disappeared, ShinRA told me you were dead. Zack disappeared, and they don’t know what happened to him at all. Perhaps he’s still alive somewhere if they never got a letter.”

“Yeah. It’s gotta be hard to lack closure like that.”

Tifa swallowed the urge to bring up Aria. There was an anger that had sunken to the bottom of her belly and sat there, like the ugly slime at the bottom of a lake. Zack’s parents were still desperate to know anything about him after all this time. Cloud hadn’t asked about his daughter even once since she’d first let him know that he died. It wasn’t clear to her why exactly she was so upset about it was it because she felt like he didn’t care about his own child or was it because she was lonesome in her grief and wanted to share it with the only person who could mourn their baby like she could? Turning to look at him, she searched his eyes for the love of her life, but all she found was a wall—a mask.

“Kind of like me when it comes to Nibelheim. You were there when it burned, but my last memory of home was being merrily waved off by your mother as we left for Midgar.”

“If you really want to see for yourself, we’ll go. Do you think you can handle seeing that place burnt to the ground?”

“I don’t know. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it since we saw the burned out reactor. It made me wonder if there was anything left of my parents’ house. But either way, I’d like to pay my
At the same time that she sought to express her thoughts, Tifa had been fishing for two things: comfort from her husband regarding the loss of their childhood home and to invite him to share his grief about it with her. She craved his heart like a newborn craves milk: for nourishment, for comfort, and to sustain her emotionally as she tried to grow in their marriage. But he’d only nodded, and it left her feeling empty and unsatisfied.

He had to save their relationship from the ever growing chasm between them. Hiding the parts of his past and obscuring his heart had created an ever expanding ocean between them; their shores slowly separating without a bridge. As much as things had been a bit more comfortable between them lately, Tifa admitted to herself that they still felt like strangers.

If only he’d soften himself in front of her, even if just for a little while.
Eternal

The buggy—while convenient—was one of the most uncomfortable methods of transportation Tifa had ever experienced (second only to crowded train cars in the slums).

It wasn’t necessarily the vehicle’s design that was the problem: cram six of them and one oversized stuffed Mog inside something meant to comfortably seat five made things interesting to say the least. Lucky for her, Tifa had a window seat. Her cheek was pressed up against the glass, more by force than by choice, and she enjoyed looking on as the world went by. No one seemed to be sure whether or not riding in the buggy was more or less aggravating than walking, but at least they’d reach their destination faster this way.

Flat clouds stretched across the blue sky in long arcs outside the window. As the hours passed, so did the landscape. Small puffs of condensation appeared on the window as Tifa breathed, trying to keep her eyes busy and her mind blank. The humid, tropical foliage near Gongaga had thinned out long ago, transforming into grassy plains and eventually into dry, red sand. Cloud was silent as he drove along, ignoring Barret’s occasional jab at his driving ability or sense of direction from the passenger seat. Aerith and Yuffie were curled together in the back, separated from Tifa by the Mog’s large body. She couldn’t see them, but she assumed they had both fallen asleep by the sound of gentle breaths and the lack of conversation. Red XIII was laid across the floor and over their feet, occasionally peeking his head between the two front seats to offer directions.

The sudden appearance of tall, red stone walls made her inhale in a silent gasp. Pressing her finger tips to the glass, Tifa admired the natural beauty of the canyon that began to close in on both sides. The towering walls of garnet colored rock obscured the direct sunlight and she felt so lucky to travel, despite the circumstances. How strange it all was: this random assortment of people all packed together so tightly, traveling the world in search of an enemy they’d barely even seen yet. It was stressful and taxing, but Tifa supposed it could’ve been worse.

Her gaze drifted to the back of Cloud’s head in the seat in front of her and a soft smile spread across her face. Closing her eyes, she let herself submit to her memories. What would she give to go back?

… … …

He told her he’d found a waterfall. She agreed to let him take her there.

Golden hair bounced before her as Cloud ran across the thicket. Tifa gasped with breathless laughter as she chased after him, clutching the strap of her satchel as it bounced against her hip. The fog of early morning still shrouded the meadow and weaved its way in between the countless trunks of pine trees. He’d stolen her away after her lesson with Zangan, hoping to carve out some secret time with her before she was gone too long and Papa noticed. Her father’s hatred for Cloud only seemed to grow with time. Now that she was twelve, Tifa was constantly fighting her desire to please her father and her overwhelming need to be with Cloud.

The pair had become gossip fodder for the other villagers: two strange children living lives outside of Nibelheim’s strict norm. While Cloud had always been shunned for being the child of a single mother, Tifa had been celebrated by their community in her babyhood. After Mama died and she began her training with Zangan, the public opinion of her began to shift toward something negative. Her blossoming friendship with Cloud had only served to continue the downward spin of the Lockhart girl’s reputation. Her father’s descent into a suffocating cycle of alcohol and social withdrawal only made it worse. But Tifa didn’t care; all she needed was Cloud by her side. In the little world they’d created for themselves, they could enjoy acceptance and peace in the safety of one another’s hearts. What was so shameful about that?
Dew glistened on the long grass that caressed over their legs, dampening her tunic and fighting tights. Heart racing with glee, she let out another panting chuckle. Cloud grabbed her hand and she grinned, high on the feeling of belonging that he gave to her. And Tifa knew he felt this way, too: this strange, euphoric feeling that made one’s chest feel like bursting with joy and excitement. It was obvious in the brightness in his typically solemn features and the enchantment that shined in his eyes. He turned to smile at her as they ran and it was the most beautiful thing she’d ever seen. His blonde hair was glowing in the early morning sun, shining as brilliantly as his pure heart. That light had always chased away the shadows living in the deepest parts of her. It was always alright when Cloud was here.

And when they’d reached the waterfall, it didn’t really matter how beautiful it was, because Cloud and Tifa were so absorbed in each other that they scarcely noticed it. They held each other’s hands, sharing secret smiles, as joy spread through them like a blazing fever.

... … …

Tifa hadn’t realized she’d fallen asleep until the shaking and sputtering of the vehicle shook her for her reverie.

Of course, the buggy had broken down in the dry heat of the canyon of all places, the only shade coming from towering walls of stone. Red XIII was familiar with the area and pointed Tifa and Cloud in the direction of a stream to fill the team’s canteens. Cloud had taken her hand and she’d grinned as he pulled her along the winding trail of stone and dirt. They walked and walked until they could no longer hear the sound of Barret and Yuffie’s explosive bickering as they tried and failed to repair the vehicle.

She giggled at the feel of his breath on the back of her neck as he wrapped his arms around her torso, pulling her against him. Her shoulder blades pressed into his chest and Tifa smiled, because she hadn’t felt this light in years. It was addicting: the feeling that the weight had been lifted from her limbs and from her spirit. Cloud kissed the back of her neck and she pushed into his touch, reaching her hand behind her to cup the back of his head. As Tifa arched her neck to the side, allowing him ample room for his affections, he smiled against her skin. Each puff of hot air as he breathed made her shiver.

“I told you I’d get you back for kicking the back of my chair.”

“It wasn’t my fault! The ride was so bumpy and—”

Cloud cut her off by a nibble and a kiss behind her left ear. Electric heat pulsed through her veins, igniting her senses and making her heart rush with excitement. Unable to suppress a pleased sigh, Tifa began to let herself react to his affections. Deep inside her, she knew this release was only temporary. This happiness was fleeting; this relief was short-lived. It was not a solution. And yet, Tifa found herself kicking sand over her cautiousness and transforming her frustration into passion.

She laced her fingers between the soft strands of hair on his neck, trying to hold him there. But he spun her around in one swift motion, sending her twirling into his chest. Instinctually grasping his shoulders for stability, Tifa blinked up at him. A blush began to creep its way over her cheeks when she looked up through her lashes to meet his eyes, which were swirling with playfulness and need. She couldn’t hold eye contact, as much as she wanted to. Why was it so hard to look him in the face? His fingers tightened around her hips and she closed her eyes, identifying his flirtatious behavior as something it had never been before: possessive. Before Cloud’s disappearance, his flirtatious behavior had always been subtle and conservative. Their love-making was always slow, gentle and sweet—laced with shyness and the uncertainty that came with a newly established
sexual relationship.

And so, the way he towered over her was unfamiliar. The needy press of his hips into hers and the intensity in his eyes was foreign and strange, but so **captivating**.

She had no idea where the Cloud of their youth had gone. Until now, Tifa had held her husband at arm’s length in most respects because of how bewildering his behavior had become. A small ember of resentment over the flippant way he treated his disappearance, the loss of their baby, and the fracturing of their marital bond continued burning: occasionally flaring up or receding depending on the state of her heart. It was exhausting to constantly analyze his behavior and run her mind ragged trying to develop methods to help him escape whatever malady had befallen him. And so, Tifa found herself craving freedom from that burden—even if just for a little while. She decided to heave away all of this heaviness, despite her usual apprehensions. Surely it would be easier to act on impulse? Rarely had she ever been allowed that.

Suddenly, Tifa pulled his head down toward hers, meeting his lips in a desperate kiss. His lashes fluttered closed and he deepened their kiss, hands moving to embrace her gently and pull her further underneath the shelter of the outcropping of stone. When she pressed herself against him, whimpering with impatience, Cloud grinned against her teeth. His mouth moved to pepper kisses along her jawline, slowly moving to place deep, long ones at the nape of her neck. Letting her head lull back momentarily, anxious hands reached to untuck his shirt and sneak underneath to feel strong muscle underneath taut skin. Cloud exhaled through his nostrils, but didn’t halt in his attentions to her neck as his mouth made its way to her collarbone. To his surprise, she guided him backward until his shoulders hit rock and began to climb him: wrapping her arms around his neck and attempting to wind her legs around his waist. He assisted her, holding her up with his hands as she reached for the buckle of his belt.

… … …

“Cheap shot, Tifa!”

“That wasn’t a cheap shot. You left your back open!”

Yuffie lunged forward again with a right hook, aimed for Tifa’s head, but the martial artist blocked with ease and countered with a punch of her own. She moved slowly, so that the younger girl could follow her movements and defend herself. Frustrated, Yuffie came at her again. She tried a series of front kicks, her short hair bobbing with her efforts, and Tifa ducked and weaved as necessary to avoid them.

The team had abandoned the buggy after multiple failed attempts to repair it. Red XIII was currently leading them toward the town where he was raised so that they could find shelter before nightfall. Tifa had been grateful when Barret had begged for a chance to rest. As scenic as their hike through the canyon was, it was very tiring. But it wasn’t the muscles in Tifa’s legs that made her yearn to sit for a while. Her rendezvous with Cloud a few hours before had left her sore in a place she didn’t dare discuss out loud: both because it had been years since they’d last been intimate and because their union had been anything but gentle this time. She’d almost sighed with exasperation when Yuffie asked her to teach her some tips on hand-to-hand combat.

“Don’t try too hard, Yuffie. You have to take your time and learn how to properly punch or kick before you come flying at your foe. Let’s go slowly, ok?”

“Fine.”

Aerith sat nearby, watching Tifa instruct the younger girl. She and Yuffie had been sharing
whispers and giggles before, making the martial artist feel insecure. Somehow, in her paranoid mind, everyone knew what she and Cloud had done earlier. Every glance her way or obscure comment sent a pulse of nervousness through her bones. Why was she feeling this way? Being intimate with her husband was nothing to be ashamed of! And yet, Tifa dreaded any teasing or questioning on the subject. It was quite a relief when none came, but something unhappy and unfulfilled still tingled in her core. She tried to put it aside like a book on a shelf.

Moving to stand beside Yuffie, Tifa took the girl’s right arm to bring it level with her shoulder. “When you punch, don’t just use your arm. Make it come out of your back—you can maximize the impact that way.”

“I know! Sheesh.”

Aerith took off her boot, shaking the sand out of it before removing her sock and flexing her toes. “If you already know, then why did you ask Tifa to teach you?”

It was possible that the little ninja may have been the most impatient person Tifa had ever met. She wasn’t certain she would’ve been a decent mentor in the first place, but the pupil’s noncompliance solidified her opinion of her abilities. Had Master Zangan ever thought the same way? After Yuffie tried a few punches in slow motion under Tifa’s guiding hand, she grinned as she went faster and faster. The girl had the remarkable quality of doing everything in a way that seemed like a complete accident. In battle, she’d flinging her shuriken at their enemies with a chaotic arc of her arm and a frivolous flick of her wrist, but they always seemed to hit their intended target. Now, she flailed her arm forward in a punch that somehow was correct, if a little awkward.

“That’s it! Now try with your left.”

When they moved onto practicing correct front kick technique, Aerith decided to get up and try, too. The girls all had great fun for long minutes, giggling when the Cetra dared to kick so high while wearing her dress. The sun’s intensity made sweat bead on their foreheads and soon beckoned them to take shelter in the sparse shade. Sipping from their canteens, they caught their breaths and admired the unique beauty of the canyon.

“See? We can have fun when you stop acting like a baby!” Aerith chided, elbowing Yuffie in the shoulder.

“Really? You think I’m the baby in this crew?” the ninja said, wiping her forehead with a cloth and tossing it at the flower girl, who screamed in mock terror. “What about Cloud? He’s the one who nearly threw a temper tantrum when Barret wanted to drive the buggy!”

“He can be a little stubborn sometimes,” Tifa conceded. “But he has the team’s best interest at heart.”

Green eyes sparkled with mirth. “Like the time he refused to stop playing Super Dunk at the Gold Saucer?”

“Ha ha! He was like a toddler as we tried to pull him away!” the ninja giggled. Tifa smiled as she sat down on the ground, back against rock. Yuffie’s short black hair swayed against her ears as she plopped herself next to the older girl. “You guys are old but don’t act like it.”

Tifa raised an eyebrow. “I’m old?”

Aerith gasped in mild offense. “If Tifa’s old, then what does that make me?”

“It’s different, she’s married.”
“I got married younger than you are right now. But I guess if by ‘old’ you mean ‘mature’, then I’ll take that as a compliment.”

“I wouldn’t go that far!”

The afternoon was waning, bringing the relief of a cool breeze over her bare shoulders. The Cetra bent gracefully to pick up the cloth Yuffie had tossed at her. She thought about throwing it back in retaliation, but folded it neatly instead. Eyes downcast, Aerith leaned against the boulder behind her and placed the cloth upon the stone. She spoke towards the dirt. “So, what’s it like to be married?”

Tifa wasn’t sure how to answer, for everything within her marriage had changed drastically from what it had always been, leaving her struggling to stand upright as her world moved with the violence of an earthquake. Her feelings had been tossed about relentlessly as the months bled into years, leaving her in a state that constantly sought stability. She’d had it once: the firm foundation of Cloud’s love and their shared hopes and dreams. Everything had changed, but her love for him had remained through it all. There were times in which Tifa felt close to Cloud and times where she’d felt further away (like right now), but her spirit had never relinquished its devotion to him.

She didn’t know how to express the depth of her emotions to the curious faces that watched her now. There didn’t seem to be any words that properly expressed such a complicated thing and she struggled to articulate just how much the bond they had woven together meant to her. Since her earliest days, she’d built her life around Cloud. One brick at a time, they’d laid out the path to their future together since childhood. But now, they seemed to be ripping up more bricks than they put down, and the road ahead was no longer clear.

“It’s—hard work. But when you’re in step with one another, it’s so wonderful,” she said, squinting her eyes and drawing her brows together in thought. “But people change as time goes by, don’t they? You have to adapt. If you fall out of step, you have to work to find out what happened and reestablish that harmony. Otherwise, how could you feel secure that the other won’t just walk away when the going gets tough?”

She looked up to find Aerith’s eyes, unsure of the adequacy of her answer. How could she possibly describe marriage in its completion? Wasn’t every marital relationship different? Her marriage to Cloud wasn’t identical to her parents’ relationship. It seemed as if there were infinite ways to describe something so intimate. The flower girl only smiled, though Tifa wasn’t quite certain what meaning was behind it.

“Eh, sounds boring,” Yuffie sighed. “And you willingly did this when you were fifteen? What a bad deal. I mean, it’s not like you get to test marriage out before you do it. You should have a warranty.”

Tifa frowned. “I’ve been in love with him for as long as I can remember, so I married him. There was no one else I’d ever dream of being with. Besides, you can’t try out commitment.”

“Sure you can!”

“Yuffie!”

The large flame of the Cosmo Candle blazed brightly in the night sky. Exhausted, the team sat around the fire, eating soup out of metal bowls and chatting quietly amongst themselves.
It had been a tiring day to say the least and Cloud was happy to see it draw to a close. It was a productive series of events for their team: learning Red XIII’s true name: Nanaki, being taught about the Lifestream from Bugenhagen and coming to understand just how much the planet was suffering. It gave them renewed purpose, since their travels tended to occasionally draw their attention to other things: such as finding the best weapons or materia. Today, one such distraction of their mission to take out ShinRA and pursue Sephiroth came in the form of something quite personal for Nanaki.

Sitting a little apart from the others, Nanaki laid with his head between his front paws. Cloud knew he felt ashamed about his prior negative feelings for his late father before finding out the truth about him today. When he was just a baby, Cosmo Canyon was invaded by the Gi tribe. He had believed that his father had abandoned him and his mother during the battle for their home and left her to die without his protection. But after AVALANCHE fought their way through the maze of caverns underneath the town today, Nanaki had been shaken by what he saw: his father’s petrified body, wridden with arrows, standing at the yawning mouth of the cave. He’d been killed defending him, his mother, and the lives of the residents of Cosmo Canyon after all. Shame radiated from his posture and expression no matter how much the others tried to encourage him.

Cloud watched Nanaki as he sat beside Tifa and finished his meal. He felt a small twinge of guilt for not wondering more about his life before his capture by ShinRA or where he’d come from. It hadn’t occurred to him that an animal, though sentient, had extensive feelings for its family or the ability to have deep philosophical thoughts. How ignorant he had been. Nanaki wasn’t the only one learning something significant today. Was the planet also sentient? Bugenhagen’s lecture had made him ponder over such things.

“Isn’t it funny?” Tifa whispered from her place beside him, looking out to observe their companions. “I think of our crew and am reminded of that ugly little blanket my mom used to keep thrown over the back of the couch.”

He turned his head to look at her, ruby eyes like drops of blood in the flickering glow of the fire. Her expression was soft and calm, but the dancing flames reflected in her eyes made a sudden nausea rise into his throat. He swallowed against it. “What do you mean?”

“It was so bizarre looking: sewed together crudely from all sorts of random fabric scraps with different colors and patterns. Papa always cringed when she used it, but it was the most comfortable blanket in our house.” Tifa looked down at her empty bowl with a small smile. “Our group is kind of like that. We’re a weird little family constructed of all different people with different life circumstances, but I guess we’re pretty awesome.”

Something inside him cringed at the use of the word ‘family’, but he indulged her, letting a smile tug at his lips. “You’re right. We work together alright, but we confuse people everywhere we go. It’s fine for now, but I can’t wait until it can just be the two of us again.”

She hummed, a small sound deep in her throat, as she rested her head upon his shoulder. “I look forward to that day.”

Cloud wanted her. He wanted her heart and her smiles and her cheerful voice. He wanted things to change for the better once and for all, and he wanted her whole self. Tifa had been more open, lately. Not only physically, but he could feel her starting to wander back into sphere of her devotion to their marriage and it encouraged him. Hooking an arm around her shoulder, Cloud tried to keep his eyes averted from the fire to keep the rising anxiety at bay. Watching one’s hometown burn to the ground could traumatize a man in such a way, and he knew that Tifa would’ve felt the same if she had been there. The couple sat side by side for a while, listening to the crackling and
snapping of the fire. Letting himself heave a deep, slow breath, Cloud focused on the weight of her head upon his shoulder. It felt so good to have her so close. Not only in physical proximity, but it seemed that the gap was closing on their emotional bond as well. Tifa’s earlier behavior had encouraged him. Feeling passion and desire pulsing beneath her skin had reminded him that he was needed.

Maybe it would really be alright to let her see all that he was trying to hide. They had promised to stick together, no matter what, and he had never known his wife to break any sort of promise. The smell of her hair and the softness of her skin soothed him, and Cloud cherished their quiet companionship. To his dismay, it didn’t last forever. Eventually, Tifa got up to collect everyone’s bowls and return them to the eatery. He’d risen to lend a hand, but she kindly dismissed him as she walked away from the fireside, promising to be back in a minute.

Unrest heaved up inside as he watched her go, suddenly feeling adrift for a reason he didn’t understand. Out of the corner of his eye, Aerith’s pink bow caught his attention. She sat with her knees pulled up to her chest, staring blankly into the flames. It was unusual to see anything but a smile on her face, so her sullen state alarmed Cloud. His feet wandered over to her of their own accord, gravel and sand crunching quietly beneath his boots. Whether his goal was to comfort or be comforted, he wasn’t sure, but something screamed that he couldn’t leave her alone there.

“Hey,” he said softly, lowering himself to sit beside her. “Are you alright?”

He’d expected her to shake it off: to offer him a smile and a little white lie about how she was just tired or something similar. That’s what Tifa usually did. But she barely moved, acknowledging him with little more than a miniscule nod of her head. Aerith blinked slowly as the fire billowed high before her, licking at the black sky and the blanket of stars. She opened her palm to reveal a white materia. Back when they’d met, Aerith had told Cloud that she received it from her mother, but it didn’t ‘do anything’. He supposed the inert materia was something she kept with her to comfort herself, as it was the only belonging she had from her birth mother. There was a moment of quiet between them and it felt strange, for Aerith was never one to hold in her feelings.

“I’m alone, aren’t I?” she suddenly whispered into her knees. Lashes moist, she studied the pale orb in her hand. Her back was curved and long brown hair was pulled over her shoulder, every part of her tucked inward. “I’m the last Cetra. The only one left of my people.”

Cloud looked up to the sky, brow furrowed as he turned her words over in his head. There were so many times that he felt utterly alone in the world. Since early childhood and the rejection by the vast majority of Nibelheim’s residents, he’d felt isolated and unwanted. Is that how she was feeling?

“You don’t have to be the only Cetra on Gaia to feel alone, you know. And you don’t need other Cetra to keep you company, either. We’re all here for you. You know that, right?”

“I guess you think I’m feeling sorry for myself. But it’s not like that, Cloud. Remember when you said you and your mom were the only blondes in Nibelheim? It’s so much more. The Cetra—the Ancients—see life completely different from ordinary people. They have different abilities, senses, and responsibilities than everyone else.”

“Not really.” Cloud said, face taut in consideration. Finally, Aerith looked over to him. Her frown was laced with frustration and hurt, but Cloud continued. “The Cetra did everything they could to protect the planet. Isn’t that what we’re doing now?”

“Yeah, we’re trying. But for me, it’s different.” Her eyes lowered and she lowered her chin once again to rest upon her knees. Struggling for the right words to say, Aerith would open her mouth
only to shut it again. The silence settled between them for long moments before she tried to articulate her thoughts. She rolled the materia between her thumb and pointer finger. “There’s something that has to be done for Gaia that only I can do.”

“And what is that?”

When she looked at him, her eyes were somber for a moment. The haunted look she gave him was brief, quickly replaced with a wink and a smile. “A secret.”

Cloud fought the urge to sigh, for she was always such an enigma to him. Getting to know Aerith was like drawing intricate pictures in the sand only to have a wave wash it all away. Just when he thought he was getting somewhere, the trail he’d been following would disappear beneath his feet and it was dissatisfying to say the least. There was so much he wanted to know. Something inside him reached out to her heart with straining hands and desperate fingers. Sometimes, it was too much. The closer he got, the worse this feeling became, and it left the man unsure of whether or not relief would come if he drew away or finally reached her hiding place.

“Hey, guys,” Tifa said with a smile, coming to sit beside Cloud. She folded her legs underneath her and looked over at them, eyes suddenly curious. “What happened?”

“Nothing,” Aerith answered. “We were talking about what Bugenhagen taught us about today—the planet, the Cetra, the Lifestream…”

Tifa hummed, looking at her boots in thought. Her feet shifted the red sand, hundreds of thousands of little grains, numerous as the souls of Gaia: past and present. Before her, the Cosmo Candle burned with heat and fury. The residents said that its flame never went out, raging on eternal. Barret told her that Cosmo Canyon was the birthplace of AVALANCHE and its planet-saving ideals decades ago. The fire was like a symbol for the good inside their hearts that lived on, even as old members fell on behalf of the cause and new members joined their ranks. Learning about how the Lifestream carried the souls of those who had once lived had been overwhelming, making her think of her parents, of Cloud’s parents, of Jessie, Wedge and Biggs. And of course, of her baby. The Cetra had a special affinity with the Lifestream that Tifa had pondered over all day. Weeks ago, Aerith had asked if she lost someone. Tifa now understood that Aerith probably knew all along. Could she ever summon enough courage to ask her about it? She took a small breath before speaking.

“I never knew about the Lifestream. I mean, I’ve always known about mako and that materia is made from it. Mako holds the knowledge of the Ancients. You must be proud to be part of such a race,” Tifa smiled at Aerith, searching for green eyes. “I’m glad you’re with us. Out of everyone on this planet, it only feels right to have a Cetra by your side when you’re fighting for Gaia.”

“Honestly, I haven’t done much of anything. But I really hope to,” Aerith said. She looked back at her white materia, before tucking it back into the knot of her ribbon. “I’m getting the feeling that our fight to save Gaia may not be as straight forward as we thought.”

… … …

It was hard to sleep, even with Tifa curled against him. The night air held a chill that may have been uncomfortable if it wasn’t for the warmth of the Cosmo Candle nearby, keeping the desert night bearable. Each of them was tucked away inside a sleeping bag—close together but still far enough apart to enjoy their own space. After being trapped in the buggy for long stretches over a handful of weeks, everyone was taking advantage of the freedom. Whenever they’d sleep out under the stars, as opposed to a tent or inn, a strange feeling would eat away at Cloud’s chest and rob him of the ability to relax. He’d chase after sleep, but never find it. Although his mako enhanced body
could sustain itself on minimal rest, this bizarre insomnia was more of a mental ailment than a physical one.

The smell of the earth underneath him. The whisper of the wind through the trees that sheltered him. Being carried for days and days, from sunrise to sunset. He could not open his eyes, but could hear the crackling of the small fire as the kind man talked to him and told him stories. Cloud wanted to smile. He wanted to thank the one who kept him warm and clean and safe. But he could barely open his eyes, let alone his mouth. Sometimes, the kind man would leave him alone for a short while. Cloud was mostly content, save for the fear that one day, the kind man wouldn’t come back and he would be all alone. When he’d fall asleep beside him, Cloud could tell by the sound of his even breathing. It was easier to try and look around when the sky was dark. He couldn’t move his head or neck, but it didn’t matter. Counting and admiring the stars in the sky always lulled him to sleep.

He noticed then that he was gripping his wife, his arms wrapped securely around her biceps where her back pressed against his chest. Afraid he might wake her or startle her, Cloud loosened his grip and began to slowly withdraw his hands. To his great surprise, Tifa reacted, gently reaching her hand back to find his and replace it around her again. There was this overwhelming need to protect her that swelled suddenly inside his chest, leaving him a little anxious. What was endangering her? His senses couldn’t detect any threats or monsters in the area. Closing his eyes, he focused, but her whisper distracted him.

“Are you alright?” she asked.

Cloud rose his head up a little, watching her stare into the flames. He drew in a slow breath before letting it out silently through his nostrils, thoughts and feelings tangled together inside him like hopelessly knotted yarn. It was easy to put the mess aside, to hide it away so that no one could get a glimpse of the absolute wreck that was Cloud Strife. All this time, he’d been so fearful of letting anyone see that there was something wrong, that he needed help, and that perhaps he wasn’t a competent leader after all. He feared belittlement from the others and disappointing Tifa. But most of all, he feared that once he opened the door to his issues, he’d discover that they were much worse than he imagined. What if AVALANCHE turned him out of their group and stripped him of their cause? What if Tifa decided that she wanted nothing to do with him and separated from him? How would he ever deal with being alone and devoid of purpose? The tornado of panic formed inside him once again, rising up into his throat.

“Yeah,” Cloud answered, swallowing to keep his voice from trembling. “A lot happened today.”

Tifa knew that he was talking about more than just their lessons from Bugenhagen or their underground battles to discover the fate of Nanaki’s father. They’d come together physically for the first time in years and Tifa wasn’t sure how she felt about it. Physically, it had left her with marks on her neck that hid behind her hair and small aches in hidden places. Emotionally, it left her confused, insecure and a little bit afraid about any possible consequences. But she wasn’t sure how to talk about that, her shyness overriding her need for clarity, and so Tifa decided to play it safe.

“Learning about the Lifestream was really something else. The cycling of human lives through the Lifestream making a path of energy of souls roaming the planet...” Tifa said, thinking aloud. “ShinRA is using the souls of people for greed. The thought of my mom’s soul being used to power something as trivial as a desk lamp really angers me.”

“I never told you that I was proud of you for being brave enough to join AVALANCHE,” Cloud said, warm breath tickling against her ear. “It must have been hard when I wasn’t there. I shouldn’t have been anywhere else but by your side. I’m... I’m sorry, Tifa.”
Her lips parted and her eyes widened as her husband reached out to her heart. Cloud had never been a proud man up until his disappearance from her life. Ever since their reunion, he’d been so obstinate and strange about matters of the heart and it was almost impossible to engage him in this sort of discussion. But now, he was extending an invitation for conversation, and she felt a strange mixture of happiness and bewilderment swirl inside her.

“Thank you, Cloud,” she breathed. “It wasn’t brave thing, really. It was mostly a decision made out of anger and the need for revenge, which isn’t very virtuous. And although we were trying to help people and the planet, we still caused harm to innocent lives.”

“You thought you were doing the right thing.”

“But we weren’t. That explosion in Gongaga was just an accident and it wrecked so many lives. We took out reactors on purpose. I can’t imagine how many were killed or wounded in AVALANCHE attacks that I helped carry out. We were so desperate to save Gaia and cripple ShinRA that we didn’t think of all the lives affected. I’m sorry that I dragged you into something like that, Cloud. You didn’t want anything to do with it.”

“I didn’t. But you pleaded with me to consider it and I did. It made you happy and so it made me happy, too.”

Tifa turned in his arms to face him, his eyes unblinking as he stared into her face. Those eyes. There was always something about them that invited her in or made her melt since the day she’d first looked into them as a very young child. Those endless blue orbs had always been her window to his thoughts and feelings, the highlight of many a memory. She recalled how he looked at her as they played together in the bluffs, as they made their wedding vows, and as they made love for the first time. It was then that Tifa realized that since she’d found him at the train station, they’d never really shared any extended eye contact. It was no fault of his own; she knew very well that when she was uncomfortable, she avoided meeting the gaze of others. Their interactions largely involved her looking at her feet or her lap, her hands or the sky. Why was it so uncomfortable to stare him in the face? Why was she afraid to meet the eyes of her beloved? Was she scared to find something there that she didn’t want to see?

She giggled quietly, out of nervousness and amusement. “Oh, yes. It’s obvious how happy being with Barret makes you.”

Cloud snorted, a smirk appearing on his lips. “Isn’t that a testament to my love for you?”

“Yes. Yes, it is.”

She rested her head against his shoulder, letting her face settle into his neck. He could feel her smile against his skin and it left a funny feeling deep in his gut. He wanted to hold her close to him, both her body and her heart. He wanted to kneel before her, broken, and ask for her help to rearrange the parts of him in their correct order. But he didn’t know where to begin or how to ask for such a thing.

“Listen,” he began, confidence trembling like the legs of a newborn fawn. “I’m sort of…mixed up. I know I’ve told you that I’ve been having trouble with my memory and I don’t know how to fix it.”

Tifa frowned as she considered his words. It was no surprise to her that he was confused, but she was amazed that he admitted it out loud. Cloud had always had a delicate heart, so she decided to step forward with caution to encourage his openness.
“Well, what’s one thing you remember clearly? Maybe if we start there, we can find a way to validate other memories.”

He considered her question for a few minutes, watching the flames of the Cosmo Candle lick at the blackness of the sky. “I know for certain that Nibelheim burned. Back when we were in Kalm, I told you everything. It is clear as crystal in my mind.”

It hurt to know that one thing he did remember with certainty was such a dark, traumatic thing. If she’d been present as everything she’d come to cherish burned to the ground, she supposed that would be the first memory she’d lose. How could she go through each day suffering horrible flashbacks of her loved ones losing their lives to Sephiroth’s display of rage? Tifa imagined that the crackles and pops of their campfires, the sight of the flames and the smell of charring wood would bring traumatic memories of Nibelheim’s demise. But none of it seemed to bother him.

“Do you think we would’ve died in Nibelheim if you didn’t take me to Midgar?”

“Probably.”

Tifa felt a sort of grim gratitude when she reconsidered all that had happened. When she’d first moved to Midgar and realized the harshness of life in that dangerous place, she’d hoped she and Cloud hadn’t made a huge mistake leaving quiet Nibelheim behind. When her husband had disappeared less than a year later, Tifa would have given anything to go back home to her birthplace. But if they’d never left for their new life in the big city, she doubted they’d be alive to fight against ShinRA today. It had been Cloud who had first summoned the bravery to move away from the comfort of home when he joined the military, and he made sure to take her away from the oppression of her father’s household by marrying her when she turned fifteen. When he stole her away to the eastern continent, Tifa felt like her knight in shining armor had rescued her from her troubles. Remembering the overwhelming happiness their escape had brought her summoned a smile to her lips. Taking care to look directly into his eyes, she placed a palm upon his cheek.

“You have saved my life in so many ways, Cloud. Thank you so much.”

There was a certain beseeching look in his eyes that drew her in. He seemed like he wanted to say more, to move closer. Her husband reminded her of an anxious person, pacing outside of a door but never managing to make it through to the other side. Tifa fought the urge to verbalize her frustrations. What was he waiting for? All this time, he’d been hiding around hypothetical corners and obscuring what lay underneath. But what was it that he was hiding from? How could she coax more out of him? Earlier that day, they’d hastily took comfort in each other’s bodies. But when she was honest with herself about it, the encounter had left her feeling empty and unfulfilled. While his body had responded to the call of her own, Tifa’s yearning for emotional connection had echoed into the void unanswered. But he was reaching out to her now, she could feel it. And so, she’d reach back.

Tifa leaned in to press a gentle kiss against his lips, smiling when he responded.

Cloud wanted to melt into her touch, to lose himself in her kiss, but something held him back. Guilt sat in his stomach like a stone when he thought about Aerith, though he technically hadn’t done anything wrong. When he was with her, the whispering in his head was silenced for a time. The anxiety and insecurity he felt would be temporarily replaced by the feeling that he needed to love the Cetra. Cloud questioned why this was, but he was attracted by the fact that it gave him a purpose, a clear directive. And oh, how much he longed to be needed. Somehow, she always saw through his exterior without him having to let her in. He felt as if he had to earn back his wife’s trust, while the Cetra looked at him with confidence and readily offered support. But he didn’t really want it from her, he wanted it from Tifa. Perhaps it wasn’t Aerith herself that comforted him.
Maybe it was her ability to understand him effortlessly that attracted his attention. It was hard to face the fact that it was his own inability to recall parts of his past (and be open about it) that had alienated Tifa from him. Did he have the courage to make things right between them?

After their lips parted, he gently tucked her head under his chin. Behind her, the Cosmo Candle illuminated the soft strands of her dark hair, and he gazed unblinking into the fire. Although he was afraid, he let himself try to reminisce about the way he’d felt before. All that he’d really wanted was her love, both then and now. She knew practically everything about him; what did he have to fear? When they were growing up, and especially when he’d married her, Cloud always expected that their relationship would always be as steady as the flame before him. But now he felt as if he was trying to resurrect the embers of his marriage, hoping that the woman in his arms could remember how close they used to be and tell him all that was in her heart. These thoughts grieved him so much that he wished he could float away, just as the ash from the fire rose into the air and disappeared into the black night.

“I want to save her, too.” Cloud couldn’t believe what had tumbled out of his mouth, unbidden. Eyes wide, he willed away nervous stiffness from settling into his limbs.


“Yeah,” he swallowed thickly, feeling like he was suddenly treading upon thinning ice. He was aware there was a chance this subject matter might hurt Tifa’s feelings and cause her to drift even further away from him, but he couldn’t stop himself. His hands held her closer, subconsciously fighting to keep her near. “By the fire tonight, she wasn’t herself at all. She looked so upset and told me how alone she felt.”

Tifa closed her eyes, lashes brushing against his neck, and considered this. She could honestly say that she had met hundreds (if not thousands) of people in her lifetime. All sorts of characters had graced her presence in Seventh Heaven, telling her endless stories and problems from lives that were both colorful and bland. So many had opened their hearts to her, while sober or with the encouragement of alcohol, but few were anything like the Cetra. Reading Aerith was sort of like reading a poem: it felt as if she could interpret the woman differently each day. But Tifa would never have described her as someone who was despairing or sad, even underneath. She had the beautiful smile that only those who see things as they really are possessed. Her eyes were clear with wisdom beyond her years, though she tried not to let anyone see it. Aerith was different, but it seemed as if she wanted to be normal. But Tifa had never been skilled at interpreting poetry.

“Is she in danger?”

“Physically, she isn’t in any more danger than the rest of us,” Cloud said. He paused for a moment, considering his words before continuing. “But something was stolen from her today…her happiness, I guess. I don’t know. Kind of like what happened to you when your mom passed away. I don’t want to watch that happen to anyone else.”

Tifa looked up, then, searching for his face. In her own mind’s eye, life before and after her mother died was as different as a calm breeze and a roaring tempest. The drastic transition from her happy-go-lucky life into a daily desperate struggle to find self-worth had left her spirit in shattered pieces. She was certain she’d never recovered them all. But Tifa had never considered what her struggle looked like to other people. Had Cloud suffered because of her pain in those years? As much as she’d tried to carry her troubles on her own, it seemed that Cloud had shouldered it along with her. How foolish she had been not to realize this! An apology froze on her tongue when he spoke again.

“You aren’t happy either and I’m still trying to figure out how to rescue you from that. I know that it’s my fault you’re upset in the first place and it hurts me more than you know. I want you to trust
me, okay? I’m trying…”

Tifa frowned as his voice faded off into silence. He sounded sincere, almost like his old self, but something didn’t feel quite right and she wasn’t sure what it was. They’d be heading to Nibelheim once the buggy was repaired; hopefully being there would help to restore some of the memories he’d claimed to have lost. Perhaps then, they could start to really mend things and finally feel better. And while Tifa prayed that it was nothing more than a strange case of amnesia, she couldn’t deny the nagging in her heart that made her think it was something darker. It was hard to admit that she harbored feelings of anger and resentment over her abandonment for those long years. Something inside her looked for someone to blame for her misery, her loneliness, the irreplaceable loss of her baby girl.

But rationality took over. Earlier that day, their team had watched Nanaki waste his energy seething over bitter thoughts that ended up not being true. She didn’t want to emanate that.

“You really are you, right?” Tifa whispered against his skin, heart speaking without permission.

She almost felt guilty for asking it, for the question seemed hypocritical at best. Over the years, Tifa had built up so many walls around her heart that she wasn’t sure where it really was anymore. Was all that armor just protecting an empty shell? Was she capable of loving him as she once had? Perhaps Cloud was facing the same dilemma. They’d both broken the sacred promise of their childhood: to never keep secrets from one another. And as she looked up into his eyes for an answer to her question, his bewildered look silence confirmed those suspicions.
Two weeks’ worth of travel hadn’t taken them very far. The terrain had grown rocky and steep as AVALANCHE made their way into the mountains. To Cloud, heading back home felt strange. There was a peculiar pulling sensation inside him—a desperate sort of encouragement to move forward—and it baffled him. Logically, this pilgrimage to Nibelheim should have been one of guilt and paralyzing fear after all that had happened there. But he felt strangely hollow about the savage burning of his home, the betrayal of his hero, the death of his mother…

The mountain path was getting steep, slowing Cloud’s pace as his feet moved sluggishly over pine needles and the beaten earth of the trail. Why couldn’t he feel the things he was supposed to? Where was his rage at the unfairness of it all? Where was the agony that should have blazed in his heart at the thought of the injustice brought upon the innocent?

“You really are you, right?”

Tifa’s question sounded again and again, echoing against the walls of his mind. What if he wasn’t who he thought he was? Is that why he felt so empty where he should have been brimming with emotion?

There were wagon wheel tracks in the wide dirt path they were following, churning up splintered memories from deep inside him. Inhaling deeply, Cloud tried as hard as he could to let the memories flood forth instead of holding them back as he normally did. He remembered traveling down this very path with his bride and taking a train to the wind beaten coast; it felt like a lifetime ago. Or more accurately, like visions from someone else’s life. Some recollections were as vivid as if he’d only experienced them yesterday, some were muddled and hazy, while others were blank completely. But how could he remember things in such detail yet still feel detached from them? It was like remembering words from a novel he’d read: recalling the story of a character yet never experiencing the events first hand. Cloud had held this dreadful confusion within him since Tifa had dragged him to Seventh Heaven from the train station, yet he’d never had the courage to tell her about it. All this time, he’d felt that he’d kept most of his insecurity at bay, but returning to somewhere as chock full of nostalgia had made these feelings overwhelming. He needed to tell Tifa about this; it was way past time. The disappointment on her face whenever he closed her off from his thoughts had not escaped his notice. Once they had time to talk alone, he’d set things right.

“The air feels so fresh in my lungs,” Tifa said, taking a second to close her eyes and inhale. “I feel like my body has forgotten what clean air felt like from being in Midgar for so many years.”

Yuffie walked closely beside her, expressing the occasional complaint about tripping on a rock or how her legs felt like jelly from the steep climb. “Well don’t get used to it. The air is gonna smell like burnt wood when we get there.”

Ahead of them, Mt. Nibel exploded into view above the timberline. The view of the massive, grey mountain sent a momentary chill through his bones and his throat tightened with anxiety. Cloud tried to focus on the crunch of sticks and leaves underfoot as a distraction.

“I bet it gets cold up here at night,” Barret mused. He’d found a large stick to help him up the path, dramatically stabbing it into the dirt every once in a while in a theatrical display of his fatigue. “Get ready to freeze in th’tent, y’all.”

Nanaki sniffed at the ground, collecting new scents as he walked along. His tail lazily swung to and
expressing the excitement that his face didn’t portray. The ground eventually began to level out, sending a silent sigh of relief throughout the crew. Aerith looked up at the thick canopy of pine branches and frowned at the dirt beneath her feet as she moved along. Blue eyes watched her closely as they drew closer to the mountain and the source of mako excavation; he noticed her increasing concern and wondered whether she noticed the slow withering of life as they approached Mt. Nibel or if the planet was whispering its woes into her ear.

Cloud swallowed hard when they finally came upon the stretch of dirt road that stood between them and the town gate of what used to be their home. Once they turned the bend up ahead, the burned out village would come into view. Tifa, seemingly thinking the same thing, took his hand in hers and held it firmly. Was she ready to confront what had happened to Nibelheim? Observing her out of the corner of his eye, he gave her hand an encouraging squeeze. Cloud expected her eyes to be lowered to the ground as anxiety took hold in her chest, but she was staring straight ahead. When they made it to the meadow outside the village gate, his jaw nearly dropped in shock. Just beyond the scraggly grasses and the wooden archway loomed familiar houses and buildings, looking the same as they always had against the mountainscape.

Beside him, Tifa let go of his hand. A breathless word escaped her mouth, though he wasn’t sure what it was. She broke into a run, sprinting toward what should’ve been heaps of ashes and blackened wood. Cloud took off after her, causing the rest of their group to rush to catch up. Jogging, he watched as Tifa stopped under the dark wood of the archway looking out across town square, crimson eyes wide with an emotion that Cloud couldn’t quite identify.

“Is this Nibelheim?” Aerith asked, catching her breath as she came beside husband and wife.

Yuffie blinked at the quiet town before her, then turned her head to look at Cloud. “Didn’t you say this place burned to ashes?”

Barret, noticing Tifa’s stunned silence, moved to put a heavy hand on her shoulder. The gesture made something protective and possessive boil inside Cloud. Was he insinuating that he was the one who made Tifa upset? Why did he feel the need to comfort her? That was his job! A snarky comment might have rolled off his tongue if it wasn’t for the overwhelming scene that stood unwavering in his view. Nibelheim was whole—intact and probably better looking than he ever remembered it to be. To his teammates, the ones who trusted his words and guidance, he must look like a disgusting liar. And to Tifa—well, he didn’t want to imagine how betrayed she felt. Panic began to run circles in Cloud’s chest, quickening his breathing and threatening to overwhelm him. His hometown had disintegrated into smoke that one night. He’d cried out for his mother when he’d found her body in the only home he’d ever known, fire eating away at everything he’d come to associate with comfort. He’d stumbled out into the street, trying to scream with smoke filled lungs, the sweltering air threatening to peel at his skin. It had happened; he was certain! Never could he forget crawling up Mt. Nibel, chasing after Sephiroth to end the madman of his torment and avenge the loss of life.

Cloud trembled, face paling as the thoughts went round and round. He really was himself, right? Who else could he possibly be?

“It did burn down! I swear!” he sputtered, looking defeated and confused.

His eyes darted around restlessly, looking for any evidence of his claims. Overwhelming doubt threatened to push him over an edge that he wasn’t sure he’d come back from if he fell. The harsh, aggressive whispers raked over his brain like sharp claws, scraping and digging. Straight ahead, the water tower loomed. Had he really sat there with Tifa and told her he was leaving to join SOLDIER? Had they really cuddled together under the stars, perched upon its wooden platform?
Those memories in the late summer air were as clear to him as if they’d happened yesterday, but could he trust his own brain? Numbing fear began to spread through him, covering his insides as frost crawls across a window pane. Cloud reached a desperate hand to grasp Tifa’s, praying that she could be an anchor to keep him from spinning out into space. Her hand was cold when he grasped it. She didn’t move, eyes unblinking, for long moments.

Cloud’s mouth was dry, but he parted his lips to speak. “Tif—”

In an instant, she flew into action. Tifa ripped her hand away from his and whirled to face her husband, concentrated ire dominating her usually soft expression. She bared her gritted teeth as something mixed between a whimper and a growl cut the space between them, grief and anger fighting for dominance over her spirit.

“Get away from me, Cloud!” she roared, taking a few steps back.

All he could do was stand there dumbly, stunned by her request. The group fell silent in the face of Tifa’s developing fit, not knowing what else to do or how to gracefully escape this awkward situation. In all of his life, Cloud had never seen her this angry or heard her address him in such a brusque manner.

“What is wrong with you? Why would you lie to me?!”

“I didn’t!“

“Oh, save your breath, Cloud! You feigned this ‘memory loss’ to try and escape retribution for abandoning me and our daughter, right? You knew the whole time, didn’t you? You just didn’t want to answer for your actions!”

Her words sliced at him, like a myriad of stinging papercuts that only she could leave upon his heart. Eyes wide, he shook his head in disbelief and heartache.

“What are you hiding? I was open with you. I trusted you and you lie to me again and again! You said that Sephiroth burned our homes and killed our parents. What happened to Papa?!” she cried, voice breaking as she tried not to let herself dissolve into broken sobs. Tears were welling up in her eyes, but she refused to look away from him.

Cloud hated this. He hated himself and the fact that any of the pain she was feeling was his fault. But it wasn’t fair! He hadn’t lied. Had he?

“Your papa,” he began, recalling the man’s body laying still in the moonlight. Pierced by Sephiroth’s sword, Brian Lockhart bled to death outside Mt. Nibel’s reactor. Cloud had held his father-in-law as he took his last breath. Nothing would ever erase the memory of his own trembling hands, stained with blood. “He died, Tifa. Sephiroth killed him.”

“How am I supposed to believe you? You lied to Zack’s parents and he was your best friend!” she accused, nostrils flared.

What? What did that couple from Gongaga have to do with any of this? Who was his best friend? The numbness inside him kept spreading, all the way to the tips of his fingers and toes. Cloud swallowed hard, eyes wide and searching for some kind of mercy. But there was none to be found. He urged himself to think of something to say, anything. But nothing came, so he stared helplessly at her until she continued.

“I need you and you keep turning away from me.” Tifa’s voice trembled, now, her shell of anger cracking to reveal the anguish inside. “I hate it! I hate what you’ve done to me.” Her feet were
moving restlessly, her hands trailing away from the sides of her head to rest on her biceps as she hugged herself. Flitting about like a mournful bird, he could tell she was trying to contain herself but was losing to the power of her emotions. The quiet of late morning and the gentle breeze through her black hair seemed to mock her as her heart poured out through her throat.

“I’m not trying to,” Cloud managed to answer meekly. His eyes trailed away from hers, for he couldn’t bear to see despair upon her face and know that he was the one who put it there. “I never wanted to hurt you.”

Tifa stood up to her full height. Her brows were furrowed and her mouth was taut; her face consumed with anger like a burning twig. The fierce spirit of her grief that had been living trapped inside her for all these years had finally broken free. She almost cut him off before he could finish, her tone snapping like tinder in the hearth.

“Then where were you all this time? You left us alone in Midgar and you can’t even tell me why! When I was at my most broken, I used to believe that if only I had you back, then maybe I could find myself again. With you, maybe I could find some self-worth or reason to keep going. What a fool I was!”

Cloud closed his eyes as his heart raced in his chest, trying to remember. He’d left on a mission to Nibelheim, but after the town burned and he confronted Sephiroth, he couldn’t remember anything before he’d reunited with Tifa. Something was very, very wrong. And if Tifa wasn’t going to help him figure out what it was, Cloud wasn’t sure if he’d ever sort himself out. What if she left him like he’d supposedly left her? What would he do without her? He didn’t know what to say to combat her accusations and his silence only fueled her fit.

“I dreamed only of you, but apparently you were dreaming only about military grandeur and fame! What were you doing when I was in a dirty clinic in the slums, vulnerable and in agony as I gave birth surrounded by strangers? Where were you in those impossible weeks afterward when my body and heart bled and bled? You say you don’t know what happened, but I think I’m beginning to understand.” Her shoulders began to slump forward slightly.

“We were never enough for you, were we? You were off enjoying your promotions while we—”

Her tongue was like a loaded gun and there was nothing he could say. She was forcing him to try to remember things that Cloud refused to think about because it was absolutely terrifying how he had no idea when he’d made it into SOLDIER, or how he came to even qualify. Why were five entire years missing from his memory? How could he ask her for help with this, now?

Most of the anger had pattered out of her voice, leaving behind desolation in its wake. Tifa looked him straight in the eye once again. “You were out chasing your dreams, where does that leave me? What about the plans that you left behind? What about our vows—the promise that you made to stay with me until the end? I guess they were just pretty words for you, weren’t they? Beautiful, meaningless words.”

She turned to run, but he wouldn’t have it. Months of hurt and frustration boiled over suddenly, and Cloud abandoned any hope they’d come together and find solace in Nibelheim. Would things always be this way?

“Don’t you ever say that!”

His voice rang out, clearly and firmly, though he didn’t mean so sound as harsh as he did. Mako enhanced senses reacted lightning fast, grabbing her by the wrist and spinning her around to face him. Cloud expected her to drop into her fighting stance or fire back with another destructive
comment, but she didn’t. Almost instinctually, Tifa flinched, eyes wild and wide for a short moment. Letting go of her wrist immediately, he met her with an apologetic look.

“H-hey, Tifa. I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

A delicate mistake had been made. After the death of her mother, Tifa had been abused by her father for a long time. Cloud had spent many an evening comforting her after a particularly rough assault that went beyond alcohol infused words of hate. Hazy memories of tiny bruises peppering her wrists or arms made him feel sick and he took two steps backward, guilt rushing through his veins. Even back then, Tifa hadn’t been helpless. Her martial arts training provided the strength and skill to bring her father to his knees, but she never fought back. It seemed that she didn’t intend to raise her fists at him, either, though something inside him wished she would. He deserved it, right? The distraction of physical pain would be a welcome one. Cloud had raised his voice at her, just like her father used to do. He’d grabbed her…

In an instant, misery washed away the fear on Tifa’s face. She turned on her heel and without uttering another word, strode off into the activity of town square.

“Tifa! Wait!” Cloud cried. He hadn’t meant to hurt her so badly and couldn’t believe the things that had come tumbling out of her mouth. Did she really feel that way? He couldn’t let her believe that was the truth. Clumsily, he started to step forward to pursue her, but a strong hand held him back. Barret had grabbed onto his pauldron, yanking him roughly in the opposite direction. The swordsman shot a cold glare as a warning before wrenching his shoulder away from Barret’s grasp. Cloud hissed out a curse when he looked back to the crowd and found that Tifa had disappeared. He tried once more to go the way she had gone, but once again, he was restrained.

“Th’ hell is your problem, man?” Barret growled. “Ain’t you done enough already?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I told her lettin’ you back in was a mistake when she found you in Midgar! ‘Never trusted you since I first laid eyes on your spikey head.’

“Shut up! You don’t know anything about us or what we’ve been through.”

“I know enough. When I met Tifa, she barely talked an’ never smiled. She was so battered inside that I never thought she’d change. I thought she’d finally healed and then you show up and set ’er back a hundred steps.”

Fists were clenched and tempers were flaring. Aerith stepped between them, gently pushing them apart with her hands. “Guys,” she said, heaving a great sigh. “This isn’t helping anything!”

Mako eyes glowing a furious blue, Cloud ripped himself away from Barret and the rest of the crew. He thought he heard someone call after him, but the drumming of his heart in his ears and the rush of hissing whispers in his head made him unsure. Maybe Barret was right: maybe he should just leave her alone. His brief surge of anger had dissolved quickly, leaving only terror to rage inside him. Tifa was broken and it was his fault—or so she claimed. She’d never been one to lie, but Cloud couldn’t remember betraying her. He had no recollection of ever deciding to ditch her and their unborn baby for his own career goals and didn’t think he was capable of something that cruel. But was he? He wasn’t even certain who he really was.

Cloud had been comforted by the fact that lately, there’d been fewer walls between them. It had excited him to begin to finally reconnect and begin to trust that perhaps he didn’t have to carry his burdens alone anymore. To think how close he had been to telling her the truth about his
scrambled mind! She’d never help him, now. His wife had been pushed too far—a cable stretched too tightly that was beginning to fray—and Cloud didn’t want to make it worse. Tifa could never understand what he was experiencing because, quite honestly, he had no idea what was happening inside him. There was something eating away at his mind, pushing him down and killing him slowly but he couldn’t scream for help.
The loneliness was driving him mad, but why should he drag Tifa down with him? He’d already harmed her enough.

When the smoke cleared in his mind, what would be left? When the winds of clarity finally blew, would everything he knew to be the truth disappear?

Before Cloud realized where he’d been going, his feet carried him to the front door of his old home. He’d been through this door a thousand times and his mother always waited for him on the other side. Pressing his palm against the door knob, he slowly wrapped his fingers around the brass piece. What was inside? His mother had been killed by falling rafters as their home burned around her, he’d seen it. If he opened the door and she was there, preparing dinner at their kitchen table… well, he didn’t know what he would do. Holding his breath, Cloud made his decision and entered without bothering to knock. The sight hit him like a kick in the gut, attracting memories as a magnet collects metal: the scent of aging wood, the sound of Mom’s laughter intermingling with his, and the blessed feeling of relief that came with the welcome environment of home. But as Cloud looked around the living space, very little was as it used to be. He didn’t know whether or not to feel relieved or mournful.

“Who’s there?”

It was not his mother’s voice. An old woman appeared, squinting at him with beady brown eyes. She had a mixing spoon in her hand and a strained apron around her waist. For a moment, Cloud was startled at the aggressive way she looked at him as if he didn’t belong in his own home. It took the passing of a few awkward moments before the blonde realized that although the stone floor of the kitchen and copper pipes along the walls were the same, this was no longer his cherished home. Love didn’t live there anymore. He felt so awkward and sheepish then, watching the woman angrily wave her wooden spoon.

“Uh, sorry,” Cloud muttered, embarrassment showing with the coloring of his cheeks. “I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“Well you certainly did intrude!” she huffed. “Do you always just walk right into people’s homes?”

“No, I…” He couldn’t help but let his eyes wander, drinking in the sight of familiar open floor plan, walls and windows. “I lived in this house until I was fourteen years old.”

It was with a growing uneasiness that Cloud realized that there were more things different than there were the same. Were his memories accurate? What was going on? Had he ever lived here or was the flood of vivid childhood visions some construction of his seemingly deranged mind?

“That doesn’t mean you own it now!”

“It’s just that…this town was burned down. I was here when it happened five years ago.”

“What are you talking about? I’ve lived here for twenty years and there’s never been a fire of any kind,” she snapped, her frizzy white hair bobbing as her hands flew to her hips. “Now get out of here! I haven’t got the time for strange visitors.”

He didn’t object. Standing on the old woman’s front walk, his blue eyes took in every detail of the
cobblestone street before him. Nibelheim was a very old village. Generations of the same families carried out the same tasks every single day. Visitors were seldom occurrences, and new residents even more rare. Looking out into the moderate bustle of town square, the realization that he didn’t know a single one of those people made something dark and terrifying slither within him. Face paling and breath quickening, Cloud swallowed against the feeling of terrifying isolation. Who was he? If he hadn’t come from here, then where was his home? Was everything he thought he knew about himself something that his warped mind had manifested? He fought the urge to kick at the flower pot beside the stone walkway in frustration.

Maybe this was why there had been a sinister feeling lurking deep inside his heart. As they approached Nibelheim, the whispers had pushed him forward, making him believe that he’d feel whole if he continued in that direction. But something else in his mind and body kept screaming to stay far away from this place because there was danger here. The flashes of obscure images in his mind haunted him incessantly, increasing in number as they neared his childhood stomping grounds. *Limbs as heavy as lead. Screaming and screaming into the silence. Watching his hands pressed up against glass. Green, green all around. Deep, carnal fear flooding his body. Blinding lights and searing pain.* Cloud shook his head once more to suppress them, but distress shivered down his spine and nestled into his core.

What was real? What was false?

Quickly, he grabbed the trowel that was resting in the flower pot beside him. Eyes wide with fright, he stumbled off the walkway and into the grass, shuffling quickly toward the fence that separated that yard from what used to be the Lockhart’s green lawn. Cloud stooped near the fence post closest to the road, pushing aside grass to find a familiar loose cobblestone. Hastily, he turned it over and pierced the packed earth with the trowel. He supposed that he might attract unwanted attention as he crouched there, clawing at the earth, but he didn’t care. He had to know if everything he thought he knew was a lie. Was he the result of some ShinRA experiment like Sephiroth? Great unease swirled around and around inside him as he realized that he couldn’t remember giving consent for mako treatments or enduring any of the proper training that prepared one to become a member of SOLDIER. Surely, the day he’d become a first class SOLDIER would’ve been the happiest day of his life. Why couldn’t he remember it? Why hadn’t he celebrated with Tifa?

Dirt was caked under his fingernails when his trowel hit something hard, a small metallic clank sounding. Cloud let out a breath he didn’t know he’d been holding as he dug out a rusted, tin coffee can.

… … …

The tree in the backyard was no more.

Her once semi-wild backyard was well manicured, now. Her sandpit, Mama’s vegetable garden and Papa’s wagon were nowhere to be found. The old oak tree where the tire swing used to be was now a neatly sawed off trunk. Not knowing where else to go or what else to do, Tifa had sat herself upon it and hid there for the better part of an hour. She was grateful that no one had come to bother her and she could cry privately as she tried to make sense out of what was going on. Often times, Tifa felt as if her life tossed about like an angry stream among rocks and boulders. As a child, she used to believe that her life would have been a simple, boring flow from beginning to end with maybe one or two gentle curves along the way. She’d hated the thought of living a life devoid of adventure or variance, but now she’d give anything for stability and some sort of normalcy. A dull ache rolled through her abdomen and her hand moved to rest against it.
With a sigh, she finally stood and wiped the tear tracks from her cheeks. Everything about Nibelheim was overwhelming, even without the fight she’d had with Cloud. There were countless lonesome nights in Midgar where Tifa had visited her childhood home to comfort herself as she waited for sleep. The Nibelheim of her dreams was not the one she’d left as a fifteen year old, but the one that had existed in her earliest days. She’d dreamt of singing silly songs with Mama as they harvested the ripe tomatoes, skipping along the road holding onto Papa’s finger, and walking to school with Cloud. Nibelheim was so different and foreign, now. Hesitantly, Tifa walked up to the steps of the back porch. They looked as if they’d recently been installed: the pine was well lacquered and there were no chips or flaws over the smooth surface. It looked nothing like the ancient, creaking wood and peeling paint that used to be there. She’d long memorized which shingles were dangling from the roof and where there were cracks forming in the white walls on the outside of her home. But there were fresh shingles on the roof and a different kind of siding on the house.

It was then that her heart began to pang with the realization that she was trespassing upon someone else’s property and shouldn’t linger as she was. Tifa began to fret over whether or not she should leave or ask to be let in just to visit with her childhood home one last time. Papa was dead…wasn’t he? Or had he gone far away? If he did, he’d sold the house and the new owners seemed to have spent a handsome amount on repairs. Maybe she could just check and be certain. Besides, if her father still lived here, she’d like to take a photo of her mother with her. She could still picture where their family portrait hung in the hall upstairs hallway. Deciding that it would be best to knock on the front door, she rounded the house. Tifa knocked again and again, but no one answered. After arguing with herself for a moment, she turned the knob and let herself in.

“…Papa?”

The wooden rocking chair and the couch were gone from the living room, replaced by a pair of taupe love seats. Her father’s drawing table with the lamp was gone and Mama’s handmade curtains had been exchanged for thick, maroon drapes. They were drawn over the windows, leaving only thin strips of light creeping across the floorboards.

“Hello?” Tifa called out, voice fading into the silence.

Slowly, she walked about the ground floor, looking for any sign of her father or familiarity. Tifa remembered every slammed door and every dried up hope that was treaded into the carpet of this place. But there was no sawdust on the basement steps, and no modest carpenter’s workshop at the bottom. There was a different set of dishware in the cupboard and photos of people she’d never met in frames on the walls and sitting upon the sideboard. Her feet took her up the stairs, heart thumping painfully. The portraits were gone from the second floor hall. When Tifa closed her eyes, she could vividly imagine each one: pictures of her parents, her grandparents and relatives she’d never even met. They’d been replaced by generic paintings of flowers and fruit. Her parents’ room had been rearranged and painted a different color. There was even a closet where there wasn’t one before, and Tifa felt so puzzled that she wasn’t certain her memory was correct. Something deep within her ached to see her mother’s jewelry box on her bedside table, the full length mirror in the corner, and Papa’s hand carved chest at the foot of the bed. But they were all gone: visions of another life.

It was difficult and startling to see and comprehend, but Tifa knew that looking through her old bedroom would be the hardest thing of all. She tried to prepare her heart as she walked through the door but the sight of the piano took her breath away. It looked exactly the same. There was a twin sized bed in the same spot where hers used to be with a familiar looking doll sitting nicely by the pillows. Even the bookcase by the window looked identical to the one in her memories. Confused, Tifa knelt next to the books, pulling each one from their place to search for anything familiar: for
her piano music sheets, for her old school primer, for the hidden letters from Cloud after he’d left for Midgar…

Putting the books back on the shelves, Tifa felt bewildered and adrift. Was it just a coincidence? Had whoever moved here changed everything but kept her room as it was for some reason? Was she losing her mind? Overwhelmed, she strode out of the room and down the stairs. This had been so much harder than she thought it would’ve been. Something made her pause in the foyer before she reached for the front door. Tifa turned around to take in what had become of her home one last time. All at once she could feel something unpleasant welling up inside her. She’d spent the last few hours keeping it veiled from her awareness, but now she saw in her mind much too clearly the image of herself from another time, at the same front door, saying goodbye to her childhood home in her wedding dress. Last time, she’d left her home behind with intent to return one day—more like a ‘see you later’ than a true parting. Now, she had to bid farewell to her home not just physically, but its essence. The place of her childhood had been replaced with foreign things and she wasn’t quite sure how she felt about it.

As she took one last look, Tifa realized why she’d wanted to come back in the first place. She’d left home with lofty dreams of happily ever after and ended up lying face down in the dirt, struggling to survive alone in the Midgar slums. Somewhere within the hardship and anguish, she’d forgotten who she was. Tifa hadn’t realized that her heart had been leading her back home, believing that if she came here she’d find herself again and start to rebuild all the brokenness inside her. So why did she feel more lost than she had before? Once, she’d been young and full of hope. She’d read Cloud’s letters again and again, believing his love would last forever and that he’d take her away to build a happy life. How naïve she had been to think that he’d go out in the wide world and still find someone as dull as her worthy of his allegiance. Tifa didn’t want to be that girl anymore. That girl had been betrayed and abandoned; the last thing she wanted was to allow that to happen again.

However, she had been foolish. Not only had she opened her heart to Cloud, but her body as well. Tifa tried not to panic as another tiny pain squeezed her lower abdomen. What if she got pregnant again? What if Cloud left her and she lost the baby again? Tifa was certain that she’d never be able to manage it or recover from the grief. She’d survived it once, but knew there was no way she could survive it again. She was much too fragile for that.

Turning quickly, she yanked the door open and met the sunlight with squinted eyes. Town square was busy, as it usually was in the afternoon, but this time Tifa took a moment to really study everything to find what was the same and what had changed. The old broken down truck still sat near the wooden frame of the town gate. The derelict mailbox of the Hansen’s farm was fixed and free of rust and the scraggly bushes lining the schoolhouse had been replaced with finely trimmed ornamental plants. The rosebush near the dry goods store was gone. Tifa began to walk, boots scraping lazily against cobblestone. There wasn’t a scrap of charred wood anywhere. The earth looked more dry than usual, but not terribly so, reminding her that the death from Mt. Nibel was creeping further and further toward the village. Something was so very, very wrong, and it only took her a moment to realize what it was.

The tiny population of her hometown had allowed her to know every single member of Nibelheim. But was she walked along, no one had recognized her or said hello. There was something worse about her old home than the knowledge that it was filled with someone else’s things. There had been no dishes in the sink. There had been a small layer of dust on the countertops and bedlinens. There were no shoes in the foyer, nothing out of place. Had there even been food in the pantry? Overwhelmed by other things, Tifa hadn’t noticed these details at the time. She’d been so busy staring at her surroundings that she rolled her ankle on a pinecone and stumbled. Cursing between clenched teeth, Tifa recovered and felt her hands tightening into fists. Anger coursed through her body, racing from head to toe in hot waves. Afraid she wouldn’t be able to reign in warring
emotions for much longer, she abandoned town square for the lonesome comfort of the mountain path.

Her anger, she soon realized, was more at the visual confirmation that everything she’d ever known was gone—replaced with faceless, characterless homes. When she thought about it, the villagers seemed more like actors than human beings. Soon after they had first met, Barret told her that rumors once swirled in his community about Nibelheim being destroyed and the carnage was covered up by ShinRA. Had she lied to herself all this time about the reality of these rumors? Perhaps she’d known the truth long ago, but didn’t want to admit that something so precious to her could be the victim of such a tragic fate. As she began to accept that it could be true, the details fell into place easily: the abrupt ceasing of her monthly letters from Claudia, the desperate phone calls to Nibelheim’s Inn following Cloud’s ‘death.’ She’d inquired about her father and was met with employees whom she’d never heard of saying that a man named Brian Lockhart had never lived just across town square. If this had all happened, what did it have to do with Cloud’s condition and memory? If ShinRA was responsible, and went to great lengths to obscure this massacre, then why wouldn’t they have murdered Cloud as well?

What would one more life be in order to silence anyone who knew the truth?

Tifa didn’t know how many times she’d walked this particular dirt path: sometimes in the blinding sun, other times in the cold moonlight. Wild grasses tickled her ankles as she continued to let her feet guide her along. When she couldn’t pull her thoughts together, her subconscious knew where to go.

... ... ...

The chipped bathroom tiles were cold under her feet, but it didn’t matter: her body had gone numb. There was blood in her underwear. Three little drops of bright red stared back at Tifa as she sat upon the toilet, eyes wide with fear and confusion. She was eleven weeks pregnant—she wasn’t supposed to be bleeding! Was the baby in trouble...or worse?

“Cloud!” she exclaimed, her call rising into a high pitched sob. Tifa let the hem of her nightgown fall back down to her knees and flew to the door, heart drumming wildly. “Cloud!”

He caught her as she rushed out into the tiny hallway, wrapping her up in his arms. His face was pale with concern.

“Tifa, what happened?”

“I’m bleeding! The baby—I think there’s something wrong!”

Cloud was dressed in his blue ShinRA uniform and had been about to head to work for the day. Two days from now, he was scheduled to leave on a week-long mission to Nibelheim and it scared her to think about being alone with her grief if their baby’s life was being threatened. Tifa’s hands gripped his sleeves as he encouraged her to get dressed. Cloud took her to the infirmary at ShinRA headquarters: the very place they’d found out they were expecting only a few weeks earlier.

Her husband could be a bit of a fretful person, but always acted calmly on the outside. She was the one who tended to wear her emotions on her sleeve, letting him see what part of her heart needed soothing without intending to. They were the only people in the waiting room at half past five in the morning, the shiny floors, bright lights and terrible silence made Tifa more unsettled than she already was. Cloud was holding her in his arms. They were both seated on the hard wood of the bench, looking sad and lonesome there, but Tifa couldn’t imagine anywhere else she’d rather be. She was terrified at the thought that their joy could be swept away without warning and fought her
astonishment over how quietly a life could be snuffed out.

Well, they didn’t know anything yet, but they would soon. Hiding her face in his shirt, she let herself cry silently and felt Cloud press his cheek upon the top of her head. Did he know how much she had come to depend on him for everything? Did he have a clue how grateful she was for his love and protection? His palm rubbed soothing circles on her back while his other arm held her tightly against him. Listening to the beating of his heart, Tifa took a deep breath. Even if something happened, things would be alright in the end, because they had each other. She memorized the hum of his deepening voice as he cooed comforts to her and committed the feel of his embrace to memory. What else could she have wanted?

And when they were called into the examination room and saw their baby’s strong, beating heart on the ultrasound screen, Tifa promised herself she’d never forget the beautiful sound of his relieved laughter.

… … …

The sky had darkened into an angry orange, but Tifa remained sitting before her mother’s grave.

Lia Lockhart had a handsomely carved head stone and Tifa felt badly that she didn’t have the means to give Aria a pretty little memorial. The graveyard was a little ways up the mountain path: a meadow surrounded by thick woodland. The grass was tall and unkempt, but Tifa ripped it away from Mama’s stone with her bare hands. Out there in the quiet, there was only the ghostly whisper of the breeze through pine needles to keep her company. She didn’t mind; she needed to think.

Obviously, Cloud had been through something strange and terrible. His denial of the knowledge of Zack was so bizarre that Tifa couldn’t wrap her head around what was going on behind those blue eyes. Zack had been everything to Cloud before both of them disappeared. ShinRA wasn’t the most efficient at wiping their mistakes clean, as she learned in North Corel. Perhaps Cloud somehow fell through the cracks? Here she was, denying truth because it was so hard for her to accept that her childhood home, her father, and Claudia were gone. Why couldn’t she expect Cloud’s brain to be much more warped than hers after he’d apparently lived through the fire and watched it happen? Wasn’t that enough to make anyone crazy? Guilt settled upon her heavily, for she should’ve been wise enough to consider all of this sooner. Her bitterness had been projected on Cloud, instead of using it toward their pursuit of ending ShinRA once and for all. She’d lost direction. Maybe Cloud did, too. Like her, his greatest desire for a peaceful life with her had been replaced by burning hatred and the seeking of justice.

Shame washed over her like a cold shower.

Her hair was caressed by a cold wind from Mt. Nibel, encouraging her to look up to the sky. The clouds were the color of fire, lazily drifting across the sky, making her wonder if her father had perished in the flames as Cloud had said. She’d made three tiny crosses out of sticks and twine and stabbed them in the earth beside Lia’s stone: a large one for her father and Cloud’s mother and a smaller one for her daughter. Tifa had taken the time to decorate the girls’ grave markers with wildflowers and chose to leave Brian’s bare. The sight before her made her feel a great heaviness, as if the earth was pulling her down toward it. Tifa made a promise that no matter what happened to her, she’d never forget them. They were all that was left of the old Tifa: the one who hoped and dreamed with abandon.

The last time she’d been here was on her wedding day. Cloud had leaned on the graveyard’s white fence while she bid her mother goodbye to go live happily ever after across the sea. That day, she’d promised Mama that she’d come back, and here she was. But Lia wasn’t her only mother. Claudia was her in-law, but had filled in the gaping holes in her heart Mama had left behind. Too bad nothing could ever fill the holes that Aria left behind. Marlene had soothed her for a time, but in
the end she only distracted her from her loss. Tifa wanted so badly to be happy, to feel closure and fulfillment by saying a proper goodbye to her family, but all she felt was emptiness. A lone hawk circled silently overhead and the wild grasses bent under the breeze, making her heart heavy with sorrow. She felt so hopeless that she supposed she’d find her own pain reflected upon anything she looked at.

Staring at the smallest cross, Tifa let herself realize one of her deepest fears: would she ever truly feel happiness again? It was so hard to realize that even the most joyful moments of her life would always be a little sad because she’d never be able to share them with Aria.

Melancholy clung to her like a cobweb and tears began to stream down her face in slow, steady streams. An ache in her abdomen rose like an ocean’s wave before receding once again, and she scrubbed at her eyes as her shoulders trembled. Tifa cried for many things, past and present. She longed for Claudia, longed for Zangan—anyone or anything to comfort her, because it had only just started to occur to her that perhaps she was more messed up than Cloud, further adrift than any of them, and it left her feeling desperate and lonesome.

The hawk called out, its sharp cry echoing of the mountains as the warm light waned into twilight.
Warding Off Ghosts

Tifa had never known what an ambulance was until she was carried by one.

A fearful whimper rose out of her chest, more from distress than from the physical anguish of her labor pains. Here she was, at her most vulnerable time, surrounded by complete strangers who were taking her to an unknown place. In Nibelheim, women gave birth in the comfort of their homes. When the time came for a baby to come into the world, the laboring mother was tended to by a midwife, her sisters, and her own mother. Birth was something personal and sacred, a time of quiet anticipation and familiar rituals. All of this was so far from what she’d imagined for the birth of her baby. Cloud was supposed to take her home to Nibelheim for the remainder of her pregnancy. She was supposed to labor alongside Claudia’s gentle encouragement and a midwife’s comforting wisdom. She was supposed to be enduring contractions in her own bed, with her own blankets and the comforting scent of home.

But Cloud was dead and she was alone in Midgar, terrified in the presence of unfamiliar people who seemed to be trying to help her. Tifa was dizzy as she watched the glow of neon lights blinked into the windows as the vehicle raced down the slum streets. Embarrassment and dread washed over her as she felt gloved hands sliding between her legs, the pounding of her heart in her ears drowning out the gentle words of the medical technician. She wanted to go home. She wanted anything familiar and comforting. Tifa cried out as the next contraction squeezed her belly like the wringing of a towel, and she writhed against the floor of the ambulance. If Cloud was with her, everything would’ve been alright. Focusing on breathing through the pains was impossible as broken sobs wrenched their way out of her core, tears mixing with the sweat on her face.

What would life be like when the inevitable happened and the baby came out? How would she ever survive? She couldn’t continue waitressing with an infant on her chest, but how would she make enough money to keep a roof over their heads? How could she parent the child all on her own? There was no one to pass on the ancient knowledge of mothering to her or hold her hand as she transitioned from a girl to a woman. While Tifa had long grieved the loss of her friends and family, she’d never felt their absence more than she felt it now.

She didn’t notice the looks of pity from the staff that attended her, nor did she hear their gentle reassurance. Panic had all but numbed her senses to anything but her loneliness and her body’s anguish as it pushed and pulled and fought. The ambulance bumped along and she tried to steady her breaths as the contraction began to fade. The slums were brutal and unforgiving, and she was so terribly lonesome, but Tifa knew her baby would give her the courage she needed to do anything.

There had been so many times in her life that she had felt beyond hope but had somehow recovered. Surely, she could pick herself up from giving birth in a strange place. The street lights ran up and down her face as they turned the corner and approached the clinic, making her think of the ocean waves that had once washed over her skin. She had been told more than once that she had had an indomitable spirit, but surely she couldn’t take all the credit. The embodiment of that spirit was about to enter the world, and Tifa was so ready to hold that tiny body in her arms.

… … …

Tifa woke up with a start, abdomen twisting with familiar pains. It wasn’t often that memories manifested themselves in her dreams. At least, not anymore.

Wet eyelashes blinked as she tried to regain her bearings, remembering almost instantly which dry
mountain path they were on. Mount Nibel loomed in the distance, stark and black against the moonlight, and the sight gave her both comfort and grief. Wiping at her eyes with the back of her wrist, Tifa slithered out of her sleeping bag as quietly as she could. She could see everyone’s sleeping forms in the dim flicker of their waning campfire, Barret’s quiet snores breaking the stillness of the night. Cloud usually slept right beside her, but not tonight. She couldn’t blame him. She grabbed her small pack and crept away from the group as another pain squeezed at her middle.

Hiding away behind a large rock quite a way from camp, Tifa confirmed that her period had indeed come at last. She let out a shaky breath and felt her eyes stinging with tears again: tears of relief and of overwhelming emotion. Being intimate with her husband again should have been something that brought her encouragement over what were the signs of the beginning of the mending of their relationship. It had only been one time, but she found herself so terrified of a possible pregnancy that she doubted she’d find the courage to do it again. Marriage wasn’t supposed to be this way. She and Cloud should feel free to love one another. Tifa should be excited at the thought of becoming a family with her husband; everything was all wrong and she couldn’t stand it.

She was so ashamed at how she’d shouted at Cloud—in front of their friends, nonetheless! Tifa had always been demure, closing off any negative feelings and wearing only a pleasant face in front of others. It was a trait she had picked up after her mother died. Papa had been in such a terrible state, never learning to cope with the loss of his wife and was angered when Tifa expressed any grief or unhappiness. The man lived a dreadful existence, having become bitter from years of brooding over his misfortune instead of striving to heal. Tifa rummaged through her bag in search of new underwear and menstrual pad, swallowing hard at the recurring thought that perhaps she was heading down the same dangerous path he had taken.

Cloud was hurting and she’d taken her frustrations out on him. Like Papa, she’d been so blinded by her own heartache that she’d put his wellbeing aside and thrown her insecurities in the face of their marital vows. Tifa couldn’t blame him for not wanting to talk when she’d meekly requested his attention in an attempt to apologize, but she couldn’t pretend it didn’t sting when he chose to roll out his sleeping bag yards away from hers. She had always promised herself that she’d never end up letting her circumstances make her better and yet here she was, holding on to pain and insecurity with white knuckles. Some nights, insomnia stole away her rest and churned up all the dark things that hid away in the shadows of her heart. Tifa had a feeling that tonight would be one of those nights.

Though they were quite far from Nibelheim, Tifa had walked these desolate paths again and again as a girl. Most times she’d been with Zangan, other times she’d been alone—memorizing the old logging trails to fill up any idle time she would’ve had to fret over her future. Even in the dark, everything was familiar. The closer they got to the reactor near Mt. Nibel’s peak, the more desolate their surroundings became. It had been like that back then, but the damaged seemed much more advanced now. By the glow of her flashlight and the light of the moon, Tifa located a nearby waterfall that she used to enjoy resting beside. The raging river of her youth had slowed to only a steady stream, now. The water quietly tumbled over the edge, rushing into a free fall before slapping the rocks at the bottom. It made her think about the leap of faith she’d have to take in order to put her trust completely in Cloud’s hands. Before the mess she’d made in Nibelheim, she supposed her confidence in him had been lukewarm at best. But Tifa had to change and trust that he’d catch her when she jumped instead of letting her hit the stone below.

It was apparent to her that she’d been wrong more than she’d been right since Cloud had reappeared in her life. Marriage calls one to give their spouse their complete self, but if she was honest with herself, Tifa had to admit that she’d had one foot in and one foot out. She needed to turn from that attitude, but wasn’t exactly sure how. It would take time that Tifa wasn’t certain she had a lot of. If only she knew how to be bold and have speech like an open book: clear and concise.
It was always so difficult for her to express herself and that flaw had finally displayed how much it was hurting their relationship. Tifa was so accustomed to listening to others as a bartender and absorbing their grief while never betraying her own. Sometimes, when she’d try and let out a tiny hint of her sorrow to her friends, she felt unheard, like shouting into the wind.

Looking up at the stars, she gasped in adoration. Living in Midgar for so long had made her forget how breathtaking they were. The glorious heavens prompted her to whisper prayers into the crisp night air: that they could be happy like other spouses, that they could find the qualities in each other that had made them fall in love, and that she could find the strength to stand by Cloud no matter what happened. How naïve she had been not to know how heavy marriage was. It never occurred to her fifteen year old self that Cloud could ever change from the sweet boy she’d known since she was born. Tifa supposed that was why the vow of marriage was such a solemn one: life changes, people change, and often times for the worse. Of what value was she as a wife if she cowered in the face of marital hardship? Guilt settled upon her spirit like a bag of wet sand.

How could she make things right if Cloud didn’t want to have a talk with her?

Chilled by the mountain wind, Tifa turned to walk the small distance back to camp with her heart heavy and her thoughts whirling.

… … …

“Psst! Tifa!”

Carmine eyes darted around in alarm. She had done her best to creep back amongst her comrades silently as not to disturb anyone. Looking in the direction of the whisper, Tifa squinted in the firelight to see Aerith sitting up in her sleeping bag. Her brown hair cascaded over her shoulders in handsome waves, its silky sheen catching the glow of the flames. She was waving her hand to beckon Tifa closer, bangles tinkling, and she quietly obeyed.

“Sorry, I didn’t mean to wake you,” Tifa said, moving to sit beside her. “Is everything okay?”

“Shouldn’t I be asking you that?” Aerith simpered. “You were gone for a long time.”

“My cramps wouldn’t let me sleep, so I figured a walk would do me some good.” Tifa folded her hands into her lap, a little embarrassed that someone had been aware of her absence. “I needed to try to clear my head after what happened today.”

“Did it work?”

“No really.”

She didn’t want to look into her friend’s face, for she was afraid of what she might find written upon it. After reuniting with the group after her meltdown, Tifa hadn’t been able to make eye contact with any of them—not even Barret. Shame kept her like a sorrowful dog, shoulders hunched and tail between her legs as she followed their path. Cloud had immediately redirected his energy toward pushing forward, being shorter with words and more full of ambition than usual. After they’d torn through ShinRA Mansion, their leader seemed to be in an even worse mood: running irritated fingers through his blonde spikes and keeping silent with a tightly set jaw unless barking out directions. Tifa was surprised that he refused to be pleasant even in front of a new recruit whom they’d strangely met in the mansion’s basement. The sights and smells of Nibelheim had beckoned endless memories of the boy he used to be. Cloud had drifted so far from the boy she once knew, like a raft lost at sea, and Tifa had no idea how to find him and help guide him home. Guilt squeezed at her heart with the knowledge that she had helped push him further from the
sweetness that lived inside him.

Aerith’s eyes were on her, analyzing and pensive in their usual way that made Tifa feel as if she could see every insecurity hidden beneath the surface. She’d never met anyone who made her want to open her heart and close it off at the same time.

“I’m sorry I lost my cool today,” Tifa apologized, nervously pulling her hair over her shoulder. “That must’ve been really awkward for everyone. It sort of came bursting out of me at the time, but it must’ve made me look like a toddler in a fit.”

The Cetra let out a quiet chuckle. “It was a little jarring, since you’re usually so reserved. I thought I’d see Barret and Yuffie have it out before you and Cloud did.”

“We’ve never really had a fight before. We’ve been friends ever since I could remember but have always gotten along or talked out an issue.” Tifa looked up toward Mt. Nibel, its hulking figure looming before the smattering of stars. “I’ve always been sort of impulsive, I guess. My mother died when I was eight. There was a weird rumor among the village kids that those who die pass over to the other side of the mountain. So the day of her funeral, I went looking for her on the trails and almost got myself killed when I fell into a gorge. I guess today if proof that I’ve never escaped my carelessness.”

There was a brief pause in their conversation then, and Tifa tried not to shrink in upon herself. Aerith had been through terrible things, too: loss, disappointment and uncertainty about who she was. How did she always stay so pleasant through it all? It was as if nothing deterred her: not her kidnapping and imprisonment, not the loss of her real parents, not the fact that the planet was dying. How did she keep smiling?

As hard as she’d tried to bite her lip and bear her hardships quietly, Tifa had erased the last few months of good behavior with her meltdown. If she had been more patient and understanding, she could have gained more insight into what was actually going on with her husband and his memories. If she had exercised restraint, maybe she and Cloud could have grown closer through the discovery of the peculiar state of Nibelheim. She had just been so weary. Her spirit was bowing under the weight of her withered self-esteem, desperation for security, and longing for the love of her life to return from wherever his true self had gone. How selfish she had been to put his wellbeing behind her accusations. Had she abandoned the promise she’d made to him on their wedding day?

Aerith began rustling around to her right, and Tifa turned to see what she was doing.

“Come on, get in,” Aerith smiled, holding open the flap of her sleeping bag. “You must be cold! I never knew how cold the mountains got at night.”

Growing up, Tifa had rarely had the opportunity to befriend other girls. Her peers in her hometown were all boys and her own shyness had kept her connection with Jesse to a friendship that was warm, yet passive. There was something inside Tifa that always held her back: a deep set insecurity that once people knew her, they’d find a flaw and reject her. That morning, she’d thoroughly embarrassed herself. Never before had she had such a public outburst and she’d spent the rest of the day nursing the terrifying thought that her teammates would want nothing to do with someone so unstable and volatile. But here was Aerith, asking her to share her bed despite the ugliness she’d witnessed, and the sight made tears threaten to well up in Tifa’s eyes.

Perhaps she’d finally found the comforting female companionship that she’d been searching for her whole life.
A thankful smile spread gently across her features as her chest constricted with a sort of hopeful sadness that Tifa didn’t know how to define. The pair was pressed together, fitting against one another like puzzle pieces, gazing upon the generous spread of stars in the heavens. Aerith always smelled fresh, like the newly thawed soil of spring: renewing and comforting. Watching her out of the corner of her eye, Tifa hoped that one day, her own presence would bring others that same sort of comfort. Would Aria have been comforted by her mother’s scent? Would Tifa’s company alone have been enough to bring her daughter happiness and security? She’d never know, now, but she liked to think it would.

“Sometimes I wonder if we were lucky or not to have known our mothers before they died,” Aerith whispered, eyes on the stars. “I mean, we got to meet them and glean whatever wisdom we could from them. But now we know what we are missing from our lives. If we never got to become acquainted with them, would we be content or would we be desperately trying to find out more about them?”

Tifa frowned in thought. “I never considered that. I spent so much time wishing I had her back that I guess I never thought to just be grateful for having known her in the first place.”

“Elmyra is wonderful. Despite living where we did, she did her best to make sure I’d want for nothing. I always felt guilty as a kid when I’d cry in my bed, longing for my real mother. It made me feel as if I was betraying her by wanting the one thing she could never give me.”

“Your mother must’ve been so special: the last full blooded Cetra on Gaia,” Tifa said, wonder laced throughout her tone. “Now you get to carry on her legacy and help the planet. It must be so exciting to have such a remarkable heritage. I must admit that I’m a little envious…”

Her head turned then, a small spiral of brown hair cascading over her cheek. Aerith’s green eyes boldly looking her in the face. “Being ‘normal’ doesn’t mean you can’t be exceptional, Tifa.”

“Maybe.”

Ducking half her face into the comfort of the sleeping bag, Tifa tried to imagine what it would’ve been like to feel ‘exceptional’. Circumstances had convinced her that her value was minimal; fate had shown her that she wasn’t worthy of her father’s approval, of enjoying the blessing of raising her baby, or of having a stable relationship with her husband. How easy it was to let such hardships suck away her confidence or sense of meaning. If she hadn’t spent so much time focused only on what she had lost, perhaps she could be productive and focus on how to help others. Maybe she just needed to figure out how to heal in order to reach her true potential and be the extraordinary person she wished she could be. Maybe opening up to someone as therapeutic as Aerith would be the first steps down that road.

Aerith nudged her with her elbow. “I almost lost my cool, too, you know.”

“Really? When?”

“When we were in Gongaga, we met that couple who was looking for their son,” she whispered. Tifa could feel the other woman’s fists clenching loosely in the fabric of the sleeping bag. “…Was Cloud really Zack Fair’s best friend?”

“Yes, he was,” she answered. Until now, Tifa had forgotten about Aerith’s strange behavior during the encounter with Zack’s parents. Was there was some sort of secret she was holding on to? Did she somehow know Zack, too? “They were sent out on a mission together and neither returned. Were you familiar with him?”
We were a couple,” she admitted, eyes unblinking as they watched the heavens. “He left that day and never came back. He never answered my letters or returned my phone calls. It was like he had simply vanished.”

“Wait…you were his girlfriend?” Tifa almost laughed in her amazement. “He’d talk about you like you were the only thing that mattered! Cloud would get disappointed whenever Zack would ditch him to spend time with you.”

“Really? I figured that he’d gotten tired of me and run off.”

“I got a letter from ShinRA saying Cloud was killed in action. I guess Zack’s parents weren’t that lucky.” Tifa inhaled slowly, pain rising at the memory. “I didn’t know what to say when we met them. I don’t know where he is any more than they do.”

“That’s why I had to be rude and leave you and Cloud to finish the conversation with them. It was a little overwhelming to be in that situation all of a sudden and I had no idea how to talk to them about what there was between us or if it was even relevant. I’m sorry I ran away like a kid…I should’ve said something.”

There was pain in her voice that Tifa wasn’t sure she meant to portray. It was then that she understood that she had not been alone in her pain, though she had wallowed in it for so long. Aerith had been through so many of the same agonies that she had. Though Aerith had been lucky enough to be adopted by a loving woman and was the last in the line of a very special lineage, it didn’t mean that she had escaped suffering. Often times, Tifa wished she could possess the Cetra’s inner strength, for it shone as dramatically as the sun in the summer sky. But this side of her friend was different. Aerith hardly ever let any insecurity or negativity show. She always seemed so certain of herself: knowing her place and her value without a trace of doubt. Tentatively, Tifa pressed her side gently against hers, humbled and honored that she had chosen to share these feelings with her.

“I really don’t think Zack disappeared with another girl. I mean, you should’ve heard the way he talked about you. Whenever he joined us for dinner, he’d unknowingly insult me by saying how your dishes were the best he’d ever eaten. Zack would boast about how fun and charming his girl was, and how funny it was that you met in an abandoned church of all places,” Tifa said, smiling warmly at memories of the SOLDIER with dark hair almost as wild as her husband’s. “Isn’t that where you said you met Cloud? What a weird coincidence.”

“Yeah, it was like some sort of bizarre déjà vu.” Aerith turned her head to face Tifa, her countenance solemn. “Can I confide something in you?”

“Of course, anything.”

“Sometimes I get envious watching you and Cloud: a SOLDIER and his wife.”

Tifa let out a half-hearted chuckle. “Do you still feel that way after learning how much of a mess we really are?”

“Zack used to tell me that SOLDIERs didn’t typically take wives because their position could take them to the other side of the world on a moment’s notice. His work load was always demanding of his time and seemed to be dangerous. I think he knew how much I was hoping that our relationship would grow into something permanent and didn’t want to give me false hope. Maybe he didn’t like me getting such thoughts and decided to back out.”

“I don’t think so. I think something bad must have happened to Zack. I mean, he hasn’t even
contacted his parents! Cloud disappeared, too, at the same time.” Tifa looked at Aerith, knowing it was her turn to confide. “Something traumatic seems to have happened to Cloud; maybe Zack suffered the same fate. He seems to be all mixed up and isn’t at all who he used to be.”

“Is that why you think he’s been lying to you?”

“Yeah, though I’m ashamed of it. I’m supposed to trust him completely, right? I mean, what kind of wife is suspicious of her own husband?” she said, sighing inwardly. “Exploding like that isn’t something very typical of me. He disappeared after that mission to Nibelheim with Zack, only recently showing back up in my life. Since then I’ve been on edge—probably because he won’t tell me anything about those missing years. He says he doesn’t remember, but how can he just black out half a decade of his life? Why does he say he doesn’t know who Zack is?”

“I think that Zack is dead,” Aerith stated flatly, mouth turned downward. “In fact, I’m almost certain of it. But it was easier to believe that Zack left me than to believe that he’s dead.” A single tear rolled away from her eyes and her brows knotted together. Tifa took her hand and ran her thumb over the ridges of her knuckle.

“We don’t know that yet. What would make you so sure?”

“I could always speak with the planet—it’s an inherited trait of the Cetra. It’s how I knew Elmyra’s husband had passed away, even though I’d never met him. It wasn’t too long ago when I felt it in my heart: an understanding that Zack had passed into the Lifestream. It was hard for me to come to terms with after trying to forget about him for so long, but I really wasn’t quite sure if it was true or not. I’d put it in the back of my mind until meeting his parents. Now I regret not being able to give them closure. Can you imagine telling them he was dead only to have him reappear someday?”

“I don’t blame you. If you’re not one hundred percent sure, maybe it’s best not to say anything you can’t prove. If we ever find out what happened to him, we’ll go back to Gongaga and let them know.” The idea of the Lifestream had fascinated Tifa. A flow of life and death that recycled life energy again and again was as beautiful as it was amazing: a carousel of renewal and hope that constantly recycled expired souls into new ones.

“Is that what happens when you zone out like that?” Tifa asked with warmth in her smile. “You’re talking with Gaia?”

“Yes, though it’s not quite as simple as having a conversation. I’m not really sure how to explain it.”

“You don’t have to. It’s probably something you have to experience to understand.”

There had been something eating away at Aerith since their visit to Cosmo Canyon and Tifa was pretty sure what it was. She’d brooded a bit the night they’d learned about the role the Cetra played in the protection of the planet. It was a heavy burden; having it fall on a single young woman didn’t seem fair.

“Have you ever felt alone?” Aerith asked, confirming some of her companion’s assumptions. “I don’t mean lonesome—like when you’re alone waiting for someone to come home. I mean alone. Like no one in the entire world can reach you where you are or understand how you’re feeling?”

Tifa understood isolation. It had first manifested itself inside the four walls of her home as her father slipped further and further away from her in his grief. It followed her into the slums of Midgar after Cloud had evaporated from her life and peaked after the stillbirth. It was only upon meeting Barret and Marlene that she’d found the glimmers of hope to lay stepping stones to
freedom and a future. The kindness he had offered her had given Tifa the courage to take the shackles of guilt and emptiness off her own wrists that had held her captive for so many years. With that newfound strength, Tifa had been able to turn herself around from facing the past to facing the future, and embracing all the beauty she might find there. But now, Tifa found that she’d made an about-face. She needed to step forward instead of wading in the murky waters of the past, keeping her focus on what lay ahead instead of over-analyzing what was in the past.

The pain surrounding her situation with Cloud could only be quelled with patient understanding, not accusation. If a little kindness could help her in such an extraordinary way, perhaps she possessed the power to help Cloud come to the same realization she had. She’d messed up, that’s for sure.

“Yes, I’m pretty sure I’ve felt that way,” Tifa whispered.

There were so many holes in her heart where people had left her: the AVALANCHE trip, her parents, Claudia, Zangan, her baby girl…nothing would ever fill them. How selfish she had been not to assume Aerith knew just as much about loss as she did. Her usual jubilance and light-hearted nature had fooled Tifa for quite some time, but not anymore. She felt like she was finally starting to get to know this enigma of a woman, who was unmistakably a gem amongst the rubble. If Aerith could be open with her about such raw feelings, perhaps it was safe to expose her secrets as well.

“A while back, you asked if I’d lost someone,” she said, trying not to let her voice tremble. “M-my baby… I lost my daughter before she even took a breath. But you might have already known that if you can sense certain souls in the Lifestream.”

“Oh, Tifa…”

“It was after Cloud disappeared and the rumors of Nibelheim burning to the ground. I thought that no one else in the world knew who I was or cared about how much I was suffering. She was the promise of happiness and hope that I leaned on every day for the courage to keep going. When my daughter died, I had no one to turn to. Without the anchor of family and friends, I felt like was without purpose or reason to keep living. I had no one to connect with and I never felt so completely alone both physically and emotionally.”

“What changed that?”

“A chance meeting with Barret.”

Aerith hummed in acknowledgement, seemingly lost in her own thoughts. The limitless expanse above them made Tifa feel so small. The scope of her issues absorbed her whole being, but to the universe they were nothing. She was one small person with small issues and smaller hopes in the perspective of the endless universe, like a single grain of sand upon the ocean floor.

“I think I blew up at Cloud for more than the reasons I said in my outburst,” Tifa admitted. “I didn’t know it at the time, but I’d developed a medical condition during my pregnancy that was the cause of the stillbirth. Since ShinRA had pronounced Cloud dead, they cut me off from medical benefits and I couldn’t afford to continue my prenatal checkups. The doctors would have treated it and Aria would be alive today if I had that option. Some wretched part of me blames Cloud for not coming home and helping me afford medical care. Isn’t that terrible?”

“Devastation can cause many crazy thoughts, especially if you still don’t know why he didn’t come home. Trust me, I know.”

“I’ve learned my lesson, though. I won’t assume anything until I have evidence. Cloud was right—
Nibelheim was different in a million small ways. What if it was rebuilt? It has been five years, after all. I just want to apologize when he’s ready to talk to me. How rotten I feel. I wonder if somewhere inside he blames me for our baby’s death.”

She’d tried so hard back then. Money was always tight, but she’d found ways to feed herself and nourish the little one within. Tifa endured agony that she never knew she could withstand as contractions rose and faded; she displayed strength she didn’t knew she had when she pushed and pushed and pushed. Everything she had done was for her baby, but the preeclampsia made every effort a complete waste. Her condition silently stole away Aria’s life and Tifa had been none the wiser. What sort of mother had she been not to know something was terribly wrong? Her spells of dizziness, her blurred vision, the crushing fatigue…she’d assumed they were all just a part of pregnancy. If she had been wise enough to seek help, maybe there was something she could’ve done to save her. Couldn’t she have somehow gotten the money? She tried and tried but in the end it wasn’t sufficient.

As a child she’d dreamed of being a mother. She’d watched the women with their rounded bellies with a sense of awe and inward joy, pining for the day that she had a little one to coo over. But now, Tifa could never imagine trying again with the way she and her husband were now. Their relationship was in shambles and the traumatic memories of childbirth and the scarring circumstances surrounding it kept her from considering a future family of their own. The agony of her ripped and healing flesh, the indescribable suffering of her heart, the ache of her empty arms all haunted her. How difficult it had been to try and recover from it as she lay alone in her bed, the long days of sadness stretching out for what seemed like a bleak eternity. Tifa was certain she’d never find the strength to endure it again.

Aerith’s gentle whisper washed over her like the comforting warmth of the sun. “You’re a mother, Tifa. Good mothers sacrifice everything for their children. If the way you treat the rest of us is any testament, your baby was the luckiest little one in the world. Cloud knows this—that’s why he married you. You have a giant, wonderful heart.”

“How could she be lucky if she died?”

Aerith rolled over on her stomach, propping herself up on one elbow to stare Tifa in the face. Her eyes twinkled with the lightness of her smile and the glow of the moon. “Babies know all kinds of things, even when they’re in the womb. They can hear your voice, follow your palm across your belly and even feel your moods. Don’t you ever question whether or not she felt your love, Tifa, because it’s unmistakable.”

Something inside her broke, like the sudden collapse of a dam, and Tifa couldn’t keep her face from displaying the deep sadness that she’d hidden inside her for much too long. But the tears that escaped her were not tears of misery; they were tears of relief. Aerith cooed quiet comforts with mirth in her voice, understanding that the cries of healing when she heard them. Somehow, the Cetra had always brought a strange sort of peace upon her, despite her original feelings of inadequacy around her. She wished so badly that she could be that way for Aerith, for Cloud, for anybody. Resting in her friend’s arms, Tifa remembered the comfort of her mother’s embrace on cold, mountain nights. Would she have given Aria that same feeling of contentment and happiness?

“Thank you, Aerith,” she sniffed, wiping at the corners of her eyes. “I’m sorry I’m such a mess. You don’t deserve this.”

“Neither do you.” There was a maternal smile upon her face, making Tifa feel welcome despite her weakness. “Come on, let’s get some shut eye before we wake everyone else up.”

There had been so much to learn since they’d left Midgar to start this bizarre journey around the
world. Today, Tifa realized that no matter how one presents themselves to others, everyone was a little bit broken inside. No one was whole, or needed to be whole to find happiness. But perhaps, if they could find the strength to comfort one another, they’d all end up alright in the end. The girls settled back down, side by side, shoulders resting gently together. Healing may take years, but she was on her way. If Tifa could lift up those who were dear to her, maybe they could find the strength to mend their own weary hearts. It was Cloud who needed her most of all. When he was ready, she’d be there, asking for forgiveness and a way to help him mend his spirit.

Encouraged, Tifa felt a tiny smile forming at the corners of her mouth.

“So, do you think my mother made it to the other side of the mountain? Have you sensed her traveling spirit?” she asked with mirth, watching the night sky.

“Yes, she did,” Aerith chuckled. “Safe and sound.”
“Damn!”

Cloud sighed, the sound of the Tiny Bronco’s propellers almost drowning out the sound of Cid’s filthy mouth. The ex-SOLDIER sat on the tail of the single-passenger plane that had crashed into the ocean a few miles off the coast and somehow remained buoyant. The dual rear propellers had enough power to move the craft through the water, though no one was quite sure where they were supposed to go. Everyone seemed to look to Cloud for answers in every situation and it only made him tired. His spirit was already bowing under the weight of his own troubles, even before Tifa had erupted at him about a few days prior.

Their newest companion was seated in the cockpit, the glass hatch raised to allow for easy communication and fresh air. These days, it seemed like they’d pick up a new member to their crew every week or two and Cloud was unable to determine whether he was relieved or on edge about it. On one hand, it was comforting to know that the bigger AVALANCHE became, the better their odds were in defeating someone as powerful as Sephiroth. Their combined talents and skills would be useful in their fight against ShinRA’s looming presence, but how well did they know all these new recruits? Was it his responsibility to discern who should stay and who should go? It was irksome to feel like he had so much responsibility thrust upon his shoulders. When he’d first been reunited with Tifa, all he’d wanted to do was take her away and start their new lives without baggage. He and his wife couldn’t be further from his wishes, now: in the middle of the ocean in the company of a strange party, emotionally distant and struggling to find any common ground. It was a surprise for Cloud to see that even a gruff man like Cid had a woman waiting for him at home. Shera was docile and sweet, but he ordered her around with the tenderness of a drill sergeant anyway. It was a bit disconcerting to watch, and Cloud wasn’t sure what he’d do if Cid started talking like that to any of the girls. But at the moment, he didn’t feel like being gentle with Tifa, either.

“Those ShinRA infantrymen can’t hit the broad side of a barn, but they somehow managed to hit the most vulnerable part of the rudder,” Cid barked at no one in particular. The whir of the plane’s engine sounded strange as it worked overtime to spin the propellers through the density of the water. Nanaki didn’t say anything about being fearful of the sea, but the way he curled himself against Cait Sith all the way in the middle of the vehicle said it loud and clear. Vincent stood at the tip of one wing, stoically gazing out to the horizon while Barret sat near his feet.

“‘Figures…” Barret propped an arm atop his bent knee. “Too bad I’d rather die before workin’ t’gether with them. Seems like it’d take less time t’hunt down Sephiroth if we were on the same team.”

Nanaki rested his head down between his paws and spoke. “If we can find the Keystone before they do, I think we’ll be in good shape. If he’s after materia in the Temple of the Ancients, we have to get there first.”

The girls on were all sitting close together on the opposite wing, currently uninterested in conversation about their mission. Each one had freed their feet from their shoes, dangling their toes in the water as it rushed by. Cloud hadn’t taken part in the discussion, either. He listened, but hadn’t the energy to contribute anything or even think of where they might find the Keystone. Yuffie and Aerith were giggling together, looking for fish or excitedly pointing out the dorsal fins of dolphins in the distance. Tifa smiled her façade of a smile for them, trying to share in their
lighthearted chatter. The way she sat with her shoulders hunched forward irked him. She hung her head and spoke quietly, as if someone would snap at her if she let her heart show too much. The whole situation made Cloud’s blood boil.

Why did she have the right to act like a victim? She recoiled with trepidation as if he was the one who had shouted at her with accusations and embarrassed her in front of everyone.

He just didn’t want to deal with it anymore. Why couldn’t Tifa see how hard he’d been trying? When she’d come to him alone to apologize after a camp-side dinner, he’d told her he didn’t want to talk. It seemed impossible for her to meet his eyes after that, but Cloud was finding it hard to summon the energy to care. Her outburst had felt like a slap in the face when he needed her softness most. It seemed as if Tifa had enough kindness in her heart for everyone but her own husband. What a hypocrite she was: acting so defeated in the face of the same rejection she’d shown him. Cloud didn’t know how to wrap his head around the complexity of his circumstances, both inside and outside the confines of his dysfunctional marriage.

Stealing a glance at his wife, Cloud exhaled through his mouth. Her skin had started to pinken by the intensity of the sun and her long hair pooled at her rear upon the smooth metal of the wing. How had things come to this? Why did she assume he was lying to her? Cloud had always been loyal to her. He’d always told her what he knew to be the truth because that’s what spouses did. Honesty was an enormous part of a worthwhile marriage and as far as he knew, he’d never betrayed that vow. So why was she so quick to assume that he was deceiving her or that his intentions were bad? His hair was damp from the spray the propellers churned up as they moved along, and it occurred to Cloud that his marriage was very much like the Tiny Bronco. It had crashed, but hadn’t quite burned. The engine was working overtime as it tried to move the parts of it that were still working. It was taking them somewhere, though he wasn’t quite sure where, and the uncertainty left him feeling lost and uninspired.

The blue expanse of the sky stretched out before them—cloudless and boundless. The smell of the salt and brine drew his attention back to the swirling wake. At first, it was hard to differentiate the hushed chatter of the girls from the whispers in his head. Cloud was starting to become accustomed to it, and found himself too exhausted to fret over whether or not that was a bad thing. It was hard to know what was normal and what wasn’t anymore. All he could focus upon was how he was unable to make Tifa happy or provide any sort of stability for her. When they’d first been reunited, it had felt like heaven when she’d wrapped her arms around him. Those first few weeks together were blissful. He’d been physically weak and so very sick, but the way she’d quietly laid beside him in the bed with her fingers laced through his own had quieted the raging fear and anxiety inside him. Her scent, her skin, and the beautiful, soothing sound of her voice had lulled him into a placid state that he wished he could’ve remained in for the rest of his days.

But they hadn’t been on the same page since he’d healed. Cloud had wanted so badly to take her away from Midgar and start new, but she’d refused and instead roped him into AVALANCHE’s mess and questionable morals. And he’d caved, because he wanted her to be happy. Now, he was the reluctant leader of this freak show and he wanted the freedom to leave everything behind more than anything else. Chasing after Sephiroth and helping the planet had only been secondary goals. Cloud had primarily wanted to rekindle his connection with Tifa. Now that he couldn’t even do that, he wasn’t sure what was left to focus on.

A roar of laughter from Yuffie and Aerith prompted him to look over the wing, where Tifa was mourning over something that had apparently fallen out of her pack and into the ocean. In the distance, the grey outline of land was just starting to come into view. Barret stood, hand shading his eyes from the sun as he squinted toward the horizon.

“Yo, Vince. Where d’you think we ended up?”
“I’m certain that’s the northern continent.”

“It is,” Cid said, cheek leaning on his fist as he sat slumped in the leather seat of the cockpit. “We’ll be coming up on Bone Village in an hour or so if we keep going at this speed.”

Vincent’s red cape was flapping in the wind, continuously catching Cloud’s sight in the corner of his eye. There was something about him that rubbed the blonde the wrong way. It wasn’t his brooding silence or morbid attitude. He didn’t believe it was because of the strange way that their group had stumbled upon the man asleep in a coffin, of all things. Something dark had settled upon him since they’d found their way to the basement of ShinRA manor. Being in Nibelheim and enduring Tifa’s outburst had been enough to deal with that day, but the instinctual feeling of dread that had threatened to freeze his limbs had made him so on edge that even the low voices of his party members had made him jump.

After Tifa’s embarrassing accusations, Cloud had been determined to show everyone that he was capable. So he’d pressed forward, despite his soul and body screaming at him to run as far as he could from that place. When he saw the large holding pods against the wall, his heart began to pound so hard against his chest that he felt like it might burst through. Something rose inside him, a feeling of intense familiarity, like an old memory from childhood. But not a good memory; it was more like a terrible, horrible memory of intense fear and pain that his heart recalled but his mind didn’t. His trembling hand had touched the glass where there were finger nail scratches on the inside, his mind flashing with strange images of surgical instruments and bright lights. The sound of his own screams had echoed through his mind, making his hair stand on end and intensifying the paralyzing terror that pulsed through him. But he didn’t run.

And now, even a week afterward, all of those feelings of dread and fear had lingered over him like a heavy fog. Was he just projecting the dark feelings from ShinRA Manor on Vincent because that’s where they’d met him? Or was there something more? During one particularly difficult fight, Vincent had morphed into a beast of some sort and continued to fight alongside them, though he lacked some self-control. He’d said it was a result of the experimentation done to him by ShinRA, but it had left Cloud a little unsettled anyway. After all, Cloud felt like he had little control sometimes. Control over what, exactly, he wasn’t certain. Was he like Vincent: a monster under the surface screaming to come out? What would happen if it did?

He couldn’t let something like that happen. It had been so frustrating to watch Tifa act like she had something to be afraid of when she was with him, even before her little fit. Seeing something ugly within him manifest itself on the outside would be giving her a reason to fear him, and Cloud certainly never wanted to do that. He’d never want to hurt her or frighten her. Since that terrible day in Nibelheim, Cloud had taken out his frustration in fights against monsters and their long hikes to get from one place to the next. The physical exertion felt good and distracted him, at least for a short time. How was he supposed to show himself—and everyone else—that he was the man he said he was? Tifa had tossed so much blame at him that it would be hard for him to prove her wrong or get the others to believe him. As if things weren’t difficult enough, he had her to thank for making the others trust him less than they already did. In the past few weeks, Cloud had tried to relax and let his personality shine through. Now that his character had been attacked, he felt like a fool for trying to get comfortable in the first place.

He’d trusted her. A man was supposed to have confidence in his wife above anyone and everything else, and he felt that she’d led him down a path that careened in the opposite direction of what was best for them. Tifa seemed too occupied by her desire to stay with Barret and Marlene to consider what might foster the repair and strengthening of their relationship, and admitting that...hurt. It wasn’t just that their marriage seemed like a joke to their comrades, this particular ache had echoed in the deepest parts of his heart—eating him from the inside out. Why did she prioritize her friends...
above her spouse?

The whispering in his head was mounting, swirling about his consciousness like the churning of the Tiny Bronco’s wake. The words weren’t discernable, but he could hear the distinct voices of a woman, a man, and a child. It made him dizzy, sending a tingling numbness dancing at the base of his skull. Cloud’s eyes felt heavy, his body beginning to sag forward with fatigue.

The deep, deep blue of the ocean seemed to reach out for him. It sent jarring flashes of a recurring vision that haunted his waking hours: suspended deep in emerald waters, heart and mind as weightless as his body. It seemed like a memory, this lucid day dream. Cloud pulled his gaze from the sea long enough to close his eyes. He couldn’t hear the trembling laughter of a gull soaring overhead or the banter of his party members as he decided to let it overcome him. He’d fought for so long against the hissing of foreign voices in his mind, resisting the tugging of strange visions with all of the power he could muster. But Cloud didn’t have the strength anymore. The reverie of peace was too inviting to pull away, as he normally did, so he let the swelling wave crash over him. He wanted to sink deeper, deeper and deeper still, surrounded by darkness and stillness and calm.

He didn’t hear the others calling his name as his world went black and he pitched forward, landing in the sea’s chilling embrace.

Cloud jumped as the shutters rattled against the windows, the wind howling as it snuck in through the cracks in the door frame. Sitting by his mother’s bedside, he replaced the damp washcloth on her head with a fresh one by the dim light of a single candle.

She’d been sick for days. The fever had manifested quickly: nonexistent when he’d gone to school yesterday morning and raging by the time he’d come home to find her laid up in her bedroom. Mom had only left her bed a handful of times since then, and today she hadn’t left it at all. Sometimes she’d tremble with chills or frown in her delirious sleep, but they hadn’t shared any words since the day before and Cloud was trying hard not to panic. Typically, he was the one who got sick. His lungs had been weak since he was born, leaving him prone to respiratory illnesses that would sometimes leave him out of school for a week’s time. Claudia had nursed him through countless fevers and stomach bugs, her lullabies and gentle words summoning maternal healing magic just when he thought he couldn’t stand it anymore. Getting sick was horrible and recovering wasn’t easy, but he never had to worry for long. Mom always knew what medicine to give or what words to say to give his mind and body peace. Having her taken away from him was never a reality that Cloud considered.

What would happen if she never got better?

There wasn’t a time that he could remember when she’d been sick before. Occasionally, she’d come down with a cold or tickling cough but never anything this serious. Feeling vulnerable, Cloud reached out to hold one clammy hand where it rested lifelessly upon the comforter. For the first time, numbing fear was shivering its way through his body at the thought that he would lose his mother. His ten years of life had taught him many hard lessons, but this particular one was a brutal thought. Even if Mom rebounded from this illness, it was an inevitable fact that she would still die, one day. And then he’d be alone.

Tifa’s mother had died and it shattered her. Watching her outgoing, playful spirit disappear had been painful, her newfound silence disturbing. If someone as vibrant and strong as Tifa became so permanently downtrodden, what would the eventual death of his mom do to someone as weak and insecure as him? The tiny Strife family only consisted of two people. If one left, only one would
remain. For a frightening moment, Cloud tried to imagine life without Mom’s lightening presence and contagious laughter. Without her, he would surely feel alone and worthless in this world. Was this how Mom felt when he got sick? How terribly disconcerting to discover how easily one’s world could be shattered and how delicate life really was. Cloud supposed that such understandings were just a part of growing up; and it made him wish with all his might that he could freeze time before he came to know any more frightening truths.

He could hear the snow and sleet blowing against the window panes and wondered if it would pile up against the front door like it sometimes did. He’d asked for all the medicine his fifteen gil could buy, and the clerk had even felt sorry enough to give him a packet of ginger tea free of charge. Dipping a cloth in a bowl of cool water, Cloud wrung it out before patting down her arms and neck to cool them, desperately trying to remember anything Mom used to do to help ease him out of a fever. His trembling voice rose quietly into the room as he sang one of her many songs, praying it would chase the illness away her ailing body and beckon peace into her heart.

… … …

The Gold Saucer was one of the last places he’d wanted to revisit, but Cloud supposed that after his embarrassing stint out at sea he was grateful for the distraction. It seemed that he’d blacked out momentarily and slipped into the water, instantly reviving at the shock of the cold surrounding his body. There had been a lot of teasing since then, since he figured it was easier to tell everyone he’d lost his balance than to let on that there was anything strange going on with him. He could tolerate the playful mocking during their dig at Bone Village and the occasional jab during the trip back to Corel. Every time he’d dropped his fork or rolled his ankle during an encounter with an enemy, someone would be there to giggle at his clumsiness. He didn’t care; at least it entertained them.

Tifa, however, had constantly looked his way with concern painted across her features. And though she often tried to secure some alone time with him, Cloud found himself purposely making it impossible for her. He quietly reveled in each tiny victory while mourning it at the same time, watching her shrink back upon herself before trying again with a new plan some time later. Something about her persistence was admirable, even when he didn’t wish to be its recipient. Now that they were back in this oversized amusement park, it had become even more difficult for Tifa to get his attention among the noise and hubbub that flowed like a merry river around them. The crowds of people made him feel claustrophobic and the smells and bright lights were overwhelming to his enhanced senses. They’d arrived late in the evening. The group had let out a collective groan when Cloud had suggested they do anything but retire for the night, and so he’d given up on locating the Keystone until tomorrow. Amongst the laughter and pleasant chaos, he could hear his party’s shoes dragging against the ground.

“If I don’t rest my feet soon, they’re gonna fall off,” Barret moaned. “Where th’hell is that inn?”

Cid let out a noise that no one could distinguish as a laugh or a cough. “And I thought my nose was gonna fall off when you took off yer boots in the tent last night.”

At this, Yuffie dissolved into a fit of giggles. Cloud almost sighed at the memory, himself, for he and Nanaki were the true sufferers with their sensitive noses.

“Don’t worry, Barret,” Aerith cooed, benign sarcasm laced in her tone. “I’ll rub your feet for you.”

“Even your healing magic won’t be able to save you from that stench!” Yuffie grinned. “Right, Cloud?”

He considered ignoring the banter, for all he wanted to do was get them to their hotel for the night and succumb to the oblivion of sleep. Despite not feeling qualified to lead and his current defeated
mood, he still cared about everyone’s well-being. It was easy to forget that none of them possessed his strength or mako-enhanced endurance. They’d been in quite a few tough battles and spent almost a week sleeping under the stars, so their spirits needed rest as much as their bodies did. But if the joke was at Barret’s expense, Cloud supposed he wouldn’t mind adding to the conversation.

“You’ll need more than a phoenix down to revive you after that.”

Aerith chuckled, her laughter like a little melody that drew his heart out of the dark place where it had settled. It was the same sort of magic that her fingers possessed as they gently held cure materia to his wounds; the same soothing enchantment of her words as they quieted all that ached inside him. Cloud knew that wading about in thoughts such as these was dangerous and unproductive, but at the same time it was hard not to gravitate toward such a refreshing presence and away from the turmoil inside him. Something about the Cetra’s quiet confidence in his abilities made him feel that just maybe, everything would be alright in the end. Maybe he did have the correct qualities to save Gaia from Sephiroth and ShinRA. If Tifa wasn’t willing to give it to him, Cloud could rely on Aerith to cheer him on and push him forward, fulfilling his need for encouragement. He wanted to make her laugh again—anything to hear that sound once more—but he kept his mouth shut. Tifa was here, after all, and he didn’t want to add any more fuel to the fire that had begun to blaze between them lately. It had severed the small connection they’d started to form. Like a fragile spring shoot, their relationship had started to grow only to be drowned out and uprooted by a torrential flood of secrets and resentment. Where would they go from here? How could they hope to take root with no solid ground beneath them?

“Come on, look! The inn is over that way,” Aerith said as she hooked arms with Yuffie.

The neon sign blinked against the black sky, beckoning them with the promise of soft beds and a hot shower. Barret bellowed his thanks to every deity he could think of and Cid puffed silently on a cigarette as they turned toward their haven for the night. Vincent followed in his usual silence as Nanaki and Cait Sith brought up the rear. When they’d finally reached the front door of the inn, Cloud was startled by a sudden tug on his left wrist. Both of Tifa’s gloved hands had wrapped around him there, halting him from following the others inside. Determination was fixed on her face where there usually was meekness or calm, and it made him think of a child trying to puff out his chest in a vain attempt to look intimidating.

“Cloud?” she asked, voice unwavering. “Can we please be alone for a few minutes? This isn’t okay…I need to talk to you.”

Her uncharacteristic boldness impressed him, for never before would he have expected her to continue knocking at a door that he had shut and locked on her time and time again. Avoiding this confrontation couldn’t go on forever, but did he really have the energy to hash it out with his wife right now? Nanaki had noticed that they hadn’t come inside and peeked out of the door, but Cloud dismissed him with a few waves of his wrist. He couldn’t imagine a conversation that could make everything he was feeling better or mend all of their frayed connections, but he’d oblige her this time. What did he have to lose aside from a little sleep? But he wanted to watch her dangle for a moment.

“I wouldn’t want to waste your time. You said it yourself: all I’m after is chasing my own dreams,” Cloud said, the glow of his mako eyes burning into her red ones. “Isn’t that why I’m here? Oh, wait. Joining AVALANCHE and taking on ShinRA was your dream.”

She bit her lower lip, as she always did when she was trying to suppress the urge to shrink away, but did not turn her gaze from his.

“Please,” Tifa whispered, giving his arm a gentle squeeze. “Will you ride the gondola with me?”
The line for the ride was mercifully short. Leaning on the fence in the waiting area, he watched his wife purchase their tickets from the booth. He’d paid her little attention since their fight, only sneaking an occasional look in her direction, but had stopped actually looking at her. There was defeat in the way she handed the vendor her gil and emotional fatigue in her feet as she stepped onto the gondola. Her body curled in on itself slightly as he sat down across from her, almost as if she was waiting for a scolding or one of her Papa’s alcohol laced fits. Instead of evoking pity or softness, her behavior only inspired anger within him. Hadn’t she been the one to blow up at him? She had been the volatile one, shouting at him with fire and blame upon her tongue. Shouldn’t he be wary of her? And yet there she sat, head slightly bent as she peeked through her bangs to look out the window.

Cloud’s pride responded of its own accord, his back straightening and arms crossing as he stared her down and waited for her to speak. When he cleared his throat and she looked toward him, he watched with satisfaction as a blush crept up her neck, blossoming on her cheeks and the tips of her ears. Part of him screamed that he should be ashamed of himself, but the louder voice within him was enjoying this quiet retaliation for the way she had hurt him. She’d gotten a little thinner, he noticed then, as she folded her hands in her lap. There were lines underneath her eyes that hadn’t been there before and a heaviness to her spirit that Cloud hadn’t recalled her having since the handful of years just after her mother’s death. He watched as her lips parted to speak only to close again. It didn’t surprise him, for when Tifa was caught up in confrontation, her well of words usually ran dry. But a closer inspection of her expression echoed more fatigue and defeat than fear, which interested him.

“You wanted to talk, so talk,” Cloud said flatly, expecting her to clam up and declare his triumph with intimidated silence.

To his surprise, she looked him right in the face instead.

“I said it before, but I’ll say it again. I’m sorry for exploding at you. There’s no excuse for my behavior, I know. The nostalgia of being home was too much for me. All I wanted was to find some sort of closure or security there, and when I thought you were lying to me I snapped. I’m so insecure, Cloud.”

“Why?” he said. He exhaled roughly through his nostrils. “All I’ve done was go along with you from the beginning. I wanted to get away from Midgar with you, but you wanted me to join AVALANCHE. When I wanted to keep you safe and have you stay with Marlene and Elmyra, you insisted on coming along and putting yourself in danger. You want me to act as your husband, but whenever I try to lead, you won’t let me.”

Tifa hadn’t considered that and it filled her with shame. “I didn’t mean to undermine you.”

“But you did.”

She paused then, frowning into her lap. “What do you want me to do, Cloud?”

“I want you to trust me. I want you to trust that I won’t to hurt you or deceive you.” Had he shown her anything but devotion? In spite of that, his wife seemed to choose to look the other way and it was terribly discouraging.

“I’ve wished for that more than anything. But it’s hard because sometimes I feel like I don’t know you anymore.” She looked guilty the moment the words left her mouth, peeping up at him. She hid her eyes underneath her bangs like she always did when she felt uncomfortable. Ever since he’d
known her, Tifa hated confrontation and shied away from conflict. He was so surprised to see her pushing against his words instead of collapsing under the weight of them, and it left him wondering if both of them were too different to ever reclaim the connection they once had.

“Did it ever occur to you that maybe you’ve changed?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, does anyone really stay the same from year to year? Things have changed so much in my life since we were separated. I can’t possibly be the same, but at least I told you why I’m the way I am. You won’t even talk to me about what you’ve been doing these five years past.” Tifa hugged herself with her arms as the chill of the night air ate up her body heat. “I thought I’d learned my lesson long ago that time changes everything, but maybe I hadn’t after all.”

It was apparent to him by the grief in her eyes that it wasn’t just their relationship that she was talking about. Cloud had watched her adapt to the many phases of her life: her mother’s death, her father taking her out of school and pinning her under his thumb with his alcoholism and abuse, the loss of her friends in Nibelheim, and the journey to Midgar after their marriage. It seemed that adjusting to his absence had been the hardest change for her of all.

“So what’s your problem, then? Things are different. We’re different. It doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t trust me.”

“It’s just that—ah, nevermind.”

“Just say it, Tifa.”

He was tired of dancing this dance. The space between them was a distance that was hard to measure. There was no type of tool or magic to destroy the towering wall that had been erected in the middle of their bond and it made him feel hopeless and irritated.

“You haven’t been looking for me, Cloud: for my heart, for my feelings, anything. But you look for her.”

Cloud frowned, moving to sit up straight from his slouched position. “What did you say?”

“Every time you’re stressed out or lonesome or tired, I see your eyes seeking her out and it hurts. I know she’s kind and perfect—better than anything someone like me could hope to be—but does that really make it right? I’m your wife. I thought we were supposed to come to each other for comfort.”

Her heart clenched painfully when he turned his head to face away from her. Tifa wanted so badly to understand him, but these days it seemed that Cloud wandered his own land. Trying to keep him open to her was like trying to keep the sun from fading into the horizon every evening. It was as if the line tethering them together had been cut, and now they struggled to find each other in the void that had grown between them.

“Is that really what you think?” he asked.

“I…don’t know.” The sudden pop of a firework startled her as it penetrated the tension of their conversation, followed by another, then another. Both of them turned to watch the explosions of color outside, the merry display contrasting the gloom inside their gondola car. “But I do know that I can’t blame you.”

Cloud raised an eyebrow at her. “What do you mean?”

“I know that I’m nothing special. Aerith is a Cetra. She’s charming and magical and always seems
to be hopeful. It’s almost effortless how she lifts our spirits and makes everything seem so much better than it really is.” The glow of pinks, greens and blues illuminated the heartache upon her features. “I want to be like that. You look at her like she’s the only thing anchoring you to this world and I just wish that you’d look at me that way. Has it really been so long since I inspired anything other than frustration in you?”

“I’ve never known you to be so blind, Tifa,” Cloud said, his tone coming across as more harsh than he meant it to be. “Since we reunited in Midgar, all I’ve tried to do was protect you and submit to what you wanted. I didn’t want to give up my dream of running away to start a new life together. I didn’t want to put up with Barret or take part in AVALANCHE’s terrorism. Do you think I wanted to dress in drag to infiltrate a brothel? I did it for you, because I thought you loved me. But maybe you only want the ‘old’ me, not who I am today. It isn’t enough for you, is it?”

Was he right? All this time, she’d been searching for something that wasn’t there. How terrible to know that her vision had been shrouded from all of his kindness with a veil constructed from her own heart. There were remnants of the shy, smiling boy from her youth in his actions and she had failed to see them. What was it that kept her eyes closed to the truth for so long? How wretched she was to have caused him so much heartache when it was her job to lift him up. Tifa wasn’t sure if he’d ever want to give her another chance.

“So what do you want, Cloud?” she asked, eyes welling up with tears. “Are we little more than a crumbling sandcastle? The tide is taking us and we aren’t doing anything to stop it.”

Neither of them was any good with words and that had become a significant problem. Words are so powerful. They have the ability to soothe, comfort, encourage, build confidence, and bring peace to a troubled heart. But they also have the ability to destroy, discourage, create wounds and invite anger. They are not easily erased and could carve deep scars to last a lifetime. Cloud knew that he had to take great care with what he said and how he said it. It didn’t surprise him that he’d grown careless in his fatigue and frustration, but he wasn’t happy about his lack of tact or control. Words had such a deep impact upon someone’s life and he hated his absence of verbal eloquence.

“I want to do something about it. That’s why I’ve been trying all this time before you blew up at me.” A firework whistled past, exploding into a thousand yellow shooting stars. Cloud’s eyes leered down into hers before he closed them with a sigh. “Tell me it won’t always be this hard, Tifa.”

To her, their relationship reminded her of stubborn winter: spring kept trying to arrive, but the nasty ice and snow kept hanging on with sharp claws. Tifa’s heart was spilling forth with emotion and a terrible craving for closeness with him, but she struggled internally with how she might express this longing. She’d been so upset that she hadn’t taken the time to marvel in the miracle that after years of believing he was dead, he was sitting across from her now. She’d dreamt a thousand dreams about him when she’d been alone. When was she going to wake up from this, helpless as her dream dissolved into nothing?

“Why is this so hard? I want to let go of the past and accept the way things are now—the way you are now. But I miss the way you used to make me feel,” Tifa admitted.

She couldn't remember the last time she hadn't questioned her self-worth and she desperately wanted to feel secure in his love for her and her place in his life. From a marriage perspective, she only had one option: to choose to love him. Fairy tales made it seem like true love was meant to be. In the stories, love was always easy and never wavered. But Tifa had come to realize that love was not automatic; love was a choice. She'd choose to love cloud, even when it was hard, even when she felt like she didn't have the strength to overcome her emotional weariness. What was love if it
was easy, anyway? You could only get out of marriage what you put into it, right? They needed to develop a steady push and pull routine, like they used to have. Love had to go deeper than happily ever after—than chocolates or flowers or haiku poems. It was deeper than what he could do for her, what about what she could do for him. Genuine love was commitment and sacrifice and reliability. She wanted to show Cloud that she loved him; especially now, when he seemed to be suffering from something she couldn’t quite understand. Tifa took a deep breath and steeled herself, determined to plant her feet firmly upon the hope she’d found.

“How would I make you feel that way again?” he asked, earnest expression washing over his face.

Cloud hated this so much. He hated the conflict between them and just wanted his wife to be at his side once more. Everything inside him longed to lay his burden down at her feet, sharing all that had been so difficult to carry alone. In that moment, deciding to set aside his bitterness to try and comfort her wasn’t as hard as he thought despite the betrayal he felt. It was, he realized, because he loved her. The way she looked at him made Cloud grateful for the gentle way he’d spoken. But it was in the softness of his eyes that made her start to melt, for she had missed it so very much. Tifa reached out her hands, tears finally finding the freedom to spill down her cheeks. When his large hands swallowed hers, she couldn’t stop herself from placing her forehead atop his knuckles.

“Just like this, Cloud. Just like this.”

Communication seemed to be their crippling issue, and it occurred to her that compromise must be in order. They had to determine something that they could do together to open the next door in their journey as friends, lovers and spouses. Maybe she’d have to recognize that her husband may no longer be capable of the emotional intimacy she was seeking or be open to sharing his past with her right away. Perhaps Cloud could press himself to open his heart and share his deeper feelings. They must seek out and fix what could be improved and accept the rest instead of retracing the same tired paths. He moved to sit beside her, curling her in against his chest, and the gesture caused her to let out a shaky breath.

“Hey…don’t cry, okay?”

She wiped at her eyes and smiled through an apology. Together, they’d begun to send out their seeds of hope in the breeze. Things could still be mended between them if they had hope and the perseverance to see it all through to the end. Perhaps their happy times weren’t just a compilation of scattered memories of their younger years. They had run low on faith, but with some work, there could be happiness in their future. That possibility began to weave some positivity between them and the feeling was addicting.

“Let’s try our best,” Tifa sniffed, trying to steady her voice. “I won’t pressure you to try to be more open with me and I’ll do my best to trust in your leadership. I guess it was always easier to lean on your guidance before I had to fend for myself for so long.”

“I never meant for that to happen to you…or to the baby,” he said, voice low and rumbling. The thought of his stillborn daughter lying lifeless in her arms made him feel sick.

“I’m sorry I accused you of that. That wasn’t fair.”

They sat quietly together for a few minutes, watching the last few fireworks fade into the night. Cloud hoped he could fulfil her expectations and get rid of the chip on his shoulder. It was exhausting to be so guarded, but he wasn’t sure he felt safe enough to let his defenses down just yet.

“I think you’re doing a great job with all this, even if you don’t want to be here,” Tifa said, cheek
pressed against the firmness of Cloud’s chest. “I appreciate your hard work.”

“I never know if I’m doing the right thing.”

“And of us would feel the same way.” She let herself cherish the sound of his beating heart, which in the past had comforted her more times than she could remember. Although it was a little scary, Tifa decided to fix her eyes on the only thing she could remember that had ever satisfied her heart. No matter how long they’d been apart, he was still her sun, and she was stuck in his gravitational pull like a satellite. It would always be that way, and there was little she could do about it.

“It’ll be okay, Cloud. Don’t worry too much, okay?”

“Sure.”

But he would worry. He would always worry, because he felt like he’d always screwed up anything that was ever important to him. Failure and misfortune were things he was well accustomed to and it seemed like there was too much in his hands now to be comfortable with. If he couldn’t handle the responsibility of his own marriage, how could he manage something as enormous as the fate of the planet? And as they walked back to the inn—hand in hand—Cloud couldn’t keep his fear from rising up in his chest. Tifa turned to smile at him over her shoulder as she led him along. The very sight that used to give him butterflies made intense unease slither through his bones.

How could she trust him if he couldn’t even trust himself?
Swept Away

It was unbearably hot. The wretched sun loomed down upon him with its unblinking eye, scorching his exposed skin with vicious ferocity as he struggled along. Left foot, right foot, left foot, right foot...one agonizing step at a time.

Cloud wasn’t really certain where he was. Occasionally, he’d remember and his heart would swell with both renewed purpose and the great pain of loss. But it always faded quickly, like an ember that flies away from the hearth, leaving him lost once again. Someone had died and left him alone, though he wasn’t quite certain who it was that had died or why they had been together in the first place. When an important memory would force its way forward and expose itself at the forefront of his mind, it evaporated as quickly as the sweat upon his brow. The wasteland was unforgiving and cruel, making Cloud ever more aware of his physical weakness and vulnerability. He was hungry and thirsty and well beyond exhausted, but relief was nowhere to be found. Midgar loomed in the distance, yet his understanding of what the city really was wavered in and out of his consciousness as he fought to hang onto the scraps of information he could retain.

His name seemed to be the only constant thing, so he chose to repeat it to himself again and again.

Cloud Strife...I’m Cloud Strife...born in Nibelheim...

There was no shade to shelter him. The vast sky was devoid of clouds and there wasn’t a tree in sight. Small lizards scarpered away from his heavy boots as they scraped along the gray sand, hiding from the sunlight in the shelter of dry brush and the shadows of rocks. Cloud rarely found the strength to glance up, his deep fatigue gluing his gaze to his feet. When he did, the disconcerting sight of birds of prey circling the air only served to frighten him further. His limbs felt like lead as he moved along with only the sound of the buster sword dragging along the ground to keep him company.

His heart felt as dry and hopeless as this barren world around him. Dry grass poked out between the gravel and sandstone, reaching uselessly toward the sun like outstretched arms. Why was he alone? What was he looking for? Something told him the sword was important and that he had to keep walking toward the enormous structure in the distance, but he couldn’t be certain what it was. Cloud gasped as he stumbled down into a dry creek bed, dropping the handle of his weapon to land on his palms. Letting himself sag onto the cracked earth for a minute, he groaned as he wondered how he’d summon the strength to get back up.

Did he really have a reason to keep going on? It seemed so much easier to just lie there and let death envelop him instead of limping forward through this seemingly endless wasteland. There was sand in his mouth and coarse gravel stuck to his eyelashes and the perspiration on his skin. It felt as if the world was swaying around him and keeping his eyes closed was all he could do to ward off the resulting nausea. All was quiet, and Cloud found himself unsure if he should pray for death or for strength. His body was lying still, but his mind was restless. Like a gust upsetting a pile of autumn leaves, his memories were scattered and blowing about. He somehow managed to catch one and held it tightly in his fist.

There was a woman with hair that was long and black, a stark contrast to his light skin as it draped over his bare arm. He remembered the weight of her head upon his chest as they lay together, nestled in threadbare blankets upon a cramped bed. Her arms were circled loosely around him and it made him feel safe, treasured and secure. Oh, how he wished he had that sort of comfort now. As lost and alone as he was, there was a stubborn hope inside Cloud that refused to be extinguished. Maybe he could find that feeling once again; maybe his feet could take him there.
If he could escape, maybe he would be able to find that life could be good and whole.

But he wouldn’t find anything but death in this ditch.

Trembling arms pushed Cloud sluggishly off the ground. Slowly and carefully, he fought against his exhaustion and rose himself upon shaking knees, clutching the buster sword with all his strength. He’d put one foot in front of the other until he found solace.

... ... ...

The narrow hallways were cold and dark. At first, they had marveled at the Temple of the Ancients: it’s architecture, complexity, and magnificent, eerie presence. But after a few hours of navigating the labyrinth of corridors and stairways, Cloud was beginning to get irritated.

It wasn’t only the confusion and fatigue of the mind—other factors were fraying the short fuse that was his current temper. The day before, Tifa had succumbed to an enemy’s poison after using the last of their antidotes when Nanaki had received a venomous bite. By the time they’d reached the nearest village to restock their curatives, Tifa had already become quite ill. Now, she and Nanaki were recovering under the supervision of Cid, Vincent and Yuffie (which seemed more comical than it did practical when he thought about it). Although it seemed she’d only need another day’s rest before returning to her normal, healthy self, Cloud found himself riddled with anxiety over her wellbeing and unable to focus without her in his present party.

Whenever he tried to remember what life had been like before she’d run into him at the Sector Seven train station, all that surfaced were recollections of fear and suffering. Since Tifa had sheltered him, that pain and suffering had stopped. It was as if there was some faceless enemy that she had held at bay for a while. It had stalked him, watched him, waiting to pounce when he was vulnerable and separated from his keeper. Now that she was gone, Cloud’s paranoia had flooded its normal barriers and seeped into his behavior and normally controlled state of mind. With only Aerith and Barret for company, Cloud hoped he would be enough to guide them to what it was they had come here to find. But with each step forward, his confidence was shriveling.

The whispers were still calling out within the confines of his skull, and he struggled against them as sweat began to dot his forehead. They was like a ringing in his ears that got louder or quieter, making his paranoia crest as he desperately tried to establish their pattern. He’d black out for mere moments, leaning a hand or shoulder against the rough stone walls of a corridor, disoriented and claustrophobic. Although he’d reassure his comrades that all was well and Sephiroth was close, the way they frowned with concern made Cloud feel transparent. Shapes and silhouettes danced in the shadows of dimly lit torches, playing with his desire to protect his comrades and his instinct to run far away from this place.

“Words, feelings…there are so many of them here,” Aerith said, and his muddled mind silently agreed.

Barret, who had been uncharacteristically quiet, muttered, “This place gives me the creeps.”

Despite the chaotic clamor of foreign words roaring through his mind, it was the collective feeling of emotion festering inside this place that made his pulse quicken. Desperation, fear, foreboding, anger, defiance… they all hung in the stale air like a vengeful apparition. It was as if an acrid presence permeated every winding staircase and damp tunnel, and Cloud began to inwardly panic as it seemed they were getting lost in this winding maze. He wanted Tifa’s hand. He wanted to hear her voice and to feel her rub soothing circles between his shoulder blades. He needed her to keep him grounded. Without her, who was he? What if she took a turn for the worse while he was gone? Cloud couldn’t stand the thought of losing his only anchor in this brutal, unforgiving life.
He wasn’t the man she wanted him to be. When would her patience run out? Tifa had sounded agreeable enough since their talk on the gondola, but what if she was just being polite? What would he do if he didn’t have her? Did she know how much he depended on her? Cloud realized suddenly that until now, he hadn’t really reflected upon the fact that his wife was his foundation. Without her, he’d crumble from his base, which was weak to begin with due to his fractured mind and scattered memories. It was with great frustration that Cloud admitted to himself that Tifa most likely knew more about him than he knew about himself, at this point. If anything were to snuff out her life, how much of his past would never be recovered?

They came upon a warmly lit room with intricate carvings covering every inch of the walls and even the majority of the ceiling. Aerith immediately moved toward the detailed petroglyphs, fanning the flames of irritation that burned inside Cloud’s chest. For some reason, he’d grown increasingly exasperated with her since they’d entered the Temple of the Ancients. Every time she spoke or smiled, the sound of bangles tinkling as they bounced against one another, the scent of her hair…it all set his blood on a slow and steady boil.

He couldn’t explain why he suddenly couldn’t stand the one party member who seemed to have always brought him comfort and a sense of ease since they’d met. He was short tempered and tired, his head groggy and jumbled. The Cetra rushed ahead of them, and it was all he could do to keep from shouting at her.

Luckily, Barret spoke before Cloud had the chance to snap at their companion. “Yo, Aerith. Look at this!”

He gestured toward one section of the wall with his gun arm. Aerith bounced back toward the boys, stopping to look at the carving before them. She opened her mouth to speak, but was interrupted by a voice that made the hair on the back of Cloud’s neck stand on edge. It was Sephiroth. The ex-SOLDIER and gunman immediately took defensive stances, stepping in front of Aerith, who stared right at their enemy with defiance in her eyes. Long, silver hair swayed as he paced between them, waving his sword haphazardly as he spoke, voice almost devoid of emotion until it would suddenly drip with mania. He talked about the black materia and how he’d make use of it to summon a great catastrophe to destroy Gaia. A meteor would fall from the heavens if he had his way, colliding with the planet and snuffing out mankind.

Cloud’s palms were sweating in his gloves as he gripped the handle of the buster sword, and he found his focus on Sephiroth slipping as the pounding and hissing in his skull became unbearable. Dread and insecurity welled up inside him like a vicious tempest, robbing him of his ability to concentrate on anything but his own panic. He was starting to lose it—things he’d kept tightly chained inside him were starting to come loose and nothing he did made it any better. None of his usual tactics worked and Cloud was terrified. The last thing he heard was the heavy metallic clank of his weapon hitting the floor before his vision went dark for what seemed like a moment or two. The whirlwind of whispers suddenly calmed, and a single voice rang out clear as crystal in his head.

“Wake up!”

He blinked, limbs trembling, as his surroundings came back into view. Had he been mumbling? What happened? Confusion began to creep in like a midnight mist, robbing him of any security he had been hoping to find within himself. Every time he closed his eyes, he saw something different. A shining, black sphere. Snow whipping about in a wicked wind. A woman’s face with pale skin and white hair. She was calling him. He was part of her; he needed her to make her whole again.

“Cloud?” Aerith asked gently, reaching out to touch his arm. “Cloud? Are you alright?”

The sound of his name on her lips seemed to beckon him back from his reverie and he flinched at
her tentative touch.

"Cloud. I’m Cloud…” he said, staring hazily into her green eyes for a moment. “I remember. I remember my way.”

Aerith and Barret exchanged a worried glance, making a violent pang of fear spread through Cloud’s body. What had he done? Why were they looking at him like that? All this time, no one had noticed when the voices would slither about inside him like slimy, oozing tentacles: cold and oily and so very malicious. Was it finally starting to show? Would they panic and abandon him once they realized he wasn’t as certain of himself as he pretended to be? Mako eyes darted back and forth between their faces.

“What’s wrong? Is something wrong?” Cloud asked, trying to sound nonchalant. His gaze ended up fixing itself on the Cetra and he couldn’t determine if her smile was laced with pity or with understanding. Reluctantly, he decided it was likely both.


Being inside the temple had been like holding his breath: uncomfortable and suffocating. Cloud was relieved when they’d escaped the temple, desperate for respite from the growing pressure that made it unbearable to reside within his own skin. He’d rushed out into the daylight with long strides and deep breaths, but found no peace under the broad, open sky. If anything, the terrible feelings only got worse. The earth rumbled as the looming structure disappeared behind them, their plan coming to fruition as the path to the black materia unveiled itself. The Temple of the Ancients was gone in mere moments, leaving behind a deep crater where it had stood such a short time ago. At the deepest part of the basin of soil and rubble was a tiny dark sphere resting on the ground.

Cloud focused his eyes and tried to steady his trembling hands by clenching his fists. Quietly, he cleared his throat before speaking. “That’s the black materia…”

Aerith leaned over the edge of the newly formed cliff and nudged a small rock with the side of her boot, watching it tumble all the way down. Barret shifted anxiously from one foot to the next, his head beginning to swivel this way and that.

“Hurry up an’ get it. I’ll keep watch up here,” he said as his fingers moved to make sure his weapon was loaded.

“If we can get it, we can stop Sephiroth from summoning meteor,” Aerith said with excitement in her voice.

Suddenly, it seemed strange that the entire fate of the planet revolved around such a small sphere. Cloud exhaled through his nostrils, glancing around to try and find the safest path down into the crater. When he started to descend, Aerith was right behind him, and he felt annoyance flare up once again in his chest. With each step downward, Cloud’s world seemed to tumble a little more out of control: dizziness and delirium cresting as hissing whispers thrummed through his ears like the crackling of white noise. Aerith’s breaths were coming in short little puffs from exertion and her very presence behind him made the ex-SOLDIER grit his teeth with a sort of malice he never knew had existed within in him. Get away from me! His spirit recoiled from her like a demon flees the light of day. Despite the battle raging between his body and soul, he tried his best to hang onto his waning self-control.

When they reached the bottom, Cloud ran toward the black materia. But the second his fingers
wrapped around it, the air began to swirl around him, blowing dirt into his eyes and dread into his heart. Suddenly, Sephiroth was there before him. Cloud’s knees buckled and he collapsed as darkness settled over him, forehead resting against cold dirt and gravel. Somewhere behind him, Aerith was shouting, but it was all muffled and sounded so far away. His lashes fluttered as Cloud tried to open his eyes, closing his fingers around the weight of the materia in his palm. Her words failed to reach him as he swayed slowly to his feet, the magnetic pull toward Sephiroth giving him the strength to move.

Cloud… do what you know is right. Come to me and you will be made whole again. Give me the black materia. Then, you can rest.

Dazed, blue eyes searched for the striking green of Sephiroth’s. The fear that would have kept him frozen in place fell away, relieving him like the cool caress of an autumn breeze. All he wanted was to do the right thing. Cloud wanted to keep his comrades safe and protect the body and heart of his wife. He pined for love, for acceptance, and for peace. It was as if some deity had heard his silent screams for help and had come to him in this very moment, directing his actions so that he could relax his thoughts at last. Though his body felt heavy and listless and his mind was turbid and murky, Cloud felt instant relief when the materia was no longer in his hand. Sinking back to his knees, he kept his head lowered and shoulders slumped forward. How wonderful it felt to be useful. He’d served his purpose at last.

“Cloud!”

Gasping at the sound of his name, he scrambled to his feet. Adrenaline pulsed through his body, setting every nerve on edge. Where was he? What had he been doing? Aerith’s palm touched his shoulder and he whirled to face her. His hands were empty. The black materia was gone. Sephiroth had come and Cloud couldn’t be sure exactly what had happened. Sweat began to bead upon his brow as the fog lifted from his mind and he began to remember.

“What happened?” he asked, voice trembling. “What did I do?”

“Cloud…calm down. It’s alright.”

It wasn’t alright. He’d failed them. After coming so far and enduring so much, Cloud had single-handedly destroyed everything AVALANCHE had been working for. The fate of his comrades—and the entire planet—had been in his grasp for mere seconds before he doomed mankind to face its own extinction. It felt like everything he did was condemned to failure; no amount of good intention could ever save him from demolishing his marriage, his career, and the trust that others had mistakenly placed in him.

“I gave it to him! Sephiroth has the black materia!” His hands moved to grip her biceps and he pulled her closer to him. He’d made a terrible, horrible mistake—at least, he thought he did. Cloud leered into Aerith’s eyes with a sort of intensity that certainly would’ve made most turn away, but the young woman met his gaze with unwavering serenity and it angered him. “Tell me! What have I done?”

She stood before him, as steady as a heartbeat. She was like the eye of a hurricane as the storm raged on around her, unyielding to the violent gales of Cloud’s growing aggravation. When she spoke, her words were sure and even.

“Cloud, you haven’t done anything. It’s not your fault.”

It was then that something inside him snapped. For so long, Cloud had held the wild leash of something very dark inside him with white knuckles. The cord had broken at last, setting free
wickedness and malice that swirled right out of his core and settled into every muscle of his body. Tension crackled under his skin, loosely restrained ire combining with adrenaline and mako to make a dangerous cocktail of inhuman strength and lack of self-control.

“Why didn’t you stop me?!” Cloud roared, pushing her backwards onto her rear.

Long, auburn hair swung behind her as she fell and her bracelets clinked together when her wrists hit the earth. Like a predator, he pounced on her vulnerable form before she could try to get away from him. What does she know? Why wasn’t it his fault? Was she hiding something? The voices were sounding like a pounding in his ears, screeching out accusations and rage against her. She’s the problem! She’s a threat! Destroy the Cetra! She stands in the way of our plans: deceiving you and leading you astray!

Aerith began to move, trying to scoot backwards while keeping her eyes upon him and saying his name softly. But it didn’t soothe him and he didn’t relent, reaching out to grab her legs and yank her back towards him, marring the soft pink of her dress with dirt and debris. When he suddenly took hold of her arm, she gasped in surprise, and he pulled her up before him until her boots dangled inches above the ground. Cloud hadn’t realized he’d been shouting at her the whole time, his voice sounding hollow and distant in his ears. He clenched his free hand into a fist, drawing it back while taking his aim upon the traitor’s fearful face. There was a shout of a deep voice as a shadow moved to his left, and then the world went cold and dark around him.

… … …

Cloud squinted against the dappled light that filtered through the canopy. It felt as if he was slowly waking from a deep sleep: one that rested way more than just the body, but covered his spirit and soul in a blanket of consolation. Heavy, weary eyelids blinked a few times as he took in his surroundings. Wild grass tickled against his ears and the tree cover swayed peacefully above him, whispering their contentment as a gentle breeze passed through. Cloud inhaled deeply before sitting up and slowly letting the air out of his lungs. His mind felt blank, like a chalkboard washed clean at the end of a school day, and for once his heart did not feel troubled.

“Feeling better?” asked a familiar voice.

He didn’t need to turn his head towards her to know who it was, but when he did, rotten memories came flooding back into his brain. Had he really shoved her? Had he hit her? Why would he ever have done such a thing? His heart sagged with hopelessness, for it seemed that even if Cloud could find peace, it was always snatched away from him before he had even really known it was there. There was a serene smile upon the Cetra’s face and the earthy green of her eyes matched that of the dancing leaves above them.

“Aerith…” Cloud whispered, hanging his head toward the ground. “I’m so sorry.”

She was kneeling beside him on the grass: legs folded neatly underneath her and arms resting upon her lap. Refusing to look at her face, the blonde chose to focus on the way her hands were clasped together, fingers were laced. It felt so utterly shameful for someone as flawed and muddled as himself to sit beside Aerith, who rarely seemed to be uncertain about anything at all. For all Cloud knew, her life seemed to be almost as chaotic and tragic as his own. But she hadn’t hurt anyone. She hadn’t betrayed their team or let her spouse suffer such severe grief that left her like a completely different person than he’d married.

To his complete surprise, she giggled. “Weren’t you listening before? I said it’s not your fault. Everything’s going to be just fine.”
“How can you say that? I…something made me attack you. There was something sinister inside me that came bursting out and I hurt you,” Cloud admitted, his back hunching forward slightly as he curled in on himself. “Just like I hurt Tifa.”

“I’d hardly say it’s the same thing, Cloud. You didn’t hurt me, but I’m sure you and Tifa can work things out.”

“Why am I so confused? I have no idea what’s wrong with me or why I’m the way that I am.”

“Maybe it’s not as bad as you think. What if you are shielding yourself from the truth?”

“I’ve built a wall and I’m afraid to know what’s on the other side,” Cloud admitted, closing his eyes against the breeze. “I lost control back there. Was that what’s really inside me? Is that who I really am? I don’t know what to do about it. I can’t just walk away. After all the bad I’ve done, I can’t bear to hurt anyone else.”

“Shame will keep you in all kinds of prisons if you let it.” Aerith reached out, her slender fingers coming to rest on his forearm. She leaned forward to look into his face as she spoke. “And it will keep you from those you love and those who love you.”

“What if those I love are safer without me? I’m not worthy of being around them.”

“I get it—you’re having a hard time and you feel badly about it. Shame is born in public and you’ve been living out secretly. But so much could be made bearable by the love that your friends—and you wife—have for you. Everyone has issues, Cloud; you won’t be left behind because you’re struggling.”

“I don’t feel like I deserve any of that. I wish I did, and I try, but I haven’t found a way to make anything better.”

“There’s always another way. Sometimes you just need someone to help you look for it.”

Cloud looked up at her, eyes pleading. “Will you help me?”

She smiled so softly that it almost made him want to cry with relief. “Of course. Isn’t that what friends are for?”

He had to admit that he felt a little better. As terrified as he was of himself, at least he didn’t feel alone or abandoned by those who he desperately wanted to trust to help him. Maybe he wasn’t beyond help or retribution. Even if he continued to make mistakes, maybe Tifa and his friends would be there to catch him every time he fell.

“What is this place?”

“This is the Sleeping Forest,” she replied, reaching a sweeping arm above her head and across the scenic view. “It leads to the City of the Ancients. I’m on my way there to take care of this mess Gaia has found itself in. It’s only a matter of time before Sephiroth calls meteor and I’m going to protect the planet. Only a Cetra can do it.”

Alarmed, Cloud frowned. “Let us go with you. We can protect you.”

She laughed. “I think you should take care of yourself, Cloud, so you don’t have a breakdown. Okay?”

He watched as she rose to her feet and patted the dust off her dress. “I feel like I’m being led by
something...like I’ve found my destiny and it’s calling to me. So don’t worry about me. For the first time, I feel like I know what I’m meant for.”

Cloud wished he knew what he was meant for. Since he was old enough to understand the concept of self-worth and ponder the meaning of life, Cloud had desperately fumbled around to try and discover why he’d been born. In the eyes of Nibelheim, he was the unwanted, shameful product of an unwed mother. To Brian Lockhart, he’d never been worthy enough to even look at his daughter, let alone marry her. And when it came to obtaining his dream of becoming a SOLDIER and making a difference in the world, ShinRA had found him so insufficient that he hadn’t even been able to audition for the position. But he’d worked hard and proved them all wrong. Cloud had met his goal of becoming a SOLDIER, so why didn’t he feel like a hero?

He looked up at her smiling face and tried to let it soothe him.

“I’ll be going, now,” she said with a wave of her hand. “I’ll come back when it’s all over.”

She turned her back to him then, long braid swaying lazily with her strides. The wind blew a little more forcefully and he stood, eyes trained on the back of her head. Something made his heart beat wildly in his chest, fear snaking through his limbs and taking root in his core. One thing that was clear in his current haze and confusion was that he didn’t want to be separated from her. Something bad was going to happen—something that couldn’t be reversed and it terrified him. It seemed that no matter how hard he’d always tried to be a provider and protector, he was always helpless in the end. What if something happened to her?

“Aerith?” he called, taking a step in her direction. When she didn’t turn to acknowledge his call, Cloud’s breath hitched and he broke into a run. “Aerith, wait!”

But she didn’t wait and his steps did not close any distance between them. Like so many things in his life, his great effort yielded no progress or reward, and Cloud watched something dear to him disappear from his sight.

… … …

She’d kept her eyes off him for less than a day and his mental state had collapsed somehow.

Barret had returned to the hut she’d been recovering in with an unconscious Cloud slung over his shoulder, and Tifa had cried in frustration and concern over his explanation. Her husband had tossed and turned in a feverish sleep that night—the same night Aerith had disappeared. When he finally awoke, Cloud seemed broken and terrified: shivering in her arms as he tried to voice what it was that had him so shaken. He hadn’t wanted to continue their mission, nor had he wanted to pursue Aerith after what he’d turned on her at the Temple of the Ancients. He’d curled himself into a ball, doubting his sanity, his ability to lead, and admitting his fear for the first time since they’d been reunited.

And so Tifa had held him close through the night, listening to him whisper his anxieties to her. Cloud told her about how he’d instantly lost control around Sephiroth and how the incident had made him question who he was and what he was here to do. Somehow, he knew where Aerith was headed, but refused to join their search for her until Tifa and Barret had reassured him that they’d keep him in check. Something wasn’t right with him and Cloud was finally willing to admit it aloud, though he was terrified of discovering the piece that was missing. For the rest of the night, she’d whispered into his ear again and again.

I believe in you, Cloud. I believe in you. It’ll all be okay.
She wished she could console him the way Aerith probably could. When the older girl gave words of comfort, they always hit where she aimed and peace would come in soothing waves. As she hummed encouragement into the dark and smoothed back wayward blonde hair, Tifa could only pray that Cloud couldn’t sense her own uncertainty as she attempted to quell his.

How reluctant he still was, now that they had finally made their way to the City of the Ancients. Tifa made sure to hold his hand, giving it a loving squeeze every so often. Her heart bubbled with hope whenever he’d squeeze back. It was hard to face the fact that as time went by, Cloud’s condition seemed to be getting worse instead of getting better. It was her responsibility to stay by his side and help him to overcome whatever demons he faced, but she wasn’t sure where to start or if she was even equipped to handle something of this magnitude. Her husband couldn’t even tell her exactly what it was that was wrong and she wished with all her might that she could free him from his mental cage. After watching his breakdown the night before, Tifa knew she had to trust that it was confusion and not dishonesty that kept his past a mystery to them both. He had to be telling the truth; he seemed too unstable and distressed for his issues not to be genuine.

AVALANCHE was quiet, their silence reflecting the tension in the air between them. The weight of their circumstances was just as suffocating as humid air that surrounded them as they tip toed through this forgotten, ancient city. Nothing had been the same since Aerith’s disappearance. Everyone seemed to be holding their breath, fearing the safety of their friend and the fate of their world. The threat that Sephiroth posed to both Gaia and Aerith frequently stole Tifa’s attention, and she didn’t know whether she should feel guilty over the distraction from Cloud’s issues or feel justified for it. The enormous cavern held the heavy scent of fresh water and the disconcerting feeling that they were all being watched closely by something unable to be seen.

They refrained from calling out for Aerith, hoping that somehow they could avoid Sephiroth’s detection, but after several hours of searching long abandoned homes and crumbling buildings the team was beginning to get desperate. Tifa had started to think it was futile, when all of a sudden, there she was.

Separated from her friends by water and a precarious stone pathway, Aerith kneeled upon her stone platform. She was so still that Tifa was certain she wouldn’t have noticed her there if it wasn’t for the vibrant pink of her dress against the natural greys and blues of their environment. The sunlight filtered down upon her, making her hair shine and complexion glow, reminding Tifa of the way her home was the only one in the Midgar slums where light had made it through the upper plate. Somehow, in this dark and terrible world, the light always found her. The brawler felt jealousy surge in her chest, for it always seemed that the only things that were constant in her life were hardship and disappointment. But Aerith, too, had experienced pain. Like Tifa, she was an orphan. Aerith had endured the loss of the love of her life, struggled with her identity as the last remaining Cetra and battled with her own insecurities. Perhaps the difference was that Aerith was strong enough to welcome the light while Tifa was too afraid to make herself vulnerable to it again.

The light exposes all sorts of deficiencies and imperfections, and Tifa knew that she wasn’t quite ready to examine herself so closely.

“Aerith!” Yuffie called out, her voice echoing back against the natural rock walls surrounding the city.

But her voice did not reach her ears, for the Cetra did not move from her place. She looked like an angel, her body folded so neatly on the smooth stone with her hands folded under her chin in what seemed to be prayer. What was she praying for? What was she doing?

“Damn it, she can’t hear us,” Cid spat, taking his weapon in hand.
“Wait,” Barret said lowly, reaching his arm across Cid’s path. “D’you think it’s some sort of trap? Sephiroth can be anywhere.”

Nanaki remained silent, but Tifa noticed the hairs of his mane were bristled and his head was lowered in discomfort. Something didn’t feel right and she couldn’t put her finger on it. Everything inside her was screaming that they should leave this place and she didn’t plan on ignoring that instinct. They had to get to Aerith and fast; Sephiroth could make his appearance at any moment! Carmine eyes wandered toward Cloud, who stood at the water’s edge.

“Everyone stay here. I’m going to get her.”

It was the first directive he’d given since his episode and the breakdown that had followed. Barret raised his eyebrows and for once, Tifa was grateful for Vincent’s passive silence. She didn’t want Cloud to move away from them, especially alone, but she wasn’t about to shoot down his fledgling confidence. With a racing heart, she watched him jump to the first stone of the crooked pathway to Aerith’s platform.

It was with great relief that Cloud leapt across the final stone, hauling himself up to reach his comrade. Again, she didn’t seem to be aware of his presence—too deep in the midst of her prayers to notice his intrusion. For a moment, he wondered if she was really there. He couldn’t say he’d be completely surprised if she ended up being a figment of his imagination after all of the strange things he’d been experiencing. It had gotten to the point where it was hard to distinguish reality from fictional formulations of his boggled brain, but Cloud prayed that just this one time, he wasn’t seeing things. Swallowing hard, he took a few slow steps toward his friend. He was about to call her when his fingers started twitching with the ache to grasp the handle of his sword.

It was terrifying at first—feeling his body move of its own accord—but by the time he’d pulled the buster sword from its resting place upon his back, his consciousness was starting to crackle and fade. It was as though something dark had lodged itself in his chest, whispering to him incessantly. It felt like he’d accidentally taken a bit inside him, like breathing in smoke from a fire. Now it was stuck in his lungs, painting them black from the inside, and Cloud was helpless against it. Breath quickening, Cloud’s strong arms raised his weapon over his head, ready to strike as he moved to loom over Aerith. That anger he’d felt before was returning: the vindictive feeling that made him want to remove the Cetra from this world. The voices returned, rising up in a chaotic crescendo as they fought for dominance in his head, clamoring and screeching for blood and death. But one voice rose above the rest.

“Stop!”

It was a man’s voice—familiar and foreign at the same time. A face flashed through his consciousness: brilliant blue eyes and wild black hair, and it troubled Cloud to his very core. *Who are you?*

“Cloud! Stop!” Tifa and Barret were calling from a distance, and the reality of what he was about to do settled upon Cloud suddenly and harshly.

He snapped out of it, fear lurching in his chest. For the first time, he realized that perhaps the voices in his head weren’t of his own manifestation. He was being controlled—like a marionette—and it filled him both with intense fear and anger. Cloud’s trembling hands lost control of the heavy buster sword and it clattered to the ground, causing Aerith to startle out of her prayer. When she blinked her eyes open and looked up at him, his troubles dissolved as he let himself become lost in their green depths. He wanted to apologize, to embrace her, to tell her that he’d never hurt her again, but all he could do was stare back at her helplessly. Fighting the urge to gather her into his arms and race back toward AVALANCHE, Cloud struggled to formulate the words to say.
Sephiroth was here somewhere and Aerith was in danger. But was she any safer with him? What if he tried to protect her but ended up harming her instead? Last time, he had almost…

And then she smiled at him. Her expression radiated such unrestrained joy and it immediately quieted his frantic mind. She was smiling with her whole face, her cheeks rising to lift her eyes, relief woven into the expression as if she’d been waiting for him. Aerith had wanted him to come; she was glad he was here. After their discussion at the Cosmo Candle, Cloud had come to realize that she must be struggling against her own demons. The fact that he could chase away some of her dark feelings made him dare to begin to feel useful again. Maybe he could give her the same sort of hope that she gave him. Every member of their party seemed to be broken in one way or another, like different branches of the same damaged tree, and it hadn’t occurred to him how much they could help one another. It would all start here and now. It was time to start mending the pieces of them that had unraveled.

Cloud reached his hand out to Aerith, her smile bringing forth a grin of his own. Extending her arm out toward his, her pink lips parted to speak. Had she forgiven him for what he’d done to her?

In an instant, it was over. A black blur descended quickly and silently from above, running her through with his curved masamune. There was no sound as the smile was dropped from her face as suddenly as lightning strikes across a stormy sky. Those deep green eyes were wide with pain and shock, her mouth parted and body slumping forward as Sephiroth removed the blade from her body in one fluid motion. It was almost as if time had slowed to a crawl as Cloud’s eyes took in every detail of the horror before him. He felt as if all the blood in his body had begun to flow backward and his heart beat loudly in his ears as his face paled with astonishment. This had to be another vision—a sinister, disturbing daydream—because it certainly couldn’t be real. But her body was heavy in his arms when he caught her, the metallic scent of blood filling his nostrils. Thick, crimson slickness covered his fingers and palms as it seeped from Aerith’s core. She was trembling and Cloud held her close, blinking again and again to try and make this vision disappear.

It would be okay, wouldn’t it? He’d wake up from this nightmare and hear her merry laugh as she scolded him for letting something as frivolous as a dream bother him. She’d encourage him like she always did, right? And it would be alright, because he had her and Tifa and their team. Nothing could separate them. He wouldn’t let that happen. But seconds ticked by and Aerith was going still in his arms. Tears were welling in his eyes; his fingers were jerking with fear and agony and something else. Cloud’s body began to shake with emotion as Sephiroth’s deep voice cut through his thoughts.

“Stop acting as if you are sad. Don’t pretend like you have feelings,” Sephiroth said. His voice was monotonous, low and even, and the sound of it stirred up terror from the deepest parts of him. “You are not capable of such things, like anger or despair.”

The words rang hollow in his ears. Cloud supposed he should’ve been brimming with anger: hot words should have formed upon his tongue and he should have grabbed his weapon and attacked their aggressor. But he didn’t. Helpless and frozen with grief, it was all Cloud could do to lift his eyes to stare into the coldness of Sephiroth’s. The man’s long hair created an intimidating silhouette as the light illuminated his figure from above: his face draped in shadow while his mako eyes shone with their eerie glow. As menacing as his gaze was, Cloud couldn’t look away.

“Cloud,” Sephiroth said, eyes unblinking. “You are nothing more than a puppet.”

In an instant, he had disappeared. Cloud’s arms began to go numb under Aerith’s body and he turned his gaze back upon her limp figure. He blinked and blinked, trying to comprehend the finality of all that had happened so quickly. A memory came flashing before him of another victim
of Sephiroth’s—another who had passed away in his arms. Brian Lockhart had been far from the first person to make him wrestle with his sense of self, but he found that no matter how hard he’d worked to prove himself to his father-in-law, he was little more than a nuisance to the man. He’d always been nothing. And even here, in the haunting depths of this ancient city, Cloud could not escape the fact that he was born to be cursed with a vapid existence. Even Sephiroth had found a way to highlight how insignificant he was, murdering his dear friend before his very eyes. He hadn’t been able to stop her demise and she was kneeling mere feet in front of him.

If he couldn’t save Aerith, how could he save anyone else? How could he save his soul from drowning in apprehension and confusion? How could he save Tifa from her fears and restore their broken relationship? He couldn’t possibly save the world.

A hand on his head brought his thoughts outside of himself once more. Tifa was there, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and resting her forehead against the back of his neck. In a moment, the rest of AVALANCHE was there, chaos in their voice and movements as they fumbled for all sorts of curatives and restorative materia. Like a statue, Cloud sat, holding onto her lifeless body and staring at the way Aerith’s face was already going pale. Didn’t they know it was useless? No phoenix down or potion could undo what had been done. Death was final. Nothing could have brought back his father, his mother, or his daughter once they’d been taken from him. Somehow, Aerith looked peaceful as she rested upon his lap. Her chest was no longer rising and falling. He was briefly aware of Barret’s shouting and Yuffie’s choked sobs, but his desperation to remember the last thing she had said to him chased anything else from his awareness.

“I’ll come back when it’s all over.”

But she couldn’t come back, now. It wasn’t alright. Nothing would ever be alright again.

“I’m…a puppet?” he whispered to no one.

It drifted into his consciousness that the others had accepted that Aerith was dead and hope was lost to revive her. Now, they were bidding their quiet farewells one by one. The girls were crying, the boys shook their heads with disbelief, and Cloud could only watch the solemn peace upon the Cetra’s face. No longer was she the only remaining member of her people; she’d joined with her family, now. It seemed impossible for someone like her to no longer be alive. Aerith was almost magical in her essence, and it didn’t seem like something as trivial as death could defeat her remarkable spirit. How would their group ever get by without her sass and smiles, confidence and optimism?

They probably wouldn’t.

Cloud rose to his feet, cradling Aerith’s body against him. Her long, beautiful hair had tumbled out of its braid and draped freely toward the ground in silky waves. It seemed only fitting for her to die here, among the shadows of her ancestors and the remnants of the purposeful lives they once led. It felt strange when he decided to be the one who laid her body to rest, since he was the one who had failed to protect her. His chest clenched painfully as he looked upon her face and watched a bead of crimson form at the corner of her mouth. A ragged breath forced its way from his throat as he inwardly cursed his ineptitude. It seemed like everyone he’d ever grown attached to had suffered greatly in one way or another.

I’m sorry, Aerith. I’m so, so sorry.

Step by step, Cloud carried her all the way out of the city and down to the water, his shivering spirit folding under the crushing weight of layering guilt. Carefully, slowly, he waded out into the swirling clear waters, their icy chill seeping into his boots, creeping upward to numb his legs. It
was wrong; everything was wrong and it seemed like nothing could ever fix how broken things had become. When the water reached his waist, Aerith’s hair fanned out over the surface. The calm current caressed his skin as he moved deeper and deeper, but it seemed that nothing could soothe the aching wounds of his screaming heart. Deep red tainted the water where her wound had bled and stained the cheerful color of her dress, but the movement of the water carried it away quickly.

Alone with her, far from shore, Cloud quietly verbalized his desolation. He whispered his regrets and mouthed his agony into the chill air, knowing that there would be no answer, but he was helpless to stop the flowing of his heart past his lips. Lazy tears rolled their way down to his chin and dripped down only to disappear into the slow dance of the current. Cloud wanted to rage against the miserable lives they lead. He wanted to shout, to scream, to cry out in frustration at how futile it all seemed. He didn’t deserve the relief and release that would come with howling one’s suffering to the sky. After all, hadn’t he caused an inexcusable amount of pain to so many people? How difficult it was, for no matter how deep in disgrace he lived, a human being is human, after all. The human spirit wanders ceaselessly in search of light. Since he was small, Cloud had strived and struggled to find his light, writhing and fighting to reach toward anything that was good and whole. But it seemed that every time, he’d drown before he could take hold of it and be saved from the darkness that he dwelled within.

But was he truly human? Why had Sephiroth called him a puppet?

With a trembling sigh, he tried to regain enough composure to bid Aerith a final farewell. He studied the smoothness of her cheek and gentle curve of her lips to remember how worthless and wretched he was. If he couldn’t save Gaia’s only hope to undo his mistake, of what use could he be to anyone? Surely Tifa had misplaced her hope and trust. He should’ve listened to her father and stayed away from her, for all he brought to his wife was uncertainty and travail. Slowly, Cloud released his hold on Aerith, letting the water calmly sweep her away to a peaceful grave. As he watched her fade from view, all he could meditate upon was how he wished he could follow and rid this world of the curse that was Cloud Strife. Surely they’d all be better off without him, and he’d finally find some sort of rest for his weary soul.

Where did the spirits of the dead go? Did they really join the Lifestream?

A memory surfaced, distant and vague, of a time long ago. He was standing in the snow clutching his school books as a winter storm blew in, the merry color of Tifa’s red scarf dancing in his peripheral vision. They were staring at Mt. Nibel in its ominous awe, wondering if the stories about the dead passing over it were true. He remembered contemplating death for the first time when he watched shovelfuls of dirt hit the handsome wooden casket of Mrs. Lockhart, and recalled realizing the terror of its finality when Tifa had become so severely injured when she had chased after her mother’s spirit. If anything, Cloud should have learned by now that pursuing the dead only brought more hardship, but now his mind was desperately scrambling to think of any way in which he might hear Aerith’s voice just once more.

He wanted to apologize for everything, but he’d been too late.

Was Sephiroth really to blame any more than he was? As a child, he’d idolized the man, desperately clinging to the hope that he could one day rise over the obstacles of his frail body and meek heart to become something he could be proud of. The SOLDIER had been the pinnacle of honor and power, and Cloud had always wanted to tap into that strength and drain it dry. But his dream had led him to barren lands and his painstaking efforts had all been fruitless.

Watching as the water enveloped his fallen friend, Cloud felt any small glimmer of hope disappear from his heart. He’d sown new curses for every mile he had strayed from his starting place,
drawing everyone who came near into the depths of his own bleakness.

It seemed that, no matter how long and tirelessly he searched, there was no haven for his heart.
Call My Name

The air was so cold that Tifa felt as if her lungs must be coated with frost by now. Though their bodies had been warmed by the somewhat perilous hike up the mountainside, each member of AVALANCHE seemed to be suffering from frozen tongues. She had her voice, but couldn't form any words. She was too small for it to find her, too insignificant.

It felt like they’d fallen and had the air knocked out of them. Their crew consisted of people who had very little in common, naturally producing some entertaining banter as a result. But not now—not after what had happened. The usual assortment of stories, jokes and complaints had ceased since Aerith’s death, leaving them to suffer a sort of social whiplash in their mournful haze. The scraping of boots, the crunching of twigs and the puffing of breath in the air were the only signs of her company, for Tifa seldom lifted her eyes from the ground to look at any of them. The world was silent around them, aside from the occasional cry of a bird of prey or gentle hush of the wind rustling the forest of evergreen trees. It was all eerie and unnerving, and Tifa wished with all her might that she could find some type of distraction.

But it seemed that everything reminded her of the one they’d lost. The lazy flurries of snow swaying toward the ground resembled the way Aerith twirled about when finally out under the open skies, the soft, thick layer of pine needles upon the ground made her think of the color of her hair… the more Tifa searched for something productive to dwell upon, the more fruitless it seemed. The City of the Ancients had been rich in its beautiful pastel colors, but it seemed like once they left their dear friend behind, the world had become monochromatic. The skies shone only grey, the snow was white, and the damp tree trunks looked to be a stark black against the pale surroundings. The light dusting of snow made their dark footprints visible, leaving a trail that reminded Tifa that each step led them further away from Aerith. It felt like they were abandoning her. She’d been with them since the beginning, and the vacancy her bright spirit left behind was achingly noticeable. Tucking her black hair underneath a wool hat, Tifa mused on how surprised she was that someone as dainty as Aerith had been a surprisingly good traveler. As her own footsteps fell upon the solid earth and thin layer of snow, she wondered how Aerith had always managed to walk so quietly.

The map said that Icicle Inn was only about five miles away, but the sun was starting to set and the wind was beginning to pick up. They’d prepared well enough for their trek into the frozen wilderness: pooling their gil for appropriate clothing, footwear, and even splurged on a new tent that would help lock heat in while letting any moisture escape. Cloud wordlessly picked a spot to camp that was sheltered by a broad rock face. He stabbed his sword down into the hard earth as a wordless claim and the others fell into their rehearsed duties. Barret and Cid set up the shelter, Cloud and Vincent worked together to start a campfire, Nanaki and Cait Sith searched for a nearby water source and the girls set out to gather firewood. There wasn’t a word as they went their separate ways.

As she picked up tinder and kindling, Tifa watched Yuffie out of the corner of her eye. It hadn’t ever occurred to her that the younger girl’s feisty spirit could ever evaporate as it had since leaving the City of the Ancients. Her usual fiery gaze had dissolved into a pitiful glazed stare as she went through the days on autopilot. Occasionally, she’d break down and weep, but most of the time she was so uncharacteristically quiet that Tifa couldn’t keep from wrapping an arm around her shoulders and pulling Yuffie close as they walked along. It briefly occurred to the older girl that she was just as broken and probably had no business trying to comfort anyone, but she had to try.

With one swift movement, Sephiroth had stolen life from Aerith and the soul from those who remained. Each one of them was floundering in the agony of loss and grief, trying to handle it in
their separate ways. All stuck in the same hole, it was impossible to pull each other out of the darkness of despair and back into the light.

When they all reunited at the camp site, Tifa immediately began to prepare their meal of canned soup over the freshly constructed fire. The silence was awkward and dry, and she felt like she’d go mad from it all if she didn’t do something with her hands. They huddled together as she rationed out their meal into empty bowls, though no one seemed very eager to eat. It was moments like these when the heaviness of their loss was truly palpable: when there aren’t any monsters to fight, tough trails to traverse or other distractions. As darkness began to descend over the earth, creeping and reaching slowly through the woods, the campfire was their only defense against its winding arms. Staring into the dancing flames, Tifa imagined Aerith would’ve thrust her hands out toward the fire and verbally rejoiced in the warmth. She was always grateful for the small things and rarely kept those feelings to herself. Tifa wished that she was that same sort of person.

But right now, all she could think of was death and the way it violently tore holes in her heart since the earliest days of her life.

She’s dead. Aerith died.

The scene kept replaying in her mind like a demented film real, repeating what happened again and again. All Tifa had seen was a glint of light off of a narrow blade before it was over. She remembered how it happened in silence; the flower girl hadn’t even screamed. Tifa had been frozen—they had all been frozen—until life came pouring out of Aerith’s body in crimson rivulets. She remembered watching green eyes closing against this world forever and the image was pressed into her brain no matter how hard she tried to wish it away. It was another addition to her mental photo album of dear people who had left her: the laughing faces of Biggs, Wedge and Jessie during their weekly poker games, her parents’ playful banter as they listened to their nightly radio show from the couch and Aria’s peaceful, tiny face the first and only time she’d ever held her. If she could just hold her for another hour, if the baby could’ve just smiled at her once, Tifa thought that she could somehow have found peace.

“I’m sorry...”

Those two words had ripped her heart out of her body, still beating and bleeding and raw, as she’d lain upon the cold hospital bed surrounded by strangers. It was at that moment that Tifa had felt more alone in this world than she ever had. But only now did she realize how truly lonesome it was that she didn’t share her only memory of her daughter with Cloud. He hadn’t been there and it had been so painful. With a slight turn of her head, she stole a glance at the broken man who sat beside her and wondered why she’d been too selfish to consider how much that had hurt him. Cloud had said countless times how he hadn’t meant to leave them and as confused as she was bout his disappearance, what if he really meant what he said? Tifa always found herself longing to talk about their loss, but Cloud had barely made any mention of their baby and it left her heart screaming for his companionship as she continued to struggle with the giant hole in her heart that Aria had left behind.

Around this campfire, AVALANCHE was united in their grief over the death of their dear friend, but Tifa felt so isolated in the loss of her child that it was still hard to cope after all this time. Did Cloud feel the same way? Was he lost in the painful sadness that a parent should never know? Why would he keep it to himself?

The group shared quiet chatter once they finished with their soup, but Tifa found it hard to join in. Strange nostalgia drifted to her—a vision of home from so many years ago—of Mama heating up bricks in the hearth on frigid winter nights to keep their feet warm as they slept. She remembered how Cloud
had never tolerated the cold well as a child; his lungs had always been weak and often made him sick. Images flooded forth, like photographs on the wall: his round little cheeks lifted by his shy smile, their mitten-clad hands clasped together as they made their way to the school house, his blonde bangs matted against his sweaty brow as he chopped firewood for her late in the evening. Winters had been so harsh in Nibelheim, but anything had been bearable with him. How had so much changed since then?

She drew back from the campfire, still adrift in the images and feelings of a different time. Tifa treasured her memories with Cloud before her world had plunged into darkness. After he’d gone missing, she’d had her collection of diaries to remind her of long forgotten details of his sweetness. It hadn’t been unusual for her to be pulled from her bed in the dead of night to hide in the closet, flipping through pages of her history by candlelight. It had been the only medicine to soothe her wounds, even if only briefly. Her tomes of handwritten whispers of her heart seemed to be her only proof that Cloud had existed or that she’d ever possessed an ‘ordinary’ life as she endured such hopeless days.

Absently, Tifa looked down at her fingers, blackened by the ash of the fire.

All of her diaries were gone now, most likely turned to dust by the collapse of the Sector Seven plate. With a sharp prick of pain in her chest, she realized that Aria’s birth certificate and receiving blanket had suffered the same fate. She’d wanted to show Cloud the baby’s things when he was ready, to give him some closure, but she hadn’t had enough time. After they’d stolen her husband from her, destroyed her hometown and murdered her family, ShinRA had finally erased the little that had remained of her past. Her old self would’ve been lost to rage and vengeance at the injustice of it all, but right now Tifa couldn’t summon the strength to be angry. Tiny flurries of snow caught on her eyelashes as she stared blankly ahead, unsure if the numbness in her limbs was from the cold or from the collective shock of her life’s arduous path.

“Yo, Teef,” Barret said, snapping her back to the present. “You an’ Spikey okay?”

It hadn’t occurred to her until now that she and Cloud were the only two who hadn’t been adding to the conversation. Her usual, automatic smile painted itself upon her features.

“I guess as okay as I can be, considering,” she said, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. Looking over at Cloud, she placed a gentle hand upon his back. “Are you alright, Cloud?”

She knew he wasn’t okay. Since they’d left the City of the Ancients, Tifa had watched him march on ahead and lead their way northward. She knew enough about his heart and demeanor to know that he was angry and scared: the way his footsteps fell, the slightly defensive curl of his arms and shoulders, and the way his head would whirl around if someone called his name. But so much of him seemed alien to her now that she didn't know exactly how to comfort him. At times he would cling to her, crying and pleading quietly in his sleep. Other times, he avoided her. The Cloud she’d always known was as intricate as a painting and every bit as beautiful. During their childhood, she’d carefully discovered his heart—brush stroke by brush stroke as the years slowly passed. But fate was cruel. It had torn him from her hands and ripped him into hundreds of pieces, scattering them to the wind. She’d been able to recover the parts of him at last, but didn’t know how to put him back in the correct order.

Was it even possible? After something so devastating, Tifa doubted he’d ever be the same. But maybe with some practice, she could convince him that it was safe to open up to her. It reminded her of when she was five years old, trying to lure her reclusive neighbor out to play with cookies and games. She leaned forward to look Cloud in the face, but he didn’t seem to have heard her. Sometimes, his eyes would go blank, as if his mind had toppled and fallen inside himself. His expression was that of someone peering at something far off in the distance, something that Tifa couldn't see. What's wrong? She wanted to ask. What are you thinking? The moment passed and
the light returned to his eyes. He would tilt his head curiously, looking first at her, then at their surroundings, as though he had been on some long voyage and only now just returned. Tifa moved her hand in soothing circles on his back before repeating her question quietly.

Cloud’s gaze was drawn toward his boots. His elbows were resting upon his knees, his hands clasped neatly together between them. A few moments of silence passed before his unwavering voice sounded, and he peeked upwards to look his comrades in the eye. There was guilt upon his features and his stare held a fragility she’d never seen in him before.

“Will you all come with me to save me from doing something terrible?”

The immediate affirmation from the others reminded her that all hope was not yet lost. She looked upward into the wintery night sky, knowing that she should offer up a small prayer of thanks for the companionship that they had. But her spirit stayed quiet, toiling in its silent battle, and Tifa wondered why this blessing wasn’t enough.

… … …

The tingling numbness on her cheek told Tifa that there would be a welt there in the morning. Icing them only helped with the swelling; the black and blues would take time. Maybe she’d feign illness and skip her daily lesson with Zangan until it healed enough that she wouldn’t have to lie about how she got it.

The sun was probably setting, though the dense cloud cover prevented any pinks and oranges of twilight to lift her spirits. Fierce wind blew as the storm whirled snow and sleet from the heavens. Town square was mercifully empty as she walked aimlessly about, scrubbing at her tears before they could freeze upon her face. The winter always gave her a sense of suffocation as the snow continued to pile higher and higher in their village. The temperatures rarely rose above freezing, so Nibelheim had to wait patiently for the spring to thaw it out of its frozen prison. Any snow drifts that hadn’t been promptly shoveled would harden into ice within days, making it impossible to move them until higher temperatures softened them at last. Right now, she wished that her heart could harden in the same manner.

It was so hard.

She didn’t want to ever go home. The old house was long vacant of warmth or welcome, pleasant memories of happier times were piled in the cracks and corners like dust. Papa haunted the place, his vengeful spirit usually hiding in his workshop. The snow trapped his work indoors for the majority of the winter, and being confined together for months on end fanned the flames of his ill feelings toward her. It wasn’t her fault that she looked just like her mother as she matured, or that their voices were similar. When she tried to make conversation, she was scolded for making too much noise. When she kept silent and went quietly about her chores, he mocked her and belittled her for moping. Papa never praised her cooking or how tidy she kept their home. Instead, she was constantly accused of trying to fill the hole that Lia Lockhart had left behind. Her battered heart knew that this was the most foolish accusation he’d ever made, for it was impossible to replace her mother. Nothing could ever recover the levity that she used to bring to their hearts and lives. Lia held their wellbeing in her hands, loving them in such a way that eased both body and spirit. Neither of them had ever recovered from her departure.

Tifa wore her father’s rage on her skin and on her heart. The bruises from angry, alcohol influenced hands would fade away, but the weight of everything else was an eternal burden.

A sharp gust of wind challenged her balance as she began to shiver uncontrollably. The thin fabric of her frock was soaked through, the precipitation melting against the warmth of her skin. Her hair
was matted against her face and shoulders, bare toes long numb from trudging aimlessly through the snow. Tifa had fled her home in a flurry of tears and fear, but now she wished she’d at least grabbed her boots. For a while, she had relied upon letters from Cloud to remind her that she had worth to someone and a possible future with her closest companion. But his letters had stopped abruptly, stirring up her original fears that he’d forget about a boring childhood friend once confronted with the excitement of Midgar. The flickering hearth of the inn’s grand fireplace was just visible through the bay window of its lobby. Warm light spilled out of the homes near town square, glowing despite the curtain heavily falling snow, and Tifa let herself whimper pitifully as her heart howled with the yearning to have somewhere that she belonged.

The mountain path beyond Nibelheim’s village gate was black as evening faded into night and the blowing snow obscured her vision even further. Briefly, she entertained the thought of heading as far as she could up the frigid trail. She could climb and climb and scream her mother’s name into the relentless wind. When the cold became too much, she could curl underneath a tree and wait for it to take her. The pain would only be temporary, and she’d already have a head start to cross over the mountain and meet Lia on the other side. There would be no more pain, no more crushing loneliness, no more fear, and she’d be where she was meant to be: in her Mama’s arms.

It was then that Tifa realized that she’d been pacing slow circles around town square, trying fruitlessly to escape the pain that was living inside her. She’d ended up right where she’d started: beside the front walk of her house. Shaky legs continued forward, but she knew that she wouldn’t submit to her dark thoughts. When her mother passed, Tifa had learned just how precious a single life could be. Was it right to even briefly entertain the thought of voluntarily giving up her own? Instantly, she recalled Master Zangan’s morning lesson, and it was as if he’d somehow known exactly what it was that would plague her heart today.

“Everyone acts out a story, but not many of us know exactly what their story is,” he’d said, and she had listened as she tried to calm her breathing from their previous spar. “You should know what type of story you wish to tell, because it might be a tragedy, and maybe you don’t want it to be. No matter how weak or miserable you feel, you always possess the power to face the terrible tragedy of life and overcome it.”

Her steps hastened as she turned away from the Lockhart home, setting her gaze upon the dim glow of her neighbor’s fireplace through the frosted glass. Tifa didn’t want her life’s story to be a tragedy. There was so much that affected her fate that was out of her hands, but not everything was out of reach. Weak as she felt, she knocked upon the door. When it creaked open, the warmth from inside caressed her face like a loving touch. Claudia Strife stared at her with wide eyes for a moment, seeming to understand in one glance the state of the girl’s well-being. In an instant, Tifa felt herself being pulled into a firm embrace and let her knees go weak at the overwhelming comfort that it fed to her hungry heart. Burying her face in Claudia’s chest, she quietly wept. Her best friend’s mother consoled her with quiet shushing and gentle strokes upon her back and Tifa wondered briefly whether or not Cloud’s departure to Midgar had left her just as unhappy as she was.

“Come, sweetheart. Let’s get you out of those clothes,” Claudia whispered with a gentle smile. “There’s plenty of soup to warm your belly.”

Papa manipulated her like a chess piece and Cloud held her life on a thin string, but Claudia had always lifted Tifa up with her sweet, servant’s heart. Perhaps adversity didn’t need to be faced alone; it was okay to lean on another’s strength when she felt her weakest. Tifa was certain that if someone with as difficult of a life as Claudia had could still smile, that she could learn to summon such remarkable strength.
His lips were chapped and cracked from the harsh wind. Cloud let out a sharp exhale as he looked around, squinting through the blinding snow in the Great Glacier. Traversing through the shin deep snow was terribly strenuous, making him thankful that his mako enhancements increased his cold tolerance and gave him a steady supply of energy. Nanaki’s flaming tail was easy to see in the chaos and low visibility, like a lighthouse in the storm for the members of AVALANCHE. There was a sharp pain whenever he’d breathe in as the subzero temperature squeezed at his lungs. The sensation reminded him of a long time past: a time when he was weak and small and worthless. But he wasn’t like that anymore. He’d worked so hard to earn the title of SOLDIER (hadn’t he?) and he’d proven his value in his tenacity and strength. He’d thought he was a hero until he realized that heroes didn’t fail. They didn’t allow innocent people to suffer and certainly didn’t allow them to die.

Aerith had been murdered right in front of him and he’d just stood there, completely useless.

Every time he thought about it, Cloud felt his very being quiver in the wake of this unspeakable thing. At his core, perhaps he wasn’t the good guy he’d always thought he was. After all, his actions had influenced ShinRA to crush Sector Seven and he’d barely even thought about all those lives that had been lost. Now that someone close to him was dead, he mourned and seethed in the injustice. What did that say about his character? Was he just as bad as the monster who had duped him into giving away the black materia and murdered Aerith mere feet before him? If any of these people knew what was good for them, they would’ve stopped following him ages ago. Tifa had solemnly vowed to stay with him come rain or shine and she had been faithful to that promise, but Cloud wouldn’t have blamed her for turning away from him now. Was he really fit to continue on?

Hearty flakes of snow pelted his face as he squinted ahead, trying to look for any sort of landmark to let them know that they were headed in the correct direction. Strangely, ironically, the only sort of guidance he had were scant visions of Sephiroth walking before him. Cloud was careful not to mention this to anyone and sporadically consulted the flimsy, soggy map to comfort himself. But if he was completely honest, he would be lost without the unexplainable, ghostly visions of their enemy. Some time ago, he would’ve been frightened by such a thing. Now, it seemed that nothing was too strange to believe anymore. Something must be terribly wrong with him and Cloud knew that it was unlikely that there would be any remedy for the daemons that haunted him.

Was there anywhere left to look for relief? Heavy with guilt, his heart knew the one place he should always search for peace. But Tifa was just as devastated as he was, and it seemed counterproductive to continue to drag her down with him. Cloud wanted vibrant green eyes and that jubilant voice that had always lifted him up before he even knew he’d needed the encouragement. He craved the security of Aerith’s smile and optimism, but he’d never experience it again because he’d failed her. He’d failed his team and failed Gaia, just like he’d let down his wife and child back then.

Something locked away inside of him was screaming—raging—and Cloud knew it was because of this loss, because of his inability to ever take injustice and make it right.

Everything whirled about in his head, like the snow swirling in the wind around him. All the things he searched for were obscured by concealing white—every possible solution was unclear, every path hidden. With a broken noise he stumbled forward, his body burning like a furnace. Marching and marching, his subconscious hoped to outrun this unease and pain, to escape this tornado of anguish that twisted and pulled at his insides. If he could leave it behind, maybe he could concentrate enough to focus on what was next and where they were going. If the others knew that he didn't know where he was leading them, they were too frozen and exhausted to protest. Internal
panic made his heart thum wildly when he considered that he might be walking them all toward their frozen graves. It was just too much.

Was he really moving of his own free will? Were his steps directed by someone other than himself? There was a significant part of himself that Cloud didn’t understand. If his comrades hadn’t stopped him, Aerith might have died by his own hands. He wanted to stop pursuing Sephiroth, his terrible track record with justice told him that he should stop, but he couldn’t. He had nowhere else to go. Besides, how else could he make amends for all the mistakes that he’d made? Anger frothed up inside him as Cloud longed for reparations to ease the scathing wounds that Sephiroth, ShinRA, and the fallout from their influence on his life. When he closed his eyes, he could see the idealistic young fool that he used to be: starry eyed and full to the measure with hope and the false promise of heroism and worth. How easy it had been for ShinRA to win over a lonely, devastated child who longed for nothing more than love and acceptance. He’d walked like an obedient lamb to the butcher’s knife and it was no one’s fault but his own. Easy and convenient as it was to place the blame elsewhere, it was ultimately his own naivety that had caused him to end up in a SOLDIER’s uniform.

However, the destruction of his home, his mother, and his dear friend could be blamed on Sephiroth. The aching and screaming of the planet could be blamed on ShinRA. This feud was personal, and Cloud would destroy those who were controlling him. He refused to have his entire life be a tangled string of fear, misfortune and pain.

“I think you should take care of yourself, Cloud, so you don’t have a breakdown. Okay?”

What had Aerith known? Now he’d never be sure. Could she have helped him? Would she have understood?

A male voice called Cloud’s name out into the wind, ripping him from his thoughts. Nanaki trotted up to him, shaking out his mane once he came to stand at the blonde’s side.

“Cloud, I think we should slow our pace a bit,” he said, his rich crimson coat dancing over his frame. “Some are struggling, it seems.”

“Sorry. I didn’t notice how fast I was going.”

Before Cloud knew what he was doing, he reached a palm out towards his friend’s shoulder. Nibelheim had been chock full of animals when he was growing up. Most families had at least one dog. The Hansen family farm had flocks of sheep, a small herd of cows, horses, goats and dozens of chickens. Cloud and his mother could never afford to raise animals to eat or the luxury of owning pets, but the summer that he’d mucked out the animal barns to raise money to go to Midgar had opened his eyes to how much affection lived in his heart for animals. There was just something about stroking their fur or sharing friendly physical contact with a member of another species that was soothing. The animals never judged him. They never looked at him like he wasn’t worthy of their attention or that he was any different from anyone else.

Nanaki was the same. The other members of AVALANCHE constantly pointed out his flaws: sometimes purposefully, other times accidentally. But Nanaki was always neutral, his presence soothing and calm, and Cloud found himself suddenly drawn into that little slice of peace. What confused him, however, was how to classify his friend. He wasn’t human, but he was more human in expression than any animal he’d ever encountered and it left Cloud struggling to know how to behave. Animals had always been creatures that were worthy of respect, and he suddenly was ashamed of reaching out to pet Nanaki in fear that he wouldn’t feel as if Cloud treated him as the other members of their group. Relief flooded through him when he felt the affectionate press of soft fur against his palm as Nanaki leaned into his touch almost automatically. Perhaps, his friend
could sense the depth of his unease. He didn’t say anything about it, didn’t hesitate, and didn’t tip
toe around him.

How grateful he was for Nanaki.

Cloud almost smiled when he felt his warmth, even through the fabric of his gloves, as he ran his
fingers through his mane. Turning to look back toward the others, he realized that there were quite
a few meters separating him them. Mako eyes scanned the group, picking out their silhouettes from
the shifting white canvas of the storm. His limbs trembled with cold and fear as he counted them,
one by one, making sure they were all there and that no one had been lost due to his negligence.

Yuffie had taken shelter underneath Vincent’s cloak, pulling it tightly around her as the wind tried
to rip it out of her fists. The ivory plush of Cait Sith’s mog was almost invisible in their
surroundings as he pushed forward behind Cid, who had tied his hood so tightly that his nose and
cigarette were the only visible features of his face. Nanaki pressed on with his head ducked against
the elements, eyes squinting into the cutting chill of the air. Tifa had fallen quite a few paces
behind the others, the violent gusts striking at her forcefully and suddenly, like invisible fists,
making her stumble from time to time. Barret, noticing her struggle, had pulled her close to his
side. Cloud’s expression softened as he watched his wife, guilt instantly pooling inside him.

“The smell of smoke is in the air,” Nanaki said, commanding Cloud’s attention once again. “The
cabin on the map must be nearby. It seems the storm hasn’t blown us too far off course.”

He’d been focused on looking for landmarks in his panic that he hadn’t considered using his other
heightened senses to find his way. “I’ll encourage them to hurry, then. We need to get everyone
warm as quickly as possible.”

He nodded, the deep red of his mane shivering in the wind.

“No will you head toward the scent of smoke and lead the way?” Cloud’s lips tightened with unease
as he looked back toward his wife, who struggled along beside Barret’s hulking frame. He had only
been trying to lead; he hadn’t meant to leave her behind. “I’m going to walk with Tifa.”

“Of course.”

Relieved of his duty, Cloud jogged back toward the others. Quietly, he thanked Barret for his
attentiveness to his wife only to receive an annoyed snort in return. Choosing to ignore the hostility,
the ex-SOLDIER knelt down before Tifa and clasped her hands in between his own. Cloud brought
her gloved hands to his mouth, cupped them together and blew hot hair into them. He repeated this
half a dozen times before getting the courage to peek upward into her eyes. Their rich, warm color
was visible even in the shadow of her hood, where long strands of black hair had been torn free by
the wind. He didn’t want to see the pain in the despondent way she stared at her hands, but he
forced himself to see the consequences of his endless mistakes.

Something defiant whispered that it was just the bitter cold and fatigue that made her gaze so
lifeless, but Cloud knew that it was much more than that.

… … …

Somehow, she’d ended up inside.

The rustic aesthetic of the small lodge was pleasant and the scent of soup cooking on the hearth
was almost nostalgic, but the warmth was the loveliest of all. The tears in Tifa’s eyes made the
white bear-skin rug waver and dance beneath her feet. She didn’t know the exact reason why she
was crying. It wasn’t the stinging of her fingers as they began to thaw, nor the exhaustion in her limbs. Her heart had been so heavy for so long. Why on earth would tears decide to manifest themselves here and now, of all times? Everyone was heartsick and lost, clinging close to one another to stay grounded as their world continued to careen into chaos. How selfish she must look: crying like this when everyone was suffering. But Tifa couldn’t pull herself from her despondence and misery because she’d never felt so useless in all of her life.

She wanted Marlene. Her arms ached to hold her warm little body flush against her chest, almost as if she was trying to stuff her into all the gaping holes inside it. That precious little girl had been a band-aid on Tifa’s bleeding heart since the day they’d met, providing her with busy hands and a sense of purpose that she’d always longed for. When she was pregnant, Tifa had spent each day imagining the amazing way her life would change once her daughter entered the world. And when that day came for her to be born, life did change dramatically, just not in the positive way she had hoped. But then Marlene had arrived into her life, giving Tifa that chance to act in the role she’d always dreamed of playing. The little girl was living far from the ideal life, but didn’t seem to mind, and it was such a relief that whatever it was that made her sad during the course of a day could be easily solved: a magic mother’s kiss upon a scraped knee, a soft song and a cuddle when a fever struck, a night light to scare the monsters away...

A teardrop fell to the ground, along with the melted snow that dripped off of her clothing and pooled on the hardwood floor of the entryway. Cid and Barret were talking with the building’s owner, peeling off their soggy jackets to hang by the fire. She didn’t hear Cloud and peeked upwards to search for him.

It took her a minute to find him in the warm lantern light. The far corner of the foyer was piled high with firewood, and her husband was stuffing as much as he could under one arm. She watched him closely as he worked, noticing his furrowed brow and the tense way he carried his shoulders. It wasn’t nearly as easy to chase Cloud’s monsters away as it was Marlene’s. Her love for Cloud and her desire to reclaim the deep bond they once had made Tifa desperate to fix his problems and make him feel whole again, but it seemed like an impossible task if even he couldn’t identify what those problems were, exactly. Was she even equipped to help solve his problems if she couldn’t even begin to solve her own?

The circumstances of her life had indoctrinated Tifa with the thought that she was responsible for the happiness of other people. She’d worked tirelessly to please her father after Mama passed away. When it worked, the feeling was euphoric, but more often than not it didn’t, and she was left feeling worthless for failing to predict what he needed or to execute her plan perfectly. Making Claudia smile a real smile, especially after Cloud had left to work in Midgar, had been a daily goal. Pleasing Master Zangan by working tirelessly to perfect the skills he taught her grew from a hobby to an obsession. In a way, she’d burdened herself with the obligation of making other people happy when truly, it had never been her responsibility to begin with. Their approval had been like an addictive drug to her broken heart, and her insecurity craved it constantly. Watching her husband struggle all this time and being unable to help him had tossed her into despair, for of what worth was she to him if she couldn’t mend all that was broken?

Cloud came and gently took her hand, wordlessly leading her away from the others. She followed without question, barely looking up from the floor as he led her down a long corridor. There was a quiet metallic click as he turned the brass doorknob and the heavy oak door swung open to reveal a small room with a fireplace, a tiny bed, and a little bathroom. After depositing the wood in the fireplace, Cloud softly—carefully—moved her to the shower and turned the water on. The steam began to fill the cramped space as he tenderly unzipped her coat and peeled the soaked clothing from her body. If she had possessed the energy, Tifa imagined that she would’ve been shocked at her husband’s boldness, for he had never undressed her before. If she had been in her right mind,
she supposed her face would’ve flushed with embarrassment at her nakedness and the sweetness in his motions as he ushered her into the shower, slowly turning up the heat as her thawing body grew accustomed to it. But for some reason, all she could do was stare.

He watched her face with those expressive eyes, holding her hand as she stood under the shower spray. And in that moment, she saw something she’d been desperately searching for for what seemed like ages: her Cloud. Her kind, beloved friend who knew her every flaw and insecurity, yet loved her all the same. Her limbs were tingling as the cold left her body and they trembled as she stepped out of the shower and into the towel he held out for her. Overwhelmed, Tifa wrapped her arms around his shoulders and he held her wordlessly for long minutes at a time, tucking his face into her neck. So many unspoken words were present in their warm embrace. This sort of comfort had long eluded the couple, and now that they had found it, they held onto it with all their strength. Cloud kissed the side of her head when he reluctantly pulled away from her to offer her a robe and start a fire. Together, they laid their clothes out to dry before the hearth and tumbled into the little bed in the corner.

It was so good to be alone. Everyone knew of the strain that had wedged its way between them, making them afraid to interact much in front of the curious eyes of their companions.

But now, they finally felt free of scrutiny. They held each other for what seemed like hours. There were chaste kisses and silent tears, but no words. The feeling of one another’s touch was like a blissful sedative as they lay side by side, numbing the overwhelming sense of desperation and emptiness that threatened to consume them. It felt as if they were drowning in a sea of their circumstances and individual choices. Cloud and Tifa were connected: their foreheads pressed together and their bodies flush against one another under the worn comforter. Their hearts, however, remained somewhat disjointed, and it made Tifa fret.

What if it wasn’t as bad as she thought?

She’d begun to understand that the seasons of their marriage would always change. It seemed colder now, but it wouldn’t always be this way. Winter would yield to spring, even if the harsh weather seemed to go on forever. Living in the mountains had taught her that brutal winters brought forth the greatest appreciation for the season of new growth and renewal. If they could overcome the twisted mess between them now, they could overcome just about anything. Couldn’t they? Climbing this mountain had been so difficult, and it was hard to tell if they’d even reached the top. But wouldn’t it be refreshing to make it to the other side? Their bond was too valuable to ever cut their ties and go their separate ways. Even if they separated, both of them knew that it would be impossible to ever untie all the experiences and circumstances that bound them so intricately together.

Their traumas had molded them into new people with no sense of whether they could or should return to being their old selves. Cloud and Tifa were not strangers to sadness and hardship in their youth, but the loss of a child and their connection as spouses was a type of grief that they had never encountered before. Aerith’s death, a devastating earthquake to the souls of everyone she’d touched, had triggered a tsunami of feelings from issues that the pair had been tip-toeing around. Being beginners at dealing with the kind of grief that only parents can feel, it seemed impossible to work together to come to terms with the incredible difficulties they were facing in life: both as individuals and as a couple. All this time, grief had sapped them of energy to decipher the best path to take in order to solve their problems. It had been so hard to talk about things, to think things through and to come to terms with all that had happened. Since Tifa had dragged Cloud’s malnourished and sick body into Seventh Heaven for the first time, they’d been stuck in some kind of holding pattern, just trying to do the bare minimum to get along.
It had been like leaving footprints in a snowstorm: they were erased momentarily, making it impossible to know their way forward and to be certain that they weren’t going back the way they’d come. Time shifted feelings and their potency. Their life circumstances had changed completely more than once, leaving their past to seem like dusty images from a different lifetime. Surely, things would change again—for the better this time.

It wouldn’t always be this hard, would it?

His arm was draped over hers, his calloused fingers curling to brush the small of her back. The embrace was soft and emotional, yet foreign. But maybe that was alright. People changed, sometimes in extreme ways, but it wasn’t always bad. Not everyone was like Papa.

“I love you,” Tifa whispered into his bare shoulder, her heart spilling from her voice. She believed there was hope amongst the ashes of what once was. “I love you so much.”

Cloud knew that he was beyond redemption. His actions (and inactions) had made him unworthy. Hadn’t he caused too much pain to be deserve anything but suffering, himself? Tifa had always been a maze to the outsider, but long ago he’d known the details of her heart so well that she didn’t seem like such a puzzle. Now, she was like a labyrinth: deep and intricate and perilously confusing, but Cloud could tell that she was genuine. Her words were like an outstretched hand, reaching to pull him back to the surface and away from the lonesome blackness of the deep. Yet he didn’t feel worthy to take hold of it. He was afraid to move from where he was—afraid to misstep, afraid to cause more harm, afraid to dream of anything better than what he currently had—because it would be unbearable to think that it could get any worse than this.

He craved a reason for the way things were: for the brutal callousness of life and the devastation of hopelessness. It was even uncomfortable to be alone with Tifa like this, since there was a chance that he could harm her and no one was here to stop him. He’d hurt Aerith and then had almost attacked her with the buster sword before Sephiroth had run her through. What if he really was a puppet? Were the missing pieces of his memory due to something like amnesia or was there something dark about himself that he didn’t know? Cloud didn’t remember what it felt like to be a ‘normal’ human. He’d always assumed that his super-senses were due to the mako treatments he didn’t remember ever having. What if he wasn’t a real person? Maybe Tifa felt like he was a completely different man from the one she married because she had married a different man. Was he a ShinRA experiment? Had he been manufactured to do the will of someone else?

The thought terrified him to his core.

As much as Cloud longed to rest in the comfort of her affection, he couldn’t help but feel cursed by the love that he received. What if she trusted him to be the man of her dreams when the real Cloud had been killed four years ago? It was too much for his fragile self to withstand at the moment. But something about the way they were laying together in a bed made for one touched his heart—gentle and warm—reminding him of a simpler time long past. He moved a hand up to cup her cheek as a shuttering breath escaped him. Out of the corner of her eye, she stared at the dried blood under his fingernails, inwardly cringing at the realization that it was most definitely Aerith’s. Cloud’s knuckles were as cracked and raw as his voice as he pleaded softly.

“Tifa…help me.”

The brokenness in his voice made her come undone. She wanted to reach deep inside of him to the beautiful places hidden under years of sadness and suffering to retrieve the shy boy of her childhood. He was so different, but still there, hidden away. It was more clear to her now than it had been since their reunion and she didn’t hesitate to reach out to him. With a tiny whimper, she wrapped her arms around him to hold him tightly against her. Her grip was fierce, as if it could
help keep the spirit of her childhood friend here with her. Would he run and hide again?

“I’m here,” Tifa’s voice trembled. “I’ve always been here, even if it didn’t seem like it. I’m sorry. I’m so sorry.”

She thought she’d cried out all the tears she had, so why did they flow so freely from her now? Maybe it was because she’d spent so much time holding onto grudges and fears. How much of her life had she spent wallowing in loss and anger, holding it tightly to her chest and refusing to let it go? All those years, she could have fought to find peace and lived each day in hope, rather than bitterness. So much time had been wasted, and it had become so painfully clear that tomorrow was never guaranteed. Could she find the courage to cling to hope?

“Don’t. Please, don’t apologize,” Cloud begged, hiding his face in her hair. “After how hard it’s been for you, I can’t bear it. You were alone because of me, struggling and terrified. I want to promise that I’ll never hurt you again. I want to promise that everything will be okay, but look what happened with Aerith. I pushed her to the ground and something evil inside me almost made me kill her.”

Reaching a hand up to his head, she smoothed his hair lovingly. Tifa pressed a kiss to his collarbone as she turned his words over in her head. Their current day-to-day life was so demanding that she rarely had the time to think about what life might be like after all of this craziness was behind them. Her husband was much different than he used to be and she longed to get to know this new man. What was it that he dreamed of? What kind of life did he want to live once things were peaceful again? Did he still have the same interests and passions of his youth? How much of his essence had been taken from him? But if he was still the same Cloud of their childhood, she knew the thing he needed to know most.

“You’re my hero, Cloud. You always have been,” she whispered against his skin. “I’ll watch over you, alright? I won’t abandon you because I felt abandoned.”

Tifa turned her face up to look at him. His eyes were closed, lashes dusting his cheeks—just like Aerith’s, just like Aria’s. Both of their deaths were premature and sudden, reinforcing a lesson she’d learned so very long ago: all life is precious. In a single moment a soul could be snuffed out, leaving no reminder that it was ever there to begin with. So many times, loved ones had left her reeling in the wake of their deaths, changing her life in an instant. This sort of thing was not foreign to Tifa and Cloud, but it felt like they’d forgotten how to deal with the shock of it all.

And so they clung to one another in the flickering light, the fire and their proximity warming the chilled space. Nothing was solved, and few words were spoken, but truths were realized as the hours passed. There was safety in each other’s arms, even if the embrace didn’t feel exactly the same as they remembered. Tears were shed for those who had left them and they trembled under the crushing guilt of believing that they’d somehow failed all of the deceased who’d been close to them. Tifa blinked slowly, staring at the wall and wondering if Aerith had found her mother in heaven—or the Lifestream. It was easy to believe that those who died were happier in the afterlife. She had to believe that; otherwise, she’d never be able to keep marching forward.

But her Cloud was not dead. He was alive, safe in her arms for the time being, and she’d cherish every second of it.
Creeping Shadows

The sudden intense heat against Tifa’s face was a stark difference from the icy wind of the Northern Crater that had beaten against it just minutes before. It made her eyes water and she blinked against the sensation, trying to make sense of the scene before her.

Nibelheim was burning.

It was overwhelming to witness the destruction of the place that had held both fond and painful memories: flames licking the handsomely painted sign of the inn and ash churning into the night sky. Instinctively, her eyes flew over to her childhood home. Smoke billowed out of her bedroom window and the roof was being eaten away by the fire’s insatiable destruction. Sephiroth was there before them, his voice commanding her attention as she wrapped her trembling arms around one of Cloud’s. The man was as maliciously clever as he was fearsome to look at and Tifa instinctively remained still—like frightened prey in the gaze of a predator. Silver hair gleaming in the flickering light, he belittled Cloud, challenging his memory of what had happened that fateful night five years ago.

“Don’t be afraid, Tifa,” Cloud said. His voice was calm and even, but his eyes never left Sephiroth. “This is just an illusion. He’s trying to break our confidence.”

Tifa wanted to obey her husband, but she had no confidence to defend in the first place. Here he was, standing stiffly beside her: his shoulders squared and his boots planted firmly against the cobblestone—the silhouette of a self-assured warrior. But his posturing seemed so empty to her, for all she could think of was the broken man who had pleaded for peace in her arms the night before. The hellish scene around them was disturbing and Sephiroth’s menacing presence made her very soul squirm in discomfort, but neither of these inspired the greatest fear that was growing inside her. What terrified her down to her bones was the chance that Cloud would crumble before their enemy as he’d done before. If he did, she wasn’t sure there’d be anything she could do to comfort him. It was no secret to their friends that this was his biggest fear as well. They’d promised to protect him from himself, and it wasn’t a vow they had taken lightly.

A small click sounded to her left as Barret discreetly prepared his gun-arm for a possible battle and Tifa found herself grateful that it was only the three of them standing before Sephiroth. After a battle with a manifestation of Jenova, AVALANCHE had recovered the black materia. Cloud had learned his lesson, choosing to give to Nanaki for safekeeping before the group had separated as they searched for their elusive enemy. Now that Sephiroth was busy tormenting them, at least Tifa could be certain that the others were still safe and that meteor couldn’t be summoned.

Like a lucid dream, the events of that terrible night played out before their eyes.

Cloud snorted, bemused and disgusted, before whispering to her. “He’s trying to mess with me. He’s trying to make me think that it wasn’t me who came out to confront him that night.”

From the corner of her eye, a man with black hair ran out into town square from the direction of ShinRA Manor. Her chest tightened painfully when she realized it was Zack Fair, and the brief thought that Aerith should’ve been here fluttered through her mind. Cloud’s best friend had always been happy-go-lucky. In the handful of months that she’d known him, Tifa had never seen anything but playfulness upon his features. Now, his eyes were wide with heartbreak and horror as he stumbled out into the street, taking in the scene around him. On the ground outside the inn was the corpse of a man whom she probably would’ve recognized if his face wasn’t burned so badly. Across the square, a ShinRA trooper lay motionless near the front walk of the Strife cottage, a few
stray blonde hairs poking out from underneath his helmet. A familiar, dear voice called out to Zack above the roar of the flames and the crackling wood. Tifa snapped her head around toward it automatically, the sound prompting her heart to cry out in longing.

Master Zangan was there, checking for a pulse on each collapsed figure. Her red eyes watched as her beloved friend begged Zack for help before disappearing into the nearest building to check for trapped survivors. Tifa’s breath caught in her throat. Was this what had really happened the night that Cloud had disappeared? Was she about to finally find out the truth or was this all really just an illusion?

“See?” Cloud scoffed. He didn’t seem phased, but she wasn’t sure if he was bluffing or sincere. “I told you: Sephiroth is trying to trick us. He wants to confuse me and make me think that I wasn’t there.”

“If it was you that was there, then who th’hell is that guy?” Barret said between gritted teeth, flinching as he watched the roof of the dry goods store collapse.

“I don’t know,” he said, blonde eyebrows lowering into a scowl. “But I was there—not him. Don’t worry about it, it’s all a ruse.”

Overwhelmed, Tifa blinked at her boots and tightened her grip on her husband’s arm. She’d forgotten just how bizarre it was that Cloud claimed to have no recollection of his best friend, but she had hoped that seeing him in this vision would stir up at least one of their many memories together. Tifa was certain that both Cloud and Zack had been sent to Nibelheim on the same mission—he told her that before he left. If Cloud couldn’t even remember someone so dear to him, how could she trust that his recollection of that night was valid? What if what she was seeing now was the real story of Nibelheim’s demise? All she wanted was the truth.

As if he sensed her uncertainty, Cloud turned to look into her eyes. “You believe me, right? I remember it so clearly: the intensity of the fire, the sight of the dead, the stinging pain in both my body and my heart. I was there!”

Tifa opened her mouth to respond, but Sephiroth cut her off.

“You’re nothing more than a puppet,” he said, like it was something that was plain to see. “You have no heart and can’t feel any pain.”

“Shut up!” Cloud hissed, fingers curling into tight fists as his biceps flexed in his anger. The sound of snapping and splintering wood echoed in the night as she watched his nostrils flare as he exhaled in short, irritated bursts. Beads of sweat formed upon his forehead, rolling down into his eyes, and she wasn’t sure if it was from the heat or the frustration. “You don’t control me.”

Sephiroth bared his teeth in what Tifa assumed was a grin, the blankness in his eerie eyes stirring up nausea within her. “This isn’t the real you, Cloud. You are pretending to love these people, pretending to be angry, pretending to feel insulted.”

Barret’s boot scraped over the stone as he shifted his stance, looming closer to his comrades. His gaze shifted to Cloud before returning to Sephiroth, the confusion evident on his features. “What’s he talkin’ about, Teef?”

“Don’t listen to him,” she said, fighting the urge to shift into a fighting stance. Instead, Tifa clung closer to Cloud, as if her physical body could keep his fragile psyche from wandering back into uncertainty and madness. She’d give anything to keep him safe in the harbor of her love. “He’s lying.”
“Am I?” Sephiroth objected. “The real you has little say over his actions. The real you willingly gave me the black materia, serving the purpose you were created for. And now, you’re following Jenova’s voice, obeying her call to all who have her cells in their bodies. Who would have thought a failed experiment would prove so useful?”

“Experiment?” Tifa breathed, guilt creeping in as she began to ponder his words. What if there was truth to be uncovered? Would it be wise to dismiss everything their enemy said?

“Don’t believe him,” Cloud said. Tifa could hear the tiny seeds of fear sowing into his tone as he spoke, looking to her for assurance. “Don’t we have our memories together? I’m me—I’m Cloud of Nibelheim.”

“Five years ago, you were constructed by Professor Hojo,” the SOLDIER continued, his piercing glare freezing Cloud in place. “Piece by piece, he put you together: an incomplete clone without even an identification number.”

Five years ago…the night Nibelheim turned to smoke and ash. The night Cloud and Zack had disappeared before he showed up in Midgar years later: broken and seemingly bereft of the heart that defined him as her lover and lifelong friend. Tifa’s quivering spirit fought the urge to interrogate Sephiroth with the flood of questions threatening to spill forward. What did he know about those mysterious years of Cloud’s unexplained absence? Cloud reached for her hand, then, and she was surprised that he’d break his illusion of bravado to show his uncertainty in such a way. When blue eyes turned to meet her, she saw the tremendous depth of confusion and fear that had been living in his heart all this time. He blinked, sucking in a panicked breath, and Tifa knew that he had finally stumbled.

“B-but, you were there. Right, Tifa? You know that I’m your husband—not something made by Hojo,” he licked his lips as his hands began to tremble. “You said that we grew up together, that we were married and had lived next door to each other since you could remember. You wouldn’t lie to me, I know you wouldn’t. Would you?”

She squeezed his hand. “Never. I’d never lie to you.”

“Don’t be so easily fooled,” Sephiroth scoffed. “Inside you, Jenova has merged with Tifa’s memories to create this manifestation of you. Out of all the memories in Tifa’s mind, a boy named Cloud might’ve just been a part of them. But you are not that boy. You never even had a name.”

“You’re not making sense—I was here to watch Nibelheim burn. We were supposed to fix the malfunctioning reactor on Mount Nibel. I was so excited because it was my first mission after making SOLDIER. Right, Tifa?”

She froze, for she didn’t know what to do. Her husband had never been anything other than a lowly trooper when he’d left her alone in Midgar for what was supposed to have been a brief visit to Nibelheim. His dream had always been to join the elite class of super-human weapons, but his physical shortcomings had kept him from even auditioning to be in SOLDIER. This time, when he turned to look at her, she saw the truth in her wide eyes and in her silence.

“Tifa…?” Mind reeling, Cloud scrambled to reaffirm what he’d always thought to be true. “Why won’t you say anything?”

All this time, Cloud had been climbing and climbing a treacherous mountain, looking for what really lived inside his heart. He’d been walking too close to the fire, teetering dangerously over the edge of sanity and rationality. When he finally made it to the top, what would he find there? Would there be warmth and peace or would he tumble helplessly over a cliff? There had never been
anything more elusive to Cloud Strife than serenity and he doubted that he’d find it now. But if he
didn’t believe that his very being was his own and worth fighting for, then what was the point to it
all? Tifa held the missing piece, the key to his past, for everyone else who had known him before
was dead. Emotion swirled in his eyes as they pleaded Tifa for validation.

But the terror on her face made his own start to pale, his heart instantly plummeting to his feet. Her
lips were sealed, unable to give him the very thing he needed most.

“Wait…when did I enter SOLDIER?” Cloud said, his eyes growing panicked and frenzied. It was
apparent to Tifa that something inside him had finally snapped. Whatever had regulated the chaos
of his addled brain had finally given way under its incredible strain, like the bursting of an
overwhelmed dam. His hands lifted to grasp at his temples, pulling the blonde hair that was
threaded between his fingers. “How did I join SOLDIER? Why can’t I remember?!”

Tifa shifted to move behind him, wrapping her arms around his chest and pressing herself against
him. Tiny tremors wracked their way through Cloud’s body, his breaths coming in quiet, uneven
gasps. She tried to soothe him with her warmth and proximity, making hushing sounds and telling
him that they’d figure things out. Words meant to reassure him had the opposite effect and Cloud
whirled in her arms, breaking free of her embrace.

“N-no, don’t. Don’t tell me it’s alright!”

“Cloud—“

“You just told me you’d never lie to me! What am I, Tifa? Why are you so quiet all of a sudden?”

It was beyond strange to hear Cloud shout. Never in her life had he raised his voice in Tifa’s
presence, and she buckled under the unease that it summoned. The man standing before her was
unlike the one she’d married in countless ways, but she knew the love of her life was still there.
Underneath the suffering and torment and bravado, the little boy of her childhood was lost and
afraid. She’d pulled and she’d pulled, but why wasn’t it ever enough to bring him back to her?

“You’re my husband!” she cried, exasperated by the situation. “You disappeared. Then you
reappeared and I don’t know what happened during those years we were apart. Neither do you.
We’ve been trying to figure it out together.”

Cloud’s voice cracked as he spoke. “What if he’s right? What if your husband is still out there
looking for you and I’m just some sort of fabricated look-a-like?”

Cloud wanted her to instantly deny it. He wanted her to say something that made sense—anything
to save him from being swallowed by all of this. But Tifa was frozen, and suddenly everything was
clear. The constant fuzziness in his head, the vast holes in his memory, the blurry recollection of
the things he did remember… He was borrowing his memories from Tifa, wasn’t he? All the little
things that he thought made up his childhood—falling from the suspension bridge, comforting Tifa
from her father’s furies, the treasure tin—were all someone else’s precious memories. The life of a
boy named Cloud was not his own. He was just a shell: half empty and half filled with feelings and
experiences that he had never been a part of.

*You really are you, right?*

Why hadn’t he answered her back then? Had his heart known all this time?

Life had been so hard. Tifa was almost as broken as he was and now he knew that it was his fault
for unknowingly playing the part of her beloved. He was the reason things were this way. Cloud
could hear his pulse pounding in his head and his breath grew ragged and strained. The vision
faded from around them, the hellish scene suddenly and violently returning them to the bitter wind and blowing snow. Cloud could feel Sephiroth’s presence, undeniably strong, releasing its dark essence from somewhere close by. Wordlessly, mechanically, he turned from his comrades to heed its magnetic call.

… … …

Breathing heavily, Cloud stumbled into the icy cave. He’d been following the whispers in his head that he’d been trying to ignore for so long, and it filled him with relief to finally give in and obey. Sephiroth was here. He was so close now that it made Cloud’s heart thrum quickly against his ribcage, straining under the anticipation and desperate need to feel whole. He’d been fighting against the lure of the darkness as long as he could and was ready to let it take him at last. The blinding snow had made it easy to obscure his path as he outrun Barret and Tifa, unwilling to look into their eyes and see the pity in them.

Expecting to find Sephiroth, Cloud was confused when three distinct, familiar voices echoed from deep inside the cavern. Fatigue had nestled itself into his limbs and he sagged into the icy wall of the tunnel. One was Rufus Shinra, another was Scarlet, and the last…

“Hojo?” he whispered to himself.

Strength returned to his body, then. His very being was driven by the desperate need to speak to his creator in the hope to somehow fill the yawning emptiness inside of him. Was there anything more isolating and lonesome than not even knowing oneself? Cloud felt like a bull chasing the matador: the red blanket had pulled over his eyes again and again, leaving him frenzied and beyond comfort. If he could just talk to Hojo and find out more about himself, maybe he’d find some sort of peace. The others didn’t notice as he moved out into the open space of the wide cavern. There were holes in the ceiling that let in enough sunlight to illuminate the crystalline ice walls in an unnerving blue. Sephiroth was here; he was so close now that the sensation was overwhelming. The whispers in his mind began to screech and moan. Jenova was calling.

“This is where the reunion happens,” Cloud mumbled. “Where everything begins and ends.”

“Hey!” Scarlet huffed. “Where did you come from?”

“I don’t know,” Cloud admitted, his chin tucking toward his chest. “But you’d better get out of here. Something big is about to happen.”

Behind them, Tifa emerged from a tunnel that was high above the cavern’s floor. Tears were flowing freely down her cheeks and her breath hitched from the force of her quiet sobs as she began to climb down the steep, rocky slope to get to her husband. She’d sent Barret back to alert the others as she’d chased after Cloud, quickly growing panicked when she’d lost sight of him in the labyrinth of caves beneath the Northern Crater. The man was lost in confusion and despair, and she was determined to do anything she could rescue him from it. Losing him to his own broken mind would be beyond devastating. She couldn’t let that happen. The sight of his blonde head across the wide space brought hope surging forward.

"Cloud!" Tifa called, the weariness of her heart manifesting in her voice, but it seemed that he could not hear her. He didn’t turn around or acknowledge her.

It was distressing to watch as he hugged himself, his shoulders swaying ever so slightly. Should she come closer? Would it make things worse?

Suddenly, Nanaki came sprinting into the cavern from an opening in the rockwork in front of
Cloud. He was panting heavily and Tifa wondered if he had run ahead of the others when Barret told them Cloud was in trouble. Perhaps if she couldn’t help him, he could.

“Cloud!” Nanaki said, breathless. “I’m here to help you!”

It was chilling how calm her husband seemed. He closed the small distance between them with slow, lumbering steps.

“Thank you, Nanaki. Where’s the black materia?”

Oh, no.

“It’s safe, I’m holding onto it.”

“I’ll take it from here. Give it to me, please.”

“Are you sure, Cloud?”

The nod of his head spurred Tifa into action. She started to climb down to where the others were congregated, tripping over her feet as she descended.

“Don’t give it to him!” she cried. “Cloud, stop!”

But he did not hear her.

”Here you go,” Nanaki said. “I was uncomfortable holding this thing. It’s a relief to have you take it from me.”

This couldn’t be happening. She’d promised him that she’d look after him—that she’d keep him from doing something terrible. And here she was, watching him make the same mistake twice. She called his name again and again. Scrambling forward, her clumsy knees tore the fabric of her pants as they scraped raw against ice and stone.

“Cloud! Can’t you hear my voice?” Had he been hearing it at all since they met at the train station? Was whatever happened to him so terribly traumatic that he no longer understood the heart of his spouse? What if he really wasn’t the man she had married? She shook her head to rid it of such thoughts. Now was not the time for doubt. “No, please don’t give it to him! Stop, Cloud!”

But he didn’t acknowledge her, even as she finally closed the gap between them. He fondly rubbed the fringe of his Nanaki’s mane. “Thanks. Leave the rest to me.”

He turned around to face Rufus, Scarlet and Hojo. Tifa skidded to a halt behind the trio when she saw mako eyes jumping between each of them. Everything inside her screamed that she should run forward and wrestle the black materia out of his grip, but his glowing blue gaze froze her in place. Cloud’s face seemed so serene that for a moment that it appeared as if his chaotic mind was finally able to rest. But Tifa knew better.

“Everyone, thanks for everything,” Cloud began. What he was thanking them for, she had no idea.

“I also wanted to apologize to you all. Especially you, Tifa—I’m really sorry. You have been so good to me and it kills me to know that I’m not the man you wish I was. I don’t have anything to give you—I’m just an empty shell. But I hope that one day, you’ll get to meet the real Cloud again. You deserve that happiness, Tifa.”

It was all she could do to stare incredulously as fresh tears welled up in her eyes. That face—her
husband’s dear, sweet face—was both blank and full of unspeakable pain and it shattered her resolve. Had she embarked on this perilous emotional journey with him only to have to turn around without him? A malicious thought was soaking slowly into her brain: she’d never been enough when others needed her most. She couldn’t fight Papa’s daemons, she couldn’t give her child life, and she hadn’t been fast enough to save her friends who had died in this fight against Sephiroth and Shinra. And now, she was failing the only person who had ever known her with the intimacy that comes from a lifetime together. Of what worth could she possibly be if she couldn’t save the man she was convinced she was born?

Watching his stoic features, Tifa would have given anything for the power to soothe his aching soul, which constantly struggled in its disquiet like an animal beating against the iron bars of a cage. She wanted to protect him as he took the time to figure himself out, but it seems that she’d only made things more complicated for him.

Slowly shaking her head in disbelief, Tifa fell to her bleeding knees.

Just a handful of years ago, she’d held Cloud in a sweet embrace as she bid him farewell. The morning he’d left for his mission to Nibelheim had been like any other: full of loving words between them and Cloud’s sporadic, affectionate caresses upon her abdomen where their little one had not yet caused it to swell. Over time, Tifa had replayed the events of that morning in her mind again and again. Each movement, each second, had been so very precious when she believed that Cloud had died. She’d watched him walk down the corridor in his uniform, unaware that his departure would devastate not only their marriage, but their individual psyches.

If she had known that they’d eventually come back together, would she have let him go? Could she have had the courage to do the things she did? That morning, how could Tifa have known as his boot steps faded down the hall that Cloud would return to her so horrifically broken? How could she imagine that the baby in her womb, whom the couple greeted each morning, would be cremated by strangers in a nameless clinic in the slums? And Cloud, with his youthful face and beautiful heart…how could she picture this dearest person on earth to her standing teetering on the brink of sanity in a grand, frigid cavern? In their apartment on that day so long ago, such thoughts were not even thinkable.

“This is perfect!” Hojo squealed with glee. “It means that my experiment was a complete success—the Jenova reunion theory has been proven. Even if Jenova’s body is dismembered, it’ll eventually come together to become whole again.”

Tifa could not read Cloud’s expression as he stared into the professor’s face. His white lab coat swayed with his steps as he approached the blonde. Cloud let him cup his jaw, turn his head this way and that, as if he was looking for something. It was baffling to watch her husband, who had formerly displayed such rage against Shinra, be so tame at the hands of this maniac.

“What number were you, hm?” Hojo crooned, examining his neck. “Where is your tattoo?”

At that, Cloud shrunk in on himself, his eyes falling to his feet. Despondently, he rolled the black materia between his fingertips and palm. “Professor Hojo, I don’t have a number. You didn’t give me one because you said I was a failed experiment.”

Immediately, the scientist’s benign expression soured into one of disgust. “You mean out of all of you, only a failure made it here?”

Hurt and brokenness painted themselves upon Cloud’s face as blue eyes snapped upward. “Professor…please, give me a number. Please, Professor…”
Desperation and panic filled his heart. If all he had ever been was an experiment, he couldn't bear to be a failed one. He was without purpose, without a number, without any identification as an individual. What could he hold onto to comfort himself if even his creator had no affection for him? Cloud’s mind was a confused mass of impressions, like an old rubbish-heap, and he struggled to scrape together any coherent thought. All he wanted was some sort of validation or praise; it was the only way that this wretched existence would be tolerable.

"Silence, miserable failure!"

Cloud balked, reaching out to onto the fabric of Hojo’s lab coat. His knees buckled and he kneeled before him, holding out his fragile, paper heart. “Please. I’ll do anything. Please…”

He no longer had any pride to defend. Begging for value, for anything to cling to, was all that mattered now. Everything else had been stripped away, for each cherished thing that he thought was his really belonged to someone else all along—even his very name. The real Cloud was shrouded in mystery, a person who felt familiar and yet far away. Guilt washed over him at the thought that he, a reject unworthy of any sort of mercy, had stolen something as intimate as his name. One of the worst aspects of it all was the fact that he had mislead poor Tifa, who had stood beside him all this time. Her relief and joy had been overwhelming when she’d found him, weak and helpless. After all her toils, she’d leave here empty handed.

Even if the memories swirling in his head were not truly his own, Cloud couldn’t deny the desperate longing for acceptance and sense of belonging that screamed and strained at his core. It seemed that all Tifa was searching for was the long lost affection and companionship of the man she’d married. They’d both come so close to filling their painful voids, but had they lost the connection they’d found? So much had happened between them. There were painful things, but joyful things, too. Cloud had once felt that it was possible to find contentment with this warm, charismatic young woman, but all of that had been erased with the discovery of what he really was. In the end, neither of them had ended up vindicated by their time together and everything inside him grieved over it.

“Don’t touch me!” Hojo growled, his body recoiling from Cloud. “You don’t deserve a number. Get out of my sight!”

That was it.

Cloud flinched away, blinking at the sudden moisture in his eyes. Rising on shaky legs, his hands rose to cover his face as he shook his head in shock and disbelief. He’d been rejected at the deepest level and he didn’t know how to cope with that understanding. All his existence seemed to bring was deception and disappointment. If he were to die, was there anything in this world he’d regret leaving behind? If he died just one day sooner, that would be one day closer to finally quieting the madness inside him.

Suddenly, quietly, Cloud was spirited away. Defeated and morose, his vision went white as he rose up into the air. When the light faded, he was sitting in a crevice in the cavern’s ceiling. Cloud wasn’t certain how he’d gotten there, but it didn’t really matter, did it? Because he didn’t matter. All of the thoughts and opinions he’d had, all of the joy and the sadness…it was not his own. Miserable, he drew his knees to his chest and leaned into them.

Oh, Tifa…

He wanted her to find him here, frightened and alone at the corner of his being. It was indescribable how much he yearned to hear her voice speaking comforts to him as it had the night before. Peace was something that constantly eluded him, but she had somehow discovered how to
lead him to a place where he felt at ease for a little while. He’d never have that again; he didn’t deserve that from her after stealing her husband’s identity. But the more he thought about it, the more Cloud realized that it had been only her who had kept him moving along through this madness.

Tifa Lockhart had given him purpose when he hadn’t known that particular hole in his heart existed. His borrowed memories had made him believe that she—and their baby—had been pillars of his desire to fight for his life. But they weren’t really his, after all. Below him, there was a quiet panic as the others tried to determine where he’d gone. His ears were trained to pick out Tifa’s voice among the rest, and it pained him to hear the panic in her voice. Every instinct he had made him desire to hold her close to him. Cloud knew that only she could calm the storm inside him, still his heart, and give him rest. Any strength his weary heart had managed to retain seeped out of him, like a great exhale, and he pined for someone to reach out to his weakness and refuse to let go. A failure didn’t deserve something so kind.

But had be truly failed if he’d carried out his mission? Jenova and Sephiroth had been beckoning him here and he’d been the only one to make it to his destination. All this time, Cloud thought he’d been pursuing Sephiroth, but in reality he was being summoned. Cloud couldn’t see him, but every fiber in his being knew that Sephiroth was incredibly close by. If he could fulfil his purpose, maybe he could fade away into nothing once and for all.

“Sephiroth, I’m here,” he said quietly, fatigue dripping from his tone. “I brought you the black materia. Show yourself to me and I’ll give it to you.”

There was a rumble, followed by the crackling of rock as something shifted beside him in the cavern’s ceiling. It was a large, blue crystal. Small pieces of stone broke free and fell to the floor below, attracting the attention of the people far below. The crystal settled, held in place by a winding system of thick roots that had burst through stone and the hard, packed earth. Cloud turned to look at it, eyes growing wide with the sight before him: encased inside the transparent gleam of the crystal was Sephiroth himself. His eyes were closed, as if in a deep sleep, sending both relief and fear surging through Cloud’s veins. There was a bit of chaos from below him as the others caught sight of Sephiroth’s motionless form.

“Sephiroth,” Cloud whispered. “We finally meet again.”

His friends were calling to him. Nanaki, who had always been calm, began to shift nervously as he looked upward and begged. The usual soothing evenness in his voice had broken, revealing the depth of his desperation.

“But it was fruitless. The words reached his ears, but Cloud could not grasp them.

Tifa’s voice, even more frantic than Nanaki’s, rose up to meet his ears. Panick-stricken, she paced around, trying to find a way to close the impossible distance between them. There had to be something she could do to help him—anything! Here she was, being held to the flame, and she was just as helpless against Cloud’s pain as she always had been. Nothing in this world compared to the anguish of watching a loved one suffer; and she had certainly experienced this particular tragedy enough to know first-hand. Since their earliest days, they’d pressed forward in the face of adversity hand in hand. Had everything they’d done and endured slipped away?

Tifa called his name again and again without effect. It seemed that Cloud had chosen to dive into despair instead of lean on what they had together. How incredibly bitter it was to know that she’d
finally gotten what she’d wanted after all this time only for things to end this way. Had she wished for something bigger than she could handle? It seemed that her woeful prayers had been answered before she’d been fully equipped to handle such a situation. All she wanted was his love and for him to feel loved in return, but it hadn’t been enough.

The earth began to shake, then. Debris and small stones shook free and fell to the floor of the grotto. They all watched, helpless, as Cloud handed Sephiroth the black materia. A pitiful whimper shivered its way from Tifa as she held onto the wall of the cave to steady herself as the ground trembled beneath her, growing more violent with each minute that passed. Flashes that quivered like lightning were coming from the crystal as the earth roared all around them. Rufus and Scarlet were shouting, fleeing with Hojo toward the cavern’s exit. Nanaki came beside Tifa, shoving her forward. A familiar voice sounded amongst the thundering noise as Barret stumbled into sight, finally catching up with the rest of AVALANCHE.

“Cloud!” Tifa called out. He would die if he stayed here. They had to save him!

Boulders began to drop from the ceiling, shaking the ground so badly that they all fell to their knees. Griefstricken, Tifa tried to run back toward Cloud, but Barret caught her arm. She screamed her voice hoarse as her friend pulled her away from the cavern, through the caves and onto the safety of the airship. A burst of energy exploded out of the Northern Crater as the ship rose into the air, causing the aircraft to lurch forward violently. The last thing Tifa remembered was losing her footing and watching herself careen toward the ship’s railing before the world went dark around her.

… … …

It felt as if she was trying to wake, but something kept pulling her back into the helpless oblivion of sleep. The visions would come and go, but they were always the same. Blurry, unfocused dreams of chasing Cloud through a black void held her in an aggressive grasp. Each repetition of the scene was more fragmented than the one before; no matter how loudly she called for him, he never slowed his steps or turned around to face her. She tried to run after him, but her feet felt like they were made of lead and her legs dragged along as if moving through sand.

All Tifa had wanted was to know him. She’d longed to close the chasm that had formed between them in the hope that they could reclaim all that they’d lost. But had he ever wanted to reach that same goal? In her own mind, she’d been striving to meet him somewhere in the middle. But if she was completely honest with herself, Tifa knew that she hadn’t always been completely faithful to that idea. She’d lashed out, she’d shrunken away… Cloud was so broken. It was hard to escape the thought that there must’ve been something else she could’ve done to keep him from spiraling so far into desolation. Now it was too late. He’d fled from her, from their friends, and from the hope that he could ever recover and live a normal life.

Flight takes many forms. It can be and unfurling of feathers, a soaring upwards into the light, a departure or running away. Both of them were trying to retreat from their pain and soar towards a distant joy that the clouds kept obscured from view. Flight can be such a very lonely enterprise when you’re heading in different directions. Although her eyes were closed, Tifa knew that a bright light was shining. Lashes fluttering, she tried to squint at her surroundings. Her head was pounding, making her grateful for the silence around her. Groaning, she squinted and turned her head. Instantly, a warm hand closed over hers and a figure blocked out the blinding glare.

“Hey, baby girl…” Barret said, his voice low and gentle. “You finally comin’ around.”

The comforting sound of her friend’s voice pulled at her heart and her hazy eyes struggled to focus on his face. How blessed she was to have met this man. He’d pulled her through more heartache
than she’d wanted to admit and felt like she was always in his debt. Barret was far from a blameless saint, but in Tifa’s eyes, he symbolized the type of person she wanted to be. Although he’d always been a family man at heart, he and his wife had that dream taken from them when she was never able to conceive. His home and livelihood were burned to the ground, his wife murdered by ShinRA, and his best friend became so lost in despair that he felt the only way out was to take his own life. His dreams, his peace, and even his hand had been taken from him, and yet Barret chose to press forward instead of looking behind. Tifa wished she had the optimism and drive that this man possessed; maybe it wasn’t too late?

“Barret…where are we?”

Slowly, he exhaled through his nostrils. “A sick bay in Junon. You hit y’head pretty good.”

She moved a hand to her temple and massaged the swollen bump there. “How long have I been asleep?”

“A few days.”

Tifa closed her eyes again, wishing so badly that she could just go back to sleep. Everything would be so much easier if she could just keep sleeping and sleeping. She didn’t want to think; she didn’t want to move; she didn’t want to do anything. Cloud was gone and there wasn’t a thing she could do about it. Her husband had always been a part of their group, yet somehow remained aloof and alone, as the moon circles the earth but remains separate from it. But just the night before they’d lost him in the Northern Crater, Tifa had felt like she’d had him again for the first time. They’d been getting better—getting closer—starting to recover pieces of themselves that had been lost to time and separation. There had been so much hope, but somehow he’d slipped through her fingers again.

Just when she’d started adjusting to the reappearance of Cloud in her life and all the changes that came along with it, but now her heart would have to rearrange itself once again. The prospect of making any decisions right now seemed impossible. Tifa wondered if she lay here long enough, maybe some benign deity would take pity on her and grant her wish to disappear.

“Hey,” Barret whispered. Tenderly, he smoothed the hair on the top of her head. “Why don’t you ask about…him?”

His question prompted her to open her eyes once more. It was too much to stare into her dear friend’s face, so she chose to focus on his beard instead. How agonizing it was to feel responsible for Cloud’s breakdown and resulting disappearance. If she’d always act in love like she’d promised him on their wedding day, would she still have him beside her right now?

“Because… I’m afraid to know.”

She couldn’t stop the tears from welling up in her eyes as she considered the very real possibility that her husband was dead—for good, this time. Curling on her side, Tifa wept quietly, for every failure she’d made had always resulted in something catastrophic. Barret reached to hold her gently and she curled her fingers into his shirt. How dare she have the nerve to cry after she’d caused so much pain and devastation? Guilt threatened to consume her, urging her to pull herself away, but Barret kept her small frame tightly against him.

In every human heart is a place where one hides their broken dreams. When a goal isn’t met, no matter what it may be, it is given up and stuffed into a wretched container with a collection of other disappointments. The trick, it seemed, was to keep the lid on tight; once that brokenness burst free, it was crippling and dangerous. Terrible hopelessness nestled itself within her as she realized that
love cannot always save someone. It had been their reason for fighting, for enduring pain, and for struggling forward into the future. But what happened when it failed?

Love had become a wound that bled and bled until there was nothing left—an emptiness that echoes into silence.
Tifa wasn’t sure when she’d last slept.

She wiped her forehead with the back of her hand before replacing the washcloth back into the sudsy tub. Taking a dry hand towel from the stack beside her, she carefully dried Cloud’s skin. The medical clinic in the small village of Mideel had three beds, but her husband was the only current occupant. Apparently, the Lifestream lay particularly close to the earth’s surface in this region and Cloud’s body had managed to surface half a mile outside of town. Tifa would forever be grateful to the children who had found him washed ashore: hair and clothing dripping with mako. It had been a little over a week since AVALANCHE had found him here, comatose and unresponsive.

The clock hands ticked. Mugs stained with dried coffee lined the bedside table. Outside the little window, palm trees swayed lazily in the humid, tropical breeze. The air would be good for him, the doctor said.

But when she sat back in the chair and looked at him, it didn’t look like anything was doing Cloud any good. She kept him clean, told him stories from the adventure books they’d read in their youth, lit small scented candles and massaged his arms and legs. Numbly, Tifa fell back into the old routine she’d had for him the last time he was sick. But this seemed much worse than his previous bout of mako poisoning. For no matter what she tried, Cloud did not respond. In the rare event that he’d open his eyes, they were devoid of life—staring blankly at the ceiling or the far wall—and it didn’t seem like he actually saw anything. His skin was as clammy and pale as it had been when she’d nursed him back to health in her cramped bedroom in Seventh Heaven, but this time he lacked the energy to even part his lips when she tried to spoon warm broth into his mouth.

The doctor and the nurse seemed to think Cloud was a lost cause, though they weren’t direct with their grim opinion. They’d periodically check on him or ask her if she needed anything, gliding in and out of the room like ghosts. Their sorrowful glances and crushing silence said all the things their voices would not. At first, Tifa had been certain he’d snap out of it. Her husband had defied the odds again and again, like a cat burning through his nine lives. Surely, he’d wake up one day and be just fine. Cloud could return even better than before, in fact. Maybe he’d all of this foolishness about being a manufactured experiment. If her greatest wish came true, Cloud would open his eyes and once again understand the complex bond they’d built since toddlerhood. It seemed that something had made him forget that their relationship was so much more than one founded on fleeting infatuation or the teenage desire to pursue independence. The depth of their bond had been born of a complex knowledge of one another’s hearts, intertwining them in a way that was both profound and intricate. The circumstances of their youth combined with their love for one another had fused them together in what seemed like an inseparable union.

Tifa had once believed that if they could survive all of the hardships that battered their childhood like a harsh storm, all of life’s subsequent challenges would be easy to overcome once they were married. What a fool she had been! For people like them, it seemed that believing things might get better only beckoned more suffering.

She shook her head and exhaled deeply, trying to breathe out the negativity that brewed within her at a steady simmer. Brooding in despair never produced a positive result, though she yearned for the support of Barret and the others to help her escape from these sorts of thoughts. Palm moving to cup Cloud’s pale cheek, Tifa frowned at the thought that he might remain like this for the rest of his life. It was very likely that he’d never recover his consciousness. Tifa didn’t know where to start when it came to submitting to the possibility that she’d never again hear his voice or feel his
touch. How terribly, horribly cruel life had been: taking him away and returning his broken body to her repeatedly. It left Tifa’s heart perpetually wounded from the emotional whiplash of coping with the never ending gain and subsequent loss of hope.

The rustle of the wind through the palms drew her eyes to the window. Just beyond the village was the ocean. The broad, blue horizon peeked at her between the trees and it made her heart ache. To her, the sea had always been a symbol of freedom and happiness. Their dream of a little house along the shore now seemed long forgotten as the desperate scramble for basic normalcy between them took hold of their lives. Everything had gone horribly wrong. The blue sky held a red tint these days. High above them, the meteor mocked Tifa’s insecurity as it loomed heavily in the heavens. It hurtled toward Gaia, serving as another reminder of how she’d failed Cloud and as a result, failed the planet as a whole. The others were moving forward in their patchwork plan to discover a way to destroy the meteor. Whether or not she stayed at Cloud’s side or aided AVALANCHE, guilt would have settled its massive weight upon her. The choice to aid her husband was unquestionable, however. Marriage vows aside, his wellbeing always came before all else.

Tifa’s gaze fixated itself on the threat in the sky. It didn’t seem likely that there was anything that could be done to stop such a terrible force of nature. If Cloud wasn’t going to recover, at least he wouldn’t have to suffer like this long. The planet-wide desolation guaranteed by the meteor’s arrival guaranteed the end of mankind and in turn, Cloud and Tifa’s anguished existence. She decided the best thing to do was to choose to take comfort in that. It wouldn’t be long, now.

“Come on, Cloud,” Tifa said, rising to her feet. “Let’s go get some fresh air. I’ll take you to see the ocean.”

He didn’t answer, but she didn’t expect him to. The nurse, accustomed to the daily routine, helped her move him into a wheelchair and secure his IV bag. Tifa whispered a thank you before slowly wheeling him out of the stale air of the clinic and into the warm sun. Gulls cried out from where they sat scattered across rooftops and balconies. The salty air, the damp scent of the dirt roads and the chatter of villagers greeted them as it did every day. Many of them pretended not to notice her and Cloud. When they did, they’d usually pass by with sympathetic smiles before hurrying along on their way—most likely unsure of what to say to this peculiar pair of strangers. It didn’t bother her, though. Having a constant reminder in the sky that the planet would be destroyed was a perfectly good excuse to keep to themselves. Maybe they somehow knew these two outsiders were to blame for their impending demise.

“See? I told you it would be nice out today. Yesterday’s rain made it hard to hold the umbrella while trying to keep your head from falling forward.”

Since he rarely opened his eyes, she wanted him to know she was always there by the sound of her voice. Tifa pushed the wheelchair along, one hand occasionally smoothing over Cloud’s head and down the side of his face. She wondered if he was like an ant hill: seemingly dormant on the outside, yet buzzing with activity on the inside. Occasionally, his lashes would flicker or his fingers would twitch, but nothing that indicated whether or not he was conscious of her presence. It left her feeling isolated and lost, for her heart knew that Cloud had taken so much of her with him wherever he’d gone. The man had come back from the dead once before. This time, she feared, his luck had finally run out.

“I don’t know what to do without you,” Tifa admitted as they reached the edge of town. “You’re here, but you’re not here and I’m scared. You must be afraid, too. I will never leave you, Cloud. I promise.”

The further they wandered from the village, the bumpier the dirt path became. She slowed their
pace, for they had no obligations to meet and the ocean wasn’t going anywhere. Loneliness had been creeping into her bones as she struggled with Cloud’s condition by herself. Now that there was no one around to distract her, the feeling threatened to swallow her.

“Do you even know how much I love you?” she blurted out, thoughts flowing freely from within. “I feel like you’ve been trying so hard not to see that. Why were you keeping yourself at arm’s length? Why can I only talk to you about this when you’re unconscious?”

Admitting that out loud solidified how pathetic it really was. Cloud’s head threatened to slump forward and she stopped moving for a moment to adjust it so that he was comfortable before carrying on. She wouldn’t be able to take Cloud all the way up to the water, even though she wished she could put his feet in the waves. Memories flashed before her of their honeymoon romp through the surf and it made her heart feel sick.

“What do I do? Where do I go? How did we manage to get ourselves into such a mess?” she asked wearily. As children, it had seemed so simple. They were so convinced that leaving the oppression of Nibelheim and her father would set them on course for a quiet, happy life together. At the time, it was inconceivable that things could deteriorate so drastically after their escape. “We worked so hard to blaze our own path and tried to work toward our goals. But really, we’re all just scraps of paper being blown in the wind. Aren’t we?”

The familiar sound of an approaching airship made her look toward the sky. In the cloudless expanse, the Highwind came into view and the sight instantly lifted her spirits. She assumed they’d be landing just outside of Mideel.

“Hey, look! Our friends are back—they came to check on you.” Tifa gently turned the wheelchair around and began to push Cloud back toward the village. “Do you think it was wrong of me to leave AVALANCHE behind to look after you? I wouldn’t have known how to help, anyway.”

There was a sudden tremor beneath her feet. She slowed to a stop, unsure if it had been her imagination or not. Holding her breath for a moment, she put her hand on Cloud’s shoulder.

“Did you feel that?”

A violent quake shook the earth, causing Tifa to cry out as it knocked her to the ground. Immediately, she reached out to grab hold of the wheelchair and pulled herself upright. A beastly roar sounded as something momentarily blocked out the light of the sun. She gasped as she whirled around to look up into the sky. Soaring through the air above Mideel was what seemed to be an enormous winged creature. It wasn’t a dragon, nor a monster. It was a weapon—sent from the planet as it toiled in its distress.

Before she could put together a coherent thought, the earth began to tremble again. Soil and rock felt as if they were rolling underneath her feet. Hands gripping the handles of the wheelchair, Tifa looked toward the distant village as she tried to steady her boots. The ground was heaving, lifting some buildings higher while others sank low. The sound of rock grinding against rock terrified her as it joined the chorus of shattering glass and cracking trees. A whimper tore its way from her throat as the ground began to crack and sink, exposing the vast underground stores of liquid mako that lay beneath. Panicked, she turned to run away from the village, pushing Cloud as fast as she could.

This couldn’t be happening!

The earth abruptly buckled beneath them, halting the wheelchair and tilting them backward. Helplessly, they careened toward the swirling mako far below. Tifa screamed, desperately trying to
hold onto Cloud as the solid ground was swept out from beneath them. Limbs flailing, she reached out toward her husband as he fell from his chair. Colors and debris blurred past as her body spun out of control. There was a loud smack as her face collided with mako. She almost didn’t feel the sting on her cheek through her cloud of confusion and panic. The hook and IV line from the wheelchair had twisted around her ankle in the chaos, dragging her deeper and deeper. She and Cloud were going to drown in mako and there was nothing she could do. Wrestling desperately to free her leg, Tifa could feel the squeezing pressure in her lungs. By time she wrenched herself free, the last of her breath had forced its way out of her and the surface was impossibly far away. Terror washed through her body and she closed her eyes, preparing to asphyxiate.

Somebody help me, please!

It was then that a soft voice floated to her ears. Like a bell, it sounded gently through the expanse of murky green. Though the words seemed muffled and unintelligible through the thickness of the liquid around her, Tifa instantly recognized who was speaking to her.

Aerith?

She sank through the liquid as if she was falling through a warm dream. Her vision was blurry, but she thought she saw a hand stretching out toward her. The tears that formed in Tifa’s eyes instantly joined the sea of mako that enveloped her. Was this what happened when people died? Were they swept away into the ether? Did some departed loved one come and usher their soul into the Lifestream? When their fingertips touched, the world went white.

… … …

Cloud was calling. He called out in his mind, then tried to call out with his voice.

“Tifa!” he screamed, raw mako filling his mouth and lungs. Blackness swallowed him whole and he was afraid. He reached out his arm, searching for anything to pull him back into the fading light. It felt as if he’d been shaken cruelly out of a long, dreamless sleep and into a lucid nightmare. He reached his arms out before him, praying for salvation from the physical sensation of suffocation and the wrenching of his lonely heart. Cloud was tired of being alone and the terror that accompanied it. The journey of his life had been so treacherous and without reward for his struggles that it hardly seemed worth the effort to limp along on this endless trail of pain. But then again, wasn’t it what he deserved? If it was fairness that was nipping at his heels and pushing him along, Cloud supposed he deserved it for all the suffering he had wrought upon others. Who was he to stretch out his hand in search of mercy and deliverance?

Then, he heard her calling his name in the distance. There was no way of knowing where it came from, but it didn’t matter. He felt slender fingers close around his own and his skin tingled under the touch.

Tifa...

The instant she took hold of his hand, it felt like they were falling. Light and darkness whirled around them—faster and faster until suddenly, it stopped. His feet were on solid ground, there was air in his lungs once again, and his body seemed free of the fog and fatigue that had what he thought was an unbreakable grasp upon him. Blue eyes dragged themselves slowly upward. Standing before him with a wide-eyed stare was his beautiful, precious wife. Despite everything that had happened, she came for him. Her brilliant smile and sparkling ruby eyes elicited hundreds of garbled memories from years past: memories that he thought had been lost to his muddled mind.

Where were they coming from? Sephiroth made the observation that Jenova was absorbing Tifa’s
memories and projecting them in his own mind, since as a constructed being he had no childhood to draw recollections from. It only made sense that seeing her face to face would set loose this landslide of information in his brain.

“Cloud!” she cried, voice cracking with emotion as she wrapped her arms around his shoulders.

Despite his confusion and tumbling mess of thoughts, he numbly returned her embrace. The warmth of Tifa’s body and sincerity as she pressed her face into his neck encouraged a feeling of vulnerability and painful relief to swell inside him. With a hitching exhale, Cloud slumped forward into her. It was as if he’d been waiting for her here in the Lifestream all this time and she’d been too blind to see him until now. But when he considered it, her blindness to the depth of his pain and isolation was his fault for not articulating the extent of his uncertainty and troubles. Marriage was supposed to be a transparent partnership. Cloud’s pride had been obscuring her path and making it impossible for her to find him as he chose to fight his battle alone. Since he’d awoken in her little bed in Seventh Heaven, he’d been pushing her away when she exposed his weaknesses and hiding whenever she called for him.

Cloud had been his own great hindrance. If he was honest with himself, he hadn’t wanted to seek healing. Perhaps that was because mending himself meant facing all that was broken.

“I thought I lost you,” Tifa said in a quivering voice. Arms still wrapped tightly around him, she moved her head to peer at the wavering expanse of green that had swallowed them. She wasn’t sure if they were dying or already dead, but right now all she could bring herself to do was cherish the feeling of his warm body against hers. The steady thrumming of his heart beat comforted her. “You didn’t hear me when I tried to reassure you that Sephiroth was lying to you. You’re a real person, Cloud!”

He felt despicable for not immediately believing her. “How can I know for sure?”

“You can trust me, first. If you believe him before you believe me, then we have more problems than we thought we did.” Her lashes closed, tickling against his skin. “If you don’t run from me, we can work together to find a way to prove it. Please…I want to help you.”

He frowned, turning her words over in his head. Maybe he’d been so distracted and blinded by fear that it had been impossible for him to find a way forward. All this time, Cloud had internalized his issues. He’d chosen not to lean on Tifa, knowing that he was responsible for most of the burdens upon her shoulders. Why was it only now that he was beginning to understand that he couldn’t do this on his own. Tifa loved him—enough to pursue him even here—and helping him would bring her joy. The two of them were so ingrained in each other’s lives that they were codependent in so many complex ways. It was no wonder that trying to conquer something so oppressive on his own had failed so spectacularly.

“I haven’t been running from you, Tifa. I think I’ve been trying to avoid remembering certain things because I’m afraid of what I might discover about myself.”

“If you will not reveal yourself to others, you cannot reveal yourself to yourself. Suppressing who you are will get us nowhere.” Removing her head from his shoulder, Tifa stood up straight. Her hands moved to cover his own, gripping them with a fond tightness that she hoped would reassure him. “If I tell you a memory, you could be imagining it. But if you recall a memory of us together, and I remember it too, it has to be real.”

Cloud looked into her face and nodded. The warmth in her eyes brought him hope and her familiar face stimulated his brain to try and recall information from his past. The details of years before lay covered in ash and dust in his mind, for he had fought to hide these things from his consciousness.
long before he’d been told to believe that he was a fabricated being. Concentrating, he began to dig
and dig at wall after wall that’d he’d erected as a reaction to fear. A flurry of visions suddenly
emerged, moving smoothly before them like a film, and he and Tifa could only watch as Cloud’s
perspective of the past played out. The relief of walking hand in hand with her on their very first
day of school, the helplessness of watching Tifa suffer as her mother descended into death, the
violent wrenching of his heart when her father blamed him for Tifa’s fall from the bridge into the
gorge.

Her fingers gripped at his arm tightly as she watched Papa scold him and the violent grief that it
weaved inside of her husband’s young heart as a result. How had anyone ever believed that sweet,
shy little Cloud had pushed her?

“Why didn’t you ever tell me about that? I could’ve cleared your name! I could’ve made them
see…”

“What difference does it make? They’re gone now.” Cloud blinked, shame creeping onto his
features. “Even your friends changed their opinion of you because you hung out with me.”

“That’s not true.”

A memory materialized of a fight between little Cloud and the ring leader of Tifa’s group of
friends, Thomas. Back then, she had been blind to the animosity between Cloud and the other boys
until an argument between these two had erupted in her backyard. Cloud’s opponent was a year
older, a good six inches taller and much stronger than he was. All it took was one punch to his chin
for Tifa to rush forward in Cloud’s defense, restraining Thomas in a crushing headlock. The
bully’s wounded pride after that had manifested in his eventual abandoning of their friendship. It
had hurt, but she could see with clarity now that it was ultimately for the better.

“It wasn’t you, Cloud,” Tifa said, smoothing a comforting palm over the back of his head. “They
didn’t want to be friends anymore because I stopped fitting in with them. At the time, I thought it
was because Thomas was mad at me for humiliating him. Now, I realize that most of it had to do
with my reputation. Papa and I had sort of disappeared from Nibelheim’s social fabric after Mama
died. In a town like this, it makes you a magnet for criticism. You and your mother knew that more
than anyone.”

She peeked up at Cloud, discouraged by the sadness she found on his face.

“I used to agonize over how much being abandoned by them must have hurt you. You were all so
close for so many years and I used to envy your ability to be part of a group of playmates. You
were my only friend and I can’t imagine what kind of person I would’ve been if I didn’t have your
companionship.” Cloud hung his head, his eyes focusing anywhere but on hers. “All the times that
I felt alone, I’d always remember that you’d been there. It hurts to remember that I wasn’t valuable
to the place I grew up and that I brought you down with me.”

“What do you mean?”

“Isn’t it obvious?” he asked. “You’re beautiful, wonderful and were born to a well-loved family of
high status. What you ever saw in me, I’ll never know. I was never good enough for you. I was
meant to be nothing, but you were always meant to be something. I'm a nobody, Tifa. Your father
knew it, Nibelheim knew it. Hell, even ShinRA knew it. Now the whole world will know what a
spectacular failure I am.”

Gently, she used her hand to cup his chin and lift it until he was forced to make eye contact.
“Don’t be so quick to judge yourself. Why can’t you understand that since I was old enough to
know who you were, you were central to my world? You’ve been my rock, my encourager, and the
foundation upon which I built my dreams. But I can’t change your mind—only you can choose to
face that truth.” She looked straight into his eyes, gaze confident and unmoving. “You’re in control
now, Cloud. You don’t gain anything from wallowing in despair. Your story doesn’t have to end
here.”

She’d hoped to kindle a fire within him, encouraging him to rise above all of this, but his
expression still communicated defeat. Cloud flicked his eyes downward, settling somewhere
between her nose and chin. His head felt heavy in her palm as he spoke.

“I don’t want to be this way. Your father was right--I couldn't protect you. All I’ve ever wanted
was to be the man you needed me to be. But instead, I ruined you.”

The sentiment made another memory come into focus. This time, he and Tifa were huddled
together atop Nibelheim’s water tower. Tifa sucked in a breath at the sight of her young self in her
blue summer frock, shivering in the night air. Cloud was telling her that he was leaving for
Midgar. Her lips were drawn into a tight line and her eyes squinted with the effort of reigning in her
urge to scream. Tifa’s recollection of this particular moment was so painfully clear that it hurt to
watch herself struggle in the third person. She remember digging her fingertips into the rough
would so hard that she thought they might bleed at the thought of facing all the darkness in her life
without him. At the time, she’d felt betrayed by his decision. But now that the passage of time had
revealed Cloud’s plan to her, she was able to understand his actions clearly and they warmed her
heart.

“Nothing you’ve ever done has ‘ruined’ me. You went across the world to try and secure a future
for the two of us. After we got married, you’d get up at the crack of dawn and work into the late
hours of the night so that we could afford our home. Your sacrifices never went unnoticed, Cloud.
You are the man I always needed you to be—you’re just confused now. It’s my job to help you
find your footing.”

Even still, he refused to meet her eyes. But she wouldn’t give up.

“Sephiroth said that you got your memories from Jenova merging with mine,” Tifa continued,
gesturing her hand toward the star-littered heavens. “But you didn’t imagine this sky, you
remembered it. I believe that you are the Cloud from Nibelheim, but you don’t believe in yourself.
Healing has to start from within, Cloud.”

“The real me was so much weaker than the person I wanted to believe that I was. I never made
SOLDIER, did I? I never worked alongside Sephiroth. I was nothing more than an expendable
trooper.”

“Just because you weren’t in SOLDIER doesn’t mean you were expendable. But you’re
remembering!” Excited by his breakthrough, she pressed a quick kiss to his forehead. “Think,
Cloud. What happened the day Nibelheim burned? That was the day you disappeared from my life.
Something terrible must’ve happened because ShinRA sent me a letter saying that you were killed
in action.”

Cloud drew in a breath and exhaled as the vision around them shifted once again, colors dancing
until they settled into a defined setting. A man with black hair and a SOLDIER uniform rushed
into the inner chambers of Nibelheim’s mako reactor, screaming Sephiroth’s name. His weapon
was drawn as he charged up the stairs toward his silver-haired comrade. The buster sword glinted
in the dim light as he swung it forward, but Sephiroth and his masamune were too fast. Bleeding
and weak, he fell backward down the stairs and remained still at the bottom, his injury rendering
him unable to move. Tifa felt tears prick at her eyes as she watched their dear friend fall at the hands of the man her husband had idolized. She thought all of the merriment he’d brought during his visits to their home, of his parents who still waited for him in Gongaga and of the pain Aerith must’ve experienced when she didn’t get to say goodbye…

“Z—Zack…” The name slid out of Cloud’s lips without beckon. “Zack Fair…”

She gasped, clasping his hands together in hers. “You remembered!”

Cloud’s discouragement for his inability to join SOLDIER had always seemed to evaporate in Zack’s presence. How endearing it was to watch her husband’s eyes sparkle with unrestrained glee as he looked up at his closest friend. He was their frequent dinner guest in the slums, and Tifa remembered how magical it was to listen to Cloud laugh and watch a beautiful smile adorn his face at his friend’s jokes and antics. It was no mystery to her how much the companionship of someone with Zack’s high status made Cloud believe that he was good enough to deserve something so precious. After being shunned by every last one of his peers in Nibelheim, this friendship had healed his heart on so many levels.

Now, Tifa watched Cloud’s expression closely. He frowned, chest beginning to rise and fall with each anxious breath. Suddenly everything had come surging back to him like a great tide. How long had he forgotten his dear friend?

Zack had somehow fallen beyond the reach of his recollection and realizing this made his chest tighten until he thought it might burst. Like waves crashing on a beach, memory after memory fell forward into his consciousness and Cloud held Tifa’s hands tightly as he tried to steady his psyche.

“My friend—Sephiroth killed my friend, my mother and my village,” he said, wild eyes watching as the past played out before them. “So I took Zack’s sword and got my revenge.”

How strange it was to see her husband swallowed up by such rage as she watched the events of his memory. Cloud had always been so subdued and calm that watching him fatally wound Sephiroth was quite a disconcerting departure of his personality. His subsequent impalement by the masamune, however, disturbed her to the core. Everything inside her screamed as she watched him slump lifelessly to the floor, blood rushing out from the wound in his chest. Tifa had long wondered where the matching scars on his chest and back had come from, now she knew for certain.

“You were hurt,” she whispered, tears freely flowing now. “Did you really die that day?”

“No,” Cloud answered, his voice husky and fatigued. “Though there were so many times that I wished I had.”

Brows knotted together in confusion, she watched as Professor Hojo and a handful of ShinRA cronies came to collect Cloud and Zack’s unconscious bodies. The scene inside the reactor faded and was replaced with a dim, dank room. It was cluttered with books, bottles of chemicals and antiseptics, and a stained gurney in the corner. Two large holding tanks filled with mako sat against the wall, reminding Tifa of the enclosures she’d seen in the ShinRA building that housed small, living creatures. But to her horror, the specimens inside were not animals or monsters—they were human beings. Zack was encased in one, and Cloud in the other. Their bodies were littered with scars.

“What happened to you here?”

“All sorts of nightmarish things.” He shivered and she held him tighter. “Hojo healed me of the wound from Sephiroth, but broke me in so many ways. My body couldn’t handle the injections of
Jenova cells or the mako poisoning. Zack was probably immune from his previous mako exposure as a SOLDIER."

Tifa forgot to breathe as she watched brief glimpses of their agony and torture as Cloud and Zack each had their turn to be drugged, dragged out of their enclosures like animals and thrown onto the gurney for experimentation. How incredibly difficult it was to hear Zack—who she had never seen be anything but cheerful and optimistic—cry out in pain and curse Hojo, ShinRA and life. But it was simply excruciating to watch her husband’s half-sedated body struggle against his restraints and whimper with the grim anticipation of what he was about to endure.

“Please, I don’t want to remember this anymore,” Cloud whispered, turning his head into her hair. “I can’t bear it.”

As incredibly difficult as it was to learn the torture that her husband had endured, the silver lining was that recalling this nightmare provided proof that Cloud had indeed existed before Hojo had turned him into a lab rat.

“Hojo didn’t create you, he experimented on you. That’s a huge difference.” Tifa pressed him against her, rubbing his back slowly for support. “How in the world did you get out of there?”

“We escaped, though I don’t clearly remember it.”

Brief flashes of recollections flashed into view: Zack dragging him out of ShinRA Manor with one bloody knuckle, carrying his comatose body over many different landscapes and hiding him when danger manifested in the form of ShinRA troops looking to recapture them.

“Zack died trying to save me,” Cloud said, voice heavy with sorrow.

“Oh, Cloud…” Tifa whispered, clinging tightly to her husband as she watched the scene before them. How tragic to know that it had all ended this way—that Zack’s valiant journey to freedom had come to an abrupt close with a barrage of bullets to the chest. She almost couldn’t bring herself to watch as the SOLDIER’s body fell to the earth. His brilliant blue eyes—always full of merriment and hope—glazed over as his chest gradually ceased to rise and fall. Dark storm clouds churned overhead as her husband crawled listlessly from his hiding place behind a boulder, croaking his protector’s name. The sight of Cloud hunched over Zack’s still body was just too much. The cold rain wash away the blood on his cheek where he’d miserably pressed it against his friend’s wounded torso.

Cloud forced himself to watch. There was nothing about him that was worth Zack’s incomparable sacrifice. His life circumstances had always reflected that he was of little value to both people and the world as a whole, but it was with great internal frustration that Cloud realized that he hadn’t been living in a way that honored Zack’s choice to save his friend at the ultimate cost to himself.

“I don’t remember how I got to Midgar,” he stated numbly. “I must’ve dragged myself across the wasteland. It couldn’t have been a coincidence that against all odds, you found me there.”

Wretchedly, Tifa curled into him, wiping the tears from her eyes occasionally. Taking comfort in each other’s embrace and the miracle of their reunion, the couple spent a long while in solemn silence. Together, they cried, letting everything sink in. The clarification of Cloud’s mysterious past finally becoming clear had simultaneously placed heaviness in their hearts and vindicated their spirits, leaving each of them exhausted and without words. Tifa’s head lay motionless against Cloud’s chest and it reminded him that he was not the only one to endure such hardship while they were separated.
“Tifa…” he said as he brushed her bangs out of her eyes. “I want to know how you suffered back then. All this time, I’ve been avoiding asking you about it because I knew you wouldn’t have been so broken if I was around.”

He wasn’t quite sure if he could handle what was to come, but he could no longer pretend like avoiding it would be helpful in any way. His wife was helping him shoulder the trauma of his past. Being Hojo’s captive had prevented him from returning to stand beside her before, but Cloud wasn’t about to voluntarily run from this anymore. He’d lift her up, this time. Tifa had been so strong for him, even though life had left her as beaten and broken as he was, and it was finally his turn to let her lean on him.

She turned her head up to look at him, stray strands of hair sticking to the moisture on her face. “Are you sure?”

“Yes, I’m sure.” He moved to gently hold both of her biceps, trying to look clearly into her eyes. “Close your eyes and remember, just like I was doing. I know it’s hard.”

Tifa had spent so many years trying to bind up the memories of those dark times and lock them away in the darkest corners of her heart. The trauma and devastation was something that she never wanted to revisit because it had been so hard to overcome the resulting depression and hopelessness. Voluntarily ripping open wounds that had barely healed did not seem wise and she found herself terrified at the thought of it. But Cloud had been brave enough to be vulnerable with her, even though it was so hard for him that it took a psychotic break to make it happen. Through that, Cloud had revealed his willingness to trust her with his fragility. Without rediscovering the mutual trust they used to have, their marriage would never recover. Besides, he deserved to know about his daughter—every last detail.

“Alright,” she breathed.

Taking a deep breath, Tifa closed her eyes and started to remember. She opened her heart and her mind to the remembrance of being told her husband was dead, feeling isolated and terrified as she tried to find a way to provide for her unborn baby, and surviving in oppressive, dirty Midgar.

Images flashed in front of them as they came into her headspace: working tirelessly in the Bailey’s bar, eating solitary meals in the dark after her electricity was cut off, hiding her growing belly with the strategic placement of her work apron. Cloud pressed his forehead against hers as he tuned into the emotions she harbored at the time—crushing loneliness mixed with a flicker of hope as she sang quiet songs to the baby in her womb. He saw the confusing blur of the painful ambulance trip to the hospital and watched her pace and cry out in the throes of labor. Everything inside him mourned the fact that he couldn’t be there to comfort her in the midst of what must’ve been extreme fear and pain.

As Cloud watched her writhe in the hospital bed, he realized that since Tifa told him the baby had passed away, he’d been terrified to know any more about their little one. A mixture of shame and grief had kept the good part of his heart closed, throwing up layers of protective armor to guard his raw and bleeding essence. Would knowing any of this lessen his suffering? Perhaps not, but it would make it easier for Tifa to bear, and that thought revealed to him that love was a sort of madness on its own. Love pushed him to force his eyes to watch as the purple baby was delivered, to see the doctors try to revive the limp little girl and let tears flow freely when he caught a glimpse of her perfect round face. It forced him to acknowledge that her death had fundamentally changed him to his core and reminded him to hold her memory close to him always. Together with Tifa, he had worked to find a place that he finally belonged. There was no way to describe how much the promise of the baby’s arrival had encouraged him to be his very best and taught him that his dream
of a loving and close family could actually come to fruition. With every pass of his fingers over her womb, Cloud had grinned with the thought of the Strife family breaking its curse of misfortune and finding peace in their togetherness.

It was impossible to know how much time had passed before the rush of activity among the medical staff slowed to a stop. With averted eyes and a bowed head, one doctor announced to Tifa that the baby was dead. Cloud watched, unblinking, as Tifa’s spirit shattered into a million pieces. There was an unbearable tightness in his chest as his wife, vulnerable and alone, held their stillborn. Fixated on the figure of the infant in a delivery blanket, Cloud tried to get closer, stepping forward into the vision. Moving to stand beside the grieving mother, he peered down at the baby that he’d never had the chance to hold. Her feathery light eyelashes were closed against pale cheeks. Her hair was such a light brown that it almost appeared golden in the electric light of the clinic. Each feature on her soft face was so perfectly formed that she looked like an ornate little doll: beautiful and whole, yet unmoving.

Intense anguish mixed awe and fondness in his heart, and he wondered if that was what Tifa had felt in that moment. When they first learned that they were expecting, Cloud wanted his child to have what he and his wife went without for most of their childhoods: peace, security, and two parents to raise her.

But that was not to be.

He’d been so afraid to face this particular reality that the two of them hadn’t discussed the baby at all since she’d first told him of her fate. And as Tifa sang to the infant, voice quivering with exhaustion, shock and emotion, Cloud felt as if his soul had been set free of its heavy shackles. Once he’d found her, he was able to find himself. The door had been opened to his cage at last and his family had held the key all this time—he was what was holding them back. What a fool he had been, but no more. Cloud Strife was a real person. His heart was strong and his strength came from within. He’d embrace the realities of life—both the good and the bad—with the confidence that he’d always emerge on the other side of heartache, pain and disappointment.

“There are so many details about that day that is blurred in my mind,” Tifa said softly, standing beside Cloud and reaching to hold his hand in hers. “I remember putting one finger on her small curled hand and feeling how cold it was. That coldness followed me as I walked back to our apartment, as I lay under the blankets in our bed…even when working in the steam of the bar’s hot kitchen. It shivered its way into my heart and I figured it would always stay there.”

Gently, Cloud pulled her flush against his body as she continued.

“But then you came back and I hoped that you could help warm me back up again. I want to know that while suffering is a part of life, it’s not all life is. Maybe we could figure that out together.”

In conceding to his responsibility to shoulder his obligations and heartaches, Cloud felt as if other things had become clear to him as well. As he kissed Tifa’s head and held her in his arms, all he could think about was how far their relationship had sunk away from the interdependence and mutual trust they’d worked so hard to build. Everything that had optimized their marriage had drowned, but deep in the reeds and green, the treasure of their strong foundation still remained. They’d been pushed to their knees again and again, making it so hard to make steady progress toward healing. The road to get here had been too long.

Cloud reached a tentative hand out and tried to gently brush the baby’s cheek with the back of his index finger, but it went right through her. As real as she seemed, you cannot manipulate reality through a memory, and the spectre of his daughter remained out of reach. How badly he wished to feel her small weight in his arms, for it seemed like that was what had given Tifa closure in the
end. His wife had hidden her face in his chest while Cloud watched the vision of her talking sweetly to her little one, and he realized her infant had been the only positive thing in her lonely life in Midgar. The baby was like a firework: her short life a burst of beauty in the darkness of the night sky. She exploded into their lives unexpectedly before fading quickly, reminding her parents of just how dark life could be when her presence faded.

“You were so brave, Tifa,” Cloud said, his chin resting on the crown of her head. “I would’ve given anything to be there with you. How did you manage to pick yourself up after that?”

“My life still feels like a puzzle without all its pieces,” she whispered, her head sagging into him. He could tell that she was working hard to still her breathing. “No one can replace her, though meeting Barret and becoming Marlene’s caretaker was a welcome distraction.”

Cloud felt weak from all of the things he’d learned. He let himself cry, mourning not only the loss of his daughter, but the loss of his youth, his identity, his freedom and his very self to torture and circumstances beyond his control. It was a great relief to release his grief alone with his wife without the fear of judgement from the trusting eyes of their team. Their lives had been a series of misfortunes: one spilling into another like a waterfall, and they were helpless against its flow. Would things always be this way? Tifa squeezed him tight, her own tears soaking into the fabric of his shirt. Remembering Zack was hard, and remembering their daughter was harder, but what cannot be changed must be endured. Perhaps together, they could push past all this.

There were memories that meant a great deal and memories that meant little. Was remembrance a liability when the past hurt so much? Perhaps it was, but as he studied his daughter’s face it became apparent to Cloud how much he lost by forgetting. It was possible to remember the hard things in life without forgetting the beauty in the process. Of course it was difficult to live with such pain, but removing all memory created a persistent pain of its own that would bleed its consequences into the future. As children, Cloud and Tifa had discovered that by leaning upon one another, they could remember in a way that embraced both the pain and joy of the past. It wouldn’t be easy, but they did not have to bear that weight alone.

“Shh…” Tifa hushed, holding his face in her hands and wiping at a stray tear with her thumb. She looked into his eyes to study him and saw the years on his face. Hardship and suffering and hunger had stolen the youthful roundness from his cheeks, leaving only sharp angles. There were lines and bags under his eyes that hadn't been there before he had disappeared. Oh, how she wished she could restore to him the innocence and trusting nature that had been ripped from his spirit by cruelty and mistreatment. But even more than that, Tifa wanted to resurrect the heart of her beloved, who had once loved her without fear of judgement or rejection. Various untruths had corrupted his soul and state alike, one form of corruption feeding the other. Chaos had beckoned and reigned in their lives without the principles that previously brought order to their marriage.

“Please don’t be afraid,” she cooed. “I will never leave you, no matter how hard life gets.”

“You chased me even though I did everything to turn you away,” Cloud said, dipping his head and breaking their eye contact. He spoke so gently that she almost began to sob.

“You loved me enough to come and find me where I was. I am so sorry, Tifa. I was so bound by my fear that I couldn’t find my way out of it.”

“There’s always a way. Sometimes, you just need someone to help you look for it,” she said before finding his lips and pressing a soft kiss there. “I love the bones of you—the very heart of you. Love is with searching for. You are worth searching for, even if it took a lifetime.”
He’d never thought he was worth anything; how had he ever ended up this lucky? Cloud could think of a million reasons why she should have turned from him ages ago. Wouldn’t her life have been so much better if she didn’t have to live in constant fear that her husband would close himself off to her or disappear altogether? Tifa deserved to feel secure and needed. At one time, he’d provided her with those things, but lately he’d only given her grief. Her loyalty was inarguable and the very thought of being separated from her made his hands threaten to tremble.

“I can’t imagine a life without you in it,” Cloud said, letting out a shaky breath. “Wherever you go, you carry my heart with you.”

She’d always remember the frail sound of his voice as he spoke and it made her want to revive the drive for betterment that used to burn inside his heart.

“I only want to be where you are. But where are we going, Cloud? What is it that we are striving for?”

For a minute, he was silent, considering her question deeply. He had been underestimating the power of vision and direction, which were irresistible forces all their own. They provided one with the power to transform seemingly unconquerable obstacles into passable pathways and expanding opportunities. As a teen, Cloud had learned this as he strove to find a way to make the expensive and arduous trip to Midgar a reality. In marrying Tifa, he’d come to understand that what you aim at determines what you see. Carving out a peaceful family life with his bride had been more important than anything else, and with his eyes on that prize it was easy to overlook their poverty and temporary living arrangements in the slums. Now, it seemed that Cloud had been too blinded by his own troubles to fixate his sights upon that goal. It had to change.

“I remember how much we wanted to move to the seaside and raise our family there,” he said, letting her brush his bangs out of his face. “I think that one day, we could still find that peace.”

All he wanted was to make her happy, and he knew that would involve having children. When he’d first been married, the thought of becoming a father had been so exciting that he’d hardly been able to contain his delight after learning about the pregnancy. It was a chance to express to his child all of the things that he’d always wished his father was around to show him. Before, Cloud had wanted so desperately to show his children love, affection and protection. But after experiencing the memory of his daughter’s stillbirth, the thought of putting himself and his wife at risk for more heartbreak was terrifying. The fear of more misfortune did not steal away his heart’s longing to be a father one day, though it made him very hesitant to say it aloud.

“I’ll hold you to that! Once we figure out this mess with meteor, that’ll be our next project.” Tifa said, smiling brightly.

Her eyes were still moist and her cheeks were flushed, but her face was beaming and Cloud could not have been more pleased. His fear to admit who he truly was had caused him to temporarily sacrifice what he could be for what he was, and that was unacceptable. He’d given up the chance to be better—to be stronger—for the security pretending gave him. As a teen, he’d accepted his flaws and yet still pressed forward to become an honorable young man. Now, Cloud had to figure out how to return to that place where the courage to accept responsibility and reality was his most attractive option.

He looked up into the swirling green of the Lifestream. “Let’s go back, everyone is waiting for us. We have so much to do before the meteor hits.”

It was a frightening observation that he was not simply his own possession to torture and mistreat. Cloud’s defiance and inability to seek the appropriate help had not only dragged Tifa down, but has
put the entire world in danger. Now that he’d gained the proper wisdom and hind sight, he owed everyone his best self. Healing had to come from within, and it was his moral responsibility to face his own demons, but knowing that he could rely on Tifa for help and guidance reassured Cloud.

“Yes, let’s…” Tifa agreed, hope dancing in her tone.

Excitement tickled her bones as joy crepted up into her smile. It had been too long since Tifa felt anything close to such acute glee and the feeling was overwhelming in the best way possible. Her body acted of its own accord, lacing her arms around his neck and reaching up to kiss his lips with a fervor that she didn’t think she could ever have again. When she was a little girl, Tifa believed that passion must surely fade with time. Like morning dew, it would evaporate into the air as the years passed by. But when her lips touched Cloud’s, so felt herself fill with so much yearning that she thought she might burst. Love was filling in all the cracks in their hearts and something told her that it would finally be enough.

They parted from their kiss, intertwined their fingers and began to rise upward toward the surface.

Fear had kept them tethered and clipped their wings, but trust eases pain better than any curative could. Hope can lighten the sky just as love can instill courage in the most fragile of hearts. They’d fly together to wherever this journey would take them, holding onto the security that one day, they’d come to land again. From the ashes of all this tragedy, a new life could be born. In the light of each new discovery and the rejuvenation of their pursuit of positivity, Cloud and Tifa realized that there was only one option left.

Go forward.
The dainty little curve of her smile was one thing that Cloud had long memorized.

There was a little gleam of excitement in Tifa’s eyes as the waitress set her coffee down on the table in front of her. Cloud wished that he had the means to take her somewhere nicer for their two month wedding anniversary, but the little diner on the corner would have to do. Besides, he’d heard that this place had the best vegetable tempura in Sector Three. It was a dish that Lia Lockhart used to make (her grandmother’s recipe), that gave little Tifa a delicious taste of her Wutaian heritage. He remembered how her mother would make it every year on her birthday. She’d bring the leftovers to school with a heaping helping of rice for lunch the next day and he’d watch her with mild fascination as she ate her treasured meal with chopsticks instead of a fork or spoon.

There were no chopsticks available at the diner, but it didn’t matter. Their dialogue had been light and full of laughter, the dim lighting and dull murmur of the conversations of other customers provided a relaxed atmosphere. Cloud told her a funny story from last night’s patrol duty and she shared with him her sudsy mishap with the electric washing machine. As Tifa told her story, he watched her carefully, for it always entertained him how she’d clasp her hands together in excitement before revealing the funniest part. He laughed when she finally did, more at her mannerisms than the tale itself. While they were struggling to try and make financial ends meet, Cloud couldn’t remember a time where the two of them had really been happier. It was difficult and stressful to be away from their only blood relatives that were back in Nibelheim. But when it came down to it, being on their own fostered the growth of their fledgling marriage without fretting over outside opinions of their union. They were managing without the relief of a familiar setting, but there was a certain comfort in knowing Tifa in the intricate way that he did that made him feel at home.

With a smile, he watched his wife load her coffee with cream and heaping teaspoons of sugar. It was always exactly three scoops, he noted, and then she’d lazily stir and stir until she was satisfied. Cloud, who preferred hot chocolate, sipped his drink as she watched her cut the little round cake they’d ordered in half. A solitary candle sat on top, a bright little token of their modest celebration. When it came to martial arts and cooking, Tifa’s hands always moved with delicate precision. But with most other things, she fumble with a sort of artistic clumsiness that always got the job done but in the most haphazard of ways. For a perfectionist like Cloud, it was as frustrating as it was amusing. His favorite part was watching the tip of her tongue stick out of the corner of her mouth as she worked, her eyebrows drawn together in concentration. Predicting her behavior before it happened was a little game he liked to play with himself. Tifa spooned his piece onto his plate and carefully stuck, a small glob of chocolate frosting sticking to her fingers.

“Happy anniversary, Cloud!” she grinned, taking her seat once again. “Let’s make a wish!”

“Isn’t that just for birthdays?”

“It doesn’t have to be.”

Cloud sat back and crossed his arms, pondering what it was he would wish for in this moment. Monetary security? A more suitable physique so that he could audition for SOLDIER? A cleaner, more spacious apartment for the two of them? He looked up at his wife, who smiled widely at him. The warm candlelight on her cheeks made his heart swell, for she was so beautiful on both the outside and the inside. Now that he had her, was there really anything else he needed? All of those other things would be nice, but Cloud knew that it was his friendship with Tifa that really made life
worth living in the end.

“Alright, I have one. It’s a small one.”

She leaned in a little to listen. “What is it?”

“That we can come back here next month, just like this. And again the next month, and the one after that,” he said. “I love this simple time with you.”

Adjusting to their lives in a foreign place had been overwhelming and frightening and yet Tifa always seemed to hold onto her optimism. Cloud supposed that was one of the reasons he was so deeply in love with her: his employment barely provided them with the means to get by, yet she made the best of everything they had and didn’t dwell upon all the things they went without. As he was growing up, he’d always felt like all of his faults and shortcomings were held under a microscope by the majority of the people he knew. Marrying Tifa and experiencing her unconditional affection for him had felt like finding a soft place to rest at the end of a long journey.

She grinned, resting her chin upon her hands. Her gaze was full of admiration and it made something warm pool in Cloud’s chest.

“Go ahead, blow out the candle!” Tifa said, her voice full of mirth. “The simple wishes are the best kind.”

Cloud sucked in a slow breath and blew, quickly extinguishing the little flame. He felt the hope within him swelling and rising, just as the tiny pillar of smoke that curled upward into the air.

… … …

Everyone was sore, exhausted and annoyed, making Cloud somewhat relieved to have separated from the others for a time.

Arriving in Wutai had been overwhelming for many reasons, the most pressing of which was Yuffie disappearing after stealing everyone’s materia. Cloud had been quite angry at himself for being duped so easily and for trusting the girl enough to give her an unsupervised shift on the nightly watch rotation. It seemed like even the smallest of decisions could lead to devastating consequences, making his subtle paranoia crest and fall as often as tumultuous ocean waves. Without the aggressive magic of materia, battles against monsters had become quite dangerous and grueling. It was humbling to see how much they’d all come to rely on it to fight and troubling see how complacent they’d become with their healing materia now that they were without it. It was hard for Cloud to let go of his fear of letting AVALANCHE—and Gaia—down. These feelings were especially hard to cope with after everyone had been made aware of his less than stellar past and his great lie of being a member of SOLDIER.

After struggling to locate an apothecary, Cloud tried to make his way back to where he’d left his companions. AVALANCHE had settled near the outskirts of the city, resting beside the riverbank after losing track of Yuffie. He just wanted to be useful—to feel like he was being productive and making amends for having misled the others for so long—and so he took it upon himself to restock some much needed supplies.

The paper bag full of potions and other curatives crinkled as he hurried along the wide avenue, weaving his way through the bustling crowd. There were dozens of little carts along the street where people peddled their wares, endless shops and brightly colored banners and lanterns hung on thin wires that ran from rooftop to rooftop. While aesthetically pleasing, the layout of the city was confusing. Every sign was written in a foreign language with only a handful having a translation...
hastily painted underneath the Wutaian characters. A winding river twisted its way through the myriad of homes and businesses, making the four temples and a single giant pagoda the easiest way to navigate the city by landmark. Their bright red color and grand, sloping eaves made them impossible to miss as they towered high above any other structure and Cloud was thankful for an obvious way to get his bearings.

After pursuing Yuffie far into the city, she’d finally ditched them in the sweeping tide of people. It was with great frustration that he’d instructed AVALANCHE to sit and rest for a little while—hoping they could nurse their bruises and formulate a new plan to catch the traitor and resume their quest.

In the aftermath of his revelations in the Lifestream, Cloud still felt that he was floundering. It was as if he’d finally heard the freeing call of the open wind and crawled out of his cave, blinking and squinting into the sun. The warm light felt comforting upon his heart, yet illuminated all of the harrowing work that had yet to be done. It was Tifa’s voice that had finally called him out from the grave, but now that he was standing on his own two feet again it was hard to hear her clearly. Ever since they’d pulled themselves out of the mako pool, shaking and coughing, things had been a little uneasy between them.

A man bumped Cloud’s shoulder as he made his way past. Paranoid, he made sure his hands were in his pockets to prevent any further theft—an old trick from Midgar that he’d almost learned the hard way. Without the disguise of his fabricated bravado, Cloud felt like his sensitive soul was naked and exposed. The angry, ruthless world had stripped so much from him that he wasn’t sure how much more could he stand to have taken from him. It didn’t help to boost his shriveled confidence that people were staring at him as he walked along. His untamable blonde mane and vibrant blue eyes made him stick out like a sore thumb in the midst of a Wutaian city. And while ShinRA’s war with Wutai had ended over a decade before, it was common knowledge that most citizens were still wary of outsiders.

The way they averted their eyes from him reminded him of the way Tifa often avoided his gaze. While always warm and friendly when they conversed, she’d been a bit spacey and shy lately. He’d watch her hug herself when she thought no one was watching—brow furrowed in what seemed to be confusion or uncertainty. Now that Cloud’s memories were filtering back into his consciousness, he had realized something very disconcerting: when it came to her mannerisms, he barely knew Tifa at all anymore. The contents of his memory provided a completely different repertoire of behaviors than the ones she was displaying and it left him feeling lost. How was he going to resume his role as her husband if they occasionally still felt like strangers?

The labyrinth of twisting streets finally forced Cloud to submit to his own disorientation. Too embarrassed to ask for directions, he decided to take the long way back to the others by following the crude footpath along the water’s edge.

The calming sound of rushing water encouraged him exhale. Was this really a reason to panic? Tifa wasn’t going anywhere. With some effort, Cloud was certain things could be mended with time and delicate care. Had there ever been anything but determination in his heart? Before his life had descended into such a nightmare, he had always pushed with all his might to reach his goals: to be the best son he could be, to do well in school, to save Tifa from her abusive and bleak household, to become strong enough to make it into SOLDIER… The temptation to turn to self-deprecation surged within him. As hard as Cloud fought to break through into positivity, doubt remained lodged somewhere in the back of his mind and he couldn’t pry it out no matter how hard he tried. Perhaps time and the appropriate attention would help sort that out, too.

It was so beautiful here in Wutai. Cloud’s eyes frequently strayed from the path ahead, taking in
the atmosphere of a city that was so unlike Midgar in every imaginable way. There were no bland-faced sky scrapers as there were on the upper-plate, nor miserable, ramshackle buildings like the ones that crookedly stood in the overpopulated slums. Here, it seemed that everything had an aesthetic significance: the color and placement of plant life in the city scape, the intricate carvings or paintings adorning the entryways to businesses and homes, even the beautiful presentation of food in its serving dish. Cloud wished that he’d been able to take Tifa here under different circumstances, for one of her dreams had been to see as much of the world as she could. How ironic it was to be traveling around Gaia—seeing great frozen plains, humid tropical jungles and even the vast desert—when all they wanted was the safety of returning to normalcy again. It was hard to enjoy oneself while the fate of the world remained uncertain.

Tifa’s mother was born in Wutai—a detail from his childhood that remained etched in his memory. Lia Lockhart’s long, straight hair had been black as night. Her gentle, sloping eyes and perfect oval face had made her such an exotic beauty in their little mountain village. When he thought of Tifa’s mother, peace always settled upon him, for she had been one of the only adults in his life that had paid him any mind. Even before he’d befriended little Tifa, Lia had always sent him off with some sort of candy or baked treat and told him how handsome and smart he was. Unaccustomed to such attention from anyone but his mother, Cloud had always blushed mightily and run off with both embarrassment and glee in his child heart. Some of the cookies and sweets Lia used to make were so different from his mother’s; he hadn’t understood at the time that it was because she’d grown up in a vastly different culture.

When he saw a familiar looking snack at a vendor’s cart on his way back from the potion shop, Cloud just had to stop and buy his wife a pretty little pastry filled with red bean paste. It was shaped and colored like a dianthus flower. He knew she’d think it was too pretty to eat and would feel bad that he spent some of their *gil* on such a lavish little dessert, but inside she’d cherish his little act of affection. If being here had brought thoughts of Lia to his mind, Cloud was certain that Tifa was overwhelmed by her own memories and longing for her mother. Perhaps this little snack could soothe the parts of her heart that words couldn’t.

Maybe it would make her smile that genuine smile that he missed more than anything. It was always her eyes that lit up first before the joy inside spread to the rest of her features.

Cloud rounded the river bend and felt his lips turn up at the sight of the others. Each one was busy with some sort of necessary distraction as they sat in the open, fussing with their backpacks on the grassy lawn beside the water. Here, at the city’s edge, there was hardly any bustle at all; aside from the occasional passerby, it was a lonesome little area. Mako eyes automatically scanned for his wife, who was a handful of yards away from the group. Just as clouds can suddenly rise to cover the sun, a shadow fell over his heart when he spotted her kneeling at the water’s edge, numbly washing their bedding. There was a little bridge behind her. It arced gracefully across the river, its lively red paint reflecting vibrantly in the lazy current of the water below.

Letting his steps slow to a halt, Cloud watched her for a minute and noted how easy it was to see the weariness of her heart when she thought no one was watching. Tifa took her time to wring the excess water out of the sleeping bag before carefully hanging it over the bridge’s railing beside the rest of the bedding she’d cleaned. With a small sigh, she rested her elbows upon the hand rail and leaned forward slightly to watch the water dance along beneath her. In this moment, she reminded him so much of the melancholy girl he had risked everything to rescue from her father’s house.

Swallowing hard, he wondered what it was she was thinking about. His own withered self-esteem told him that she was definitely regretting all of her life choices that had led her here. Although he knew that these thoughts were lies manifested from his own troubled self, Cloud couldn’t help but feel his heart bleeding. The more he thought about how badly he wanted the *old* Tifa back, the
more aware he became that this must have been how she was feeling about him this whole time. Craving connection and emotional intimacy with her overwhelmed him, but he was usually too afraid to initiate anything deeper than a light conversation. Most of this fear was the result of guilt, he was certain. The way he’d unintentionally abandoned her must’ve scarred her terribly, and it was in moments like these that the extent of her wounds was clear.

His body felt heavier than it had before. There was a little dread in his heart that tempted his feet to drag along when he finally decided to make his way toward her. How difficult it was to continue to face the sadness that continued to ripple out from their trauma! Cloud wanted to cheat. He wanted to skip to the end: where they could rest in their happy ending after the hard work of finding one another again. It was as if they had started over from the beginning—both of them were completely different than they were on their wedding day. It was exhausting to even think about rediscovering his spouse when all he wanted to do was take comfort in her now.

Had it really been so long since the days where they’d dream through all the noise, oppression and hardship? Believing in one another used to be so easy! With the strength of their youth they pressed forward against ever-stacking odds. Nowadays, Cloud felt like he no longer had the strength to find beauty and hope in the small things. He had a feeling that she didn’t, either. Wasn’t he was supposed to feel free now that he’d been set loose of his chains? Instead, the yearning for her patient heart bound his thoughts and held captive his ability to focus upon what could be done to remedy this. He had to discover how to once again cross the space between them. Tifa had always been the home to his fretful heart and troubled mind, protecting him from all the suffering that howled at them outside of the safety of their marriage. He’d give anything to reclaim the easy access to that security. It seemed that now, he had to work for it a first.

Tifa caught sight of him approaching, her face snapping upward in surprise when she realized he had returned. He watched her try and disguise the weariness upon her face with a welcoming smile. Instead of becoming discouraged, Cloud tried to remind himself that it wouldn’t always be this way if they worked hard to change it. Quiet confidence and hope were laced in each step as he moved to join Tifa on the bridge and the gentile in his voice tried its best to make her feel safe in his presence. They barely touched shoulders as they spoke their sparse and shallow pleasantries. Cloud let the newfound shyness he sensed from her fascinate him, though the lack of twirling her hair and lack of blush dusting her cheeks confused him. Occasionally, those red eyes would pierce his own—filled with questions and intensity—before the water drew them back to it like a magnet’s pull.

Cloud never thought he'd find them here, struggling for words to say. Though perhaps words were not necessarily needed to convey what was in his heart.

Curiously, Tifa watched him out of the corner of her eye as the crinkling of a paper bag broke the quiet between them. Excitement swelled inside him as he handed her the little confection, wrapped neatly in waxed paper. The delicate, sugary petals were dyed pink and purple with great artistic precision, making his wife smile in both amusement and awe. He watched carefully as multiple emotions fought for dominance upon her face before she finally closed her eyes. Gently, Tifa held the packaged little cake to her chest like a memory, and Cloud let himself press a small kiss to the crown of her head.

Instead of hiding and cowering, he wanted to be the Cloud of before: the one who always reached higher, even when life pulled him down to his ankles or pushed him to his knees. Their trip through the Lifestream made him realize that there really was no other safe direction to look than straight ahead. Fingers laced with Tifa’s, he’d try his hardest to guide them back toward happiness. But what exactly was happiness, anyway? From a conceptual level, happiness seemed to be such a subjective, fleeting thing. Cloud remembered how joy had bubbled up inside him when Tifa first kissed him—hidden away amongst the dense trees of their mountain home. He could almost
remember how light his heart had once been when he’d slump home after work his shift as a ShinRa trooper and tumble into her waiting arms. The smell of the food she’d cooked for him, the press of her weight against him as they cuddled together on their worn couch, the soothing sound of her voice they talked late into the night…

All these things had shown him happiness. Oh, how Cloud craved to feel alive like that again!

He smoothed a palm down her arm, instantly noticing the cool breeze off the water had caused goosebumps to form there. She was looking out to the water, watching the little ripples that the wind spread across the surface. Cloud waited for her to lean backward into him, expecting her to say something about the pastry, the scenery, or even her mother, for Tifa was never one to be comfortable with even a benevolent silence. Instead, she carefully tore her treat in two. It was almost as if his wife had been trapped in the dangerous limbo between shock and insecurity, and he wondered if she felt like a stranger in her own skin as he often felt.

There were few things that seemed light about her, from the heavy way her elbows rested upon the railing to subtle shifting of her weight from one foot to another. As sad as he felt that Tifa was struggling to come to terms with all that had happened, her unease didn’t completely discourage him. Cloud knew how it felt to be dense and grey as a stone when everything inside him longed light as a feather and bright as the breeze. Preventing her from drowning in that emotion would drive him forward, for he wanted so badly to be her relief. He wouldn’t back down. Instead, he would concentrate on seeing all those new sides of her that had emerged over their lost years.

She turned in his arms to offer half of her pastry to him with a funny little smile that didn’t quite register in his catalogue of Tifa’s repertoire. The strange tugging of her lips, the weighted pivot of her ankles as she turned and the slight tucking of her chin toward her chest…they all meant something, yet nothing to him. This coded language was a lover’s secret lost in fragments and dust. Each tiny mannerism held its own wealth of meaning, but Cloud had lost the ability to decipher them. The girl of their youth had been like a well-worn map in which he had carefully marked and noted both trail and wilderness with elaborate detail. But Tifa was a new woman, now. Circumstances had changed her topography into something unrecognizable, making her a new territory to discover.

It was daunting to be a pioneer, but it could also be quite exciting.

Cloud let his hand wander down to gently grasp hers after she’d finished nibbling on her treat. The friendly little squeeze of her fingers was one familiar behavior and it prompted a smile upon his lips. There was so much to learn about her, and he was so behind, but he’d look upon the opportunity like the promise of a new horizon. Did she feel the same excitement about rediscovering him? Perhaps she was tentative about embarking on this new adventure because it held the possibility of more disappointment or hardship. He had been the same: refusing to trust his own feelings (because he was frightened by them) and instead of taking action, he had simply waited for the remedy to find him. It never had, and he felt that it might’ve been the biggest mistake of his life. Cloud had learned that inaction and cynicism had hidden away the part of him that could learn to quell suffering and bring about peace, and he refused to be stagnant despite fear of the unknown.

Besides, searching for her continuously helped to coax him out of his mental fog. One slow step at a time toward something that resembled normalcy was what he hoped for and making tiny little goals seemed to be manageable and realistic. Today’s goal was to bring a real smile upon her face and he had managed to meet it. Cloud decided he would focus upon that.

With a few gentle words, he coaxed her off the bridge with the promise of finding some hot coffee.
The pep in her step was small—yet detectable—and it gave him hope. Before, a heavy black shroud had held down his feelings and created a pillar for his daemons to reach him. He didn’t want Tifa to make the same mistake. Together, they walked back into the city streets. It was refreshing to be able to pause in the midst of such a stressful pursuit to enjoy one another for a few fleeting minutes. It was a way to take a step back and remember what was important in the end. The years between them had spun outward like the rings of a tree trunk—growing further apart instead of closing in together, and he wanted to change that.

Somehow, they located a small café. It was pressed tightly between two large buildings with barely any sitting room inside. Little pots of bamboo and other plants crowded the window of the storefront and a tiny bell jingled as they opened the door to go inside. The smell of toasted sugar and espresso was pleasantly dense and the air was welcoming and warm. Tifa’s cheeks had been colored pink by the chilly air of late afternoon, and she cupped her hands to blow hot air into them as they crossed the threshold. He searched for her in her silence, watching her hands closely. Those hands had held his own as they made their vows under the shade of mountain pines. They’d lovingly stroked his hair as they fell asleep in their cramped bed in the slums and cradled the tiny, perfect body of their stillborn. Her fingers had helped write the story of his youth and carve out the rehearsed routines their day-to-day life. Surely, they’d be there to help write their future and find their home.

Cloud wrapped an arm around her shoulder as the pair got in the short line to place their orders. When Tifa rested her head upon him and leaned her body into his, Cloud felt something inside him melt with a sort of pleasure he hadn’t known for what seemed like a lifetime. His heart craved her warmth like a desert plant craves water, searching for those ruby eyes that burned like embers. He missed the feeling of her weight against him, for it kept him grounded and secure in his role. The trusting press of her body into his one-armed embrace reassured him that he was wanted and needed, which was really what Cloud needed to keep his mind on the right track.

It made him feel as if his little flicker of time on this planet was worth while. For the past few months he’d been in this world, but not really existing in it. Starting anew with a more enlightened sense of awareness was imperative, and it was about time that he made the decision to see life in a more truthful and positive color. Cloud could only pray it was what Tifa needed to start healing in her own time. For all of his toil, he may not exactly be the hero he wanted to be. But he wasn’t exactly nothing, either.

When they stepped up to the counter, Cloud ordered a hot chocolate for himself as he fished some gil out of his wallet. Tifa’s voice sounded quietly as she placed her order.

“One coffee, please. Black.”
“Good girl! That’s it!” Tifa chirped with excitement.

Marlene’s chubby fists were wrapped around both of her index fingers. Just after she turned three months old, the baby girl had lost her family, her home and almost her life. But she wouldn’t let any of that hold her back. While all the baby books said to expect a child to walk around twelve months, Marlene was determined to toddle around at just ten months of age. While fate had put her at a disadvantage, the baby seemed to have decided that she was going to be unstoppable no matter what anyone else thought. Tifa was not her mother, but she couldn’t have been more proud.

It was a typical morning in the tiny apartment. Breakfast had already been eaten and the dishes were piled in the sink. Tiny pieces of scrambled egg stuck to Marlene’s chin as she grinned, marching her little legs out theatrically before slamming them down onto the hardwood of the hallway. Nearby, Barret was trimming his beard in the bathroom before heading off to work. For Tifa, it had been quite a welcome adjustment to live with Barret and work as the baby’s primary caretaker. She was immeasurably grateful for the benefit of their companionship and for the stability it placed in her previously chaotic, lonesome existence. But even after all her suffering, she couldn’t help but feel as if she still had been dealt a better hand in life than Marlene had. For this reason, combined with her redirected need for a mothering role after Aria’s stillbirth, Tifa was very protective of this little girl.

“Barret! Do you see this?” she called.

From his place at the bathroom sink, Barret could practically hear the grin in her voice. He leaned out into the hallway to see what the fuss was about, his large bare foot making the hardwood creak. A booming smile spreading across his face when he saw his adopted daughter toddling along.

“Hey, that’a girl! Look a’chu go!” Barret laughed, moving out into the hallway and crouching. “Let’er go, Teef. I think she could do it on her own.”

Tifa frowned, her grip tightening protectively around the baby’s little fingers. “I don’t want her to fall.”

“If she falls, she falls! It won’t kill’er.”

It wouldn’t kill her, but it would most likely hurt. Tifa couldn’t bear the thought of putting Marlene in harm’s way, even for something as trivial as this, and she swallowed hard as Barret looked at her with a questioning stare. The reasonable part of her brain knew Barret was completely correct and that she was blowing a small thing way out of proportion. But her heart was so soft for little Marlene that she always had a hard time with things like this, even when the outcome would be helpful. What torture it had been for Tifa to let the pediatrician give the baby vaccines or let the little one cry herself to sleep in her arms when she was sick and upset.

Seeing the silent struggle in Tifa’s body language, Barret tried to reason with her.

“She can’t learn t’do it on ‘er own if you’re always hoverin’. Don’t you want ‘er to be independent like you?”

“Of course I do,” she said. “I just don’t want it to hurt to get there.”

Tifa never considered herself to be particularly tough, since her heart was always as soft and
easily scathed as freshly fallen snow. Barret had always reassured her that she was a fighter: not just her body as a martial artist, but her spirit, too. These things were always difficult for her to believe, though she occasionally allowed herself to consider that they might be true—after all, she was still alive. What was the price of shedding weakness? Things had been ripped from her soul that would most likely never return, trading her youthful optimism for permanent skepticism and replacing her lofty dreams with contentment over surviving from day to day. Imagining that sweet Marlene may one day end up with a heart as battered and bruised as her own made Tifa swallow thickly.

Is this what it felt like to be a parent? Growing pains, changes, disappointments and fears were a part of life. Nothing she could ever do would protect this precious little girl from knowing pain or loss, for life spares no one from the reality of suffering. But if she could learn to stand on her own two feet and get a head start on facing this cruel, twisted, beautiful world, perhaps Marlene would have better tools to fight against the unavoidable ugliness in her life. How could one grow if they are never challenged? Would the baby ever truly be happy being sheltered from the myriad of things that could harm her in this life?

With a quiet exhale, Tifa let her fingers slip out from the grip of the Marlene’s little fists.

… … …

The mountain fog was so dense that they couldn’t see the tops of the tropical trees. Cid had grumbled about taking the detour to Gongaga because there wasn’t a convenient place to land the airship nearby, making the village impossible to reach without a lengthy hike from the nearest clearing. Yuffie would normally have complained about it, too, but Tifa figured she was still too embarrassed over her brief rebellion to say anything. Mercifully, the others didn’t challenge Cloud’s decision to return for personal reasons. Although the meteor looming in the sky reminded them that they were all on borrowed time, her husband was adamant about coming back to speak with Zack’s parents.

The group marched along in single file. Insects chirped and called in a chaotic symphony through the jungle surrounding them, only drowned out by the occasional rumbling of thunder in the late afternoon air. It boomed every few minutes or so, like the opening of a great door, making their circumstances seem much more ominous and heavy than they really were. Tifa walked obediently behind Cloud, rolling a restore materia around between her index finger and thumb. Somehow, since Aerith died, she had been the one to inherit the healing materia during battle. She couldn’t help but feel insecure, for Aerith had somehow always managed to heal the soul as well as the body after a conflict. Tifa wasn’t very good at using such materia. Scratches and bruises would remain on her patient’s body even after attempting to heal them twice and she wondered if there was any sort of trick to it that she was missing. These days, her hands were mostly used to punch instead of soothe, and she felt more at ease smashing a monster in the jaw than she did comforting anyone.

A dull flash of lightning made her look up. Cloud marched steadily forward, and the determination in the straightness of his spine and purpose in each step encouraged her. Before, the days had been falling slowly beside them like the dead, dry leaves that crunched beneath her boots. But everything was different now. Their hearts held the joyful promise of spring and they each were holding their breath as their connection began to grow and bud once again. They had to believe in one another; they had to believe that in the end it would be alright. Slowly, they were stitching back together the parts of them that had been torn loose from the wicked winds of their separation. It was tedious work, but it was certainly worthwhile.

For the first time in a long time, pride was blooming in her chest. It was amazing that even after all
of the terrible things that life had done to Cloud—and all the unfairness that robbed him of the kindness he deserved—her man still pursued justice. Rising above was what Tifa had always known her dearest friend to do. He was learning to walk again, and she would let him go. Tifa promised to always be standing there with arms wide open, waiting for him to come stumbling into them. Trying to avoid confrontation on the issues between them had hindered his recovery while coddling his heart and it had done so much damage in the end. Learning from her mistakes was imperative.

With a smile, she jogged ahead to march along beside him, matching his pace. Her limbs felt light as she reached up to squeeze his shoulder.

“You’re a good man, Cloud.”

He smiled at her kindness, but he didn’t feel like a good man.

Guilt loomed over his heart like the thick, grey cloud cover above them and he wasn’t quite sure whether or not it would dissolve once he completed his objective. The last time they visited Gongaga, Cloud lied to Zack’s parents about the fate of their beloved son. It hadn’t been intentional, yet it was hard for him to sleep knowing that he’d been the one to rob them of the closure and peace. The death of his baby haunted him even though he knew how she left this world; Mr. and Mrs. Fair had endured years of unanswered questions as they waited endlessly for their boy to give them some sign that he was alive. Cloud hadn’t had the chance to build any memories with his daughter, yet her departure from this world had devastated him. The lives of these hopeful parents would change forever in the worst way when he told them about Zack’s fate. His heart trembled at the thought of being the bearer of bad news, but it had to be done.

It was with relief and dread that Cloud led his party into Gongaga at last. The village looked sad in the stormy gloom. The worst of the thundershower had already drenched AVALANCHE on their ascent up the mountainside and had now dissolved into a heavy mist. Light was beginning to fade fast as afternoon waltzed gracefully into evening, sending the others flocking toward the inn with weary sighs. Cloud watched them go with a detached gaze. Why was it always so hard to do the right thing? He wanted to shy away from all this…but Zack didn’t shy away from anything. He had to bring peace to his family, even if it shattered their hearts first. But did he really have the courage to do such a thing? Suddenly, Tifa was there, her warmth engulfing his rain-slicked back as she wrapped her arms around him from behind.

Cloud closed his eyes and let out a trembling breath. It would be alright.

She was the only person who could shake the weight of the world off his shoulders in one small gesture. It was hard to admit that his decisions were what ultimately led her down such a tough road in life; now she didn’t even have a place to call home. Here he was in Zack's home town, where people still loved him and treasured the memory of him. Around them, villagers were heading home for the night. Normally, he wouldn’t have paid much attention to random civilians as they arrived in a new place. But now that they were in the home of such a dear friend, Cloud found himself looking around and realizing that everyone else had a life that was complex, like his own. These people were friends and mentors of Zack’s who watched him grow up and leave to chase his dreams and would now mourn the loss of a man who had such an impact on so many hearts and lives.

Reaching up, he took his wife’s hand that had settled over his heart. Home was like an anchor, wasn’t it? Though Zack had been an esteemed member of SOLDIER who made an impact in Midgar and around the world, every road he’d taken still led back home. But he and Tifa were adrift. They had no place that they were tethered to—in name or memory or otherwise. Cloud
would change that as soon as he was able.

He remembered exactly where the Fair hut was located and turned in that direction before cowardice could creep into his bones.

Tifa’s warm hand in his was like a constant, soft encouragement as they walked along, and he was as grateful as always for her thoughtfulness. When the hut came into view, the candlelight flickering in the windows made him nostalgic. As they approached the door, Cloud didn’t realize how tightly he was gripping his wife’s hand. When he knocked upon the untreated wood, he felt as if his tongue was a loaded gun waiting to fire on this unsuspecting couple. And as Ella fair opened the door and welcomed them in with a smile that looked so much like Zack’s, he felt his confidence sink quickly to his feet.

It felt both wrong and right as he stepped over the threshold and into their home, Tifa trailing closely behind. Slowly, Cloud took in the details of their dwelling place. These people lived a modest life, as all the residents of Gongaga seemed to live, without much room for anything that wasn’t essential. Last time, he hadn’t noticed the small collection of damaged playthings in the corner: a wooden sword, a worn leather ball and a toy truck which seemed to be missing a wheel in the back. The aesthetic of the tiny home summoned memories of homemade apple strudels and long talks with mom about everything and nothing. Knowing such a precious thing would never happen again made a strange type of loneliness brew in the pit of his stomach. Once he realized those toys had once belonged to Zack—most likely scavenged from the wreckage of the Fair’s old home after the reactor blew—it was even more painful to realize that his friend would never come back here again.

His palms were getting sweaty as he was invited to sit at the table, but he cleared his throat and spoke.

It wasn’t as bad as Tifa thought it would’ve been, though her heart hurt for Cloud as he struggled through Zack’s story. The hut’s window was open to let the storm’s breeze through to provide relief from the humidity, but there was still sweat beading upon her husband’s brow. She watched his eyes, which were full of sorrow and shame, and they reminded her of the expression he used to make when scolded as a child (usually with her). His chin was tucked slightly downward, blue eyes big and soulful, and his mouth drawn into a slight frown. She remembered this exact face when his cheeks were full and round, his nose was small and pink, and his eyes were so large that they looked adorably cartoonish. The boy of her childhood really did still exist, and she gently smiled at him as he stumbled forward in this painful conversation.

She kept her hand upon his back the entire time in silent, unwavering support. Hearing this story again was hurt so badly and it was with grief that she realized just how much more devastating it was for Cloud. To him, Zack was so much more than a treasured friend. He was a dream realized: not only as a first class SOLDIER, but as living proof that he could be valued even by someone much higher in status than he. Growing up in Nibelheim had stripped Cloud of any potential social confidence; befriending Zack had almost erased those feelings of inferiority. Hearing him stutter with emotion as he fought through his narrative broke her heart, yet encouraged it at the same time, for Cloud was growing in leaps and bounds. He was transforming before her eyes and it was inspiring.

Her own fearfulness kept her from watching the faces of Zack’s parents at first, but curiosity drew her gaze toward them as Cloud told them the enormous impact their son had upon his life. There were wrinkles and lines upon their faces that she knew had been carved by grief along with age in the wake of their boy’s disappearance. Ella closed her eyes and Shaun’s gaze remained locked upon Cloud, the creases in his forehead deepening as he listened, an unreadable expression upon
his face. He told them everything: from the tentative care Zack took in teaching an unskilled trooper like himself to fight to the complete infatuation he had with a sweet brunette from the slums. It seemed to comfort them to know that their only son had grown up to be a man of virtue who died trying to save a friend, pursue freedom, and return to his beloved.

For the first time since her talk with Aerith on Mt. Nibel, Tifa pondered over the sad thought that she died without ever knowing that Zack was trying to get back to her. Though she thought her Cetra instincts had whispered to her about his passing, she was never able to confirm it and find any peace regarding her lost lover. How clearly she remembered Aerith’s silent tears and the hurt that brewed inside her the night they discussed his possible fate. Now that she had joined Zack in the Lifestream, was her heart finally tranquil? Meditating upon all this, Tifa realized that she was so accustomed to loved ones disappearing from her life that she found it hard to become attached to anyone else in their hodge-podge little team aside from Barret. She was kind and loving to each member of AVALANCHE, yet still kept her spirit somewhat detached.

It was wrong to close her heart to others, even if it might bring about some sort of pain in the end. Cloud seemed that have embraced that same revelation as he opened himself up to Mr. and Mrs. Fair. She said a silent prayer that she could adapt the same bravery that her husband had manifested.

“I’m sorry I couldn’t tell you before,” Cloud said, hanging his head. "The last time we met, I wasn’t myself. There was something dark inside me that kept me from remembering the trauma of what happened back then. I feel so much shame over it. I understand if you don’t forgive me. You must hate me for keeping this from you.”

It was torture to have this couple hanging on his every word, but he knew that every bit of discomfort was worthwhile. Zack was the closest thing to a hero he’d ever had the pleasure to meet. Every quality of the SOLDIER had been what he’d yearned to emanate since he was a child. And yet even when Cloud had managed to convince himself falsely that he was a hero of the SOLDIER type, he had quickly found himself coming very close to becoming a villain. It was Sephiroth’s influence that manipulated him, he was certain. But his personal weakness had enabled it, too, and Cloud knew that Zack was much stronger in his heart and mind. He’d strive to be of sturdy heart so that acting as a hero was less like walking a very thin line between valor and evil.

Swallowing hard, Cloud continued.

“Your son was my best friend. Before I met him, I never thought anyone else aside from Tifa could find any sort of value in me. But Zack saw past every flaw of mine and saw who I was on the inside, saving my life in more ways than one. Nothing I can say or do will lessen the pain of his loss. But now that I can remember everything as it truly happened, I’m going to honor him and what he did for me in the way I live my life. Thank you for raising your son to be the fine man that he was. You deserve to be proud of his heroism and sacrifice.”

Hearing Cloud express his feelings so eloquently was something that was unfamiliar to Tifa. When they’d first entered the hut, she’d struggled terribly with the thought of letting him speak on his own. Though she’d offered to speak to them herself a handful of times, he’d refused, and Tifa had been both proud and fearful. Instead of opening Cloud’s pandora’s box of emotional tumult, facing his fear of speaking with Zack’s parents seemed to bring him a sense of calm and clarity. Tifa had taken a risk by letting him toddler into this confrontation without help, for she had been so afraid that he’d fall and shatter. But instead, he was learning to walk steadily on his own two feet to accomplish his goals and it quieted some of the wailing fears in her heart.

“Mr. Fair, Mrs. Fair…” Cloud said, looking up into their eyes. “Zack saved me from falling prey to
the desperation of meaninglessness and hopelessness as I tried to discover who I was. I hope that you’ll always be comforted by the fact that neither his life nor his death were meaningless.”

… … …

When Cloud spotted a child’s tree house near the jungle at the village outskirts, Tifa knew they wouldn’t be joining the others at the inn. It was a little past midnight when she called Barret’s PHS to let him know. He told her in a sleep heavy voice that she was crazy, but Tifa didn’t care. She and Cloud were an exhausted, emotional mess and were dying to be alone to digest the heavy conversation they’d just navigated through.

By lantern light he led her to the ladder, which was crudely constructed with cut tree limbs of different sizes. After testing how sturdy it was, Cloud led the way into the derelict little structure as his wife followed close behind. There were a few playthings scattered over the uneven floorboards and Tifa felt nostalgia tug in her chest when her eyes caught sight of a half dozen marbles in a wooden cup. In one corner, there was a significant leak in the ceiling. The plip-plip-plop of the drops hitting the floor was pleasant and calming, encouraging Cloud to let out a long exhale as he found a dry spot to sit. Tifa snuggled in close beside him. It was a little exhilarating to be sneaking off to hide in a place like this, despite the draft and lack of a comfortable place to sleep. Her body was weary from the traveling through the untamed wilderness to reach Gongaga and her mind was tired from running mental marathons as they talked for hours with the Fair couple.

It was easy to wish for a soft, dry bed to escape into the oblivion of sleep. But right now, she and Cloud needed to get away together without hounding questions from the others. As they sat alone, it occurred to her that at the beginning of this crazy journey, Tifa used to try her hardest to avoid being alone with her husband. But now that his true persona had begun to shine through once again, she found herself actively searching to carve out time alone with Cloud. There was an addictive sort of excitement to rediscover this man, and she let it embrace her.

“Was it as bad as you thought?”

Cloud paused a moment before setting the lantern carefully on the floor before them. “No, though I didn’t expect them both to cry.”

He’d done the right thing, even though it was such a hard thing. The unbridled emotion of Zack’s parents had frightened Cloud, and Tifa could tell by his mannerisms that their tears had made him unsure whether or not he’d made a mistake by coming back to Gongaga. She linked her arm with his and tried to encourage him.

“They weren’t only tears of sadness, though. I saw gratitude and relief there.”

“Relief?”

“Yeah. I mean, it’s been quite a while since Zack passed away. Now they finally know what happened to their son. Like you said, it must provide at least a little bit of comfort to know that he held onto goodness and virtue all the way to the end. You want your children to live a full life and help people,” Tifa said. She shivered as the draft chilled her wet skin and she tucked her legs up to her chest. “I was trying to put myself in their shoes.”

“He was a hero. Of course they’d be proud,” Cloud replied, an unidentified emotion laced within his voice. “What’s more noble than the ultimate sacrifice?”

“I don’t know.”
The lantern light flickered as a stormy breeze passed through the little gaps in the wall’s wooden planks. A small collection of leaves swirled in the corner as the rode the in the wind’s wake, prompting Cloud to think of cycles and renewal, of the Lifestream and eternity, and of the circling of the seasons. There were seasons of life, of marriage, of being, and pondering over it brought forth a sense of wonder and smallness.

“My dad died before I could form any real memories of him. Mom always encouraged me to follow my heart and be the best person I could be. I feel like they're watching me from the beyond in shame.”

Tifa turned her head up sharply to look at him, looking almost offended by his statement. “Why would they? You nearly died providing for me and the baby. You were injured and kidnapped and suffered terribly! Having bad things happen to you isn’t the same as doing something wrong.”

“If that’s true, why do I feel so guilty?” Cloud lowered his head, but still held her gaze. “If I had nothing to regret, why do I constantly feel shame?”

While Cloud was free of his mental enslavement to his own delusions and confusion, he still wasn’t free of the repercussions of it all. He was making steady steps forward in reclaiming parts of himself that were ripped away, but it grieved Tifa to know that there would be some things that would remain lost to him forever. Her husband’s optimism had always been laced with uncertainty, but guilt and fear had never eaten away at him the way they did now.

"I miss you," Tifa whispered, making Cloud strain to hear her above the pounding of the rain upon the thatched roof. “It's not fair—you've been suffering for so long. You've been suffering since you were born. And for what? Nothing was ever from fault of your own. I've gone through hell, too, and now there are walls between us where there shouldn't be. I just want to see you smile again, like those days running through the mountain wildflowers and forest paths.”

The helplessness in his expression broke her further as she saw the little boy inside him, floundering in their struggle and wishing desperately for the knowledge of how to fix all that was wrong. Emotion threatened to well up and overflow out of her eyes, but she swallowed it down as she continued.

“It's not fair—none of it is! Hojo and ShinRA destroyed your life. They ended Zack's life, your mom’s, my Papa’s…so many lives were shattered by these people and you're the one left to pick up all the pieces. I can't stand it.”

Tifa let her head sink into her hands and Cloud felt his heart drop down to his gut at the sight. Was it really the company that was to blame? Could they really accuse Sephiroth of all this destruction and chaos? Whether or not they wanted to admit it, both he and Tifa had played their part in the madness, even if it was reactionary or with the purpose of saving Gaia. Any number of things could have happened to have them wind up on the same path. It was easy to place responsibility in any hands but their own and it got them nowhere.

Cloud smoothed a comforting hand down the back of her head. “What good is it to run ourselves in circles looking for someone to point the finger at? It’s a distraction that won’t change our future.”

“You’re right,” she admitted. “Everything seems out of control, now. We need to submit to the free fall and crash or learn to fly.”

They sat in silence for a while, listening to the rain and the calls of nocturnal animals they couldn’t identify. With a gentle sigh, Tifa peeked up at her husband to find that he was peering at her, too. They chuckled simultaneously, a beautiful little harmony, and she wiped at the moisture pooling at
the corners of her eyes. Bashful, Tifa turned away, and in that moment she almost felt like they were flirtatious teenagers once again.

Cloud hummed in amusement. “Remember when we spent that summer waiting for the baby birds to fly from the bird house?”

“Yeah. The mother bird would harass us because we always tried to check on her babies.”

The memories of that time were a jumbled collection of freedom and excitement in the space of her mind, and she smiled warmly as they flooded forward.

“I had so much fun that season,” he said with a hint of wistfulness in his voice. “I remember being unable to sleep one night because my child mind realized that those days would never come back.”

She let out a small, gentle laugh. “You mean you realized you couldn’t rewind time?”

“Heh, basically,” Cloud said, scratching the bridge of his nose. “The concept that time continuously stretched forward and away from those happy memories made me feel so lonesome and sad. Each moment with you and the fun we had was so precious and it made me depressed to realize that they were lost forever. Even if we watched the birds again the following year, it could never be exactly the same.”

“Those are some deep thoughts for a young kid,” Tifa smiled. “But you were always the pensive type.”

A low, growling thunder sounded and the earth reacted with a slight tremble. Instinctively, she pressed herself closer against him as she continued to speak.

“A year or two ago, I had some thoughts that were kind of similar. I was sitting at the bar going over my budget spreadsheet while Marlene scribbled on some newspaper on the floor. It saddened me when I realized that the run down little bar was this little girl’s home. I realized that I never considered the slums to be my home. When I thought of home, I thought of cooking with my mother or sitting on Papa’s lap as he told me stories. None of the darkness and sadness that ruled our home after Mama’s death come to mind when I consider that word. To me, I guess home became more of a place in time than an exact location, and it will never come back.”

Cloud nodded as he processed her words and Tifa watched him carefully. Mako green swirled in the deep blue of his eyes as he internalized and analyzed what she’d said, and it made Tifa realize that careful listening feels so much like love that she could hardly tell the difference between the two. The quiet attention of her husband was so fulfilling that a little burst of joy came rising out of her, manifesting itself in a demure smile.

“It won’t always be that way,” Cloud said with surprising confidence. “One day, we’ll have a proper home once again—just like we wanted. When we finish this mess with Sephiroth and meteor, let’s focus on that. We’ll make new memories to treasure—a new home and a new life.”

It was a modest goal and he liked it that way, for Cloud had learned that it was usually the smaller things in life that brought true complacence. Closing his eyes, he imagined sitting with Tifa just like this on a little porch to their house. He’d wrap his arm around her, fill his lungs with the fresh summer air, and rest in the peace of Tifa’s presence. The longing for the hope and promise of their future was overwhelming now as they took continuous steps closer together after such an initially tumultuous reunion. Now that the confusion in his mind was slowly ebbing away, it was hard for Cloud to sit still as he focused his mind and heart upon his goals for the days ahead. Tifa rested her head against his shoulder, her hair falling slightly forward, and his heart made a silent promise to never stop striving to lift her up. Each fleeting moment of life was too precious to squander on
anything but positivity, and Cloud didn’t intend to waste any more of it.

“Tifa…” he said, finding her hand and lacing his fingers between her own. “Let’s not wait until this is over to be happy.”

Relief spread like warmth through her body as she stared at their joined hands.

“That sounds like a perfect idea.”

Another gust of wind tore through the treehouse, this time snuffing out the quivering light of the lantern. A small gasp of surprise escaped Tifa with the sudden onslaught of pitch darkness, the only light being the occasional flash of lightning or the dim glow of Cloud’s eyes. Knowing that neither of them had materia with a fire spell, Cloud wordlessly moved to fish a soggy matchbook out of the pocket of his fatigues. Despite the distraction, he couldn’t help but continue to ponder how exactly they’d find happiness in the here and now. Up until recently, he’d been too busy wanting instead of giving. If both of them chased after the other’s happiness instead of only looking for their own satisfaction, Cloud was certain it would lead them in the right direction.

“I never finished guessing your three favorite memories,” he said calmly as he struggled to light a match. His mako enhanced vision helped him see well enough in the dark, but it couldn’t help him dry out the matchbook.

“Oh, yeah,” Tifa said, her voice betraying how the dark unnerved her. “You want to try again?”

“Sure. Bet I could get’em in five minutes.”

She laughed at his rare verbal bravado, which made Cloud feel like he’d already been victorious.

“Alright, go ahead.”

“Well, let’s see. I know for sure that your first time seeing the ocean was one of them,” he said. The memory of that morning was so clear now that his mind wasn’t clouded with delusion and he found himself falling in love all over again with the fresh-faced Tifa of years ago. Recalling her laughter, her unbidden excitement and the way she flounced like a child through the surf gave him hope that with his help, she could once again be as she was then. “The second one…is the time you tore the skirt your dress when it got stuck in a sticker bush and we laughed until we couldn’t breathe.”

“The first one was right, but not the other,” Tifa answered. “The night we traded our darkest secrets in the ShinRA mansion is the second: I think that was the moment I learned that I could truly trust you with anything and everything. That time you rescued me and my broken ankle in the train station was the third.”

“Hey, now! You didn’t give me a full five minutes,” Cloud said in mock protest. “Why would you be so fond of the memory of your broken ankle? You were so terrified and upset that it had me feeling guilty over bringing you to Midgar in the first place.”

“I guess it was the way you took control of the situation and carried me home. It made me remember just how big of a comfort you were to me in that unfamiliar place,” she said, smiling sweetly at the memory. Tifa looked up at him and winked playfully. “You were so macho! My very own hero swept in to protect me and literally sweep me off my feet.”

“You don’t have to try and flatter me.”

Finally, Cloud succeeded in igniting one of the matches in time for Tifa to watch the bashful flush
of his cheeks and ears. Once the lantern was re-lit, she resumed her place beside him, snuggling into his warmth as the hiss of the rain began to lighten.

“What about your three favorites? I’ll make a guess and then you tell me the rest.”

“That’s fair.”

She propped her fist underneath her chin as she thought, prompting a smile to form on Cloud’s lips. The way her eyebrows drew together and her lips were close to a pout made him sit back and revel in just how cute his wife was. As Cloud took in her features, he knew that nothing again would make him forget just how much he loved her. Every one of his fondest memories had Tifa in it and he wouldn’t have it any other way.

“Well, I know it wasn’t the marathon train, boat and car rides when we were traveling to Midgar,” she tittered softly, grinning when he rolled his eyes at her little joke. “How about the night you came home from Midgar? Our embrace was pretty epic before you asked me to marry you.”

“Oh course you picked one of the most obvious,” Cloud teased with a rare, toothy smile. “But yes, that is one of them. The comfort of being in your arms again after all that time apart was overwhelming, and in that moment I knew that all of my struggling hadn’t been for nothing. My best friend was going to be my wife.”

“Do you still feel like we are best friends?”

“Yes,” he answered without hesitation. “We just have a bit of catching up to do.”

Satisfied with his answer, she leaned more of her weight against him. Cloud watched her sweet little smile out of the corner of his eye and cherished the bubbling joy that came from the knowledge that he alone had put it there.

“So what else?” Tifa asked quietly.

The thunder’s roar was now dull and distant as the rain began to subside. The insects, which had eagerly waited for their turn to rejoin the soundtrack of the night, began to sing in the darkness. Cloud let go of Tifa’s hand to wrap his around her shoulder and pull her close. With a pleased little sigh, she settled back against him.

“Remember how I was always so sick in the winter when I was young?”

“Oh course. I always felt so bad because you could never come out to play.”

“I spent so many evenings laid up in bed. My mom was always around, but for some reason I still felt so alone. But then I’d hear you practicing piano with your mother and remember that you were right next door. Knowing that you cared about me and were near made my loneliness fade away.”

“I never knew you could hear that!” Tifa cupped her hands to her cheeks with embarrassment. “I was so bad until I was probably seven or eight.”

“It was perfect, Tifa. It lulled by tired body to sleep and made me feel relaxed. Mom used to get angry with me for falling asleep on the window seat with my cheek pressed against the glass. I couldn’t see into your room from that angle, but I could see the light through the glass. Those were some of the most peaceful memories I have.”

“It’s funny how you can make such an enormous impact on someone’s life and be completely oblivious to it.”
Cloud was quiet for a moment. “Do you think Zack was oblivious?”

“No, I just think he was humble about it,” Tifa said with confidence. “What’s the last one?”

Cloud knew that he had two choices. He could tell the truth or he could lie and think of some other pleasant memory to avoid any uncomfortable conversation. Briefly, he struggled with the remnants of doubt and fear that had stubbornly held fast in his heart, but he ultimately resigned to be honest with his wife. Lowering his eyes to the floor, he spoke, and Tifa could feel tension growing in his shoulders.

“The last one was that day we found out we were going to be parents.”

Discovering that he was going to be a father had blindsided the sixteen-year-old at the time. Excitement and paralyzing fear had swirled inside his giddy heart when the nurse shared the results of Tifa’s blood test that day, and he’d never forget how his wife had stared back at him with the same bewildered look and infectious smile. This was his big chance: the chance to share the abundant love that overflowed inside him with another human being, the chance to give him and Tifa another blood relative, and the chance to prove to himself and the world that he could meet the material and emotional needs of his family. Growing up without a father had been so hard and it left Cloud with many insecurities about being a parent and the head of a household. But it also had lit a fire within him to be the absolute best he could be for his wife and their children. Fear had held him in its icy claws back then like it did now, but he felt ashamed that his past self possessed courage that Cloud couldn’t seem to muster now.

He looked at Tifa, watching with a lump of emotion in his throat as she slowly turned her gaze toward him.

“We were both so excited,” she whispered, choosing to smile at the memory. “We were in a sort of quiet daze on the train ride home and started laughing and grinning like kids once we reached the apartment.”

“I just…I felt so connected to you. I felt like we were such a strong unit and I want to feel that way again,” Cloud said, letting his weariness bleed into his voice. “Tifa…pursuing you was the greatest and most rewarding risk I have ever taken. Before anything else happens, I want you to know that I’ll always pursue you. I see you struggling to come to terms with everything that’s happened. It’s okay to need time and space for that sort of thing. Just…please don’t ever think that you’re alone.”

She turned to take in the sight of him—with his anxious expression and rain-speckled hair. How blessed she was that her lover had returned to her after she’d lost all hope. Tifa wanted him to feel secure in her loyalty, her love, and her opinion of him. In an attempt to soothe his anxiety, she exhaled in a soft, humming sound.

“Thank you, Cloud. I didn’t feel alone when we were kids and I don’t feel alone now. Just knowing you were right next door always made me think I could withstand whatever my dad dealt out,” she said, clutching her knees tightly against her chest. “I’ve been a little quiet and strange, I know. I think I just need a little time to adjust, just like you must need. And that’s okay—we’re okay.”

Not long ago, Cloud had looked at his wife and saw an unsolvable puzzle. Now, it felt like the winding labyrinth of her heart had suddenly turned into a straight line, with hope and peace and comfort waiting at the end. How long had he chosen to stay in place? How much time had he wasted wallowing in uncertainty? Not this time. Stepping forward was his choice and his alone; no one could make it for him, and standing still had only resulted in further isolation and misery. Despite lingering doubt, he’d run to the finish line and embrace whatever he found there. It would
be alright, because she’d be at his side. If something happened and he was to fail, Cloud knew with confidence that Tifa would help him to his feet once again.

“I can’t believe that you’ve seen the dark side of my heart and still love me just the same.” A smile broke across his face as he spoke, for he’d expended so much effort to dodging arrows from his past for what seemed like forever. Now, he could relax in the confidence of safety in her heart. “It makes me feel invincible.”

“You practically are invincible, mako-man,” Tifa giggled. She poked him in the ribs and it made him jump.

“Don’t call me that ever again.”

She pressed a quick, unexpected kiss to his cheek and Cloud drew in a surprised breath. He’d spent so much time wondering what his life would look like if it were better. What a relief it was to realize that happiness can be found wherever life happened to take him. Outside, the first trace of morning light was starting to show through the little window on the far wall. A new day was beginning, certain to bring with it new challenges and new problems. But instead of discouraging him, Cloud let it light a fire in his bones. At last, dawn was breaking inside him as well. Instead of letting fear take hold, he chose to be joyful.

With a great yawn, Tifa tucked her face into the crook of his neck and he was happy that she couldn’t see the warm blush creeping over his face. Their mutual trust was returning steadily; there was no need to rush. As the sky grew lighter and lighter, so did the crushing weight of the burdens upon his shoulders.

It wasn’t always easy to distinguish between ends and beginnings. Conclusions do not always hurt, and starting afresh may not always feel entirely happy. Letting go brings peace and turns the tide toward the future. Perhaps happiness is to be found in the journey uphill and not only in the fleeting sense of satisfaction waiting at the next peak. It felt so good to walk on his own two feet instead of cowering and letting fate push him along.

Much of happiness is hope, and Cloud would never again let it go.
The plume of smoke rose high into the dry, summer air.

It was a quarter past eleven in the morning, but everyone had stopped going about their duties to stand on the grassy hill just outside the village gate. There had been no rain in May, nor in June, July or August. The drought had been a peculiar phenomenon for Nibelheim, for their geographic location usually experienced mild, rainy summers. Now in the first week of September, no rumble of thunder had ever been accompanied by precipitation since late April. Every creek near to the village had long dried up and hauling water all the way from the shrinking river was difficult and time consuming, so Mayor Taylor had arranged for a water truck to come twice a month to help the villagers sustain their homes, gardens and livestock. It had been enough for the residents of the village, but the surrounding woodland received no such relief.

A forest fire had erupted miles and miles away, eating away at the base of the neighboring mountain. Cloud stood in a cluster with the rest of his school mates. Mrs. Nelson had paused their lesson so that they could join the rest of Nibelheim to watch the distant blaze, but the boy found himself too busy watching the worried faces of the adults. The other boys verbally expressed their awe for the spectacle and Cloud felt as if their excitement was childish and narrow-minded. Although he was only thirteen, Mom said he had the mind of an old man. Cloud wasn’t certain what she meant by that, but he knew that he was very different from his peers in almost every way. Their constant rejection made that fact unbearably clear.

Thinking of his mother, his head swiveled around to look for her.

It didn’t take Cloud long to spot her blonde ponytail and brightly colored apron at the edge of the crowd. What would happen to them if the fire came here? Where would they go? His mother once told him that they hadn’t always lived here in the mountains, but he didn’t remember calling any other place home. They rarely had the gil to stock their pantry and ice box each week. How would they be able to afford to move to another place if Nibelheim burned? Why weren’t any of the other kids concerned about this? Maybe he really was a freak. At least Tifa didn’t mind.

Cloud’s eyes widened and his spine straightened when he realized he hadn’t seen his best friend among the spectators. Come to think of it, he hadn’t seen her father, either. In fact, Tifa hadn’t met him before school yesterday or come to sew with Mom after dinner. What a horrible friend he was not to have noticed until now! Dread pierced his belly, taking hold of him as he feared the worst. Slowly, he began to weave his way through the crowd, wondering if he was a fool for wanting to trespass upon the Lockhart property. For as long as Cloud could remember, Brian had harbored an intense resentment for both him and his mother. Imagining an encounter with Tifa’s father was enough to send his fledgling courage scampering for the hills, but he decided that it was a risk he was willing to take.

He had just broken free from the crowd when he saw her in his periphery. Tifa’s long black hair was smooth like silk, cascading gracefully over her shoulders; her bangs were unkempt and were starting to obscure her vision. There were tiny holes along the hem of her ill-fitting, knee length frock. Cloud guessed that she’d been on her way home from collecting kindling for the stove and had come to see what all the fuss was about. A smile split his face at this sight of his best friend, then dissolved when he came close enough to see the sullen look upon her features. Her large, doe eyes were moist and her face was pale as she nervously clutched at the shoulder strap of her stick-filled satchel.

A million scenarios ran through Cloud’s head about what had gone on in the Lockhart home in the
past day or two to make his friend look so forlorn and hopeless. The injustice was enough to make
his blood boil and his heart break for the girl who meant more to him than anything else in his life.
He wanted to scream in despair and anger or tell her that she didn’t deserve to feel this way, but
instead the boy wrapped his arm around her shoulders in silent comradery.

It wasn’t long before the crowd began to disperse and his teacher called her students back to class.
With a gentle rub of his palm on her back and a few comforting words, Cloud moved to follow the
call. But Tifa grabbed his hand and met his eyes with a pleading stare, making his heart lurch
painfully in his chest. He felt a folded piece of paper in her hand and it took him a moment to
realize that she was giving it to him. After grabbing the paper and reassuring her that he’d find her
after school, Cloud rushed back to the schoolhouse.

The other children were riled up from the sight of the forest fire, chattering loudly and avoiding
sitting in their seats. Cloud took the opportunity to hunch at his desk and open Tifa’s note as
discreetly as possible—the last thing he needed was for his bullies to gain more ammo to harass
him with. With sturdy hands and a lump in his throat, he opened the creased paper in his lap. What
was it she wanted to tell him? Would she let him know why he hadn’t seen her in a few days or
what her father had said to keep her from even going to her lessons with Master Zangan? Instead
of the paragraph he expected, there was only one little line of text.

‘Do you love me?’

… … …

Slowly, weary blue eyes squinted open in the darkness. Without the help of a digital clock on the
bedside table, it would’ve been impossible to know what time it was and it brought back vague
flashbacks of living in the perpetual darkness of the Midgar slums. Carefully, as not to disturb Tifa,
Cloud rolled over in their bunk to see how early his anxious mind had made him rise.

5:27 am

It was a tempting thought to roll back over and snuggle into Tifa’s welcoming form and he wished
they had the freedom to lay about all day, basking in the miracle that was their reunion. But there
was so much to be done. If all went well, they’d have plenty of time for that later. Cloud paused
momentarily to take in the sight of her sleeping peacefully before kissing the top of her head. His
boots were always right beside his bed—a behavior beaten into him during his time in the military.
Pulling them over his socks and lacing them tight, Cloud drew in a deep and steady breath. He
stood, took the satchel of materia off the nightstand and quietly exited the Highwind’s sleeping
quarters.

He blinked to adjust to the brightly lit interior of the hallway. It seemed like everyone else was still
asleep, for his enhanced hearing only picked up the idle humming and whirring of the airship’s
machinery. AVALANCHE had been traveling around the world rapidly and without pause with the
help of the Highwind. Together, they’d traveled underwater in a submarine and into space via
Cid’s rocket. They’d retrieved Bugenhagen from Cosmo Canyon and used his wisdom to
understand the power of Holy and the Aerith’s white materia in the Forgotten City. They fought
against Diamond Weapon as it marched toward Midgar and stood in awe as Junon’s canon
dispelled the protective force field around Sephiroth’s dwelling place in the Northern Crater.
Cloud wasn’t sure how many days had passed in all this madness, but he did know that his team
was exhausted, and they had every right to sleep until a respectable time.

Stepping into the grand cockpit, he took in an awed breath at the view through the enormous
windows. Dawn had just begun to break above the distant mountains on the horizon, long shadows
stretching between the paths made by the rays of the morning sun. He reached out and put his hands against the glass with his fingers splayed, like a child looking into a toy store. Brilliant orange was breaking through, chasing away the darkness ushering in a new chance to move forward. Lips curving into a smile, Cloud let the simple beauty lift his spirit. He’d fallen out of love with life and he wanted so much to change that. His heart had once been hardened like a stone; it would take some time to get back what was taken, but he’d embrace the journey.

The peaceful smile faded quickly from his face when he sensed another presence nearby, catching him off guard. He spun around, expecting to see Vincent, for he was the only member of their crew who was so socially peculiar that he rarely announced his comings or goings. But when Cloud looked behind him, no one was there. Holding his breath, he slowly scanned the cockpit with his eyes. He was ashamed when he realized that he’d been looking at the wrong height, for curled miserably under the broad counter of the control panel was Nanaki. He was sitting upright, though slouched forward, his drooping mane obscuring half of his face as he peeked at the blonde. Cloud felt his whole body go slack at the sight.

“Hey,” he whispered. Slowly crossing the space between them, Cloud crouched before his friend. “Are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” he replied, though his entire disposition said otherwise. “I’m just…still trying to process Grandpa’s death.”

Cloud felt that familiar yawning sadness ripple through him, for AVALANCHE had been so busy that they hadn’t had the time to properly mourn Bugenhagen’s passing. Aerith’s death had crippled them all, for each party member had come to know her deeply. But Nanaki was the only one who knew Cosmo Canyon’s patriarch closely and Cloud couldn’t imagine how alone he must’ve felt in his grief. Although it was hardly only his fault, he couldn’t help but assume personal accountability for this emotional neglect. Had he really been that blind to his suffering? Cloud was usually quite watchful over his companions, for as the leader he felt like their welfare was his responsibility. Somehow, quiet, pensive Nanaki had slipped through his fingers and he hadn’t even noticed.

“I’m sorry, Nanaki,” Cloud apologized, remorse dripping from his voice. “Things have been so crazy that I didn’t even remember to check on how you were doing. That’s pretty terrible of me.”

He hoped that his body language would soften into something less forlorn, that he’d crack some sort of joke about Cloud’s memory issues or something. But Nanaki just remained where he was, ears pinned back against his head and neck lowered submissively. It was then that Cloud realized just how selfish his thought process had been this whole time. Instinctually, his place as group leader made him strive to make sure his party was adequately fed and had a somewhat comfortable place to sleep. He’d been so absorbed in the issues within his marriage and frazzled mind that everyone else’s emotional needs were put on the backburner. Each one of the members of AVALANCHE had been walking on a long, hard road, and shame washed over Cloud when he realized that he’d been willingly blind to that consideration.

The friction with ShinRA and the constant looming threat of the meteor had frayed everyone’s fragile minds to an extent, embedding an innate undercurrent of fear among them that no one seemed willing to discuss. Though Nanaki had been alive for more than twice the number of years that Cloud had, he learned from Bugenhagen that he was still quite young in the context of the longevity of his species. He was about the same age that Cloud was when his mother died, and his heart bled for Nanaki who was scrambling to come to terms with his ‘grandfather’s’ passing in the midst of such a chaotic time.
In that moment, Cloud wished more than anything that Tifa was there with him. She always seemed to fill AVALANCHE’s need for a mothering, comforting type of person. What would she do right now? Would encouraging Nanaki to talk about Bugenhagen only make him feel worse? Should he place a comforting hand on his back? Would changing the subject make things less awkward for both of them or would it seem uncaring? Panic swirled around in Cloud’s head. He was definitely over thinking this, wasn’t he? Long, emotional discussions was something that his heart usually ran screaming from, for expressing himself verbally and offering any sort of advice was never something he’d been any good at.

“Want to help me?” Cloud offered, hoping to coax him out from under the control panel. “I need to sort through our materia and decide who gets what today.”

“Of course.”

Cloud slowly ambled to the open area in the middle of the room, unceremoniously plopping himself down on the floor. He was encouraged by the sound of paws obediently following him, but he soon began to fret. Was he too dismissive of Nanaki’s admission? Why was this so hard?

“You can tell me what you’re feeling,” Cloud fumbled, feeling clumsy with his speech. “I mean, I may not have anything helpful to offer in the way of advice, but I don’t want you to feel alone.”

His voice sounded weak as it wavered into the still air of the cockpit, showcasing his feelings of inadequacy with this sort of thing. Awkwardly, Cloud passed the satchel from one hand to the other in his lap, the materia knocking together each time with a clack. Nanaki sat down beside him: close enough to feel his fur tickling his bicep.

“I can’t get the image of my father out of my mind,” Nanaki admitted, his head still lowered in shame. “He’ll be stuck there forever, hardened into stone. It makes me sick to think of how long I’ve slandered his name.”

Cloud nodded quietly, staring blankly at his lap as he processed the words. This journey had taught them all just how closely life and death are intertwined. Life was so much more than being alive. It was more than letting time and circumstances carry you from your starting place to your ending place, like a train hopelessly stuck on its tracks. It was individual action that made change possible—that was what AVALANCHE was trying to do.

“How easy and simple it seemed when he worded it like that. And yet—there’s more to healing than a simple recognition of the truth. Tifa had been pretty aloof since their eyes had been opened in the Lifestream. It was a part of her healing process. Cloud knew that it would be alright in the end and she would come around when she was ready. He’d begun to push back against his guilt, raging against the doubt and sadness that ate him away from the inside. How difficult it was to know how badly he’d messed up when they were reunited. Chasing after her, proving how much she mattered to him, and telling her of the abundant joy she beckoned in his heart should’ve been his top priority. Dropping that ball was one of his biggest mistakes, but he wasn’t going to dwell on it. Instead, Cloud was going to push forward and fan the small flame of confidence that burned in his belly. Maybe he could model that progressive behavior for his friend?

Nanaki seemed to be internalizing his words quietly. The tip of his tail was swishing lazily to each side, the flame dancing this way and that. Carefully, Cloud emptied the bag of materia on the floor. He corralled the little spheres together with his hands, but they periodically rolled back and forth a bit with the lazy, rhythmic lilt of the airship.
It was difficult for Cloud to constantly fret over the fate of his crew and to know that there was no way he could ascertain their survival or victory. But there was a small relief in knowing that he chose this responsibility—the others didn’t hold him accountable for their wellbeing. What was rewarding and encouraging was that fact that when things got hard, the rag-tag members of AVALANCHE held each other up. Despite a few minor squabbles and their relational imperfections, they were the closest thing he’d had to a ‘family’. Perhaps, in the end, he didn’t have to be perfect at providing counsel or comfort to be a place of solace for a weary heart.

“It isn’t realistic to just snap out of this, is it?” Nanaki asked. “I feel as if I’m wasting energy by letting myself feel sorrow and shame. But when I think about leaving it all behind, it feels like abandoning the memory of my parents and my grandfather.”

This was a concept Cloud understood well. Guilt had stripped him of any confidence, like a lion without its teeth, and he’d been fumbling along the road of life since. Just as Nanaki struggled with the memory of Seto, Cloud struggled to remember his daughter without paralyzing remorse riding in on her coattails. He found that when he allowed these negative feelings to poison her memory, he voluntarily rejected remembering her at all due to his self-disgust. He had faced the guilt surrounding his role in Zack’s death and painstakingly explained it all to Mr. and Mrs. Fair. Why was it so hard for him to face his daughter’s death, embrace the beauty of the impact she left on him and Tifa and step forward with assurance? Aria was a blessed hope—a treasured gift—whose honor shouldn’t be voluntarily smothered.

“Since all of this madness began, I’ve been struggling with guilt, too. There are so many things constantly gnawing away at me. Guilt serves no purpose and yet I kept allowing it to hold me down,” Cloud said, placing an ‘all’ materia into one of the open spaces on Tifa’s fighting gloves. “I don’t want to be that way anymore. I don’t want to watch you fall into that trap, too.”

Quietly, they sat side by side for a few moments: like two offbeat drums looking to get back in step with a productive, positive rhythm. Defeating doubt required them to rage against it, despite the temptation to passively ignore the destruction that it would inflict upon their hearts.

“Wisdom is born from uncertainty, questioning and confusion,” Nanaki said, sounding mature. “At least, that’s what Grandpa used to say. It’s hard not to find something you despise about yourself, but I guess self-evaluation is necessary to grow and change for the better.”

“That’s right. Making peace with yourself and your flaws is key,” Cloud replied. He looked over at Nanaki, making eye contact. “I’m still learning how to do that, but I’m going to keep trying. Will you?”

“Yes, I will. There is no other reasonable perspective.”

Satisfied with this answer, Cloud exhaled slowly. The ‘XIII’ tattoo on Nanaki’s leg was glaring in his peripheral vision. Upon closer inspection, he realized it wasn’t a tattoo at all, but a brand in the animal’s skin. Understanding that this was only one of the probable many painful things that Hojo subjected him to made his heart pang uncomfortably. They really weren’t so different, were they?

“For days, I’ve been plagued by the question: how do I honor my father’s legacy?” Nanaki asked, more to himself than to Cloud. “Then I realized, I honor his legacy by taking what I learned from the way he lived his life and use it to shape the way I go on living mine.”

“That’s right.”

“I’ll protect Cosmo Canyon. I’ll protect life. I’ll protect peace.”
“You’re brave, Nanaki. I wish I had that strength.”

With a sort of crooked smile, he looked Cloud right in the eye. “Perhaps you are overvaluing what you don’t have and undervaluing what you do.”

Perspective is powerful; changing it changes everything. Cloud smiled back at his friend, for he was reminded once again to count his blessings instead of his flaws. He was not the only one who had suffered, nor was he the only one struggling. Cloud and Tifa’s dream to live an ordinary life, like any ordinary person, must have been the vain dream of countless others. Fate had stolen that from them long ago, but did that really mean that they couldn’t find happiness and fulfillment? It was meaningless to constantly question everything: his action or inaction, the ‘what-if’s, and the things of the past. What mattered was the future.

Nanaki was so young, yet tried so hard to act as if he was an adult. He was rushing the process of maturing and putting forth a façade as Cloud once had, but it had escaped his notice until he found him cowering like a frightened child here in the cockpit. False personas were dangerous and he’d never want Nanaki to make the same mistakes he once did. However, his friend’s determination was encouraging.

“What would you say I’m undervaluing?”

“Your experience, your kindness, your comprehension of life,” Nanaki said matter-of-factly. When Cloud looked at him dubiously, he followed his statement up with a question. “I’ll let you prove it to yourself: what are the most important lessons you’ve learned about discovering who you are?”

A pensive silence hung heavily in the air as the blonde pondered the question. He continued slowly sorting the materia into several piles—one for each party member, Nanaki assumed. After a while, the four legged beast began to wonder whether or not his friend had heard his question in the first place. He was about to ask again when the other finally opened his mouth.

“Pay attention to your words and follow up with your actions. Note your errors and strive to correct them,” Cloud thought aloud. He was startled by the hidden wealth of knowledge within him. “Take aim against the sea of troubles in your life—it’s the only way to find any sort of protection from the tragedies you’ll confront along the way. Specify your destination and chart your course forward.”

“See? You sound like a wise old man!”

“If I didn’t glean something from all the craziness in my life, then it would’ve just been meaningless suffering and wasted time.” A dry chuckle forced its way out of Cloud’s throat. “It was almost that way. There was almost nothing left of me.”

“What do you mean?”

Cloud’s expression hardened briefly as he gathered his thoughts, placing a ‘fire’ and an ‘elemental’ materia in front of Nanaki.

“One summer when I was a kid, a giant forest fire swept past a neighboring mountain. We were all enraptured with the scary might of the fire, so my teacher used it as a learning opportunity. She said that forest fires burn out deadwood and return trapped elements to the soil. Sometimes, however, fires are suppressed, artificially. That does not stop the deadwood from accumulating. Sooner or later, a fire will start. When it does, it will burn so hot that everything will be destroyed—even the soil in which the forest grows.”
Nanaki looked at him questioningly before swapping the ‘fire’ materia he was given out for an ‘earth’ one.

Amused by the animal’s preference, Cloud continued. “Agnosticizing over what my absence did to my family, the guilt, the shame, the sadness over the death of people I loved, my feelings of inadequacy...they’re all deadwood in my heart—building and building. I don’t want to give opportunity for all of it to destroy me.”

“Taking on one at a time is like setting little fires, isn’t it? It’ll keep everything manageable.”

“Yeah. Now you know what happens to a man when the deadwood builds up,” Cloud fixed his friend with a sad smile as he reached over to pluck the Adaman clip out of his mane. “Don’t be like me, Nanaki.”

“But I want to be like you,” he retorted, feeling Cloud’s self-analysis was unjust. “You are a protector, even if you were going about it the wrong way. You kept walking forward even though you weren’t sure of yourself. I want to be like that.”

“But every step I took was poisoned with empty pride or a sense of revenge, not the desire for a better future. I wish I could’ve been more like Aerith. She didn’t know what was going to happen any more than the rest of us did, but she was filled with joy anyway. She didn’t worry about how we would get somewhere or how we would reach our goals, she just trusted that everything would be alright.”

Skilled fingers placed Nanaki’s chosen pair of materia into the empty spaces on his clip, along with a ‘sense’, ‘cover’ and ‘barrier’.

“The things we saw and felt with Grandpa in the Forgotten City...I haven’t been able to get them out of my head,” Nanaki said, mystique in his tone. “Why do I feel as if Aerith is still here with us?”

For a brief moment, Cloud froze. All this time he thought he was crazy—or at least the only one with a strange sort of sixth sense. The feeling that the Cetra wasn’t truly gone from their presence was something he assumed was the effect of guilt warping his brain or the overthinking the circumstances of her death. Mako eyes flew to meet Nanaki’s.

“You feel that way, too?”

“Yes. It’s a feeling much different from when we were passing through the tunnels and I sensed the spirits of the Gi Tribe. I don’t feel the presence of an apparition or anything like that. It’s like a sort of calm understanding...an omnipresence. I may sound like a fool, but I am telling the truth. Is it impossible for us to carry on what Aerith tried to accomplish?”

Cloud brought a thoughtful fist to his chin, eyes distant as he thought. “Do you think Aerith did what she did on purpose?”

Nanaki cocked his head as he waited for an explanation.

“Think about it: she ran off knowing that she had no chance to defeat Sephiroth physically. She would have gone with us. When I gave Sephiroth the black materia, she said that she was the only one who could stop him. But why would she have gone alone? There was no reason for that.”

“There’s still a piece missing to this story that we might yet find. I’m sure Grandpa is asking her the same question in the Lifestream right now.”

The thought made Cloud smile. There was something comforting about the concept of the
Lifestream—that maybe Aerith was happy and the deceased members of AVALANCHE were resting after their hard lives. Perhaps Dyne had found his peace, Brian and Lia Lockhart had been reunited, and his mother had run into his father’s waiting arms. And what about little Aria? Was that tiny baby resting comfortably in the tender embrace of her grandparents? Did she feel their affection and know that her parents on Gaia loved her, too? Not a single day went by that he didn’t think about his daughter; the memory of her peaceful little face haunted him like nothing else ever had. He was a father, still, though it wasn’t exactly the way he had expected fatherhood to be. It was time to accept it and embrace it. Maybe that was the final piece to this puzzle that kept him from shirking off his guilt and burning away his deadwood. No longer would he push her away because he was afraid of the pain of her loss.

“I know you miss your Grandfather, but you won’t be apart forever. One day, you’ll be reunited. And not just with him—but with your mother and father, too. Whenever it’s time to leave this world, we can rest knowing our loved ones are waiting for us.”

“That’s right. I’m going to honor my mother, my father and my grandfather,” Nanaki sat up straight, spine stiffening with inspiration. “I will not be afraid.”

“That’s it,” Cloud smiled, affectionately pulling on one of the feathers tied into his friend’s mane. “If you can do it, I guess I can, too.”

Materia now in place in the Adaman clip, Cloud returned it to its rightful place behind Nanaki’s ear and sat back to admire how regal it made him look. The animal barely seemed to notice, for his sharp gaze was on the collection of colored spheres before them. He frowned, as if deep in thought, before opening his mouth to speak.

“Cloud—“

“What are you weirdos doing in my cockpit with all the materia?” asked Cid, his gruff voice breaking through the tranquility of the moment. “You look like kids playing a game of marbles.”

Startled, Cloud moved to stand as the pilot entered the room. “Nanaki was helping me divide up materia for each of us in our battles today.”

“And making sure Yuffie was keeping good on her promise not to keep any of them for herself,” Nanaki added, suspiciously eyeing their collection.

The smell of smoke wafted by as Cid passed, a freshly lit cigarette between his teeth and a mug of black tea in his hand. He flopped in the pilot’s chair and slouched forward as he checked the navigation display and various gauges and monitors.

“Eh, I wouldn’t worry. She’s so spent from puking her guts out that I doubt she’d know a piece of materia from a hole in the ground. She’s passed out in her bunk.”

“Is that why?” Nanaki asked, mirth in his voice. “Or is it because you ‘mercifully’ cast sleep on her?”

Cid momentarily stopped punching the keys of the control panel to smirk at his friends. “What makes ya accuse me of that, Red?”

“Simple. We are missing our ‘sleep’ materia.”

Cloud was ashamed that he hadn’t noticed.

“Damn, you caught me,” Cid moaned, throwing up his hands in defeat. He dug into his pocket to
fish out the missing piece. “Are ya really surprised after all of her hollerin’ and complainin’ last night? You should be thanking me!”

He tossed the materia at Cloud, who caught it easily and laughed. Both the meteor and their problems still weighed upon their hearts, but leaning on each other made everything much more bearable. They could not standstill because the world keeps on turning. Each day gave way to the next and its stories must be folded, tucked away like children’s clothes: outgrown, cherished and never quite forgotten. Change was everywhere. It was in the departure of old faces and the arrival of new ones and in both new tears and joys alike. Yet the circle of love was never broken, but ever expanded outward.

And as Cloud watched Nanaki stand up straight with pride and strength in his previously shriveled posture, the unstoppable power of a well-forged bond was apparent. Each member of AVALANCHE was from a different walk of life, but in the end, they weren’t very different at all. Every last one of them craved a sense of love, belonging and purpose. It would’ve been easy to submit to panic and fear as they questioned their ability to save Gaia as it faced its possible demise, for how small and helpless they seemed against such a grand problem! But instead, Cloud chose to rest in the love that bound them together against impossible odds.

For love bears all things, hopes all things and endures all things. And love never ends.
She knew they couldn’t stay long.

It was late afternoon by the time the Highwind had come to rest outside the little village of Nibelheim. Tifa knew it wasn’t practical, for time was short enough as it was, but she couldn’t help but beg to spend an hour or two in her hometown. It seemed selfish and wasteful of her, but the expected protests and complaints from her teammates never came. Perhaps her quiet reflection over the past week or two had made her friends pity her, for she hadn’t been truly melancholy but hadn’t really been herself, either. She was fine; everything was okay. But in spite of all of the newly found hope in her life, Tifa still felt like a half-filled tire. She still carried out her tasks, just without the gusto she’d hoped for.

Perhaps all she needed was some inspiration.

That familiar, sinking feeling returned as soon as her boots touched the cobblestone of town square. Cloud stood beside her while everyone else remained on the aircraft, holding her hand and glancing this way and that. His wandering eyes betrayed his unease; after discovering what had happened to him in Nibelheim’s ShinRA mansion, Tifa couldn’t blame him. While she knew that he wouldn’t ask her why she felt the need to take this little detour, she still wished she had an answer to give. The truth was that Tifa had been lost for a long time. Wasn’t it natural for her feet to ache to wander somewhere familiar?

There wasn’t a soul out and about. Her grand collection of memories told her that at this hour, there should be the scent of various home cooked dinners in the air as children were called in from their games to eat. Mr. Nelson, the blacksmith, could usually be heard stubbornly clanking away at his latest project until his wife came to his workshop to fetch him. There usually was a gaggle of old women chatting outside the tavern and the laughter of middle aged men in the air as they made their way home from their jobs. Flustered mothers were taking laundry off the line before rushing inside to check the food left simmering on their stoves. But now, all was still, and it seemed that she and Cloud were alone.

Now that Tifa knew what had happened to her hometown, it became apparent that there were only a handful of people here. They were most likely ShinRA employees, brought in to cover up the carnage of Sephiroth’s rampage. She doubted these people knew how to survive brutal mountain winters or had the skill to manage a garden with the area’s unique, moist summer climate. Did they know the steep mountain trails like the back of their hands? Had they walked the dozens of forest paths?

Gently, she tugged on Cloud’s hand and began to walk toward her old house, each step provoking one memory or another to flood forward. The spinning weathervane atop the water tower reminded Tifa of sneaking out for secret talks with Cloud as they perched atop the structure in the middle of the night. The distinct, earthy scent of the late afternoon air reminded her of sitting curled in her mother’s lap on their back porch as they watched the stars come out, one by one. And when Tifa climbed the small staircase to the front door of the house that was once her home, she paused as her heart brought forth a detailed memory from long ago.

She remembered sitting alone on that step at eight years old, still reeling from the death of her mother and recovering from her week-long coma. A rare visitor who happened to be passing through walked by and noticed her there on the stoop. Tifa had been so busy watching the other children play in the square that she hadn’t noticed the stranger approaching, for if she had, her newfound shyness would’ve urged her to flee back inside to hide. The man smiled, tipped his hat
and gave her a round red candy. More than a decade later, she remembered clearly the joy she felt then.

“Are you alright?”

Shaken from her reverie, Tifa looked back at Cloud, whose hand still firmly grasped hers.

As she looked into his eyes, Tifa realized that it wasn’t just children who were deeply touched by unexpected joy brought to them by others. Everyone was. Her mother used to tell her time and time again that kindness was such a wonderful medicine, and she found that when she was the recipient of it, she was unable to forget it. Doing something kind for another never resulted in a negative feeling and it fostered a spirit of altruism and selflessness. Cloud watched her carefully, a protective look in those beautiful eyes, and it made her remember just how much he’d suffered from the foolish prejudice of Nibelheim when they were children. Would human beings ever learn to cooperate and care for one another? What a lovely place to live Gaia would be if only the ugliness of the human heart could vanish. If people could let affection and kindness rise above their sinful nature, which envied those better off and scorned those who were less fortunate, so much undue suffering could be avoided.

Swallowing hard, she nodded and leaned in to kiss his forehead. “I’m okay. Everything’s okay.”

His shoulders relaxed a little, then, and Tifa smiled softly. Last time, being back in Nibelheim had beckoned forth such an ugly, hostile side of her. But this time, she let the assault of memories bring fondness for her husband flooding forth. The trauma and heartache they’d been through had only served to highlight just how unbreakable their bond was and Tifa found herself mourning the fact that she wouldn’t have the chance to raise Aria with this broken, imperfect, wonderful man. But if one day, they were brave enough to have another child, Tifa would refuse to let a day go by where she didn’t rejoice that invaluable gift.

Together, they’d teach their children that if they felt glad when they were given a piece of candy, then they in turn should give something good to others. Having an intricate understanding of the burning sting of rejection and cruelty of others would make them the perfect ones to teach their sons or daughters to value all life and practice the kindness they’d pined for all their lives. A child’s heart is a blank sheet. Tifa knew without any doubt that Cloud would help her fill that sheet with patience, understanding and benevolence.

He didn’t let go of her hand as she opened the front door and slowly stepped inside. Everything was exactly as it had been the last time she came here, leaving practicality behind as she searched for any trace of her father. Now, Tifa was certain he was gone, and yet her foolish heart had returned once again. Looking back on her strained relationship with Papa with an adult’s perspective, logic told her that his anger and resentment were not her fault. He was broken in an irreparable way by her mother’s death. Years of failed attempts to soften him had been all the proof any rational person would need to understand that nothing would be enough to inspire Brian to move forward. Growing up in this sort of environment should have made her wise, but instead she still found herself wracking her brain for anything she had been doing wrong back in those days. Why was it that her mind understood her blamelessness, yet her soul did not?

She wished there was some way to exchange human hearts for new ones, for Tifa would’ve exchanged hers in the space of a breath. Yet for all her vain hopes, she was incapable of doing anything for herself.

Everything was kept immaculately clean, just as it had been last time. There were no cobwebs, no dust on the furniture and no shoe scuffs on the hardwood. The cleanliness highlighted the fact that there was no sign of anyone actually living in this house, and Tifa didn’t know whether to feel sad
or relieved. Turning toward the staircase, she let go of her husband’s hand.

“Cloud, do you think I could go into my room alone?”

Despite the confusion on his features, he nodded. “Of course. I’ll wait down here.”

After thanking him, she let herself float up the stairs, down the hallway and into the space that used to be her bedroom. It used to be so much more than just a room: it had been her sanctuary from Papa’s furies and the place from which she felt safe to dream. When Mama was alive, her room had been the place where they’d laughed and bonded over countless hours of piano practice. She’d cried so many tears in her bed, hoping that the next day would bring new promises and second chances. But now, her treasured place had become foreign, and for some reason it was such a hard truth to swallow. Tifa let her hands glide over the windowsill, over the carved wooden doors of the wardrobe and across the flat top of the piano, hoping that something about this place would fill the gaping void inside her. She tried so hard to imagine that this was the exact place of her youth—that it wasn’t a new room made of new material—as she groped around for peace in the familiarity.

After long minutes of reflection in the stillness, tears threatened to pool in her eyes when she realized that returning here could never give any closure to the unresolved conflict with her father. It couldn’t help her remember the fading memory of what Mama’s voice sounded like, nor could it help discover how to reclaim the confidence and joy that had filled her spirit in the early days of her childhood. Feeling lost and defeated, Tifa slumped onto the piano bench. Maybe it would’ve been better if they hadn’t stopped here to indulge her silly hopes. Disappointment made her anxious to get going, but her heart wasn’t quite ready to leave.

With a sigh of discontent, she lifted the fallboard to expose the black and white keys of the piano. Closing her eyes, Tifa let her hands automatically move to rest on the keys. But instead of feeling smooth ivory, soft paper met the tips of her fingers. Her lashes flew open and she frowned in curiosity as she picked it up, turning it over in her hands and letting out a quiet gasp when she saw her name written on the face of the sealed envelope. Confused, and a bit alarmed, Tifa carefully opened it. Inside was a letter with dearly familiar handwriting.

My dearest Tifa,

What has happened to our town? It wasn’t too long ago when the flames destroyed this place, yet here it is: restored as if Sephiroth had never burned it to the ground. If I know your restless heart as well as I think I do, I’m certain you will come here one day searching for the truth of what happened to your husband and your father. I am writing this with the distant hope that one day, it’ll be in your hands.

With great regret, I can confirm the passing of Brian Lockhart. I found his body on Mt. Nibel’s trail with a sword wound, most likely from Sephiroth. Your dear husband was lying motionless in his ShinRA uniform on the cobblestone outside of his home as the fire raged, most likely poisoned to death from smoke inhalation. The beloved Nibelheim of your birth is no more. The new residents of this town tell me I am senile and have a faulty recollection of what happened that day, but I know for certain that this place burned to the ground. I remember the blood on my hands as I tried in vain to help people escape. I remember the heat of the fire and the fear in my heart.

Now, this place reeks of ShinRA and I hate it. Don’t believe their lies, Tifa! They refuse to tell the truth about what happened here, and therefore I doubt you were ever given the true account of why those who are dearest to you disappeared seemingly overnight. This place is no longer our home, and I will not return here again. How grateful I am that you were far away from here when the
attack happened. I know that if they were alive, both Cloud and your father would have shared in that sentiment.

I want you to know that I came looking for you in Midgar eight months after the destruction of Nibelheim. I asked around and checked the public housing records, but it soon became apparent that trying to find anyone in a city that size was like trying to pick out a single kernel of corn from an entire silo. I tried, Tifa. I swear I tried. There has not been a single day in which I do not think of my most treasured pupil, and I will not stop trying to find you.

Since you were a small child, I’ve watched your spirit grow and bloom into one of the most remarkable human beings I’ve ever had the pleasure to know. Though only a young woman, you have experienced more grief and suffering than most people many times your age. Overcoming loneliness and finding purpose are things that I know you are more than capable of. You have one of the strongest hearts that I’ve ever known and I am so, so proud of you. Not only as my student, but as a remarkable human being who has not let grief and hardship rob her of her courage or compassion.

Don’t underestimate yourself, nor the power of the great vision you have for your life. Together, these forces can transform what might seem like an impossibility into a great opportunity for progress. Strengthen yourself, take care of yourself, define who you are and refine your personality again and again. If you pursue a rich purpose for your life, you can bear almost any wretched thing. Stand tall, my precious student, for how you present yourself on the outside reflects how you feel on the inside.

I hope you will continue to sharpen your skills and remember all that I have taught you—not only martial arts, but lessons of the spirit as well.

Take heart, Tifa.

--Master Zangan

Fat tears flowed freely down her face as she traced the pen strokes of his signature with her index finger. Numbly, Tifa rested the letter in her lap and let herself silently cry. Over the handful of years that had passed since Nibelheim’s demise, she had ceaselessly pondered over what had happened to her mother-in-law, her father, her husband and her teacher. Finally—finally—she had answers to all of the questions that continuously haunted her in the lonely, dark hours of the night. Master Zangan’s note had been found at just the right time, making her ever more certain that there were no coincidences in this life. His words were a welcome breath of fresh air and gave her the final push to find the strength she needed to face the uncertainty of her future. A quivering smile worked its way across Tifa’s lips, for she hadn’t been forgotten or lost. Knowing for sure that the man who had been the closest thing she had to a loving father was alive and well brought her great hope. The fact that he had been looking for her was enough to heal a gaping wound that she seemed to have forgotten.

She would run forward. She’d run for her parents, for Claudia, for Cloud, for Aria, shedding her trepidations and sorrows for that moment, at least. Hands trembling, Tifa sighed a quivering sigh of relief, for she felt like a tree whose roots had finally broken into the rich soil far below the surface. At last, her weary heart could rest. It was alright; she would be alright. Nothing could take away her strength, her happiness or her spirit without her permission, and it gave Tifa a sense of security in the turbulent state of Gaia. For the longest time, she had been allowing the gales and rain of this life to toss her about as a loose pebble in the powerful ebb and flow of ocean waves. No more. Tifa had the power over the direction of her life and she promised to never give it up again.

… … …
His heart had never felt so full. The newborn was tiny and so very light, but Cloud had never held something in his arms that could compare with her powerful presence. What a strange feeling it was to observe her previously unfamiliar features and feel as if he’d known this little girl forever. There was no pride swelling in his chest, just tentative, fragile joy. It was terrifying to think about the fearsome, brute strength his mako enhanced body harbored as he cradled this delicate, precious baby in the crook of his arm. What a surreal, humbling experience to hold his own flesh and blood.

Curious, Cloud ran the pad of his index finger along the underside of her tiny foot and watched as her toes flexed outward before slowly curling back in again. The smile that twitched at his lips was genuine and his heart ached for more of this sweet, sweet feeling. Her eyes, which had been squinted shut until now, peeked open to look at him. Cloud almost gasped as he admired their color: a soft, cinnamon-red hue, identical to her mother’s. Automatically, he leaned in to press a gentle kiss upon the downy hair on the crown of her head. In that moment, there was nothing more Cloud wanted to do than just stare at her forever, memorizing her features and watching her curious gaze.

Carefully, he shifted her compliant little body to lay upright with her head over his heart. Cloud tucked his chin to rest his face against her perfect, round head and breathed in the unique scent of her skin. Discontentment threatened to drag his spirit down as he briefly lamented who he had been in the past, but he quickly replaced it with the hope and promise that he would be his best in the future. And as the beat of his heart began to lull his daughter to sleep, Cloud felt a sense of completeness and peace, like everything was finally as it should be.

And for a while, it was.

Cloud flinched awake. Startled, he frantically took in his dimly lit surroundings and hopped to his feet. He quickly remembered what he was doing and relaxed again, willing the hastened thrumming of his heart to slow to its regular, relaxed cadence. It seemed that he’d fallen asleep at the bottom of the stairs as he waited for Tifa as she revisited her bedroom. Letting out a deep breath, he looked down at his empty arms and felt a pang of emptiness inside him. It was a dream, after all. But it had felt so real.

Did Tifa have dreams like this? Now that he’d seen his daughter in Tifa’s memory, Cloud found that he thought of her nonstop. Oh—Tifa! Was she still upstairs? How long had he been asleep? Quickly, he checked the time on his PHS to see it had only been a twenty minute nap. The light through the windows was now a deep orange as the sun began to set. “Tifa?” he called gently up the stairs. When he heard no answer, he started up the stairs and opened his mouth to call her again when she appeared at the top.

“I’m here”, she answered in a voice just above a whisper.

He looked up at her face, bracing himself, for he expected to find pain there. The hardest part about seeing someone you love in distress is not being able to do anything about it. Trying his best not to make things worse had kept him occupied as he watched her struggle to heal. But relief
coursed through his veins when he saw her expression, for she wore a smile so beautiful that it
reminded him of his earliest memories of Tifa. It was as if the hardship and burdens of the past
twelve years had lifted from her shoulders at last. Her eyes—though shining with tears—were
bright with hope, and the infectious smile on her face had instantly spread to his.

… … …

How rapturous it was to feel like children again. Hand in hand, they floated into the forest, dappled
orange light dotting the ground as the sun’s rays filtered through the canopy.

Tifa felt both giddy and shy as Cloud led her to their old favorite place by the stream. Had it really
been so long since they’d been light hearted kids? How had their concerns suddenly gone from
worrying about being scolded for dirtying their clothing to trying to save Gaia from the meteor?
They’d been through worlds of anguish, and yet somehow here they were, blushing and giggling
like adolescents as they hurried toward their favorite haven. One of her hands was firmly clasped in
Cloud’s, the other held a bottle of wine they’d purchased from the tavern. Her husband had raised
an amused eyebrow at her when she handed the alcohol to the cashier, and Tifa had responded by
joking that it was to ‘celebrate their homecoming’.

There was no dirt path leading to their secret spot, but their feet still knew the exact path to take.
The smell of rotting wood and damp earth awakened something that had been sleeping within her
for a long, long time. This beautiful forest felt more like home to her than that reconstructed house
did. Tifa lifted her eyes to watch the tree-cover as they hurried past, which blurred like rough brush
strokes of orange, green and brown on an endless artist’s canvas. The grey sweater that was tied
around her waist was starting to come unraveled with the jarring of each foot fall and she laughed
between panting breaths.

“Wait! Wait, I’m going to lose my sweater!”

Cloud obeyed, trotting to a halt and releasing her hand. He took the wine bottle from her as she
untied the garment and decided to put it on instead.

“No matter. We’re here, anyway,” he said.

He wandered closer to the edge of the stream, letting nostalgia wash over his senses as Tifa came
up beside him. The last time either one of them stood in this very place was during their wedding
ceremony and Cloud didn’t know how he should feel about that. When he considered the boy he
was then to the man he was now, he couldn’t say for certain whether or not he’d really evolved as a
person since that day. His idealistic young mind used to think that one could only progress in their
journey into greatness. How naïve he had been to forget that growing spiritually and emotionally
has its hiccups and snags. It felt as if he’d moved forward in a small handful of ways, but had
regressed and submitted to many of his old daemons. It was a little disheartening, but he refused to
let it discourage him.

Tifa reached to hold his hand, her slender fingers twining together with his. He watched her close
her eyes and had to smile at her peaceful expression, for she chose to let herself drown in fond
memories instead regret.

“Oh, how I’ve missed this place,” she breathed. “Our secret place…our safe place.”

“I feel like it’s been decades since our wedding. I remember my mother standing right here.” Cloud
pointed to one spot before gesturing to another. “And Master Zangan was right here.”

“What a large crowd we had to celebrate our joyous union!” Tifa laughed as she turned on her
heel.
She walked over to a nearby log, plunking the wine bottle in the dirt at her feet as she sat upon it. Her long hair was still trapped under the sweater from when she’d pulled it over her head and she freed it with a practiced flick of her wrist. Cloud plopped down beside her, slowly inhaling the pine scented air as peaceful reminiscence continued to reign over his thoughts. A lone squirrel began chattering noisily in a tree nearby, and he watched as it scrambled up the trunk.

“It still hurts me that Papa didn’t show up that day,” Tifa said suddenly. She was looking at her fingers, which were laced together neatly in her lap. “I didn’t think that he would, but there was a small part of me that hoped he would snap out of it and realize how important he was to me.”

Cloud nodded sympathetically. It had taken him a long time to realize that Brian Lockhart’s hatred for him was not necessarily because of anything he’d done wrong. While his child mind couldn’t truly comprehend the concept of misplaced bitterness, his adolescent mind could. Nothing vindicated his wounded heart like understanding that Brian’s brokenness wasn’t his fault, nor had it been Tifa’s. His wife, however, had taken much longer to release herself from any blame or guilt regarding her father’s malevolent sadness. Cloud was never quite sure if she ever managed to be rid of it completely.

“I told you that he died, but I didn’t tell you that I was there when it happened.” Out of the corner of his eye, he saw her turn to look at him, but he couldn’t pull his eyes from the ground. “Sephiroth dealt him a fatal injury and I held his head as he passed.”

“You did?”

“Y-yeah,” Cloud said, swallowing thickly at the memory. “And he told me to take care of you. There was so much regret and pain in his voice. He loved you, Tifa. Underneath that grief and bitterness, he loved you so much. The last thing he said was your name.”

“It came too late,” Tifa said softly. She leaned forward to pick up the bottle of wine. “But I forgive him. I’ve forgiven him a long time ago. Everyone sees their childhood through different lenses. I’ve decided to remember the happy times we had together and put everything else behind me.”

“I think that’s wise. I’m proud of you, Tifa.”

Finally summoning the courage, Cloud turned to look at her. The frown on her face seemed to be more from determination than anger, but he couldn’t help but sense a little frustration. She gently spun the bottle of wine and watched the deep red liquid swirl through the tinted glass.

“Oh, shoot. I don’t have a corkscrew.”

Cloud snorted in amusement. He’d expected her to cry or ask for every detail of her father’s death, but it seemed like Tifa didn’t want to discuss it any further. Perhaps she knew that a conversation like this would only lead to heartache. Judging by the way she was trying to pull at the cork, she was determined to maintain her light hearted mood.

“Here, let me help you,” he said, holding his hand out.

“No! You’ll only break it with your super strength.”

He rolled his eyes and chuckled. “How are we going to get it open, then?”

“Don’t worry, I know all the tricks.” She looked at him and winked. “Just watch the master.”

Curious, Cloud sat back to watch her work. Tifa set the bottle on her lap as she bent down to undo the laces of her left boot. She pulled it off of her foot with one hand and placed the upside down
wine bottle between her knees. Startled, Cloud nearly began to laugh as Tifa began to slap the bottom of the bottle with the heel of her boot.

“If you weren’t a bar tender, you’d seem like a crazy alcoholic.”

“Ha!” she laughed. “Honestly, Cloud…”

After a few minutes, she’d loosened the cork enough to pop it off with a victorious smirk. She held the bottle out to him to offer him some, but he waved his hand dismissively, claiming she worked too hard for him to deserve the first sip. With a shrug, she took a swig. The forest seemed so quiet, for there weren’t many insects chirring or humming at this time of year.

“Growing up, I never thought I’d actually leave this place,” Tifa mused, handing off her drink to her husband. “But getting out of here was all you could think of since you were really small.”

“I never felt like this was home. My body was here, but my heart was somewhere else I guess.”

“Apparently it was in the filthy slums of Midgar,” Tifa snorted bending to replace her boot. “I never thought I’d end up there!”

How terrible it was to know that he’d unintentionally abandoned her and the baby in such an unforgiving place. The thought haunted Cloud every so often, but he knew it would do no good to dwell upon what he could not change. Instead, he turned his attention to his beautiful, resilient friend, thanking whatever deity that watched over them for the simple fact that he could enjoy her company in this very moment. While life had been cruel, it hadn’t yet taken her from him, so he rested in that small miracle. His hyper-tolerance to alcohol made it impossible for the wine to even make him tipsy, but he took a small drink anyway.

“How did you ever survive there?” Cloud asked, wiping his mouth with his wrist. “I remember how hard it was for you to get a job without a high school diploma. And you were pregnant.”

“It was humbling. I thought life was hard in Nibelheim, but it was nothing compared to the frightening time after your disappearance. I never had to fret over whether or not I’d have a roof over my head until then.” She slowly rolled a pinecone back and forth underneath her boot. “I hid my rounded belly and became a waitress for a while to make ends meet.”

“How did you run into Barret? You two make the strangest pair of friends.”

“Heh, I guess we do,” she admitted, smiling at the thought of her dear friend and how they were polar opposites in almost every way. “Not too long after the baby was born, he and Marlene stopped at the restaurant. She was so tiny at the time—the two of them had just recently arrived in town. Marlene didn’t take well to cow’s milk, so I offered goat’s milk and it did the trick. I knew I wasn’t allowed to give it away, since the chef used it to make fancy butter and cheeses. My boss fired me when he found out.”

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“How did you ever survive there?”

“Yeah, he kind of saw it happen. He took pity on me and hired me as Marlene’s live-in caretaker. I was such a terrible, hopeless mess and he saved me from despair and an even worse life in the slums. I’ll always feel indebted to him.” She took a moment to drink before lowering her head and continuing. “I basically won the deed to Seventh Heaven in an unorthodox fight and it felt so good to repay his kindness with a more suitable place to live and make a living.”
From the beginning, Cloud and Barret had held an obvious suspicion of one another that was like poison to any potential bond. The older man had despised him for his involvement with ShinRA and Cloud’s distrust in Barret stemmed from the guilt he’d had over his absence from Tifa’s life and jealousy over the protection and companionship he’d given his wife during those vulnerable years. How childish he’d been acting! Barret was no pariah of maturity himself, but Cloud knew better. Things were clearer now after his revelations in the Lifestream, reminding him that he never used to be so bristled and defensive. It was silly, really, because Barret and Cloud both shared the same goals. The defeat of ShinRA and the well-being of Tifa were primary concerns to both of them. In the end, they were on the same team.

“A physical fight? You never told me that.”

“You never asked!” she said with a chuckle. “I was proud of it at first, but really, all I wanted was to go home. Now that we’re here, now that I can smell the earth and see the sky, I remember how terrible I wished to be right here. Our Nibelheim is gone and is only a place in our memory. In that way, I can never go home. But the fact that your home is the same home and we share the same memories of those days makes me feel less lonesome.”

For too long, they’d just been two scared kids caught in limbo: terrified of their future and haunted by their past. How wonderful it felt to break out of that cage and step out bravely into the unknown, hand in hand. Cloud leaned his head back to look at the sky, his fingers gripping the moss of the log as he smiled at the darkening sky. Beside him, Tifa stood as the sun began to disappear below the horizon. Nearby was a tree with a peculiar, wide base that had fascinated them as children. There was a hollow in the trunk where it met the ground that was more than wide enough to house their little bodies during a rainstorm. A hundred tiny memories assaulted him at the sight of it, prompting a smile to his lips as Tifa wandered toward it. She ran her fingers in the rough grooves of the bark with one hand as she took an indulgent sip of wine with the other.

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“Easy there,” Cloud chided playfully. “Am I going to have to carry you back to the Highwind?”

She snorted in amusement, as she circled the tree and peeked at him from behind it. “I’m not going to get drunk! Just a little loose, that’s all.”

It was charming to watch her slowly pace around the tree, a habit she’d had since they were children in this very same spot. But there was an important topic between them that they’d rarely discussed tugging at his mind’s attention, making it hard for him to concentrate on the calm of the moment. While they had tip-toed around it, dipping one foot in before quickly retreating it again, it was never enough to satisfy the growing need that had begun to burn like a flame inside him. Now that Cloud had decided to face the things that terrified him most instead of push them away as he did before, it was now impossible for him to ignore. While he was hesitant to bring it up and potentially ruin the relaxed state of their rare evening alone together, the words sprung from his throat without permission.

“Tifa…” he began, swallowing thickly. “I’m really sorry I couldn’t be there for you when you gave birth to our daughter. It’s been eating away at me for weeks now. I even dream of her.”

She froze, then, with her back to him and the fingers of her left hand still loosely gripping the bark of the large spruce. Cloud felt as if this was the last of the walls between them and hoped that tackling this sensitive topic would be the final hurdle in their quest toward emotional confluence.

“I dream of her, too,” Tifa admitted quietly. She turned around to face him as a gentle breeze slid through the trees with a hiss. “All the time.”

Their eyes locked together in search of connection and solidarity over this tragedy that had torn
both of them asunder. But instead of turning away from the sadness in her expression, he embraced it, holding eye contact. Cloud watched as falling leaf kissed Tifa’s cheek before falling to the ground, wishing his lips had been there instead. He stood automatically, for everything inside him longed to be close to her in these moments of pain, and it was an enormous comfort when she reached out a hand toward him. When he placed his hand in hers, Cloud was startled when she pulled him gently toward the tree hollow and crouched to crawl inside. How wonderful and strange was the comfort of nostalgia, and he found himself suddenly grateful that his wife had had the random urge to come here. Feeling a bit silly, he crawled into the tree after her, still holding onto her hand.

It was much more cramped than he remembered, so they chose to sit side by side at the mouth of the hollow and stretch their legs out. The earth inside was damp and soft and he flinched as a spider web tickled his ear. His eyes turned skyward as the purple twilight shone through the lattice of leaves overhead and he breathed deeply at the peace in that moment: it wasn’t just the tranquil and familiar atmosphere, but the relief that stemmed from feeling secure in his marriage once again. How far they’d come! Beside him, Tifa handed him the wine bottle before playing with the edges of her sweater sleeves as she considered what to say.

“The night I made it home from the clinic was rough,” she finally said. Her voice was soft, but there was determination laced in her tone. “It was such a sad, strange thing to leave without the baby and it was hard for me to comprehend. My hormonal, grieving mind would hear baby cries that didn’t exist. I remember lying in our bed that night and thinking that if I could just go to sleep and wake up a year later, things would be better then. But I couldn’t stop because the bills wouldn’t stop. I was so afraid of ending up homeless.”

It was beyond difficult to listen to her words, yet it was something Cloud desperately needed to do. He closed his eyes as the wind caressed his skin and gripped her hand tighter.

“It must’ve been so lonesome.”

“It was,” Tifa admitted. All I wanted was you. I wanted to feel you hold me and cry with me because no one could have understood that the depth of that pain like you could. You were her parent, too. There’s no one in this world that understands exactly what we’ve been through except each other.”

Now it was Cloud’s turn to take a long drink of wine. The abnormally fast metabolism gifted to him by mako enhancement made it impossible to get drunk, but Tifa didn’t know that. After a quiet minute, he offered the bottle back to his wife, who slowly reached out to take it. He wrapped his arm around her shoulders and pulled her tightly against him.

“After living through that, I’m certain that it’s one of the worst things that can happen to somebody,” Tifa lamented. “Initially, I sort of pushed any memories of it away. But since you came back into my life, I’ve been thinking about it almost nonstop,” Tifa admitted. The tips of her fingers held the mouth of the bottle, swirling it lazily in a clockwise motion. “I’ve realized that while it’s terribly devastating, it’s also kind of a binding thing. It’s a commonality that is even deeper than many of the other things that we have in common. If I choose to look at that blessing instead of the emptiness of her loss, I find it’s easier to tolerate.”

Tifa leaned her head to the side, hiding her face in the crook of his neck. Cloud felt her breath on his skin, summoning goosebumps there, and felt his heart leap with pleasurable surprise when she began to place little kisses there.

“Let’s not let this destroy us,” he blurted. “We have faced so many hardships, Tifa, and I don’t intend to let everything we’ve worked tirelessly to build unravel.”
Feeling his posture relax, Tifa cuddled further into his side. He lifted a hand to caress the sensitive place behind her ear, letting her long hair drape in between his fingers. Sighing with contentment, her arms wove themselves around his torso.

“In the rare times I’d talk about how much I missed Mama, your mother used to tell me that loss is made endurable by love. Now, I’m starting to understand what she meant,” she whispered. “We’ll be alright. Won’t we, Cloud?”

“Yes,” he promised. “Of course.”

The shimmering blanket of stars was just beginning to appear in the darkening sky and they watched as they began to show in the gaps of the canopy. A small sense of pride was welling up inside Cloud’s chest, for he had finally found the strength to face so many of his fears. How freeing it felt to be able to admit that he was in love with his sweet little daughter, though he’d never truly met her. His ability to listen about Tifa’s terrible struggling in his absence without plummeting into self-hatred and guilt was encouraging and uplifting. You must be brave to be in love, knowing full well that your heart may be broken somewhere along the way. But it was well worth it, because Tifa made his life meaningful and encouraged him to discover his self-worth.

Sitting there as the world darkened around them, it became clear to Cloud that love doesn’t adhere to time or boundaries, it just is. How fragile life was; a great gift should never be wasted. There seemed to be an inherent duty to live every moment to the fullest, even if it meant risking pain or loss. Otherwise, what was the point to it all? How could one discover their true potential if their limits were never challenged?

Cloud decided that from now on, he no longer had any spare time to brood over unimportant things.

"What was her name?" Cloud asked into the night air.

He felt her lips curl into a delicate smile against his skin.

"Aria."
“Hyah!” Tifa cried.

Her voice rang out across the plains only to be swept away into the gentle breeze. AVALANCHE was making their way back toward Midgar and planned to stop in Kalm on the way. It was well into the sunny, pleasant morning. Tifa had packed up her gear hours before everyone else so that she could sneak away to warm up her joints and muscles by practicing a kata. Half a mile from camp, she concentrated her body and spirit in a long forgotten morning ritual.

The realization that Master Zangan was still alive had helped to erupt the embers of her struggling heart into vibrant, lasting flames of resolve. He was alive, she was alive, and there would be nothing to hold her back from her potential anymore. As a small bead of sweat rolled lazily down her temple, Tifa pondered exactly how many years had passed since she and her tutor had practiced their katas together in the meadow. They used to meet at the first rays of the sun each morning, moving together like a synchronized dance of discipline and aggressive grace. How dear those lessons had been to her. At first, they’d been a way for her to occupy her grieving little heart with an activity that she might use one day to protect her loved ones. But as the years passed, her lonely soul had soaked in Master Zangan’s kindness like a dry sponge. He satisfied her overwhelming need for fatherly instruction and companionship. Tifa took a moment to be thankful that the universe had given her both a mother and father figure to look to when her biological parents were not available.

Abbreviated puffs of air accentuated her movements as she jabbed twice before following up with a right hook. Clenching her abdominal muscles, Tifa readied herself for two knee strikes and a push kick. The kanku sho kata was her very favorite, for it was one of her final hurdles to graduating from her discipleship and making her master proud.

Her body felt so good.

She remembered how difficult it had been to get back into shape after pregnancy and the stillbirth. The inspiration to join AVALANCHE and bring purpose back to her life had motivated her to rediscover her physical strength, and for a time she’d focused on rebuilding muscles that had wasted away. Now, Tifa felt that same thrill she had experienced then. Never in her life had she used her martial arts as much as she had in the past few months and while she was often sore from endless battles, she couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt so agile and energetic. Tifa was certain that it was more than just the exercise. Her spirit hadn’t felt this light since the early days of her childhood! It was empowering to know that she was using the things that Master Zangan taught her for good, but the overwhelming elation that came from working out her issues with Cloud (and with herself) was simply intoxicating.

Large, puffy clouds drifted lazily across the sky, occasionally covering the sun. Muscles clenched, Tifa let out one more ‘hyah!’ as she completed her kata. With a merry sigh, she uncurled her fists and flopped backward onto the plush grass to watch the white clouds roll by. How wonderful it was to rediscover herself and her purpose and to feel forgiven for her sins and misguided ways. And, for the first time in so very long, to feel free. At first, she’d felt quite silly, for the things that had once weighed her down could have only done so with her permission. The strength to find liberty had been within her all along—she just lacked the courage to grasp it.

It was times like these that she thought of Aerith. She imagined that if she were here, she’d throw her arms up to the sky and rejoice in the warmth of the sun. The thought made her smile as she gazed upward. It seemed like years since she’d heard the voice of her dear friend, since so much
had happened since the Cetra had left them. How much time had passed since she twirled and danced in the freedom of the open plains after their escape from Midgar?

As the sky arched above her like a beautiful painting, she sighed as she caught her breath from her exercise.

Automatically, her mind submitted to an old game of childhood she’d frequently played with her mother. Red eyes scanned the heavens for shapes in the clouds, smiling at the fond memories that came blooming into her consciousness. They’d lain side by side—just like this—laughing over who could come up with the silliest shapes, setting their imaginations loose with ivory paint on the cerulean canvas above. The grass had tickled her ears then exactly as it did now and Tifa sighed in contentment, recalling how Mama’s slender arm would reach upward to trace the clouds with her pointer finger.

The happiness of those days called out like an alluring siren’s song to Tifa. While the thought of letting herself long for those days was tempting, she’d already fruitlessly chased echoes of the past for much too long. It seemed that so many of her daily thoughts revolved around the dead. For years and years, she’d wallowed around in suffering as she lamented the terrible pain of loss, wasting the gift of life that she’d been given. How much time she’d allowed to flow away from her! Death and hardship had much more to offer than travail alone. Now that Tifa could see that reality clearly and plainly, she was ashamed for how narrow minded she had once been. Instead of being completely occupied by sorrow, she should have opened her eyes to all the lessons that life was trying to teach her. But it wasn’t too late.

As a young girl, Tifa had pictured her mother as almost super-human. Somehow, Mama knew all the answers to her questions and could fix just about any issue that happened to arise. She used to look at her with fierce admiration and awe, similar to the way Marlene regarded her. Rarely had Tifa chosen to reluctantly admit that although her child was no longer alive, she was still a mother.

Without thinking, Tifa let one index finger trail over her lower abdomen, remembering fondly the little bump that used to be there. She used to wonder what her baby’s face looked like or what her little voice sounded like and in the end, she had only received the answer to one of these questions. But what was it like to watch your baby grow up? Was it hard to stand by as they slowly outgrew their need for you? Her heart cried out at the thought of Marlene no longer asking to go for walks or sing songs with her. The bittersweet reality of motherhood was something that she rarely wanted to think about, for it seemed simply unbearable sometimes. Watching a child mature to be an independent, secure, well-rounded person was the dream of all parents, wasn’t it? So why did it make her so sad?

The thought of her mother looking down upon her from heaven was enough to make her eyes fill with tears. Was Mama watching over her? Was it her guiding hand that kept Tifa safe through all of her hardships and troubles? There was a gentle whisper in the wind as it caressed her cheek, like the comfort of her mother’s soft palm.

*I’ll always be with you.*

At the memory of Mama’s words, Tifa felt tears stream out of the corner of her eyes and soak into her hair. She expected the words to push her to dissolve into despair, but instead, a smile spread across her face. How blessed she was to have experienced that love. How wonderful it was to know that no matter where she was or what trials she faced, her mother was right there with her.

Tifa sat up, scrubbing at her eyes with the back of her hands. She didn’t have to feel sad or lonesome, because every kind word and caring gesture Mama had given to her was always there in her heart. Looking out across the plain, she watched as hundreds of tiny white flowers bobbed and
swayed in the breeze. Aria died, but that doesn’t mean that she and Cloud would never go on to have any other children. It would be scary to try again and put themselves at risk for the same heartbreak, but she didn’t think she could ever give up on her dream of having a family if Cloud was still willing.

The grass brushed at her legs as she stood, still looking up at the sky.

“Help me to move, Mama,” she said quietly, closing her eyes. “Help me keep going—to see and do what is needed for my husband, for my friends and for myself.”

Every lesson that her mother had taught her seemed to revolve around how precious life was. The handful of years they’d spent together shown Tifa that expressing gentleness did not mean a person lacked strength, and a joyful person could still harbor great pain. There were things one saw with their heart instead of their eyes and there was immense beauty in the small things. Now that she was grown, she wished more than ever that she could have just one more conversation with Mama. She yearned for her wisdom and to share their stories about relying on faith to guide them through life’s trials. There were probably many things she didn’t know about her mother.

But there would be time for that later. One day, when it was her time to meet her in heaven, they’ll have an eternity to spend together. Until then, Tifa would carry on with a smile.

“I’ll live strong. I promise.”

The rolling plains were mostly sparse of tree cover or bramble, but a not too far away was a lonesome maple tree that had grown in an awkward fashion. Its trunk seemed to have grown out from between a split boulder at the top of a gentle hill, the tangle of branches reaching up to grasp at the sun. Tifa thought that if she climbed the trunk, she might be able to see Kalm in the distance, so she jogged over to it. Seemingly boundless energy rushed through her from a source unknown. Had it been her previous dismal attitude that had rendered her so listless?

She let out a short laugh in between foot falls, marveling over how much could change with one seemingly small action. Time was too short to waste it wallowing in misery and fear!

A certain childish glee pumped through Tifa’s veins with each thrum of her heart as she scrambled up the tree trunk and took in the vibrant blue expanse. Sleepy little Kalm sat in the distance, the red roofs of the buildings looking tiny and indistinct. Far beyond it, like a black speck on the horizon, was Midgar—their destination. Seeing it made a dark cloud threaten to rain over her mood, but she shook it away with a flick of her wrist through her black hair. There was too much opportunity in front of her to surrender to such feelings, and it was completely overwhelming in the most pleasant of ways. Tifa hadn’t realized that the maple tree, the sky and the world could be this beautiful. How long had she walked around with her eyes fixed on the ground? She’d had no room in her life to enjoy such things.

The tiny, tickling feet of an ant startled her as it crawled from the bark onto her hand. How very delicate and fragile it was, yet it fearlessly clamored on with its duties. The insect made its way down her pinky and back onto the tree, unbothered by the obstacle she had been. Crickets were chirping in the course grasses below. Bees hummed over the foliage in search of pollen. A little spider spun its web in the branches above her head. They didn’t know what tomorrow would bring, nor did they fret over it; they were alive today and that was enough.

Tifa was alive for one more day and was so glad to be.

She wasn’t afraid to feel, nor was she afraid to fall. There was no longer a paralyzing fear that held her back; it had been replaced by the rapturous need to move on from this way of life. Of course,
Tifa had no idea how all of this would end, but it didn’t matter anymore. How could you know how far you’ve come if you didn’t know exactly where you’ve been? Those dark, empty days were behind her forever and nothing could steal the light from her eyes.

“Tifa!”

The call was faint in the prairie wind. Hanging onto a tree branch with her left hand, she spun to look behind her. Making his way through the grasses and wild weeds was Cloud, his black clothes making him stick out like a sore thumb in the pastel coloration of the plains. His flaxen hair, however, danced in the wind like the little yellow flowers that dotted the ground like a thousand lemon drops upon the earth. There was a puzzled look upon his features as he scanned his surroundings for her. His furrowed brow and big blue eyes were so charming, making her heart swell at the sight of her beloved.

It briefly occurred to her that this march toward Midgar was not so different from the first time they’d traveled to the city together, full of determination and hope. The experience of breaking apart, coming back together, and navigating the emotional fallout afterward had helped her discover that marriage worked best if they weren’t hyper focused on each other. Once they set their sights upon what they could accomplish for others and the importance of their personal goals, everything seemed to fall nicely into place. For now, the urgent need to protect the planet from Sephiroth and the meteor kept them from over-analyzing their flaws and shortcomings, lending them a sense of satisfaction in the simple fact that they were on the same team. As long as they didn’t forget that again, everything would be alright.

“Hey, Cloud!” Tifa called, waving her free hand. “Over here!”

He turned at the sound of her voice. The wind swept across the open plains, grass bending with its gentle force like ripples on a pond. Cloud’s face instantly brightened with relief when he spotted her. There was hope in those shining blue eyes and joy in his smile, and Tifa felt warm all over at the sight. It made her remember how they’d run through life hand in hand toward the promise of a better future. She’d missed those hopes and dreams and wanted to reach for them once again. The two of them had let their faith and courage shrivel and die for a time. But like the tiny buds on a tree at winter’s end, there was a promising glimpse of life in their spirits once again just waiting to bloom.

The sun returned from its retreat behind a billowing, white cloud and Tifa squinted against the bright light as her husband jogged toward her. His buster sword bounced against his back, occasionally reflecting the sun’s rays. She couldn’t help but muse over how miraculous it was that many years ago, Cloud had grown breathless merely from playing together in the yard. His mother would’ve beamed with joy to see how healthy and strong he’d grown: both in body and in spirit.

She’d stopped watching him like he’d disappear again.

They’d beaten the odds before, she and Cloud. They’d done things and broken boundaries that no one back in Nibelheim ever thought they could. Their bond and their marriage bound them together as a couple, but since they’d first learned of the little life growing in her womb she’d thought of them as a family. Tifa supposed that any family she and Cloud could form together would have to adapt and navigate to life’s changes and struggles like any other family would, leaning on the knowledge that things would be alright if they’d stick together. At least, that’s what she assumed normal families did. Hers had been broken since she was so small that she scarcely remembered what Papa was like when Mama was alive. She didn’t recall much quarreling or hardship; if there was some she didn’t know about it.

The departure of one family member had turned her life into something unrecognizable. For so
long, Tifa assumed that it was nearly impossible for a family to function if one member were to leave unexpectedly. Cloud’s father died and it had negatively affected the Strife family’s daily life and reputation in Nibelheim. Her mother’s passing devastated her little family beyond repair. When Aria died, the debilitating aftermath almost kept her from rebuilding her relationship with her husband. But now, as Cloud came to a halt underneath the shade of the tree, she was starting to understand that things needn’t be that way.

They could create a clear vision of their future and cling to it. They had the power to form new dreams and build them up with all their strength. There’s nothing you can’t do if you throw yourself into it with all of your being.

Panting through his grin, Cloud looked up at her.

“The others are coming,” he said, catching his breath as the breeze shuffled softly through his hair. “We’re leaving for Kalm now. I brought your backpack.”

“Thanks!”

She caught the movement of the others out of the corner of her eye and turned her head to regard them. There was a chaotic beauty to it all, the way their small group flowed together from place to place. Before, it was times like these when they feel the heaviness of their losses—when there weren’t many monsters to fight or other distractions. But now, there was laughter echoing from the direction of their friends as they joked and conversed. Tifa supposed it was strange considering the seriousness of their goal and the ever present meteor burning red in the heavens, but she was proud that in spite of it all, they refused to give up on happiness.

They were all floating on.

“Catch me!” Tifa laughed, crouching on the branch.

Amused, and a little confused, Cloud held out his arms. “Alright, go ahead!”

One...

Two...

Three!

… … …

“Papa! Tifa!”

She’d seen them coming from down the street. It seemed that she’d been playing in the front yard when they’d caught her eye and she bounced over to the squat picket fence around the lawn’s perimeter. Tifa smiled, because Marlene had always possessed the eyes of a hawk, which made many aspects of life interesting and a bit comical. The sound of her voice almost brought tears to Tifa’s eyes, but she blinked them away and broke into a run toward the girl. Upon reaching the fence, she bent over it to scoop Marlene up, not bothering to go through the gate in her haste to hold her.

“Marlene! Oh, Marlene!” Tifa cried, burying her face into the child’s chestnut hair. “How I’ve missed you!”

The way the little one wrapped her arms around Tifa’s neck made the woman sigh with adoration and relief. Marlene was safe and thriving, and she was so, so thankful for that. Pressing kiss after
kiss against her head, Tifa squeezed the girl against her until she heard that squealing laugh that her heart had been longing to hear.

“Uh oh,” Marlene said, pulling back and showing Tifa her soil-covered palms. “I got your shirt dirty.”

The white cotton of her top was smeared with little hand prints and her motherly heart cherished them. As a small child, Tifa had the freedom to make mistakes and messes in the name of fun, freedom and learning. Mama would always let her enjoy her exploration of the world before teaching her how to clean up after herself. But once she took over the Lockhart household duties, she was forced to become a perfectionist if she wanted to avoid Papa’s harsh admonishment. Tifa wanted Marlene to enjoy this particular liberty for as long as possible.

“That’s okay, sweetheart,” Tifa said before pressing a quick kiss to her forehead. “They’ll be my good luck charms.”

“Where’s my baby girl at?” Barret said in a bellowing laugh.

“Papa! Papa!” Marlene squeaked, practically vibrating with excitement in Tifa’s arms. Her little failing arms reached out as Barret moved in to scoop her up.

“Look at’chu! Playin’ out in the sun,” he grinned as he rubbed the pad of his thumb across her dirty cheek. “Boy, are you filthy! Was my little flower plantin’ flowers?”

The group had been so absorbed in Marlene’s presence that they didn’t notice Elmyra, who had been sitting in a chair on the front porch. She stood immediately with her eyebrows drawn together in worry until she recognized just who it was that had come to visit her young charge.

“Oh, it’s you guys!” Elmyra greeted as she made her way down the porch steps and onto the lawn. She wiped her hands on the worn apron covering her green dress. “I was the one planting the flowers. Welcome!”

It struck Cloud just how peculiar it was that someone was doing something as menial as planting flowers when Gaia’s fate hung in the balance. The meteor loomed overhead, tinting the sky with a touch of red even at midday. How could anyone just relax and tend to their hobbies like everything was under control? For him, every day was a struggle against his confidence. Would he really be able to lead AVALANCHE to victory? Did he really have what it took to stop Sephiroth and somehow dispel the meteor?

Marlene had squirmed her way out of Barret’s arms. Cloud watched her intently as she ran back and forth collecting her playthings to show her father. A shovel and pail, a little plastic horse and wooden blocks were all fetched and shoved into her Papa’s large hands. Her brown hair was pulled into lopsided pigtails that bounced with her dress as she ran to and fro. The enormous grin upon her face pushed up into her pink, round cheeks. Her big brown eyes were shining with unbridled joy and it both warmed his heart and made it ache terribly, for Cloud couldn’t help but wish to see those beautiful cinnamon colored eyes of his own little girl.

Would she have liked her sandy colored hair pulled back or would she have preferred to let it spill over her little shoulders? What toys would Aria have preferred to play with? Would she enjoy getting her hands dirty like Marlene or would she have been fastidious and clean? The sound of the little girl’s breathless laugh was almost too much for Cloud, and he couldn’t help but turn his face away as she skidded to a halt in front of Barret.

“Are these new friends?” Elmyra asked, gesturing toward the others.
“New friends?” Marlene echoed. Her eyes widened as she finally realized that it wasn’t just Tifa and Barret that had come to visit. Suddenly shy, she hid behind her Papa’s leg, peering at the strangers with one skeptical eye.

Tifa crouched beside the girl. “Yes, this is Cid, Yuffie, Vincent and Nanaki.”

Marlene put her index finger in her mouth as she watched the newcomers carefully, then quickly took it out again once she tasted the dirt upon it. She pressed her face against the back of Barret’s knee when Cid tried to smile at her with a cigarette between his teeth, only to have it look like a grimace. Her curiosity about Vincent and his flowing red cape could only be surpassed by the wonderous sight of Nanaki and his flaming tail. But in the end, it was Yuffie’s enthusiastic waving that earned a nervous smile from the little girl.

“You remember Cloud,” Tifa said softly, placing her hand on Marlene’s head. “Right?”

In that moment, a wave of something like embarrassment or shame washed over Cloud. He felt heat rising to his face when the child turned her face upward to look at him, her expression contemplative as she took in his features. Cloud had only been in Marlene’s presence for a brief handful of weeks, most of which he had spent bed-bound as he recovered in Seventh Heaven. When they had interacted, he made certain that it was brief, and the girl usually was more than happy to look away when met with his glowering countenance. Back then, it would’ve been impossible for him to admit to himself that the reason kept Marlene at arm’s length with his unfriendly behavior was because he was angry. He was angry at the unfairness that she was there and his own daughter was not.

Now that Cloud’s mind was clear once again, wisdom could override his immaturity and jealousy. When they’d first met, he remembered how quickly Marlene’s presence annoyed him. The way she needed constant assistance and reassurance made him impatient, and he was irked by the way she’d pout or whine in childish fashion when she wanted something that Tifa or Barret weren’t willing to give. Why had it only occurred to him now that adults are not so different from children? It always seemed that they also always wanted what they couldn’t have. Cloud was so ashamed of the way he’d acted during those confusing, tense days following his recovery; his behavior had been so far from who he’d been raised to be. Yes, the trauma from his captivity and torture (combined with the effect of mako poisoning on his body) was to blame for his desperate confusion, pain and moodiness, but he didn’t feel like he could let himself off the hook for his belligerence.

“I remember,” Marlene almost whispered.

She frowned at him in a thoughtful manner, as if she was analyzing the blonde, and Cloud couldn’t help but feel intimidated by the scrutiny of a pure heart. Surely, a soul as untainted as Marlene’s could see just how crooked and undeserving he was of her forgiveness or approval. Despite that thought, he wanted her to know that he hadn’t really meant to push her away. Cloud loved this little girl; not only for the joy she brought to Tifa’s life, but for the optimism and happiness she possessed despite her world being so dark and lacking. Like he and his wife, Marlene was an orphan whose original home had burned to the ground. For the most part, she’d been raised in the dirty, crime-ridden Midgar slums as her guardians tried their best to afford a lackluster education or a second-hand pair of shoes for her tiny feet. But despite that, she was rarely anything other than content. Perhaps, one day, he’d adopt that same mindset and glean the wisdom that it had to offer. Her soul was so resilient, and he loved Marlene’s indomitable spirit.

Feeling uncertain, Cloud tried his best to smile at the girl, but sorrow and regret chased it from his lips. There was a moment or two of silence before Marlene let go of Barret’s leg, running toward
him without warning. He didn’t know what to do, but she did. She collided with his legs, spreading her arms out as wide as possible in an attempt to hug them. Taken aback, Cloud hesitated before crouching to her level.

“I’m sorry, Marlene,” Cloud apologized, leaning back to search for her eyes. “I wasn’t very friendly to you before, but I’m feeling better now.”

“It’s alright,” she said in a nonchalant manner.

She moved to place her arms around his middle, instead, and the press of her small body against his sent warmth spreading through his chest. Almost automatically, Cloud returned her embrace. He pressed his head gently against the crown of hers, and it felt as if his entire body was softening in an exhale of great relief. After a moment, the girl leaned back and looked into his face once more.

She patted Cloud’s head with her tiny hand, a bright smile spreading from cheek to cheek. “I just want you to feel happy.”

And just like that, he was forgiven. Cloud almost didn’t know how to process her reaction, for his childhood had taught him to expect immediate, lifelong judgement and scorn. Truly, there was nothing quite as healing as a child’s soul.

… … …

It had been a dreamy afternoon, filled with things that were so normal that it was so incredibly satisfying to Tifa’s heart. She’d helped Elmyra cook a meal for AVALANCHE and even baked a cake with Marlene for dessert. It was easy to put aside her fear of what would happen when they traveled to Midgar to confront Hojo the following day when she did the things that made her feel happy and secure: cooking, playing with Marlene and spending time with her husband and friends.

Typically, Marlene would let out a disappointed sigh when it was time for her bath (since that meant it was almost time for bed). But today, she raced up to the top of the stairs with Tifa hot on her heels, arms extended in a threat to tickle her if she was caught. Little bare feet quickly padded toward the bedroom she’d now called her own in the tiny cottage and burst through the door with a happy squeal. Tifa followed, slowing her feet to stare at the surroundings. Back in Seventh Heaven, Marlene’s room had been littered with her drawings, which were displayed proudly on the wall, bedframe and door with scotch tape. Here, there wasn’t a single one on display. Her crayons used to be some of the girl’s most prized possessions, but it seemed that she scarcely had time for her art anymore. Atop the chest of drawers were some miniature stockings with grass stains and tiny tears at the knees.

A funny feeling filled her heart as Tifa realized that for the first time in her young life, Marlene had the freedom to act as a normal child. The thought both relieved and shamed her. While she and Barret had done their best for their charge in the Midgar slums, they couldn’t provide her with this basic need for sunlight and nature. When this mess of a journey was all over, they’d have to re-establish themselves someplace where they weren’t hidden away from the sky.

“Oh oh,” Marlene said softly, regaining Tifa’s attention.

She had fetched her sleep dress and was clutching it against her chest, looking down at where a scrape on her knee had left a crimson stain on the hem of her pinafore.

“Are you hurt?”

“No, I’m just sad that I stained my pinny.”
“Come on, let’s get cleaned up.”

The little girl led her to the cramped bathroom and carefully placed her night dress on the closed lid of the toilet seat. Tifa watched as she went into the cupboard to take out a yellow towel and a small plastic basket of bath toys. Fastidiously, she placed the towel atop her nightdress (making sure it was still folded) and the basket on the wide ledge of the porcelain tub before pulling the faucet handle and drawing water into the tub. Marlene had always been quite independent for her age, but Tifa was astonished at how little she was needed. It was only a handful of months ago that she’d last given Marlene a bath, but in that short period of time it seemed that she’d outgrown their evening ritual.

“Look at you! Do you take baths by yourself now?”

“No,” Marlene said as Tifa helped her undress. “Miss Elmyra plays with me and keeps me company.”

Once the water reached an appropriate level, she shut off the tap and climbed into the bath on her own. Automatically, Tifa reached for the shampoo bottle and cup to rinse her hair with, but the child insisted that she could do it herself. And so, there was little more she could do than watch Marlene scrub her hair into a rich lather. The fact that the kid still managed to maintain a somewhat ‘normal’ daily life despite all that had happened was miraculous. While Tifa was glad, she couldn’t help but feel the sting of jealousy and sorrow, for it seemed that Marlene was just as happy staying with Aerith’s mother as she did staying at Seventh Heaven. It was ridiculous to feel this way, she knew, for she’d had a special bond with Marlene since her babyhood. But the years of yearning to have meaning and acceptance in her father’s eyes had trained her to seek approval and value from others; while Tifa knew better, it was a hard habit to break.

“Wheee!” Marlene squeaked as she dumped a cup of water over her head.

Tifa smiled at her simplicity. It was admirable how children seemed to strive to be happy, no matter their circumstance. This little girl had lost two homes, was separated from her adoptive father and mother figure, had relocated to a foreign place and saw the constant threat of the approaching meteor in the sky, yet she lived in the moment and enjoyed the small things to the fullest. Of all the lessons that Marlene had taught Tifa over the years, this one seemed to resonate with her most. She’d always been so worried about the future; too preoccupied with looking into the horizon that she missed all of the beauty and simple pleasures to be found just before her.

It wasn’t the first time she made up her mind to be more like Marlene, and it wouldn’t be the last.

She watched as the girl slid the washcloth over her skin, and her heart both lamented and praised her independence. It was a heavy thing to realize that so much time had passed since Marlene was a helpless infant in her arms and that there were so many things she’d never have the chance to do with her again. There was rarely any warning before the ‘last times’. The midnight feedings and snuggles ended abruptly when the baby began to sleep through the night, the last time she held the infant’s hunched body over her shoulder and burped her after a bottle or even the last time she changed a diaper were gradual changes that came to a sudden, bittersweet end.

Now, she could add helping Marlene bathe to that list.

It was unbearable to think that there would be a last time that she’d reach for Tifa to pick her up, that there would be a last bedtime story and a final goodnight kiss. She smiled sadly as Marlene used the washcloth to clean the bottoms of her feet, wavering as she tried to balance on her rear. Is this how a mother feels? This precious child had made her realize that babies are born to walk away from you. How sad it was to know that one day, Marlene would prefer to spend time with her
friends over helping Tifa cook or try on her shirts as they folded laundry. But while their relationship would change, it didn’t necessarily mean that they’d grow distant—would it? Oh, how much they’d needed each other when they first met. It had been easy for her wounded heart to adopt the girl as her own after Aria died, but Tifa actively fought the desire to view Marlene as a daughter. But was that really the best thing to do? While Barret’s little girl didn’t call her ‘mom’, she looked to her as a mother in almost every way and it felt so right.

Marlene had been taken from her mother by death and given to Tifa through fate. In the same way, death had taken Aria and delivered her little soul to her waiting grandparents in the Lifestream. For the first time, Tifa was starting to realize that her baby wasn’t gone forever—merely separated from her for a time. One day, when it was her time, she’d meet her daughter again.

For a time, they played together with Marlene’s handful of toys and splashed each other until Tifa’s hair was almost as soaked as the child’s. Letting out a hum of contentment, Tifa drained the water in the tub and wrapped her dear little friend in a towel cocoon. She set Marlene in her lap and began to dry her hair with the towel, making her laugh when she scrubbed her head in a rough and playful fashion. In the small window beside the sink, the evening sky had begun to grow dark with the setting of the sun and approaching storm clouds, but neither of them noticed until a low rumble of thunder sounded. Immediately, Marlene’s face snapped upward, eyes wide with fear. When she heard the hard slapping sound of rain against the roof, her little face disappeared into Tifa’s chest.

“The scary storm is back!” she squeaked, voice weak with worry.

The older girl was taken aback, for rarely had they ever encountered many things that frightened Marlene. Many children were afraid of thunderstorms, but Marlene had endured the loud ruckus each night in Seventh Heaven, the constant backfiring of rickety vehicles in the Midgar slums and the roar of her father’s voice when he lost his temper. Never had she expressed fear in the face of any loud, booming thing in her world. Frowning, Tifa wracked her brain. Was it the memory of the terrifying, crashing sound of the Sector Seven plate that made her afraid? Or perhaps, it was simply the fact that the poor thing wasn’t yet accustomed to something as simple and natural as weather. In the slums, temperatures would seasonally change. Runoff from precipitation would drip through any cracks or open areas in the upper plate, making it appear to ‘rain’ or ‘snow’ in some places. But it had only just occurred to Tifa that to someone who had only known the slums as home, witnessing storms in all their glory against the expanse of the sky must be quite overwhelming.

“It’s alright,” Tifa cooed, squeezing her tight. “I used to get scared of storms when I was small like you.”

“Really?”

“Oh, yes,” she reminisced, closing her eyes and resting her cheek atop Marlene’s round little head. “But then I realized that the rain falls on the trees and the grass and helps them grow. It falls on rivers, streams and ponds and gives us water to drink. Without it, everything would dry up. The rain gives us the beautiful world we’ll see in the morning.”

Slowly, the girl turned her head to peek at the window. “It keeps the grass alive? And Miss Elmyra’s flowers?”

“That’s right,” Tifa affirmed, placing a kiss to her brow. With a small sigh, she also looked toward the window in time to catch a flash of lightning. “Rain is just a part of life. The sun will always come back out, even if it takes a while.”

The girl snuggled in closely, curling her legs up to her chest in Tifa’s lap. Her baby was growing up, yet somehow knew how to make herself seem very small. It was easy to pull Marlene closer
still, wrapping her arms tightly around the damp towel that covered the set of tiny shoulders. Tifa had held Marlene to her chest hundreds of times, but she’d only had the chance to hold Aria in her arms once. The heartache of that separation would probably never leave her, but that was alright. She’d been her baby’s only home. In the womb, the sound of her heartbeat and voice lulled Aria to sleep and the sugar she ate made the little one dance. With these experiences in her heart, not even death separated them, and Tifa smiled as she cherished Marlene’s small weight against her.

“Come on, let’s put on your night dress before you catch a cold.”

She tugged it over the girl’s head and Marlene happily put her arms through the sleeves. Tifa picked her up and placed her on her hip as they moved toward the window. Lightning danced across the sky periodically, making them ‘ooh’ and ‘ahh’ in unison. But it wasn’t long before the eerie red glow of the meteor caught Marlene’s attention and she pointed in its direction, pressing her little finger against the glass.

“Are the clouds red because of the big rock in the sky?”

“Yeah…but me and your Papa are going to make it go away. That’s why we brought all of our friends with us. We’re on our way to Midgar to try and fix things.”

Alarmed, Marlene’s head swung around to look her in the face and Tifa knew she’d made a mistake. Out of respect, she almost always told Marlene the truth. There was no way she could’ve led the girl to think that they’d be staying before they snuck off, but perhaps she should’ve let Barret break the news to her.

“You’re leaving again? You can’t go!”

“Marl—”

“What if you get hurt? What if you don’t come back this time?” she cried. Fear and sorrow were painted across her features and it pained Tifa to know that she’d put it there. “I want to stay with you and Papa! Please?”

“It’s not safe. You need to stay with Miss Elmyra for a little while longer, ok?” she pleaded quietly. “I promise that we’re coming back again! It’s alright.”

But the little girl didn’t seem comforted by her words. Her light kept dimming, gradually fading from her face, like a lightbulb flickering, before tears began to form in her eyes. She squirmed out of Tifa’s arms and bolted out of the bathroom door, her little cries following her clumsy steps down the stairs.

“No! No! Papa, you can’t go!”

Concerned, Tifa slowly followed as she made her way down into the living room. Barret, who had been sitting in the armchair, sat forward in alarm and caught his daughter in his arms. It was easy to forget just how much trauma Marlene had been through, since she was typically full of optimism and seemed as carefree as any normal four year old. So when that fear and insecurity manifested in her behavior, it sent a tingling feeling of guilt crawling upwards into Tifa’s throat. She and Barret shared the responsibility of protecting her: both physically and mentally, and there were so many times where she couldn’t help but question if they were doing the right thing.

Marlene’s situation was anything but typical, but Tifa supposed that parents in a ‘normal’ familial structure still faced the same sort of woes. Caring for this small person and helping her develop into a kind, confident adult would always be challenging, even if they were able to provide a better
environment for the kid. She smiled as she stood gripping the banister, watching as Barret held Marlene close and spoke to her softly. Maybe, what they had to give was enough for that treasured little girl. A pretty home with a big yard and ample toys would be nice. But it seemed that their hearts was what Marlene was looking for and that was something they’d always give without restraint.

... ... ...

It took a few hours for Marlene to fall asleep. She’d refused to go to sleep in her bed as she did everything she could to convince Barret to tell her one more story or sing one more song. Despite her declaration to stay up all night long, she fell asleep around eleven o’clock against her father’s chest. There were only two bedrooms in the cottage, so AVALANCHE decided that Barret would share one with Marlene, Elmyra would stay in her own room and Cloud and Tifa would each sleep on a couch. The others were happy to rent rooms in the inn if it meant they’d each have their own comfortable bed to sleep in after days of camping or sleeping on the hard mattresses inside the cabin of the Highwind.

The house was quiet now that the others had left and Elmyra had retired for the night. Cloud was seated next to his wife on the couch, an arm protectively wrapped around her as they discussed their plans for the next day. Lately, the blonde had felt sort of sheepish whenever he spoke with Barret. Since the first time he’d met the man, he’d been so hostile to him. Now that he was feeling like himself again, Cloud was ashamed of his less than kind behavior toward someone whom he actually was indebted to. With Tifa around, things weren’t too awkward. But when she announced she was going to take a shower before getting ready to sleep, Cloud felt a wave of anxiety wash over him at the thought of being alone with the gunman.

When she ascended the stairs and disappeared from sight, his pulse began to quicken and he felt heat creeping up his neck. There was so much he needed to tell Barret, including several apologies, but guilt and embarrassment threatened to keep his lips sealed. Cloud cleared his throat quietly, leaning forward and folding his hands in his lap. It got the older man’s attention and he lifted an eyebrow in response.

“Barret,” Cloud said quietly. He decided it was best to be straightforward instead of beating around the bush. “I wanted to apologize to you.”

“For bein’ a jerk?”

“Heh, yeah,” Cloud snorted, a nervous smile spreading across his face. “And for being hostile in general. I’m not like that—I wasn’t myself and now I’m ashamed of that ugly behavior.”

Still bashful, he stole a glance in Barret’s direction and watched as he stroked the back of Marlene’s head with his wide palm.

“S’alright. I knew you was messed up from th’start.”

“I don’t blame you. I was covered in dirt, starving and sick.”

“Nah, I knew it when you opened yo’mouth.”

At this, Cloud couldn’t help but chuckle. Aside from Cid, Barret had the foulest mouth around! But he was right—Cloud had been snippy, selfish and negative since they’d met. What the man really deserved was gratitude.

“It’s long overdue, but I wanted to thank you for helping my wife,” he said, running his fingers through his unruly hair. “It kills me to know that I couldn’t be there for her and I hate myself for it.
I’m so grateful that you gave her a place to stay when she needed it.”

Barret’s voice was usually booming and commanding. Now that he was trying not to wake the girl on his chest, the softness of his voice betrayed a side to him that Cloud hadn’t experienced before.

“No need t’thank me. Marlene and I needed someone t’look after us as much as she needed a roof over her head an’ food in that scrawny body.”

“It wasn’t just shelter.” Cloud shifted, widening his knees so that he could hunch forward. “I think the friendship you offered and the sense of purpose Marlene gave were what really saved her in the end. Thank you.”

Barret looked at him analytically, which always made the younger man uncomfortable.

He let out a rush of air through his nostrils. ‘Tifa an’ Marlene…they’re jus’ kids that had t’grow up too damn fast. Now I can see that you didn’t escape it, either. It’s not an excuse for you bein’ a jerk, but it still sucks.”

Life had always been hard. Since Cloud was born he’d been struggling through the arduous path that had been carved out for him by fate and misfortune. If he wasn’t fighting physical weakness, he was wishing that the bullies at school would leave him alone. The never ending cycle of seasons provided endless physical labor for Cloud and his mother as they struggled to survive on her meager income. He tried with everything he had to get to Midgar, to get a job, to marry Tifa, to support his wife and unborn child. Every step had been harrowing. For so many years, he’d looked around as more fortunate people seemed to skate effortlessly through the days and wondered if he was meant to live or if he survived this long out of pure luck.

How long had he been searching for meaning in his existence? In all of his conscious time on this planet, Cloud couldn’t help but wonder if he was ever meant to be more than a struggling peasant with a head full of dreams. But how did one measure success? When he’d married Tifa, he felt that he found purpose in his marriage and place in his wife’s heart. She needed his provision and protection, and was the only person on the planet aside from his mother who treasured his affection. And when they conceived a baby, Cloud never felt a stronger sense of drive and meaning to his life. When he’d lost his child and Tifa’s trust, it all came crashing down again.

Was the source of his worth really so impossible to find? Had he been trying to find it in the wrong places? He had no parents to be proud of him. His wife had been shaken by his absence and transformation, and his baby never had the chance to even hear his voice. He couldn’t even call himself a good friend: two dear souls slipped away right in front of him. It seemed that in any direction Cloud turned, he was faced with his own worthlessness and inadequacy. Was he hoping that succeeding in this struggle to save Gaia would open his eyes to a part of him that held value? Was revenge against Sephiroth and the desire to avenge his mother just a cover up for his desperate search for purpose? Where was he supposed to turn?

“I want to believe that there’s more than disappointment and pain in this life,” Cloud admitted. “I’ve come a long way, but I’m still working on it. There’s so much possibility in the future and I feel like it’s best to focus on that. Maybe then, I can finally prove to myself that I’m a ‘somebody’.”

It was strange to be opening up like this to Barret, but it was a strange relief at the same time. Since he’d feverishly woke up in Seventh Heaven for the first time, the fear that he was alone had been suffocating him. While it felt freeing to admit his weaknesses and uncertainties, it was terrifying at the same time. Life had always ruthlessly taught him that expressing vulnerability was rewarded with little more than pain and ridicule, so it was against his nature.
Barret almost seemed to sense his silent struggle and looked him right in the eyes.

“It’s a helluva lot easier to accept who you are, in all your damaged glory, than to try to be someone you're not,” he said. His countenance was stern before breaking out into a grin. “It's sure a hell of a lot more fun, too.”

The gun arm lay heavily upon the arm of the chair while his free hand rested atop Marlene’s head. It hadn’t occurred to Cloud until now that Barret was the father of a broken family. The man was full of character flaws and made some decisions that Cloud considered rash, but it didn’t make Marlene adore him any less. She treated her adoptive father with unrestrained admiration and affection despite the man’s glaring flaws, viewing him as a superhero in the innocent lens of a child. There was so much at stake in raising a child and so much could go wrong. How had Barret known that he could handle the responsibility of bringing up this little orphan?

“How do you do it?” he asked, nodding his head in the direction of the girl. “It’s scary to be a father, isn’t it? There are so many ways that things can fall apart or fail to work altogether. Handling that pressure must be daunting.”

“I just put one foot in front of the other,” Barret responded matter-of-factly. “I lost everything all at once, but wadin’ in it just makes it all worse. I was sad for a while, but I decided there was no time or energy to waste bein’ miserable and I channeled it toward AVALANCHE. Besides, Marlene was depending on me.”

What was it like to have a child relying on you for its every need? Cloud pictured the face of his daughter in his mind and felt something shrivel up inside him. His heart yearned to hold her right now, just like Barret was holding Marlene. He wanted to feel her little chest rising and falling with each deep breath as she slept soundly because she felt safe as she rested on her father. While Cloud felt secure in Tifa’s trust and affection, he couldn’t help but pine for the special kind of love that only his child could give.

“When you’ve met as many people as I have, you realize that it’s always wounded people who are holdin’ things together,” Barret continued, stifling a yawn.

“Do you ever get jealous of other families? I mean, they get to live such normal lives with their children and you can’t—at least, not now.”

“Nah. Comparison is the thief of joy and I ain’t givin’ into that. As long as Marlene is alright, I’m alright, and it’s simple as that,” he said, closing his eyes. “You let yourself get too riled up—worryin’ about every little thing. Let each day take care of itself.”

Cloud nodded, absorbing Barret’s wisdom. He’d never expected such a volatile, foul mouthed man to be so astute. But adversity builds both character and wisdom, and Barret had certainly endured many struggles. The best advice was always found in peculiar places and he was grateful for it.

“M’sorry about your baby,” the older man offered. “Tifa told me about her shortly after I hired her to look after Marlene.”

Cloud sighed with a mixture of sadness and release. Having Aria’s story be out in the open instead of a sad little secret was a surprising relief upon his heart. “It’s alright. It just wasn’t meant to be.”

Maybe he wasn’t meant to be a father. It was as if the universe knew how terrible and selfish and weak he was. Were the flaws in his personality so severe that even fate itself had prevented him from raising his child? He shook his head, trying to rid his thoughts of such addictive pessimism. Embracing himself and all his shortcomings would be a struggle, but he had to try.
“I don’t know how to be a father, anyway,” Cloud said, sitting back to lean on the couch cushion.

“Mine died when I was too young to remember anything about him. No one stepped in to pick up that slack for my mom in Nibelheim, so I never got to witness a good father’s work.”

“Eh, nonsense. You’ll be alright.”

Cloud blinked, shocked at how quickly Barret dismissed his sentiment. “You really think so?”

“Yeah,” Barret comforted. “And if that day ever comes where you have another baby, Tifa will be there t’keep your head on straight.”

“I guess you’re right.”

The young man smiled, encouraged by the reminder that he wouldn’t be alone. Marlene sighed in her sleep, rolling over to rest in against Barret’s bicep.

“Did you tell her about Dyne?”

Barret frowned almost instantly.

“It’d make me a pretty poor father t’ask a little kid t’carry such a load,” he muttered, bringing his left hand up to massage his temples. “Marlene is smart, but I think some knowledge is jus’ too heavy for her. When she’s older an’ stronger, she can bear it, but right now I’m gonna carry it for her.”

Cloud looked up at the ceiling. He knew that, sooner or later, his wife would want to discuss whether or not they planned to try again to start a family. If he hesitated, would it break her heart? How would he confront this heavy question when it inevitably came?

“I want to say that I’m strong enough to carry my kids’ burdens, but I’m not sure that I can. If Tifa and I never had a family, I don’t know if I’d feel relieved because of my fear or if I’d live in regret.”

He was shocked at the words that flowed effortlessly from him, especially because he was talking to Barret. But for some reason, Cloud felt safe, now.

“You gonna pay a price for every damn thing you do and every damn thing you don’t. You don’t have a choice not to, you only get t’choose which poison you take. That’s all,” Barret said, shrugging his right shoulder. “But I think you’ll regret lettin’ fear run your life.”

“The last time I let fear take control, you saw what it did to me.” Nervously, Cloud rubbed the back of his neck. “You’re right, but it isn’t only my choice. I need to talk to Tifa about it.”

After seeing the darkest parts of his heart, would Tifa still want to raise children with him? He hoped that, when they finally discussed this, she’d be honest and avoid sugar coating her opinion. She had her own flaws and insecurities, but her gentle and nurturing nature hadn’t been ripped away from her. Cloud wasn’t sure what he had to offer a child.

“Do you really think I could raise another human being?”

Barret thought about teasing the younger man with a witty retort, but Cloud’s expression chased the notion away. It was as if those piercing blue eyes were staring straight into his soul, begging for peace or affirmation.
“Listen,” he began, hoping to set Cloud at ease with the truth. “Everyone makes mistakes. Your folks might’a seemed like superheroes t’you, but parents are jus’ regular people. You gonna mess up, but kids are resilient. How d’you think Marlene isn’t a complete mess?”

The sound of a door opening upstairs caught their attention. Tifa’s bare feet came down the stairs as she ran a comb through her damp hair, humming softly in her throat. The boys watched quietly as she came into the living room and tossed the comb into her backpack on the coffee table.

“Ready for bed, Cloud?” she asked. The way the boys looked at each other made her suspicious, prompting a worried expression to form on her face. “What?”

“Nothin’,” Barret sighed. “Jus’ cherishin’ this time with Marlene before mornin’ comes.”

He rose carefully, cradling the girl against his chest. Tifa ran a gentle hand through the Marlene’s hair as Barret passed by on his way toward the steps. The thought of his giant body trying to squeeze in Marlene’s bed made her stifle a giggle.

“G’night, Teef. Get some sleep.”

“You too,” she said, fixing him with a relaxed smile.

She flopped down on the couch beside her husband and planted a quick kiss on his jaw before bending to put her socks on. It was still miraculous to Cloud that despite the chaos in their lives, things were normalizing between them. Looking toward the stairs, he watched as Barret ascended. The only part of Marlene that was visible was her tiny feet, which dangled over the crook of his arm. In that moment, it finally became clear how important it was to hold each other close and keep each other safe. There was imperfection everywhere. There would always be wounds that would weep, but day by day, they’d all move on.

“Hey, Barret?” Cloud called softly.

Barret stopped and turned to look over his shoulder.

“Thank you.”
Biting Back

It had been a bad day from the start.

After a full day’s work and an evening of bar tending, Marlene had awakened every hour from one in the morning until four, much to Tifa’s dismay. When Barret tried to console her, the two year old had whined and cried for Tifa until the young woman tiredly acquiesced. It seemed like she’d walked in slow circles all night with the baby on her hip, singing every comforting song she knew in a desperate attempt to lull the little one back to sleep. But not long after she’d laid Marlene back in her bed, Tifa would once again be pulled from blissful sleep. The toddler didn’t have a temperature or a dirty diaper, nor was she frightened to be alone. It was times like these that she wondered whether or not she was really cut out for being a mother figure. Most of the time, Tifa felt that her care for Marlene was adequate, but the occasional days where she felt completely lost were incredibly discouraging.

Not only did they make her feel insecure and detached from Marlene’s needs, but they also reminded her that she was not the girl’s real mother.

Groggy and unrested, Tifa rose at five o’clock for her early morning workout. She accidently woke up the baby as she fumbled through her drawers for her misplaced exercise clothes, stubbed her toe on one of Barret’s enormous dumbbells, then burnt the toast and eggs she’d made the others for breakfast. It seemed that with each passing moment, something else helped send her mood spiraling continuously downward. So when she reviewed her ingredients for the bar’s dinner menu, she wasn’t surprised that she was missing an essential ingredient. Although it was a Sunday morning, Barret still was required to report to his job site, so Tifa left Marlene in Jesse’s care while she ran out to the grocery store for a particular packet of herbs and spices.

She sighed as she shut the door behind her and shrugged on her jacket. Compared to the typical chaotic streams of pedestrians during each weekday, the streets of Sector Seven were calm on the weekends. The unusual cold snap in late March seemed to drive most people inside and away from the market, and Tifa was grateful not to have to wind her way through packed crowds to reach her destination. To her left, a young couple and their toddler stood at a hot food cart. Tifa slowed her feet to discreetly watch as the rosy-cheeked boy bit into his warm cookie, smearing chocolate around his mouth and making his parents laugh. Further down the avenue, the bright lights inside the wide window of a diner caught her attention. Inside, a handful of families were enjoying small towers of fluffy, syrup covered pancakes. The golden hair of a man seated at one of the tables made Tifa do a double take before she tripped over the curb, scraping her palms against the rough pavement.

Scrambling to her feet, Tifa felt her face burn with embarrassment. Instead of swinging her head around to check who had seen her fall, she shrunk into the collar of her jacket and strode onward. She was so angry, and it had nothing to do with making a fool of herself.

It hurt so badly to watch perfect families living their perfect lives, constantly making her think about how she hadn’t a single family member left on this planet. Wedge had tried to push her to attend some sort of grief counseling or support group, but her heart resisted the idea with such surprising force that she hadn’t considered it again. Tifa made her way into the grocer’s and paid for the spices without making eye contact with the clerk. On the way home, a truck rumbled by, splashing mud on her pants and boots, and two children tossing a ball back and forth caught her in the crossfire. So by the time she crossed the threshold of Seventh Heaven, it was all Tifa could do to keep herself from slamming the front door.
She took off her coat and placed it on the coat hook, letting out a frustrated growl when it fell to the ground.

“Woah there,” Jessie said, looking up from her place at the bar. There was a collection of sandwich ingredients on the bar top and a collection of crumbs, making Tifa’s fastidious nature bristle. “I thought a rabid dog snuck in here.”

Tifa frowned and unlaced her muddy boots. She kicked them off with a huff, not bothering to place them neatly on the shoe mat, and threw the packet of spices on a nearby table. Jessie pushed the barstool beside her out from the counter with her foot, wordlessly offering Tifa a seat. Unceremoniously, she plopped down beside her friend, black hair draping like a curtain around her bent head.

“What happened?”

“Everything. Everything happened and it’s only noon,” Tifa moaned, folding her arms on the bar so she could rest her head on them. “Where’s Marlene?”

“Nappin’,” Jessie answered, taking another sip of cola. “Want a can?”

“No.”

If she was honest with herself, Tifa knew that her foul mood had little to do with the minor inconveniences of the day and was the result of her recent emotional relapse. Most days, she was able to swallow her past and keep busy with the endless day to day tasks, but with the recent passing of her eighteenth birthday, it was difficult. She’d finally gained the status of ‘adult’ in Midgar, something she’d wanted so badly because it’d make life much easier without Barret having to cosign on orders of alcohol or open her own line of credit with a bank. The morning of her birthday, Tifa tried for a long while to convince herself that she was happy.

But she could only deny for so long what was really in her heart. It was agonizing to realize that time was still moving forward without Cloud and Aria in her life. How empty it felt to reach milestones in her life when they weren’t there beside her. How could time still pass—how could her life still be moving forward—despite their absence?

She stole a glance through her bangs at the older girl, who smiled as she flipped the page of one of her nerdy tech magazines and took another bite of her sandwich. Jessie was no stranger to injustice or suffering, yet she was steady and calm as a gentle stream. In comparison, Tifa felt much like a rollercoaster: she’d have blissful highs and dismal lows without very much in between. Jessie had been mistreated by her parents and by ShinRA, yet made the choice to be positive and channel her energy into helping the planet. If there was ever rage in her heart, it never showed. Tifa was embarrassed to admit that she occasionally lost control to her anger and sadness, letting the others see what was inside her as it manifested in her behavior. Did Jessie think she was immature for this sort of thing?

“How do you do it?” Tifa asked with a weary sigh. “How are you always so relaxed?”

Jessie shrugged with one shoulder, brown eyes still scanning the contents of the magazine. “I guess I’m just used to smothering bad feelings.”

“You mean you just shut them out?”

“No, it’s more like…channeling that energy into other things. You can’t really ‘smother’ them. They’ll come out in one way or another—it might as well be productive.”
For Tifa, it just hadn’t been enough to find her way back to a ‘good’ life. She felt selfish and ungrateful to admit such a thing, for she couldn’t imagine where she would be without the second chance at life that Barret, Marlene and AVALANCHE had given to her. There were certain holes in her heart that could never be filled, she supposed, and it was hard to accept. Ashamed, Tifa kept her eyes averted.

“I used to drink, you know,” Jessie offered, nudging her friend’s shoulder.

“Really? You’ve always refused alcohol, even for celebrations after a successful mission.”

“Used to,” she smiled and winked. “It was the way I saw everyone try to cope with pain or rejection in the slums. Then I met Biggs and Wedge. They taught me that bad things happen that aren’t my fault, and I had the power to create my future by choosing what kind of story I wanted my life to tell.”

Tifa frowned as she considered those words, sitting upright again. Resting her chin upon one fist, she realized how much sense Jessie was making and let out a bitter chuckle at how obvious the concept seemed. For so long, she had been convinced that all of the tragedy in her life was karma for mistakes she’d made or people she’d hurt in the past. Adopting the premise that she wasn’t to blame for the deaths of her loved ones was freeing, but Tifa still had to embrace the fact that she was responsible for undoing the thinking patterns that those traumas created.

“The story of my life would be such a depressing book,” she said with a sad smile. Brushing her hair over her shoulder, Tifa shyly turned to face Jessie. “I want to change that. I want my book to have a happy ending, but I guess I’m the only one who can control that.”

The older girl rose and walked around the bar to grab a small plate from the cupboard.

“That’s right. If you change your response to what you remember, you’ll be on the right path. The way you respond to difficult circumstances is key—at least, that’s what I’ve learned.”

Tifa watched as Jessie grabbed a can of cola and began to construct another sandwich. It was so hard to think of her friend as anything but strong and determined, and hurt to know that she’d struggled with alcoholism and hopelessness just like her father had. How thankful Tifa was that Jessie had been spared from a life of perpetual emptiness and pain by changing her mindset and holding fast to the things that gave her hope.

“I know that without you guys, my life would be so dark. Before I ran into Barret, my outlook on my future was so dark and hopeless,” Tifa admitted, drawing aimless circles with her index finger on the lacquered wood of the bar top. “But the way I see the world has changed so much since those days and I owe it to all of you. I feel like such a spoiled child for the way I’ve been acting.”

The older girl’s ponytail swung as she sent the can of cola sliding down the bar toward Tifa.

“Eh, don’t beat yourself up about it. Everyone has bad days,” Jessie said in a nonchalant manner. She cut the sandwich in half and placed the plate on the bar in front of her friend. “After all, you made it this far. And that, my friend, wasn’t easy. You went through the unthinkable and made it to the other side. If you can do that, you can do anything.”

They’d all been through so much and it didn’t seem fair that every day continued to be a struggle even after the worst of their traumas. But Jessie had helped open her eyes to the fact that experiencing deep grief had forced them to develop higher levels of grit than most, which was quite an advantage in the grand scheme of things. Didn’t the world need damaged people like themselves to show others the way to healing?
If she hadn’t experienced such hardship and loss, how could she ever hope to inspire and help others? If her life had always been free of trouble, would she have developed all of the positive and strong characteristics that now defined her?

As she took the first bite of her sandwich, Tifa decided that choosing to find strength in the face of adversity—instead of simply crumbling beneath it—was a noble ambition. It had been one of those tough days where everything seemed to be trying to bring her to tears. But when she cracked open the can of cola only to have it spray her in the face, she chose to laugh instead.

… … …

Midgar was in chaos.

Civilians were fleeing in droves and the streets were a disordered mess of harried people and scattered debris. The reckless firing of the Sister Ray atop one of Midgar’s mako reactors had caused a great deal of unintended structural damage to the upper plate. Overhead, the meteor continued its plummet toward Gaia, looking larger and more threatening with each passing day. People were crying, fearing for their lives. If the plate didn’t crumble and kill them, then the meteor certainly would when it collided with the planet.

But AVALANCHE wouldn’t run.

They’d traveled through the sewer system at first, trying their best to avoid being spotted by any vengeful ShinRA employees and figuring it would be easier than weaving in and out of people during their mass exodus of the city. But now, they’d resurfaced with the intent of confronting Hojo, who was perched high above them at the control panel to the Sister Ray.

The rain pounded against the winding metal stairways with a ping-ping-ping as Tifa climbed the tower behind Cloud. His pace was steady and determined and his focus was completely on his target, but Tifa found herself unable to resist looking out on the city far below. The canyons of steel and light harbored alleyways between them, twisting and turning like an elaborate maze. Lights flickered and hummed in the grey as trains swayed along their tracks. It was hard to see the dizzying fear of the people from this high up. This time, it was ShinRA who had caused such chaos from their reckless, dangerous actions. But one upon a time, Tifa herself had been partially responsible for similar things. Remembering her activities with AVALANCHE made guilt swirl in the pit of her stomach, but she pushed onward anyway.

The metal landing shook underneath her boots, trembling like her anxious spirit, and she panted as she turned to follow Cloud up the next flight of stairs.

They were almost there. The very thought of Hojo sent anger rushing through her core, for it was just so unfair. How much pain did this single person cause? How many people’s lives did he destroy? But by feeling disgust for Hojo’s actions, was she being a hypocrite? Tifa would be the first to admit that she wasn’t innocent: her actions to hinder ShinRA had undoubtedly hurt—maybe even killed—people. While she’d argued to be working with AVALANCHE out of concern for Gaia, the truth was that her heart had sought revenge for the pain and loss ShinRA had caused. Hojo seemed to be working for his own unsavory goals, just as she had, and she tried not to let the thought make her sick to her stomach.

But perhaps, there was a difference between them.

Tifa had realized the error of her ways. Letting anger control her and abandoning self-control in the name of something as immoral as revenge was not how she’d been raised. In her suffering, she’d turned from the values that had been instilled in her heart from very young age. In a way, she was
no different than her father had been. But Tifa was not that way anymore. It was true that Hojo had almost killed Cloud, nearly permanently snuffing out the light of his sweet soul. He’d stripped her husband of dear parts of his being, changing the young dreamer so that he no longer could go on as he had before. Like Tifa’s, Hojo’s sins had caused so much anguish. But unlike Tifa, however, the deranged scientist had never considered the well-being of others, admitted his wrong-doings or expressed the desire to make things right.

Repentance was arguably the most important step towards redemption, and Hojo seemed to reject it completely.

Somewhere along the way, Cloud’s ambition had morphed from a strict need for vengeance into a deep drive to protect others. In this case, protecting humanity and Gaia itself depended on putting a stop to ShinRA, Hojo, the meteor and Sephiroth—whatever it took. And she was so proud. Sometimes, it felt like they were still groping around in the dark for splinters of the old Cloud: the tentative optimist, the visionary, the kind hearted man who always tried to find pleasure in small things. There had been a few setbacks, but they were getting there. When Tifa thought back upon the life of her husband, it seemed that he’d always had a rope around his neck—being led from birth continuously into ruin. As she watched him sprint tirelessly up the endless metal staircase, it was apparent that he’d finally decided to take his fate into his own hands.

It was time to stop the cycle.

At last, they reached the top of the structure. The rain was pounding, now, washing over the sheet metal in a loud hiss. Blinking, bright lights of a large control panel immediately caught their attention. It was covered from the rain by a crudely constructed tin canopy, casting it in a broad shadow. In front of the buttons and switches was a familiar silhouette. Tifa wiped her dripping bangs out of her eyes as her limbs shivered with cold and fear, for the figure was most definitely Professor Hojo. Beside her, Cloud’s hands tightened into fists. There wasn’t a trace of apprehension in his features and she fed off of his bravado. Hadn’t they decided together that they wouldn’t flee?

Their combined collection of strife had taught them to face fear, sadness and hopelessness with a straight back. The misfortune of losing their daughter had made them better people in the end, for they’d learned that they were living for more than just themselves. There was more to life than their tiny sphere of existence. Life was something precious and should be protected, no matter the cost. This nightmare that they’d faced had shown them that they could survive pretty much anything, since they’ve already been through their own personal version of hell.

Her heart softened when he turned to look at her, blonde spikes drooping with moisture and expression brimming with resolve. It seemed as if he was looking to her for reassurance that he was doing the right thing and that he’d wind up okay in the end, so she smiled and gave him a resolute nod. They were strong, both in the heart and mind, married and bound by their promises, grief and dreams. She couldn’t imagine there was anything in existence that could tear them apart now.

Cloud let his startling eyes linger on hers, for he couldn’t stop appreciating his wife and her intrepid heart. How blessed was he that, since early childhood, Tifa had served as a voice of reason and truth in his life. She always encouraged his feet to move forward by reassuring him that he could do it and that he didn’t need to be afraid. For so long, Cloud had chosen to listen to the dispiriting lies of Sephiroth instead of his wife because he hadn’t the strength to believe her words. But now, all that had changed. They’d started to rebuild a bridge of loving memories—new and bright ones that would carry them into their future. Nothing could hold them back; when she pulled him near, he came to life.
“Hojo!” Cloud roared, sprinting forward with the rest of AVALANCHE following behind.

The enormous barrel of the Sister Ray towered overhead, stretching out into the black sky. Dozens of wires and enormous cables fed the canon, crisscrossing and overlapping as they wound their way up toward it. Mako electricity sparked and snapped across them, displaying the crude, hasty construction of the monstrous structure. At the control panel, Professor Hojo barely acknowledged them when they skidded to a halt just meters away.

“Oh, it’s you. The failure,” he muttered.

Another crackle of electricity rippled through the air as Cloud almost growled in frustration.

“My name is Cloud!”

He’d had a long time to become accustomed to Hojo and the type of person that he was. The years of torture under the man’s experimentation were still only a fog of pain and terror in Cloud’s mind, but he’d learned enough within the last few months to conclude that the scientist was one of the most despicable human beings alive. It was shocking how, when being confronted by someone he’d tormented for years without consent, the man could barely muster the courtesy to turn around.

“Whatsoever,” Hojo sighed. He was typing furiously on a keyboard as he monitored the screen’s display. “Everytime I see you, it reminds me how little I used to know.”

Cloud slowly pulled the buster sword from its resting place on his back, a familiar weight in his hands.

Hojo’s words made the grip of his past cling a little tighter, and it made him realize that he might never heal completely from this particular trauma. The ghosts of his regrets and sins howled and screamed, clawing and biting as they threatened to ruin him. But he wouldn’t despair, because Tifa would be with him no matter what. On the days where either of their hearts felt weak and vulnerable, they’d lift one another up. It was okay for his steps to falter once in a while, for he was standing on her love and promises. As children, their bond had lit up the way through tangles and snares and darkness; surely, it would be no different now. Like two cords of rope that had been woven together, they were strong and unbreakable when they clung to one another.

“Back in the crater, I evaluated you as a failed project,” Hojo continued, finally turning around to meet his aggressors. “But now it’s clear that you’re the only successful Sephiroth clone.”

How many others had Professor Hojo tortured? Though turbulent and foggy, Cloud’s memories of those days included the agonized screams of Zack Fair. Somehow, his best friend had been able to keep enough of his wits about him to stay conscious and even come up with a successful plan of escape. Cloud was tempted to let himself descend into feelings worthlessness, for Zack had been an extraordinary person in every aspect. He’d tried with all his might to emanate those admirable traits, but had always come up short. Now that he could think clearly, however, it was easy to conclude that comparing himself to someone else was foolish and counterproductive. Instead, he’d compare the Cloud he was yesterday with the Cloud he is today. Only then could he truly measure his growth or success.

“None of that matters,” Cloud growled through gritted teeth. “This needs to stop, Hojo!”

He barely noticed Vincent and Nanaki come to stand beside him, anxious to put an end to this madman’s tyranny.

“Oh, it’ll stop. Once Sephiroth completes his goal, it’ll all be over,” Hojo cackled, the flickering
light glinting off of the lenses of his glasses. "Sephiroth needs more mako energy, so I’m lending my son a hand. He is in need of my assistance to gain power. His energy level is only at eighty three percent—it’s taking too long!"

“Your…son?” Cloud gulped, suddenly feeling sick to his stomach.

Who in the world would ever choose to reproduce with a man so vile and bankrupt of morals? Despite the evil and pain that Sephiroth had subjected each one of them (and Gaia itself) to, this man still was bent on trying to help him to cause more suffering. For a moment, Cloud hesitated. If Aria had survived, what lengths would he have gone to aid his daughter? Was there any chance that he would’ve been just as crazy in his attempts to give her what she needed?

“Yes, but he doesn’t know,” the professor mumbled. He turned back to the control panel, resuming his frenzied keystrokes. An unhinged bout of laughter tumbled from him. “What will he think when he finds out? He always looked down on me. I offered the woman with my child to professor Gast’s Jenova Project. When Sephiroth was still in the womb, we took the cells of Jenova and—"

“Enough!” Vincent cried. His deep red eyes were bright with malice and contempt.

It was strange and unnerving to see Vincent, who was usually passive and reserved, display his anger so freely. Although he hadn’t asked too many questions, Cloud knew that Vincent was also a victim of Hojo’s. Was that the only reason that he was simmering in uncharacteristic ire?

“So it was you who was behind it all,” Cloud surmised. “You turned your unborn child into an experiment to chase your scientific goals! You lied to him since he was born and he went mad—you ruined his life!”

With Hojo’s admission, Cloud no longer hesitated to condemn the man’s motives. Helping Sephiroth would always come second to helping himself and his own goals. The mad scientist held no emotional attachment to his own flesh and blood—he merely sought to use him until the very end. Cloud hadn’t had much insight into mankind’s capacity for good until he had some well-developed insight into mankind’s capacity for evil. This situation had highlighted some of the very ugliest human hearts on Gaia, and he wanted nothing more than to purge that evil away.

“I slept for decades to try and forget the pain of what you did to Lucrecia and me. How foolish I was,” Vincent seethed, his voice still smooth as silk. He raised the barrel of his gun, pointing it at the professor. “The one that should have slept was you, Hojo!”

Cloud exhaled, tightening the grip on the handle of his weapon. Nanaki growled beside him, lowering his head aggressively as his body tensed into a pounce position. It was that moment that Cloud realized that he’d finally gained all that he’d ever wanted. Tifa was at his side as his wife, offering her continuous love and support, even when he felt his weakest. For the first time in his life, he had a group of friends who shared some of his goals and dreams. They had all stood by him when he was at the lowest he’d ever been. Each one had lifted him up with their own personal stories and triumphs, and expressed their confidence in his leadership despite his problems. Despite the many losses in his life, Cloud’s heart was full.

“I won’t be defeated so easily,” Hojo crooned, a sinister smile stretching slowly across his face. “I’ve injected Jenova’s cells into my own body. Please enjoy the result.”

For his entire life, Cloud had never had the upper hand in any situation. He’d struggled and struggled for even the most ordinary things in life and it seemed that the same was true for his comrades. Perhaps, this was their chance to finally rise beyond. For Nanaki and Vincent especially, this was their time to shine after being tortured by Hojo at some point in their lives. Cloud thought
of how they were connected in their suffering, bringing them together even closer in a sort of twisted bond of brotherhood. He thought of Zack, and how this man had torn him away from Aerith and the parents waiting for him in Gongaga.

Before them, Hojo began to change form. His skin started to turn a sick, greenish tint and his body began to shake. Whatever had been left of Hojo’s humanity evaporated away as he transformed into a ghoulish creature in front of their eyes. Cloud’s predatory vision locked on his enemy, pupils dilating as mako green swirled within bright blue. Zack had sacrificed his life trying to save him. That day, Cloud promised to be his living legacy—to live his life as if it had two lives in it: one for him and one for Zack. Each day would be full of gratefulness, love and adventure as he stretched the limits of his comfort zone, tip-toeing every day toward new horizons.

Vincent was the first to attack, the firing of his gun startling Cloud out of his pensive state. It became ever clearer that this broken world was full of broken people. But the choice to fight against that brokenness or let it swallow you in its gaping darkness was what set apart the strong from the weak. There was so much light within him to counter that darkness and Cloud would not back down. He leapt forward into the fray, the memory of Zack and his honor beating in every pulse of his heart.

ShinRA was crumbling, but for the first time in her life it didn’t seem of any importance.

AVALANCHE had boarded the Highwind, cold and wet and shaken after the encounter with Hojo. While any loss of human life was a terrible shame, Tifa found herself relieved that Gaia was no longer home to a man who held no remorse for the suffering he had wrought upon so many. And now, as she hid in the airship’s chocobo stable to steal secret kisses from her husband, she felt unbridled joy tingling through her body. Watching Hojo transform from a miserable human being into a literal monster reminded her of all that Cloud had been rescued from. Her heart was ready to explode with thankfulness as she stood up on her tip-toes to reach his lips with her own.

How worn their hearts had become as they’d wandered in this desert of endless peril and conflict. But despite it all, they’d blossomed, and their story would not end in tragedy if they could help it. Tifa wrapped her arms around Cloud’s shoulders, kissing him with a fierceness she couldn’t remember possessing before. He yielded, returning her kiss before grinning against her lips as she used her weight to push him gently against the wall.

“What’s gotten into you all of a sudden?” he panted. A rare, silly smile had woven its way across his face, making her remember just how terribly she missed it.

Tifa moved her hands down to rest just below his shoulders, looking up at him with mirth in her eyes. “It’s those giant biceps, of course. I just got to watch them work.”

Cloud’s eyebrows shot upwards. “Seriously?”

“No!” A chuckle broke its way from her throat and she leaned forward to kiss him again. “I mean, you’re the most attractive man on earth. But right now, I’m just grateful that you’re here with me.”

He pressed into her kiss before scooping her up in his arms. Tifa giggled, wondering when the last time was that she felt so free and light as she wound her arms around his neck. Without warning, Cloud broke the kiss and spun her around in a tight circle, watching as her long hair trailed behind. He wanted this moment to last forever, for he had waited much too long to see the sparkling happiness in her eyes and know that he was the one who put it there. Gently, he placed Tifa back on her feet.
“I’m just grateful that you trust me,” he sighed with relief. “I understand why you did it, but watching you hesitate around me hurt.”

“How’s this for hesitation?” she grinned, suddenly tackling him into a pile of soft hay.

Tifa could tell he was surprised, for he offered no resistance and ended up falling on his rear. His baritone laugh was even rarer than his smile and she cherished the sound. It didn’t matter that the hay poked and scratched at her knees that landed between his legs or that it wasn’t the most romantic of locations. All she wanted was her beloved: his familiar scent, his sweet embrace and his comforting warmth. The need for revenge on ShinRA had long dissolved from her bones, replaced by the desire to work hard toward a better future. Why had it taken her so long to see that seeking to harm those who harmed her would only lead to more emptiness? It would have never erased the scars upon her heart, only continuing the chain of suffering.

The thirst for revenge brought about a certain sort of moral blindness that had convinced her broken heart to toss away the ethical truths that she’d learned long ago. Now that her eyes had been opened once again, Tifa was ashamed of how quickly she’d fallen into such a vindictive and cruel state of mind. And now, as she looked into Cloud’s eyes, she vowed that she would never again fall victim to the seductive attraction of revenge, no matter how much loss or tragedy was in her future. Pushing forward into Cloud again, she smiled as he easily yielded to her and flopped down on his back into the hay. Resting her head on his chest, Tifa sighed with content. The scent of the hay alone reminded her of home: of long days exploring the Hansen family’s farm with her friends and watching the birds come to collect nesting material from the recently cut hay fields. Tifa closed her eyes and remembered how Papa had stuffed the scarecrow for their little garden with straw, and that Cloud’s mother had used straw as mulch for her plants. Were those days really so far away?

“I’m starting to feel better now,” Cloud said softly. “And I can tell that you are, too.”

She turned her head upward to look into his face, admiring his features. The softness in his eyes was reminiscent of the little boy she used to know, and her heart felt full at the memory of her lifelong friend. At one time, Tifa believed that Cloud could fill in all the holes that life had carved in her heart. Age and experience had brought wisdom, revealing the fundamental truth that no one would ever be able to heal each and every wound she’d sustained over the years. It wasn’t fair to place that burden on any single soul. Everyone lived with scars; the strongest learned from them and bolstered their integrity.

It lightened her heart to see that Cloud was one of those strong people.

“I want to say that it was because of you,” she said, crossing her arms over his chest and pressing a short kiss to his nose. “And maybe it was. After I thought you died, it took me so long to find any sort of normal again.”

He watched her closely, listening with both his ears and his heart. Cloud’s head lay against the hay, his hair as golden as the straw beneath him, and she couldn’t help but smile at the sight. But her husband’s expression had fallen, those blue eyes heavy with guilt.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered. “I can’t imagine what you must’ve felt. Especially after she was born…”

Tifa slowly inhaled, closing her eyes at the memory. But a gentle smile still graced her lips. Her grief could not control her anymore; she had finally been set free.

“I thought I’d healed back then, but I didn’t. I was just pushing every thought that hurt me away
and closing my heart off.” She reached a hand up to sweep a stray piece of hay from Cloud’s cheek. “But I’m different, now. I’ve grown. I’ve faced the very worst memories and monsters inside of me and I’m alright, Cloud. I’m okay. I want the story of my life to have a happy ending.”

He leaned up to kiss her lips before cradling her against his chest with both of his arms. Tifa sighed happily, for his embrace was her ultimate place of solace.

“Tifa...”

“Hm?”

A few empty moments went by. She listened to the steady beat of his heart, her head rising and falling with every breath he took.

“I want to be a dad.”
When Tifa first stepped outside to tend the garden, the fresh air had felt soothing on her healing skin. But now that the sun had risen higher into the sky and chased the shade away, a thin sheen of sweat had formed on her forehead, arms and chest.

She’d spent the better part of a week in bed, recovering from chicken pox. The highly contagious illness had spread quickly through Nibelheim’s small community. Cloud, whose body had always been particularly susceptible to ailments, caught it immediately and hadn’t left his house for five days. Unfortunately, Claudia had invited Tifa over for dinner the very night that Cloud’s pox started to appear, and the close proximity to her best friend had sealed her fate. One evening, as she was soaking in the bath tub, Tifa noticed an itchy bump just above her navel. Then there was one on the outside of her right thigh, and three on her chest. That night, she’d walked slow circles in her room, fretting over whether or not she should let her father know. Open, comfortable conversation with Brian was a thing of the past, and she knew better than to bother him with anything he would consider to be trivial.

Ultimately, fear and delirium from her rising fever coaxed Tifa to wander into his workshop and show him her spots. He wasn’t concerned, dismissing her with the sentiment that chicken pox wasn’t fatal, and she mourned the death of the distant hope that he’d have pity and help care for her. Soaking in a baking soda bath had been her only saving grace during the worst of the itching and she was grateful to be left alone as she waited impatiently for her fever to break. Alone in her bed, Tifa ached for her mother’s loving care (as she often did), and felt trapped in her loneliness. At twelve years old, she supposed she should be more mature than to long for her Mama, but it was hard to stifle such feelings.

Surely, Papa would’ve scolded her for her foolishness.

But now that she’d recovered, she could bury herself in her distractions and chores once again. Tifa was thankful for that small mercy.

The heavy rains of late summer had allowed for dozens of weeds to pop up in the garden and by half past noon, she’d already filled the large bucket with them and other plant waste from pruning and trimming. Tifa wiped a hand across her brow, removing the sweat but leaving a smear of dirt in its place. The water pump was near the fence that separated the Strife’s backyard from hers, and she slowly wandered over to fill her watering can. A small grunt escaped her throat as she pried the spigot handle from its resting position. Sighing, Tifa watched the water run into the can and slumped against the fence until the sound of crunching twigs and leaves told her that someone was approaching. A nervous swivel of her head allowed her to spot the familiar figure of Cloud, entering his backyard from the woods beyond.

His crudely made fishing pole was slung over his right shoulder and his rolled-up trousers were damp from wading. There was a small burlap sack in his left hand that she assumed held at least one fish. A strange urge to hide washed over her suddenly and Tifa quickly hid behind the wide trunk of the oak tree. Never before had she purposefully hidden from Cloud (outside of a game of hide-and-seek), and the girl felt her face heating up with shame and nervousness. Peeking carefully out from behind the trunk, she watched him through the gaps in the fence until the sound of crunching twigs and leaves told her that someone was approaching. A nervous swivel of her head allowed her to spot the familiar figure of Cloud, entering his backyard from the woods beyond.

Over the years, Tifa had seen Cloud shirtless more times than she could count. It wasn’t a strange
occurrence, so why was she so curious about his body all of a sudden? Sucking in a breath, she let her gaze wander over him as he prepared to chop wood for the stove. His muscles flexed as he split each log, his pale skin shining with sweat in the midday sun. There were still pink blotches on his skin where his pox had been, but the bumps were gone and the discoloration was barely noticeable anymore. Cloud’s thirteenth birthday had passed a handful of weeks ago and Tifa swore that there was something very different about him now—something much more grown up and almost out of reach. Papa had taken her out of school three years ago—after her mother’s death—and she felt so far behind her friend academically that she was embarrassed at the thought of him discovering her lacking literary skills. How much he had changed since he was just a small slip of a boy without confidence or even shoes to wear to school!

Blushing, Tifa turned away. She couldn’t let Cloud see her, now! The pox on her face had shriveled and hardened into ugly dark scabs, her hair was unkempt from her toils in the garden and she was wearing her oldest frock with the large tear in the hem of the skirt. For a moment, her heart battled with itself, for her desperate desire for companionship in her lonely life was just as strong as her will to stay hidden from sight. In the end, Tifa’s shyness won, and she stealthily sped up the porch steps and into the back door.

Catching the movement out of the corner of his eye, Cloud turned his head toward the Lockhart’s backyard. Wiping the blonde bangs out of his sweaty face, his heart leapt joyfully into his chest at the thought that his best friend might feel well enough to say hello. Gardening instruments had been abandoned in the soil along with an overflowing bucket of weeds. Holding his breath, he scanned the yard, but it seemed that Tifa was nowhere to be found.

The only sound was the slow plip, plip, plip of the spigot as water dripped slowly into a full watering can.

… … …

“Do you think they’ll come back?”

Though he hadn’t meant to verbalize it, Cloud’s question broke the comfortable silence. Although the prairie wind was soothing and gentle against his skin, his heart was quite troubled.

After AVALANCHE had calculated that there were approximately seven days until the meteor finally collided with Gaia, Cloud had encouraged their team members to visit with their loved ones. He’d suggested it with the premise that they’d all have the chance to rediscover just what it was they were fighting for, but it was also his way of allowing each one a final farewell to those who meant most to them. There was no guarantee that their rag-tag group would be victorious over such a supernatural force. In the morning, they’d head to the Northern Crater to confront Sephiroth once and for all. How would it feel to know he had led them all to ruin? If Gaia was destroyed, Cloud knew there was no way that even death would free his soul from the guilt of his responsibility for it all.

“I hope so,” Tifa breathed beside him.

Unlike him, his wife seemed so calm. She sat at his side with her legs crossed in the grass, watching the meteor with a sort of detached gaze that made Cloud wonder if she actually saw it at all.

“Isn’t it strange?” Tifa mused. “Here we are, at the end of the world. We lost our home and our families and even ourselves, for a little while…but we’re still here: alive and together.”

“Do you think we’ll manage to keep that lucky streak?”
“Yeah, I think we will,” she sighed, smiling calmly as she closed her eyes. Cloud watched as the wind gently tussled her hair, incredulous that the beautiful woman beside him was the dear little girl of their youth. Since they’d met, Tifa filled up some sort of yearning, empty place inside him. Over the years, his wife’s heart had been battered and bruised, but never beyond repair, and Cloud was never more relieved than he was now. She turned to look at him as she continued. “And even if we don’t, it’ll be alright, because we’re together.”

Cloud nodded. “We’re no strangers to fear, are we? It’ll be alright in the end.”

The sky was clear, devoid of clouds as the fiery sunset began to slowly fade into twilight. Inhaling slowly, Cloud focused on the sensation of the mild air filling his lungs before quietly breathing out again. How peaceful they were now. It was if they were sitting in the serene eye of a hurricane, enjoying the calm before enduring the rest of the storm.

“Do you think we were born for this?” Tifa asked suddenly, her voice laced with a bit of wonder.

“To save Gaia?”

“Yes. I mean, all this time I’ve felt like fate has just kind of pushed me around like a feather adrift on the sea,” she explained, moving her hand up and down in a wave-like motion. “But now, I think I’m beginning to see things more clearly. Maybe, all of our toils and struggles were carefully planned out before us: like a piece on a chess board. Even a lowly pawn can tackle a king if the player is careful enough.”

Tifa leaned her head against his shoulder, eyes on the sky as the stars came out of hiding: one by one. He shifted his weight to lean slightly against her, taking comfort in their proximity as he reflected upon her words. It was a rare occasion for Cloud to consider that the suffering he’d experienced in life was anything more than poor luck or missed opportunities. Was there really something more at play here? Had there truly been a well thought out plan and purpose for his life since his conception? At first thought, it seemed outlandish and silly to believe that there was meaning in his strife and trouble. But perhaps his wife was on to some hidden truth beneath all of this sadness and grief. Could it be true that every circumstance was more than just happenstance? The thought was intriguing and strangely encouraging.

She watched as a half-smile crooked at the corner of his mouth before he answered. “Some of us are pawns, but others are definitely queens.”

He raised his hand to hold her chin between his thumb and pointer finger. Tifa immediately turned away with a bashful flick of her head, silly grin spreading from cheek to blushing cheek.

“Oh, you…” she giggled, treasuring the way he chuckled in response.

For so long, she’d been desperately searching for the Cloud of her youth and was now convinced that in some aspects, that boy was gone for good. However, he’d seem to have retained many of the qualities she held dear while growing and maturing in areas where he’d lacked before. His posture was always straighter and a newfound confidence encouraged him to hold his head high. He spoke his mind, seeming to finally believe that he had the same right to his desires and ambitions that everyone else had. Pride swelled within her, for Tifa had watched him struggle endlessly to overcome his endless trepidations. She didn’t want the old Cloud back anymore. It seemed that she was wholly, completely in love with her husband’s transformation. Fear no longer caged him in with iron bars; he’d found the way out on his own, flying boldly out into the warmth of the sun.

Tifa rose a hand to her cheek, which was still painted pink with embarrassment. “Cloud…even if meteor hits, you’ll be a hero even then.”
"How do you mean?"

He shifted slightly, turning to face her. Wind rippled across the prairie grass and filtered through Tifa’s long hair, making Cloud long to run his fingers through it. Her long, silky tresses had always fascinated and beckoned him, and he was momentarily distracted by the gentle swaying of dark strands.

“You saved me from my loneliness, and my dead-end life in Nibelheim,” she said, slowly twirling a lock of hair with her pointer finger. “All that happened at home, when I was young…it made me feel like I wasn’t worthy of saving from the bleak future I thought I had. But you came to save me, even though I didn’t deserve it.”

“Are you kidding?” A short, wry laugh broke free from his throat. “All the lies your father put in your head—all the things you convinced yourself to believe—aren’t true. We are all flawed, right? You think I’m a hero, but I still am guilty of wrongdoing.”

Cloud closed his eyes as a handful of sins flashed across his memory: as a young trooper, he’d aided in the capture of AVALANCHE members in Junon, likely leading to their execution. He’d abandoned his mother in Nibelheim to pursue a vain career only to fall miserably short, and was unable to stop Sephiroth from burning his hometown to the ground. He’d unintentionally abandoned Tifa and his unborn daughter for four years, aided in the destruction of ShinRA property (and probably employee lives) and was part of the reason for the Sector Seven plate collapse. He couldn’t save Zack nor Aerith because he’d been weak: either physically or mentally. But what was the point of marinating in guilt and grief, regret and shame?

“We all have sins,” Cloud continued, pausing as he let a slow breath out through his nostrils. “I think that the point is to grow despite what’s trying to hold us back—to admit our faults and work to correct them. I have to believe that there’s a path to forgiveness.”

Tifa hugged her knees to her chest. Her arms were littered with goosebumps as the chill of twilight made the temperature begin to dip. Resting her chin upon her knees, she mumbled against her skin.

“Is there really redemption for people like us?”

For some reason, those words made Cloud’s heart begin to bleed. As children, their purpose in life had seemed so simple: to find the right path to catalyze their dreams and find happiness. How foolish they’d been not to realize just how many snags and snares there were along the winding road they’d chosen. There used to be a time where the two of them could stare out at the sky and imagine a life of endless possibility. Would they ever feel that way again? Their sins had carved eternal marks upon their hearts and changed them in a permanent way, no matter how many regretful tears they’d shed over them. It didn’t seem like there was a way to escape their transgressions. Perhaps there was one still waiting to be found.

“Someday, we’ll find the answer,” Cloud decided, blue eyes locking with wine-colored ones. “Right, Tifa?”

Their lives had demonstrated that reality was indeed cruel, yet hope always managed to seep through the cracks and pool at the bottom of their battered spirits. The truth was: even with their sins, there was still so much that made their lives worth living. In her heart, Tifa knew that having the chance to experience Cloud’s love was worth the pain of living with a heavy conscience.

She met his gaze with a cautious smile. “Yeah, that’s right.”

He wrapped an arm around her, pulling her even closer to his side as they watched the dusting of
stars appear in the heavens. How humbly sweet it was to merely enjoy each other’s closeness, basking in the simple pleasure of their soulmate’s presence. Before, some thought or circumstance had always gotten in the way. And now, somehow, peace had flooded forth. Tifa rested into the secure hold of his arm, sighing in contentment at the comforting feeling of his body heat against her. How safe she felt there, even without the promise of victory against the meteor. For a time, they remained there, the only sounds being the gentle rhythm of their breathing and the chorus of crickets reverberating through the sea of grasses.

“Tifa?”

Lazily, she rolled her head to look at him. “Hm?”

“Did you date anyone in the years we were apart?”

While his inquiry was valid, she couldn’t help but laugh. “Are you kidding me? One hundred percent of my efforts were focused on surviving and trying to be ‘normal’ again.”

“Oh come, now,” Cloud teased, a benign grin flashing across his face. He leaned in toward her face slightly. “You’re the most beautiful girl in the world! I’m sure you were fighting off guys all the time.”

“Not exactly. And trust me, I’m too shy to flirt with a man if I tried. Growing up with the man I’d marry really spoiled me,” Tifa stuttered. She hated how easy it was for him to get her flustered and hot in the face!

“I know you’ve suffered through so much,” he whispered. Tifa held her breath as he gently kissed her cheek. “Won’t you let me spoil you some more?”

Her limbs began to tingle in an unfamiliar, pleasant way as her heart began to beat wildly in her chest. Somewhere along his awful journey, Cloud had transformed from her fumbling, lovable boy into a man and it drove something deep within her wild. His lips were hovering just beyond her own—simultaneously teasing and asking permission—and she couldn’t help but press into them with a crushing kiss. She felt Cloud exhale through his nostrils as he deepened their kiss, moving to hold her gently in both of his arms. To Tifa’s dismay, she felt her shyness returning, swelling up within her like an over filled balloon threatening to burst. She wanted to hide for some reason she couldn’t explain and she fought to struggle against it, for she had hidden too much of herself from him for too long. How badly she needed to let Cloud in, to let him see who she’d become: the good parts and the bad. In turn, Tifa would be forced to face that reality along with him.

Eyes burning, she parted their kiss, drawing back to look into his face. “I can’t be me without you, Cloud.”

Unbidden, a tear threatened to trickle from the corner of her eye. Tifa lifted her hand to wipe it away, unsure of what was making her eyes well up in the first place. Was it relief? Happiness? Her husband gently cupped her hand, bringing it between both of his. How grateful she was that Cloud seemed to understand her when she couldn’t understand herself, his expression displaying calm comfort instead of worry. He kissed the ridges of her knuckle and met her gaze.

“And I’m right here,” he whispered against her skin. “So don’t cry anymore, Tifa.”

As if his words tore away the resolve that kept her upright, she collapsed forward into his strong, sturdy form. Cloud held her closely, allowing her to listen to the steady thrumming of his heart as she rested her head against his chest. There, pressed closely together, he spoke to her without words. Although they were scarcely moving, Tifa felt his body speaking clearly to her. The small kisses he planted on her brow told of how precious she was to him and the soft stroking of his
thumb along her bare shoulder whispered his need to protect and shelter her. When she pressed her chest flush against his, she wanted him to know just how much she needed his partnership and strength. The languid kiss Tifa placed at the base of his throat screamed how much she craved to get even closer still.

His slow, shaky exhale let her know that he echoed that sentiment.

Resting her palm over his heart, she could feel its steady beat and the measured rise of his breathing. Curious, she caught his hand, running her thumb over the sword callouses on his palm before sliding her fingers up the length his arm. Tifa watched as the orange light settled softly upon his features. His eyes were sparkling with promise and the light of hope lit up his face from the inside, making the sunset pale in comparison to his brilliance.

Tifa placed her hands on his chest, feeling the solid muscle underneath the ribbing of his shirt before dragging her fingers down to his abdomen. She stilled for a moment, gathering her resolve, before untucking the garment from his fatigues. Even now, lingering fears of possible pregnancy tugged at her heart. If they survived Sephiroth and the meteor, would she and Cloud be stable enough in any way to deal with a child if one were to come of this union? Would her heart be able to stand the fact that a new child was growing where Aria once had? Childbirth had been so violent and traumatic that the thought of enduring it again made her shudder. But wasn’t it worth it to finally be a real mother?

Tifa was a real mother, though she struggled to admit it to herself. Deep inside, it was hard for the thoughts of Aria to echo anything except failure. She should’ve sensed something was wrong back then. She’d had no money, but surely she could’ve found a way to have a doctor monitor her pregnancy. If she hadn’t been so careless and clueless, would her daughter have survived? Would she be in her arms right now? The familiar tornado of dead end thoughts and blame was starting to swirl again, but she took a deep breath to still her mind once more.

Everything would be alright.

She’d grown, she’d learned and she’d become so much stronger than she ever dreamed she would be. Cloud was here. He wasn’t leaving and Tifa could rest in the assurance that they would face any new circumstance together. Nothing would make her relinquish her newly found freedom and bravery. At long last, she’d found the liberty to breathe the tranquil air of peace once more. How precious it was to possess the knowledge that nothing could hold her down without her permission.

A smile tugged at her lips as her husband undid the clasps of his pauldron in a clumsy hustle, freeing himself from the straps and buckles of his suspenders and thick belt. Tifa took the opportunity to shrug out of her own pair of suspenders, sucking in a nervous breath as her husband pulled his tank top over his head, unceremoniously tossing it into the grass. For a brief moment, a memory of her scrawny childhood friend with limbs like toothpicks and a goofy, toothless grin came to mind. She could hardly believe that the well-sculpted man before her could possibly be that same little boy. Mako and endless battles had burned away excess fat and defined each and every muscle on his svelte frame. Why hadn’t she taken the time to notice just how perfect he was before now? Perhaps, Tifa had been too focused on his battling heart and mind to notice his flawless body.

Almost automatically, her hands reached out for him. One cupped his cheek while the other trailed slowly down his bare chest. Tifa drew in a slow breath as she explored the littering of scars across his skin. The sight brought unbearable thoughts creeping into her mind of how much he had suffered, both in his body and his mind at the hands of a madman. Her gaze landed on the large scar where Sephiroth had run him through as Nibelheim burned. The faded mark was a testament to
his bravery and she exhaled with pride. Cloud may be unsure of himself and struggle with confidence, but when in the face of evil, her husband had stood his ground. The scar was barely visible, long since healed through a combination of materia and mako therapy. Bending, Tifa pressed a kiss there in silent thanks.

She sent her hands twining slowly around his neck. They teased the short hair at the base of his skull as Cloud dipped his head to trail slow, loving kisses down her throat, her collarbone and along the top of her shirt. The sound of her pleasured sigh awoke something primal within him, and he bit back a groan as her fingers began to roam the sensitive skin along his ribs and the small peaks of his abdomen. Without conscious thought, his palms came to rest at her hips, thumbs caressing the exposed skin at her hip. When he kissed her, it was full of passion and urgency, and it filled him with relief that he felt the same intensity upon her lips. The sensation of his calloused fingers slowly sliding up her shirt sent flutters of excitement and arousal tingling through her core. Tifa decided to tug off her own shirt, hastily at first before slowing her movements as her deep-rooted modesty took hold.

Cloud caught her slight hesitation and looked up to meet her eyes with a questioning glance. Had he read her emotions incorrectly this entire time? The last thing he wanted was for his wife to feel uneasy, especially in this aspect of their relationship, and he drew back a few inches.

“Tifa?”

She shook her head, dark hair swaying with the slight movement, and took hold of his hand. With a reassuring smile, Tifa placed his palm upon the soft fabric of her bra. Cloud watched her expression closely, memorizing the warmth in her eyes. She looked as though she was feeling abashed, and he loved her all the more for her vulnerability. Raging testosterone tempted him to keep his hand at her breast, but he moved it to cup her face instead in an attempt to reassure her. Tifa’s smile was so pure in that moment that it set his heart ablaze with the thrill of her love and the pleasure of the closeness they shared—both in body and spirit. When she turned her cheek into his palm with a hum of contentment, Cloud couldn’t help but grin before pressing a kiss to her forehead. How precious she was. Cloud adored her trust in him and wanted to continuously bolster it. He’d come to realize that feeling vulnerable himself had helped his understanding of the nature of human vulnerability, in general. Fear, anger and resentment tended to ferment in the heart of one who feels weak and helpless. His experience as an outcast, an underdog, and an experiment had allowed him to see those feelings manifesting inside himself. If there was one thing that Cloud knew, it was the definition of pain. As he pressed a gentle kiss to her blush-dusted cheek, he couldn’t quell his desire to keep her—and the future family he dreamed of—from knowing this torment. Tifa tugged at the back of his shoulders, gently pulling him down on top of her, and he acquiesced. Cloud dipped his head to kiss her stomach, stroking his thumb tenderly over a faded stretch mark underneath her navel before kissing it as well.

His kisses whispered a song of comfort across her skin and she closed her eyes, letting them lull her into a pleasurable trance. Feeling her relax under his attentions was like an answered prayer, encouraging him further. Cloud had told her that he wanted to be a father, and he’d meant it. Perhaps not now; but if it happened, he’d embrace it. It took a lot of careful thought before he had come to such a conclusion, and a little more self-convincing to actually verbalize it to his spouse. Because when he considered it, starting a family with Tifa would make their lives better in a myriad of ways. But he had to be cautious, because improving his life would mean adopting a lot of responsibility, and that took much more effort and care than deciding to remain living in pain and selfishness.
It would all be more than worth it.

Tifa squeezed his sides with her thighs, and he looked up in surprise to meet her devilish grin. His heart leapt into his throat and he smiled in return. It was indescribable—the joy that was sweeping through her—for seeing Cloud’s true sweet, lopsided smile was so rare since their reunion in the train station. It reminded her of how unguardedly happy they had been before life had become unrecognizable and mercilessly cruel. Memories swirled inside her, tiny waves breaking against the shores of her mind as she pictured that exact smile on a face a decade younger—full of hope for the future. His happiness was infectious and she laughed, unable to stifle it. Cloud wanted to believe that he’d come to be her hero once more, and he finally felt confident that he had become just that. How exhilarating to feel as if he’d come closer to being whom and what he’d always wanted to be.

He had to believe that he was enough, for he’d found his home. Her open arms, the familiarity of the curve of her hip, the taste of her lips...they all beckoned him like a sweet song. She arched her body into his and he answered her call with the press of his hips.

They were on their way.

... ... ...

It had taken them a few minutes to catch their breaths. The bliss of their intimacy had left them in a sort of dream-like haze as they lay curled together, absorbing one another’s warmth in the cool wind of the twilight hour. Silently, they listened to it whisper through the tall grass for a long minutes, tempted to let it lull them to sleep despite the chill in the air. Eventually, Cloud’s watchful eye caught sight of the goosebumps forming on his wife’s arms and decided to gather her clothing.

She looked alarmed when he sat up, instinctively mimicking the movement and covering what she could of her nakedness. Curling her knees to her chest and tucking her hands between her heels and rear, she watched as he leaned to the side to pick up a piece of discarded clothing.

“Did you have to ruin our romantic moment?” Tifa said in mock disappointment. “It was so nice just to lay there like that, uninterrupted.”

Cloud smirked as he passed Tifa her white crop top, which she took quickly.

“You’re going to get bug bites in unfortunate places,” he said, clearly amused by his little jest. “Besides, you’re cold. You’ll be more comfortable once you get dressed.”

He handed her the rest of her clothes as he found them, before pulling on his pants and shirt with relative ease—not bothering with the straps and buckles of his protective gear for now. When he tried to pass Tifa her boots, she flinched and turned away quickly.

“What’s wrong?”

“N-nothing,” she said quickly. Cloud could tell by her strained tone that her cheeks were flushing with bashful frustration and it amused him that his wife still possessed this childhood trait. She peeked at him over her bare shoulder. “I just don’t want you to watch me get dressed.”

“Why is that? It’s not like we haven’t seen each other without clothes on just now, or many times before.” He smiled and turned away, offering her privacy. “Besides, you have nothing to be ashamed of. Your body is so perfect that I bet the goddesses are looking down with envy right now.”

“Oh, please,” Tifa snorted, shaking her head as she hurriedly dressed. “I don’t want you to watch me struggling to pull on my skirt or fumble with the hooks of my bra.”
“You worry about the strangest things,” Cloud said flippantly, trying to ease her worry with his dismissive tone.

She tugged on her shirt and buckled her belt, looking down upon her stained, worn clothes. There was an excuse for her unkempt appearance, since they’d been constantly traveling and fighting. But even in normal circumstances, Tifa couldn’t help but feel like the furthest thing from the attractive and put together woman that her husband deserved.

“It’s just that…I so often feel like an awkward tomboy compared to other girls.” Images of a perfectly tied pink bow and gentle rivulets of auburn hair came to mind. “I want you to see me and be under the illusion that I’m graceful and ladylike, somehow. You know…beautiful.”

Shyly, she turned slightly to peek at him. He was still turned away from her, legs sprawled out in the grass as he gazed out at the darkening sky. With a deep breath, Tifa picked up her boots and went to sit beside him once more. Cloud turned his head to look right into her eyes, the shadows within them shifting with his thoughts and his expression suddenly solemn.

“I always see you like that, Tifa.”

A sarcastic smile immediately appeared on her lips as she turned to call his bluff, but her tongue held fast when she saw sincerity in his expression. It had never occurred to her that perhaps her view of herself was biased, or even untrue. When she considered it, it seemed that her sense of value and worth had been assigned to her by a handful of people—the wrong people—and Tifa had never let herself believe that maybe their opinions were incorrect. Cloud knew her better than anyone else on the planet. If he thought she was wonderful and beautiful, why shouldn’t she believe him? What did she risk in looking at herself in a positive light? It would take some time to shake herself free of the terrible habit she’d developed; constantly assuming that she was less than everyone else had never been helpful before. Maybe if Tifa managed to find the courage to turn her thoughts around, she could gain a perspective to help more than just herself. Her eyes held a hint of gravity as she looked his way.

“You do?”

Cloud wrapped an arm around her shoulder, pulling her close once more. “Always have. Always will.”

They could have gone back to the shelter of the Highwind, but neither could pull themselves away from the turning splendor of the stars. Like frivolous children, they curled together there in the grass and watched the deep blue canvas above them slowly turn to black. There was little conversation, for in those moments it was enough just to lie beside one another. Tomorrow would bring chaos and great risk to their lives, but they would choose to worry about that when it came. They knew better, now, that each minute of their existence slowly drained away like the sands in an hourglass—they could never retrieve each moment lost. Time is precious. They were wise enough now to make each second worthwhile. Tifa smiled up at the heavens, for she knew that they couldn’t have made it this far on their own.

But instead of her mother coming to mind, this time it was Aerith who dominated her thoughts. Was she keeping watch over them from the afterlife? The Cetra had always been a bit cryptic and mysterious behind her lively personality. Perhaps there was something she’d known all along that the rest of them had missed.

How content she felt: snuggled into Cloud’s warmth as his chin rested on the top of her head. Time passed like a dream, and Tifa felt as if she was continuously fading in and out of sleep as the hours waltzed by. Cloud’s slow, steady breathing accompanied by the faint cadence of his heartbeat was
the perfect lullaby. She couldn’t be certain when a deep slumber had overtaken her at last, but the sound of his voice pulled Tifa back into the waking world.

“It’s almost dawn, Tifa,” Cloud whispered against her hair.

Her heart began to mourn. It felt like it took centuries for them to get back to this place of mutual safety, trust and a shared sense of peace. Now that they were facing their possible demise, it was so hard to leave this slice of serenity behind.

“Please, Cloud. Can’t we lie here just a little bit longer?” she begged “I don’t want this moment to end.”

“Of course.”

Tifa knew that even when they rose to face the day, they’d still be side by side. But it felt so good to temporarily let themselves shed the stress and anxiety that seemed to constantly rest upon their weary shoulders. Cloud lay still, without a hint of tension in his limbs, and she realized that even long before they’d been separated, Cloud had rarely been able to free himself from his worries. Maybe he’d come to realize that fretting was a waste of energy: it wouldn’t change the outcome of their future. It gave her the courage to let go, too.

“Do you think this is the last day that we have together?” Tifa whispered, snuggling closer against his lithe frame.

If it was, and their lives came to an end, she knew that she would be content. A younger version of herself might’ve begun to cry at the thought of her life ending at such a young age. She would’ve mourned the death of her dreams and her future, listing the possibilities of what could’ve been and numbering her regrets. It was hard to discern what it was that kept her from riding this pointless thought train to nowhere, but Tifa decided to focus on how grateful she was for all of the wonderful things in her life. She’d experienced her mother’s gentleness and love, learned that she had more tenacity than she’d dreamed through Zangan’s training of her body and mind, and married the love of her life. She’d experienced the beautiful mystery of growing a baby in her womb and had the chance to cradle her daughter’s tiny body against her chest. Discovering the resilience of her spirit, the joy of helping Barret raise Marlene, and the chance to reunite with and rediscover the heart of her husband were beautiful and wonderful experiences, despite the challenges.

Cloud found her hand with his own and laced their fingers tightly together. “No, I don’t. But I don’t think it’ll be easy.”

Nothing had been easy. Not growing up in her father’s house nor surviving alone in the Midgar slums. It had taken Tifa much too long to realize, but it seemed that one thing would always be true, no matter the circumstance: be thankful and you will be happy. Maybe there were principles that really were that simple.

“Nothing worthwhile has ever been easy, has it?” Tifa grinned, turning her face up to meet his eyes.

Watching her warm expression, Cloud knew exactly what she meant. Everything they’d ever accomplished in their young lives had always been hard won, especially their turbulent reconnection over the past handful of months. This marriage was worth the work—their relationship had always been the most valuable thing in his life and he knew that nothing could ever change that. Smiling, Cloud placed a gentle kiss upon her forehead.
As the first rays of the morning sun began to creep over the horizon, he couldn’t help but take in its beauty. All of his struggles and suffering had led him to this very moment of serenity. And though the world had been cruel to him, he was overwhelmed with how much he loved it. Cloud had seen so much ugliness in his travels, but he’d also seen the great capacity for love and kindness in human beings. Gaia was worth saving, because love was more than kisses and embraces. It was sacrifice, compassion, hard work and devotion.

Love is more than words, and love is larger than the walls that shut it in.
The breeze was gentle in the late September afternoon.

There was ample shade as Cloud sat on the broad branch of a lush maple. The whirring of insects in the brush was beginning to fade as summer bowed out into autumn and the daily temperature began to dip, creating a bubble of anxiety in his chest. He was leaving for Midgar in a matter of weeks and he still hadn’t told Tifa about his plans for any reason other than his own cowardice. It was hard to decide whether or not it would be more painful to tell her sooner rather than later, and he’d already waited so long that she would probably be upset with him regardless.

Cloud sighed as he shifted his weight, carefully adjusting his position with one hand while clutching his father's pistol. Hunting deer was hard work, especially without a rifle. He’d been practicing all summer—and while his technique was far from perfect, he was no longer floundering in his attempts. Last winter, hunting rabbit and other small game had gotten him and his mother through the long season without starving (and Mom was grateful for the fur that she fashioned into warm hats to sell), but he knew that more would be needed this year. Cloud felt as if he was abandoning Mom and Tifa to face the harshest season alone, and he didn’t want to leave them without a reasonable stock of meat. He’d killed two young bucks in the past four months and his mother had happily salted and preserved the meat. How proud he had felt when Tifa had looked upon his kill with awe, though he was nervous that she’d be horrified by the corpse. Instead, she remarked on the loveliness of the white markings around the animal’s nose and eyes.

He had to smile at Tifa’s ability to see beauty where he thought there was none.

It had been a difficult journey to learn how to hunt without instruction, and it was times like these where he really felt the hole in his life that Aren Strife left behind. After many mistakes, Cloud had come to understand that to be a good hunter, a man had to understand his prey. His bullies had certainly known that fact. They hunted him day and night, tormenting him by knowing enough about him to cut straight into his spirit. While the process of trial and error hadn’t been very kind, experiencing the lows (fruitless waiting and hiding for hours each day for weeks on end) allowed him to experience thrilling highs, and he appreciated his rare success all the more. Forming extreme patience and working tirelessly to find a method that worked reminded him that laziness never bears fruit: it was useless to just wait for something great to fall into his lap.

That was why he had to go to Midgar and become a SOLDIER. Greatness wouldn’t just happen in his life. If he stayed in Nibelheim, he’d never be able to earn Mr. Lockhart’s respect and marry Tifa. How could he provide for her and get her out of her sad home life if he let his nerves keep him from joining ShinRA? He was going to prove that he was a man: capable, brave and loving. Nothing could stop him from striving to give Tifa the life she deserved and prove to his bullies (and himself) that he was capable of being more than anything they’d ever thought he could be. This was the most important thing Cloud would ever do in his life and he couldn’t mess it up.

The pressure of his weight on his legs had caused them to tingle with the beginning traces of numbness and he shifted again. He hadn’t seen a deer for weeks, now, though he was following all of the correct procedures. Apples and sweet feed had replaced the original corn he’d used as bait in the beginning. Cloud had taken care to note the direction of the wind and choose his perch appropriately to avoid giving himself away by scent. While it was lonesome to sit up in his perch for hour after silent hour, it provided ample time to breathe the fresh air deep into his lungs and simply decompress. Life was so complex and the weight of impending adulthood was almost too much to bear at times.
Occasionally, Cloud was tempted to forget the whole thing and try and manage to make a small living in Nibelheim. It was easy to quit before he’d even started—staying in this place of relative safety and certain stagnancy, submitting to the fate everyone always thought he’d have. But the thought of Tifa’s eyes—those beautiful eyes that had replaced their jubilance for sober somberness—burned into those thoughts of weakness. It reminded Cloud of how he’d been too afraid to attend school for the first time at six years old. His mother sat him down, looked him in the eyes and told him that he didn’t need to worry about anything else besides showing up, because the rest would take care of itself. In their own strange way, despite many struggles, things had taken care of themselves over the years. He supposed that circumstances would resolve themselves in Midgar, too.

There was movement at the corner of his vision and he whipped his head around, torn from his thoughts. Cloud sucked in an excited breath as a buck came into view. The antlers were broad and wide, and his coat had a handsome sheen in the waning sunlight. It was mesmerizing to watch the majesty of this animal as he steadied his pistol and took aim, admiring the grace of the deer’s steps as it made its silent way through the underbrush. As he patiently waited for the perfect position to shoot, Cloud began to realize that he was in a state of appreciation. How thankful he was that the woods gave him the opportunity to hunt and that his body was healthy and able to perform such a task. How wonderful it was to be able to provide for his mother and (hopefully) future wife, and he was thankful to this animal for giving its life to allow them to continue on living.

Hunting had taught him that he wouldn’t always be successful, but giving up would ensure that he’d never be successful. Traveling to Midgar alone would be terrifying and becoming a SOLDIER would be difficult, but things would take care of themselves. Cloud would be alright, he just needed to show up. And as he pulled the trigger, it became clear that he wouldn’t always be the underdog.

Cloud was certain that somehow, he’d be something great.

… … …

He was flying.

Or floating, it seemed. Suspended in midair in a boundless sky, Cloud felt like gravity had little hold on his body—as if he was underwater, only without resistance. Blue eyes blinked as he sucked in a breath, wracking his brain for his last conscious memory. Oh—that’s right. He and AVALANCHE had fought the alien-esque form of Jenova, then found themselves in a battle with some manifestation of Sephiroth. The eight of them finally facing off against their arch nemesis had been invigorating, sending a rush of adrenaline and something he couldn’t quite identify through his veins. He was drenched with sweat from fighting, but he felt fine despite the minor cuts and scrapes from battle. It appeared that they’d had the upper hand despite the difficult battle and Cloud thought they’d defeated the monster.

So why was he here alone? Had he died? Was this what heaven looked like?

There were clouds swirling all around: shades of white, purple and pink blending beautifully together. It was almost dreamlike how peaceful the atmosphere was, and Cloud’s fatigue tempted him to close his eyes and rest in such rare tranquility. If somehow, he’d died and was on his way to heaven, he might as well enjoy the ride. He inhaled slowly through his nostrils and focused on the pleasurable sensation of the air slowly filling his lungs.

“Cloud!”

The sound of his wife’s voice made blue eyes fly open almost as soon as they closed. Cloud immediately locked onto her big eyes, which were filled with urgency and fear instead of the peace
of the afterlife. His hands reached out automatically to hold hers with the hope that he could quell even a small amount of her obvious anxiety as his eyes searched for the source. Behind her was Barret, who had his gun held at the ready as he faced to the left. Before he had time to wonder what was happening or where the rest of AVALANCHE was, Cloud turned to look in the direction of the gunman. Something was taking form before them.

At first, it was unmistakably human: Sephiroth’s shirtless form appeared, his glorious silver hair was slicked back against his head before flowing out behind him. But as he continued to take shape, the rest of him was unrecognizable. His lower body was submerged within a billowing cloud, with six massive blue-tipped wings protruding from where his legs should be. A deep crimson wing had replaced Sephiroth’s right arm, and its magnificent size was intimidating and fearsome. Ironically, two linked angel-like halos arched behind his head. His expression seemed to seethe with hatred and bitterness.

Tifa felt her heart began to pound within her chest, her breathing becoming rapid as she turned to look at Cloud. Something irrational triggered paranoia inside her as the altered form of Sephiroth took shape, frightening her into believing that something would make her husband disappear again. Her bravery had shriveled away when she realized that they’d given it their all and their enemy was still alive and seemingly unscathed. Muscles fatigued and body sore, Tifa felt vulnerable, reawakening the scared girl she’d been when she’d found herself pregnant and alone. Her mind was foggy and lightheaded, swirling with confusion and doubt. Was all of this a figment of her imagination? Was she dreaming? It all seemed like a dark illusion.

But the feeling of Cloud’s fingers clutching her own and the warmth of his hand were real. He existed without a doubt, burning with anger, trembling with determination, watching their enemy with unwavering eyes. She gave his hand a tug. He resisted. He didn’t disappear. She didn’t awaken, trembling to find herself alone in the darkness of their Midgar apartment. They were here, side by side, enduring each threat together. Cloud was with her, and he wouldn’t let go. Tifa watched his face for a moment longer, admiring his desire to take on all the sadness and harm he’d unintentionally wrought. How encouraging it was that he no longer cowered in his vulnerability, but shone in his strength, and it gave her hands the courage to stop quivering as she turned toward Sephiroth.

Thinking quickly, Tifa let go of Cloud’s hand and cast a big guard spell for an extra layer of protection.

Barret open fired upon their enemy, the bullets seeming to have little effect before he retaliated with a lightning-quick slash of the dark wing his arm had become. It was meant to hit Barret, but it hit Tifa instead, and hearing his wife cry out sent Cloud into a torrent of protective aggression. There’d been a time where brokenness and pain were all that he knew, but now he’d come to rediscover hope and could not be shaken. He looked toward Sephiroth’s face, remembering how much he had fallen prey to his deceit as Jenova influenced his mind. Back then, darkness had washed over his heart and his soul, but he was no longer captive to those lies. Fear had no place to hide anymore. As he pulled his sword from its resting place upon his back, Cloud realized he was no longer prey. He was the predator.

A predator knew his prey.

As a child, the spindly blonde had spent countless hours reading and re-reading every newspaper article he could get his hands on that mentioned ShinRA’s war hero. As a military grunt, Cloud had studied Sephiroth’s every move during the rare chances he had to watch him spar and train with Zack—first class SOLDIER versus first class SOLDIER. In this trek around the planet and through his own mysterious mind, he had discovered each step toward his idol’s downfall into
madness. He knew what drove Sephiroth to this state—what made him seek to destroy.

It seemed that misery was the weapon he brandished in his hatred for those who had betrayed him and used him for their own scientific gain. Confused and angry, the man couldn’t handle the possibility that he might not be completely human. He hadn’t known the identity of his father or mother, nor had he ever experienced parental affection or any aspect of normal family life. But the true reason why Cloud understood the man was because, terrifyingly, he had almost followed down the same exact path. Sephiroth’s misery was his attempt to prove the world’s injustice, covering up his conscious refusal to strive and live after encountering hurt and disappointment. The pain of the truth had been too much, leading him to submit to Jenova’s influence. His willingness to suffer in his pain was inexhaustible, for Sephiroth was attempting to use that suffering to prove his strength and control. Or perhaps, it was his revenge on his existence altogether.

Sucking in a breath, Cloud leapt forward to attack after Barret stopped firing his gun to reload.

Everything about fighting felt different as of late and Cloud couldn’t quite put his finger on why that was. If he had to guess, he’d presume that it had to do with the fact that he was looking actually looking forward to his future. How vindicating it felt to allow himself to be excited for the boundless possibilities of what might come in the years ahead! It gave him the strength to focus completely on the task at hand. For the first time in a long time, Cloud was certain of who he was and knew the things that he wanted to fight for. Defeating Sephiroth was about so much more than revenge. While it seemed a little strange, he was grateful for the hardships he had endured and the way they’d shaped his capacity for compassion and perseverance. The buster sword hit where he’d aimed, leaving a significant wound upon Sephiroth’s left shoulder, and courage swelled further in Cloud’s chest.

It was then that he thought he heard it—a voice echoing from somewhere inside him. Was it a memory or simply a reflection of his heart’s yearning, Cloud couldn’t be sure. But the face of Zack Fair appeared in his mind’s eye, filling him with inspiration and determination.

After he’d been unable to even audition for SOLDIER, his friendship with Zack had given him the hope he’d needed to give life to his dreams and give his feelings and desire for greatness a role. Remembering his friend’s sacrifice and the promise he’d made to him made him feel alive, echoing with each beat of his heart. Cloud was going to live. He was going to live his life in a way that would honor Zack, Aerith, and all of their fallen comrades. Thoughts of his mother came flooding forth, reminding him of how much he wanted her to look upon him with pride. But most of all, he wanted to live his life as his best self for Tifa, continuing on together in search of who they were meant to be.

His wife cried out as she attacked, fists clenched and biceps taut with her hard-won strength and Cloud couldn’t suppress his amazement and pride. All too clearly, he remembered how the light in her eyes had slowly retreated into the shadows after her mother passed away. For much too long, Tifa had hidden inside herself, and how empowering it was to watch something fan the flames of her spirit once again. Her soul and body were finally free to let her passion and skill loose. It was beautiful. Her fist collided squarely with Sephiroth’s jaw and he instantly retaliated with a powerful spell, sending her flying backwards toward her comrades.

Cloud felt heartless angel wash over him, pushing him to his knees as his strength left his body. He gasped, desperately trying to draw air back into his lungs as pain wracked through his veins. Arms trembling, he attempted to push himself to his feet only for his legs to buckle underneath his weight once again. There was no time to think or panic before the booming sound of Sephiroth’s voice reverberated through the air and shook at his core. Lolling his head upward to look at his nemesis, Cloud blinked lethargically as he spoke.
“You’re nothing,” Sephiroth mocked, piercing eyes trained upon Cloud’s face. “You’re weak and worthless. You were born that way and you will die that way.”

A younger, immature version of himself would have lashed out at those words, insecurity over his weaknesses bubbling over into angry words upon his tongue. But Cloud’s wisdom told him that it was the here and now that was important—looking back on the pains and regrets of the past held no value. He was stronger, now. He could bear the weight of them, recognizing they’d always be a part of him without letting them bind his arms and legs and keeping him from moving forward. He’d come too far to quit, now, following the path that Zack had blazed before him. How long had he followed his shadow along this broken road to better himself? The words and friendship Zack gave to him had helped Cloud find meaning in his life, and even now he heard his voice calling out to his heart: *Don’t give up! Don’t back down! Live!*

And Cloud would.

The comforting, warm tingle of *White Wind* flooded through his body and he instantly felt his strength returning. The memory of Zack and the time they spent together rushed into his brain, reminding him of the inspiration and joy the man had offered him with his optimism and presence. Those precious days would always remain inside him, and Cloud wanted to live like that again. He could hear Barret thanking Tifa for healing him as the three of them stood up against their foe once more. The battle raged on for an unknown time, pushing the team to their very limit of strength and spirit. Sephiroth was bleeding—battered and bruised beyond what each of them was currently suffering—and it was easy to tell that he was nearing his end. His large wing was mangled, twisting unnaturally in its broken state. His long, white hair was streaked with crimson where it stuck to the wounds on his shoulders, neck and forehead. Sephiroth’s attacks were growing more desperate and sloppy by the minute, and Cloud knew it wouldn’t be long now.

In the end, it was one of Barret’s attacks that dealt the final blow. Sephiroth slumped forward, defeated and spent, and Cloud wasn’t sure exactly how to feel. Cloud assumed that he’d be experiencing unbridled joy at the defeat of this menace and the proof that he was stronger than anyone thought possible. But as the figure of his former idol dissolved into splintering blackness and disappeared into the swirling purple color of the clouds, he was surprised by the sadness in his chest. Before Cloud could look to Tifa or Barret and check if they were alright, a fog of dizziness engulfed him and made him sway on his feet. There was no warning as his vision faded to black.

There was no fear in his heart, though Cloud supposed that he should feel frightened as he tried to figure out where he was. He could barely find the will to open his eyes, for a sudden peace had washed over his body and allowed his fatigue to outweigh his concern. But when he did, it appeared that he was flying through a tunnel of some sort with time and space swirling around him, and he couldn’t help wonder if he had somehow died from the battle with Sephiroth and was actually making his way to the afterlife this time. If he was, he could finally meet Aria, and the thought gave him peace. He could finally, *finally* hold her in his arms and tell her how much he loved her. But most importantly, Cloud could tell his daughter just how sorry he was that he wasn’t there as she grew inside her mother and wasn’t present at her birth.

Cloud closed his eyes once more, which were heavy from weariness and the gravity of his thoughts. His hair blew as he was rushed forward by a force unknown; feeling weightless and relaxed, ready to accept his fate instead of fighting against it. Fast and faster, his body flew through the blackness in a passageway of sorts until it all stopped abruptly. Shaken from his trance, Cloud’s eyes flew open as he landed roughly on his feet in the featureless dark. Head swiveling from side to side, his peaceful state evaporated as worry began to creep up his limbs and settle into his chest. Where was he? What was going on? And then he came into view. Ice spread through Cloud’s veins as his eyes met with Sephiroth’s, sky-blue locking with ethereal green and he shivered. The
hero of his childhood stood some paces away, fully human in form with masamune poised to attack, and doubt used that moment to once again try and slink into the corners of his consciousness.

He was alone with Sephiroth. What if he was manipulated and fell prey to his mind games once again? What would happen now that no one was here to help him?

But Tifa’s belief in him guided him and the silent voice of his precious child called his name, leading him forward. Zack’s breath was in his lungs and Aerith’s strength weaved its way to his core. Cloud knew that his perception of life was flawed and still underdeveloped in many ways. He was far from knowing if this was truly the reason why he was alive. But if he could be certain of anything, it was that he was getting a little closer to finding it each day. And for Cloud, that was enough. Maybe defeating Sephiroth was what he was born for, and maybe it wasn’t, but he vowed to do everything he could. Readying Zack’s buster sword in his hands, he inhaled slowly and focused. Sephiroth lunged forward suddenly, his eyes crazed with rage and revenge yet still lucid, somehow. The old Cloud would have shriveled with fear and lack of confidence, but never again. He knew what to do.

Sephiroth’s attack was low to the ground, so Cloud leapt high into the air. He watched his opponent so carefully that briefly, time seemed to pass in slow motion. The tip of the masamune grazed the bottom of his boot as Sephiroth altered the arc of his swing and the blonde felt his heart leap in his chest. A guttural growl tore its way from his enemy’s throat when he missed, and Cloud tried to counter the moment his feet met the ground. Instead of landing a hit, there was a loud clang in the air as the buster sword was blocked by the katana, steel meeting steel. Cloud’s face was mere inches from that of the man who had once been his idol, and adrenaline and resolve rushed through his body. But while his physical self was careening into a heightened state of instinctual fight-or-flight, Cloud’s mind was calm and pensive—surprisingly clear.

He wasn’t sure where exactly he was, or whether or not he’d survive this confrontation. But he did know that the past few months of his life had taught him to find peace with both the pleasant and unpleasant things in his life. It was clear that Sephiroth did not share that acceptance and submission to the things of the past. Did Sephiroth consider that these may be his final moments? Was he thinking about his the choices he made in his life? What did he regret? What did he cherish? Since his earliest days, it had been clear to Cloud that one did not have the choice whether or not to pay a price as they passed through life. No matter what, pieces of one’s being would be taken and rearranged by the circumstances of their lives. But if you played things right, you could choose exactly which price you are willing to pay.

It seemed that Sephiroth had surrendered everything but his pride, letting it swallow him whole.

The man’s strength was overwhelming—the influence of mako, Jenova and unbridled rage threatened to overtake him. But Cloud had something that Sephiroth didn’t have. He had friends and family who counted on him. Etched into his heart were the joys and regrets of dear ones both living and dead. The dreams of those who had fallen, the hopes of those yet to come—he’d take them and turn them into strength and let them fill him with determination. Cloud felt the power of a second wind pulse through his muscles and he pushed into his blade, knocking Sephiroth back with a grunt. The other man transitioned flawlessly into a counterattack, the blade just barely grazing the side of Cloud’s head as he ducked to dodge.

Sephiroth’s back was open as he followed through on the swing of his masamune; Cloud would only have half a second to take advantage of it. With great speed, he leapt up as high as he could and prepared for his ultimate attack: omnislash. Mako green swirled through the electric blue of his eyes as he fixed his target with a predator-like stare as he rushed in. He had to give Gaia a
chance. Cloud prayed that defeating Sephiroth would be enough to save humanity, but if he searched his heart, he knew exactly whom he was fighting for.

This was for Aria. It was for the tears that were in his eyes when he first learned of the delicate life taking hold within his wife—his own flesh and blood. The combination of his heart and Tifa’s that forever left her tiny footprints across the sands of his soul. He fought for her precious life, which was taken too soon—for Sephiroth had stolen away many a life before their proper time. It was for his mother, who had scarcely done anything but love and support him despite constantly feeling the coldness of others’ hearts. She’d taught him to value each life, each moment, and to hold fast to and grow all the good that was in his heart. She showed him that his hands, though small in the grand scale of things, could be capable of so much good.

The first hit was satisfying, as was the second, and Cloud could scarcely believe the speed at which he was moving through the air. Three hits, then four. How ready he was to end Sephiroth’s trail of blood and death! How many had perished by his hands?

There was Brian Lockhart, who in his own backwards way showed Cloud the importance of protecting the weak and drawing near to loved ones when the pain of adversity and loss threatened to tear him asunder. Witnessing the destructive nature of pride reminded him that it was okay to let himself lean on others for strength when he needed it. He fought for Zack, who taught him never to abandon those who rely on your strength. His best friend had demonstrated how important it was to protect your honor in the face of the temptation to give in to the shifting tide of the world. Stand firm in what you believe, protect the weak, have faith in your companions…the young man had been a wellspring of lessons in morality. Cloud would never forget that preserving another’s life is worth the sacrifice of his own.

The fifth strike was for Aerith, who embodied remarkable courage and displayed the power that optimism could have in a life that was wrought with sadness. Her great sacrifice was still surrounded in mystery, but Cloud couldn’t help but feel that her influence didn’t end with her death. She taught him that self-discovery, while empowering, could also be discouraging and difficult, but it shouldn’t snuff out one’s determination or spirit. He couldn’t help but picture the warm smile she’d given him moments before Sephiroth had smitten her and it filled him with rage as he struck his enemy again and again and again.

Sephiroth was stumbling, now, and Cloud knew that one more hit would finish him.

As he flew back in to strike once more, he thought about his wife and how the things she taught him had given him the strength to make it this far. Tifa had shown him that love is so, so deep, and can’t be easily dismantled or broken. It’s so much more than physical touch or happiness and light hearted conversation. It’s grit. It’s holding onto one another through the worst things life could throw at them. Love is the confidence that no matter what, no matter how dark things get, your spouse will never leave you. His marriage with Tifa had given him the confidence he needed to feel comfortable in expressing even the darkest corners of his heart without fear of rejection. Working together, lifting one another up and sacrificing for the sake of their joined wellbeing were essential to their partnership and through it, Cloud had learned so much about himself—both his strengths and weaknesses. His wife had showed him the danger of hiding away and deceiving with half-truths. Strengthening their connection was to be put above all things. How precious it was to know how much he mattered to his dearest companion.

Picturing her face, he made his final hit.

Sephiroth’s legs began to falter and he wavered in his stance, but his eerie green eyes never left his enemy. Blood dripped down his face and leaked from his mouth. His body was streaked with deep
purple and red as he dropped his weapon, fingers trembling as it clattered to the ground. Cloud watched as beams of light began to pierce his body from the inside out: streaks of white and red permeating the darkness around them. He blinked and just like that, Sephiroth was gone.

A mixture of relief and exhaustion made him fall to his knees, too tired to rejoice but lively enough to smile. Cloud closed his eyes, exhaling slowly, unable to believe that it was finally over. There was no pride in his heart that his hands had been the ones to defeat that menace, for he knew that he was nothing on his own. How many hands had lifted him, helped him and guided him to this very moment in time? How grateful Cloud was for each and every one of them. A warm, tingling feeling surrounded his body and his curious eyes opened at the sensation. Graceful green ribbons of energy swirled around him and emerald specs of light sparkled against the blackness. Enraptured by its beauty, Cloud watched motionlessly.

It was the Lifestream. It was free.

He was free.

Grateful, peaceful, he let himself float away once again into the endless dark.

………

With a groan, Cloud struggled to open his weary eyes. His head was pounding and his body felt listless and heavy, but Tifa’s familiar scent comforted him. It seemed that he was cradled in the safety of her lap and that knowledge instantly gave him a sense of calm. Where were they? What was going on? Slowly, Cloud lifted his gaze to find her face.

“You’re awake,” she sighed with relief, smoothing his cheek with her palm.

“Yeah.” He grimaced as he tried to sit up.

“You scared us, you know. You’re lucky we found you in the Crater—you were out cold!” Tifa helped him rise, supporting his back as he slumped forward. “I guess it has something to do with the giant wound on your head?”

Cloud gently touched his fingers to his right temple—the source of the throbbing pain. His wife handed him a potion (now that he was awake to drink it) and he gulped at it greedily. The feeling of her soothing hand between his shoulder blades was just about as healing as the liquid remedy.

“It must’ve been a rock or something,” she continued. “The earthquakes were so violent when Holy burst out of the ground and the caverns started to collapse.”

Oh, right. Cloud stiffened and looked around.

They were in the cockpit of the Highwind, and it was with great relief that he could verify that each member of AVALANCHE was present with a quick sweep of his eyes across the immediate vicinity. The vast sky swallowed up the broad window before them: angry and red and roiling. Cloud swayed to his feet in alarm. He rushed to the glass to peer out over the railing like the rest of the crew, with Tifa following close behind. Midgar was some distance away, and they watched as the meteor loomed down upon it with unrelenting force. The destruction was evident even from a distance, and Cloud swallowed thickly at the thought that there may still be people in the city. Aerith’s bright Holy spell was there, a shining white ring of light that served as the only barrier between the city and the meteor.

“It’s not working,” Cid observed with an anxious puff of his cigarette.
Tifa bit her bottom lip as she watched. “Did it come too late?”

It couldn’t be. Cloud frowned as the heated, crimson light of the meteor seemed to be overtaking the protective spell. Aerith had given her life while summoning *Holy*, and the possibility that it could fail had never crossed his mind. Could she really have died for a fruitless cause? It was a terrible thing to consider and he exhaled roughly through his nostrils at the thought. Why hadn’t the spell come forth until now? Perhaps if it had manifested earlier, it could’ve helped defend against meteor before it was so close.

“I’m guessing that it was Sephiroth who was holding it back,” Nanaki surmised. “Now that he’s defeated, Holy could rush forth. But it doesn’t seem to be enough.”

Yuffie turned away from the sight to search the faces of her companions. “Do you think he’s gone for good?”

“Yeah, I think so,” Cloud said, nodding.

For so long, all he had allowed himself to feel toward Sephiroth was hatred. Honestly, it was the easiest thing to feel as a result of all that the man had taken from him. But Cloud had learned so much during this journey and it had evaporated his loathing away, leaving behind only pity and sorrow. Despite all of his accomplishments, prowess and physical strength, Sephiroth had really been a weak man. After all, responding in violence to hardship and betrayal is no mystery. Violence and destruction is the default human response, easy to surrender to. Peace was the true mystery. Finding peace among the turbulent path of life was difficult, for it is learned, instilled and earned. Part of Cloud’s heart still mourned the loss of Sephiroth as his role model and inspiration from his earliest days, but nostalgia alone could not redeem him.

Barret grunted, leaning back from the ship’s railing and slamming his fist down upon it. “It’s gonna hit. Everythin’ we did was for nothin’!”

A few tense seconds passed by. AVALANCHE watched in detached astonishment as the earth trembled far beneath them. Upon Midgar’s upper plate, buildings were crumbling under the meteor’s onslaught, one by one. Cloud didn’t want to believe that all this time, they’d toiled for nothing. Was it really possible that all of the hard work, sacrificed, and loss of life was for naught?

“I had everyone take refuge in the slums,” said Cait Sith, shaking his head with sorrow. “But the way things are now, I don’t think it’ll do any good.”

“We’re doomed!” Yuffie cried, her hands flying to her head in alarm.

But Cloud didn’t think so. His heart was thrumming wildly in his chest as his head scrambled to make sense of it all: his eyes saw destruction, and his mind wanted to panic, yet something in his heart remained calm and hopeful. Billowing, black clouds rolled forth, stretching to the horizon. It seemed that they were at the epicenter of world’s end with a front seat to the apocalypse, yet his limbs didn’t tremble with fear. Beside him, Tifa’s fingers gripped the railing tightly, knuckles white as she watched the scene before them. Cloud examined her face out of the corner of his eye, wishing he could take away the anxiety written across her countenance. Her expression suddenly softened and eyes widened. Softly, she spoke.

“Wait…what’s that?”

From the north came a great green light. It had burst out of the sea, swirling upwards in a loose, curling spiral into the sky and bending toward Midgar in a steady, flowing line. To the east, a second stream burst from the earth. Then another, and another. Within the span of a minute, there
were too many of them to count as they spun through the air—some combining and intertwining as they reached and reached toward their destination. Luminescent emerald and white light curled gracefully as it traveled toward Midgar from all directions.

Slack-jawed, Barret let his arms fall to his sides. “What the hell is that?”

Cloud blinked slowly at the spectacle. Lightning flashed across the black, stormy sky, joining the light show in the heavens. Far below the Highwind, the trees bent with the force of the wind and the ocean churned with large, choppy waves.

“I'll come back when it's all over.”

Aerith’s words sounded through his mind, both a memory and a reverie. The recollection of her cheerful smile as she waved goodbye in his vision back then flashed through his mind’s eye. How overwhelming it all was, now.

“The Lifestream…” Cloud breathed, his cerulean eyes glistening with emotion.

She was here. She’d never truly left them.

Cloud felt Tifa grasp at his hand, and he laced his fingers tightly with hers. There were tears in her eyes as she gazed out at Gaia. Trees were being ripped from the soil. Tremors and small earthquakes were causing the ground to buckle and heave. Midgar’s plate had begun to crumble in some places under the harsh red light of the meteor, and it was terrifying to witness such destruction. Despite knowing the myriad of things that could possibly be upsetting her right now, Cloud heard himself ask her what was wrong anyway.

“It’s just so beautiful,” she squeezed his hand as she answered in a whisper. “All the different branches of the Lifestream—like all of the people who fought to save Gaia—coming forth to work together.”

He found himself smiling widely, for even in the midst of all this devastation, his wife still had the ability to find beauty where there wasn’t any.

The countless rivulets of the Lifestream met at the meteor, surrounding it and joining with Holy in a great flash of light that made them all recoil from its brightness before fading once again. Sparkling green light engulfed the meteor, illuminating it in a shining sphere before it slowly began to dissolve into glistening shards that faded into the night. Incredulous laughter rippled through the cockpit. High fives and joyous embraces were exchanged. Barret scooped Tifa up, twirling her around in a crushing bear hug before setting her back down beside Cloud. His roaring laugh was soothing to her trembling heart, and she smiled as he went to give Yuffie a pat on the back that almost knocked her to her knees.

“I want to say ‘We did it!’” Tifa chuckled, embracing Cloud and planting a kiss on his cheek. “But I really don’t feel like we did much of anything, in the end.”

He hummed in thought, holding Tifa close as he looked out upon Gaia once more. “Do you think Aerith meant to die?”

“What do you mean?” Brows furrowed in thought, she looked up to meet his eyes.

“She went to the Forgotten City to pray for Holy. She must have known that Sephiroth would be waiting there to stop her—why else would she have gone on her own?” Outside the window, the brilliant, benign light of the Lifestream continued to swirl against the dark expanse of the sky. “We freed Holy from Sephiroth’s restraint, but that spell alone wasn’t enough to save the planet.”
Tifa leaned her head against Cloud’s chest, wrapping her arms around him. “I see. She had to return to the planet and command the Lifestream to help Holy.”

“At least, that what my heart tells me.”

“It doesn’t make me feel any better about it,” Tifa mumbled against his shirt. “But if she came to accept her fate, maybe one day I can, too.”

“There’s too much to do to let grief bind our hands,” Cloud said before placing a kiss upon the crown of her head. “When Zack died, he trusted me to be his living legacy. People like Zack and Aerith gave their lives so that we can live on in a way that is worthy of their sacrifice.”

There were endless possibilities for the good he could accomplish in this life. There were countless ways that he could bring joy to others the way Zack had rejuvenated his weary spirit. There were people to help, lives to restore, dreams and promises left unfulfilled. These thoughts encouraging him, allowing revival to spread like wildfire in his heart. Nothing could steal his joy, now; he had been restored.

Nodding, Tifa sensed his optimism in the tone of his voice and wanted to mirror it so badly. She knew she’d have to let go of the guilt and the pain of her past, gleaning the fond memories from the timeline of her life to hold onto while letting go of the bad. Letting go head always seem like giving up, but now that she had grown, and experienced so much, she knew that it required more strength to go than to hold on. There was a reason why she, Cloud the others had been through the traumas they had endured. Looking around at their rejoicing companions, Tifa realized that they’d all lost a little of themselves within the struggles of their lives. Their hardships had been a lesson in strength.

Exhaling slowly, she listened to the beating of his heart. The unknown of the future was frightening, but she had to stand tall in the face of that uncertainty. One could not properly navigate without something to aim at. While we are in this world, one must always navigate, and so she chose to always have a goal to strive toward and keep her anchored. As the cycle of seasons swiveled around them through the years, she might waver, but Tifa promised herself that she’d keep on walking by his side. In the ever turning tides of life, that was the only thing that would never change.

“Let’s live, Tifa,” Cloud said, holding her against his chest. She heard the fragile bravery in his voice as he dared to dream. “We’ll start a new life—the life we’ve always wanted. We have each other again. Everything will be okay.”

If she tried, Tifa could find a million hypothetical terrible situations that could jeopardize their future, but she chose to believe him instead. She moved to look into his eyes, which were bright and shining with hope, and realized that the door to their cage had been opened. Captivity was long behind them, and they were free to step out into the bright light of freedom if they chose. Cloud smiled and cupped the back of her head, taking in the beauty of her features as he allowed himself to dream of their future. He wanted to build a home and a family with his wife. Making Tifa feel happy and secure while providing for her and their children seemed like such a simple dream, but Cloud knew that his family would be his foundation. His back was built to carry his children and wife through this life, and he’d hold them up no matter what came their way. Alongside Tifa, he wanted to raise his children into strong adults and push them to be the best he could be. He vowed to lift them higher and higher, no matter the self-sacrifice required.

Cloud promised himself that he’d never stop.

And when a grin broke across her face, he found such mercy in the loving eyes of his spouse. Her
confidence in him reminded Cloud that he was capable after all of his missteps and mistakes. When she learned up to kiss him, he met her lips with gentle enthusiasm. Cloud and Tifa would step forward in this new life—wobbling, unsteady steps, like a newborn fawn. But as the weeks and months and years went by, their footfalls would grow steady and firm, hands tightly clasped.

In the large window of the fight deck, fragments of the meteor were raining down like glistening stardust around them. The beauty and the calm of the moment was a great relief. For too long, now, their hearts had been beating so loudly that they wanted only quiet in the aftermath of it all. Sometimes, it was the smallest gestures that gave one the strength to do enormous things. To love generously can unleash great tenderness and lead, in time, to deep love and understanding. In one conversation, a life can be changed.

And together or alone, we are closer than we know.
“Is she here yet?”

Cloud glanced out of the bedroom door and into the apartment’s living room, thinly restrained unease on his features.

“Not yet!” Marlene called from behind the curtains. Her fingers were splayed against the glass and her breaths caused the cold pane to fog up near her nose and mouth. “But the snow is getting worse and it’s getting dark. I can’t see very well!”

Outwardly, Cloud was calm. He couldn’t let the kids see the panic that was beginning to well up inside, for it seemed to be the thin barrier that prevented the current situation from dissolving into mild chaos. Marlene had been practically bouncing off the walls with gleeful excitement for over an hour, now. Luckily, Denzel was much more contained and reserved. The boy was kneeling at the coffee table trying to make progress on his homework, unaware that his anxiety was showing through the gentle tapping of his pencil against the wood.

It had taken longer than Cloud thought to feel comfortable in his role as the head of a family. After the destruction of Midgar, Cloud, Tifa and Barret had struggled to quickly put together some sort of ‘normal’ life in the newly growing city of Edge. With the help of many others, they’d constructed the new ‘Seventh Heaven’ bar with an apartment on top, providing both a source of income as well as a living space. Barret had left Marlene in their primary care for an unknown amount of time as he helped the WRO search for alternative energy sources. Legally, she was Barret’s daughter. Tifa had acted as a ‘mother’ of sorts to the little girl for so long that it didn’t faze her, but Cloud found himself quite unsure of his role in her life.

Orphaned, homeless and sick, Denzel had run into Cloud almost by fate in the debris of what used to be Sector Five. It was never a question to Cloud and Tifa that they’d adopt the boy, but building a relationship with Denzel hadn’t always been straightforward. Being a father was something that Cloud truly wanted, though this wasn’t quite the way he’d envisioned it happening. So much change happened so quickly, which was overwhelming for Cloud. But after the boy’s formal adoption paperwork had been finalized, things seemed to calm down for a time. It was hard to believe that two years had passed since then.

Slowly, the four of them had worked out their own routines and traditions. Cloud hadn’t noticed just how much he needed this order in his life to thrive and feel at peace. He had drowned in chaos for so long that it had become a way of life for much too long, and he was thankful for every lazy day, homemade meal, and mundane chore. It wasn’t quite the dream life he’d imagined, but he was more than content where he was. Disappearing back inside the bedroom, Cloud moved toward Tifa’s hunched form. She stood up from her perch on the bed and pressed herself flush against him, a trembling sigh shivering out from her spirit. This was so much harder than she’d thought it would be.

“Oh,” Tifa gasped.

She clung to him tightly as she rode out another contraction, gritting her teeth and hissing as her body clenched in upon itself. Together, they languidly rocked back and forth to help her cope with the pain, like a slow dance of sorts. The lamp light was low and warm in their room and the bedsheets were tousled from frequent laying and rising to pace about with bare feet. One of Cloud’s oversized black shirts hung loosely over Tifa’s shoulders, but her swollen belly pushed at the fabric around her middle.
It wasn’t really the pain that shocked her. It had been four years since Gaia had been saved from Sephiroth, four years since she and Cloud decided that they were ready to start their family, and four long years of trying to conceive. What had astounded Tifa was how difficult it had been to get pregnant (after it had been so easy and unexpected in her teens!), and that even after she discovered she was expecting at long last, there had been little joy throughout the months of her pregnancy. Soon after the rapturous discovery of a positive pregnancy test (finally!), her giddiness had quickly spiraled into darkness. How foolish she’d been to get so absorbed in trying to have a baby that she hadn’t considered the emotional toll it would take!

The wave of pain crested for what seemed like ages before slowly subsiding once again, and Tifa panted in its wake. Cloud held her close, supporting her as her knees trembled. The quiet, comforting shhhhh from his lips helped to steady her breathing, and she pressed her face into his chest. This was progressing so much faster than it had with Aria, and she was frightened.

“It’s relentless now,” she said, voice trembling. The circling of the ceiling fan wasn’t enough to dry the sweat that beaded under her bangs. “I think it’s coming, soon.”

The anxiety regarding the baby had been crippling. Through the long weeks of her pregnancy, Tifa had felt herself splintering as guilt, joy and fear fought for dominance inside her. With each successive prenatal appointment, she had trouble trusting that it was true when the obstetrician said the baby was healthy, and the terror of another stillbirth overcame any positive feelings that she wanted so badly to feel. She’d tell the baby in her womb how much she loved it every day, fearing that one day, without warning, it wouldn’t be alive anymore. As the months went by, Tifa became ever more anxious about her ability to care for a newborn and keep it alive. Cloud had been so patient and supportive, and she couldn’t help but feel as if she was stealing his chance to be excited about this pregnancy. When she broke down crying at her baby shower, her husband made a suggestion that changed everything.

“Ana is here! She’s here!” Marlene squeaked from the hallway.

They listened as two pairs of little feet rushed down into the bar space to unlock the front door.

“Oh, thank goodness,” Cloud sighed, voice dripping with relief.

He looked torn between going to greet the midwife and staying with Tifa, but her solid grip on his hand made the decision for him. Before she could vocalize it, another contraction rippled its way through her core and the pain took her breath from her. Cloud held her through the pain before guiding her back toward the bed.

While it hadn’t solved all of her problems, hiring a midwife was probably the best thing she could’ve done. Ana came into the picture when she was about seven months along and desperate for emotional relief. A practiced professional in her sixties, the midwife kept her greying hair tied back in a loose ponytail at the base of her neck. When she spoke, it was with a motherly, soothing tone that instantly put Tifa at ease. She taught her different activities to ease her anxiety, assured her that it was normal to experience emotions other than joy and helped Tifa regain her sense of identity as a mother after losing her only child. Without her assistance, she wouldn’t have prepared her heart for the possibility of post-partum depression or other tumultuous feelings that may come after the birth. The older woman reminded her that her grief over Aria would remain with her forever, but that was normal and the passage of time would make it easier to bear. Ana was her anchor when she felt life was spinning out of control, and Tifa would be forever grateful.

Cloud exited the room once more, and she heard his voice welcoming Ana and telling the kids to play downstairs in the empty bar space until he came to get them. It was with wild eyes that Tifa watched him go, for she felt so fearful and vulnerable that being separated from her husband—even
for a moment—seemed unbearable. Gripping the sheets in her fists, she whimpered at the paralyzing memory of giving birth alone. Cloud was her rock, right now, and she needed him so badly. If she was alone, surely something bad would happen! Weary and agonized, she laid back upon the pillows. When her husband and the midwife entered, Tifa wished to greet her, but only managed to moan and roll on her side.

“That far along, are we?” Ana smiled as she set her bag down on the vanity.

Cloud returned to Tifa’s side, wringing his hands as he updated the midwife: recounting details of the labor while watching her set up her equipment and don a pair of latex gloves. Uncertain of what to do next, he took his wife’s hand. Tifa whimpered, immediately reaching to hold onto his arm instead as she writhed in discomfort. Ana calmly removed the comforter and placed a plastic covering under the sheets to protect the mattress. This was it! Tifa’s eyes rose to the ceiling as tried to take in deep breaths. Her ideal image of their family had always been like a song she couldn’t get out of her head. But now that it was finally happening, Tifa was more frightened than excited.

“Alright, sweetheart,” she said, taking a second to wipe Tifa’s brow with a cool cloth. “Let’s have a listen to that beautiful little heartbeat, shall we?”

Ana knew Tifa’s story. She’d been told about the circumstances of her first pregnancy at such a young age, about the stillbirth and the myriad of fears that resulted from it all. Checking for the fetal heartbeat had always spiked Tifa’s anxiety, so the midwife knew just what to do. She held her client’s hand firmly as she put the stethoscope to her swollen belly, smiling as she located the baby’s thumping heart.

“There it is—beautiful and even,” Ana breathed softly, giving Tifa’s hand a reassuring squeeze.

Still, Tifa wasn’t convinced that everything would be alright. She remembered these birth pains and how they’d been followed by the greatest emotional anguish she’d ever known. Another contraction squeezed its way through her and she cried, squeezing her eyes shut against its intensity. Oh, how she wished for her mother! Picturing Lia’s face provided a small amount of comfort, but remembering her beautiful voice was what allowed her to breathe and concentrate through the pain. Imagining her mother there, singing to her through her contractions, temporarily distracted her from how overwhelming it all was. It was as if she could hear her voice beside her—tune distinct but the words indistinguishable—and she almost smiled as her head sunk further into the pillow. Briefly, she noticed Cloud’s lips kiss her forehead in her weary fog.

All of their broken dreams had led them to this very moment.

When she opened her eyes, Tifa realized that there was indeed a soothing tune in the air. Ana was humming calmly as she worked, checking her patient’s dilation and assessing the baby’s position. Tifa gripped the sheets as she did, whimpering through the momentary discomfort before letting out a distressed breath when she finished. Crimson eyes looked fearfully for Ana’s brown ones, certain that she’d have some sort of bad news. The wrinkles at the corner of her eyes deepened as she smiled, and the expression made relief flood through Tifa’s bones. Ana’s presence reminded her of home. Having the chance to give birth in her own bed was reminiscent of her rural upbringing, and the comfort of familiar surroundings during such a vulnerable time brought her some security. After Aria’s traumatic delivery, she wasn’t sure she could bear having a baby in a clinic again.

“You’re ready, my dear,” Ana said, her tone even and soft. “You have to push now.”

Tifa remembered the pushing stage. She remembered straining and struggling for well over an hour before finally giving birth, and she remembered the team of doctors trying to revive her tiny
baby. How many times had she relived those horrible moments in her dreams? There was great pressure between her legs and the urge to push was strong, but Tifa was so afraid of what would happen once the baby came out. Her legs trembled as her next contraction—strong and long-lasting—squeezed her body like a vice without her permission. The pain and fear swirled together in a dangerous cocktail.

“I can’t—I’m scared!” she cried, her voice quaking with emotion. “I’m not ready!”

But her body was working without her consent, the muscles in her abdomen pressing and pressing. Cloud swallowed nervously, eyes large with panic as he tried not to regret their decision to have a baby. Tifa had been so fearful and timid during her pregnancy and it all seemed to manifest in this moment. Never before had he seen her in the amount of distress that she was in now, and he fought to push away the guilt that loomed over him. Blue eyes turned toward the midwife, desperate for her to work some sort of magic to take away his wife’s blinding terror. And to his great relief, she did.

Ana took Tifa’s hands in her own, stroking her palms with her thumbs. “Tifa, listen to my voice. You are strong and you are capable. I’m here to help you. Cloud is here to help you. You are not alone, my dear.”

Tears welled up in Tifa’s eyes, for everything was so overwhelming.

“Breathe, breathe,” whispered the midwife. She squeezed her hand and looked into her eyes. The wisdom Tifa saw there influenced her to obey, turning her focus to taking steady breaths. The air entering her lungs brought little relief to the pain and distress of her body, but it helped her calm down some.

“Now, let’s concentrate,” Ana continued. She moved into position to help deliver the baby and instructed Cloud to help hold onto one of Tifa’s legs. “I want you to push with the next contraction, and don’t stop until we count to ten. Alright?”

Tifa nodded, because there was nothing else she could do, and moaned as the next wave of pain washed over her body. Dizzy with anxiety and agony, she tried to focus her body’s efforts on getting the baby out. Tucking her chin to her chest, she pushed and pushed. Cloud was there, whispering calm encouragements. Ana was there, kindly instructing and praising her hard work. Her mother was there in spirit, watching over her. Denzel and Marlene were downstairs, waiting anxiously to meet their ‘sibling’. Whatever happened, Tifa didn’t have to face it on her own this time, and she had to believe that things would not be as they were those long years ago. Faith, like hope, is a rope and anchor in a shifting world. Tifa decided that she would take hold of it with both hands.

It happened so quickly, it seemed—her mind had automatically assumed that it would all be as difficult as it had been last time. But in less than twenty minutes of bearing down and concentrating, the little one came rushing into the world. Delirious from fatigue and newfound physical relief, Tifa lifted her head from the pillow to try and see her baby. Cloud took her hand, praising her with one of his rare, toothy grins before kissing her briefly upon the lips. The sound of the newborn’s cry filled the room—shrill and startling—but to Cloud and Tifa, there was no sound more beautiful. After all the fearful anticipation, their baby was alive! After clamping and cutting the umbilical cord, Ana chuckled warmly as she cleared the squirming baby’s airway and wiped it down with a towel.

“Here he is,” Ana beamed as she handed the baby to his mother. “Your healthy, sweet little boy.”

Tifa reached out to take her son, hands trembling uncontrollably. So many feelings swirled about
inside her: shock and fear, fatigue and relief. They rose up past her chest and sat in a ball in her throat as the weight of her swaddled son settled into her arms. She didn’t notice when she choked out a soft sob as she gazed upon the little red face of the infant, who screamed with his strong little lungs and balled fists.

“C-Cloud,” she whispered, but was unable to say any more.

Within moments, the baby quieted, feeling the comforting sensation of his own skin against his mother’s. Tifa held her breath as his big blue eyes blinked open, staring up at her as if to see who it was that belonged to the voice he’d come to know while inside the womb. Just as nothing had prepared her for the devastation when Aria wouldn’t take a breath or open her eyes, there was no warning for the awe and wonder of meeting her own living flesh and blood—an extension of her love for Cloud and a symbol of their perseverance toward their dreams. When she found the strength to tear her eyes from the child, Tifa turned her head to look at her husband. It was only upon seeing the tears streaming down his cheeks that she became aware that she, too, was crying.

Tifa kissed the baby’s head before offering him to Cloud, who gently reached out to receive his son. It was a fascinating sight: she’d seen him break steel into splinters with his mako-enhanced strength, but he handled his newborn with such tenderness that one could easily forget the power he was capable of.

He was in such a state of awe that he couldn’t bring himself to smile, only stare incredulously at the baby in his arms: a little boy who would grow into a man with his own ambitions and hopes. How overwhelming it was to finally experience a dream that had come to fruition after all the years that had gone before them. Things had been so challenging, even after Sephiroth’s defeat, and both he and Tifa had struggled to adapt to their new life together. He’d wake up some mornings wondering what he was doing in this strange new place with two children and his wife to lead and support. The weight of so many past traumas and disappointments whispering in his ear had made him feel as if he was dangling by a thread from time to time. But together, they’d held on and were beginning to discover the people they were meant to be. Success is found in one’s willingness to grow, and Cloud and Tifa refused to be held back any longer.

Running the pad of his thumb over his son’s pale, downy hair, Cloud let out a quiet breath. He smiled, thinking a fleeting thought about how not all treasures could fit into a rusted coffee can like his child-mind had once believed. It was hard to comprehend that this little person was real and would change their lives forever, just as Marlene and Denzel had. Being responsible for the life of another human being was daunting, yet exciting, and Cloud decided that he was satisfied. More than satisfied—he was wonderfully at peace. There were answers to the myriad of questions he’d have about raising these children, but for now, he was content to leave them in another’s keeping.

“Shall I get the children?” Ana whispered, and Cloud realized that they’d already been ogling over the baby for almost half an hour.

“Yes, please,” Tifa answered, a bit breathless from fatigue and overwhelming relief. “They should come meet their brother.”

The kids rushed in, trying with great difficulty to be quiet as they sped toward the bed. They looked like two overfilled balloons, appearing contained but ready to burst with excitement. Marlene bounced up and down as she gripped the side of the bed and Denzel’s eyes were almost as wide as his grin. Tifa felt tears stinging at her eyes once more as she watched Cloud proudly introduce the children to the newcomer. Having a second child would not replace Aria, and the pain of losing her would always live inside her heart, but she knew with certainty that this baby would be a constant reminder that no matter how terrible the storm, sunshine would always follow.
“Oh! He looks like Cloud!” Denzel gushed.

Marlene gasped. “He’s got blue eyes!”

“Told you he would.”

“Did not!” The girl frowned, playfully shoving Denzel. She timidly reached out and mused over the baby’s tiny fingers and toes. “He’s so little! I can’t believe he was what was inside your belly all this time.”

She climbed up on the bed and snuggled in close to Cloud, gently stroking the infant’s cheek with her finger. Automatically, Denzel followed suit, settling closer to Tifa. With a puzzled expression, he turned toward his guardians.

“How did he get inside there, anyway?” he asked.

“That’s a discussion for another day,” Tifa chuckled. Exhausted, she leaned her head back against the pillows. “Right, Cloud?”

A dusting of pink threatened to bloom upon his face, for he certainly wasn’t prepared to answer these types of questions now (or ever, if he was completely honest with himself). Cloud glanced down at the baby, who blinked back up at him, and he knew that there would be more than one awkward conversation in his future.

“Yes, definitely not today.”

Thankfully, the kids were too curious about the newborn to protest much. Huddled there on the bed together, the family quietly celebrated the arrival of their newest member. The snow was whipping against the bedroom window with each gust of frigid wind, but they were safe inside, warmed by the electric space heater and their love. They weren’t in their coveted house by the sea, nor were they quite the traditional ‘family’ they’d dreamt of in their youth. But neither of those things was important, now, and they’d learned that there was bliss and beauty outside of their original goals and dreams.

Happiness wasn’t something one earned. It was a gift: given to those who had the courage to search for it, even in the hardest of circumstances. The journey was hard and the road was long, but facing the hardest things—the lowest of the lows—allowed them to truly experience the highest joys. There was no genuine happily ever after and struggles never ceased. One hardship would come to a close only to be replaced by another, and it seemed that would never change. Cloud and Tifa had learned that it was the way they evolved to handle such hardships was what really mattered. Coming close together and trusting one another is the only way to progress and thrive. Life is full of pain, and life is full of loss. But life is also full of joy, full of gladness and blessings. And in this moment, their biggest blessings were right there, cuddled around them.

Together, they’d come to understand that people are not defined by the things that make them separate and distinct, but by the moments they shared and memories made with others. They were shaped by the cherished hands held within their own: some would be tightly grasped for a lifetime, and others would one day be gently released. Home, it seemed, was not merely a mark upon a map any more than a river is just water. It is the center of a compass from which every path radiates and where the heart is fixed. It is a force that forever beckons one back, lures one on, and instills a sense of security and belonging. Tifa looked up to lock eyes with her husband, who smiled at her with such relief and happiness that her spirit filled with peace.

For where the home is, there lies hope for the future.
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