What It Means To Be Living
by The_Ocean_Deep

Summary

If Cloud and Tifa were close friends as children, would their lives really have been that different? This story follows the early days of their lives up until the beginning of FFVII. (Complete)
A/N: The idea to write this story came to me after hearing Tracy Chapman's song 'Fast Car'. It reminded me of Cloud and Tifa for some reason or another and I couldn't get them out of my head. This is the first time I've written anything, so I'm excited to give fanfiction a shot. Feedback is always welcomed. I hope you enjoy!

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“Clap hands, clap hands ‘till Papa comes home! Without him I feel oh, so alone! I want to see him comin’ on the wagon way! So he can rest his feet and play with me all day!”

Tifa Lockhart sat at the kitchen table, snacking on apple slices and swinging her feet in time to her little song. Watching Mama baking bread at the wood stove was only fun for so long and she was growing restless. The mountain winter had been long and the bitter cold kept everyone inside for the better part of five months—much too long for any adventurous child to bear. Now the days were getting longer and the smell of thawing earth was irresistible to the young girl.

“Mama, may I please go outside? I want to play in my sand pit!”

Mama shook her head as she continued to work her mixing bowl, “Hmm, I don’t know. It’s still chilly outside, love. ”

Tifa slumped in her chair, pressing her cheek to the table top. She wouldn’t get sick, she was a big girl. Papa always said so—she was four years old after all! Tifa was tired of playing with her doll, tired of looking at her picture books and even tired of playing with the little wooden horse Papa had carved for her. She almost didn’t remember what it was like to play outside—it had been so, so long!

Mama’s long dark hair swayed as she turned to look over her shoulder and sighed, “Oh, alright. Fetch your jacket and your hat.”

Spirit renewed, the little girl straightened and grinned. Tifa popped the last apple slice from into her mouth, slid the chair back from the table and hopped down to run for the foyer closet. She hurriedly pulled her arms through the sleeves while Mama worked at the brass buttons, bouncing in excitement. Shoes on and hat securely on her head she raced away.

“Thank you, Mama!” she called as the screen porch door banged shut behind her. The cool air felt good on her cheeks and she laughed with the excitement of freedom from the confines of the house. There was still snow on the sand pile and Tifa was displeased to find the sand underneath was heavy and wet. Disappointed, she wandered to the old oak tree on the far side of the yard.

Hanging from a low branch was the tire swing Papa had made for her last summer. She was too little to mount the swing, and Papa said she mustn’t try to climb on it herself, so she settled on pushing the tire and watching it rock to and fro. The rope was taut and stiff from the bitter cold of winter, but the rising temperatures of mid-March made were beginning to loosen the fibers. Papa would be home soon and he could push her higher and higher!

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Cloud sunk further into the worn wool blanket he had pulled from his bed. He felt dizzy and tired, but insisted on remaining perched on the window seat in his bedroom. It was much better to watch the birds fly across the grey sky than to lie in bed with nothing to see except the cracks in the uneven
ceiling. A spot of color and motion drew his blue eyes downward and into the neighboring yard. He let out a breath as he watched Tifa race around the yard before stopping to dig in her sand pit. Cloud wanted to play, too. But he felt shy and sick.

He inhaled slowly and his chest felt tight. His lungs were always weak, Mom said. She told him it was because he was born too early and his lungs didn’t have time to get strong. When he wondered why he got sick so often, she’d tell him his body was weak because it wasn’t ready to be born when it was. Cloud wondered how such a thing could happen and when he asked, Mom would just smile and tell him it was because she was so excited to meet him that he came out of her belly early.

That made him feel happy—there weren’t too many people he knew who got excited to see him. Sometimes the lady at the dry goods store would smile at him until he felt his cheeks heat up and he’d hide his face in his mother’s side. Mrs. Lockhart next door would tell him he was a handsome little man before giving him a cookie and patting his head. One time, the milk man had tipped his hat to Cloud as he sat on the front step next to the empty glass bottles. Cloud was back inside before the man got close enough to speak to him.

Although he was little, he knew that people looked away when Mom held his hand and they walked about the town. When Cloud asked her why that was so, she’d given him a funny look and said, “Sometimes people don’t know what to do when they see us without Daddy.”

He had looked in her eyes and nodded, but did not understand.

To him, Daddy was a shadow in the part of his memory where everything blurred and faded. A deep voice and large hands that would throw him up into the air and catch him again. Daddy was a lump in the bed that stayed very still in the dim candlelight. Daddy was in the big wooden box with flowers of pink and white and yellow on top. Cloud shifted to rest his feverish head on the window, closing his eyes at the comfort of the cool glass. It made his head hurt to try to remember things so far away and fuzzy in his mind. It wasn’t important, anyway.

What difference did it make if he was here or not?

His eyes felt laden with sleep and he wasn’t sure how long he had closed them before the familiar creak, creak of Tifa’s tire swing reached his ears. The corner of his mouth twitched upwards and warmth flooded his chest as he watched the raven haired girl push the tire and twirl it so that it spun and spun.

Tifa was always excited to see him never turned her face away or pretended she didn’t notice when he looked her way. She told him he was a nice boy and always knew just what game to play. Cloud would get so nervous when she’d tug his arm to lead him away or grasp his hands to teach him how to clap to a nursery rhyme. He spent so much time alone that he didn’t always know how to play with someone with boundless energy and an unlimited imagination. Often times, he’d find himself growing breathless from the exertion of a romp around through the grass on Tifa’s hobby horse or after chasing the old leather ball around the yard.

Cloud liked it much better when she was content to sit in the sand pit with him or play with the colored marbles on the Lockhart’s back porch. It was easier on his body, but he couldn’t let her know that. If she knew he was weak and sick, maybe she wouldn’t want to be his friend anymore. And oh, how he wanted to be good enough to be her friend! He didn’t know what he would ever do if she became one of those people who ignored him as he passed her on the street. He swallowed the lump in his throat at the thought. It was getting hard to fight the heaviness of his eyes as he watched Tifa bounce around the side of her house and disappear from sight. Exhaustion overtook him and he slipped into a gentle sleep, slumped against the window.

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The clip-clop of horse hooves on the cobblestone of town square made Tifa gasp with excitement: Papa was home! She raced around the front of the house and through the open gate to greet her father. Mr. Hansen’s old mare, Dot, slowed to a stop in front of the Lockhart house, happy for rest from the heavy load she’d been pulling. Wood and assorted other wares were piled high onto a wagon.

“Papa!” Tifa cried with a grin as her father climbed off the wagon and bent to scoop his daughter into his arms.

“There’s my little sweet pea!” Brian Lockhart laughed as he tickled Tifa under her arms.

Mrs. Lockhart appeared at after hearing the commotion, leaning on the door frame and wiping her hands on her apron. She smiled as her husband blew a raspberry on Tifa’s cheek, earning a giggle from the little girl.

“It’s about time!” she teased. “You had me worried! “ Brian swung Tifa onto his hip before grinning at his wife and closing the space between them.

“It wouldn’t have taken half as long if I wasn’t so afraid to come home to your cooking!” he teased. His wife gasped in mock offense before claiming his lips with her own. Mr. Hansen cleared his throat from his perch on the wagon and Brian grinned sheepishly.

“Lia, I’ll be in after I unload some of the lumber into my woodshop.” He handed Tifa off to his wife before turning to help Mr. Hansen take armfuls of cedar and pine planks to the back door. Tifa bounced in her mother’s arms when she was taken inside and smelled the aroma of her mother’s vegetable soup. Spring was coming which meant long walks in the woods with Papa, planting the garden with Mama, and warm days in the sun with Cloud!

Cloud fascinated Tifa: her reclusive neighbor with unruly golden hair and pretty blue eyes that reminded her of the open sky. The boy who never looked like he wanted to play but always did when he was asked. He reminded her of the squirrels she would feed with Mama during the long winter months. While sitting in the snow filled yard with stale bread in her hands, Mama had explained to Tifa that if she set out a path of food and then sat very, very still, the animals may even eat out of her hands! It had filled her with such a thrill when a little squirrel hesitantly took the hunk of bread from her plump little hand. Cloud was quiet and flighty, but if you were patient, he’d come if you waited long enough. Every time it filled Tifa with that same sort of thrill.

Content with the thoughts of all the fun to be had, Tifa let herself be carried inside.
Claudia Strife hummed as she hung freshly washed laundry to dry in the midday sun of early May. Cloud sat on the grass under the nearby pine tree, fingering the well-worn pages of the thick book of children’s stories she had given to him on his last birthday. Nearing six years old, she knew he should be in school with the other children. Every time she heard young Jane Strauss ring her bell to beckon her little students into the town’s tiny school house, she felt a pang of guilt. But what could she do?

Cloud wasn’t like the other children. The others wouldn’t be kind to him because he was small and weak. The children of the town were sure to have been poisoned by their parents’ gossip regarding that unmarried Strife girl and her fatherless, bastard child. Cloud was smart; she knew that. The hours she spent teaching him by candlelight in their tiny kitchen proved fruitful. He could already read better than most eight year olds and could do rudimentary arithmetic expected of a child his age.

She sighed as she pulled another pin from the basket to secure a damp frock to the line. Was she doing more harm than good? Cloud couldn’t stay shut away in their tiny house forever. Claudia turned to glance at her son, who lifted his golden head when he realized Mom had stopped humming and felt her eyes upon him. He gave her a small smile before returning his attention to his book and running his fingers over an illustration of two frogs as he read the accompanying story to himself.

He needed friends. He needed the company of peers to mature and grow to be a well-adjusted young man. So far, the attitude of the townspeople, her protective measures and Cloud’s frail disposition had resulted in a lonesome existence for her and her son.

BANG went the back door of the Lockhart house, snapping Claudia out of her thoughts and startling Cloud, who flinched and looked up. Out of the corner of her eye, Claudia could see little Tifa bounding out onto the back porch with her hobby horse and her father’s riding hat. She hopped down each of the porch steps before leaping to the ground. The girl bounced around most of the yard before she noticed mother and son in the neighboring yard. Hobby horse dropped and forgotten, she raced to the white fence separating the yards to peer through the slats.

“Hello!” the little girl called. Claudia smiled and Cloud stiffened.

“Good day, Miss Lockhart!” the woman replied as she picked up her empty basket and met Tifa at the fence.

“Good day…”Tifa’s eyes strayed from Claudia’s face and finally landed on Cloud before her plump cheeks turned up with a smile, “Hi, Cloud! Do you want to play?”

Cloud wasn’t sure. He looked down at his book, back at the house, and froze when his blue eyes locked with Tifa’s wine colored ones. He wanted to say yes, but what if he started to feel sick? What if she found out why no one wanted to talk to him and she decided that she didn’t want to, either? He tried to swallow the lump in his throat but it wouldn’t leave and his heart suddenly started to beat faster.

“O-ok,” he finally managed, shutting his book and placing it carefully under the apple tree. This was always the hardest part. He had played with Tifa many times before. Initially gathering the courage to join her was always difficult, but once he was with her, it was easy to forget about the things he was afraid of.
Tifa grinned and hurried to open the little wooden gate for him. Cloud looked at his mother for reassurance before she smiled and gave him a little wave, “Be back for supper alright?”

Cloud nodded and walked through the gate with apprehension before Tifa gently took his hand and led him towards her little sand pit. Claudia let out a sigh of relief before turning to head inside. Thank heaven for that little Lockhart girl.

“Guess what, guess what!” Tifa swung her legs over the side of the porch as she eagerly bit into a ginger cookie. Cloud nibbled his own cookie and looked towards his playmate.

“Yesterday was my birthday!” Tifa exclaimed, “Now I’m five years old, just like you!”

Cloud’s heart sunk. He had forgotten her birthday! He would be so sad if someone important to him had forgotten his birthday, but Tifa didn’t seem to mind.

“Mama baked me a birthday cake—a big white one with a little flower on top made of frosting! I got new shoes, too.”

Cloud looked down at his own bare feet and swallowed a pang of jealousy. He hadn’t had shoes for a long time and could barely remember what it felt like to have his toes confined by leather. Mom said there just wasn’t enough money for shoes. Instead she wrapped his feet with cloth and made him a pair of tiny fabric sandals to wear as he accompanied her on her errands. Of course, the lack of footwear kept him inside most of the winter. Cloud liked to pretend that he preferred the indoors because of his lack of shoes and not because the frigid air made it hurt to breathe.

Tifa finished her cookie and wiped her hands on the skirt of her faded play dress. She grinned as she turned to face Cloud.

“—and I got a nice present, too! Wanna see?”

She was already on her feet before Cloud could respond.

“It’s in my Papa’s workshop; he made it for me. He’s got all kinds of neat stuff in there! Come on, I’ll show you. ”

The thought of exploring something new sparked Cloud’s curiosity and he let Tifa lead him into the back door, through the kitchen and down the old staircase. The stairs were coated with a light layer of saw dust, and the smell of fresh wood hung heavy in the air. Tifa reached up on her tip toes to hit the light switch, bathing the room in artificial light that flickered once in a while. She knew that it was against the rules to play in the woodshop, but certainly if they just looked it would be fine, right?

Tifa led the way down the steps.

“Woah…” Cloud gaped.

His blue eyes widened at all there was to see in the small work space. Tools of all sorts lined the walls: files and hammers and hand saws of many shapes and sizes. Cans of wood stain and glaze sat on the floor and lined the wall on the far side of the room, near the large table saw and work bench. The countertops along the walls were piled haphazardly with unfinished furniture pieces, wagon wheels, window frames and the like. Lying next to a large, red toolbox sat a brightly painted birdhouse.

Tifa poked Cloud to get his attention and pointed at it.

“There it is! That’s my birdhouse! Isn’t it pretty?” She carefully pushed a stool over and climbed up
to pull herself onto the counter, “Papa said that when we hang it up outside a bird might build a nest in it an’ lay eggs in there!”
Cloud grinned at the thought, “We could watch the eggs hatch.”

“Uh huh!” Tifa answered, “An’ watch the mama bird teach them to fly! Here, I’ll pass it down to you so you can see.”

Saw dust clung to her stockings and to the skirt of her pinafore as Tifa leaned over the tool box to pick up her birdhouse.

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Lia wiped her brow as she closed the wooden chest in her bedroom closet. She had finished storing the family’s winter clothes away, filling the dressers with summer attire. Tifa was growing fast, and Lia sighed as she realized many of her stockings and frocks would have to be either taken out to make room for her growth or replaced entirely. She had just stood up and slid the closet door closed when she heard a crash of metal coming from downstairs. Lia reached the bottom of the steps when she heard her husband’s voice.

“Hey! What are you doing down there?” Brian shouted, his heavy boot steps heading towards the basement stairs. By the time Lia had joined him in the woodshop, he had Tifa by the arm and Cloud had already hidden himself under the counter.

“You there—Strife boy!” Brian growled, “Come here.” Cloud gulped and somehow gathered enough courage to obey. He kept his eyes cast downward where the tool box had fallen, littering the floor with all kinds of metal utensils. Tifa tugged her father’s arm.

“Don’t yell at Cloud! I just wanted to show him—“

“Tifa! You know that I’ve told you time and time again how dangerous it is in here!” Brian interrupted. “What were you thinking? “ Tifa peeped through her bangs at her father’s angry face, cheeks red with fear and embarrassment. Oh, now he’d done it! Papa had gone and scared him and Cloud will never want to come back to play, now!

“I’m sorry, Papa.” Tifa said as she lowered her eyes to her feet. She felt herself being ushered towards the stairs.

“Go on, up to your room,” Brian ordered and Tifa bit her lip to keep it from trembling. “And you…”he pointed at Cloud, “Go on home, now.”

Tifa was escorted away by her father and Lia moved to put a hand on Cloud’s shoulder. Once Brian and Tifa had ascended out of ear shot, Lia knelt down in front of Cloud.

“It’s alright,” she reassured the small boy, “He was just worried about you two. Are you hurt?” Cloud bowed his head apologetically.

“No,” he whispered. Lia gently cupped his chin to tilt his head up towards her and smiled at him when he met her carmine eyes.

“Come on,” she took Cloud’s hand, “Let me walk you home. We can pack up two pieces of Tifa’s birthday cake—one for you and one for your mother. Doesn’t that sound nice?”

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Tifa climbed down the stairs and padded across the wooden floor of the foyer. She had taken her bath, brushed her teeth and combed her damp hair with Mama. When she peeked into the kitchen, she saw her father filling the tea kettle with water from the tap.

“Will you put me to bed, Papa?” she asked as Brian banked the wood in the stove and set the kettle on top to boil. He turned and faced her with a mischievous grin, holding both arms up with his fingers wide.

Tifa knew what this meant. With a shriek and a grin she quickly turned and sped back through the foyer. She tried not to trip on her night gown as she fumbled up the stairs, her father’s mock growls and roars growing louder behind her. Tifa turned at the top of the stairs, raced through the door to her bedroom and leaped onto her bed just as her father caught her to tickle her sides and blow a raspberry on her cheek.

“Your mustache tickles!” Tifa laughed, gasping for air as Papa turned back the covers to place her underneath. The little girl set her head upon the pillow, her smile fading momentarily.

“I’m sorry that I went into your workshop today.”

Brian pressed a kiss to her forehead, “It’s alright, sweet pea. It’s not safe in there and I thought you might have been hurt.” He tucked her in before switching off the lamp on the nearby desk.

“From now on, I expect you to be a good girl and do as you’re told. Understood?”

“Yes, Papa. I love you.”

“I love you, too,” he said closed the door before making his way downstairs.

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“How often has that Strife boy been over here?” Brian asked with a slight edge of annoyance in his voice. Lia set down her mug of tea gently before looking her husband in the eye. The subject of the little blonde boy had always been one on which they did not agree.

“Cloud and Tifa play together all the time. They’re neighbors, it’s only natural.”

Brian’s mouth twitched as he shifted in his chair, “Lia…it seems harmless and all now, but what about later? Think of Tifa’s future—her social life. Her marriage prospects…”

Claudia and Cloud were a controversial pair at best. The village of Nibelheim was a small, isolated town where there was little room for change in traditional social norms. Lia kept her eyes on her tea and tucked a strand of dark hair behind her ear.

“They’re children. Let them play! Cloud is a lonely kid, not a monster. Let the old women gossip; I don’t care. He’s a good boy, Brian. He loves Tifa and they get along well—” She knew immediately that she said the wrong thing before the words completely left her mouth.

“Heaven forbid he falls in love with her! How could I let my daughter marry a fatherless child of questionable lineage—what kind of parent would I be?” Brian snapped, gripping his mug and making eye contact with his wife.

“I think you’re getting ahead of yourself. They’re children…” Lia said softly. “Let’s just let things be for now, alright?”

She watched as Brian gulped his tea, rose to put his mug in the sink and excused himself. He adored
Tifa and wanted the best for his only daughter but sometimes Lia wished he could see the fault in his protective measures.
Lia watched from the kitchen window as Tifa played in the backyard. Since the incident in the workshop, Cloud had made himself scarce and his little playmate was trying every trick in the book to convince him to come out and join her. She had called to his open window, knocked politely on the front door of the Strife house, and rang the little jingle bells that had rusted off Brian’s snow sled to try to get the boy’s attention. She would even try to bribe him with cookies through the wide slats of their fence when his mother sent him in the backyard to fill the water basin from the pump.

But nothing seemed to work, and her daughter was growing irritated.

Lia remembered the first time she saw little Cloud when Tifa was still just a babbling toddler on her hip. Claudia Strife came to town on a wagon of tapestries from the desert east of Corel with empty eyes and solemn spirit. Her two year old clung to her skirts and was nearly as silent as his young mother. The town was not welcoming.

She had come to Nibelheim with just a small satchel and her ghost of a little boy. No one bothered to ask her what had happened; her desperation and the absence of a ring on her finger told everyone all they cared to know. Somehow, Claudia had managed to purchase the tiny cottage at the end of the street with some old bank bonds and her mother’s jewels. Lia never dared to ask about Cloud’s father, but over time she had learned that he had died and now mother and child were alone.

At that time, Lia was new to the area as well. She grew up in a small fishing village on the coast of the Wutai, a large nation occupying most of the western continent. She happened to meet Brian by chance as he was travelling and the pair had instant chemistry. Getting married at age fifteen and moving to the mountains had flipped her world upside down. The additional changes that went along with getting pregnant made her feel more homesick and out of place than ever.

Unlike Claudia, she had married an esteemed member of the village and was welcomed with smiles and gratuity. However, she found herself sympathizing with the newcomer through feelings of displacement and pangs of loneliness. Lia had made a point to be friendly towards Claudia and her flaxen haired boy, to which she was rewarded by seeing some light return to the young mother’s pale eyes. Currently, she and Claudia held a distant friendship. They met occasionally for tea or would chat over the fence as they tended their gardens, but her pretty neighbor was always too busy for any real social engagements.

The daughter of a seamstress, Claudia ended up earning a meager living by making and mending clothes, quilts and the like. It was enough to feed herself and Cloud, but not much else. Fortunately for her, Nibelheim didn’t have a proper millinery or tailor and her skills were needed in the community. The townspeople refused to let Claudia know her value and kept interaction with her down to strict formalities. Lia hoped that her quiet companionship filled the cracks in the single mother’s heart as much as they soothed the aches in hers.

With a frustrated huff, Tifa threw a stick high into the air as she could and watched it crash to the ground beside the fence at the rear end of the yard. She just didn’t understand. Papa had scared Cloud but that was days ago. And Papa never stayed mad for long, anyway. Didn’t he want to play with her anymore? It was unbearable to think of how sad and lonely and boring life would be if Cloud never came out to join her again. She had tried everything! What else was there to do?

She pushed her tire swing aside with one arm as she dragged herself over to the back porch and through the screen door, letting it slam shut with a loud BANG. Lia looked up from where she was stirring a pot of rice porridge on the stovetop.
“He won’t come out,” Tifa said, eyes cast downward. She frowned tugged anxiously at the hem of her pinafore, “It’s been two whole days. I kept trying and trying but Cloud doesn’t want to play!”

“He’s shy, dear. You know that.”

“Why is he shy, Mama?” Tifa asked softly. She didn’t understand how one could be shy. It was fun to talk and play and be loud and silly. As hard as she tried to understand Cloud, he often left her confused. But instead of deterring her, this difference set her curiosity ablaze.

Mama seemed to think for a moment before she left the porridge pot to smooth her hand along Tifa’s head. She smiled before explaining, “Every person is different, and sees the world in his own way. Often times people are shy because they’re afraid other people won’t like them for some reason or another. But don’t worry, Tifa. Cloud will come out again.”

Tifa didn’t seem convinced, “How do you know that?”

“Because you treat him with kindness, and kindness is such a wonderful medicine,” Lia tapped Tifa on the nose, drawing out a reluctant giggle from the girl. She rose and set the boiling pot to cool before turning back to watch her daughter take off her shoes.

“Why don’t we practice piano until Papa gets home? Then we can have supper together,” she suggested and Tifa’s small head snapped upwards with hope.

“Oh, please! Let’s play!”

“Go on and wash up, then we can start.” Lia watched as Tifa bounced through the kitchen and made her way to the washroom.

Lia’s piano sat in the large study upstairs. That instrument had been her source of solace in the early days of her marriage when homesickness often overtook her. When she’d glide her hands over the keys, she could almost hear the gulls and the bells of the fishing boats of her home town. When Tifa was born, the room was used as a makeshift nursery and currently housed most of the girl’s belongings. Tifa’s bed was a close fit between the side window and the piano but the arrangement didn’t bother the child. Tifa took to it quickly, asking to practice again and again until Brian would playfully shout that she was going to have the whole town complaining about the noise. It filled Lia with great pleasure to teach her daughter the magic of music, just as her own mother had with her.

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Cloud looked up from his storybook when the gentle music reached his ears. Folding his book under his arm, he abandoned his spot at the kitchen table to settle on the window seat upstairs in his room. It was a daily ritual that he enjoyed: hearing Mrs. Lockhart’s graceful hands playing a pretty melody, followed by Tifa’s clumsy plunking of the same notes. Unlike the flickering candlelight in his own home, the electric light in Tifa’s room made it much easier for him to see into her side window from where he sat. If he leaned just so, Cloud could see the very end of the piano. Their houses were close enough that occasionally he could hear Tifa’s melodious giggle and Lia’s soft laugh as they played together.

Cloud wondered what the piano keys might feel like under his fingers, or how wonderful it would feel to learn to play a song. Maybe one day, Tifa would let him play? That is, if he could swallow his fear. He’d felt guilty for shying away from her since the day her father got angry, but he had always had a bad feeling around Mr. Lockhart and got so frightened when he had shouted!

Turning his attention back to his book, Cloud continued to read his stories of knights and warriors and heroes. They were fearless and strong, saving the day and rescuing the princess. Heroes were
never afraid. Heroes didn’t have weak bodies or ran cowering from scary things. Oh, how he wished he could be brave like a hero! Then, maybe, the others would smile at him and want him around.

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“Tifa? Are you there?”

Cloud stood apprehensively at the little white gate that led to Tifa’s yard. He had made up his mind: he was going to be brave and ask Tifa to play. Mom had said that sometimes it hard to do the things that were best for us, and he could wholeheartedly agree. He inhaled when a figure came around the house in response to his call. It was Mrs. Lockhart, clad in a dirty apron over an old, worn frock. She held a small gardening spade in her hand and adjusted her hat with her free hand.

“Hello, Cloud!” she beamed, “Come on in. Tifa is in the house, but she’ll be out in no time!”

Despite his shyness, Cloud felt a smile tugging at his cheeks. Tifa’s mother was always kind and he felt safe with her. He followed Lia around to the back of the house and watched her kneel down in her small garden, tending to the plants that were growing stronger with each sunlit day. He crouched nearby and watched and Lia turned the dirt and plucked weeds from the earth. His mother’s garden was much smaller than theirs and only grew potatoes.

Lia urged Cloud into quiet conversation until the porch door banged shut and Tifa hopped down the steps. She halted momentarily upon seeing her blonde companion and squeaked with excitement as she ran to embrace him.

“Cloud, I’m so happy to see you!” she laughed. Mama was right, he did come back! “I missed you! Wanna help Mama and I in the garden?” The boy nodded before musing, “Your garden sure is big…”

“Uh-huh!” Tifa said proudly, moving to point at the rows of plants. “This one is t’matoes, and this one is carrots. Cabbage is here, right Mama?”

She was happy to name the half dozen plants in the garden and show Cloud how to tend to them alongside her mother. Before long, the girl grew restless and led Cloud away to play.

Thankfully, Brian was busy in his workshop and was too occupied to notice that his daughter’s playmate was around. It wasn’t Lia’s intention to deceive him. Brian hadn’t forbidden the children from playing and so there was no reason to keep them apart. Tifa was happy, Cloud was happy and why should anything else matter? But still, Lia knew it would be best to have them play when her husband was away cutting lumber or aiding with construction elsewhere. Out of sight, out of mind, right?
Small Savior

The summer was mild and rainy, which was good for the gardens and the Hansen’s small farm at the edge of the village. It also allowed Tifa ample time to practice piano and for her mother to teach her a thing or two about cooking, which she enjoyed thoroughly.

Tifa sat on the back porch, watching the rain fall and playing with her little wooden horse. Papa had hung her brightly painted birdhouse high upon one of the porch’s wooden support beams. She checked with Cloud almost every day (with Mama’s help) but there were no birds. When she asked why that was so, Mama had said that it was probably too late in the year for the birds to lay eggs. She and Cloud had been so disappointed to learn that they’d have to wait until next spring to see any eggs in the birdhouse.

However, that disappointment was forgotten when Mama told her that she’d be attending school in a few short weeks. Every day as she ate her breakfast, she watched through the window as the town’s children make their way down the street. They skipped along with their lunch pails, slates and books, disappearing into the schoolhouse when the teacher came out and rang a small bell. Tifa couldn’t wait to join them!

She was so excited to tell Cloud, but when she did he didn’t seem very happy about it. And when she asked if he would be going, too, he got very quiet. Tifa was sure not to mention it again no matter how hard it was not to gush with excitement to her friend.

That changed when Cloud’s birthday came and went and he had called her to the back yard, arms clutching a bundle wrapped with burlap. He had proudly showed her its contents: a brand new primer and slate, with two slate pencils. Tifa had taken his hands and bounced with excitement: he was going to school with her! And for the first time, she heard him laugh along with her.

… … …

She hadn’t slept well last night. With a foggy head and sleep heavy eyes, Claudia fed Cloud his breakfast before helping him wash his face and don his new shoes.

The distress had been evident on her son’s face when he told her Tifa said she’d be starting school in the fall, and Claudia figured that enough was enough. Cloud would miss his playmate, but most importantly he’d eventually become aware that he was being denied a chance to learn with the other children. Somehow, she’d have to figure out how to afford the things he’d need for his education. Even harder than that would be convincing herself that her son would be alright on his own with his school mates. Kids could be so cruel.

And so she worked long into the night for weeks, stitching and cutting and mending to make enough wares to sell so that she could afford some shoes for Cloud. Claudia set up a tab at the dry goods store to slowly pay off the cost of the slate, primer and slate pencils. She carefully made Cloud two new shirts and one pair of slacks out of material from his father’s old clothes. Now that the day had come, she wondered if she had done enough to prepare him for this.

From the looks of it, Cloud hadn’t slept well either. She handed him his lunch pail, kissed his head and wished him luck as she escorted her son out the door.

… … …

His breakfast felt like a lead weight in his stomach as Cloud adjusted his pail and books so he could hold them all with one arm. When Mom told him he’d be going to school, he was so excited at first!
If he could learn and do what the other kids did, maybe they’d talk to him and include him. But now he couldn’t help but be anxious about meeting the other children. The only person to ever ask him to play was Tifa, why would going to school change that? What if they all made fun of him?

No, no. He couldn’t think about that; Mom had said to be brave. Steeling himself, he took a breath and turned to step in the direction of the school house.

“Cloud, wait!” came a familiar voice from behind. He turned his head to see Tifa running towards him, hair tied up in a deep red bow to match her new dress. A leather pack bounced off her hip as she bounded forward. She took his hand when she reached him. Cloud smiled as he felt some of his anxiety fade.

“Will you walk with me, Cloud?”

“Of course,” Cloud gave her hand a squeeze, prompting a giggle from Tifa. It gave him courage to walk beside her.

“Let’s walk together every day,” he suggested. Tifa nodded and swung their arms as they began to move towards the school.

The pair walked along, passing the water tower at the center of town square and through the smell of freshly baked bread from the small tavern within the inn. Ahead they could see the other children gathered near the tiny school house. Tifa bristled with excitement and Cloud swallowed anxiously.

Before Cloud and Tifa could talk with the others, the school teacher appeared with a bell in her hands and rang it to summon everyone inside.

Miss Strauss was a kind young lady with frizzy brown hair pulled back into an unruly braid. She didn’t look much older than some of the biggest students but carried a confidence in her steps. She instructed her pupils to line their lunch pails at the back of the room before taking the seats she assigned to each of them last term. Miss Strauss knew each of her students by name, even her two newcomers, for Nibelheim was a tiny village and even the most aloof of residents was bound to be noticed. Tifa and Cloud stood together, not knowing where the teacher expected them to sit.

“Welcome,” she smiled at the pair. “Please introduce yourselves to the class and we’ll find a seat for you.” She walked behind them, putting her hand on Tifa’s shoulder to prompt her to speak.

“I’m Tifa!” Tifa stated, and proudly told the class she was five years old when Miss Strauss asked for her age.

Cloud cast his eyes downward when the teacher moved to stand behind him. Never before had so many pairs of eyes been on him! He could feel his palms getting sweaty and his face getting hot. He swallowed, shifted his primer and slate in his arms, and cleared his throat softly.

“Cloud Strife, six years old.”

“Welcome, Cloud. Welcome, Tifa,” the class recited in bored monotone when prompted by their teacher. Tifa beamed and Cloud kept his eyes on the floorboards.

They were both assigned places to sit and lessons quickly began.

Tifa grew anxious when she was separated from Cloud and took a moment to observe her surroundings. There were two rows of wooden desks, each long enough to sit four students. A large chalk board spanned much of the length of the front wall, the bottom lined with a wooden ledge that held some chalk and a cloth eraser. The room was small but there were plenty of windows and the mixture of the white walls and sunlight made the schoolhouse bright with natural light. In the rear
corner of the room sat a small wood stove and a small pile of books.

Miss Strauss’s desk was near the chalk board, and Tifa had been assigned to the seat closest to it. Tifa turned to peek over her shoulder and saw Cloud seated in between two boys a few rows back. She observed her classmates and it seemed like they had been seated according to age: younger kids in the front, older in the back. Tifa counted thirteen students, of which she noticed she was the smallest. Suddenly she realized something was wrong—there were no other girls!

… … …

They were supposed to be reading quietly; he was good at that. With Jason Hansen on his left and Thomas Taylor on his right, it was impossible. They both took turns jabbing him in the ribs with their slate pencils, tugging on his golden hair and flipping his primer shut. Cloud silently hoped that the teacher would notice, but his tormentors were too sly. To make things worse, his new shoes were pinching his feet and he knew there would be blisters later. Cloud didn’t know whether to be relieved or afraid when Miss Strauss dismissed them for lunch outside and away from supervision. At least he’d get to talk to Tifa again.

He walked outside with his lunch pail, trying to stay out of sight by sitting between the trunk of a pine tree and the wall of the school house. Cloud removed the lid from his lunch pail, revealing a small corked bottle of milk, a hunk of buttered bread, a cube of cheese and apple slices wrapped in wax paper. He was about the reach for the bread when out of the corner of his eye he saw Jason, Thomas and a dark haired boy named Jim Ackerman approaching. His heart began to pound in his ears and he wished with all his might that he never left his house today.

“Hey Cloud,” Thomas sneered, his auburn hair glinting in the daylight. Cloud was quickly surrounded by the threesome. He had learned that Jim and Jason were six, like he was, but Thomas was already seven years old. All three of them were tanned from days in the sun, playing or helping on their parents’ farms during the summer. Cloud looked at his own skinny, pale arms and immediately felt inadequate.

“What kind of name is Cloud, anyway?” Jason teased, leaning over Cloud and blocking out the sun. “My pop says he’s got no daddy, so he hides inside all day,” Jim stated, a cruel smile spreading across his face. “That’s why he’s so pale. Even his hair is pale!”

Cloud kept his head lowered, hoping that if he kept quiet they’d get bored and leave him be. There was a loud metallic clank as Thomas kicked over his lunch pail.

“Hey! Don’t you have anything to say?” Jim shoved the side of Cloud’s head. Cloud tensed to get ready to run when he heard his name. Tifa was calling him. He looked up to see her round little face hurrying towards him, holding her own lunch pail. She smiled at the group, unaware of Cloud’s predicament.

“Hey Cloud…your milk bottle broke. Let’s share mine, ok?”
Before he started attending school, Cloud had always hated the winter. With the cold weather always came weakness and illness, the tightening in his chest from the frigid air, and isolation from Tifa. While he still strained to breathe sometimes and occasionally felt dizzy and sick, he now saw his friend most every day. And best of all, the children ate their lunches inside the schoolhouse under the watchful eye of Miss Strauss. He was safe from his bullies for the most part.

Cloud was safe on the walk to school and on the way home since he held Tifa’s hand the whole way. If he was careful and timed it perfectly, he could get to school just as the teacher rang the school bell so he wouldn’t have time to interact with the other students. Thomas and Jason only had the chance to pester him as they sat at the desk, something he had gotten used to by now. In the rare times that he wasn’t in Tifa’s presence at lunch time, the trio of bullies would rough him up a bit or take his lunch but it was never too bad. The other students pretended not to notice and Cloud was grateful that they chose not to join in. Tifa would occasionally notice a bruise or a scrape and Cloud would tell her not to worry. Mom had told him never to hit anyone, no matter what.

A gust of wind rattled the shutters and Cloud looked up from the math problem on his slate to glance out the nearest window. The pine trees swayed against the gray January sky—warnings of an incoming snow storm. A stray flurry began to fall here or there and he wondered if they’d become fat flakes by the time school let out for the day. The boy shivered in anticipation, for he didn’t have a coat yet. Mom had just about saved enough gil for the material to make one for him, but he’d have to be patient.

Miss Strauss rubbed her hands together from the cold and told the children to break for lunch. The wood stove in the schoolhouse was too small for the heat to radiate very far, so the kids grabbed their lunch pails and sat as close to the warmth as possible. Cloud chose to sit along the wall instead and Tifa was instantly by his side, eager to talk after the past few hours of lessons.

Soon, the chatter of the other children caught their attention.

“Did you hear the story about the man went to cross Mt. Nibel?”

“Yeah, the traveler from the south! Dad said he wanted to cross over without taking the path through the valley.”

“But it’s the middle of winter! He’ll freeze to death!”

“Well, they say no one makes it over the mountain alive. Maybe only ghosts can make it to the other side.”

Tifa put her milk bottle down and moved to scoot closer to the semicircle of boys near the woodstove. She just had to hear about this! Papa had been everywhere in the mountains! He knew the best places to gather oak, where the strongest pitch pine grew, and where to cut hard cedar to make wagon wheels. Tifa had sat on his lap many times as Papa looked at his maps, plotting a course in which to take the wagon and gather timber to bring back to town.

From what her Papa had told her, there weren’t many trees or plants at all on Mt. Nibel and this had fascinated her. When she asked why, she was told it was because of the ShinRA company’s big building high up Mt. Nibel that gave some of the buildings in town electricity. Tifa didn’t understand how a building had anything to do with the plants and her father had told her that he’d explain when she was older. She remembered from the detailed maps that Mt. Nibel was full of winding caverns
“Hey,” she tried to worm her way into the group. “Are you talking about Mt. Nibel? I know a lot about Mt. Nibel!”

She quickly motioned for Cloud to follow, but he made no move to leave his spot by the wall.

“Oh, yeah?” Thomas quirked an eye brow and some of the other kids began to talk amongst themselves.

The boys had largely ignored Tifa up until this point, but looked interested when she said that she had more information on the subject. Cloud watched with unease, wondering if the group would turn her away. To his surprise, they moved aside so she could sit among them. Instantly, he felt the grip of loneliness and anxiety—Tifa had left his side!

“My Papa has maps of Mt. Nibel! He showed them to me—there’s a lot of caves an’ stuff,” Tifa began, sending a reassuring smile in Cloud’s direction before telling the children what she knew of the paths of the towering mountain beyond the village. They quietly listened and Tifa was thrilled to show off some knowledge while interacting with her fellow students. Despite her friendly nature, she hadn’t been able to form any solid friendships since most of the young boys wanted nothing to do with a little girl. It didn’t help that Tifa had spent most of her time with Cloud since day one and he avoided the boys the best he could. She guessed it was because he was shy.

When the teacher called them back to work, Tifa returned to Cloud, crammed the last of her bread and cheese into her mouth and replaced her pail at its place on the back wall. Cloud followed the group back to his seat, a knot forming in the pit of his stomach as he thought about Tifa joining that group of bullies.

… … …

There was a thin coating of snow on the ground by the time the children were dismissed for the day. Cloud took Tifa’s hand and held it tight. He couldn’t help worry that one day Tifa might realize that there was something wrong with him and reject him like the others. He forgot that such a thing could happen before he saw her leave his side to chat with the boys. Cloud felt selfish and awful, but he wanted her to stay with him even if it meant that she didn’t get to make other friends. He turned to begin their usual route home but Tifa tugged the opposite way. When she saw the puzzled look on his face, she explained her motives.

“Let’s go look at the mountain, Cloud! Can’t we just peek at it, please?”

Cloud considered this, pulling his shirt closer around his skinny chest in a futile attempt for warmth. His mother had expected him to come right home in the winter time, for he had no coat and was prone to illness. He was so cold and the wind was picking up but his curiosity about Mt. Nibel won out. What harm could one quick look do?

“All right, if we hurry. My primer will get wet from the snow if we don’t.”

He allowed her to lead him down the wide path that stretched away from the town and out towards the mountain peak. The path was unfamiliar; Cloud had never left town before. He glanced around as Tifa led him forward and a large, dark structure looming to the left caught Cloud’s attention. It was the old manor owned by the ShinRA electric power company. His mother said it had once used by ShinRA scientists and now it sat abandoned on the outskirts of town. They continued along the snowy path and before Cloud could wonder what was in that big, dark building, he heard Tifa speak.
“Look, Cloud!” she stopped and pointed toward the summit that had come into view beyond the timberline. “That’s a long way up…”

He gazed at the up and nodded in agreement. The mountain was so high that the blowing snow from the storm obscured the peak from view. Cloud shivered as another gust of wind blew.

“Do you think it’s true, what the others said?” he asked, turning his gaze back to Tifa. “You know, about no one being able to cross it alive?”

Tifa paused in thought, her long hair tugging in the wind. One mitten clad hand came up to rest on her cheek as she pondered.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Do you think there are really ghosts up there?”

He thought for a moment. Ghosts…people who die become ghosts, right? Would my father be up there? Nothing about the mountain seemed inviting. If his father really was up there, he wasn’t sure if he wanted to see him.

Thick white drifts blew across the path in front of them. The snow danced to and fro, swirling and seeming to take on a shape before dispersing again. Cloud and Tifa watched with fascination as it happened again and again. A gust blew against the children with a loud, moaning howl. Tifa let out a startled yelp and hopped behind Cloud, whose blue eyes were wide with fright. Cold and thoroughly spooked, the pair scuttled back home convinced there was a ghost on their heels.

… … …

It was printed in bold letters on the front page of the newspaper: ShinRA had declared war on Wutai. Lia wasn’t surprised, but expecting such a thing didn’t make it hurt any less. She had been well informed of the ongoing conflict between ShinRA and Wutai from both the newspapers and from the letters her mother sent her monthly.

She frowned and gripped the newspaper so hard that it creased at the sides.

ShinRA Electric Power Company was a world power that monopolized the use of Mako energy, which was harvested from the earth using multiple reactors stationed throughout the world. This energy was used as electric power which improved the quality of life for people around the world. Even in Nibelheim, things like electric powered lights, ovens and ice boxes were beginning to be used in the house holds that could afford such luxuries. But it wasn’t without a price. Since the construction of the Mako reactor on Mt. Nibel, much of the plant life of the surrounding area had withered and died.

Wutai had adamantly refused when ShinRA approached them about the building of a Mako reactor. They were the only part of the world that had not yet submitted to the company’s tyrannical rule. Lia knew that Wutai’s freedom couldn’t last forever—and after so many years of heated friction, war had finally come. What did that mean for her family there? Would they be safe?

She hadn’t seen her parents in the six years since she married Brian and had hoped to travel to see them in the near future. Now that war had broken out, it would be impossible to get there safely. She felt hot tears burning and threatening to fall as the words of the newspaper blurred together. Tifa had never met her grandparents and Lia wanted so badly to see her mother smile at the sight of her only grandchild. But most of all, she wanted to hear her father’s laugh and feel the arms of her mother hold her once more. She hadn’t realized how much homesickness still plagued her until the possibility of returning had vanished.

“Are you alright?” a small voice asked. Lia looked up from the newspaper and across the table to see worry in her daughter’s deep red eyes. She quickly wiped her eyes and thought of how she could
possibly explain what she was feeling to a small child.

“I’m just a little homesick, Tifa,” Lia said.

“But we are home, Mama…” The girl looked puzzled and her mother smiled sadly.

“Mama grew up in a place far away from here. Before I married Papa, I lived on the other side of the mountains and across the sea. That’s where your grandmother and grandfather live,” Lia explained. Tifa seemed to be in thought as she ate another spoonful of her soup. After a few moments of silence, the girl asked what her hometown was like. Somehow, it soothed her to try to describe her childhood home and the smell of the salty air to her daughter.

When it was time for bed, Lia tucked Tifa in and kissed her forehead before turning off the light. Once her mother had gone downstairs, Tifa sat up to look out the window. There were two windows in her room: one that faced the front of the house and the one beside her bed that faced the strife cottage. When Tifa craned her head to the right, she could just barely spot candle light coming from Cloud’s bedroom window. She wanted to open her window and call to him, but his window was shut and Tifa was sure her parents would hear her before Cloud would.

She’d have to wait to tell him all about her mother’s stories of a faraway place with sand that stretched for miles and a body of water so big that you couldn’t see the other side.
Secrets

Cloud didn’t meet Tifa for their walk through the snow to school the next morning. When she knocked on the door to his house, his mother said that he had come down with a fever and would need to rest. Tifa hung her head in disappointment—she had never been to school without Cloud before! The short walk to school felt strange and lonesome.

Cloud hadn’t held her hand since Papa scolded him for it a few weeks ago and she missed the secure feeling of his grip on her fingers. The village was silent as she walked along; the fresh snow was still mostly untouched, except for the trail of the milk man’s sleigh. She wrapped her red scarf more tightly around her neck and chose to walk in the sleigh’s path instead of trying to tromp through the accumulated snow.

“Hey—small fry!” a voice called behind her. Tifa turned to see her classmate hurrying towards her. It was rare to be addressed by any of the boys at the school besides Cloud and it excited her to think that she had been noticed! She was smiling wide by the time Thomas caught up with her, his auburn hair poking out from under his thick wool hat.

“Where’s your blonde buddy? He’s always stuck to you like glue!” he teased. Tifa dropped her head to watch her boots navigate the snowy street. Of course he asked about Cloud. Cloud was a boy, and boys just wanted to play with other boys. Girls were boring, right?

“He got sick. He’s staying home today.”

Thomas looked disinterested in hearing about Cloud’s well-being and it left Tifa confused as to why he asked in the first place. She felt suddenly shy as the pair fell into silence. They approached the school and several students were already waiting outside. Jim and Jason ran to meet Thomas, confused when they saw him walking with the little dark haired girl.

“My pop said that you were right. Mt. Nibel is full of holes and caves! “Thomas said as he popped a piece of gum between his teeth. His friends were instantly drawn in by the topic of the mountain.

Tifa’s head snapped up, “He must’ve seen Papa’s maps!”

“He said they’re like an anthill,” Thomas continued. “The caves go all throughout like a maze!”

“How can you get through there without getting lost?” Jason asked.

Jim scratched his head, “No wonder no one knows what’s on the other side.”

Tifa’s eyes widened with realization, “I do! I know what’s on the other side!” All eyes were on her as she explained her about her Mama’s home on the other side of the mountain and across the sea.

Tifa skipped through the snow after school, swinging her lunch pail and humming a tune she had been learning on piano. What seemed like it would have been an awful day turned out to be a wonderful one. She was convinced that being without Cloud would’ve made the day long and lonesome, but Tifa had had so much fun with Jim, Jason and especially Thomas. He had even let her sit next to him at lunch and gave her part of his blueberry muffin!

She felt like she belonged when they listened with fascination as she talked about Wutai and all the things her mother told her about that faraway fishing village. Maybe the fact that she was a girl didn’t
matter to them at all! She wasn’t sure why Cloud always wanted to stay away from them; they were so fun to talk to! Her heart sunk as she passed by the little Strife cottage and thought about poor Cloud, sick and alone in his bed.

Since the night before, Tifa had been thinking of how she and Cloud could talk to each other from their bedroom windows. How useful that would be if he was sick and couldn’t play! If only they had a telephone, like the one in the inn run by Thomas and his family. One time, she had heard it ring! A pretty little sound that reminded her of the jingle bells Papa had on his winter sleigh—oh! Her jingle bells! Papa had given her three and she played with them often.

Maybe if she tied a thread to one and threw it to Cloud from her window, she could pull the line and ring the little bell whenever she wanted to talk to him. If she fastened the other end to a second jingle bell for her room, he could do the same. Grinning, Tifa bounced up the front steps and into her home. She had work to do!

… … …

He was so hot. Cloud had long since tossed his quilt aside and taken off his shirt, yet sweat still beaded on his forehead and his sheets were still damp with perspiration. He wasn’t sure what had done it, but perhaps staying out in the snow storm with only his school shirt on for that extra half hour the day before was to blame for this wave of illness. He was so weak and it angered him. Cloud sat up, making his head spin and the room lurch. He breathed deeply and swallowed at the brief nausea that passed over him from moving so quickly. Everything was so hot and uncomfortable that he wished his mother would just let him lay out in the snow; her cool washcloths on his skin just weren’t enough.

He slowly rose and padded over to his window seat, sighing with relief when he pressed his head to the window and felt the cool glass against his burning skin. He slumped there, passing in and out of sleep until he heard a small metallic sound. Just when he thought he hadn’t really heard it, there it was again. Cloud knew that noise. It was a jingle bell.

Opening his heavy eyes, he peered out the window to see the silhouette of his little friend against the electric light of her bedroom. She seemed busy fiddling with something in her hands as she leaned her elbows on the sill of her open window. Cloud felt awful—he hadn’t been able to walk to school with her today! He hoped she wasn’t too lonesome eating lunch by herself against the back wall. He pried his window open with the intention to apologize.

“…Tifa?” Cloud called softly into the night. The dry, frigid air felt like medicine on his skin and like poison to his lungs. Tifa’s head snapped up, her dark hair falling over her shoulder. He was relieved to watch her grin when she saw him. She wasn’t angry with him!

“Cloud!” she gasped softly. “I’m sorry you’re sick! Are you okay?”

“I’m alright,” Cloud lied. “I just hope you weren’t lonesome.”

“It’s ok, I had fun with Thomas!” she giggled and Cloud’s heart sunk to his feet.

The selfish side of him hoped that Tifa had missed him, but she had made another friend. Not just any friend, Thomas of all people. What if Thomas told her that Cloud was just a weak little runt without worth and without a father? Tifa never asked about his father, which surprised Cloud because she was always so inquisitive. He had been relieved that maybe she would never find out, but Thomas and the others were sure to tell her! Cloud felt panic rise in his chest. If Tifa found out, she’d hate him like everyone else and then he’d be alone!
“Look, I made something!” she said cheerfully and pulled Cloud from his thoughts. A jingle bell glinted in the light coming from the room behind her as she held it in her palm. The bell was tied at the top with a thin line of twine that disappeared into Tifa’s bedroom.

“I’m going to throw it to you. Try to catch it!” Tifa said, holding the end of the twine with one hand and heaving the heavy little bell out the window with the other. Cloud snapped his foggy head to attention and reached to catch the bell. Ping! It hit the corner of the window pane and fell to the bushes below. Tifa gasped and held onto the twine, pulling the bell back up into her window. She tried again and Cloud was surprised when he caught it against his chest.

Tifa let out a small noise of victory before turning her attention back to the boy.

“Cloud, keep that in your window, and I’ll keep my bell in mine! If we want to talk to each other, we can just pull the string and the bell will ring. What do you think?”

He held the bell between his fingers and couldn’t suppress his smile. Even if Tifa was friends with those boys, she still sought his company and it soothed his anxiety. As long as he had her, he’d be alright.

“How do you think of such good ideas?” Cloud praised softly, the cold air making his lungs sting. Tifa shrugged with a small smile. Tifa’s father called her name from inside the house, startling the girl.

“I’ve got to go! Feel better, ok?”

“Thank you, Tifa…”

She closed her bedroom window and disappeared. Cloud shut his own window carefully, making sure that the twine wasn’t pinned too tightly underneath so that the bell would ring if Tifa tugged the line. He pulled his curtain over a bit more so that it rested gently over the bell, obscuring it from sight.

How exciting—he and Tifa had a secret all their own!

… … …

Near to the warmth of the hearth, Brian flexed his legs and slumped further in his armchair. His cheerful daughter had been suspiciously eager to retire to her bedroom that evening, but he was too tired to overthink the mind of a little girl. Tifa was a pretty little thing—stealing her deep red eyes, flowing dark hair and perfect, porcelain skin from her mother. Since the day she was born, the very fact that she was female brought happiness and hope to the village, which seemed to be cursed with a multitude of male children.

The Lockhart family had always been well respected in the area—that fact combined with the fuss over little Tifa’s birth had helped Lia find a high level of status in the local social circle. It was something his wife didn’t always seem very comfortable with. Lia hailed from a less conservative area, he was sure that she didn’t understand just how important it was to be well respected in a place like this. Brian turned his head to glance at his wife, who was attempting to mend a pair of Tifa’s stockings on the couch. She would’ve had a much easier time seeing if she had turned on the lamp on the end table, but Lia stubbornly chose to rely on the light of the fireplace instead. Her quiet protest of ShinRA electricity did not go unnoticed by Brian.

“Watching you mend something is like watching a dog walk on its hind legs!” he teased with a smirk.
Lia fired back with her own aggressive smile as she threw a thimble at his shoulder. She couldn’t fool him. The worried crease still lingered between her eyebrows as she thought of her parents and homeland. The war haunted his wife, hanging over her heart like a dark fog, and Brian was trying everything he could to lift her spirits. Her smile quickly faded as she rested the stockings on the cushion beside her.

“Everyone is talking about the war,” Lia whispered, eyes on her lap. “All I hear is people saying: ‘It’s about time!’ or ‘Wutai will be trampled in no time.’ No one knows how much it hurts, and it makes me feel so lonesome here, sometimes.”

“…Come here, Lia,” Brian beckoned softly, and Lia rose to stand in front of him. Gently, he pulled her onto his lap and cradled her shoulders with his arm. Threading his fingers through her flowing black tresses, he planted a soft kiss to her cheek. She rested her head against him quietly for long minutes before she spoke.

“Do you think I’m a bad daughter? When I left home…” Lia began, before closing her eyes for a moment and leaning into the warmth of his hand.

“Oh, Brian…I should’ve invited them to stay here when things were getting tense with ShinRA. Now, it’s too late.”

He cupped her cheek with his hand and turned her face to look at him, “You are a remarkable daughter, Lia. You didn’t abandon them when you married me—I know you think that. None of this had anything to do with you.”

Coaxing her head to rest on his shoulder, Brian gently ran his hand up and down her back. Lia focused on breathing deeply and evenly to stifle the wild emotion in her heart, but her husband sensed the raging storm beneath the surface.

“I love you, Lia. It’ll be alright…”

The couple remained there long after the fire in the hearth had burned away and only orange embers remained.
Cloud had always been small for his age. Being born prematurely, the odds were stacked against him from the start. Watching her newborn struggle to breathe was heartbreaking for Claudia and she was never sure if that little chest would still be rising and falling when she awoke every morning. He had been slow to nurse and slept so much that it scared the young mother. Those were some of the most frightening days of her life; death always seemed to be looming above her son as he fell in and out of fever those first few weeks of his life. She and the baby’s father had named him Cloud, for he was always so close to returning to heaven.

Claudia took a pair of Cloud’s trousers off the line where they had been hung to dry next to one of her brightly colored dresses. This particular pair had been mended at the knees more than twice and the material at the hem was fringed from use. She grinned as she realized that for the first time in his life, Cloud was growing rapidly. Now eight years old, his legs were growing lanky and long and his lean torso stretched to accommodate that. His hair was growing, too. Claudia had tried to cut it, but Cloud refused and chose to pull it back into a tiny excuse for a pony tail at the base of his neck.

She was proud of her son. Cloud helped her tend the garden, had begun to run some small errands for her and even swept the floors. Slowly but surely, he was growing stronger and even seemed to be gaining some confidence. Although he still isolated himself from the other children for the most part, Claudia was thrilled to see him running and playing with the Lockhart girl almost every day. For the first time, she found herself truly believing that Cloud might end up living a somewhat normal life. It was her fault that he was ostracized after all. The pain of watching her gentle little child suffer rejection again and again due to her marital status was indescribable.

She glanced toward the glade of pine trees at the back of her yard. The kids were currently playing in one of their favorite spots, a gentle stream about 50 meters into the woods. They should be back soon for lunch. Picking up her laundry basket, Claudia turned towards the house.

… … …

“Jason said that his lessons were expensive, but I want to try it! I know I can do it if I try!” Tifa said as she threw a pebble into the stream.

A man named Zangan had moved into town and his arrival had caused quite a stir among the children. The boys had told her that he taught martial arts to children and naturally, they all wanted to become his students. She wasn’t exactly sure what martial arts were, but she knew it had something to do with fighting. Fighting of any kind wasn’t proper for a girl to do, but her friends were going to try it and she wanted to go with them!

Cloud looked pensive as he tossed fat stick into the water from his place beside her and watched it disappear with a loud sploosh. Tifa had been playing with Thomas, Jason and Jim more and more since their first year of school and he felt guilty when the stabs of jealously made him angry. If he told her all the things they did to him when she wasn’t around she’d hate them all like he did, right? But he couldn’t let her know. If he told her, she’d know how weak he really was.

“I’m sure you could do it,” he said. “But are you sure your parents will let you go and learn to fight?”

“I’m not going to tell them about it unless he wants to take me as his pupil. Master Zangan is going to test us tomorrow. Are you sure you don’t want to come with me?”
Cloud wanted to go more than anything. He wanted to learn to fight and be strong enough to defend himself from the bullies. Maybe if he knew martial arts, the other kids might even see him as someone worthy of their company.

“I’m sure. Even if he chose me to be his pupil, Mom hasn’t got the money,” Cloud said. Tifa shifted where she sat beside him and wrapped her arm around his shoulders.

“Don’t worry! If he chooses me, I’ll teach you everything I learn!”

He tried to smile, but couldn’t. Cloud felt wicked and selfish. He didn’t want Tifa to become Zangan’s pupil. If she did, she’d spend even more time away from him. The summer was coming to a close and soon he’d have to share Tifa with the others every day at school. She played with the others often but spent most of her summer days with Cloud: playing in their yards, wading in the stream or running through the bluffs just outside the south side of the village.

The girl noticed his sullen disposition and tickled his ribs before ruffling his wayward golden hair. She smiled triumphantly when Cloud laughed and she quickly rose to unstrap her sandals and wade into the water. Tifa bent to splash him until he jumped in to join in the fight. They returned home—trousers soaked and dress dripping—with smiles adorning their faces.

Tifa bounced in her seat as she wolfed down her breakfast. Today she was going to meet Master Zangan! It was hard not to mention it to her parents but if they knew, they’d never let her try. Once she impressed Zangan and he decided to make her his pupil, then she’d worry about convincing them. Part of her felt guilty. She hadn’t told a lie, but she didn’t tell her parents where she was going either. Tifa knew Zangan’s test would be physical, so she chose to wear her loose pinafore with black leggings underneath so that she could move freely. She scraped the last of her oatmeal out of the bowl and into her mouth before rushing to put her dish in the sink.

“Bye Mama, bye Papa! I’m going to play!” Tifa kissed Papa’s cheek, and he chuckled and tugged her long hair as she moved away from him. After playfully sticking her tongue out at him, she quickly donned her shoes and moved to head out the door.

“Stay out of Mr. Ackerman’s hay fields. There are snakes in there! And don’t bother the sheep,” Lia warned, sipping her tea.

“I won’t!” Tifa promised as she rushed out into the late summer air.

In the clearing at the edge of town, Master Zangan stood with a half dozen children sitting at his feet. Tifa hurried to join her friends, glancing at the man as she approached. He was a muscular man with skin that was bronzed from time in the sun. His grey hair and beard gave away his age, along with the wrinkles at the corners of his pale blue eyes. He was dressed like a warrior: studded fighting gloves adorned his hands, his chest was covered by a plated vest and the boots on his feet looked solid and strong. A faded red cape hung from his shoulders. Jim waved to Tifa as she approached and the brunette moved to sit next to him and the other boys. Their whispered conversation was cut short when the martial artist cleared his throat.

“My name is Master Zangan. You are all here because you wish to learn martial arts. Today, I will put you through a series of tests to judge your strength, your cunning, and most importantly: your spirit. If I feel as if you have sufficiently demonstrated qualities that are fitting for a student of mine, I will take on only one pupil,” he paused to survey his small audience.

Tifa thought he had a kindly voice despite his gruff appearance. She hoped he would pick her! How
cool would it be to learn from someone like him?

“Stand up,” he prompted. “Let’s start with a run.”

… … …

Tifa collapsed onto the grass, panting and wheezing. Her sweaty bangs stuck to her forehead and she wiped them to the side with the back of her hand. She had done it! Even when some of the boys gave up, she pressed on gave it all her might!

Master Zangan had run the children up and down the steep, rocky hills in the pine forest outside the village, draw water from the well and carry the buckets up hill and down again for a quarter of an hour, then stand holding the bucket about their heads for as long as possible! It was hard work but the boys tried to make it more bearable by joking around, throwing pinecones during the run and telling Tifa there were spiders on her back while she struggled to hold her bucket above her head. She retaliated by poking Jason with a stick or playfully trying to step on the back of Jim’s shoes as they ran their laps.

Not once did they stop for a break or for lunch and Tifa felt her stomach grumbling when the sun was high in the sky. She was relieved that the test seemed to be over. She was so tired and if she didn’t come home soon for lunch, Mama would worry about her. There were only four of children left when Zangan asked them to sit back down in the clearing—three boys had given up from exhaustion or disinterest.

The martial arts master had one final assessment before he made his decision. He was having a one on one discussions with each of them before sending them home for the day. Tifa quietly plucked blades of grass as she anxiously awaited her turn. She was the last to be called and she eagerly hopped to her feet to meet Zangan.

She smiled up at the man when she reached him, about 15 meters away from the others. Tifa hoped he’d be proud of her! She was a girl and did everything he asked even better than some of the boys. He just had to choose her—she didn’t mess up once! All of the boys had been rejected; there was no doubt in her mind that it was her who had done the best.

“Come sit, Tifa,” Master Zangan said and she obeyed. He folded his arms as he gazed down at the girl. “You’ve done well to keep up with the others, even though you are younger than they are. The fact that you are even here tells me a lot about you,” he praised and Tifa beamed.

“Thank you, Master Zangan,” she said as politely as she could. This was it!

“I have one last test for you,” he said as he fixed her with an intense stare. “Why do you want to study martial arts?”

The smile disappeared from Tifa’s face. She didn’t expect a question like that—she wasn’t even sure what martial arts really was! You learned to punch and kick and fight, right?

“I—uh…well…” she stuttered. She felt her cheeks redden under his gaze and she pulled at a loose thread at the hem of her sleeve, “I want to learn so that I can be strong.” She peeped up to see Zangan closed his eyes, seemingly in thought. Tifa waited quietly as he took thought.

“I’m sorry, young lady. I cannot take you on as a pupil.”

Tifa’s eyes were wide with shock as she took in the older man’s features. Politeness forgotten, she hopped to her feet.

“What? Why not?!” she asked with despair in her voice. She had done so well! She’d be a great
student, why couldn’t he see that?

“You are undisciplined. You spent the majority of today’s test distracted and playing with your friends instead of being focused on demonstrating your tenacity,” he said with an even tone.
“Furthermore, you failed to present an adequate reason for wanting to possess the power that I have to teach.”

Tifa’s face crumpled into a frown. She had done everything that he asked of her and it still wasn’t enough! She felt hot tears prickle at the corners of her eyes and she balled her fists at her sides. Her breath hitched in her chest and she excused herself with a quick bow to Master Zangan. Hiding her tears, Tifa turned and ran back towards her home.
Rising Tensions

It was well into the afternoon when he heard it: that little tingling noise he had come to know well over the past few months. Somehow the thin piece of twine connecting the Strife and Lockhart houses had gone unnoticed by the adults, allowing Tifa and Cloud many hushed late night conversations from their respective windows. More often than not it was the girl who rang the bell to tell Cloud some detail of her day and bid him goodnight. But sometimes, when Cloud felt particularly lonesome he’d find himself reaching to tug the string. It was such a comfort to the boy to know that connection to Tifa was there if he needed it. As long as he had that bell, he’d never be alone.

Cloud sat up in the wash tub before quickly scrambling over the side, trying not to slosh too much water onto the wooden floor. He clumsily donned his pants as he ran up the stairs (grateful that his mother was still out in town square selling her wares). The jingle bell at his window was still ringing by the time he poked his damp head out to see Tifa’s sullen expression.

“Tifa! What happened?” he asked, noticing the tension marring his friend’s usually happy-go-lucky features.

“Can you come out?” she asked, eyebrows knitted together. “I…Master Zangan turned me away.”

A mixture of pity and relief washed over Cloud. He wanted to hug her the way she always did when he was feeling discouraged and alone. If he could give her comfort the way she had always soothed him, it would make him feel so wonderful.

Cloud locked eyes with hers and nodded,” Come on, let’s go. We can go to our place by the water.”

A letter had come from her mother. Nibelheim’s post office was little more than a desk with a dozen cubbies behind it along the back wall of the inn’s lobby. Lia had come straight home when picking up the letter, anxious to know about the well-being of her parents as ShinRA waged its war upon Wutai. She bypassed the sound of Brian sawing away in his woodshop and quietly ascended the stairs to read the letter in the quiet of her bedroom.

Lia had been closely following the war’s coverage in the newspapers. Every day, the papers reported the continuing infiltration of ShinRA’s troops throughout her homeland. Closer and closer they came to the little fishing village she called home. What would happen to her parents once the soldiers reached their town? With a deep breath, she opened the envelope and let her eyes glide over words scrawled in her mother’s neat handwriting.

Although the letter had been written in a seemingly cheerful manner, Lia could read between the lines. Her parents were afraid. Life had changed drastically in a short time in Wutai. Food was now being rationed as the enemy continued to conquer more and more of the countryside farmland, everyday goods were becoming impossibly expensive, and all the young men had disappeared to go fight for their freedom. Their once peaceful, sunny life by the sea had been blanketed by dark clouds of uncertainty and desperation.

Lia’s heart ached at the thought of how distressed her parents must feel. Not only were they soon to be terrorized or killed by ShinRA troops, but it would be near impossible for their country to dream of victory. Would she ever see them again? Would she ever be able to spend another jovial day in the surf with her family smiling at her side? Would little Tifa ever meet her grandparents? She was so
deep in thought that she hadn’t heard Brian come up the stairs. He called to her softly upon seeing the distress on his wife’s face. She looked up when she heard her name, carmine eyes filling with tears.

“Brian…I’m frightened.”

The letter in her hands told him all he needed to know. He was at her side in a moment, holding her tightly to his chest. It hurt Brian to know that there was nothing that he could say to bring her peace. He gently guided her to lie down on the bed, stroking her long hair with his fingers and placing gentle kisses on her forehead. Hours stretched by as he lay beside her, and he knew it would take a lot more than gentle caresses to heal this kind of wound.

… … …

Tifa knew she was in big trouble.

The children had lost track of time. The sun had slipped below the horizon and the woods had grown dark around them, making it hard to know which way to go. The stream wasn’t far from the village, but the shadows of night were deceiving. It was way past supper time and her parents were going to be very, very angry.

For the first time in a very long time, Cloud held her hand and it comforted her. Although she was getting cold and a little frightened, she let her friend lead her along. There were noises in the woods and crooked shadows of branches that looked like hands trying to grab them. Her heart fluttered in her chest but the feeling of Cloud’s firm grip on her hand kept her breathing steady. Tifa tried to look to the sky but the canopy obscured the reassuring light of the moon and stars.

There was crunching of leaves and snapping of twigs. Her paranoia made it hard to tell whether it was an animal coming to eat them or just the sound of their own feet shuffling through the leaf litter. She wondered if Cloud was frightened. He kept telling her not to worry and that he would get her home safely. Tifa didn’t notice the fear in his eyes as he desperately searched for something familiar. The sound of a man’s voice calling in the distance made the children freeze in their tracks. Cloud listened carefully for the direction of the voice before altering his course and quickening his pace.

“That must be someone looking for us!” Cloud said, urging Tifa onwards. Hope swelled in her chest as she followed behind her blonde companion.

Eventually, the voice turned into several ones and Cloud could make out the faint light of three lanterns ahead. Beyond the small group, the lights of the village were glowing softly against the night sky. He could recognize the voices as he neared the search party. One was his mother’s, another was…

“Papa!” Tifa cried as she let go of Cloud’s hand to run to her father. He embraced her tightly and set down his lantern.

“Tifa! What on earth happened to you? You had us scared to death!” Brian held her to his chest.

“Cloud, thank goodness!” Claudia wrapped her son in her arms and smoothed a hand over his freckled cheek.

Cloud looked up at her face and felt his face burn with shame at causing her to worry. He glanced behind her to see a half dozen adults who had formed the search party. Without meaning to, he made the mistake of making eye contact with Mr. Lockhart.

“M-mom, I’m sorry…It was—“
“You!” Brian shouted, pointing at Cloud. “What were you thinking?! It’s dangerous in those woods and you know that! Your stupidity could’ve gotten Tifa killed!”

Cloud trembled under Mr. Lockhart’s accusing glare and pressed his body further into his mother’s chest. What could he say? What could he do? After all, he was the one who asked Tifa to go to the stream. He was responsible; Tifa’s father was right. Cloud knew he was a worthless and awful child—everyone seemed to think so. And now, he’d endangered his only friend. She’d be sure to see how insignificant and foolish he was. Cloud wasn’t sure he could bear having her hate him, too.

“Please, Mr. Lockhart,” Claudia began as she held the boy protectively against her. “It was just an accident, a mistake—“

“A mistake, indeed!” Brian roared, “That boy is trouble! Is this how you raise him—to lure smaller children into danger? “

“No!” Tifa interrupted, pushing her father’s chest away from her with both of her small hands. Brian faltered, looking down at his daughter in surprise.

“It was my fault,” Cloud whispered. “It was my idea to go to the woods.”

“Cloud listened to me when I was sad! He protected me when I was scared and brought me home! He’s a good boy, Papa! A good boy! –Ah!” she squeaked in surprise as Brian grabbed her ear.

“Tifa—you should have known better! Strife, if you don’t teach your boy some decency then I will!”

The agitated man picked up his lantern and began to make his way back toward the village, pulling his daughter along by the ear.

With the children safe and sound, the small search party disbanded. Cloud felt like he had been struck. Mr. Lockhart was so angry with him! He had to apologize somehow; he had to make it right! He felt his mother press her lips to his forehead and tell him how brave he was to lead Tifa home and tell her father the truth. His body felt numb as she gently rubbed his head and led him home. It wasn’t until he had shut himself in his bedroom that Cloud noticed the quiet tears streaming down his cheeks.

… … …

“Lia, I’ve told you before, that kid is trouble!”

Tifa rested her cheek against the banister as she crouched at the top of the stairs. Mama and Papa were cross with each other and it scared her. She had never heard them argue before. She knew she was supposed to be in bed, but she couldn’t sleep. Mama and Papa had been upset with her for getting lost in the woods and even angrier when they found out about how she took Zangan’s test without asking. Her parents had lectured her and sent her to bed without supper or a bath. From her hiding place, Tifa could see the Papa’s pacing shadow on the wall, flickering in the light from the hearth.

“Tifa is to blame as well,” her mother countered. “She’s old enough to know better. Kids do these things, Brian.”

“How could I have expected that boy to have values or know what is right? His mother spends all her time working! She should spend that time reigning in her wayward child,” he growled.

“Be reasonable! Claudia needs to work, she’s got no husband to provide for her and Cloud,” Lia crossed her arms in an irritated manner.
"Claudia and Cloud are people, just like anyone else. Should the lack of a man in that household really be a reason to overly criticize a childhood misadventure?"

Tifa’s eyes widened. How hadn’t she noticed? Cloud never talked about his Papa, and she’d never seen him, either. For as long as she could remember, it was just her friend and his Mama in the house next door. That was just the way things were and she never stopped to think of why that was so. What happened to Mr. Strife? Why did that make Cloud a bad child?

“I don’t know. I’m just afraid he’s a bad influence on Tifa. I don’t want her to be ostracized or carry his stigma around.”

Brian sighed and Tifa heard her father’s footsteps approaching the staircase. Quickly and carefully, she fled back into her room. What was the matter with Cloud? He never did anything to hurt her. What was a stigma, anyway? She rested her head on her pillow to glance out her window and over at Cloud’s. There was no candlelight; he must be asleep. Tifa felt guilty that her father had blamed Cloud for what had happened and hoped Papa believed what she said about her blonde companion.

She closed her eyes and thought of how upset Cloud must feel. Though he wasn’t as timid as he used to be, Cloud’s heart was still delicate and he must have been so frightened! She’d have to make it up to him somehow.
Afraid to Fly

*Creak, creak* went the tire swing.

Now tall enough to reach it on her own, Tifa lazily swung back and forth. The sky was crowded with grey clouds and the warm summer air was growing heavy with humidity. Even if it started to rain, she didn’t want to be inside the house. Since she had gotten in trouble the night before, the mood inside her home had been gloomy and quiet. Papa had taken Mr. Hansen’s horse and the big wooden wagon to cut lumber on the south side of the mountain and wouldn’t be back until supper time. Mama was quiet and upset, but Tifa knew that it wasn’t because she had gotten lost the night before.

She was playing the piano again, all by herself. Tifa knew that her mother did this when she was homesick. At breakfast time that morning she had read the newspaper for a long time before moving to Tifa’s room to play her instrument for the rest of the morning. What was it like to be homesick? Tifa couldn’t imagine what it was like to leave your home forever. She was certain she would be sad if she never got to sleep in her bed or play on the piano or rock on the tire swing again.

She heard a door gently close next door and looked over to see Cloud emerging with a small basin of dirty water, which he dumped into the garden. Now was her chance to apologize! She dug her foot into the grass to still the tire swing before hopping off and hurrying to the fence. She called his name softly and he looked up to meet her eyes.

“Tifa, I’m so sorry. Now your father is angry and I didn’t mean to-“

“No, Cloud! It’s not your fault.”

“I want to apologize to your parents,” Cloud hung his head.

“I can apologize with you; it wasn’t just your fault! Let’s talk to them when Papa comes home—he’s out working and won’t be back ’till late. Mama is playing piano, now. I think she wants to be by herself for a little while,” Tifa said sadly as she lowered her gaze.

She couldn’t look into Cloud’s pretty blue eyes without thinking about the things her parents had said the night before. It didn’t matter one bit to her that Cloud had no papa. He was the best friend she could ask for.

“Cloud, could you come sit on the porch with me?”

He looked apprehensive until she reassured him that her father would not be home for hours. They talked as they sat side by side on the porch steps. Movement out of the corner of his eye caught Cloud’s attention and he looked up at the birdhouse on the side post. A large chick, just about full grown, was fluttering its wings in preparation for flight. A smile pulled at the corners of his mouth.

“Look, Tifa! The chick is going to fly today!”

That summer, only one of the three robin eggs they found in the birdhouse had hatched. Every few days, Cloud and Tifa climbed onto the porch railing and up the wooden support beam to peek at the naked little chick. It’s big mouth and tiny, featherless body was fascinating! They could only look for a few moments before the mother bird chased them away. Watching the chick grow, sprout feathers and begin to fly had been a lot of fun. It had fluttered and floundered around for the past week under its mother’s careful eye and was growing in confidence. Today might be the day.
"You can do it, bird!" Tifa called quietly.

For a moment, the children held their breaths. The only sounds to be heard were the slow melody from the piano upstairs and the sound of the wind through the pine trees. Suddenly, the chick left its perch, soaring across the yard and towards the great woods beyond. Cloud and Tifa watched with awe as the robin disappeared out of sight.

"It’s all grown up,” Cloud said, eyes still shining with wonder. “Do you think it’ll come back?”

"I don’t know," Tifa said as she turned her gaze from the sky to look at the forest of pine trees in the distance. “Where do you think the birds go when they leave their Mama and Papa?”

It scared her to think that one day she’d have to leave her mother and father. If it would make her as sad and homesick as Mama, she wasn’t sure it would be something she could ever do. How could she survive each day without seeing Mama’s warm smile and smelling the comforting scent of fresh wood on Papa’s clothes? It made her chest hurt to think about it, so instead she turned to look at Cloud. He pinched his brows together in thought, blue eyes narrowing as he gripped the top of the step that he sat upon.

"To find a new place to live, I guess. Maybe they go to lay eggs of their own,” he thought aloud.

"But won’t they miss their parents? …I would,” Tifa admitted as she smoothed her skirt over her knees.

"Maybe when you’re grown up, you just know when it’s time to go. Kids can’t stay with their parents forever, right? Then they couldn’t be parents themselves,” said Cloud, turning his eyes to hers. Tifa swallowed the lump in her throat. What if she became an adult and just couldn’t bring herself to leave?

"I don’t think I ever want to grow up, Cloud.”

………………

It was Mrs. Lockhart who answered the door that evening when Cloud had knocked. In his hands was a small package of cinnamon rolls wrapped in waxed paper that his mother had made as a token of good will. He shifted nervously on the front step and fought the urge to run when he spotted Tifa’s father coming to join his wife at the door.

“Good evening, Cloud. Won’t you come in?” Lia said with a smile. Hearing the name of her playmate caught Tifa’s attention and Cloud felt so relieved when she bounced over to greet him. The boy carefully stepped into the house.

“What brings you over here?” Mrs. Lockheart asked. Cloud’s cheeks began to heat up and he tried to avoid direct eye contact with the adults. Tifa’s father came closer and the boy felt his body begin to tremble. He had come to ask for forgiveness for the night before, but seeing Brian’s angry eyes made the words die in his throat and his courage evaporate completely. Tifa seemed to notice and came to stand at Cloud’s side. Her presence beside him made him feel a little bit better, and he finally got up the nerve to speak.

“I wanted to apologize for keeping Tifa out past dark yesterday. I didn’t mean to put her in danger and I’m very, very sorry,” he said, bowing his head respectfully.

Tifa smiled before bowing her head along with him, “Forgive me, too. I made us late by talking and we didn’t realize how late it had gotten! I’m sorry.”
Brian made a short grunt and the children weren’t sure what that meant until they felt a hand upon their shoulders. They looked up to see Lia’s gentle smile.

“It’s forgiven. Please, be wise in the future, for heaven’s sake! Let’s let the past be the past, shall we?” she rubbed Cloud’s head and Tifa grinned. Brian uncrossed his arms and turned to head back down into his woodshop.

“Are those cinnamon buns that I smell?” she asked as she gestured toward the box in Cloud’s hands.

“Yes, ma’am. My mother made them for you,” Cloud said and handed the box to Tifa’s mother.

Lia couldn’t help but let her smile fade for a moment as she thought about poor, overworked Claudia taking the time to make her and her family sweets. It had been quite a while since the last time they had tea together and it was high time to catch up with each other. She felt embarrassed by Brian’s reaction the night before and wanted to reassure Claudia that all was well; Brian just overreacted sometimes. Tomorrow, she’d bake her delicious ginger cookies and invite her neighbor over for tea. It would be silly to let a little incident like this get in the way of their friendship. With a smile, she ushered the kids into the kitchen.

“Well then, why don’t we have some for dessert and you can tell me all about your adventure in the woods?”

…” … …

There was still a knot in Tifa’s stomach when her mother tucked her into bed. Would she really have to leave her parents someday? Mama leaned over to fluff her pillow and Tifa studied her features. She took in the sight of her long, straight hair, the delicate curve of her cheek and gentle slope of her neck glowing softly in the candlelight. Tifa wanted to make sure she remembered all of these things so that she could never forget them, no matter how far away life took her. As was their normal ritual, Lia ran comforting fingers through her daughter’s dark tresses and began to sing her favorite lullaby.

‘Sleep, my child, and peace attend thee,  
All through the night  
Guardian angels God will send thee,  
All through the night  
Soft the drowsy hours are creeping,  
Hill and dale in slumber sleeping  
I my loved ones' watch am keeping,  
All through the night’

The knot had risen up into her chest by the time Mama had finished the all too familiar song. Instead of helping her drift into an easy sleep, she felt anxious and panicked. When Lia smiled down at her and Tifa studied her mother’s crimson eyes, the knot burst. Hot tears flowed freely down her cheeks and her face crumpled into misery. Lia put her hand to Tifa’s head in alarm.

“Tifa, honey, what’s wrong?” she said as she bent to scoop her daughter into her arms.

“M-Mama—I don’t want to ever leave you!” Tifa cried and buried her head in her mother’s chest.

“Leave me? You mean, when you grow up?” Lia asked, gently stroking Tifa’s hair. Her daughter nodded and clung tightly to her nightgown.

“I d-don’t wanna leave when I get m-married!”

“Oh, Tifa…” Mama lifted the girl’s chin to look her in the eye. “That’s not for a while…and if you
live in Nibelheim, you can see me all the time. When you get older, you’ll be excited to get married.”

Tifa wasn’t sure how she could ever be excited to leave her family and go to live with a man. She knew that Mama had travelled far from her family when she got married and now she was homesick. Her mother seemed so sad when she was homesick, and Tifa never wanted to feel that way. Lia sensed her daughter’s insecurity and continued, “It’s so nice to live with a man that loves you. When you get married, there’s a big party and lots of delicious food. And you get to wear the most beautiful dress you could ever dream of!”

Tifa wiped her eyes, “You do?”

“Oh, yes. Come with me, I’ll show you mine.”

Lia took the bronze handle of the oil lamp and stood. The girl followed Mama into her parent’s bedroom and waited for her to find the dress in the back of her closet. Mama produced a flat wooden box and set it on the bed before working the latches free. Moving aside tissue paper, the woman gasped softly as her fingers touched the hidden garment and slowly pulled her wedding dress out into her arms. Tifa’s eyes went wide when she saw the gown. It was pure white and covered with lace from the bodice to the train. With its delicate beading and long, flowing skirts it was the most elegant dress she had ever seen. The girl ran her hand gently down the fabric.

“It’s so beautiful…” Tifa breathed. “You wore this when you got married?”

“That’s right, love. One day, I’ll give it to you to wear at your own wedding. That way, you’ll have a part of me with you as you start your new life,” Lia smoothed her hand over Tifa’s head and kissed her plump little cheek.

“Don’t be afraid. No matter where you go, I’ll always be with you right here,” she poked the girl’s chest.

“Never forget that, Tifa.”
Facing Weakness

Fat flakes of snow lazily drifted through the air as Cloud escorted Tifa home from school.

It was only half past eleven in the morning, but Tifa had fallen ill and needed to go home and rest. She had been quiet that morning as they walked to school together and Cloud had suspected something was wrong. Her endless, jovial chatter usually made his heart light enough to withstand whatever school threw at him each day and her silence disturbed him. Tifa had denied anything was amiss every time he asked, but when she excused herself during lessons to be sick outside the school house Cloud knew his intuition had been correct. If anyone knew what it was like to be sick, it was him.

He went to take her hand, but hesitated. It had been over a year since he and Tifa had gotten turned around in the woods and scolded by Mr. Lockhart and Cloud had done his best to stay out of his path ever since. After that incident, Tifa’s Papa had forbidden him from holding the girl’s hand and Cloud thought it was ridiculous. He was nine years old, for heaven’s sake! What was the harm in it? It made the boy so angry, and he didn’t quite know why. Cloud mused that maybe he deserved it after failing to bring her home before dark that one time.

Despite how unfair it all seemed, he wanted to respect her father’s wishes—even if he didn’t agree with them. A shaky exhale from Tifa brought his mind back to the present. Tiny beads of sweat dotted her brow and her gaze was unfocused as she trudged along beside him.

“Come on, Tifa. We’re almost there,” he chose to put his arm around her shoulders instead. Tifa managed to nod and kept her head bowed low as he helped her forward. Her bad habit of leaving home without her coat had finally caused her to fall ill. Numerous times, she had met him to walk to school with one parent or the other on her heels, reprimanding her for going into the winter air without protection. The girl was unsteady on her feet and he noticed how pale her face was behind her maroon scarf. Cloud tightened his grip as he felt Tifa tremble and lean more heavily on him. In the moment, he felt so good to be able to help his friend, even in a small way.

“I’ve got you, don’t worry,” he reassured her.

“T-thank you, Cloud,” she whispered. He smiled in return.

Winters were always harsh and long in the mountains. Cloud knew winters meant dry, frosty air that made it hard for him to breathe; winters meant constantly battling illness and sleeping near the wood stove with his mother for warmth. Now Tifa had gotten sick as well, and he didn’t like that at all. In all the time he had known her Cloud had never known Tifa to get sick, not even a cough or sniffle! It was so unsettling to watch her struggle to stay upright. Whenever he got sick, his mother was always so worried even though he recovered every time. He recalled vague memories of the quiet room where his father had lain unmoving and thought maybe that’s why Mom got so frightened. When he was old enough, he wanted to take his mother and move to someplace that was always warm. Maybe then he wouldn’t get sick so often and Mom wouldn’t always be afraid. After she recovered from her illness, maybe Tifa would want to come, too.

Cloud was relieved by the time he reached the Lockhart house and even more elated when Tifa’s mother answered the door instead of her father. He explained what had happened and was thanked profusely by Lia before he returned to school. Cloud worried about his friend for the rest of the day, hoping that she wouldn’t be sick for too long. He didn’t want her to suffer, and he certainly didn’t want to be alone with the bullies at school. He watched the clock with dread growing in his gut. For the first time, he had no protection from the bullies after school. The walk home wasn’t a long one, but it was long enough to be caught and tormented. When Ms. Strauss finally dismissed them for the
day, Cloud hurried to grab his lunch pail and books and head out the door. Maybe if he was fast enough, the others wouldn’t bother him. He only made it ten feet from the school when a teasing voice called out to him.

“Hey! Chocobo-head!”

Cloud froze when he heard Thomas’s voice, eyes wide. He hated this so much. If he ran, they’d catch him for sure—there were three of them and only one of him. Instead, he chose to be brave like the heroes and knights in those stories in his books. Slowly, he turned to face the bullies. He hadn’t faced them completely before an icy snowball smashed into his face. Cloud cried out—half from surprise and half from pain. Wiping his eyes with the sleeve of his thick sweater, he turned to glare at his aggressors as his heart pumped frantically in his chest.

“Ha ha! Got you good!” Jim cawed, holding his sides and laughing. The others quickly surrounded him. Cloud swallowed hard.

“You know, I was going to bring Tifa home,” Thomas said. “What makes you think you’re the right one to walk her to her house? You’re so weak! You couldn’t take care of anyone—you can’t even take care of yourself!”

Cloud inhaled slowly, blood sliding from a cut on the bridge of his nose where the snowball had hit him. Anger bubbled up inside him. Don’t hit anyone. Don’t hit anyone. Don’t hit anyone.

“Ms. Strauss asked me to,” Cloud replied in a careful imitation of tranquility, trying not to show the rising degree of his discomfort.

“You’re a teacher’s pet!” Jason tittered. Jim cackled and Thomas moved to grab the collar of Cloud’s sweater. The blonde’s blue eyes widened as he felt himself being tugged forward, dropping his primer and lunch pail to grasp at Thomas’s strong wrist, using all his strength to try to pry himself free. He tugged and squirmed but the older boy was too strong. Cloud gulped and trembled, closing his eyes and trying to prepare himself for whatever came next.

“Who’s a teacher’s pet?” said a stern voice from behind them.

The bullies balked and Cloud was dropped to the cold cobblestone. Ms. Strauss’s frizzy brown hair blew in the wind and her skirts fluttered behind her. Cloud had never been so happy to see his teacher in his life.

“Go on home, now. Leave him alone before I tell your parents!” she scolded.

“Yes, ma’am,” Thomas replied, flashing Cloud a scowl before retreating with his friends. Jim made sure to kick Cloud’s lunch pail before sprinting off into the village. Cloud noticed his legs were trembling as he tried to get to his feet. Ms. Strauss bent to pick up Cloud’s belongings and help him up from the snowy street.

“Are you alright, Cloud?”

“Oh—yes, ma’am. Thank you, ma’am,” he stuttered, embarrassed and flustered. He excused himself and quickly ran, leaving his confused young teacher standing in the street.

Tears stung Cloud’s eyes as he ran through town square. It wasn’t right—none of it was. He hadn’t done anything wrong! All he had ever done was what he’d been asked to do and what he thought was right. He tried to go through life unnoticed and yet trouble always seemed to find him. No matter how hard he tried he would never be good enough, would he? Mom had always said that he was handsome and that she was proud of him. But she was his mother. She had to say that.
The boy reached his little home in mere minutes but couldn’t bring himself to go inside. He wiped the cut on his face with the back of his hand, smearing blood across the freckles on the bridge of his nose. The breath hitched in Cloud’s throat and he ran around the rear of the house. He threw his belongings on the back step and hastily climbed the pine tree near his mother’s garden. Once he was high enough to be hidden by the thick pine branches, he leaned against the trunk. Drawing his knees to his chest, he buried his face against them and wept. The frigid wind that blew from the north constricted Cloud’s lungs as he took sobbing, uneven breaths. He pulled his sweater more closely around him for comfort and buried his face in the knit sleeve to keep his tears from freezing his eyelashes shut. Sometimes, he wished that he would disappear. He didn’t mean anything to anyone. Yes, his mother loved him. Before, it had always been enough. But something had change inside him and he now he felt empty—so empty and worthless and invisible.

Sure, his teacher had helped him and Mrs. Lockhart was kind, but did they didn’t yearn for his presence or seek him out. Aside from his mother, was there anyone who really valued him? Life was so incredibly lonesome. No one knew his heart and that knowledge left him feeling so hollow and unfulfilled. Would anyone miss him if he was gone? Cloud lifted his face just enough to peek above his woolen shirt sleeves to gaze through the branches at the house next door.

Tifa loved his heart, right?

... ... ...

The hot broth of the potato soup did well to warm the chill in Cloud’s bones and chase some of the gloom from his heart. Mom hadn’t asked about the fresh scab on his nose or why he had come home so late from school. For that, he was grateful. He had told her about how Tifa had become ill that day and that he had walked her home but mentioned nothing of his bullies. Mom had enough to worry about without being burdened by his inability to get along with his peers. Cloud was sure that if his mother knew how badly the others treated him, she’d be embarrassed! She worked so hard to afford his clothes and shoes and book that he couldn’t bear to see disappointment on her face. And so, he kept his misery to himself.

Claudia had finished her soup and rejoined her son at the kitchen table with a heap of fabric in her arms—a dress Cloud had seen her working on that morning. She flipped her long golden hair over her shoulder before she began to stitch the collar of the unfinished garment. The little battery-powered radio above the sink was broadcasting news about the ongoing war in Wutai. Cloud loved to listen to the radio and learn about things from faraway places. It excited him to hear about the how ShinRA’s soldiers were fighting gallantly against Wutai’s troops. He wasn’t sure why there was a war and what they were fighting for—those details didn’t matter when there were brave heroes to hear about.

“Oh—Cloud, they’re talking about him! The great Sephiroth has done it again,” Claudia grinned across the table at her son, who straightened in his chair. She noticed Cloud’s spirits seemed to lift a bit when he heard the name of his hero escape her lips.

“Mom, he’s so amazing! At school, I heard that he took on a whole battalion on his own,” Cloud gushed.

“Is that so? He must be very strong,” she mused as she studied the way Cloud’s eyes shined as he spoke of the soldier. Violence and war weren’t subjects that Claudia thought were good material for conversation with her nine year old, but there were few other things besides Sephiroth’s heroism that made the boy smile like that.

“He is the strongest man in the army! No one can do what he does,” the boy said, unable to hide a small smile as he stirred his soup with his spoon.
Cloud knew all about Sephiroth. He was no ordinary infantryman, but a member of ShinRA’s elite SOLDIER program which composed of a small group of super soldiers of varying classes. According to his classmates, these men had superhuman strength, speed and senses—the best of the best! And Sephiroth was the strongest amongst those in the SOLDIER program. Naturally, he ranked first class. Wouldn’t it be amazing to be a hero like that? Cloud doubted that Sephiroth ever worried about bullies or got his lunch stolen from him.

Mother and son listened through the static as the news went on to describe victory after victory on the battlefront.

… … …

Cloud shivered underneath his blanket. His mother had put a hot brick under the sheets at the foot of his bed to warm his feet, but it wasn’t doing as much as he hoped it would. The boy sighed and drew the comforter around his shoulder and stepped out of bed—he’d have to spend another night in front of the wood stove. Cloud paused before heading to the stairs and looked towards the window. Was Tifa alright? She had seemed awful sick and Cloud was worried. On his windowsill, the jingle bell glinted in the moonlight. The window opened easily with a soft jerk of his wrists.

He tugged gently once, twice, three times and waited with his head leaning out into the frosty air. The snow was still gently falling, settling on his eyelashes as he watched for movement from Tifa’s window. Her lamp was out and the room was dark, but still Cloud waited. Long minutes stretched by and he finally decided to close his window and give up. It was the first time she didn’t answer when he rang and it left him feeling terribly lonesome. The blonde quietly headed down the stairs, dragging his comforter along. He curled next to his mother who had made a makeshift bed next to the woodstove in the kitchen.

Tifa would probably be too sick to go to school tomorrow, he knew. Without her by his side, the bullies would do their best to make him miserable and he was already exhausted just thinking about how to avoid them. Cloud felt selfish and rotten when he thought of not going to school since his mother worked so hard to get him there. But it would be nice to stay out of sight until his companion was feeling better. If he was strong and brave, he wouldn’t be in this predicament. If he was as tough as Sephiroth, the others would leave him alone—maybe even want him around!

He had been thinking of what it might take to be a hero when he grew up. Cloud had asked his mother about the army and she said he would need a paper stating that he finished his studies—a diploma. If he was diligent and studied hard he could pass his final exams, earn his diploma and join the army if he wished. Cloud drew in a deep breath: he’d have to be brave tomorrow.
“That’ll be one hundred gil, please.”

Tifa reached into the pocket of her winter coat and produced the handful of coins her father had given her. Mama was very sick. When Tifa had come down with the flu a few weeks ago, her mother had contracted it soon afterward. Although Mama healed quickly and seemed to bounce back, she developed a cough shortly after accompanied by a fever. She hardly got out of bed anymore. Father had sent for a doctor that lived down the mountainside that came to visit from time to time, checking up on her mother and prescribing medicine as he saw fit. Papa was nervous and short tempered because of it, so Tifa made sure to be quiet and obedient.

Just as there was no doctor in Nibelheim, there was also no proper apothecary, so Tifa frequently found herself with the duty of picking up Mama’s medicine at the dry goods store. She felt useful to even do this small task for her father, for he had been so busy fussing over his wife: cleaning sheets, placing cool washcloths on her burning skin and combing her long hair. Miss Carrie Hagen smiled down at her as she handed her the small paper bag with a thank you and a nod. Tifa numbly took the bag in her hands.

“Don’t worry, Tifa! It’s sure to work this time,” Carrie said upon seeing the gloom on Tifa’s features. She sure hoped so. None of the medicines seemed to be working and they kept getting more expensive. Mostly, they just made Mama sleepy.

“Thank you, Miss Carrie.”

The clerk leaned against the desk pensively for a moment. Feeling sorry for the little girl, she took the lid off the glass jar of lemon candy and handed two of the sugary orbs to Tifa. It was the least she could do.

Tifa looked up in surprise, “Oh—for me?”

“That’s right. One for you and one for your mother.”

Tifa smiled and tucked the bright colored candy into the pocket of her apron. After quickly bowing in thanks, she hurried out the door. Although it was nearing the end of March, the nipping chill of winter still hung in the breeze. Despite that, town square was bustling with activity. Villagers moved about, eager to be in the spring air and out of the house, and Tifa’s friends were among them. Normally, she would have called out to them and asked to play but she was too worried about her mother to want to do anything else but bring her medicine to her. Her hand froze on the doorknob of her front door when she heard a familiar voice call her name; Jim, Jason and Thomas were hurrying towards her.

“Hey, Tifa! What’s in the bag?” Jason skid to a stop in front of her. Jim and Thomas had caught up in a matter of moments, panting and smiling.

“Just my Mama’s medicine,” Tifa answered. The boys were immediately disinterested.

“Hey, can we play on your tire swing?” Thomas asked.

“Alright, just don’t be too loud, okay? My mother needs to rest. I’ll be right there, let me put this inside.”

The boys raced through the side gate as Tifa disappeared into the house. Papa thanked her for picking up the medicine with an affectionate rub on the head and said she could go and play. Life
had changed drastically in the house since Mama had fallen ill. She wasn’t allowed to see her mother much for fear that she would catch the same illness that had settled in Mama’s lungs and it made her feel disconnected from her. Papa was so busy working and taking care of his wife that he no longer had time to tell Tifa stories or take their walks in the forest. Tifa felt awfully lonesome these days. Her friends didn’t seem to understand. It was nice to have them to play with and distract her from the situation in her home, but the time with them did little to console the anxiety and unease in her heart.

“So what do you guys want to do?” Jim asked, rocking lazily on the tire swing. Jason had perched himself in the old oak tree—on the same branch on which the tire swing was tied with thick rope. Thomas was drawing pictures in the wet sediment of the sand pit.

“We could go see what the blacksmith is making today,” Jim continued. “Or maybe we could go and see if there’s anything growing in your dad’s cabbage field yet, right Jason?”

Jason shook his head, “Nah…Pop doesn’t want me playing outside town square for now. Your Pa told him about the wolves that got two of the sheep from your pasture and he’s still spooked.”

“Can we go check out your barn then?” Thomas asked Jason. “We can play with Dot and the mules.”

“Alright, let’s go!”

Tifa wasn’t paying much attention as she plucked at the blades of grass where she sat. She wasn’t aware that the boys got up to leave until she felt Thomas’s hand gently grab her wrist to help her to her feet.

… … …

The cheerful chatter of the children in the yard prompted Lia to open her eyes. She felt so weak and unrested, despite being mostly bedridden for weeks. It was pneumonia, the physician had said. The disease had settled itself in her lungs somehow, making simple breathing a painful ordeal. Coughing was agonizing and her rising and falling fever made her delirious at time. The chills were bothersome and the breathlessness was troublesome, but nothing hurt worse than seeing the frightened faces of her family. Tifa had noticed that this was no small cold, for sure, but didn’t understand the severity of the situation. Brian did. His grim countenance haunted her feverish dreams and her heart ached for him.

Her husband had been so attentive and wonderful throughout her illness. He always made sure she was warm and comfortable with heaps of blankets and hot tea that soothed her aching throat. Brian would spend long hours laying quietly beside her, endlessly walking beside her in her time of uncertainty and illness. Lia was so grateful for his kindness, his dedication, and his companionship, especially since the day the package had come.

A week ago, Brian had come home with package from the post office wrapped neatly in heavy brown paper. It was addressed to her, and Lia didn’t recognize the handwriting that had scrawled her name on the package’s delivery slip. She did, however, recognize the address: it was from her little village in Wutai. Lia had opened the package with haste but froze when she saw its contents. There were two small wooden mortuary tablets, one with her father’s name and one with her mother’s name. The hastily written letter from her parents’ neighbor confirmed Lia’s deepest fears: her mother and father had been killed when ShinRA soldiers had carried out a raid in the village.

She didn’t know how to grieve, so she sat at the piano bench and played for as long as she could. Even as the fever made her disoriented and she wearily slumped forward against the keys, she wouldn’t let Brian take her away. She hadn’t meant to let Tifa see her cry, but at that moment she just didn’t have the strength to hide her sadness. Since then, Lia was sure the news had taken its toll
on her already weak body. Brian now cooked, cleaned and washed the clothes in addition to his own work and she felt guilty that she was no longer of any help to him. She had learned that marriage was a partnership that needed all of its parts to be working smoothly. Her illness had shoved a stick in the spokes and shifted the balance of the house. Brian was suffering under the weight of his profession, taking on the household chores and struggling with his fear and her daughter was left out of the loop purposefully to protect her from undue grief. She had broken the delicate balance a family needed to function well and Lia felt guilty not only for being unable to play her role, but for frightening them as well.

Once she was back on her feet, she’d be sure to make it up to him and Tifa.

Papa had forgotten about supper again. The house was so quiet that Tifa flinched when she opened the door to the larder and it protested with a loud creeeak. She took out the container of dried fruit and package of rice crackers to eat as a makeshift meal. Mama had taught her to make a few kinds of soup, how to bake bread and also how to put together a handful of casserole recipes, but without the heat of the wood stove she couldn’t cook a thing! Papa must’ve forgotten to chop fire wood, too.

The bread box was empty, but the milk bottle wasn’t. She poured herself a glass and was about to sit at the lonely kitchen table before deciding against it and climbing the stairs with her meal in tow. Papa had gone to meet with Thomas’s father who owned the town’s inn—something about a water pipe breaking and new wooden floors would be needed. Usually, Tifa was not allowed to eat in her room, but Papa was out and she had a plan. She set her food on the bedside table and chewed on a dried apricot while staring at the keys on the piano. Tifa had gotten quite good over the years of learning how to play under her mother’s tutelage. Maybe if she showed her Mama how well she had learned, it might make her feel better. Rolling up her sleeves, she set to work, playing as gracefully as she could.

Tifa stopped when she heard her mother cough and wheeze for breath in the neighboring room. She rushed into the hallway and peeked into the room to see her mother bent over in her bed, a slender hand holding a handkerchief to her pale face. When Tifa paused to take in the sight, she realized that Mama didn’t look much like herself anymore. Her once rounded, rosy cheeks were now pale and angled. The shine was gone from her silky air and there was no longer a brilliant twinkle in her eyes.

“Are you alright?” Tifa asked with a small tremble in her voice.

Lia smiled at her daughter and straightened up as best she could before waving her inside. “Come here, Tifa,” she beckoned softly. “You play so beautifully; I’m proud of you.”

“I was playing for you, Mama.”

Tifa didn’t hesitate to come to her mother’s side. She climbed up on the bed and sat so that her hip was pressed against Lia’s. Even though she wasn’t supposed to be this close to her mother, the girl had craved the comforting feel of her mother’s presence in the weeks that she had been denied that luxury. Tifa knew that it was difficult for Mama to talk, for the illness in her lungs made it hard for her to catch her breath. The girl spent the better part of an hour slowly brushing her mother’s hair, rubbing her arms and telling her about the happy things that had happened that day. If no other medicine was working to heal Mama, maybe kind medicine would. Suddenly, she remembered the candy that Miss Carrie had given to her.

“Oh—I almost forgot! I got lemon drops from the dry goods store. One for you and one for me,” Tifa pulled the candies out of her apron pocket, putting one of the cheerful yellow orbs into her mother’s hand.
Mama smiled and slowly lifted the candy to her lips. A grim realization dawns on Tifa as she watched her mother struggle to do the simplest of things. What if her mother never got better? She simply couldn’t live without her mother!

“IT’s delicious, Tifa.” Mama smiled the biggest smile she could muster and reached over to cup her little girl’s cheek.

Tifa closed her eyes at the sensation. Everything would be alright, wouldn’t it? Mama would be well again. She just needed some cheering, that’s all. When she had asked why her mother was so sad, Papa had said it was because grandma and grandpa had gone to heaven. It was hard for Tifa to sympathize until she had understood that grandma and grandpa were her mother’s Mama and Papa. Deciding that she needed to be a source of comfort, Tifa put on her brightest smile and continued to tell her mother about her cheery adventures with the boys and about how spring was finally coming.

As the minutes went by, Lia grew more and more fatigued. She leaned back against her pillows and reached to pull Tifa into her side. Mama could no longer sing to her; her lungs were far too weak. The girl rested her head against her mother’s chest and began to softly hum her favorite lullaby.
On The Other Side

It all happened so quietly that it didn’t seem real.

Each and every one of Nibelheim’s residents had gathered in the small graveyard that stood in a small clearing up the mountain path. The sky was a brilliant blue and the wind was blowing steadily. Cloud stood beside his mother with his eyes on the ground. Once in a while he’d try to glance towards the front of the crowd to try to see Tifa, but he was too short and there were too many people in the way. It was a lung disease that took her, Mom had told him. Pneumonia, it was called. The thought of his lungs getting sick enough to take his life frightened Cloud. He knew what it was like to have a hard time breathing, though his lungs seemed to be getting stronger as time went by. The sickness had killed Tifa’s mother, and Cloud didn’t know what to do. He supposed that he should know what it felt like, since his father had passed away and he was left with one parent as well. But he had been too little at the time to remember any of it, so it was difficult to try to know what to say or understand what Tifa was feeling. Normally, his presence seemed to go unnoticed by children and adults alike. Cloud hoped Tifa would notice that he was there for her as she navigated the hollow stillness of the first days adjusting to her mother’s departure from this life.

He could hear the booming voice of Mr. Taylor as he led the mourners in the reading from the book civil rites, then said a few kind words about Mrs. Lockhart. Cloud peeked up at his mom, who held her jaw firm despite the moisture pooling in her eyes. Tifa’s mother had been kind to both of them. The way Mom smiled and hummed and sashayed about the house after a visit from their gentle neighbor hadn’t gone unnoticed by the young boy. Though he usually made himself scarce when the two women sat at the kitchen table, the happy chatter and his mother’s laughter had brought a sense of peace upon him. Thinking of a future without Lia’s visits to his mother or protection from Mr. Lockhart made him stiff with dread. In his hands, he held a single lily. Cloud knew he was to place it on the casket, but he really wanted to give it to Tifa. If it would help her feel even the slightest bit better, he’d pick her a thousand flowers! The mountainside was full of wildflowers this time of year—brilliant pinks, purples and yellows. Since the boy lacked the words to say to help his friend pick up the pieces of her broken heart, maybe a simple gesture would do. Cloud decided to pick one for her when they got back home.

After the formalities, the mourners were led forward to pay their final respects to Lia Lockhart before she was lowered into her final resting place. As he passed and put his flower upon the coffin, Cloud studied the casket and let the sight draw forth vague memories. Daddy’s coffin had been wooden, too, but there had been only a handful of flowers atop it. Turning his head, he caught his first glimpse of his little friend. A pretty black hat with a mourner’s veil sat upon Tifa’s head, her face bent towards the ground. The wind pulled at her long, dark hair, which hung loosely over her shoulders. Her father held one of Tifa’s hands; the other fisted the fabric of her lacy black frock. Cloud wanted to tell her he was here, embrace her, or just do something.

He felt his mother’s hand on his back, prompting him to walk forward and follow the line as it headed back down the slope toward the village. There were few things he knew of that were more frustrating than helplessness.

… … …

Tifa wasn’t sure how she had gotten back to her room. She didn’t remember much after watching her mother being lowered into the earth. Her tears had blurred the world together into a molten mess of wavering color as she heard the dirt hitting the wooden casket, shovelful by shovelful. When she went to sleep that one night, Mama was there. When she woke up the next morning Mama was
gone. She never had the chance to say goodbye. Nothing could fix this. Nothing would be okay again. She was the one who had gotten Mama sick; it was all her fault that she was dead. If only she had listened to her mother’s warnings and had worn her stupid coat! It seemed like it was all some sort of nightmare—losing her Mama forever was too terrible to be real. Tifa wanted her here now. She wanted her to smooth back her hair and tell her that everything would be alright. She wanted to sit on Mama’s lap as she plunked the piano keys. She wanted to fall asleep to the flowing lilt of her mother’s lullabies.

Tifa’s whole body shook with the power of her sobs as she hid her face in her pillow. She hadn’t slept the night before and fatigue and gloom quickly pulled her into an uneasy sleep. Tifa woke several times, her mind fogged with grief and lethargy. She had no way of knowing when her trio of friends had joined her in her room. Had they come to comfort her? They coaxed her out of bed, but she only moved to sit on the floor at the foot of her bed. Mama was dead. Mama was dead! If she hadn’t gotten sick, Mama would still be alive. Misery washed over her and she pulled her knees to her chest. With her head feeling heavy and her body feeling listless, she dropped her forehead to rest on her knees. Downstairs, the murmur of many voices of the well-wishing visitors blended into one slurring tone. Next to her, the boys were talking amongst themselves but their voices sounded so far away.

“Hey, look! Cloud’s coming,” Jim said, peering out the front window. “Do you think he wants to come in?”

Jason and Thomas came over to look. The blonde was tentatively coming up the front path to the Lockhart house. He was no longer in his black mourner’s clothes and had something in his hands.

“Don’t worry, her dad hates him! Mr. Lockhart won’t let him in!” Thomas said, brows furrowed and arms crossed.

Tifa didn’t hear them. All she could hear was the beating of her heart in her ears. She wanted to see her mother. This couldn’t be the end; she hadn’t even said goodbye! But most of all, Tifa wanted to say she was sorry. There had to be a way. Slowly, she turned her head to peek at the piano. Mama had spent hours playing when she was homesick. Oh…

Her mother had wanted to go home. Her home was over the mountain and across the sea. Memories of conversations of years past flooded back into her brain.

*On the other side of the mountain. Only ghosts can cross the mountain.*

It hadn’t been too long since she had died—there was still time. If Mama’s spirit wanted to go home, it would have to pass over Mt. Nibel. She couldn’t have gotten too far. Tifa stood up suddenly, stoically turning to face the boys.

“I want to see my mother,” she whispered before running out of her bedroom and speeding down the stairs.

Startled, her friends followed close behind. Tifa weaved through the mourners crowding the foyer and stumbled to the front door. Cloud had his hand on the Lockhart’s knob when the door flung open, pushing him to the side. He gasped with surprise and his eyes widened when he saw Tifa heading away from the house. Cloud was about to call out to her when the trio of bullies ran out next. Where were they going? Was Tifa alright? He needed to find out. Cloud followed at a distance, holding a daffodil in his hands.

Tifa didn’t slow her pace as she headed up the mountain path. The wind was growing fierce, and whipped her hair and skirt this way and that. She fought for breath and her knees buckled from time
to time, but her eyes were clear: there were no tears left to cry. Her wrinkled black frock bunched at her knees as she climbed and climbed, ignoring the calls from her friends. The path was winding and rockwork was jagged and sharp, but it didn’t discourage her. Tifa had seen her Papa’s maps. She knew where to go.

“Tifa, wait!” Jason called, “You can’t go up there!”
“A lot of people died on that mountain! Don’t be reckless!” cried Thomas.

The higher they climbed, the more uncomfortable Jim became. The grassy turf became more and more dry as they ascended the mountainside. The earthy greens and browns were turning to dusty grey as they ascended, and it made the brunette remember endless warnings he had received about the infamous mountain. There were ghosts and rock slides on Mt. Nibel, and he sensed trouble.

“K-keep going after Tifa!” he called to the others, “I’m gonna tell my Pop!” With that, Jim turned to descend the rocky path, barely noticing Cloud who lagged behind.

Cloud watched Jim run by, swallowing the anxious lump in his throat. What on earth was Tifa doing? He needed to get to her, fast! The stony path led to a rope bridge that crossed over a large chasm. Tifa’s step didn’t waver as she traversed onto the wooden planks. Blinded by grief and desperation, she pushed forward without acknowledging the groan of the ropes as the wind made the bridge sway. Thomas and Jason stood tentatively on the cliff face, too afraid to step onto the bridge in front of them. They tried one more time to call out to the girl, but their pleading fell on deaf ears. Panicked, they turned and ran back the way they came. Cloud had managed to catch up and saw Tifa slowly crossing the bridge.

“T-Tifa!” he called. “Come back!”

The howling wind carried his voice away as soon as the words left his mouth. He paused to look at the gorge below. It was a long, long way down. The bridge was swaying in the cross winds and he saw Tifa stumble. **Be brave, Cloud. Be brave! You have to help her!** If he could just get to her, he could take her hand and lead her back home to safety. If anything happened to harm Tifa while he was present, he’d never forgive himself. His grip tightened on the daffodil stem and Cloud sucked in a deep breath as he took his first step on the swaying bridge. He held onto the rope railing until his knuckles turned white, calling out to his friend as he inched forward.

“I’m coming! Don’t worry, I’m coming to get you!”

Cloud had almost caught up to her! A sharp gust of wind rocked the bridge and Tifa missed her step, sliding between the strands of rope that held the boards to the railing. With a cry of surprise, she found herself frantically clawing at the wooden planks. Cloud gasped and reached to grab her wrist. Tifa’s garnet eyes widened as reality finally set in and she saw her friend reaching toward her. Their fingers brushed for a fleeting moment before hers slipped from the worn wooden walkway. Cloud cried out as the bridge swayed back the way it came, momentum pushing him forward and over the edge.

Together, they plummeted into the gorge below.

… … …

It hurt. He gasped as air came rushing into his lungs. Why did it hurt to breathe? Consciousness came flooding in quickly as stinging pain spread through his legs. Something soft and warm was pillowing his head. **What happened? Where am I?**

Slowly, Cloud opened his eyes. He was lying face down on a lump of dark fabric. **Black lace?**
Realization hit him and he gasped, reeling backwards and scrambling a few feet backward. In an instant, it all came rushing back. He was too late. He had failed. He let Tifa fall and now she’s lying there so very still. Cloud’s breathing came in short huffs and he tried to stand, but searing pain in his knees made him buckle and he cried out in agony. The world spun. Disoriented and sick with fear and trauma, he collapsed to the ground and retched onto the earth until his stomach was long empty. Tifa was dead. His only friend was dead.

Why didn’t I die, too?

Cloud swallowed and turned to look at his fallen friend. A thin layer of dust coated Tifa’s black dress, which was now torn in several places from the jagged earth. One little shoe had somehow been tossed from her foot and lay in the gravel a small distance away. Her dark eyelashes were closed against her pale cheeks which were marred with shallow scratches. Dark soil clung to her tear tracks in thick lines down the sides of her face. Cloud’s eyes widened when he saw a pool of blood slowly seeping into the dry earth from a wound that must’ve been where her head rested on the ground. Strands of dark hair draped over Tifa’s mouth, moving slightly with each of her ragged breaths. For a short moment, relief washed over him.

She was alive!

“T-Tifa?” he whispered.

She didn’t move. Immediately, fear and a sense of urgency turned his insides to ice. He needed to do something, quick. He couldn’t let her die—he needed to get help! Cloud tried to rise but his knees were mangled and he stumbled when he tried to take a step. Choking on a sob, he fell back onto his rear, whimpering miserably. He was useless, completely worthless. How could he save her if he couldn’t run for help? Cloud drew in a deep breath into his frail lungs and shouted as loud as he could, again and again. His forlorn cries echoed through the canyon in lonely waves. Someone had to hear him, right?

This wasn’t real. It couldn’t be real.

Small sounds of woe flowed freely from his throat and he crawled back to Tifa’s side. Cloud curled beside her, protectively putting one arm over the girl and nursing his bleeding knees with the other. Tifa was always a happy, vibrant spirit. Her jovial nature and kind heart had always wrapped his around his wounded soul like a warm blanket. How could he possibly live one day without her in his life? If she died, what was there that made life worth living? Cloud was used to feeling like an outcast; most of his time had always been spent by himself. But it wasn’t until the only friend he’d ever known lay lifeless at his side did he realize what it truly meant to feel alone.

Nearby, the lone daffodil had fallen—a splash of yellow amongst the grey gravel.
What Lies Underneath

The antiseptic stung, but Cloud didn’t flinch. He stared ahead with unseeing eyes as his mother tended to his wounds. Oh, how he wished that he could disappear. Nothing mattered anymore. The scene played over and over again in his mind as if branded to his brain with a hot poker. Mr. Lockhart’s words looped again and again and again.

“Why did you bring Tifa to a place like this?! What the hell is the matter with you? What if she dies?!”

Jim had led a small group of adults to the place where Cloud and Tifa had fallen. At first, feelings of relief and hope had given him the strength to rise from his place beside the girl and try to walk, but his marred knees buckled and he fell crumpled backward once again when he heard Mr. Lockhart’s voice booming with anger and accusations. Cloud had tried to tell him that he had only been trying to save her, but fear and the shock of what had happened made the words hold fast to his throat. His head had been foggy and he felt disoriented and sick as Tifa’s father scolded him, unbridled fury in his voice. Mr. Ackerman had carefully picked Tifa up, cradling her in his arms and checking her wounds. Cloud was sure that Mr. Lockhart would’ve had much more to say to him if he had the time to. But the adults were anxious to get Tifa seen by a physician and hurried to return to the village through the valley. Her hair was matted against her head where the blood had begun to dry. Cloud had shakily stood to follow, bloody knees burning with every step he took.

“Cloud…”

His mother’s voice snapped him back into the present. Keeping his head low, he avoided eye contact. Instead, Cloud focused on watching cotton gauze being wrapped around his knees. Dirt had stuck to his face where the tear tracks had dried. His mother had stared in shock when she had seen Tifa’s limp little body being carried into the house next door and cried when she saw her little son limping behind them with blood soaking into his socks and over the leather of his shoes. Everyone thought it was his fault that Tifa fell and got hurt. He ignored Mom’s outstretched arms to follow the adults into the Lockhart house, angry tears streaming freely. Desperation replacing shock, he had finally worked up the courage and tried to tell them he wanted to help her, that he had followed because he was worried about her, but no one had listened. Cloud had hovered until Tifa’s father had shouted at him. The doctor had said Tifa was in a coma and no one knew if she would wake up. Her prognosis did not look good and Cloud wasn’t even allowed to see her.

He was so weak. Because he was weak, Tifa was in a coma. If he was faster and stronger, he could have kept her from falling. A hero like Sephiroth would never have let that happen. The future seemed so bleak. If Tifa woke up, she’d hate him forever for letting her fall. If she didn’t wake up…

“Cloud!” Claudia tried again and the boy slowly raised his eyes to look into her own. “Talk to me…”

After all that had happened, seeing the comforting softness in his mother’s blue eyes was just too much. The world was suddenly so much more unfair than it had ever been and the boy wasn’t sure what he had done to deserve such misery. Before he could stop himself, Cloud’s face crumpled into misery. Against his will, a wretched whimper tore from his throat. Claudia embraced the boy tightly as he dissolved into pitiful sobs.

“It’s alright, I’ve got you. I’m here,” Claudia whispered, smoothing her hand through her son’s hair. Her son’s knees would heal over time, she knew. But she wasn’t sure if his heart ever would.
It was frightening how easy life became meaningless. With such ease, his very reasons for living were being torn from his hands no matter how tightly he tried to hold on. Just days ago, he was the head of a picturesque little family. A beautiful, loving wife and a happy-go-lucky child were what every family man dreamed of and Brian Lockhart was no exception. When he married Lia, they both shared dreams of a large family—maybe five or six children—to dote on and raise up. When his wife had been pregnant with Tifa, they awaited her arrival with giddy anticipation. But immediately after their daughter was born, Lia had suffered a spell of depression that lasted a few weeks. It had frightened him, but the doctor said that post-partum depression was common in new mothers and not to worry unless it advanced to a severe state. It hadn’t, and Lia was back to her old self soon enough: singing to her newborn, smiling with that sparkle in her beautiful eyes and even teasing him from time to time. A year or so before her death, Lia had suggested having their second child but the fear of having his wife suffer another bout of depression made Brian shy away from the idea for the time being. Now he regretted that decision. He’d give anything to have had a little son to advise and pass on his carpentry skills to. It was with anxiety that he realized he really didn’t know the first thing about raising a girl to be a woman—if Tifa survived, that is.

Brian found it difficult to move from his place lying listlessly on his bed; the grief weighted him in place. He had hoped that Lia would overcome her ailment, too, yet the love of his life was gone. She had been taken away from him quietly in the night as he slept beside her. There hadn’t been any struggle, no gasping for breath or ragged coughing. His radiant bride had quietly slipped away without warning and he was waiting with grim anticipation for his sunny little Tifa to follow that same path.

That damned bastard child had led her up toward the mountain summit—on the day of Lia’s funeral for heaven’s sake! Somewhere in the back of his mind rationality tutted that the little blonde misfit was just a well-meaning child, but anger snuffed out that small voice like a candle in a wind storm. That time he had gotten his daughter lost in the woods those years ago should have been enough of a warning. Claudia had brought the pale little wraith over to apologize and Brian had turned them away with a wild fury. Their empty words wouldn’t change anything. How could he live each day without his gentle wife?

Her knitting basket with the unfinished blanket lay in the corner, waiting for her to complete it. The smell of her perfume lingered on their bedsheets. Her hair brush sat on the bedside table. It was just too much to bear.

His beautiful, foreign bride had given him a vision of a bright future: a big family and a happy home. Her serene spirit and patient heart ad always eased his troubled mind. And now what was left? His darling daughter lay unmoving in the room next door and Brian found it easier to just accept that she’d never wake up. If he didn’t hope for her return, he couldn’t be disappointed when she died, right? It had been four days since she had fallen from the bridge on the mountain pass. Each day that stretched forward in stillness made it harder to hope that she would recover. The girl’s dark hair against her pillow was a stark contrast to her pale, lifeless face and it was so hard to look at her. His little, vivacious Tifa…surely death would quietly come for her as it had for her mother.

It was good for him to get out of the house, Mom had said, even just for a little while. Cloud knew she meant well, but his mother just didn’t understand. He wanted to stay home, away from accusing eyes, pointing fingers, and hushed whispers where he could hide and pretend that he had a different life. Facing reality was unbearable these days and he did his best to weave a fantasy life where he could stand being Cloud Strife. She had sent him to pick up a newspaper from the printing press and a few odds and ends from the dry goods store. He had kept his head lowered the entire time,
cautiously avoiding eye contact and trying to stay out of sight. Cloud was just about to reach the door to the printer’s shop when he heard it: the worst sound in the world.

“Hey, Strife!”

Cloud stiffened, afraid to look in the direction of Thomas’s voice. Oh, no. Not here! Town square was busy at this hour of the day and his bullies were sure to make a scene. What could he do? Experience had taught him that they would intercept him if he tried to run and so he remained frozen in place, resigning himself to his fate. In moments, the trio had surrounded him.

“So there you are! You’ve been hiding in that shack of yours for days. It’s about time you showed your face,” Jim sneered.

Cloud gulped, tightening his grip on the paper bag in his hands. He could feel them closing in—getting closer and closer. He kept his gaze on the dirt and gravel between the cobblestones and the scuffs on his worn shoes.

“He looks so guilty!” Jason crooned. “I always thought you were too much of a pansy to do anything like that. You sure are messed up, pushing Tifa off the bridge!”

At that, Cloud’s head snapped up in surprise. He knew that Mr. Lockhart had blamed him for leading Tifa up the mountain. But did everyone really think he would do something as unspeakable as push her into the gorge?

“I didn’t push her!” Cloud cried, surprised at the sound of his own voice. “S-She fell. I wanted to help her…just like you. But you ran away.”

There was a blur to his right as Thomas lunged forward, knocking the bag out of Cloud’s hands. Spools of thread and little spheres of pink soap rolled out onto the cobblestone. When Cloud spun to face him, Jason tugged the tiny blonde ponytail tied at the base of his neck and his head was jarred backwards. Disoriented, he didn’t see Jim rounding to his back and before he knew it, Cloud had been pushed to the ground. The shock of his tender knees hitting the hard ground made him cry out.

“Not so fun when someone else does the pushing, huh?” Jim taunted.

“You’re so pathetic. How could Tifa spend so much time with someone like you?” Thomas said as he moved to stand in front of Cloud.

Cloud stood slowly, body trembling. His heart thrummed wildly in his chest and his breaths came in short puffs. *Don’t hit anyone. Don’t hit anyone. Don’t hit anyone!*

“If she wakes up, she’ll never want to see you again after what you did!”

The thought of the shocked expression on Tifa’s face when someone told her that he had mercilessly shoved her into the canyon broke something inside him. Blue eyes flashed with rage and he snapped.

With a roar, Cloud sprang forward, upper cutting his fist into Thomas’s chin. Startled, Thomas fell backwards onto the street; he never had expected Cloud to fight back! Like a predator, the blonde pounced upon the bully, drawing back his fist to slam it into Thomas’s nose. Cloud felt detached from himself; he wasn’t aware of when he started to scream and didn’t feel his arms swinging with wild punches. He had lost control. Instead of running to their buddy’s aid, Jim and Jason stood there, speechless. That little runt was beating Thomas with a fury they had never suspected him to be capable of.

Cloud had never felt such a rush. Hearing his bully’s cries of surprise and pain had flipped a switch
somewhere in his brain. His fists were numb but blood rushed to his arms and adrenaline pumped through his biceps. No more hiding his anger at the unfair circumstances of his existence. No more holding back pain and disappointment behind a carefully crafted mask. No more struggling alone against the isolation and loneliness. No more submitting to years of torment from these punks who never gave him a chance to be anything more than their plaything to torment. All of the restraints had broken as his bloody fists came down again and again. This would show them. They couldn’t think he was weak, now. He’d show all the townspeople that he wasn’t a pathetic little waste. It wasn’t his fault, it wasn’t his fault!

A sturdy hand grabbed the back of Cloud’s collar and hoisted him backwards as a dazed Thomas attempted to rise to his feet, blood dripping from his nose and split lip. Jim and Jason looked up with awe and horror: Master Zangan! He held Cloud up so that his feet dangled above the ground. Cloud, still blinded by fury, struggled to get free. Tears flowed freely down his cheeks and his breath hitched through angry sobs. Thomas’s blood stained his knuckles.

“I saw what happened here,” Zangan said with contempt in his voice. “Get out of here before I tell your parents about your disgraceful behavior. Go on—git!”

Embarrassed, Jim and Jason helped a disoriented Thomas walk away and they all beat a hasty retreat. Once the boys were out of sight, Zangan lowered Cloud to the ground. The boy scrubbed at his face, too upset to form words between his uneven breathing and hiccoughs.

“Calm down,” Zangan said as he stooped to pick up the fallen bag of goods. “Let me take you home.”
Self Worth

She remembered gasping awake—being jerked back into consciousness suddenly, only to be pulled back into the darkness by leaden fingers. She remembered blinking at blurry faces peering down at her and hearing slurred voices but not understanding the words. Then, the blackness would wash over her again. Tifa felt as if she was floating for the longest time. There was no way to tell how much time was going by (if it was even passing at all) and she may have been fearful if she could find the strength. Instead, she faced the endless void with apathy. The next time she had opened her eyes, she had recognized her father’s blurry form, hunched over the bed. She wanted to talk to him, but oh—her head! It hurt so badly! Somehow, she managed to let a groan escape, surprised at the hoarseness of her voice. There was a bit of commotion, then. Her father had shouted and someone else had entered the room. Papa was talking to her; she stared at him with heavy eyes, but wasn’t really listening.

*How did I get here? What happened to me? Think, think...*

“Tifa?” Papa asked through the thick fog. She hadn’t realized she had closed her eyes again until she pried them open to acknowledge him. “What is the last thing you remember?”

*A quiet, still house. A man carrying Mama in a white sheet. Papa was crying? The smell of thawing earth.*

It hurt to think. Every scrap of information was scattered about, a confusing patchwork of bits and pieces that she wasn’t sure how to rearrange. It was easiest to focus on one scrap at a time.

*People standing all around. Bright flowers on a wooden box being lowered down, down. Oh, no.*

*No, no.*

*Mama was dead.*

… … …

They told her that she had been in a coma for a week. Papa had said that she fell and hit her head, though she didn’t recall how. Whenever Tifa felt the urge to ask, snippets of memories of the world spinning out of control in blurs of grey and blue frightened her into silence. Everyone was so kind, coming to visit her and leaving small bouquets of flowers, tiny boxes with pretty candies and small burlap satchels of chocolates. Tifa was overwhelmed by the generosity and attention of the villagers, but if she was honest with herself she really just wanted to be alone. Before her accident, she relished the attention. She loved to be around people, to hear them tell her how big she was growing and ruffle her raven tresses. The art of conversation was an amusing one indeed, and it had been one of her favorite games. But reluctance had frozen her voice in her throat. The girl had been used to letting her emotions flow freely through her speech or actions, but something had built a dam in her heart and it was so tiresome to try to find a way around it.

One person whom she wanted to see was Cloud, but he never came. She thought of him constantly. The feel of his hand in hers had always brought peace to her soul and she longed for that now more than ever. The spring breeze drifting through her curtains made her shift her gaze to the rusty bell that dangled from knotted twine. He hadn’t tried to call her, but Tifa was too weak to move to answer it anyway. It didn’t matter; she didn’t deserve to be fussed over. She was a wretched girl whose carelessness had caused her mother’s death. There was no reason for everyone to pity her or treat her with kindness. Maybe Cloud was the only one who knew that.
Tifa had been recovering for a few weeks before she had the strength to go outside. Her body had been ready, but her mind was not. For some reason, anxiety blossomed in her chest even at the thought of interacting with her friends. Would they see the guilt that lurked in the depth of her carmine eyes? Tifa held Papa’s hand as he led her through town square. Most people they passed tipped their hats or said hello, happy to see little Tifa out and about. It used to be so easy to smile at everyone and skip merrily alongside her father, but now it was so hard to muster the strength to even meet the gaze of those who spoke to her. She studied the smooth surfaces of the cobblestones instead of their faces. The feeling of dread that welled in her throat was foreign and she didn’t understand. Maybe this was shyness. Tifa decided that it was a frightening thing.

With a flick of her eyes to the left, Master Zangan came into view. He approached with even gait and acknowledged her with a polite nod and gentle smile as he passed by. She remembered the man’s words about her lack of discipline and felt inadequate in his presence. The martial artist was the type of man who had the skill to read a person like a book, and she felt exposed and ashamed to be seen by his understanding eyes. Embarrassed, she hid her face in her father’s side. The next time she peeked out into the crowd, Tifa’s eyes zeroed in on the sight of a familiar head of unruly flaxen hair. She would’ve stopped in her tracks if her father’s pace didn’t pull her along. Oh, how terribly she had missed Cloud! He was walking in their direction, carrying an armful of new linen and fabric. His voice was soothing her aching chest and she longed to speak with him more than anything! Cloud’s eyes met her own for a brief moment, and Tifa was surprised at the fear she saw in them.

“Let’s go to the tavern, Tifa,” Papa suggested, gently tugging her hand to get her attention. “We can get some good food, since my cooking is abysmal.”

Tifa looked up at him and nodded. When she turned back to look at Cloud, he had vanished.

… … …

“Once you finish hanging all that to dry, you can bank the wood in the stove and finish chopping the vegetables for the stew,” Claudia said, refusing to look up at Cloud as she measured and cut fabric.

His mother had been speechless when Master Zangan had escorted him home with hitching breaths and bloody knuckles. Cloud was glad the man had rescued him when he did, but he was embarrassed that he had seen him behave in such a manner. Master Zangan was well respected in Nibelheim. With only his bare hands, he had defended the little village from attack by monsters from Mt. Nibel on dozens of occasions and was rewarded with groceries and the like. The man was a local hero, and Cloud was so ashamed at his lack of control that he did his best to stay out of Zangan’s sight. The man’s outward gruffness and pale eyes had always unnerved Cloud, anyway.

Mom had never been so angry with him. He had been in a few more fights since the first one in town square and they had left his emotions in a tempest of thrill and guilt. Sometimes he started them, sometimes he didn’t. Either way, Mom always found out about it. Now, Cloud was stuck inside scrubbing clothes against the washboard with lye soap. As he grew, his mother naturally gave him more chores around the house and he knew more than anyone how much she needed help. However, he was now being punished and had limited freedom. After school he was to come straight home, fetch things as his mother asked, tend the garden, aid with cooking supper, do his homework then go straight to sleep. Doing the laundry was such a back breaking task that he was glad he only had to do it once a week.

Cloud felt both satisfaction and shame at his newfound aggression, something that he knew astonished his mother. It felt good not to have to hide the anger he felt towards the other boys. Showing them that he’d no longer back down had allowed him to start developing a sense of pride. But at what cost? If Tifa knew what he’d been doing to her friends, she’d hate him for sure. When he
saw her that day after picking up his mother’s fabric order, all he could think about was how much he wanted to hold her to him and tell her how relieved he was that she was alright. But seeing her father beside her was enough to spook him away. Cloud never wanted to be in Mr. Lockhart’s presence ever again. Did he tell Tifa that Cloud was responsible for her injury? The thought made him suck in an anxious breath. He needed to talk to her; it had been way too long.

Cloud looked toward the window and weighed his options when he saw the orange glow of the setting sun. If he could meet with Tifa under the cover of nightfall, it would be easier to avoid being seen by her father or any villagers who might tell her he had pushed her off the bridge on the mountain pass. It would also allow him to sneak away while Mom thought he was asleep. Dishonesty left a bad taste in his mouth and a sinking feeling in his gut, but this was important! He scrubbed faster before rinsing the clothes and hanging them outside to dry. In the Lockhart’s yard, the tire swing slowly rocked in the gentle breeze.

It was unlike Tifa not to be playing in the yard at all hours of the day. She hadn’t asked him to play or been outside at all since her injury, aside from that one time he passed her in town square. Cloud hoped it was because she was still recovering and not because she had lost interest in him. His neighbor had become reclusive, not answering when he called or playing with anyone, even the boys from school. Most disturbingly, he no longer heard the notes of the piano dancing through his evenings.

After supper and an hour of homework at the kitchen table, Claudia sent Cloud to bed. He feigned disappointment and slumped up the stairs, running to his window seat once out of sight of his mother. Grasping the rusted jingle bell, he gently tugged a few times.

Please, answer. Please, please, please….

Long minutes ticked by before Cloud gave up and curled into his bed. Maybe the bullies were right: maybe Tifa never wanted to see him again after what happened. Just as his chest started to tighten at the thought of being separated from Tifa forever, the weak ringing of a bell reached his ears. His lips curled into a hopeful smile as he rose to answer Tifa’s call.

……

Heart pounding, Tifa snuck out into the vacant town square. Father was busy down in his woodshop and wouldn’t notice if she wasn’t asleep in her room. She was overjoyed to that Cloud had sought her company, for she had craved his attention almost as much as she craved her mother’s touch. Tifa was confused as to why he asked her to come and meet him in secret, but it mattered little if it allowed her to see him. The dark part of her heart was worried that he would be angry with her for not coming out to play, for not seeking him out, for killing her mother…

The water tower stood tall in the center of town square. It was a large wooden structure that held a large metal cylinder full of water about four meters off the ground. Pipes and wood boards made it easy to climb, and Tifa easily made her way up the side. She was almost to the top when she heard Cloud’s kind voice call her name softly from his perch atop the metal tank. Quickening her pace, she hauled herself up over the final ledge and saw Cloud’s face in the moonlight.

“Oh, Cloud!” she moved forward to embrace him. “Oh, how I’ve missed you.”

It felt like heaven to feel his arms close around her and she pressed her face into the soft cotton of his sleep shirt. Comfort was something that was so hard to find these days. Papa was mostly stoic when she was with him, but she often heard his quiet sobs in the middle of the night and it frightened her. Never had she ever heard Papa cry. It was hard to reach out to him for solace, since he never encouraged her to talk about her mother or her sadness. But Cloud was the best listener she knew! He’d understand, wouldn’t he? She let her head rest on his shoulder for a moment before pulling
back, bowing her head down. Together, they sat on the wooden ledge of the water tower.

“Tifa, I’m so sorry,” Cloud began, shifting nervously. “I called you out here to say that I hope you’re alright. I didn’t get to tell you that I was sorry about your mom before you hit your head.”

She smiled at the comforting sound of his voice.

“It’s alright. I…don’t remember much about that day.” Tifa said, running a hand over the stitches hidden underneath the hair on the left side of her head. “I remember Mama’s funeral, but everything is fuzzy after that.”

Cloud exhaled with relief—she didn’t remember? He supposed that was a good thing. If she knew he had failed to save her—if she knew how weak he was—she would be so disappointed, and he couldn’t bear to see the look on her face. Cloud wished that he could forget that day, too.

“Oh—Cloud! What happened to your cheek?”

The boy flinched. He was covered in small battle wounds from a brawl with Jim the day before, the most noticeable being a large, black bruise across the right side of his face. Thankfully, the dim moonlight hid the scrapes on his chin and his bangs veiled another swollen bruise on his forehead. He couldn’t let her know that he had been fighting with her friends. The Cloud she knew was gentle and kind, and she used to praise him for this. The volatile moods which he had consumed him since the accident had changed him into someone he didn’t recognize. It was not the Cloud that he wanted her to see.

“Oh—I fell from the tree in my yard…it’s nothing,” he lied, swallowing hard when her soft hand came up to cup his face. He could tell by the look in her eyes that she wasn’t buying it.

“Did something happen? You can tell me,” Tifa pressed, looking deep into his cerulean eyes. How was it that no matter how sturdy he had built the walls around his heart in the past few weeks, she knew how to bring them crashing down in an instant?

“…I got in a fight after school,” he hung his head to escape her gaze. “It isn’t a big deal.”

Ruby eyes flew wide. Cloud? In a fight? Her timid, gentle next door neighbor wouldn’t harm a fly! She watched as her friend nervously ran his fingers along the wooden boards underneath them, trying to read between the lines of this behavior. Was someone picking on him? Cloud was always too timid to stand up for himself and it made her so angry that someone would hurt her best friend. Protectiveness swelled in her chest.

“Who did this? Cloud, this is important.”

He wouldn’t answer.

It wasn’t until recently that Tifa began to understand pain. Accidentally dropping your school books on your foot or falling and scraping your knees hurt, but pain of the heart was much, much worse. She now understood what it was like when something made you so sad that you just couldn’t talk about it, even if you wanted to. It hurt so much to know that without her, Mama would still be alive. She had come to the water tower hoping to be able to tell Cloud about the guilt that followed her like a creeping shadow. But now, her confidence had ebbed and she found herself shoving the confession of her sin back into the hidden parts of her heart.

Wordlessly, she pressed her shoulder into his and tentatively placed her fingers atop his knuckle. The boy leaned against her and they sat like that for a long while, a comfortable silence settling between them. Tifa thought of Cloud’s startled face when she saw him in the market the day before; he hadn’t
had the bruise, then. She remembered hiding her face when she saw Master Zangan, who was just as tall and strong looking as he was when he had rejected her last year. If only she had been good enough to become his student, maybe she could’ve protected Cloud from his attacker. If only she wasn’t so foolish and undisciplined, maybe she would’ve been wise enough to wear her stupid coat and not get her mother sick. It was too late, now. But maybe she could try once more, for Cloud’s sake.

... ... ...

Papa had told her that she wouldn’t be returning to school. He had decided that she knew how to read, write and cipher well enough, so now that her mother was gone she needed to stay home and take care of the household chores. The boys had been distraught by this, especially Thomas. He made sure to stop by on his way home from school most days and fill Tifa in on what was going on in the lives of their classmates. She was grateful for this and enjoyed Thomas’s company, but somehow felt shy and out of place around her happy go lucky friends.

Tifa wasn’t a great cook, but Mama had taught her enough to get by and be able to follow the recipe cards in the little wooden box beside the stove. Sometimes she wanted to ask for Papa’s help, but he was always working in his woodshop and would get short with her if she did. He was always busy out in the town and when he was home he was hard at work, sawing and hammering. Worst of all, he didn’t want to play with her at all these days and she felt so lonesome. But she understood. So much had changed in their lives that it didn’t feel right to be silly anymore. She didn’t feel like the same girl that used to frolic through the fields with her playgroup, even though that was the girl whom she longed to be. The one person she actively sought out was Cloud, but he was stuck doing chores or studying and rarely had free time lately. Papa wasn’t fond of him, anyway, and she didn’t want to do anything to make his mood worse. So she settled for a passing wave on the street or a brief chat over the fence.

Since their late night meeting, Tifa hadn’t been able to stop thinking about Cloud’s bruise and how much she just wanted him to be alright. She had made up her mind to ask for Master Zangan’s tutelage once again. When she told her father about it, he brushed her off and said that a young girl should have no business learning anything of the sort. Little did Brian know that his dismissal of her ambition only further fueled the fire in Tifa’s heart.

The day before she turned nine years old, Tifa sought out Master Zangan. Wearing a plain white pinafore, she strode to the edge of town to the clearing where the martial arts master practiced his morning katas. Papa was gone for the day to cut timber, and she was going to do this—with or without his permission. Being disobedient was a foreign thing to Tifa, who had always wanted to please her parents. But her father just didn’t see how important this was. She needed to do this. Her mother would’ve been proud of her for wanting to help Cloud. Would Zangan think she was worth enough to consider giving her a second chance?

The biggest problem that she had run into was the subject of payment. Tifa had heard that his lessons were expensive, making all of this impossible without her father’s support. She lacked the materials and skills to make anything worthy of trading for his services. This was pointless! He wouldn’t waste his time with a spoiled, undisciplined girl with no gil. And yet, her feet carried her forward anyhow. He was there, as expected, when Tifa reached the clearing. She waited quietly some distance away as he gracefully demonstrated his moves with precision. Zangan noticed her there and but waited until he had finished before turning to face the girl.

“Good morning, Ms. Lockhart.”

She flinched at the sound of her name, suddenly unbearably nervous. A gentle breeze blew, making the wildflowers in the meadow sway peacefully as silence passed between them. Say something! But
she was frozen. Zangan was surprised at her behavior. Since he came to Nibelheim almost a year ago, he’d noticed that hesitance and shyness had never been traits of Tifa’s personality. But there she stood, timid and still with trepidation in her eyes. He had always had a soft spot for children.

“Come here, it’s alright,” he encouraged, and Tifa found herself stepping forward.

She felt her nervousness start to recede at the kindliness in his voice. Upon reaching him, Tifa knelt to the ground and bowed low at his feet, dark hair pooling on the grass. Zangan watched the girl, curious. In the place of the playful child who had sat at his feet last summer now sat a solemn girl with sorrowful, desperate eyes. He had scarcely seen the child since Lia’s funeral in March and knew of her dreadful injury. It was a lot of trauma for even an adult to process, so he was sure that was the cause for her shift in behavior.

“Master, I want to learn martial arts,” she said quietly, keeping her face to the grass.

He had not anticipated this at all. Perhaps he underestimated the will of this little girl. Stooping to the ground, he gently lifted Tifa’s chin with his thumb and forefinger. She raised her head, but kept her eyes lowered beneath ebony lashes.

“Look at me,” he requested in his softest voice. She obeyed instantly and he studied the brokenness he found in those deep red orbs. Zangan’s heart bled for the little girl.

“Why do want to be my student, Tifa?”

This time, she was ready with an answer.

“Master, I want a strong body and mind,” she said. Thinking of Cloud’s bruises, she finished, “But most of all… I want to protect the ones that I love.”
Coping Mechanisms

How could she? Her mother dies and she becomes wild and unpredictable! Was it because she had too much time alone? It wasn’t his fault, he had to work to make a living so he could dress and feed his wayward daughter. Tifa was old enough to be on her own during the day. At least, he had thought she was before she had run off to disobey him. Brian was furious when that Zangan fellow had knocked on his door, saying that he was pleased with his daughter’s determination and felt like she had potential as his student. Tifa’s obstinate refusal to obey him was one thing; he could discipline his daughter. But for a man to suggest something as outrageous as teaching a small girl how to fight was enraging!

Tifa was a young lady and ought to act as such. Her future depended on her reputation as a proper little lady and he needed to protect it. How else could Brian ensure that she’d be well taken care of as an adult? No one would want to marry a delinquent young woman with boyish hobbies. She needed to be at home, learning the skills to help her in life as a wife and mother. Only two months after the loss of his wife, he was already struggling with how to parent the girl alone. Most of the childrearing responsibilities were Lia’s forte and Brian was now unsure of his role. His wife was empathetic, sentimental and expressive. She could read Tifa like a book and always knew what their daughter needed before the girl could voice a request. Sharp as a tack, she was a wonderful mother, and Brian knew he could never fill her shoes while still wearing his own.

The burden of acting as both a father and mother was a crushing one, and Brian felt the security of his world crumbling further each time Tifa gave him that forlorn face as he left the house for one reason or another. She couldn’t understand why he didn’t have the time or energy to spend with her anymore. Even if he wasn’t so busy, there was such little happiness in his heart that he could barely form a smile on his lips, let alone do something as jovial as play with her. Things had changed; the girl would learn that soon enough. Children were quick to adapt, weren’t they? Tifa had no choice, she had to be.

That night, he had sent her to bed after she finished cleaning the supper dishes. Her disobedience had gotten her into trouble in the past and he needed to nip it in the bud. Last time she had disobeyed his order to wear her coat and it had cost them Lia’s life…

No, no. She was just a child and Lia’s pneumonia was a grim coincidence.

Now that he had a few days to calm down and turn the idea over in his head, regretted his hostility towards the martial artist. Surely if he let Tifa try learning martial arts, she’d grow tired of it quickly and get it out of her system. Maybe it would give her something other than housework to do and help her cope with the loss of her mother. It was probably just a phase. Lia would’ve told him that he was overreacting, like she always did, and he smiled fondly at the thought of his late wife wagging her finger at him. It didn’t change the fact that he didn’t want her lessons to be seen by others. If they could keep the apprenticeship hidden and Tifa could still get her chores done, Brian would agree to let her try.

The house was quiet, save for the crackling of flames in the hearth. In the stillness of the night, the monsters in his head would emerge and take him to dark places Brian didn’t know he had in his heart. His loneliness and hopelessness made him weak. The man longed to hold his daughter close and share his grief with the only one who might understand the pain of Lia’s departure from this life. He wanted to go into her room and cradle her against his chest. But he couldn’t show her his pain; he was a man and had to be strong. There was no room for weakness in this world. The thoughts swirled and swirled in his head, like a fly trapped in a jar: relentless, unending torture that gnawed at his psyche. It was enough to drive one to drink.
He’d tell her these lessons were her birthday present, since he’d forgotten to get her anything else.

… … …

He was in the newspaper again. All the boys at school were talking about it, saying there was a photo of him, too! Cloud grinned as her ran home from school; he couldn’t wait to see the article! He opened the door to his home and stopped short when he heard giggling coming from inside. The kitchen table was piled high with fabrics of many patterns and colors. Mom and Tifa were talking and giggling, discussing what would be best appropriate for her lessons.

“Hi, Cloud!” Tifa grinned, and Cloud was relieved to see an actual smile on her face for the first time in quite a while. “I have news.”

Cloud put his books and slate down on the counter and moved to stand near his friend.

“Master Zangan accepted me as his pupil. Papa said that I can learn if I still do all my chores,” She smiled and shyly shifted her gaze to the floor.

“Isn’t that wonderful, Cloud?” Claudia said, standing behind the girl and putting her hands on Tifa’s shoulders. “How fascinating, to learn martial arts! You’re a clever girl; you will do wonderfully, I’m certain!”

“Yeah, she will. She’s wonderful at everything she does,” said Cloud, sincerity in his eyes. Tifa blushed at the praise, her eyes cast downward with a small smile.

The boy was relieved to finally see the sparkle reemerging in Tifa’s eyes. He hadn’t realized how much he had needed the refreshment the girl’s jovial spirit offered until it was gone. Cloud remembered how much she had wanted to be Master Zangan’s pupil in the past and he was happy to see that her ambition was met with success.

“Cloud, could you go upstairs for a while? I need to measure Tifa and have her undress. We are going to make some new clothes that are appropriate for her apprenticeship.”

Cloud nodded, grabbing the newspaper off of the counter on his way towards the stairs. Once in his bedroom, he immediately sat, opening the newspaper wide on the floor. There, in black and white print, was the only photo he’d ever seen of the great Sephiroth. He was a young man, with bright eyes hardened by determination. His straight hair was even longer than Tifa’s, but so light in color that it seemed white. It was hard to tell without a color photo, but Cloud hoped that Sephiroth’s hair was blonde like his. The article was titled: The Hero of the Wutai War. He took his time learning more about his idol, reading it over and over before cutting the square of paper out with a pair of old fabric scissors.

If I could get stronger like Sephiroth, maybe I could be someone great…

I just want to be someone.

Would people care about me if I was stong? If I was like Sephiroth, I could’ve stopped Tifa from falling.

“Cloud! You can come down now. Let’s have supper with Tifa!”

He folded the paper neatly, adding it to his collection in a small wooden wine box under his bed before hurrying down the stairs.

… … …
Tifa thanked Ms. Strife again as she exited her neighbor’s house, enthusiastic energy thrumming through her body. Papa was kind enough to give her some gil for new clothes to fight in, be he seemed far from happy for her and it quelled her excitement some. She knew that her father wasn’t fond of Cloud or his mom, but she was the only seamstress in town and she had no choice to ask for her services. He couldn’t be angry with her, right? She’d tell him all about how kind Ms. Strife had been and how grateful she was that Papa had let her get new clothes. Maybe she could make him some hot cocoa and ask him to tell her stories, like he used to love to do. Maybe that would cheer him up! The smile disappeared from Tifa’s face as she approached the front door of her house. All the lights were off. Where was Papa?

She turned the door knob and let the door slowly swing open.

“Papa?”

No answer. Something about this was unnerving and Tifa wanted to turn around and run right back into the warm atmosphere of the Strife house. Fists clenched at her sides, she steeled herself. Facing the eerie emptiness, she walked inside and flicked the switch of small lamp on the end table. Everything seemed to be in place, but there was no evidence of Papa’s presence. She checked the woodshop, the back yard, his bedroom, but he was nowhere to be found. His boots were gone, she finally noticed. Tifa removed her shoes and set the kettle to boil. He’d be home soon, and he always wanted tea before he went to sleep. It would be too late for hot cocoa if he stayed out much longer.

She bathed and combed out her hair, then changed into her night gown. The tea kettle still hadn’t whistled, and when she wandered to the stove, she realized that there wasn’t enough wood burning in the stove. The wood box was empty—Papa must’ve forgotten to cut some. Tifa wondered what to do before deciding to use some of the scraps of wood scattered across the floor of the woodshop. When the tea was properly steeped, she poured a mug and set it on the kitchen table. He would be pleased that she was clever enough to keep the stove hot without proper tinder and that she had thought ahead!

Tifa moved to the sit, resting her head on the arm of the couch. Fatigue had her instinctively wishing for the soothing sound of her mother’s voice to put her to lull her into dreamless sleep. She wanted to curl up in her comforter as Mama sang All Through the Night and feel her hands rubbing comforting circles on her head. Crimson eyes stared into the cold hearth. Those days were gone, but she could still remember them fondly and visit those memories whenever she wished.

Her eyes were getting heavy; she would just rest them for a little while…

_BANG!_

Tifa startled where she lay as the front door flew open.

“Papa?” she sat up, eyes wide with fright.

“What’re you doing up? Don’t you know s’late?” He staggered inside and held the sideboard for balance as he unlaced his boots.

Tifa sat, frozen on the couch. Hair bristled on the back of her neck and adrenaline pumped through her blood. Something was wrong with Papa. His face was flushed and his eyes were bleary, and he seemed a little unsteady on his feet. Was he sick? What had happened? Where had he been all this time? Tifa wanted to go to him, but instinct held her fast to her seat.
“Didn’cha hear what I said? Get to bed!” He grabbed her by the wrist and pulled her off the couch, shoving her towards the stairs. A tiny whimper escaped her throat as she was pushed forward. It didn’t hurt, but Tifa couldn’t swallow the lump of fear in her throat. Papa released her wrist and she scuttled to the bottom step. Tifa paused for a moment, placing one hand on the banister and peeking over her left shoulder.

“P-papa, I made you tea…”

“I didn’t ask for any damned tea! Get upstairs or you’ll be sorry!”

Tifa didn’t need another warning. She scampered up the stairs, tripping over the long hem of her nightgown as she rounded the landing. Slamming the door behind her, she flung herself onto her bed and burrowed under the sheets. Tears stung her eyes as she hid, quietly listening for her father’s footsteps. He was coming up the stairs! Why was he so angry with her? Tifa was afraid that he’d come in there and shout some more, or maybe even strike her! She squeezed her eyes shut and held her breath as the footsteps reached the top of the stairs. Long seconds ticked by and she shivered with anticipation until heavy boots moved away, toward her parents’ bedroom. A silent whimper of relief escaped her lips.

For a long time, she lay there, trembling and listening. Eventually, Tifa fell into quiet sobs, removing the blankets from her head. She ached for her mother’s embrace; she would’ve known what to do. Mama would’ve protected her and made everything better again. She would’ve told her why Papa was acting so strangely. She rested her head on her pillow, staring out the window beside her bed. On the sill sat the little wooden horse Papa had made. Her father was kind, playing with her and taking her for lengthy walks in the woods, he got mad sometimes but it was never for long. He had never shouted at her like that before, or pushed her. Tifa couldn’t understand what had changed. Closing her eyes, she prayed that she’d fall asleep and wake up in her mother’s arms with her happy, cheerful Papa there to tickle her and blow raspberries on her cheek. Comforting herself with such visions, let herself be pulled into an uneasy sleep.
“Your back leg needs to be straight! And bend the knee on the leading leg. There, much better. Center yourself. Feel the energy flow from your core and into the tips of your toes as you kick.”

Tifa closed her eyes, trying to focus. The crisp air of the early morning felt good on her skin and the dew was cool under her bare feet. She thought that she would’ve been nervous to train with Master Zangan, but after a few days she felt much more relaxed practicing in the clearing than she did at home. The old man was kind, guiding her with patience and gentle instruction. Tifa latched onto the peace of his voice. With her master, it was clear what was expected of her. At home, she wasn’t always sure what her father wanted from her or what would make him irritable. These days, his patience was always thin and he always wanted to be alone.

It had been two weeks since the night Papa had come home acting strangely. In the morning he came into her room sorrowful and apologetic, saying he didn’t mean to frighten her. He had held her, petting her hair and telling her he was sorry for his behavior. Papa said he had been at the tavern and that sometimes, drinking made people act strangely. She nodded like she understood because she was afraid to ask questions. What was he drinking that could make him act that way? That evening he had left a tiny container of cherry candies on her bed as an apology, but she didn’t have the appetite to eat them.

Since then, he had come home in such a state twice more. But this time Tifa knew to stay out of his way and pretend to be asleep. Each time, there had been another good will gift on her bed the following day. Confused and frightened, she never talked to Papa about it.

She snapped her leg forward as her mentor had shown her, earning his praise.

“Be sure to keep your toes flexed upward. Aim to strike with the ball of your foot so you don’t break your toes. Here, practice on my hand,” Zangan said, moving to stand in front of her.

Tifa practiced the motion again and again, the orange light of the rising sun growing brighter and brighter. It was almost time to go home. Papa had been adamant that she took her lessons in secret, out of the view of the townsfolk, so she and her master had agreed to meet before sunrise in the clearing outside the village. When it rained or was too cold, she snuck out to take her lessons in the seclusion of her master’s little cottage just outside the village. Once she got used to it, she enjoyed waking up early to meet Zangan and thrived in his soothing presence.

“Good girl,” Zangan said, his well-Trimmed mustache tilting up with a smile. “Much better than yesterday, I’m proud of you. That’s it for today—it’s getting light out.”

Tifa smiled. The praise was like medicine to her bruised heart. Kind medicine, she thought.

Bowing respectfully, she thanked her master before moving to put on her shoes and throw her leather satchel over her shoulder. It used to be used for carrying her school books, but lately she had found many other uses for it.

“Thank you, Master! I promise I’ll have my new clothes soon. Ms. Strife said they should be ready within the next few days,” Tifa said as she smoothed the skirt of her pinafore.

“It’s alright; we’ll make do until you get them. But remember, proper footwear is important. I’d recommend some sturdy boots. I won’t have you rolling your ankles or hurting your feet.”

“I’ll ask my father about it,” the girl said, though she wasn’t sure if she should. It might make Papa angry and she didn’t want that!
“Very well. Take care, Tifa.”

After a quick goodbye, she raced out of the grassy field. She had a lot of work to do!

Something unnerved Master Zangan as he watched his tiny apprentice hurry away. He had always been a perceptive person and the way Tifa had averted her eyes when they spoke of anything regarding her home life made an uneasy feeling settle upon his heart. Mr. Lockhart had made it known that he wasn’t thrilled about this arrangement. Hopefully, he wasn’t giving his daughter too much grief about her desire to learn martial arts. It was good for her and the Tifa seemed to be taking well to her apprenticeship. Maybe, the hesitation and reluctance in her eyes meant nothing, but he couldn’t be sure. He’d have to keep a close eye on the girl.

… … …

Saturdays were wonderful. No school, less chores and if he tried, he could stay out of sight of the bullies. Mom had loosened her leash on him now that he’d stayed out of trouble for a while and Cloud was enjoying his freedom by exploring the woods close to home. He had wandered to his favorite spot, the spot he and Tifa used to frequent near the stream, and climbed a nearby tree. Cloud sighed contentedly as he rested his back against the trunk, pulling out his pocket knife to whittle away at the end of a large stick. Relaxed, the boy lazily swung his foot as it dangled off the branch. Before long, the sound of crunching twigs and footsteps on leaf litter snapped him out of his contentment. Cloud withdrew his swinging leg and held fast to the branch on which he was perched, careful to stay perfectly still. Someone was coming up the path, and he wasn’t sure that he wanted to be seen.

A small figure appeared in a dirty maroon pinafore, a large satchel draped across one shoulder towards her opposite hip. The girl bent to pick up the occasional stick of appropriate size to place in her bag, hair tousled a bit from her morning session. Cloud’s lips tugged upwards in a smile: it was only Tifa. Silent as a stalking cat, he waited until she followed the dirt trail towards him. When she passed under his tree he leapt from the branch with a loud roar, boots thudding on the ground and with arms raised in the air. Tifa squeaked in surprise, startling backwards with such force that she fell on her bottom. Crimson eyes flew up to meet him, wide with fear. Upon realizing the identity of her attacker, she began to giggle and was delighted to hear his joyful laughter join hers. It had been much too long since they had shared such a carefree moment.

“Cloud! You scared me half to death!”

He grinned and extended a hand towards her. Tifa took it, and he lifted her back up to her feet.

“I guess I can be cunning when I try. What are you doing out here, anyway? You’re always stuck inside with chores.”

“I’m collecting wood for the stove,” she patted the satchel at her hip. “It’s a chore, just one that’s outside the house.”

“What happened to the firewood your father cut?”

Tifa’s eyes turned downward, unsure of how to answer. Papa hadn’t cut firewood consistently for weeks, now. Luckily, the weather was warm enough that she didn’t have to worry about having a big enough fire in the hearth to stay warm. If she could figure out a way to keep the stove warm enough for cooking, things would be fine. To get by, Tifa had been collecting tinder from the forest floor, for she was too small to be able to wield the axe. Papa had been busy; it wasn’t his fault. He’d be back to his old self once he didn’t have so much work to do.
When he was home, he spent most of his time in his woodshop where she could hear him sawing and hammering away. The fair weather meant it was prime time for construction and her father had been doing a lot of work reinforcing the lofts of Mr. Ackerman’s hay barn. Sometimes he went to the tavern at night; sometimes he stayed home and quietly read the paper or went to sleep early. Tifa wasn’t sure which was worse: Papa being out of the house all the time or subtly avoiding her during the time that he was home. Although she was in the house with him, she had never felt more alone. Things were certainly changing in the Lockhart house.

“It’s all gone, now. Papa’s been busy. It’s alright. I’ll get enough to cook by! Summer is almost here and we don’t need it for warmth.”

Cloud didn’t question Tifa’s answer, but a strange feeling settled in his gut.

“Let me help you,” he said, looking around for thick pieces of dry wood. “It’ll go twice as fast if we work together!”

It didn’t take long to fill Tifa’s bag, and Cloud had found enough wood to carry an additional armful back to the village when they decided to leave the forest.

She had filled him in on the progression of her martial arts training and took the time to show him the things she had learned. Papa had said that she mustn’t tell anyone about her apprenticeship, but she couldn’t keep it a secret from Cloud! Last year she had promised to teach him what she learned, and she was going to keep her word. Besides, it was fun! The two practiced together until a thin sheen of sweat dotted their foreheads and they decided to rest. Exhausted, they lay on their backs in a clump of soft grass at their spot by the stream. Cloud wished every day could be like this. Being in Tifa’s company fed the confidence in himself that growing (and fighting) had slowly been giving to him as time went by. After all that happened, she still wanted to be by his side and that made him happy. But what would make Tifa happy? What was going to happen to her now that her mother was gone?

“Tifa…” Cloud began, rolling on his side to look at her face. “What do you want to do with your life?”

Closing her eyes, she thought for a long moment.

“I know I’m supposed to get married and have babies. That sounds nice, but… I’ve been thinking a lot and I want to see what it’s like in other places. My mother used to tell me about the sea, and it always fascinated me. I would like to see it, even if it’s just once.”

She paused to tuck a strand of hair behind her ear. “I want to know what it’s like and why Mama loved it so much. That way, when I do have children of my own, I can tell them stories of faraway things like she used to tell me.”

Cloud listened quietly and considered her words. If one thing was certain, it was that as long as he could remember, he had always wanted to give Tifa whatever it was she desired. If he ever managed to grow out of his weakness and become someone worthwhile, may he could take her to the ocean and see the smile on her face as her dream came true. He just wanted to make her happy. But to do that, he’d need money. To earn money, he’d need to have a job. Without a father to teach him his trade, and the thought of being a tailor making him cringe with boredom, Cloud was unsure of what to do. He wanted to be something fulfilling, something exciting. He wanted to be a great hero and make her proud to be by his side.

“What about you? What do you want to do with your life, Cloud?” Tifa turned her head to look at him.

He looked straight into her eyes. How could he ever be a hero if the entire village saw him as a
nobody? It seemed like an insurmountable problem.

“I…just want to be someone.”

... ... ...

Cloud had walked her home, depositing his armful of sticks into the large, empty woodbox on her back porch. He didn’t linger for long since he was afraid to be discovered by her father, but she was grateful for his company and assistance. When she was very small, she had told Mama that Cloud’s hair reminded her of the sun. Her mother had laughed, telling her she was a silly girl, but nowadays it was more apparent than ever that the boy the brightest source of light in her young life. Just seeing his face filled her with peace. Smiling with warmth of gratitude in her chest, she went inside the house. Maybe, if she tried hard enough, she could be a bright light for her father.

Tifa hummed as she set about her chores, sweeping and dusting before wandering to the kitchen to flip through her mother’s recipe cards. Sifting through dozens of little slips, she found it hard to decide what to cook for supper. Her skills were very limited and she was growing frustrated looking for something to put together that would be fitting for a novice. One slip of paper was more worn than the rest—Papa’s favorite beef stew. She thought for a moment: they had some cured beef in the icebox and she knew how to cook it. But she had never made stew by herself before. Tifa had watched her mother do it dozens of times, surely she could manage if she followed the recipe, right? If it would make her father smile, she’d make him his favorite meal a thousand times!

Tifa immediately set to work. After kneading and setting the bread dough to bake, she began collecting the other ingredients for the stew from the larder and was relieved when she was able to find everything except corn and celery stalks. Satisfied, she began chopping away at the cutting board. It took her much longer than she anticipated, but both the bread and stew were hot and ready by the time Papa had stepped through the front door, looking weary from the day’s work. He looked towards her with a gentle smile and it encouraged the girl. She smiled her biggest smile and moved to the parlor greet him, wiping her hands on her apron.

“Welcome home, Papa. I have supper ready!” she stepped towards him with vigor as he removed his boots.

“Is that beef stew I smell?”

Tifa beamed.

“Yes, it is!” she said, smiling shyly at the ground. “You’ve been working so hard that I thought you might like some.”

Papa’s hand rested gently upon her head, his calloused fingers running their way through the length of her hair. Tifa closed her eyes at the soft gesture and leaned into his hand, savoring the contact that she craved in the long months since her mother died.

“Thank you, sweet pea. I’d like some very much.”
“Hello? Is anyone home?”

Claudia rapped at the front door to the Lockhart home. In her hands was a large package, wrapped in burlap and twine. Tifa’s clothes had taken her longer than she anticipated to make and she hoped that the girl or her father would be around so that she could properly apologize. Since it was midday and she Tifa no longer attended school, Claudia expected the girl to be home. If she was honest with herself, she had come to visit Lia’s little daughter for more than just dropping off her goods.

Her sharp ears caught all sorts of gossip as she peddled her wares in town square. If the rumors were true, Mr. Lockhart had been spending quite a bit of time at the tavern with the bachelors and old men. In the aftermath of the loss of Lia and the girl’s head injury, it wasn’t right to Tifa was alone for any longer than necessary. The upheaval of day to day routine must have been devastating for the Lockhart family. Claudia remembered how frightening it was to suddenly find herself in a world that had changed so drastically from the way it was before. Knowing that life would never be the same had sucked the brightness from her eyes and truthfully, it was little Cloud who had helped her move forward in the end. She hoped Brian would be able to see that father and daughter needed each other to heal and build a bright future.

Setting the package down outside the front door, Claudia scribbled a quick note to thank her patrons and slipped it under the twine.

It had been quite a while since she had stood on the Lockhart’s doorstep. The last time she had darkened this doorway was just before Lia had gotten sick and they had shared a cup of tea over talk of the weather and the children. Oh, how she missed Lia. She had often mused how the two of them were exact opposites and yet still were able to connect on an emotional level. Lia was a ruby eyed foreigner with hair as dark as midnight that fell in a straight curtain to her waist; her own eyes were a calming blue and her hair fell in golden blonde waves past her shoulders. Brian’s bride had come to Nibelheim as a blushing virgin and she as a hopeless disgrace with a frightened toddler. Ms. Lockhart was the picture of a successful mother of a lovable, darling daughter while Claudia struggled to put bread on the table for her ostracized little boy.

And yet, that hadn’t mattered to Lia. She had reached out to her anyway, always offering kindness and baked goods to both her and Cloud. For a time, she had hoped that Lia’s affections might serve as a gateway to a better social status within the village. As selfish as it seemed, the single mother was a social creature and loneliness ate away at psyche. More importantly, her son’s future depended on his ability to make friends and form bonds with the people who scorned him for things completely out of his control. If a well-to-do family like the Lockharts accepted her and Cloud, maybe the others would, too. But that hope had died when her neighbor had breathed her last. Despite that, Claudia held some faith that little Tifa’s continued companionship with Cloud would help her son to find some sort of healthy social niche. Lia’s big heart and generous spirit seemed to live on through her daughter.

Claudia slowly made her way back home, running through her mental list of chores she needed to finish before starting supper. Her son would be home within a few hours and he was always hungry after school.

Cloud had been changing and his recent transformation had confused her. He was angry and hurt to be blamed for Tifa’s accident and she couldn’t fault him for that. The other children had taunted and teased him for it she was sure, and Claudia knew they roughed him up a bit once in a while. It must’ve only felt natural to Cloud to fight them back, despite her warnings and pleas for him to do
the opposite. At least then, he could’ve used the excuse of self-defense. But what had startled her the most was the fact that Cloud had started some of these fights. Cloud had always been a docile child, spending long days of his childhood reading books or playing quietly. Rough housing was quite a foreign notion to her reclusive little boy. But he wasn’t so little anymore, even if he was still a little bit smaller than the others. He had always been an obedient child and she had ordered him never to hit anyone. She was disappointed that her son had stopped honoring her wishes.

Shutting the front door behind her, Claudia rolled up her sleeves to start kneading the bread dough. Boys would be boys, she supposed.

Hot, white steam rose into the air with a loud hiss as Benjamin the blacksmith doused his hot metal tongs into the quench tub. Four pairs of eyes watched with awe when he withdrew a perfectly shaped horse shoe from the water.

“So cool!” Jason grinned. “I want to be a blacksmith someday!”

“You aren’t going to be a farmer like your Pop?” Jim asked, adjusting his red cap.

“Nah, blacksmiths get to make all sorts of tools and even weapons!” Jason countered.

“Yeah, but he hasn’t had the time to do that since he married Miss Strauss, right Ben?” Thomas teased, sending a grin towards Tifa, who looked on with mild amusement.

“Mrs. Nelson, now,” the blacksmith corrected with a grin. “You lose your free time when you get married. I can’t be making a ton of swords and daggers for fun, these days. Strictly business and commissions, for now.”

The boys groaned and Ben smirked.

“Oh, it’s not all that bad. Being married is nice!” Ben began hanging his tools up on their assigned hooks and tidying up his work space. “You get to always come home to a hot meal and you aren’t ever lonesome.”

Tifa held her breath. She forgot about making dinner! It was difficult getting used to balancing filling Mama’s shoes and trying to hold on to snippets of her on life. Her father will want his hot meal when he got home and she needed to start preparing it now if she had any hope of finishing by then.

“I’ve got to go, guys,” Tifa said, hopping down from her perch on the wooden barrel against the wall.

“So soon?” Thomas moved to her side. “It isn’t yet five in the afternoon! We’ve got hours of sunlight left.”

“I need to get home and make dinner for Papa,” she said and Thomas stopped pursuing.

After bidding goodbye to the boys and Mr. Nelson, Tifa smoothed her ruffled skirt and hurried home. It was never easy to explain to her friends why she couldn’t come out to play for long hours each day. They just didn’t seem to understand that she had a great deal of responsibility on her shoulders now that she was the lady of the house. Their mothers all took care of the cooking, cleaning and laundry, but Tifa didn’t have that luxury anymore. The lengthy summer days that they used to spend romping and exploring weren’t an option for her now. Even if she had the time, there were things holding her back from feeling like she could be so carefree again. Her guilt and sadness quietly followed her like a shadow.
A smile crept across her face when she saw the package on her doorstep—her fighting clothes were finally ready! There was a note that read:

*For my dear Tifa  
Enjoy your clothes and work hard to learn!*  
--Ms. Strife

Grinning, she picked up the package and headed inside, looking forward to trying on her new garments once her chores were done. She fixed supper as quickly as and had the table set by the time Papa was supposed to arrive, but he was late. She swept and cleaned all the kitchen counters as she waited. That morning she had asked for boots for her training and Papa had groaned, calling her a prima donna. Maybe it had upset him so much that he didn’t want to come home? The sun had long set when she gave up and ate her meal alone, a hard knot in her stomach with the realization that tonight might be one of those nights where her father would come home angry and smelling of his drink.

Tifa cleaned her dishes, set Papa’s food in the ice box and quietly retired to her room. Her spirits lifted when she remembered the package she had placed on her bed. Unwrapping the twine and burlap, she smiled at the stack of garments folded neatly against each other. There were four tunics of different colors, made with room for her to grow. There were four black pairs of pants as well, but they were stretchy like her leggings and ran the length of her leg from her waist to her ankles. Shedding her dress and stockings, she slipped on a pair of her new pants. Experimentally, she lifted her knee up high and practiced a few of her kicks. The elasticity of the fabric gave her great ease of movement. They were perfect!

At the bottom of the stack were four pairs of wool boot socks and four camisoles made of the same stretchy material as the pants. Four back cloth belts made her set complete. Curious, she picked up a camisole. Ms. Strife had told her that these were to be worn underneath her tunic as an undergarment. Tifa donned the camisole and went to look at herself in the full length mirror in her parent’s bedroom. The tight-fitting pants made her legs feel secure, but the camisole felt strange. Thick straps adorned her shoulders and the garment clung to her chest and ended midway down her ribcage. She had never worn and undergarments on her chest before.

Tifa looked up when she saw movement behind her reflected in the mirror. She gasped—Papa was home! She was so intrigued by her new clothes that she didn’t even hear him come in!

“What the hell are you wearing?” he said, irritation dripping from his voice. Tifa froze. He had seen her in her undergarments! Although her abdomen and arms were the only parts of her body that were exposed, a wave of newfound modesty washed over her.

“P-Papa, Ms. Strife finis—”

“She made you these clothes? Figures! That harlot certainly would give ya somethin’ like that to wear.”

She felt his boot steps on the floorboards under her bare feet as he came closer. Tifa didn’t know what a harlot was, but she could tell that it wasn’t a nice thing. And Ms. Strife was always nice.

“These are just t-the undergarments…she made tunics, too.”

“You look like a goddamn prostitute! There’s no way I’ll ever let my daughter parade ‘round without proper clothes on.”

Slowly, he turned her to observe the clothing before letting out an indignant snort. Before she could
stop herself, a question flew out of her mouth.

“W-what’s a prostitute?”

“You, if you keep on dressing like that. Now get out of my room,” Papa barked, shutting his door with a little more force than necessary when Tifa scuttled out into the hallway. Breathing deep to keep tears at bay, she quietly stepped back into her room and did her best not to make any noise.

It’s okay. It’s just the drink. He doesn’t mean it. He said it makes him act strangely. It’s okay, it’s okay…

She realized she hadn’t yet taken a bath, but she was too afraid to make any noise and instead chose to curl up in her covers and wait for sleep to take her.

… … …

*Everything was quiet. There was dull candlelight and she moved quietly on her feet towards the bed. Long, dark hair draped over the side. Bloody handkerchiefs; dark bottles of medicine. Someone was wheezing. Brightly colored flowers sitting on a wooden box. The wind was blowing. She was high up in the air, walking on wooden planks. Everything shifted and the world spun. A finger brushed her hand before she was falling, falling…*

Tifa woke with a start, surprised at the tears streaming down her cheeks. Her breath came in panting gasps as she tried to collect herself. What a peculiar, frightening, and strangely nostalgic dream. Even in sleep, these things haunted her and it wasn’t fair. She wrapped her arms around herself, seeking comfort. It was dark outside her window and she didn’t know what time it was, but the emptiness inside was just too much. Reaching up, Tifa grabbed her jingle bell and tugged.

… … …

She rose extra early the next morning. The excitement to wear her new clothes had dulled with the memory of Papa’s harsh words, but Tifa still lavished the feel of the soft fabric against her skin and felt confident she could move much more freely in her tunics than she could in her dresses. She tip-toed down the stairs, grabbed a hunk of day old bread from the bread box and snuck out into the pre-dawn air.

Tifa didn’t come home until she was certain that her father was out working. She made sure all her chores were done, the woodbox had some tinder in it and supper was prepared before retreating upstairs. Maybe if she made sure all her responsibilities were taken care of and she stayed nice and quiet, Papa wouldn’t shout at her. Tifa opened the door to her room, the light of sunset bathing everything in orange. There, on her bed, was a brand new pair of leather boots.
Hope for the Lonesome

The class was restless, everyone fidgeting in their seats as the minutes slowly ticked by.

There was whispering and hushed giggling as the students anticipated their dismissal. Mrs. Nelson rapped her ruler on the edge of her desk a few times and silence fell upon the room once again. Cloud focused on the arithmetic problems on his slate, trying to sit as still as possible. He was quite mature of mind for a ten year old boy, but all the hubbub had him antsy as well. The scent of freshly baked pastries floated into the schoolhouse on the crisp, autumn air and it made his mouth water. Tonight was the annual harvest festival and everyone was so excited! Even his mother was energetic and eager to bake her apple strudels and bring some of her linen wares to sell.

Guests from neighboring villages would be visiting for the event, and with them would come a slew of new things to buy and new food to taste. There was always music, plenty of games to play and sometimes even a magician would come! Cloud could hardly wait to explore what the festival had to offer with his best friend. Last night, as they leaned their heads out of their bedroom windows, Tifa had told him that she was looking forward to enjoying the evening with him. His face had felt hot after that and the boy couldn’t understand why there was such giddiness in his heart long after he laid his head down upon his pillow.

After a half hour more, Mrs. Nelson had given up. With an exasperated sigh, she dismissed them for the day. There was a collective cheer as the children gathered up their belongings, anxious to get home and prepare for a fun evening of games and excitement. Cloud lingered behind, purposely taking his time to gather his things until the bullies were gone before making his way out the door and into town square. A dozen men were busy building wooden vendors’ booths, hanging decorations of brightly painted paper and rolling large barrels of ale over the cobblestone. His curious eyes wandered through the scene for a while until he spotted Mr. Lockhart cutting wood at the tablesaw nearby. To his horror, the man glanced up, making brief eye contact. Startled, Cloud flinched and averted his gaze before quickening his pace toward his home.

He hadn’t interacted with Tifa’s father for more than half a year and had no intention of seeking out the man’s attention. Was Mr. Lockhart one of the people who thought he pushed Tifa off the bridge? He couldn’t believe that—wouldn’t Tifa have been forbidden from seeing him if he did? Something inside Cloud wanted to approach the man and tell him all that had happened on that day, but he feared making things worse by reminding him of the incident. It was just safer to stay away from him, and Cloud was good at being invisible. He reached his home in short minutes.

“Hey, Mom. School let out early because of the festival,” Cloud said as he closed the front door, letting the sweet scent of baked treats delight his senses. The kitchen was an absolute mess, with just about every bowl and mixing utensil they owned spread on the table and over the counter. Bits of apple jam and pale dough dotted the area, along with dustings of white flour.

“Oh, good! You can help me!” said an exasperated voice, somewhere behind the mountain of cookware and debris.

Claudia rose from where she had been removing her baking sheet from the oven. Her hair was messily pulled back into a high ponytail and there was flour smeared across her cheek and forehead. Cloud grinned at her sloppy appearance.

“What?” she asked, pausing to raise an eyebrow at her son as she set down the tray.
“Nothing,” he almost laughed. “You’re just covered in flour!”

She watched the boy closely for a moment before launching toward him with flour covered hands. Cloud balked and tried to avoid her, but Mom was too quick. After wrestling Cloud around a bit, he ended up with finger trails of flour across his face and neck. There were splotches of white on his navy blue school shirt where she had tickled his ribs. Soon, they were both smiling and catching their breath from their place on the kitchen floor.

“Since when was my little Cloud such a hypocrite? Come on, you can slice the apples.”

… … …

To Brian, October’s harvest festival was both a blessing and a curse. It provided him with enough work to be continuously busy for the few weeks of preparation and some extra pay to boot. The distraction from the dull turn his life had taken was welcome. The physical exhaustion helped his insomnia and let him slip easily into dreamless slumber and he’d been rising well rested in the mornings. But even toiling and hammering and sawing day in and day out wouldn’t rid him of the haunting memories. Last year, he had enjoyed the festivities as he grasped Lia’s hand with his right one and Tifa’s little fingers with his left hand. His heart was full and he was so proud of his little family. He remembered Tifa smiling and laughing as she bounced beside him in her pretty blue dress. Lia had squeeze his hand and leaned into his shoulder with that lovely, gentle smile on her face.

She had been so beautiful that night, adorned in a flowing crimson garment from Wutai. The rich red hues of the kimono enhanced her wine colored eyes and the interwoven golden threads made her glisten in the lantern light. Brian remembered the how the long sleeves made her look so elegant and otherworldly as her golden hair ornament twinkled in the light that it caught. His stunning, foreign beauty was the envy of all of the other men since the giddy newlyweds had moved into the house in town square. He had spent many a night lying by her side and wondering how he managed to get so lucky.

No amount of work or distraction by festivities could keep the pain and bitterness at bay. Currently, Tifa walked along beside him, taking in the sights and sounds of merriment around her. Brian watched her carefully. Except for the roundness of her face, the girl had lost any remaining baby fat from toddlerhood. Her lean, lanky figure was foreign to him and he found himself longing for that chubby little toddler who used to run to meet him as he come home from work. Now, her hair had grown far past her shoulders and Brian couldn’t help but notice that her resemblance to his darling wife intensified as she grew. Tifa’s round face, long hair and large, doe eyes were the mirror image of her mother’s. It made resentment rise in his heart. His rebellious daughter’s carelessness had taken Lia from them. Tifa’s solemnity and quiet presence were nothing like the way she used to be or anything like how her mother had been. For some reason, it made him so angry that Tifa could dare to look like the graceful, soft spoken, gorgeous love of his life. It just wasn’t fair.

It was a dangerous way to think. Though he knew it wasn’t Tifa’s fault, it didn’t lessen the pain of being around her. Every time those crimson eyes met his, his heart would hammer painfully in his chest.

“Papa?” the girl asked softly. “Do you think we could play a game together?”

Brian sighed inwardly. Last year, his small family spent the entire evening playing games and eating treats. But after all that had happened, how was he supposed to feign such lightheartedness? Was Tifa really that indifferent to her mother’s death that she felt free to be frivolous and silly? The thought of doing anything joyful with the girl made him feel sick to his stomach. Surely, she had only asked him out of formality. The fact that she didn’t want him around had been evident for a
long time. The girl frequently made herself scarce when he was around, choosing to remain quiet and withdrawn for the most part. He didn’t need her, either.

“Why don’t you go find those unruly friends of yours? I’m sure they want to play childish games with you much more than I do,” he replied in a tone that was more annoyed than he meant it to sound.

Tifa’s eyes turned downward and she nodded obediently, hurrying away through the crowd. Brian watched her go before turning and heading towards the vendors’ booths.

… … …

Weaving through the mass of people, Tifa took in the sights of all the visitors. Once in a while, a familiar face would appear, but most of the people were strangers. The population of Nibelheim was so small that she could probably name everyone if she sat down and really tried. On the side of the busy street was a familiar little cart. Ms. Strife had set up shop there, looking busy and cheerful. The woman waved at Tifa when she spotted her on the edge of the crowd. Tifa smiled and immediately jogged over.

“Good evening, Tifa! Oh, don’t you look beautiful!” Claudia gushed.

Tifa blushed at the praise. “Thank you, ma’am.”

She had worn the same dress to the festival as she did last year and had done a bit of growing since then. The hem of the dress’s blue skirt used to brush at her heels—now it fell to her mid calf.

Tifa approached Claudia’s cart and ran her hand over the fabric of the pretty skirts, slips and dresses. While her blue dress was nice, it was plain and palled in comparison to any of Ms. Strife’s intricate garments. Mama had never known how to make clothes. Whenever something needed mending or hemming her mother would do her best, resulting in haphazard stitches and uneven hem lines. Claudia’s stitch work was perfect and straight, delicate lace lining pretty petticoats and handsome men’s shirts with neat collars and shiny buttons.

“Ms. Strife, you make such beautiful clothes,” the girl said, her gaze lingering on the cart. “My fighting clothes are my favorite things to wear. Thank you.”

“You’re very welcome, little one. Come right on over if they ever need repair, alright?”

“I will. Say…I was hoping to find Cloud. Do you know where he might be?”

As if on cue, Cloud appeared, carrying a large wicker basket with a cloth on top. When he caught sight of Tifa, he smiled and greeted her. Claudia thanked Cloud and took the basket from him, pulling back the cloth to reveal several dozen apple strudels. She handed one to each of them, before digging in her coin purse and handing Cloud some gil.

“Here’s ten gil. I know it’s not much, but use it to go play some games or get something to eat, ok?” she said as she ruffled her son’s hair.

Cloud let out an embarrassed groan before muttering his thanks. Tifa couldn’t contain her excitement and stepped forward to give the woman a hug, exclaiming her gratitude. The older woman squeezed her back with a hearty giggle. It felt so good to feel Claudia hold her head to her chest. For a moment, Tifa couldn’t help but close her eyes and take in the small act of affection. The woman smoothed Tifa’s hair before sending her off with Cloud, smiling fondly as she watched the children disappear into the crowd.
It was such a magical night, with pretty lanterns hung all around, music dancing in the air and merriment everywhere she looked. Tifa and Cloud watched kids and adults play games, tasted some delicious food and looked at all the nice things for sale. They stopped to buy a snack after exploring most of what the festival had to offer.

“Where’s your Papa? Why isn’t he with you?” Cloud asked as he polished off his paper bag full of popped corn.

Tifa shrugged and pretended that it didn’t hurt that her father sent her off instead of choosing to spend the enjoying the night with her. She clutched her own paper bad and looked up towards the orange paper lanterns hanging above the vendor’s booths, thinking of what to say.

“He thought I’d have more fun with friends. Besides, if he made me stay with him the whole time I wouldn’t be able to spend the festival with you.”

“You’re right,” Cloud said as he looked away, suddenly bashful.

She quickly changed the subject, “This popped corn is making me thirsty! Want to go get something to drink?”

The pair walked side by side until Tifa pointed out a sign above a booth saying ‘Ale and Drink’. She asked Cloud what ‘ale’ was, and he could only shrug. A large man stood behind the booth and smiled at the children when they came near.

“Hello there,” Tifa said with her brightest smile. “One ale please!”

The man burst into laughter and Tifa’s polite smile faltered.

“M’sorry, little lady. If I gave you some ale, you’d be swayin’ around and actin’ like a fool! I can’t serve you alcohol if you aren’t an adult.”

Gears were turning in Tifa’s head. “You mean I’d act strangely? Sir, do they serve ale in the tavern?”

“You bet they do,” the vendor answered. Tifa’s lips pressed into a tight line.

“How about some juice instead?”

It was getting late. After trying for a while to find Mr. Lockhart, Cloud decided to walk Tifa home. He was angry that the man would just ignore his only daughter for the entire night, but at the same time he was happy that he got to have so much fun with his best friend. He was sure that if her father caught him walking beside her, he’d be in big trouble. But it would be worth it; she meant the world to him. Courage mounting, he looked at Tifa out of the corner of his eye and slowly slipped his hand into hers as they walked away from the noise of the festivities. Tifa flashed him a radiant smile that made his heart jump in his chest.

“Thank you for walking me home,” Tifa said, suddenly unable to look him in the face.

She held onto his fingers and ran her thumb over his knuckle. A blush dusted his cheeks immediately and he swallowed thickly.

“Oh, you know…it’s no big deal. I wanted to. You’re right next door, after all,” Cloud stuttered.
“Good night,” Tifa said, gently dropping his hands. “See you tomorrow?”

He nodded in response, “Yeah, tomorrow.”

She quietly disappeared into her house and Cloud was frozen where he stood. Sometimes it didn’t matter that he was an outcast in the village, that he had no father or that he only had one friend. Because in these moments of clarity, she was the only one that he needed. Feeling grateful and still a bit embarrassed, Cloud turned to walk away, ears pink from the rush of feeling her fingers clasped against his.
Tifa let out a cry of surprise as she landed with on her back to the mat.

“Get up, try again!” her master said and Tifa quickly obeyed, hopping to her feet.

Tifa faked to the left before swinging to the right to strike with a side kick. Zangan easily avoided her, caught her foot, and spun her off balance so that she tumbled to the floor. She only paused for a moment before getting to her feet again.

This was how it was, every day, and Tifa couldn’t get enough. Learning martial arts was such a thrill and daily escape that she constantly found herself internally distraught whenever it was time to go home. It was such a pleasant environment: the structure of their sessions was predictable and enjoyable, Zangan’s confidence in her was inspiring, and she thoroughly enjoyed how her body felt stronger and lighter. Tifa was feeling the benefits of being a student of such an art, learning to connect her body and mind—just like playing the piano. When she was in Master’s dojo, she felt like her hard work played off and that she was channeling her energy into something productive. It was such a vast difference from what she felt at home. Master Zangan was patient and gentle and Tifa clung to his kindness like a magnet, finding comfort in the stability and the sense that she belonged. She knew her place and her teacher was always optimistic and told her that laughter was as important of a teaching tool as anything else. Her home was a stark contrast to her learning environment, slowly changing into a place of tension and gloom.

In the winter months, her father hadn’t had much construction work. Instead, he spent much more time at home, carving or sawing or sanding in his woodshop. When he wasn’t working and the snow wasn’t too high, he made himself scarce by lingering in the tavern or haunting her mother’s grave. Any other time they spent together over meals or during the frequent snow storms seemed uncomfortable and strained. Once or twice, Papa would have a kind word or even a smile to give her, but more often than not Tifa sensed that these days, she was more of a maidservant than his daughter. Gone were the days that they’d read together or play card games by the warmth of the hearth. Life was lonesome in that house, but it was bearable when he was sober. Things only became frightening when he came home angry and full of liquor. Her wardrobe had become the perfect hiding place when she sensed that Papa was in a foul mood.

But now that March had come and the oncoming spring was beginning to make itself known, she hoped the atmosphere of the Lockhart house would become less melancholy. The sun would be back soon enough, hopefully filling their home with hope and warmth as well as light.

“Enough, Tifa,” Zangan said and relaxed from his fighting stance. “We’ll go through that again tomorrow—I want to begin to teach you how to fall properly to minimize injury and quicken your recovery time.”

“Please, let me try once more!” Tifa begged. She didn’t want to go home, yet!

Her master shook his head, “You need to get home before the sun rises, young lady.”

She tried not to let the disappointment show on her features. “Yes, Master.”

Zangan sensed her unhappiness and knelt beside his pupil. At first, he had been apprehensive about taking on Tifa as his pupil and regretted the fact that it was more out of pity for her after her mother died than her skill or tenacity. A decade ago, he had agreed to take a young girl as an apprentice and she had lost interest after six months. Tifa had now been under his tutelage for about ten months, and
had already proved his initial assumptions wrong by progressing quickly in her abilities.

“Tifa, you know that I am only honoring your father’s wishes. Come here any time as he allows it.”

The girl looked into Zangan’s eyes. She thought that the kindheartedness she found there would give her peace, but instead made her heart constrict painfully in her chest. She bowed her head in thanks and rose to her feet.

Tifa changed out of her fighting clothes, folded them neatly into her satchel and exited her master’s home—a small cottage down the dirt road from the village. The snow had almost melted completely, exposing grass here or there in lawns and pastures. The dirt roads were muddy and lonesome at predawn, but the crisp morning air felt good on her skin. She snuck back into town square shortly before the village began to stir. Passing by Cloud’s house, her heart lurched as she was reminded of the days when her friend would hold her hand and walk with her to school. Those happy days seemed so far away, now. The empty feeling of isolation would creep over her as Tifa thought of the other kids skipping to the school house each morning, learning their lessons and playing with one another in the yard. As much as she enjoyed her apprenticeship with Zangan, she couldn’t help but feel as if she now existed in a completely different world from her peers—even Cloud.

The day was long and lonesome as Tifa set to work, prepping food for her and her father and heating up snow to use for the laundry since the pump in the backyard was still frozen underground. Papa hadn’t been home all day which was a blessing, for it took energy to feign happiness in his presence. The girl took the broom down to the woodshop so she could sweep the sawdust and debris from the floor when she saw something unfamiliar. There were a half dozen dark, glass bottles lying around. Some were on the counter and others lay on their sides on the floor. They seemed to be empty, except for one that was half full on the counter top. Tifa took the bottle from its perch and slowly rolled it in her hand so that she could look at the label.

“Whiskey…” she read aloud.

Tifa sniffed it once and recognized the smell. It was the same scent on Papa’s breath when he pushed her onto her bed and shouted at her to go sleep. She’d never forget that odor as he squeezed her wrists and growled harsh words. Tifa contemplated taking a sip, but she was afraid to. Her father had told her once that drinking helped make it easier for him to live without her mother. However, all it seemed to do was transform him into a scary man. She wondered if drinking the alcohol would make it easier for her to live through these bleak days. What if it made her fall into a fit of furies like Papa? Tentatively, she brought the bottle to her lips and sipped. She instantly regretted it. The liquid felt like fire in her throat and she immediately fell into a coughing fit. Face flushed and teary eyed, she set the bottle back into its original position and quickly resumed sweeping.

The sun had set and she was still alone. Was it a blessing or a curse? Tifa eased her tired body in a hot bath; her muscles sore from that morning’s training. She dried herself and dressed in her white nightgown. Lonely and unsure of how to remedy that, she stood in the hallway for a long minute.

Her feet led her forward of their own accord and she wandered into her parent’s room. It seemed that Papa hadn’t moved any of her mother’s things. She ran a finger through the dust sitting on top of perfume bottles, the jewelry box, and lacquered make up case.

A necklace lay on her mother’s bedside table: tiny, delicate pearls dotted a silver chain. Tifa had seen her mother wear this very necklace many, many times. Instead of adorning Lia’s graceful neck, the piece of jewelry lay on the cold, dusty wood. The sight was enough to make a lump rise in her throat, and Tifa quickly swallowed against it. She couldn’t cry. It could never bring Mama back; she had certainly cried enough tears over Lia’s death to know that. The girl reached out to touch the necklace but drew her hand back when a sudden, eerie feeling fell over her. Slowly, she glanced
around the room. Her mother’s shoes still sat in the corner; her shawl still hung on the hook behind the door; her mending basket was still against the wall. Unease grew into heaviness and fright, and she quickly removed herself from the room, shutting the door firmly behind her.

Her trusty satchel made picking up produce and groceries much easier than clumsily balancing fruits and vegetables in her arms. Tifa made her way through town square, bidding a shy hello to passersby as she walked along. It was early afternoon and the area was bustling with activity. Tifa was excited to get home. After putting the food away, she and Cloud could go on their usual walk through the woods and spend some time playing. It had been quite some time since she had the chance to spend an entire afternoon with him. It was hard to see Cloud in the winter months, since the high amount of snowfall and bitter cold of the mountains made it difficult for them to meet in a way that was safe from her father’s watchful eyes. And so, most of their conversations took place shivering as they whispered to each other out of their open windows. Her hands ached for the feel of his fingers in hers.

A long time ago, she and Papa used to stroll on the wooded paths together. He would teach her the names of the birds and imitate their songs, making Tifa giggle. He’d point out fuzzy caterpillars and carry her on his shoulders as he taught her how to tell maple from oak, spruce from pitch pine. They’d linger in thick groves, singing together and breathing in the pine scented air. Once, he had taken a break to sit against a tree and she had waited until he had closed his eyes before dumping an armful of pine needles on his head. Tifa remembered how he’d laughed and tickled her until she couldn’t breathe. She’d give anything to have the Papa that would call her his sweet pea back. But those days were unreachable now. It was easy to get lost in the spiral of sadness and loss, so Tifa chose to focus on the blessing of having a friend like Cloud to explore the thickets with instead.

Shopping completed, she trotted along towards her home. She spotted Mrs. Nelson sweeping the mat outside of the schoolhouse and couldn’t help but stare at the woman’s rounded belly. Cloud had told her that there was a baby inside that was due to be born in June, and it fascinated her. How exciting, to get married and have a baby in your belly! When it was born, it would be fun to play with and take care of. And with a baby around, things could never be lonesome. Babies liked to laugh and be merry, and they made all the adults happy, something that was growing more and more difficult to do as she grew older.

She would be ten in May and allowed to marry at age fifteen. Five years was a long time away and her heart sunk to think that she’d have to wait that long to escape the monotony of each day and the oppression of her empty house. How wonderful would it be to get married to a man who loved her as much as Papa had loved her mother? Would she be allowed to choose a husband or did her father pick for her? She hoped she got to decide, because her father would certainly never choose Cloud, and he was her first choice. The thought of living with Cloud in a house of their own made an excited giggle threaten to form in her throat.

“Yo, Tifa!” She turned to see Thomas walking towards her in his dress clothes from school.

Tifa gave him a small smile, “Happy birthday, Thomas.”

He had been talking about it all week. As the eldest member of their little crew, Thomas frequently boasted about his age and everyone was well aware that he had turned twelve. In his hand was an expensive looking slingshot.

“Is that your new toy?” she asked, observing the little wooden weapon.

“It’s my birthday gift from my parents!” he grinned, holding it out for her to see. It was intricately
carved and painted with streaks of red and blue. A fine lacquer made it shiny and strong.

“That’s so cool! You’re so lucky.” Tifa said as she reached out to run her hand down the smooth handle and touch leather pouch held on by a thick elastic string.

“Come on, I’ll show you how to use it!”

Thomas reached forward and took her hand, pulling her out of the square and towards the clearing at the edge of town. The grass tickled her stocking clad legs as they made their way out into the open.

He bent down to pick up several small rocks. Tifa crouched to help him find some ammo. Although she felt as if she existed in an entirely different world than the other kids, Thomas had always reached out to her and kept her in the loop. Though he was a little cocky and a tad pushy, he had always been good to her. Smiling, she handed him her fist full of pebbles.

“Ready?” he asked, loading a rock into the pouch. “Aim…fire!” He drew the elastic back and let go, watching the projectile fly into the distance.

“Amazing!” Tifa grinned. “Can I try?”

“Sure,” Thomas said, standing to move behind her. “Let me teach you”

Placing the handle in her palm, he showed her how to properly load her ammo into the pouch and position her hands when drawing the strings back.

“Alright, let ‘er fly!”

Excitement coursed through her veins as she let go, watching the rock sail through the air. After fifteen minutes of practicing their aim and laughing at Tifa’s misfortune of slapping herself in the thumb with the cord, they sat together on the wooden fence at the pasture’s edge. Big, fluffy clouds lazily drifted against the blue sky and a warm breeze blew, promising the arrival of spring at last.

Tentatively, Thomas reached to place his fingers atop Tifa’s hand.

“So what did you get me for my birthday, Tifa?” Thomas turned to face her with a grin.

“Nothing, I’m sorry. I don’t have any gil of my own.”

“That’s alright. I can think of something free you can give me.”

He gently touched her chin with his index finger and thumb, tilting her face upwards as he leaned in closer to her. Tifa wasn’t sure what was happening until she felt his breath on her lips. He was trying to kiss her!

“H-hey!” she stuttered, pushing him away. “Knock it off!” Tifa hopped off the fence and quickly bent to pick up her bag. What just happened? Thomas was her friend, right? Why would he try to do something like that? Face hot with embarrassment, Tifa just wanted to get away as quickly as possible and process her feelings about all this.

Startled, Thomas watched her with wide eyes. “Where are you going?”

“I promised Cloud I’d meet him,” she said, averting her eyes.

Thomas frowned as she moved to walk away, “What’s wrong? You’re not locking lips with him, are ya?”

Tifa’s chest puffed up in offense and she slung her satchel over her shoulder, “No, I’m not! Leave
me alone, Thomas! I’m going back.”

The boy watched her stride away, confused. He and Tifa had been friends for years! How could she turn him away so easily? Her laugh and smile had enchanted him since she had first started school and he was always sure to play with her, even though she no longer attended school. Without his companionship, she’d just be Cloud’s loser friend. He was the popular one, everyone wanted to be around him. How could Tifa blow off the chance to kiss him?

Did she really prefer that loner Cloud? Tucking his slingshot into his pocket, he threw a rock across the clearing in frustration. He’d have to change that.
Weaving Bonds, Breaking Bonds

The summer sun rose high in the sky, bathing town square in a brilliant glow.

It was another slow day for Claudia as she sat at her cart attempting to sell her wares while stitching at the toe of a cotton sock. Airy frocks and thin men’s shirts were piled high on the little wooden pushcart along with other garments appropriate for summer weather. It had been a disappointing season for sales and it made her anxious. Cloud was growing quickly and she was hoping to get him some new shoes for his birthday while the cobbler was visiting. It wasn’t looking very promising. Ted was only in town to make shoes during the summer months, usually heading south once mid-autumn settled in. It was stressful that he was only available for part of the year, since she seemed to make more revenue in the winter and Cloud would certainly outgrow his current pair of boots by next summer. Things like this made her miss how easy it had been to provide for her little blonde toddler as he played barefoot in the grass with a small assortment of toys. It was hard to believe that it had been eleven years since she went into labor on a humid, August night.

A baby’s cry drifted to Claudia’s ears and she looked up to see the young school teacher trying to console her two month old infant. Since her birth, little Sarah Nelson was immediately the talk of the town. It was seldom that a child was born in Nibelheim—especially a female child—and the new parents were overwhelmed by the attention Sarah brought into their lives. The plump little baby looked so different than Cloud did at that age. Her rosy cheeks and lively brown eyes were the picture of health. Her son had been small and sickly and his arrival laced with fear and anxiety. Hearty baby Sarah was a parent’s dream.

She remembered little Tifa being the center of attention in Nibelheim when Claudia had first moved to the sleepy mountain village. She totted about in her frilly little dresses and lacey white bonnet, the village women cooing and fussing over the dark haired baby. Lia had always tried to politely shy away from the attention, but it followed her as long as she had Tifa in tow. It was something Claudia never had to deal with. No one had fussed over her blonde little boy and it had made her angry that he was treated with such contempt. When the villagers decided to withhold themselves from her because of her position as an unmarried mother, she could deal with that. But the fact that the village of Nibelheim actively shunned a small child, who had done nothing to deserve this treatment, made her furious. The effects of this isolation on her son’s heart were sure to follow him for the rest of his life and it wasn’t fair.

Sighing, she stood up, taking a pretty cotton blanket from her cart and making her way towards Mrs. Nelson.

“Here…for your little girl,” she said. “It’s a gift from the Strife family. Thank you for teaching my son.”

… … …

Sweat beaded on Cloud’s forehead as he brought the axe down again and again. Chopping firewood was hard work! He lined up the log, then grunted as he swung and hit his target. His arms ached already. This would be much harder during the winter when he’d need to chop three times as much. He startled when a small voice broke the silence between the periodic twack of the axe on the wood.

“Is that for your wood stove?”

He looked up to see Tifa’s round face peering over the fence between their yards.
“That’s right. Mom said I’m old enough to use the axe.”

Smiling, she came around the fence to join Cloud in his back yard. The boy decided to take a break and leaned the axe against the stump he was using to split the logs before sitting down on the grass. She plopped down beside him and the skirt of her blue pinafore fanning out on the lawn underneath her. Warmth bloomed in his chest when their shoulders touched.

“Could you teach me?”

Cloud shook his head, “Nah. I don’t want you to have to worry about firewood, anymore. I worry about you going out into the woods alone to pick up sticks. They don’t burn well, anyway. I promise to make sure to always cut you some.”

Tifa turned to look at the sincerity in his blue eyes. Cloud was such a selfless and kind person and she couldn’t understand what the boys had against him. Over the past few months, she had caught her friends bullying Cloud more than once and it bothered her. After she’d stick up for him, the blonde would assure her that he was fine and things would go back to the way they were. Why did they want to pick on him so much, anyway? It was driving a wedge between her and the trio of boys; her heart had always sided with Cloud, but how was she supposed to treat them now that they were out to get him? Would it be fair to shy away from them? Cloud would probably feel like it was his fault if she stopped playing with her other friends. But it certainly wouldn’t be fair to Cloud to keep going forward like nothing had ever happened.

She had thought about asking Papa about it, but decided against it since he wasn’t fond of Cloud, either. Mama would’ve known what to do.

Her eyes fell past the line of pale freckles over his nose and rested on his mouth, reminding the girl of how Thomas had tried to kiss her back in early spring. As much as she was fond of Cloud, she could never imagine kissing his lips! But still, she wanted him to know just how much his benevolence and companionship meant to her. She leaned in, placing a delicate kiss on his right cheek.

“Thank you, Cloud. I don’t know what I’d ever do without you.”

He blushed furiously and fidgeted awkwardly before clearing his throat. To chase away the giddiness and discomfort of the situation, Tifa piped up with a change of subject.

“Hey! I learned a new kick today. Wanna see? Let’s spar!”

Cloud jumped up at the opportunity, “Alright! Let’s do it!”

Their little sparring sessions were almost a weekly ritual by now. The pair practiced and fought for a while, careful to never hurt one another, and always had a great deal of fun. Tifa was so grateful to have a sparring mate her own size and below her skill level. Going against Zangan was always difficult and sometimes it was a nice change of pace to teach instead of being taught. Cloud blocked a punch and struck back with one of his own when they were interrupted by a voice.

“Tiiííifa, are you back here?” Thomas appeared around the corner of the house. He stopped in his tracks when he saw Cloud.

“Hi, Thomas,” Tifa greeted, wiping the sweat from her brow and smoothing her dress. “What can I do for you?”

Cloud didn’t like this. He had always loathed that Thomas and his nasty gang would steal Tifa’s attention from him. They constantly goaded him on and he wished that she knew of their manipulative games. Now that Thomas saw the two of them together, he was sure to start something.
Tifa’s presence alone used to shield him in the past, but he wasn’t sure if that was still the way it was. Although the group had always picked on him since they had met, Cloud was certain that his close friendship with Tifa bothered Thomas. The thought made him smirk. The boys’ eyes met and tension crackled in the air.

“I came to take you on a walk,” the bully glared at Cloud. “You’re not busy, right?”

Thomas grabbed Tifa’s hand and gently pulled her beside him. Cloud bristled with anger and possessiveness.

“She is busy. We’re sparring,” the blonde said, trying to remain calm for his friend’s sake.

“Sparring? No wonder you’re weak, you practice with a girl.”

The hurt look on Tifa’s face made Cloud clench his fists. He knew that comment was meant to insult him, but it had hurt her instead and that was unacceptable.

“You think I’m weak? I’d knock you flat in a half a minute!” He immediately felt foolish, since Thomas was a year older than Cloud and a good six inches taller.

After a few more taunts from his auburn haired adversary, Cloud prepared himself as the bully rushed forward. Cloud was able to hold his own due to over a year of Tifa’s careful instruction in martial arts and he could tell Thomas was surprised at his skill. Tifa watched in horror. Master Zangan had instilled in her that martial arts were for self-defense and to help others, not for some petty quarrel.

The fight was short lived. As soon as Thomas landed a blow to Cloud’s chin, she stepped in. Using her skills, she caught Thomas in a tight head lock before he knew what hit him. The boy gasped for air.

“Stop it! Leave Cloud alone!”

Cloud looked on as Tifa released her captive and the boy fell to the ground on his hands and knees, catching his breath. Thomas growled at the loss of dignity and straightened to his feet.

“Where the hell did you learn to do that?!” He spat, shooting a fiery glance at Tifa. Embarrassment and wounded pride fanned the fire in Thomas’s heart. His gaze fell to the firmness of her biceps that he had failed to notice before. The girl kept her mouth shut.

“Master Zangan taught her,” Cloud snapped, and Tifa’s eyes widened as she turned her head toward her fair haired friend. Oh no. Papa said no one was allowed to know!

“Yes, I—”

“I should’ve known something was up with you! You’ve been acting strangely around me for a long time. What have I ever done to deserve that?”

“I can think of at least two dozen things,” Cloud seethed, blue eyes never straying from the older boy.

“Can it, Strife! You two are both freaks!” he said, regaining his composure and turning to stomp away. “You’re meant to be together, along with your drunkard father!”
Tifa stood in place, shaking fists at her sides, as she watched Thomas storm out of the yard. Cloud swallowed hard when he saw moisture glistening in her eyes. His temper cooling, the boy stood there and wondered what to do to comfort her.

“Don’t listen to him, he’s always telling lies,” Cloud said softly. “You’re not a freak, and neither is your dad.”

… … …

The house was always eerily quiet once night fell and it was hard to imagine that it had only been two years since her mother’s presence had disappeared. When Tifa thought about it, being tucked into bed and having her forehead kissed by Mama felt like a lifetime ago. She slowly climbed the stairs and switched on the electric light of the upstairs hallway. Sometimes, when she lay down in her bed in the empty silence, she imagined she’d wake up and this gloomy life would be just a bad dream. The faint tinkling of her jingle bell pulled Tifa out of her thoughts. She had been hoping Cloud would call. After kissing his cheek today, she had hoped he was thinking about her and wasn’t too angry about the encounter with Thomas. Smiling, she turned to move towards her bedroom when the front door opened and an angry shout echoed through the still house.

“Tifa! Get over here!”

She froze at the top of the staircase, heart immediately beginning to thunder in her chest. Instinct told her to run, but experience had taught her that it only got worse if she didn’t obey. Trembling, Tifa quietly descended the staircase, bare feet on cold hardwood. The front door was still open, carrying the sound of summer crickets into the house. Papa stood in the doorway, looking like a monster in the muted candlelight of the foyer. His features were wrinkled with anger and his dark eyes full of fury. Tifa let a silent whimper escape but continued obediently towards the man, who grabbed a handful of her hair once she was in arm’s reach. She cried out as he threw her on the couch, breath reeking of alcohol and cigarettes.

“What have you done, you little wretch?!” Papa yelled, and all the girl could do was stare frightfully into his rage filled eyes. Her father’s large hands pressed her shoulders into the softness of the cushions.

“All everyone is talking about is strange little Lockhart girl that beats up boys in her backyard! I told you never to let anyone know about your training! Do you know how bad this looks?!”

She didn’t. Tifa couldn’t understand why it might look bad for her to defend Cloud. Sure, it was strange for her to be learning to fight as a girl, but why was Papa so worried that other people knew? She had hoped that he would be proud of her for being a good pupil and learning as quickly as she had. But what had Thomas said? She hadn’t hurt him at all!

“How can I ever expect to marry you off now, with everyone thinking ill of you? No one will want you as a bride—you disobedient welch!”

Her father returned his grip to the hair at the crown of her head and began to drag Tifa towards the stairs.

“Your mother is rolling in her grave! No daughter of mine would have been a subject of gossip and ridicule. I don’t care what you do, I don’t care where you go, just stay out of my sight!”

Papa tossed her to the ground at the bottom of the stairs before turning to head towards his woodshop. Tifa scurried up the stairs and hid away in large wardrobe. Tears were freely running
down her face now and she didn’t try to stop them. She raised a hand to massage her aching scalp, realizing that his words hurt more than anything he had done to her body. She couldn’t be what he needed, and instead caused him constant grief. With a sob, she thought of her mother being disappointed with her. How much would she give to have her back again?

The bell quietly jingled again. She didn’t know if she could let Cloud see the tears in her eyes. But what if he needed her? Quiet as a mouse, she pushed out of the wardrobe and opened her window. The candlelight from his room illuminated Cloud’s silhouette.

“Hi, Tifa! Mom wanted me to—” he stopped short when he saw the look on her face. “What happened?”

She could only stare at him, words sticking in her throat. The kindness and concern in his eyes broke any resolve she had to keep her misery to herself.

“Tifa, what happened?” he tried again.

“P-please…please, come outside,” she begged. Her father did say he didn’t care what she did, right? And right now, her need for comfort outweighed the risks.

He nodded and was gone from the window. Tifa crept down the stairs and fled out into the humid night clad only in her night dress, sniffling and breathing with uneven breaths. Desperation and the need for solace carried her into her neighbor’s back yard, bare feet pounding the earth. Cloud caught her in his arms and she sank into the comfort of his embrace.

“Don’t go…d-don’t go!” She hiccupped and Cloud clung tighter.

It was the first time he’d ever seen Tifa cry and it disturbed him. He didn’t know what had happened, but the shouting he had heard and the frightened look in her eyes gave him an idea. Her knees buckled and they both slowly sunk into the grass. The crickets drowned out the sound from Tifa’s quiet whimpers. Inside him, Cloud felt an overwhelming need to protect the girl. But what could he do about Mr. Lockhart? What would a hero do? In the stories, it was always straightforward—the hero kills the dragon, rescues the princess, and everything is happy in the end. But this wasn’t a story, and there was no monster to slay. But there certainly was a princess to rescue.

Resting his cheek on the top of her head, he told Tifa over and over that he was right here, she wasn’t alone.
Starting From Zero

There was a growing pile of clothing on Tifa’s bed. Lately, dressing comfortably was becoming more and more difficult and she certainly didn’t have time for this! Today was the big boat race on the river bank and she was meeting with Cloud to join the festivities—that is, if she could ever decide what to wear! She slipped on her bathing dress and stared at her reflection in the full length mirror. Nothing fit right anymore.

Now twelve years old, she had grown much taller since her last birthday. Her shoes pinched and her dresses were all too tight, especially around the chest. Tifa ran her hand at the fabric near her collarbone. Sensitive, tiny breasts now pushed against the bodice and they ached as the material chaffed against them. Tifa knew that adult ladies had breasts but wasn’t sure how they got them. Before now, she had never given them much thought or knew what their use was until she saw Mrs. Nelson discreetly nursing little Sarah in the market. She supposed it was something her mother would have taught her about if she was still around.

Sighing, Tifa threw on her thin, yellow summer frock over her bathing dress and fastened the buttons, leaving the top one undone so her chest wouldn’t feel so constrained. She nervously ran her hands through her hair, which draped down to her elbows.

“I guess this’ll have to do.”

Her sandals didn’t hurt as much as her closed toed shoes, so she slipped them on and made her way down the stairs. Hand on the knob of the front door, she paused at the sound of wood being cut in the basement. She had to try.

“Papa?” Tifa asked quietly from the top of the woodshop’s staircase. The sound of sawing stopped, so she continued. “Are you going to the race today? Did you make a boat?”

“I don’t have time for that sort of thing.”

“I know; you work so hard. But you love to build things and I thought you might find it fun.” She held her breath and gripped the skirt of her dress. She just wanted to see him smile again.

“I’ve got three hundred pounds of wood to cut for the Nelson house. I don’t have time for fun.”

“Ah, I see.” Tifa awkwardly lingered for a moment, “…I love you, Papa.”

The answering silence carved deep scars into her heart. Tifa let the back door of the house slam shut with a BANG.

Almost the entire population of the village was there at the bank of the river: picnicking, flying kites or playing card games as they enjoyed the sunny Sunday afternoon. Puffy, white clouds hung high in the sky and the sound of cicadas echoed across the valley. Cloud and Tifa hurried down the dirt path to join the others. The boy grinned as he held the tiny wooden sailboat they had made and Tifa merrily jogged behind him, gripping the strap of her leather pack as it bounced against her hip. She could see the crowd of men and boys gathered where the starting point of the race would be.

“Hurry! They’re going to start without us!” Tifa panted as the pair sprinted towards the water’s edge.

Cloud skidded to a halt at the starting line with Tifa on his heels, carefully setting their boat into the water. The sail had been made of a spare piece of Claudia’s handkerchief fabric and the rest was unevenly constructed with bits of sticks and spare wood from Papa’s workshop. It looked more like a raft than a boat, but it would have to do. At the sound of the whistle, Cloud let go of the boat, letting
it drift into the river’s lazy current along with the others. There was cheering and laughter from the 
crowd as a dozen or so little boats raced each other down to a finish line marked by a fishing net that 
was strung from shore to shore. Most of the racers followed along the shore as their creations drifted 
downstream.

“Oh no! Cloud, look!” Tifa pointed towards their little raft as it tilted to the side. Its uneven hull 
dipped below the surface, hampering its speed. Nearby, Jason and his father cheered as their boat 
took the lead by a small margin. A gust of wind quickened the pace of the race, sweeping Thomas’s 
boat up as competition.

“Ah, darn it,” Cloud huffed as their boat succumbed to the current and began to sink below the 
waves. Once the tip of the mast disappeared under water Tifa let out an amused giggle, prompting a 
half-hearted chuckle from her friend. A hand on both of their shoulders pried their eyes from the 
water.

“I guess neither of you should pursue a career as a shipwright!” Claudia laughed. “Nice try, you two! 
Maybe next year, you’ll come out on top!”

In the end, it was the little boat built by Thomas and his father that reached the net first. Tifa watched 
him collect first prize—a brand new checker board and pieces—from her spot on the picnic blanket 
beside the tiny Strife family. Distracted by uneasy thoughts, the girl took a tiny bite of the sandwich 
Claudia had made her. She and Thomas hadn’t been on very friendly terms since she had scolded 
him for fighting with Cloud. They were rarely alone together, and when they were something felt 
tense and strange. She watched as Thomas entered the tree line a short distance away and vanished 
out of sight, likely gathering some sticks on which to roast some snacks over the small bonfire his 
father had built. Tifa had apologized several times in the past and tried to make amends, but the boy 
seemed to be growing disinterested in her companionship as time went by. If she had hurt his 
feelings, she certainly hadn’t meant to. Maybe she should try once more. She stood up, smoothed the 
skirt of her dress and wrapped the remainder of her sandwich in the small piece of cloth it had been 
packed in.

“I’ll be right back!” she said before she sprinted off towards the forest.

Cloud watched her go with a frown. He had seen her watching Thomas and knew she was going to 
seek the boy out. The thought made him anxious—what did she want with that pompous bonehead? 
What if their meeting wouldn’t go well and something bad happened? Thomas had been continually 
hurting the girl by neglecting their friendship and becoming distant. Cloud thought this was for the 
best, since nothing about that boy was good in his opinion. But he knew Tifa’s was distressed by the 
abandonment of her friends, and he worried about her. Telling his mom he was going to make sure 
Tifa was alright, he rose to his feet and followed after her, making sure to keep a stealthy distance 
away.

… … …

“Congratulations on winning the race, Thomas.”

Cloud shifted quietly behind the large trunk of a spruce, just meters from Tifa and that numskull that 
she called her friend for some reason.

“Eh, it wasn’t a surprise. We won last year, too.”

She nodded and uncomfortable moments of silence stretched between them before the girl found her 
voice again.

“Hey, Thomas…I wanted to say I’m sorry if there’s something I’ve done to make you upset with me.
I’m your friend...did I hurt you that day in my back yard? Or w-was it that time you…tried to kiss me?”

Cloud’s eyes widened. He had tried to kiss her? What nerve! The blonde clenched his fists as an unfamiliar feeling surged in his blood. Jealousy? Anger? Anxiety? He wasn’t sure.

“I really thought you were smarter than you are, Tifa. I mean, what would you want with that pale headed whore’s boy, anyway? You hang around him more than with me.”

“What? Cloud is—“

“What’s so special about him? I hope it’s something real good, because you’ll live a peasant’s life with that boy!”

From his hiding place, Cloud bristled with anger. How dare Thomas insult his mother! He hadn’t talked to her a day in his life, how did he know anything about the woman who had raised him with her gentle voice and kind smile? He could handle the nitwit insulting him; he had done it for years. But his mother was off limits!

“He’s my best friend…and his mother is nice and generous. Why do you speak so lowly of them, anyway?”

“Are you blind? They’re riffraff and the whole village knows it. Heck, even your drunkard father knows it! You’re not the same, Tifa. No, maybe you’ve always been like that—a freak just like them.”

There was silence as Tifa stiffened. Anger bloomed in Cloud’s chest and it took all of his control not to leap out from his hiding place and slug that arrogant face! His fists tightened and he held his breath until he heard Tifa’s shaky voice break the stillness.

“I see…”

“Go home, Tifa. I don’t want to spend my last week here being followed around by you. Mom says you’re gonna end up and old maid.”

His last week? Thomas was leaving? Cloud’s silent prayer of many years had been answered in a mere sentence.

“Where are you going?” Her voice was tight with thinly veiled emotion.

“I’ve got an apprenticeship in Junon. My old man set me up with a glass grinder out there. I’m finally gettin’ out of this place.”

“Oh…good luck, Thomas.”

There was crunching of twigs underfoot as Thomas turned to leave. Cloud peeked out from behind the tree, watching the back of Tifa’s head as the bully headed in the direction of the river. She was frozen there in the still summer air, holding her breath as the cicadas sang in the trees. Thomas’s voice rang out one last time through the grove.

“Don’t wish me luck. You’re the one who needs it.”

… … …

Her sandals kept snagging on twigs as Cloud led her hastily down the forest path. He had started
acting strangely after their picnic by the river. When she asked if he was alright, Cloud had avoided her question and asked if she’d like to go swimming. After helping to pack up Claudia’s blanket and basket, Tifa let him lead her to their favorite spot by the stream. He was stiff and quiet, almost seeming angry, his fingers laced tightly between hers. Her mind was far from her body as Tifa stumbled along behind Cloud, barely registering her surroundings as the wooded world flew past her.

Inside her chest, her heart was heavy and broken from continuous rejection. Papa was right: even Thomas knew that no one would ever want to marry her. Was she really going to end up as an old maid? Tifa had never been a vain child, but even she didn’t want to look at her swelling, awkward body anymore. Not only did she have unladylike interests like fighting—now she wasn’t even nice to look at. In only three years, she’d be expected to explore her options when it came to marriage. If no one wanted her, she faced the dreaded fate of staying trapped in her father’s house indefinitely unless she could somehow find a way to make enough money to justify emancipation. Her vision of a loving husband and a little baby of her own evaporated and was replaced with the image of endless days of hiding in the eerie stillness of her once happy home. The thought drew tight knots in her chest and made her eyes sting, but she swallowed her misery. Tifa was getting very practiced at hiding these feelings until she was alone. Only then would she let them escape, in the solitude of her dark bedroom.

Cloud slowed, and she glanced up. He had taken her to a small pond downstream of their usual meeting place. A drop of sweat slid down her temple and she gave him a weary smile.

“If you wanted to go swimming, we could’ve just stayed at the riverbank like everyone else,” Tifa said, smiling wearily.

Her friend turned to face her with an unfamiliar seriousness, “We aren’t like everyone else.”

Cloud stripped off his shirt and boots to wade into the water. Tifa had worn her bathing dress under her yellow frock for this very purpose. Swimming was one of her favorite activities, especially on a sweltering August day like this, and she grasped at the fabric to pull her frock over her head when she paused. Cloud had already dipped beneath the surface, and Tifa watched as he popped up again in the waist deep water. His body had grown long and lean, though she had never taken the time to really look before. Now a teenager, she could see tiny muscles beginning to swell in his arms and chest. His jaw grew more sharply defined as his soft cheeks disappeared. Cloud was no longer the boney boy of their childhood. Even his voice was changing! Slowly, he was beginning to morph into a man.

Her friend seemed more confident in himself than he ever had.

“Aren’t you coming in?” he held out a hand to her.

She hesitantly removed her frock to reveal her white bathing dress, covering her chest with one arm while taking his hand. Unlike Cloud, the changes she was enduring made her more insecure than ever. Her tiny breasts must be strange looking compared the full bosom of a grown woman, and Tifa wanted to hide any of her imperfections. Giving the villagers any other reason to gossip about her would only make her life harder and her father angrier. Cloud was her closest companion—what if he saw the unfamiliar softness of her hips and the budding of her chest and felt strange around her? Thomas was right: she wasn’t the same, and she couldn’t bear the thought of Cloud discovering this fact and losing interest in her friendship.

Tifa met his eyes and he smiled encouragingly. She submitted as Cloud lead her slowly out into the water. In her head, she heard his words of comfort from a muggy, terrible night two years ago.

“I’m right here, you aren’t alone.”
She gasped quietly as the cool water washed over her hips and navel, bathing dress trailing behind her. Smiling, Tifa decided that she could trust Cloud to keep his promise, no matter how much she changed.

… … …

Quietly, the master watched the apprentice, observing her fluidity as she practiced the kanku sho kata.

At fifty eight years old, Master Zangan had seen many things in his life. He had been born with an incessant itch to travel, to explore, to experience and to learn. Since he could walk, he had been taught the art of self-defense by his father and older brothers, using it as a way to make a living once he grew old enough to be independent. In the forty seven years since he left his birth place in the grasslands near Junon harbor, he had taken on over one hundred students around the world. Most had begun their training as children and endured intense lessons for a short amount of time before Zangan got restless and migrated to settle in a new place. After several years of teaching a spirited, raven haired pupil in the oppressive humidity of Gongaga’s rainforests, he had decided to head north to the refreshing briskness of the mountain air and a new apprentice. Routine, as usual.

However, Tifa’s situation was anything but normal, and for the first time in his life Master Zangan was unsure about how to act. He had begun to suspect some tension in the girl’s family life when she’d be nervous to ask her father for necessities like clothes or footwear, and how she often seemed reluctant to go home. Zangan’s suspicions were all but confirmed when he’d spot small bruises on Tifa’s wrists and along the hem of her collar. Last winter, there had also been a purple bruise on her cheek. When he had asked what happened, she had nervously replied that she had been hit in the face during a snowball fight. But her master knew better.

“Hyah!” the girl cried out at the appropriate time of the exercise, performing swift and disciplined moves she had memorized to perfection.

Brian Lockhart had stopped paying for her lessons two years ago after he had angrily confronted him, shouting about how it had been his fault that the villagers knew about Tifa’s training—something they had agreed to keep secret. Tifa wasn’t told about any of that and he kept instructing her as if nothing happened. There was guilt in Zangan’s heart. If he hadn’t broken the stiff local customs by taking on a female apprentice, maybe Tifa wouldn’t be enduring her current situation. The child hadn’t understood the repercussions of stepping out of social norm each time she had asked to be taught; would she understand the reason behind her isolation? He had made the mistake of assuming she would’ve grown tired of martial arts in a week or two, but she wouldn’t give up after all this time. Zangan admired her spirit.

“Good girl. Feel each movement in every muscle; let everything flow from your core.”

He saw her close her eyes in concentration, slowing her movements just enough to focus on grace and strength. Out of every student he’d had, he felt Tifa could use the training to center her mind. Although resilient in her own way, the trials she faced would require a strong understanding of her own self-worth to endure. But there had to be more he could do to save the girl from a life of abuse and emptiness, right? Where did the line between teacher and parent begin to blur? This was a situation that needed to be approached with utmost care.

The tremendously conservative nature of Nibelheim had shocked him at first, but what should he have suspected from such a remote place? The isolated little cluster of villages in the area seemed to be forgotten by time, slowly catching up to modern conveniences. However, the local customs and values took even longer to progress. Zangan knew that reporting Tifa’s abuse may not bring about any positive results. But it had to be addressed, even if it was just to give her some reassurance.
When Tifa had finished her kata, he praised the elegance of her performance and asked her to sit in front of him. He asked for her hand and his student complied, inquiry flashing in her eyes. Zangan turned her palm upwards and gently ran his fingers over the pale bruises on her wrist. She stiffened instantly.

“Your father is struggling, Tifa. But you shouldn’t suffer for it, my dear,” he said softly.

Tifa’s silence told him all he needed to know. He let the girl draw back her hand and she hung her head low to the earth, hair falling over her face.

“Forgive me, Master. I lied to you.” His sharp eyes noticed the tremble in her frame.

“Tifa, look at me.” Hesitantly, she complied. “Thank you for being honest with me. None of this is your fault.”

The girl fought to keep her expression neutral as she nodded, but Zangan knew her like the back of his hand. She didn’t believe him at all.

“W-what are you going to do? Please…don’t tell anyone.”

The man considered his options. At this point in time, the martial arts master was a highly respected individual due to his age, experience, and protection from the increasing number of monsters descending from Mt. Nibel in recent years. Commenting to others on the household of another man would be taken as unnecessary meddling. The old man worried that extreme retaliation by Brian could end up with him turning Tifa out of his home or forbidding him from continuing to teach her. That wouldn’t do.

The villagers had mostly turned a blind eye towards Brian’s increasing withdrawal from social functions and tendency to drink with friends well into the night. At first, their pity for the broken Lockhart family had shielded him and Tifa from critical eyes. But now that four years had passed since Lia’s death, the gossip about the drunkard man and his strange daughter were whispered about constantly. Zangan knew Tifa was skilled enough to defend herself from her father’s abuse—it was her love, loyalty and respect that kept her submissive. Confronting her father would be a breach of social formalities that he would risk if he thought it would really help her, but there was no way of knowing if he’d do more harm than good.

There was really only one thing he could do.

“Worry not; you are in control. Whenever you face such hardships, remember what I taught you about centering your mind. Rest in the knowledge of your strength and your worth and find serenity there,” Zangan said, placing a hand between her shoulder blades.

“I’m here, Tifa.”

There was a crowd in the lobby the inn. Cloud had come for the same reason as the rest of them—Mr. Taylor had purchased a large television shipped all the way from the city! It was strange for anyone in the area to be able to afford such a luxury. Most houses in Nibelheim still didn’t have basic electric amenities and when they did, it was used for little more than lamps or electric ice boxes. He was shocked when Tifa had told him about the it, excitement twinkling in her eyes. She had said she’d sit next to him tonight. Cloud had heard of a television before and knew that he could see video of the things he heard about on the radio. There was supposed to be a news broadcast at seven in the evening. The open windows did little to ease the summer heat combined with the stuffy air of the tightly packed room.
Claudia chose to take a seat along the wall and her son slipped in beside her. His dinner churned in his stomach. Since last week’s boat race, he hadn’t been able to get Thomas’s words out of his head. His bullies always seemed to have something to say about his mother or lack of a father. The village was never very warm towards Claudia and he was beginning to put the pieces together to why that was so. He wasn’t deaf to the hushed, crude conversations the older boys had at school (though he couldn’t help crinkling his nose with disgust) and now had some sort of understanding about how he came to be born. For the first time in his life Cloud was becoming quite curious about the person who Mom had loved. He wanted to ask her about what kind of man his father really was, but his words always held fast in his throat.

“Oh! They’ve turned it on, Cloud!” Claudia said, nudging him excitedly.

The crowd’s chatter quieted in order to hear the broadcast. Once in a while, the faulty Nibelheim electricity would flicker, making the screen blink. A monotone male voice narrated some happenings from around the world, eventually updating the spectators on the war. Cloud’s gaze didn’t waver from the television once Sephiroth was mentioned, but thoughts of the hero made his mind wander. Thomas had begun to bully Tifa, too—berating her only living parent as well and he wanted so badly to protect her from that torment. Cloud had been thinking about what it meant to be a man. It had frightened him when he realized that he had no mentor in this area. In a few years, he was supposed to get married. He couldn’t imagine being married to anyone but Tifa, but there was no way Mr. Lockhart would ever allow that.

How could he be a good husband if he never had his dad around to teach him? How could he be a good parent if he never had a chance to see how a proper father should act? The men in the village hunted for meat for their families, while all he could do was fish. They worked for a living in their various trades then came home to play with their children. Cloud couldn’t learn a trade from his deceased father and he’d barely ever seen a baby, aside from his teacher’s little daughter. Would Mom even understand if he tried to ask her about this?

The whirling thoughts stopped when he saw video Sephiroth on screen in full color. The narration told of his status as a war hero and of the battles he had won singlehandedly. Cloud was enraptured with the strength of this man, a SOLDIER, first class. If he could be that strong, maybe the village would see that he was worthy of their attention and approval. Maybe then, he would be worthy of having Tifa as his bride one day. For as far back as he could remember Cloud could never imagine facing life without her by his side.

“He’s so cool!”

“How did he get so strong?”

“Look at that sword!”

The boys were chatting amongst themselves, pointing at the screen with glee. Thomas had left for Junon the day before, leaving Jason and Jim content to ignore him—that was fine with him. There’d be less fighting now that their ring leader was gone. The kids let out a collective groan when the video switched to a shot of President Shinra. No longer transfixed by the silver haired warrior, Cloud let his gaze shift around the room. Tifa had never come.
Priorities and Qualities

The silence made her hold her breath as she peered up at the bed. Darkness, stillness. A candle eating at the last of its wick. Father is slumped in the chair beside her, head hung. A pale hand limp on the comforter. The scent of sickness suffocates her in the stuffy room. Black hair draped over the doctor’s arm as he carries Mama away. The white sheet over her body sways as he brings her down the stairs. Papa is crying and she’s so frightened. She lays there, staring at the ceiling until light comes again. The tears don’t come until she hears the dirt hit the wood, showered by shovelful.

Climbing and climbing, eyes burning. Her hair whips around her head and she steps on the bridge. A familiar voice. Shoes scraping against the wooden boards. There are tears in his eyes as he reaches, their fingers touch. One second of stillness before the colors all blend together. Weightlessness, she’s suspended in the air. Down, down, into the dark.

She rose with the sun, but she didn’t don her sparring tunic. The mug in the sink meant Papa had already gone. At the table, Tifa ate her breakfast alone in the chair closest to the wall. Cheerful laughter in her memories clung to the curtains, the woodwork, and the brightly colored dishware. Closing her eyes produced visions of her mother by the stove and father laughing at the hearth where he told her long tales about elves and fairies. These ghosts chased her with remarkable persistence and Tifa was running out of ideas to evade this specific torture.

The autumn air was brisk against her cheeks as she wandered into the backyard with gardening tools and tin pail in her hand. Without guidance, her attempts to manage the garden had been decent, at best. Somehow, the vegetables were never as plump or plentiful as when her mother would care for them. Last year, the boys had come once in a while to help her dig or draw some water from the pump for the thirsty plants. Now, Thomas was gone. Jason and Jim had begun to treat her as if she was a nuisance. There would be no help from them in the garden this harvest season.

The sun was high in the sky when Tifa stopped to take a break, wiping the sweat dotting her brow and drifting over to the tire swing. Seating herself upon it, she held onto the thick rope and rocked slowly, leaning her head back so that her long hair brushed the ground. Papa used to push her on this very swing, teasing her and making her squeak with surprise when he’d spin her around and around. She closed her eyes. Breathe in, breathe out, Master Zangan would tell her. Center your mind, block out the pain. Soil and leaves and pine filled her nose as she swung in lazy circles.

“Boo!”

Tifa gasped, falling backwards onto the grass. Cloud’s voice cracked as he laughed and bent to offer his hand. Her eyes warmed when she met her friend’s eyes and she reached out to him. He pulled her to her feet with little effort.

“What was that for?” she asked with mock anger as she rubbed the back of her head. Cloud smirked and shrugged.

“You were zoning out.” He pointed his thumb over his shoulder towards the Lockhart’s back porch, “I came over to drop off some firewood for you.”

“Thank you for your kindness, Cloud.”

The smile she gave him made heat rush to his face and he wasn’t sure why. Realizing he was still holding her hand, Cloud jerked his back and shyly looked away. Tifa smiled at her bare feet before climbing back into the swing once more, resting her head on top of the tire this time.
“…I asked Jason if he wanted to play yesterday and he told me to bug off. He and Jim walked right past me in town square when I called out to them.” Tifa said, staring out at the tree line. “I know you don’t get along with them, either. I heard that you bloodied Thomas’s nose once.”

Cloud shifted nervously, “I didn’t want you to know about that. I thought you’d hate me if I fought with your friends.”

“Did they bully you?” Tifa asked, tilting her head where it rested on rubber treads. She had suspected something like that had happened, but had never been sure.

“They made comments about my mother, my father, and you. I couldn’t let them get away with that. I never told you—that was a part of me that I didn’t want you to see,” Cloud admitted. He lifted his face just enough to make eye contact. “I’ve been doing a lot of thinking. Tifa, I have a feeling that maybe, I could be someone. A hero…like the great Sephiroth.”

The girl closed her eyes and considered his words. “You are a hero. My hero…who comes riding on his white horse to cut me firewood!” The smirk on his face gave her the courage to continue. “Cloud, if it wasn’t for you, life would be so lonesome. You’ve always been someone.”

Moving to lean against the tree, Cloud studied his friend. The bruises on her wrists were faded, but the bruises on her heart were so large he could easily see them with just a quick glance of her countenance. He could see the wound from every harsh word in the way her body curled in on itself, every shout in the dark shadows in her eyes. Years ago they had played on this very swing and her endless laughter filled his heart with hope, day after day. Could he do that for her? Her sadness was something she wouldn’t—she couldn’t—talk about.

Cloud didn’t know if she really thought he didn’t know of her father’s mistreatment or if Tifa avoided talking about it simply because it was a frightening thing to think about. Admitting such a think aloud made it more real. He couldn’t blame her. He knew what it was like to try to stop the bleeding of the heart by pretending everything was alright. One thing was certain—he needed to get her out of here, he needed to take her somewhere safe where her father could never hurt her again. Cloud stepped forward and put a hand on her shoulder.

“Thank you, Tifa. You always know what to say.”

His eyes moved down the soft curve of her cheek to rest on her mouth. Cloud felt ruby eyes on his face, casting a spell over him that made him suddenly unaware of anything else but how much he wanted to know if those pink lips were as soft as they looked. Something unfamiliar possessed him and he slowly leaned his face towards her only to jerk backward when he realized what he was doing. The sound of horse hooves on the cobblestone street startled the pair.

“Oh—Papa’s coming. You’d better get home.”

Cloud nodded because he was too flustered and embarrassed to form a complete sentence. As much as he knew he needed to get back on the Strife side of the wooden fence, his instinct was screaming at him: telling him not to leave her alone with Mr. Lockhart. He needed to protect her, to hold her tight…

What was wrong with him?

The two of them split, Cloud hopped the fence while Tifa ran inside to greet her father.

… … …

The girl had steamed squash and carrots, diced and mixed them with rice from the large sack in the
larder. He supposed she was being resourceful, using vegetables strictly from the garden instead of asking him for money for the market. She’d go to great lengths to avoid talking to him, wouldn’t she? But even if she had asked for gil, there wasn’t very much to give her. Reaching for a hunk of bread, Brian watched his daughter carefully. She stirred her food slowly, occasionally raising the spoon to her mouth. There was little he hated more than her silence and timidity. His happy-go-lucky daughter had morphed into a solemn slip of a girl who tip toed through the house and hid in the shadows. What did she have to be so sad about? That Zagan fellow still bothered to give her lessons—what did she have to pity herself over?

There was anger and embarrassment boiling in his heart, and he wasn’t sure if he was ashamed of her or himself. What would Lia think of how he watched their daughter sink into gloom instead of reassuring her and lifting her up? He saw Lia in Tifa constantly. While the girl’s solemn aura was nothing like Lia’s angelic presence, their physical resemblance was uncanny. As Tifa grew, her emerging gentle curves and her graceful neck played tricks with his mind. The girl’s deep red eyes and curtain of black hair echoed the exotic beauty of his bride from Wutai. Instead of inspiring fondness in his heart, the daily reminder of his late wife put Brian in a constant state of unease. Some part of him blamed Tifa for the disintegration of their family, something that he knew was wrong. But as the years went by, a dark part of his heart had actually started to believe it.

“Papa…I was wondering if maybe I could get some new clothes?” Tifa asked, eyes steady on her plate. “My shoes don’t fit anymore, either. I was worried about the winter…”

Brian leaned back in his chair, “The cobbler won’t be back until June, you know that. And your clothes are in good shape. I’m not about to indulge an adolescent prima donna.”

A new set of clothes for the girl would cost more than he could afford at the moment. Requests for his services had become few and far between as of late and any spare gil went to suppressing that hopelessness and emptiness gnawing at his heart. Some of his friends had begun to keep their distance and the women would whisper as he walked by. Brian knew of the rumors swirling throughout the village about the sad, alcoholic father and his strange ghost of a daughter who fights with the strength of a man. It was difficult for Brian to admit that the Lockhart family was no longer held in high esteem in Nibelheim.

Tifa’s eyes rose up from her plate. Those big crimson orbs with their gentle slope—like the ones he had looked into at the altar on his wedding day. He felt his eyebrows draw together in a frown and the girl quickly averted her gaze. Time heals all, they said. But the enormity of his loss would never leave him. The situation just seemed to get more hopeless as the years passed. Brian rose, taking his plate to the sink. Tifa’s eyes were on his back.

“I’ll be in the shop finishing Mr. Lambert’s order.”

Without another word, he descended into his lair.

… … …

The night stretched forward quietly. Tifa sat in a warm bath, eyes roaming over her changing body. Her legs were growing longer and her hips were beginning to flare out into a womanly shape. She sighed. Growing was causing quite a dilemma. If her mother was alive, she’d understand that she was growing and needed new clothes—her current ones were growing indecently short and tight. Mama used to wear beautiful dresses with pretty shoes that always matched. She had lovely white sandals, delicate block flats and feminine winter boots for the snow… oh. All of Lia’s clothes had gone untouched for years now. If Papa wouldn’t get her anything to wear, maybe she could borrow some from her parents’ closet.
Tifa dried off and changed, the hem of her nightgown now rising above her knees. Smiling, she crept into Papa’s room and headed straight to the closet, slowly flipping through the garments on wooden hangers. There were a dozen dresses for different seasons, a winter coat and even the beautiful, cream colored satin robe Mama had worn at bedtime. Each piece held dozens of memories and her chest tightened with emotion. At the back of the closet was a magnificent red robe. Gold thread spun images of oak leaves and intricate patterns along the trailing sleeves and hem. Without thinking, Tifa took it off of its hanger and slipped her arms through the silk sleeves. Without the fastening support of the obi, the kimono draped elegantly over her body, falling to the floor in smooth, red waves.

Turning to look in the mirror, she gasped as she saw the way the rich color of the garment brought out the unique hue of her eyes. Never before had she worn anything so beautiful. The girl walked and spun, relishing the softness of the silk on her skin.

Closing her eyes, Tifa swayed into the hallway with a smile. Her eyes flew open when she collided with her father’s chest.

The familiar smell of alcohol radiated from Brian and grazed over Tifa’s senses, automatically prompting her body to tremble. She took two steps back, eyes wide with alert when she saw the look in her father’s brown orbs. Brian stared at her with shock and anger, like her couldn’t decide what he was looking at. Tifa’s sharp eyes and years of training prepared her to dodge the arm that flew out to grab her wrist but she suppressed the instinct to dodge or block. Experience had taught her that it would only make him angrier.

“What the hell d’you think you’re doing?” he snapped. “Who said you could rummage through your mother’s things?” Tifa squirmed in his grasp.

“I j-just thought Mama’s clothes might—”

“Your own just weren’t enough for you, huh? Spoiled little ingrate!” he shoved the girl and she fell to the floor, kimono pooling on the hardwood.

*He doesn’t mean it. It’s just the alcohol. It makes him crazy. It’ll pass.* The chanting in her head did little to slow the pounding in her chest. The electric light flickered once overhead as Brian moved to stand over his daughter, boots caked with sawdust. His eyes were watery and fierce. Tifa knew how to defend herself, but she couldn’t defy her father! Zagan had told her that her father was hurting and struggled with thinking clearly—he couldn’t feel better without the temporary release of alcohol. Without her master’s guidance she would’ve been desperately confused. His instruction on how to center her mind allowed her to remain relatively calm in these situations.

“I’m not being ungrateful, my clothes don’t fit so well—”

“Don’t talk back to me!” Brian fist the collar of her night dress, jerking her to her feet and pulling her close enough to smell the whiskey on his breath. “You’ve become nothing but an expensive burden, you know that? Wearing Lia’s clothes won’t change that! You may look like your mother, but don’t think for a second that you have her charm or her heart! You’ll never be who your mother was!”

Deep, deep down, something broke. Rage kindled in Tifa’s eyes and she lifted her face to meet his. Energy tensed in her muscles and her fists were clenched at her sides. Her features crumpled into a grimace as she moved to escape his grasp with a practiced maneuver. Stepping back with her right foot, she drew back her right hand. She extended her fingers and locked them before snapping her arm forward to drive her fingers into Brian’s neck. Master had taught her how to bring a man to his knees in an instant by utilizing pressure points. Tifa knew how to channel her energy into her fingers with such force that she could burst arteries with deadly accuracy. But the strike against her father was only meant to startle him and it did the trick. He gasped, more from shock than from pain, and
the girl twisted from his slackened hold and flew down the stairway.

A blur of red and black, Tifa pushed through the front door and out into the night. Panting, her bare feet pounded the earth, kimono fluttering behind her. Tears in her eyes made the world fly by in a haze of shadows. The light of the harvest moon was enough to see by, but she didn’t need any direction. Tifa knew exactly where she was going. It hurt, it hurt. Every tangled thought clawed at the walls guarding her heart: walls that she had carefully constructed over years of guilt, rejection and loneliness. Quiet whimpers broke the stillness of the night as they tore unbidden from her throat.

_Run, run, run...Leave it behind._

Half of her knew that it was futile to run from the pain that she carried within her, but she pushed forward. Up the path, away from the village, onto the dirt road she ran. Tifa didn’t stop until the grass of the graveyard was soft and cool under her toes. Bare knees shaking, she stumbled over to her mother’s grave. Falling to the ground, she finally released the wave of emotion that had been stifled for much too long. Crying over her mother’s death was something Tifa did not allow herself to do. Mama had said that she’d always be with her and that certainly was true. Lia’s brave spirit flowed through her daughter’s veins. Tifa would watch the way her mother soothed away worries with a calming hand on her head. She was awed at the way Mama had chased away insecurities with her playful, gentle voice. The way she’d take Tifa’s hand whenever life got too hard always made her feel safe and loved. Even when the woman was sad, she somehow was able to put her feelings aside to make others happy. Tifa yearned desperately for that skill. Mama was a savior, she was an anchor.

She was ashamed of running out on her father. Normally, Papa’s comments were things she could stand with quiet acceptance, but not that last one. Papa’s moods were like a dangerous see-saw and it was becoming more and more difficult to predict when he’d lash out. Tifa never realized how much she wanted to be like her mother until it was apparent that her wish had not been granted. Mama always knew how to make pain go away—both pain of the body and pain of the mind. Tifa would smile at her father and try to talk with him; she’d keep his stomach full and his house clean, but nothing helped him escape his grief. She couldn’t understand how becoming inebriated was his only escape; he certainly never seemed happy when he drank. Why couldn’t he share his grief with her? Wouldn’t it be good for both of them? She wanted him to know that she missed her mother, too.

“Mama…”the girl whispered to the granite. “I don’t know what to do.”

She wiped the tears with her sleeve; the softness of the kimono was like mom’s palm on her cheek. The realization came upon her that for so long, she’d done her best to avoid thoughts of her mother. If she didn’t, she was afraid to end up like Papa. It was so hard to go through this alone and Tifa would give her very soul to know how to help her father heal. She missed his booming laugh, the rough feel of his mustache as he kissed her cheek, the way he’d walk the forest trails with her for hours on end. But as hard as she tried, nothing she did was right. She felt like a flower trying to bloom in the snow.

“I want to be happy. I want Papa to be happy, too. His heart is sick with sadness and nothing makes him better.”

The wind rustled through the trees and blew softly at her back. Dry leaves blew to and fro as the mountain wind tore them from their branches. Tifa pulled the kimono taut and the soft fabric made her remember the feel of Mama’s loving arms around her shoulders. She realized that she was still trembling as she ran her fingers over the engraving of the name on the cold granite. Drowning her own sorrow to appear strong for her father was hard work. Was it really worth it to keep trying? Dropping her hand to the grass, she closed her eyes and let old memories of her mother flood her mind. Hundreds of recollections ebbed and flowed as she searched the unearthed the thoughts she
had hid long ago. One particular piece of Lia’s advice rung loud and clear:

“Kindness is such a wonderful medicine...”

Cloud ran his fingers over the smooth metal of the pistol’s barrel. Mom kept it in the drawer of her bedside table, but he never knew about it until now. There was a faded cardboard box of bullets beside it. The night before, he had asked her about what his father did to make a living. She had offered him an awkward smile before explaining about his trade as a gunsmith and showing him the unloaded gun she had stashed away. It fascinated the boy to think that his father’s hands had crafted this very weapon—even to the beautiful design carved into the grip. The thought that his fingers were in the very spot where his father’s were so long ago made a strange feeling rise in his chest. Cloud had never seen a pistol before. The only guns he had ever seen were rifles that the men used for hunting for venison or the shotgun Mr. Ackerman kept for protecting his small flock of sheep from wolves that occasionally came down from the mountain. None of their guns were as fine as this little pistol and its delicate details.

In the few instances when they had a conversation where his father was mentioned, Mom would get that faraway look of fondness in her eyes and tell Cloud that he was a good man. But what did it take to be a good man? A good husband? His thoughts drifted to his neighbor, alone with her father in the quiet house. He had once envied the cheerful atmosphere of the Lockhart home, but now he pitied Tifa for having to return to there each afternoon. Although she liked to pretend everything was fine, Cloud was an intuitive friend. He knew what hid in the dark shadows of her eyes. He had always thought Mr. Lockhart had the things required to make a good husband and father, but the marks on Tifa’s body and her newfound timidity showed Cloud that maybe good men could turn into bad men.

He jumped when he heard the front door open, shutting the drawer with haste. Mom had said he was allowed to look at the gun since she didn’t keep it loaded, but there was still guilty, sinking feeling in his heart and he didn’t understand why.

“Cloud! Come here—you have mail!” Claudia said cheerfully, shutting the door against the chill of the autumn wind. A wide grin flashed on his face as he ran to meet her in the kitchen.

“It’s what you’ve been waiting for,” she said, ruffling his hair before handing him the fat brown envelope.

A few days after he had first seen Sephiroth on the television in the lobby of the inn, he had asked Mom for permission to send away for information about ShinRA, its army and SOLDIER program. After two long months of waiting, a response from ShinRA had arrived—his name printed in bold letters on the envelope. Eagerly, Cloud sat himself in his seat at the kitchen table and tore into it. Hours later, he remained at his place in the wooden chair, reading carefully through the stack of pamphlets and paperwork. His mother floated around the kitchen in her purple dress as she prepared supper for two.

“It says that I can apply for SOLDIER when I turn fourteen,” he grinned, prying his eyes from the text to watch his mother finish whipping the potato mash. “If I can take my exams soon and get my diploma, I can go by the end of next year!”

“You’d have to go to Midgar, then. That’s a big city, Cloud—a dangerous place. It’s not at all like Nibelheim.”

“I know. But I’ll be careful, it’ll be alright. All I need to do is get to this building,” he said, holding
up a pamphlet with a photo of ShinRA tower. Claudia glanced at the photo as she pulled a tray out of the oven.

“It’s huge! If you can find your way out of the Hansen’s corn fields, you can find your way to a giant skyscraper, I’m sure!” Mom said as she gave his freckled cheek a loving pinch.

Annoyed, Cloud rubbed the side of his face before once again setting his eyes upon the papers. He sifted through to find the application and thumbed through the stapled stack of forms. At the bottom of the last page, bolt print read: Application fee: 250 gil. Cloud drew in a breath before letting out a defeated sigh. The financial aspect of this adventure hadn’t occurred to him until now. He certainly couldn’t ask his mother to shell out that kind of cash, she worked hard enough to put dinner on the table each night. He was of age—he could earn the money for his application fee. And then he’d have to afford transport to get to Midgar, and that would be expensive. This was going to be quite a process and he hoped that he’d be able to earn the money by the time he turned fourteen in August.

“Clear off your papers, honey. You wouldn’t want to get food on them would you?”

He obeyed quickly and helped Claudia set the table, a contented little smile on his lips. He was going to do it! By this time next year, he’d be a SOLDIER for sure.
In and out, in and out—the repetitive passing of the needle through the fabric was soothing.

Claudia watched the thread move through the material with unseeing eyes. Lately, her heart was heavy with guilt. Cloud was maturing and starting to make ambitious leaps toward a future of his own, and it was her fault he was at such a disadvantage. Lately, the boy had been repeatedly inquiring about his father and Claudia could only bring herself to tell her son bits and pieces about her time with the man she had loved with a ferocity that she’d likely never feel again. After years of resisting the pull of her memories, now they were beginning to haunt her in the daylight and not just in the shadows of sleepless nights.

Aren had made her weak at the knees when she first saw him at a late summer fair in her home town. His crooked smile drew out her own sheepish grin. Their romance had been short and intense; the intoxication of her first love was an addicting thrill that only grew as the months went by. She was pregnant by January and was able to hide it from her parents until April. They turned her out after several arguments about shame and deception. Aren had held her until she felt safe, whispering gentle promises into her ear while gently rubbing her swelling belly. In the morning, they packed their things and headed south on one small wagon and Aren’s tired old horse.

Her pregnancy had been uncomfortable and they traveled slowly because of that, bouncing between small villages as they made their way through the desert. Aren was taking her to his childhood home on the southern plains where he was certain that his parents would be more than excited to have a grandchild, even one conceived outside the security of marriage. Claudia was sure that it was the stress of travelling in the desert heat that brought on her contractions, and Aren had clumsily helped her deliver Cloud into the world one August night. Their son had been so small and sick that they decided to halt their travel, taking refuge in a nearby town for the first year or so of Cloud’s life.

The money Aren made from selling and fixing firearms as well as other miscellaneous tools combined with the gig Claudia earned from her skills with the needle provided enough to get by, but not enough for a good doctor for the baby. Between the cost of feed for the horse and the expense of the mustard oil to help the baby breathe, they couldn’t even afford a marriage license. Two months after Cloud’s first birthday, Aren decided it was time to move. With a grin, he saddled up his horse, hitched the wagon, and smoothed his thumb over Cloud’s cheek as he promised Claudia they’d reach their destination in two weeks. They only made it three miles outside of town before disaster struck. Desert raiders were lying in wait for those too inexperienced to travel without the safety of a caravan. In an instant their wagon was surrounded, Claudia shielding the baby while Aren reached for his rifle. He was shot before his hand could pull the weapon from its hiding place. But the joke was on the bandits, for the couple had very little of value.

In and out, in and out. Claudia noticed her stitch work had become uneven as she recollected; the moisture welling in her eyes made it hard to focus.

They took the horse and left the young mother with little but the baby in her arms. She stumbled the distance back to the village and screamed for help. Aren clung to life for three days before succumbing to blood loss and infection and Claudia had never felt more lost in her life. She didn’t know Aren’s parents or in what village they lived on the southern plains. Even if she did, they had no responsibility to take care of their son’s illegitimate child and his mother. How would they know she wasn’t lying? Cloud didn’t have his father’s dark hair or deep brown eyes. Claudia sold Aren’s leather boots and gold necklace chain to pay off the wagon driver to take her and the baby wherever he was going with his wagon of goods. She ended up in the mountains.
There was no way to escape the guilt in her heart as she watched Cloud struggle as he grew, carrying the burden of her own stigma. She yearned to help him, but didn’t know how. Even if she felt she could move on and marry another man, it was impossible to hope to find a husband in this conservative environment. After befriending Lia, Claudia had hoped that Brian would be kind to Cloud and give him some sort of role model to look up to as the boy grew into a man. But he was not as kind as his pretty wife had been, and Cloud’s unlucky nature dealt him another blow.

Anxiety had plagued her heart ever since Cloud had started talking about joining ShinRA. Since she had arrived in Nibelheim, she had wished that the boy would grow up and leave this place to escape his stigma and finding a better life somewhere where people wouldn’t judge him. But now that it was actually happening, she was frightened. Cloud was her reason to put a smile on her face, her reason to rise up every morning and face the struggles of being a single mother, her reason to keep living. It was selfish and terrible, but Claudia wanted him to always stay by her side. She couldn’t face the loneliness of a life without meaning.

“Hello?” a gentle voice called out, accompanied by a knock on the front door. “Ms. Strife, are you there?”

Claudia rose, opening the door to see Tifa smiling shyly, grasping the loose knot of a large cloth bag. A thick strap held a bulging leather pack against the girl’s hip.

“Tifa! So nice to see you, today,” the knot in her chest loosening at the sight of Cloud’s little playmate, who wasn’t so little anymore. “Won’t you come in?”

Her young neighbor thanked her and quickly stepped into the house. Claudia looked her over, her seamstress’s eye automatically noticing the ill fit of Tifa’s frock and the way the frayed hem climbed towards her knees. The blonde offered Tifa a seat at the kitchen table and put the tea kettle on the stove to boil.

“What a pleasant surprise! What brings you here today, little lady?” Sitting herself in a chair opposite her guest, she leaned her cheek on her hand and smiled.

“Well, I was wondering if you could help me with something.” Tifa’s eyes didn’t rise to meet hers as she traced the grooves in the table with her finger. “I need some new clothes, but I don’t think my father is going to be able to have any made for me. Please, Ms. Strife…could I watch you work? Maybe I could learn how to make things for myself.”

Claudia was quiet for a moment, considering the girl’s words. What kind of man didn’t find a way to dress his daughter properly? Lia would be rolling in her grave to know that pretty little Tifa looked like a pauper in her shabby clothes. It was no secret amongst the village that all was not well in the Lockhart house, but Brian should have some sense of decency for the basic needs of his only child. If she could provide for Cloud on her meager earnings, surely the local carpenter made enough gil to supply adequate clothing. Claudia realized that Tifa must’ve taken her silence for reluctance when the girl spoke again, lifting her leather pack to the table.

“I-I don’t have any **gil**, but I brought you these as a form of payment,” Tifa said, producing a variety of home grown vegetables from the bag. “I’ll give you whatever I can—or I can help you with some chores to earn my keep. I just—I would really appreciate your help, if you’re willing.” Strands of her raven hair pooled on the table as she bent her head forward submissively.

“Oh, Tifa…” Claudia began, reaching across the table to place her hand on Tifa’s fingers. “Those are from your garden, aren’t they?” Tifa nodded. Claudia rose from her seat and began stuffing the produce back into the bag. “Keep these and make your Papa a nice dinner. Your presence here is enough payment for me.”
The girl’s head snapped up at Claudia’s words, and the woman shot her a toothy grin. Bowing her head back down, Tifa thanked the seamstress profusely.

Claudia smiled and nudged the cloth sack with her foot.

“What’s in here?”

“I brought the fighting clothes you made me. The pants are getting a bit short and I was wondering if there was any way to make them longer,” Tifa said, bending to remove said garments from the bag. “Also…I brought some of my mother’s clothes. Please, don’t tell my father! He doesn’t know—I just thought it might be less money if maybe I can make myself clothes out of the fabric of her old ones. That way, he wouldn’t recognize them and be upset.”

Claudia let the girl’s words sink in.

“Besides…if I could wear her clothes, I’d always have a little bit of her with me.”

… … …

It made Claudia happy to see Tifa leave her home more cheerful than when she came in. They had settled on a simple agreement: Claudia would help Tifa obtain some well-fitting clothes if she came by a few times a week to learn to sew and keep her company. Starved for female companionship, both ladies seemed excited about the prospect of spending time with one another.

However, the visit had given Claudia a disturbing glimpse into the state of the Lockhart home. Something was very wrong. Tifa barely seemed like the vivacious little girl who boldly prompted her son into endless hours of play. Her shyness and quiet presence had surprised the woman, and it made unease settle into her stomach. She had quickly calculated what she could afford to give the girl—settling on some socks and undergarments. She’d already decided to make the girl a bra of some sort to hold her tiny breasts in place and reduce the ache as they grew. Everything else would have to be made from the material of Lia’s clothing. As much as she’d love to supply the girl with everything she needed, Claudia couldn’t afford to waste a scrap of fabric.

When her son came home from school and went straight to his packet of ShinRA pamphlets, that familiar lump formed in her throat once again. Maybe Cloud would think about it and determine that the army just wasn’t a good fit form him. Although he had grown out of most of his childhood frailty, he was still small for his age and lacked the muscle and endurance required of a member of the military. Maybe he’d decide to marry Tifa and stay in the mountains. Claudia glanced at the boy, seated on the floor nearby. She shook her selfish thoughts away as she continued stitching.

“Tell me what you’ve read about the SOLDIER program, Cloud.”
How To Trust

It was early morning and the sun had just begun to rise. Tifa’s feet felt light as she hurried down the dirt path, Mama’s winter boots leaving fresh tracks in the light dusting of snow. It was the start of a new year and the girl had mustered up enough hope that positive changes could come her way. Master Zangan was waiting for her at his small cottage a quarter mile outside the village where she could escape the low temperature and mountain wind to continue her lessons indoors. Yesterday, he had said to get a good night’s sleep and come full of energy for a challenge this morning. She was certainly ready for whatever he had up his sleeve! It was funny how much a new set of well-fitting clothes could lift one’s spirit.

The past few months had been good to her. Although Papa still suffered from his drunken furies from time to time, Tifa was learning to predict these foul moods and make herself invisible when she needed to be. Seeing Claudia on most days was a wonderful blessing to her lonely heart. Cloud’s mother treated her as if she was her own child and the girl drank in the affection like a dry sponge. Over time, she was learning about more about the seamstress next door. The woman had endured many hard things and gained wisdom through those experiences to help Tifa through the hardships in her life. When she got older, she’d be sure to help someone in need and pay Claudia’s kindness forward. Tifa had recently learned how to backstitch and had begun working on a frock under Claudia’s supervision. Together, they had designed a pretty blue summer dress using the fabric from her old white pinafore and one of Mama’s old robes. Her mentor showed her how to construct the seams so that they could be taken out as she continued to grow. Tifa was learning a lot lately and it filled her with hope and purpose.

She called out to her Master when she entered his home, moving to remove her oversized knit sweater and boots.

“Leave them on,” the old man said. “We’re going out today.”

Tifa paused before retying her boot. “Where to?”

“Mt. Nibel,” he said with a level voice. “We will be practicing the skills of your body and the strength of your integrity.” Moving back out into the dry winter air, the pair made their way toward the mountain path. Zangan noticed the hesitance and haunted look in his apprentice’s eyes once the village was out of sight.

“The number of monsters coming down from the mountain has been increasing over the years; I assume it has to do with that mako reactor at the summit. Today we will be seeking them out. I want you to fight them.”

“Me? But Master—“

He held up a hand to silence her as he focused his attention towards the tree line. Rustling could be heard in the brittle underbrush and Tifa held her breath. Without warning, a growling creature stumbled out onto the path. The girl’s eyes widened at what once looked like it could’ve been a wolf, but now seemed to have strange growths protruding from its mako enhanced body. Saliva spilled from its mouth as it surveyed its prey, eyes glowing with energy and something unnatural.

Tifa whimpered and her teacher shifted into battle stance.

The girl was no stranger to wildlife; since she could remember, she had spent a great deal of time in nature and seen everything from bears to ground squirrels. But there was something very wrong with
this one. It staggered this way and that, approaching them instead of fleeing at the first sign of humans. Its fur was matted, dark and dirty, contrasting with the gleaming white of its teeth. Is this what mako overexposure did? Was ShinRA responsible for this?
The animal turned and crouched before quickly springing forward and lunging toward them. Before she could let the air out of her lungs to gasp, Zangan had reacted—twisting forward in a smooth round house kick, colliding his heel with the beast’s skull. It skidded against the hard earth with a yelp.

“Tifa! Finish it!”

She gulped. Never before had she fought any one besides her master or Cloud, and it was never to actually hurt them! How was she supposed to kill this thing? The creature slowly rose to its feet, locking its eyes on Tifa now that Zangan had retreated. Fists raised, the girl sent quick, uncertain glances in the man’s direction as she circled her snarling opponent. It lunged forward and she jumped to the side to dodge, barely avoiding the snapping jaws. She brought her elbow down upon the back of its head before regaining her stance, backing away again. Tifa tried to follow up with a side kick but missed, the monster was too quick this time.

The wind whipped flurries through the air and her hair flew wildly as she recovered her stance. For the first time, she looked into the creature’s eyes. The green, hollow orbs sent fright shivering through her frame. Snarling and bristled fur flooded her senses and it was just too much. She wasn’t skilled enough! She was going to die! The beast threw itself forward, aiming its teeth for her neck. Timing her high kick perfectly, Tifa crushed the animal’s jaw with her heel, sending it flying backwards into the snow dusted dirt. With a stifled whimper she turned to run towards the protection of her master. Thoroughly frightened, she stood behind him, watching the beast recover and stumble towards them once again. Tifa squeaked as the animal leapt at Zangan. She watched with fascination as the old man moved with incredible speed, thrusting out his arm to catch the animal’s throat in his hand. With one quick move, he crushed its wind pipe. Tifa forced herself to watch as the beast collapsed to the ground, gurgling and twitching before it fell still at last.

Master Zangan turned to face her slowly and she instantly recognized the disappointment on his face. “Do you trust me?”

She quickly met his pale eyes, “Oh yes, of course I do!”

“Then why did you run away when I told you to finish that monster off? Don’t you trust me to take care of you?” He held her still with his analytical gaze. Guilt flooded her chest and she quickly realized she didn’t have an answer.

“If we were fighting side by side, could I trust you to guard my back?”

The girl nodded without hesitation, “Of course!”

“What is in your heart that I should put my faith in it?”

Tifa fell silent for a moment, having to bite her tongue to keep from blurting out that she’d protect him because she loved him. She had been battling the guilt of betrayal to her father over the years, trying with all her might to deny the fact that her master had slowly replaced the role of father in her life. It was equally as difficult to admit that she was moving Claudia into the hole in her heart left by Lia’s death. The thought of it made her feel wretched. If she was unfaithful to the people who brought her into this world—how could anyone trust an ungrateful daughter like her? She hung her head.

“I don’t know, Master.”
He waved her forward and they continued up the mountain path, student two steps behind the teacher. Despite being prompted to be alert, it was hard for Tifa to take her eyes off her feet. The brown soil gradually turned into ashen gravel as they continued toward Mt. Nibel and it stirred up memories that had been swept into the dark corners of her mind. She shivered, obediently following in spite of the feeling that she shouldn’t be here. What was wrong with her? Why couldn’t she remember what it was that froze her insides with binding fear? Finding the memory that inspired such instinctual unease was like stumbling around in the dark.

The pair remained on the mountain until the wind picked up and threatened to leave frostbitten fingers and noses. For most of the encounters with monsters, Master had her fight alone. If she got overwhelmed or he felt she was in danger, her teacher would intervene. It was invigorating to have the chance to use her skills against real enemies and Zangan seemed pleased with her performance. Tifa felt the shredded pieces of her confidence begin to mend, even if she was a bit disturbed over the circumstances. One day, would she have to fight people like that? She was sure that she could never end the life of a human being, even if she was being attacked. It was hard enough to take the lives of the monsters that threatened to come down into the village. Hopefully, the path of her life would never lead her to make such a choice. Frozen to the bone and exhausted from hours of brawling, they descended.

“Misplaced trust can be deadly, Tifa. I wanted you to know what it felt like to trust someone with your life,” Master said and she nodded, reflecting on how much she had relied on his help that day. “Be careful whom you trust. Know a man’s heart before you make yourself vulnerable. Always be wise when placing your faith in people.”

Long after she had lain down to sleep that night, Master Zangan’s lecture continued to run through her head. He had taught her the qualities of trustworthy people; she knew to look for the company of those who were dependable and honest, keeping even small promises. Master had said to seek out people who put her at ease and would never hurt her. Papa hurt her sometimes—her body and her heart. Was he really someone she couldn’t trust? Her stomach churned when she thought of the years that had changed things between them and what a wicked child she was to even think that she couldn’t depend on her own father. He was just sick, that’s all. Papa was sick with sadness and alcohol. But Tifa had no excuses for herself. Did anyone see her as a trustworthy person? She decided in her heart that she’d try her best to make sure they did.

… … …

There was never a whole lot to eat in the winter. When he was younger and food was scarce, Mom used to fill up his belly by adding extra water to her soups or buying two day old bread from the tavern. For as long as he could remember, she’d toil away during the year, picking wild berries at sunrise to make jams for use during the winter months or preserving vegetables from their little garden in rows of glass jars. Cloud wasn’t a little boy any longer and his drive to provide for the ones he loved was growing as quickly as his body was. He wasn’t content to let Mom do all the work anymore. Besides, he needed to practice being a provider if he was ever going to be a husband. Three weeks ago, his mother taught him how to use his father’s pistol. She had taken him far into the woods to have him practice firing at stumps and tree trunks. Cloud wasn’t a natural marksman, but he was learning to aim well enough.

He was a mile outside the village, creeping along the thicket surrounding a clearing. The brush was high at his waist, snagging his clothing as he strained his ears for any sign of prey. Hunting rabbits was a difficult process, even if you had enough snow on the ground to track foot prints. Mom had been so thrilled when he had come home last week with a good size rabbit, since meat was an
expensive luxury in their lives: much more costly than the bullet used to kill it with. There was a
sudden rustle of branches as a rabbit startled near his feet, bolting out into the open. Cloud quickly
took aim and fired; dirt and snow jumping from the ground. The rabbit zig zagged back into the
cover of the thicket. Damn—that was a big one, too.

Cloud sighed and crouched into the thin branches of the barren blueberry bushes, waiting. He was
learning that hunting took patience, which was something he had plenty of. Long minutes stretched
by and the silence made his mind wander. The thoughts of military grandeur pulled his spirit away
from the mountains, constantly gnawing at his heart and tugging at his mind. Cloud didn’t think that
being alone scared him—after all, he had been ostracized as a bastard child for as long as he could
remember. But leaving everything familiar to move to another continent and work in the biggest city
on the planet made him uneasy to say the least. He’d be leaving his mother and Tifa behind. If he got
lost or hurt or rejected by ShinRA, he was on his own. The realization both thrilled and frightened
him.

For a long time, the only thing that moved was the condensation from his breath in the icy air.
Cloud’s blue eyes blinked against the stinging cold. To the left, something stirred and he locked his
sharp gaze upon it. The cottontail cautiously lingered near the edge of the bramble, nibbling the long
withered leaves. Slowly, he took aim, finger poised on the trigger. He had the power to take the
animal’s life in an instant: a strength built by repetition and tenacity.

What does it mean to be strong?

Visions of Sephiroth winning battles singlehandedly flashed in the boy’s mind. But strength, as he
was learning, didn’t rely only in the ability to overtake and kill. Mom had lectured him for half an
hour before having him try to use the gun, telling him that one should only use a powerful weapon if
they possessed a strong mind. As he turned these things over in his thoughts, Cloud had come to
understand that true strength lay in wisdom and the control to never abuse your power.

BANG! The shot rang out in the still air.

A tuft of fur flew and the rabbit disappeared back into the brush. Cloud followed the blood trail into
the dense thicket until he found where the large cottontail had collapsed. He picked it up by the ears
and grinned when he felt its weight. Mom would be so thrilled to have five pounds of meat to eat and
more fur that she could turn into muffs or collars. Hopefully, Tifa would come by to work on her
dress and Mom would make some rabbit stew for them to eat. Tifa would be so impressed, wouldn’t
she? He flipped the safety on his pistol before returning it to its holster.

For the first time in his young
life, Cloud was beginning to feel a sense of purpose and it was absolutely addicting.

Turning south, he pushed towards the village. There was firewood waiting to be cut for his one and
only friend.

… … …

Grief tore and tore at her chest as she stumbled forward, falling to her knees and scraping her tights.
Gravel snagged the black lace of her dress, but she pressed on and on up the gravel path. It would
be worth it—if she could just see Mama once more. She barely saw the bridge swaying in the wind
up ahead, tears turning the world into a wash of color. Howling gusts whipped ebony locks across
her face as she stepped forward, desperation overriding any innate fear of swaying on a flimsy
bridge high above the gorge. She heard Cloud’s voice, but the wind carried it away. Her foot
slipped when a gust rocked the bridge and she gasped in surprise as she slid off the edge. The wood
splintered under her fingernails and she looked up to see blue, blue eyes, wide with fear. His finger brushed hers as her grip faltered. She fell into the abyss, a blonde blur tumbling after her.

Tifa trembled and trembled once awareness washed over her. She lay unblinking upon her pillow, staring at the fibers of her cotton quilt. Unconsciously, fingers moved to brush over the scar on her head that hid beneath layers of her black tresses. Cloud had been there that day? No one had told her. Why hadn’t he said anything? Slowly, Tifa sat up. Fingers shaking, she gripped her blanket as her heart pounded against her rib cage. Cloud had fallen, too? Guilt rose up from her stomach and into her throat. She had killed her mother and never told her best friend about it. The trip to Mt. Nibel with Master Zangan must’ve stirred up long forgotten memories that revealed how her stupidity and selfishness had put Cloud in danger, too.

The winter sunrise cast an orange glow across her sheets and she drew her knees to her chest. Some friend she was. Already, her quiet vow to be a trustworthy person was being compromised by her fear to let the boy see the shameful things she’s done. Swallowing hard, Tifa had to tell him the truth about what had happened to Mama as soon as possible. She’d bottled it up so long and she had to let it out of her heart before she exploded. After all, it was his perception of her that mattered the most. Cloud was someone she could trust with her secrets. He deserved her honesty, even if it required her to be brave and face the possibility that he may not want to associate with someone carrying a burden like hers.

Quietly, she dressed in her gray tunic and descended the stairs in search of a quick breakfast. Once in the kitchen, she heard shuffling on the floorboards overhead. Papa was awake.

She instantly quieted the fear in her chest, reminding herself of her mission to do what she could to heal her father from the monsters inside his head. Taking a deep breath, she took two plates from the cupboard. Brian lumbered into the room, sluggish with sleep and that permanent air of melancholy. His thick brown hair was disheveled and a layer of stubble adorned his jawline. Papa slouched into a chair at the table and watched her with weary brown eyes.

“Good morning, Papa,” Tifa said, making sure to smile. It was safe to talk to Papa in the early mornings, she had learned. He was usually more patient and almost always responded when she talked to him. The girl poured him a mug of steaming tea.

“Mornin’.”

She forced herself to chatter happily at him as he sipped his tea like Mama used to do, seldom drawing a brief response from his lips. She crossed him to reach the breadbox as she told him about how her sewing skills were progressing so she’d be better able to mend any of his things. Tifa set a large helping of bread and butter in front of Brian before helping herself to her own. The man kept his eyes on his plate as Tifa told him that she had begun to use her skills and fight monsters with her teacher.

“At first, it was frightening. I didn’t know if I could kill something—even a monster that might endanger the village. But Master told me that it is either kill or be killed in this world,” Tifa paused as she took a bite of her bread, hoping her father would comment. When he didn’t, she swallowed and continued.

“I’ve finally mastered the Unsu kata. Master Zangan told me he was proud of me,” the girl said, shyly sweeping strands of thick hair over her shoulder. “Papa…are you proud of me?”

He father finally looked up to meet her gaze.
“Why would I be? Every time you wear that and go off with that man, you shame me.” His comment stole the brief flash of hope from her eyes. For a long time, Papa’s personality was sort of like flipping a coin. His two sides were very distinct: angry and abusive or quiet and sad. Tifa was starting to see the two sides blending together. Alcohol was no longer necessary to draw hurtful words from his mouth.

“But I’m learning so much,” she countered. “I’m learning to protect others. I want to help people.”

With a guffaw, he sat back in his chair and set his mug down with a loud thunk. His short, booming laugh almost made Papa sound like his old self.

“Ha! Help others? You should worry about yourself. You’re going to need all the help you can get to grow up to be anything more than a lonely old spinster like that woman next door you love so much.”

“I never meant to shame you. I love you and I just…” Swallowing the rising emotion in her throat, she cast her gaze downward. “I want you to be happy.”

“How can I be happy with my wife lying cold in the soil and my only daughter battling beasts like a man? It’s embarrassing, Tifa, can’t you see?”

She certainly didn’t see why learning to use her strength for the good of others was an undesirable trait in a person. Wouldn’t a potential spouse be impressed? Tifa reassured herself with the reminder that Cloud was always happy to hear about her skills and eager to learn what she had to teach. Papa just couldn’t see that. She flinched when his chair scraped backwards against the tile as he stood.

“Clean up the workshop before you go to your lesson. I’m going to fetch the newspaper,” Papa said as he moved into the foyer. Tifa frowned but rose from her seat to obey.

She waited until the front door clicked shut before making her way down into her father’s lair. As usual, there were almost a dozen glass bottles strewn haphazardly about. Dark ones, clear ones, thin ones, fat ones. Tifa had tidied up the woodshop countless times and every time the fragrant liquid would tempt her. She picked up a half empty bottle, attracted by the brightly colored berries on the label. This wasn’t Papa’s usual ginger beer or whiskey.

“Vodka…” she read aloud, turning the glass container in her hand. “Huckleberry flavor.”

There were other words on the bottle that were hard for her to read. She rose the bottle to her nose and took in the familiar alcoholic tingle, mixed with a fruity essence. Tifa remembered the burning of her throat the last time she was bold enough to actually try one of Papa’s drinks. Her long hair swung as she glanced around before tentatively raising the bottle to her lips. She took one small sip, then a larger one. Her eyes watered but she didn’t choke on the fire in her throat. Tifa wanted to know what it was about these beverages that Papa said quelled the hurt in his heart. She hoped that maybe, whatever it was would soothe her wounds as well. Feeling guilty, she carefully placed the bottle back on its perch on the counter. Picking up her broom, she quickly set to work.

Tifa had been distracted as she trained with Master Zangan that morning and was still in a fog when she left his cottage after noon. The mix of her father’s words and the few sips of alcohol made her unable to focus on the grace and precision required by her teacher and he watched her with a careful
eye. The sun was high in the winter sky as she made her way home, sweat freezing her bangs to her forehead in the brisk winter air. Did her martial arts training really disqualify her from being a desirable wife? Cloud didn’t let it keep him from being her friend and for that, she was grateful. But the fear that he’d reject her due to the blood on her hands wove tense knots in her chest that made it hard to breathe. Tifa decided to tell him the first chance she got. He would be out of school in a few hours—she’d make sure to intercept him on his way home.

Once inside she quickly bathed and wrapped her body in a thick cotton towel. Her bare feet padded onto the hardwood floor of the hall, its white walls cluttered with picture frames of different sizes. Something made Tifa linger there, taking the time to study each photograph. There was one of Mama and Papa smiling on their wedding day, the train of her magnificent gown spread wide at their feet. There were numerous photos of herself as a big eyed toddler, one of her father riding atop a handsome stallion, and even a print of Papa as a boy. She slowly followed the frames to the end of the hall.

The last photograph on the left made Tifa freeze. Encased in a thick mahogany frame was a picture of her mother as a girl, with what she assumed were her grandparents. In the background, the ocean sparkled in the sunlight. When she looked closely, Tifa could see the waves lapping at the shore like her mother had described to her dozens of times. She had never been able to meet her grandparents. Years ago, after they put her to bed, Tifa heard her parents having long discussions about ShinRA and Wutai, but she had been too young to understand. One spring day she had asked Mama about it. The woman had made a strange face before excusing herself to go inside, leaving Tifa alone in the garden.

Shortly before Mama died, Papa had told her that ShinRA had killed her grandparents, and the sadness made it hard for her mother to get better from her illness. Tifa wasn’t aware there was a war going on until a few years ago when Cloud had chattered excitedly about some soldier with a long name and even longer sword. The ShinRA Company gave them the power for appliances and such, which was a good thing. Memories of her mother always opting to use candles instead of the electric lamps made sense to her now. But if the cost of convenience was the lives of her extended family, Tifa couldn’t rationalize ShinRA as being anything but bad.

Carmine eyes fixated on the rolling waves in the photo. Oh, she longed to go there. Ever since her mother had first described the smell of the air and the feel of the sand, Tifa felt the call of the sea beckoning her. In her mind, it was a place of happiness so different from her gray world in the mountains.

Tifa donned her tan cotton dress with the black sash and sleeves, brushing her long dark locks over and over again until they were dry. Tifa fusssed and fusssed with her hair, unhappy with the way it hung limp and lifeless down her back. She wanted to look pretty for Cloud and these days it was hard to feel anything but awkward in her skin. When it was almost time for the school day to end, Tifa laced up her mother’s boots, wrapped a thick black shawl around her shoulders and strode out into the cold.

She was leaning against the white wall of the school house when the students began to emerge. Mrs. Nelson stood at the door, little Sarah in her arms. Tifa’s eyes locked on the sight of the brown haired baby with bright hazel eyes and rosy cheeks. She babbled happily, one chubby fist clutching her mother’s sweater. The school teacher smiled and kissed the crown of the baby’s head. For a reason she couldn’t explain, the sight squeezed her heart mercilessly. Familiar faces filed out into the flurries and Tifa immediately averted her gaze when Jim and Jason came into view, hoping they’d ignore her like they usually did these days. She wasn’t that lucky.

“Hey, Lockhart. Here to walk your boyfriend home from school?” Jason taunted, barely slowing his stride.
“She’s the boyfriend!” Jim snickered as he passed her by. “She’ll protect him with her manly fists.”

Tifa didn’t lift her head until their laughter died and they were out of sight. Flakes of snow stuck to her eye lashes as she looked around for the familiar shock of yellow hair and she smiled when he appeared, clutching his school books. Cloud’s pale eyes lit up with surprise when he noticed her there.

“Hey!” She shyly waved in his direction.

“Hey, Tifa!” He strode over to meet her. “You’re never here after school. What’s the occasion?”

Tifa smiled sweetly at her friend before nervously fidgeting her hands. She took a breath, knowing that if she didn’t get it out now, she might lose her nerve.

“What is it?” he asked, concern crowding his features. Tifa opened her mouth to speak, but the milling about of villagers in town square made her close it again.

“Could we go somewhere private?”

Cloud’s eyebrows knotted together in thought before he grinned and grabbed her mitten clad hand. “I know just the place!”
ShinRA mansion had been abandoned for decades. Thick layers of dust coated the surfaces and dense cobwebs hung in the dark corners. The large wooden door to the grand entranceway shut behind them with a resounding click. Tifa’s eyes were wide as she slowly took in her surroundings. Ever since she could remember, everyone had warned to stay away from this place, so she never gave it a second thought. Rumors of strange people and stranger things done by ShinRA behind the mansion’s closed doors were enough to keep people away.

“This place looks even bigger from the inside. It’s enormous,” she breathed. Cloud came up beside her, grin adorning his face. He set his school books down by the front door before heading to the large staircase in the foyer.

“Come on, you haven’t seen anything yet!”

She paused and looked at him in awe. “You’ve been in here before? You know we aren’t allowed to play in here.”

“Aw, it isn’t so bad. Just a little spooky,” the blonde said as he beckoned her toward him. He wrapped his fingers around hers and met her eyes with a reassuring smile. “Since when did you follow the rules so closely, anyway?”

That comment had been meant to make her smile, but instead it made that squeezing feeling return to her heart and she couldn’t find the strength to muster even a false smile. Unsure of exactly what he had done wrong, Cloud’s pale brows knitted together in apology. He gave her hand a quick squeeze, “Come on, I know the perfect spot to talk. You’re going to love it!”

Tifa let him lead her up the stairs and down a long, dusty corridor to a set of ornate wooden doors. He opened the doors to reveal a large dining room, complete with lacquered side boards, a large hutch and the longest table she had ever seen. A large chandelier hung above the table, cobwebs drooping from its arms in an eerie canopy. At the far end of the room, long, heavy drapes hung from brass rods, blocking out the natural light.

“Close your eyes,” Cloud said as his fingers slid from her palm and Tifa obeyed. She could hear him drawing back the blinds and could sense light hitting her closed eyelids. Cloud prompted her to look, and she opened her eyes wide.

“Ta da!” he grinned, and the sight before her drew an awed smile to her lips. The pane of each window stretched almost five meters high, revealing a spectacular view of the pine woods and the mountain beyond the tree line. Snowflakes danced and swirled in the wind, sprinkling a magical glow upon the scenery. Tifa didn’t realize she had stepped forward until she felt her fingers touching the thick glass.


He leaned against the dusty wallpaper and smiled at her, his eyes lingering on her thick eyelashes and the smooth skin of her cheek before roaming down to study the emerging curves of her waist and hips. His best friend was changing and it hadn’t escaped his attention. The boy snapped his gaze back to Tifa’s eyes when she turned to face him, an embarrassed pang reverberating in his chest. What is wrong with me? He was changing, too. The tenor of his voice had begun to slope into a cracking baritone and small muscles bulged from his slender arms. The roundness of his cheeks had long disappeared, while other parts of him were beginning to grow. Cloud constantly battled the
desire to be around Tifa. The incessant urges to feel her skin under his fingertips both confused and fascinated him. She smiled at him and his heart stopped. Cloud moved to sit on the floor and used his hand to swipe the dust away from the spot beside him. He patted the hardwood in invitation.

“This is the most private place I can think of. What did you want to tell me, Tifa?”

Slowly folding herself on the floor beside him, the girl kept her eyes on her lap, where her hands fidgeted awkwardly. There was so much she wanted to tell him: that his companionship made her life worthwhile, that she wanted to be in his life for as long as she lived, that she was a wretched thief of life and happiness that didn’t deserve his attention…

“There’s something about me that I’ve hid from you all this time. I was afraid you wouldn’t want to be my friend anymore if you knew,” Tifa began, closing her eyes. She could feel his sapphire ones studying her closely and she took a shaky breath to try and still her quivering confidence. “I was the one who made my Mama sick. She caught her flu from me when I was disobedient and didn’t wear my coat during that winter. Then it turned into pneumonia and she died, because I was foolish and defiant.”

Fat tears threatened to spill from carmine eyes but she kept her breathing steady. Despite the fear, it felt so good to shed the burden of this secret and to have someone willing to listen. She sniffed and drew her knees to her chest, bending forward to hide her nose and mouth.

“Now, my Papa is so sick from sadness. He drinks a lot and rarely ever spends time with me or his friends anymore. Sometimes he gets so mad that he—he yells, and—”

“He hurts you,” Cloud finished for her. “Doesn’t he?”

“I deserve it,” she whispered. “I took his wife away from him.”

Her face disappeared as she pressed her forehead to her knees, letting her black hair falling forward to obscure her further. Cloud’s face was creased with a deep frown and he felt the anger rise in his chest. He had suspected that Mr. Lockhart had been responsible for Tifa’s bruises but having his daughter believe that she deserved mistreatment fanned the flames of his newfound protective instinct.

“No! Tifa, listen to me.” He paused until she lifted her head just enough to peer at him from behind her knees. “Your mom got sick and died—that’s what happened. It’s no one’s fault. People die and the ones who are left behind are always thinking that if they did something different, maybe they could’ve saved them.”

A small whimper escaped from the girl and she hugged her legs tighter. The sound made Cloud’s heart bleed with empathy and he moved to put his arm around her shoulders, pulling her flush against his side. Resting his cheek on the crown of her head, he took a deep breath before speaking again.

“My father hadn’t been married to my mother when I was born. Mom’s family turned her out when they found out I was in her belly. She told me that he died helping us try to escape to a better life, and that there’s been guilt in her heart ever since.” Cloud stared out at the swirling snow. “But it doesn’t make sense. There was nothing she could’ve done—the bullet was what took his life, not her. The sickness took your Mom, not you.”

Tifa shifted to bury her head in his shoulder. “I n-never knew about your dad. That’s why people treat you different, isn’t it?”

“Yeah. I was always afraid that if you knew about my father, you wouldn’t want to be around me
“Oh, no—never,” she let out a brief chuckle between hitching breaths. “You’re my best friend.” Tifa inhaled slowly, keeping her face hidden in Cloud’s jacket. “People treat me differently now, too. It hurts…”

Cloud nodded against her head, before pulling back to look at her. Her eyes were glassy with moisture and the tear tracks on her cheeks glinted in the waning daylight.

“We aren’t alone. We’ve got each other, right? I want to be here for you.” He shifted slightly in order to face her more directly. “Don’t cry anymore, Tifa.”

His heart hammered and blood pounded through his body. Cloud just wanted to erase the heavy sadness he had sensed in her in the years since her mother’s passing. Slowly, he began to lean forward, unable to stop himself. What if he ruined everything? What if this one move broke the bond they had made over all of these years? It was too late. Cloud was drawn with a magnetic pull, gently pressing his lips to the side of her mouth. Tifa relaxed against the brief kiss before the boy broke away after a moment or two, face flushed with embarrassment and excitement. He began to apologize until he saw happiness glittering in her ruby eyes; it was only then he allowed a bashful smile to adorn his face. It was alright, she was blushing too. Tifa let out a nervous giggle and wiped her eyes, mirroring Cloud’s abashed grin. The way the grey light illuminated his blue, blue eyes made her remember that they were the only clear thing she recalled as she dangled off the wooden planks of that bridge.

“I remembered, Cloud.”

He cocked his head in question. “Hm?”

“I couldn’t remember things about that day for a long time. But in my dreams, I saw you. You were trying to help me before I fell off the bridge. Were you really there, Cloud?”

The initial confusion in his eyes melted away and his body stiffened. He had worked tirelessly to bury the memory of being too late to catch her hand, of falling into the chasm, of Tifa’s blood soaking the gravel. Cloud balled his fists.

“Tifa, I’m so sorry,” he hung his head with shame and fear that she would see the guilt in his eyes. “You weren’t thinking straight and I wasn’t fast enough. You got hurt because I was too slow to catch you when you fell. I was too ashamed to tell you—”

Cloud quieted when she took has face in her hands, smoothing her palms along his cheeks and encouraging him to look at her. She smiled that same gentle smile that that Lia used to give him and it made his heart beat thrum in his ears.

“My own actions led to my injury, not yours,” she whispered. Dropping her hands, she scrubbed at her eyes once again. “You should follow your own advice.”

The boy let out a weary chuckle and ran a nervous hand through his wayward spikes. Cloud dared to take a glance at Tifa, who was nervously collecting her hair over her shoulder as she looked out the window. He could see the weariness on her features; the scars on her heart from the years of holding onto her secrets and the hurts of her heart. Could she see his wounds as well? Watching his friend transform from her lively, brave self into an apprehensive loner had made it apparent to Cloud how destructive pain and guilt could be. He’d give anything to see joy return to her features. Nothing would please the boy more than taking her far away from all the things that cast shadows on her heart.
“Let’s make a deal,” he said, leaning to take her hands in his. “Let’s promise each other that if there’s something bothering one of us, we’ll talk to each other about it. No more secrets! Then we wouldn’t have to keep anything trapped inside.”

Tifa smiled at their joined hands, “I’d like that. All right, I promise.” She scooted to rest her hip against his. “Thank you, Cloud, for listening.”

Cloud moved to hold her close, wrapping his arms around her. It felt euphoric to release her fears and insecurities and finally have someone see her raw heart without rejection. Tifa snuggled into the older boy, quietly sighing in contentment. Life continuously snatched comforts out of her life, one by one, but she’d be alright as long as she had him by her side. Together they huddled, watching the snow fall as daylight was drowned out by the rapidly approaching dusk. Holding onto each other’s secrets, the pair hoped for the chance they’d come upon better days. With hands laced together, perhaps moving forward to face the future wouldn’t be so bleak.

… … …

The winter wind blew in sharp gusts that rattled the windows, but Tifa wasn’t cold at all. Heat and blood had rushed to her face and her body was tingling with giddiness. Cloud had kissed her—right on the lips! He had held her hand as he walked her home from ShinRA manor, a newfound confidence in his step. She kept her eyes on his back the entire way, wondering when it was that his shoulders had gotten so broad. Mind hazy with infatuation and hope, Tifa bypassed the sound of a glass bottle clinking in the basement and the shuffling sound of Papa’s feet on the woodshop’s steps. She floated to her room, sighing and smiling until her cheeks hurt. She was free! Telling Cloud her darkest secret had allowed a layer of gloom to shed from her heart. For the first time in many years, joy came flowing from deep inside her. Tifa committed the comforting feel of his lips on hers to memory as she skipped into her room to lay her jacket on her bed.

Maybe, just maybe, she wouldn’t end up as an old maid. Her body pulsed with energy at the thought of Cloud asking to be her husband and the thought of the peace of knowing that she wouldn’t have to live out the rest of her life under Papa’s thumb in this sad little house. She spun and swayed, skirt puffing out around her as she hummed a happy little tune Mama used to play on the piano. Tifa drifted over to rest her fingers on the ivory keys, ignoring the small layer of dust. It had been so long since she had even touched Mama’s piano. Every time she thought about practicing, stabs of guilt and pain and sadness in her chest made her turn away. But it was different this time—no more guilt. With Cloud’s help, she could learn to put her sadness behind her. If she learned how to love herself again, maybe she could figure out how to help Papa, too.

Tifa could hear her father beginning to climb the stairs, muttering angrily under his breath. Brian’s footsteps had begun to close in on her bedroom and all of her senses were on edge. She knew by the sound of his gait and the angry slurs escaping his mouth that he was coming for her in one of his usual drunken furies.

“Tifa…” he growled.

Instinct told her to take shelter in her usual spot in her wardrobe—he hadn’t yet found her in there. Torn between the need to protect herself and the desire to bring healing to her father, she hesitated. Those hardest to love need it most. The soothing sound of the piano soothed Mama when she was upset. Maybe it would soothe Papa, too. Boldly, she pressed down on the keys and the first cord to that jaunty little song sounded in the room. After all this time, her fingers still knew exactly where to go. Tifa quickly flew into the cheerful melody, concentrating hard as she pulled the notes from deep in her memory. Closing her eyes, she prayed and prayed that Papa wouldn’t hurt her and the
plunking of white and black beneath her fingers would chase away the hurt and rage in his heart. She listened for the sound of the door knob turning, but the door never opened. Tifa didn’t realize that her fingers were shaking until she finished the song and the sound of the final note died into silence.

Had the sound of the piano really kept him away? Nervous that the sudden silence would rouse his anger once again, she grabbed the music book of sheet music on the stand and flipped through it for any familiar piece. The well-worn page of Conservati Fedele, Mama’s favorite aria, caught her eye and Tifa set to work at once. Her tentative keystrokes became more confident as she eased into the familiar piece; a steady tune with varying tempo that she hoped was soothing enough to lull her father out of his foul temper. Almost ten minutes later, Tifa ceased playing and held her breath. Her thick socks muffled any sound as she crept to her bedroom door, cracking it open to peer into the darkness. She stepped cautiously into the quiet corridor, ready for hostile words but was met with stillness instead.

The door to Papa’s room was ajar. Tifa peeked into the doorway just enough to see the bottoms of her father’s boots suspended above the floor where he lay face down on his bed. It worked—at least, for now. Whether she had lulled him to sleep or simply subdued his anger, she didn’t know. A tiny sliver of hope bubbled up to the surface of her heart. It would be a journey to learn to heal her father, but at least she knew where to start.

... … …

Mountain winters died a slow death as spring breathed life back into the residents of Nibelheim. Long after the snow had melted, the memory of frost and deadly low temperatures lived on and complaints regarding summer’s heat were rarely heard.

The fumes from the paint made Cloud’s lungs constrict, but he dipped the brush in the bucket again anyway. It was abnormally hot for early June and the wet paint on his hands made it hard to wipe away the sweat that occasionally dripped into his eyes. He swiped at the bridge of his nose with the back of his arm.

Making money was hard work, but he was full of enough determination to carry him through even the toughest chores. In two days, he was due to take his exams at school to earn his diploma—one of two things he needed to carry out his plan. The other requirement was enough funds to get him to the coast, across the sea and to the east continent. Cloud had already earned a hefty sum of gil from doing odd jobs around the village, which he stored in the wine box under his bed with his news clippings of Sephiroth.

Jason had been hired to work with a wheat farmer in the southern plains; his family’s agricultural background and his own savviness at crop rearing landed him a perfect way to make a living. Cloud thought that he wasn’t really savvy at anything and swallowed the jealousy in his throat when he mused about how easy it was for bad people to fall into good things. Instead, he chose to focus on the positive side of all this: another one of his bullies had left for good and his departure had left his parents in need of an extra hand around their little farm. His father had been so desperate for a farm hand that he didn’t care that help came in the form of the blonde haired misfit. The Hansen’s farm was home to two horses, two mules, and four dairy cows. Cloud spent most of his time mucking out the stable and baling hay—two jobs that helped him gain muscle mass as well as the funds for a ticket out of Nibelheim.

White washing Mr. Hagen’s fence was taking too long. Cloud looked at the sun and knew he was expected at the farm in an hour or so. With vigor, he quickened the pace of his brush strokes. Mom said that it wouldn’t be easy to get out of this place when he told her about his plan and he supposed she knew more than anyone what it was like to leave everything you knew behind as a teenager.
Guilt bloomed in his heart when he thought about leaving Tifa in the gloom of her father’s house while he sought out a status of glory in SOLDIER. But it was only temporary; he’d come back for her.

Somewhere over the past few months, Cloud had come to realize that he was in love. He wasn’t sure how it happened or when his devotion towards Tifa changed from friendship into something more. He had resumed his old ritual of sitting at his window seat as he studied, listening to Tifa play the piano and thinking about how lovely it must look to watch her graceful hands glide over the keys. He had noticed that the raven haired beauty had been on his mind constantly, everything from her gentle voice to the softness of her newly forming curves. As a child, Cloud had read dozens of books and stories about knights and heroes and warriors who would gallantly sweep the girl off her feet after saving the day—but none of them ever explained how one actually fell in love, or what to do once you realized that you were.

And so, the boy floundered, trying to sort out his feelings and actions to show Tifa that he cared. That brief swell of bravery (and instinct?) that brought his lips to hers all those months ago had evaded him ever since and Cloud was frustrated with his own cowardice. Since then, things had changed between them for the better and seeing light return to Tifa’s eyes made a sense of relief and pride wash over him. She came to meet him after school often since that day. He held her hand as they walked in the groves and in the evenings they’d climb the water tower to sit and watch the stars. But their time together had been slowly dwindling as Cloud took more odd jobs around town to bolster his savings.

At the end of those stories in the books of his childhood, the hero would marry his damsel and ride off into the sunset. If he could, he’d marry her the moment she turned fifteen and take her to see the ocean like she wanted. Cloud would do whatever he could to take her as his own and make her feel safe and wanted. But getting her father’s permission to marry her would be a huge hurdle that Cloud wasn’t sure he could overcome. He wasn’t sure if there was anything he could do to change Mr. Lockhart’s perception of him—but if becoming the strongest warrior in the country didn’t do it, nothing would. If he passed his exams, he’d be leaving for Midgar as soon as he had the money. His stomach dropped to his feet when he realized that he’d eventually have to tell Tifa that he was leaving her behind.

“\There you are!” The blonde’s head snapped upward at the sound of the sing-song voice. The subject of his thoughts bounced toward him in her blue summer dress and a faded apron. “Your mom said you were here.”

Without hesitation, she picked up a spare brush near the paint bucket and began to help him white wash the wooden planks.

“Careful, you’ll get paint on your dress. You worked on it all winter.”

“Eh, I’ll be careful,” she said, brushing off his warning. “It’ll be worth it if I get to talk to you! You’ve been so busy that I haven’t been able to ask you about your job on the farm.”

“It’s not too bad, though I’m sure you wouldn’t want to smell me after cleaning out the stable,” Cloud winked.

“I hope you make enough gil to justify smelling like cow pies!” Tifa giggled as she smoothed her paint brush delicately over the wood, eyes bright with happiness and the sun.

“It’s not much but it’s enough to make losing all of my free time worthwhile,” he said, stomach flipping in anxiety at her radiant smile. Wasn’t he the one who prompted their promise not to keep secrets? It had been so long since he had seen an uninhibited smile on her face and something died inside him at the thought of making it disappear by telling her his plan, even if it would end up
helping her in the end.

“I’m sure all that work is what gave you muscles like that,” Tifa said, nodding towards the modest swell of his bicep. “Soon you’ll be stronger than Sephiroth!” A small smile tugged at the corners of his mouth.

The girl knew of his long lived fascination with SOLDIER since the first time they had sparred in her backyard. Cloud had been determined to learn how to fight and had gone on and on about his silver haired hero, expressing his desire to be a first class SOLDIER. At the time, Tifa could only raise a skeptical eyebrow at his lofty goals. For someone aspiring to be a warrior, Cloud certainly didn’t seem to have a natural talent for fighting and struggled to learn even some of the basics of hand to hand combat. Often times, the boy would grow frustrated when he failed to grasp Tifa’s gentle instruction. Losing over and over again to a girl who far surpassed his cunning and skill was too much for him sometimes, it seemed. When she smiled and suggested they take a break from sparring for a while, Cloud agreed. That had been over a year ago. Newfound shyness prevented her from asking him again, though she couldn’t pinpoint the reason for it. Besides, Master Zangan had been away on a trip to visit one of his pupils in the south and wouldn’t be back until the end of the summer. She’d embarrass herself if she fought Cloud now that she was getting a bit rusty.

“Hey, I know you’ve been busy, but would you like to take a walk in the woods with me?” Tifa asked, suddenly unable to take her eyes off of the wooden boards. “I-I mean, we used to do it all the time and I thought it’d be nice since we haven’t had much time together.”

Cloud paused for too long, and she felt blood rush to her cheeks. She snuck a peek at her friend as he fixed the fence with a pensive stare.

“I can’t—Mr. Hansen is expecting me and then I’ve got to study for my exams.” He could see her disappointment in the slight drooping of her shoulders out of the corner of his eye. “But I’d like it if you could come over for supper.”

“Oh, alright!” she agreed, spirit renewed. “If I start now, I can make a dessert!”

Cloud grinned. She made the best desserts. “Looking forward to it!”

They stood back to admire their finished paint job. Cloud gathered the brushes and picked up the bucket to return to his employer. Tifa carefully wiped her hands on her apron and poked Cloud right on the nose.

“You’ve got paint on your face!” She tittered as she turned to run back towards the village square.

… … …

There was a handful of money in her pocket that Papa had given her for groceries. It wasn’t much, but over the years Tifa learned how to stretch each gil in her budget to the limit. With her trusty satchel, she headed into the market. A week’s worth of bread, a pat of butter and a five pound sack of rice would probably cost her thirty gil, leaving only forty left to haggle for some eggs, flour and fresh vegetables. She had to be thrifty—she’d need a few gil left over to bake an apple pie to bring over to Cloud’s house later. After acquiring her groceries and ending up with three gil, Tifa made her way to the cart of shiny red apples. She had to be sure to pick the biggest ones since she only had enough money for six.

As Tifa turned a piece of fruit over in her hand, she felt eyes upon her. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw two ladies whispering to each other near the water tower, holding their baskets of goods. It was soon apparent that they didn’t think she could hear their hushed conversation.
“There she is, the Lockhart girl. She’s become quite a rare sight in the market, hasn’t she?”

“Yes, since her mother died she’s been hidden away in that house or running around with the Strife boy. Her father should’ve remarried. Then maybe he wouldn’t lock himself away like that and the girl would have someone to look up to.”

Tifa froze where she stood, fingers numb around the apple’s waxy skin. A long time ago, she’d walk on the cobblestone street, holding her mother’s hand and smiling at everyone who passed by with a ‘how do you do’ as Mama had taught her to. She pulled foggy memories of flouncing around in lacy little dresses from the corners of her mind. The ladies in the square would coo and fuss over her until she bashfully pressed her face into her mother’s leg. Tifa remembered Papa’s hand in hers as he rubbed her little head. Where had it all gone wrong?

“She needs a mother figure to remind her how a young lady acts. I’ve seen her running around in pants when she goes to meet that Zangan fellow.”

Shame washed over her body in a violent wave. These people used to be her friends, but now it felt foolish to trust them. Now that she thought about it, they’d treated her differently since Mama died. At first she thought it was just because they didn’t know what to say to a grieving child but things had never been the same since. Had they ever cared for her or was it simply her mother that they had cherished?

Standing there in her homemade dress and shabby apron, she felt like a stranger in her own skin. The memories of better days made her feel suddenly lost and frightened. Tifa had been so focused on simply surviving after losing Lia that she hadn’t realized the slow descent of the Lockhart family’s reputation until it was too late. Perhaps she had simply been too young to understand. Years ago, little Tifa was met with friendliness and smiles everywhere she went. Now, she was met with whispers and stares. Was this how Cloud and his mother always felt? Once she was the beloved talk of the town, today she was a reclusive mystery, in love with the village outcast.

“S-six, please,” Tifa said, holding out her gil to the vendor. Heart bleeding, she hurried home to hide away from judgmental eyes.

… … …

Cloud was so nervous. He had taken his final exams at the schoolhouse that morning and now sat along the back wall of the classroom, watching Mrs. Nelson grade the stack of papers. Knee bouncing in quiet anticipation, he watched the teacher’s face carefully, grimacing every time she paused and wrote something down. He had to pass, he just had to. If he didn’t, he’d have to wait an entire year to retake his exams and he didn’t have time for that! Cloud had always been a good student. He had started school with more advanced reading and arithmetic skills than his peers, thanks to Mom’s constant attention and tutelage when he was small. Frequently ill and lethargic in his early years, Cloud usually only had the energy to sit there and learn to read and look at his picture books. It seemed that at least in a small way, his frail disposition had given him an advantage.

Estimating his projected income and factoring in his savings, Cloud estimated that he could afford to leave for Midgar sometime in September. That gave him about three months to make as much money as he could and work up the courage to tell Tifa about his plan. Every time he thought about her smile fading and eyes widening with shock and despair at his news, his stomach would drop to his feet. He had played out the scenario over and over again in his head but it had ended poorly each time. Trying to find a gentle way to break this to her was so difficult! But he’d figure out how to do that out later. Right now, he had bigger riddles to solve.

Cloud couldn’t remember ever residing in a place that wasn’t Nibelheim and had very little
knowledge of life outside of the little mountain village. According to the world map he’d seen at school, Midgar was so far off to the east that it was on an entirely different continent! It made him dizzy to think about how about travelling halfway around the world alone and a small panic had set in when he realized that he had no idea how to get to there. When he had asked his mother, she told him that he’d probably have to take a boat once he got to the coast, but had no idea what ports housed passenger ships to the eastern continent. He wasn’t even sure how to get to the coast line. Sighing, he rested the back of his head against the wall.

When Mrs. Nelson cleared her throat, Cloud’s eyes rose to look towards her desk. Smiling, she beckoned him forward with her hand. He jumped to his feet and rushed to her side, hoping and hoping that her bright countenance meant he had passed.

“You were a good pupil Cloud, I’m proud of you.” The young woman blew the ink dry on a thick sheet of glossy paper before handing it to him. “Congratulations, Mr. Strife. It’s been a pleasure having you as a student.”

... 

A/N: The concert aria Conservati Fedele referenced in this chapter is the work of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart.
"Aren! Come, look! He’s walking!"

She had set a blanket out on the arid earth beside the wagon for the baby to play on. The baby crawled around, babbling to himself as she sat next to him and continued her needlework. Claudia grinned when her son rose with shaky knees to take a clumsy step toward her. Reacting to his mother’s excited shouts and happy face, Cloud’s nose briefly crinkled as he formed his own smile. Usually subdued and quiet, Cloud was having a good day. At eleven months old, Claudia was relieved that he was finally nursing well and had the energy to play and grow. His little hand grazed hers before he toppled forward into Mom’s waiting arms.

“Oops! That’s okay. Try again!” She stood and set Cloud on his bare feet once again, holding his tiny arms for support. Aren appeared around the rear of the wagon.

“He’s walkin’? Well I’ll be!” the brunette laughed, squatting a few feet away and holding his arms out. “Come on! Come to Dad!”

The toddler’s big blue eyes flashed with delight at the sound of his father’s deep voice. Cloud cooed as he ambled in Aren’s direction, leaving the support of Mom’s hands and smiling at the silliness in Dad’s voice as he encouraged the baby forward. The man laughed heartily when his son collapsed into his arms, ruffling the toddler’s feathery blonde hair and tossing him up to catch him again. Cloud laughed and rubbed his little fingers over the dark stubble on Aren’s jaw.

“See, he’ll be just fine, Claudia. I know it.”

She had smiled wide as the dry, desert air kissed her skin.

“Mom?”

Her hand was frozen on the lid of the jar as she snapped out of her reverie. The counter was littered with fresh carrots and potatoes from the garden and Claudia was hard at work preserving the food in jars for the winter. Her heart sunk when she realized that she’d need to store less food now that her son was leaving soon.

“Hm?”

Cloud placed another bucket of potatoes on the counter beside her. “I rinsed ‘em already. Do you need more water to boil?”

“Yeah. Thanks, hun.”

She was trying to be positive, she really was. Since she had first laid her eyes on her newborn, Claudia knew that one day, he’d leave her side. Children grew up, that was the way of the world. Years of watching Cloud struggle to grow physically and socially had fanned the flames of any protective behavior normal for a mother. She’d never forget those long nights where she sat with her wheezing toddler, rubbing his chest and back with mustard oil or making him sip ginger water as he gasped for air in her arms. Didn’t he still need her love and protection? She couldn’t give that to him if he was an entire continent away from the only home he’d ever come to know.

Cloud’s fascination with SOLDIER had only grown with time, much to Claudia’s disappointment. When the boy’s eyes first began to sparkle at the mention of Sephiroth, she had hoped it was just a childhood captivation that would fade as reality and maturity drew his attention to his future. The
lonesome mother had prayed that the boy would make a life for himself nearby, so she could visit him often. He was all she had left in this life. She tried to summon memories of how she had felt when she left her home to build her life with Aren. After the initial heartache of being turned out by her parents, Claudia had chosen to step forward with a smile on her face and hope in her heart. Escaping her old routine to find a new one was invigorating. She learned to live in step to the rhythm of her baby’s needs and her lover’s uplifting spirits as they slowly traveled south, anticipating their eventual marriage and a simple life together with little Cloud.

Just because her journey away from home had ended in tragedy, didn’t mean that Cloud’s would. He’d be alright, just like Aren said. She had to let go.

“I want to help you get some work done around here before I go. I promise I’ll clean the chimney the best I can. I’ll clean the gutters, too.”

She nodded in thanks as she sliced carrots to appropriate size. “Have you decided when you’re leaving?”

“Before winter really sets in, I hope. It’s almost October and you know how early we get snow. I figure it’d be best to get off the mountain while the trails are clear, right?”

Cloud looked to her face and she tried hard to smile. There had been such a bounce in his step and twinkle in his eye since he had brought his diploma home, firmly set in his ambitions to depart for Midgar. For the first time since his birth, her son was making decisions about his future all on his own. The culture in the isolation of the mountains was a little different than it had been in her hometown. Here in Nibelheim, marriage arrangements are usually made between two sets of parents in the best interest of their enamored children, who are old enough to wed at fifteen. The teens are treated as young adults and left to navigate the ups and downs of newly wed life with little interference from their parents. Claudia’s mother and father had never expected her to marry until her early twenties or so, but she supposed the harsh conditions of life in the mountains left little time to waste when it came to having a family. She had learned quickly that little fingers were quite helpful at assisting her with daily chores. It was hard for her to look at her bright eyed son and see an adult, but Cloud seemed quite certain of himself in his maturity.

“So, you have your whole plan mapped out? You know how to get there?” Claudia averted her gaze as she lit the burner to heat the water to a boil.

“Kind of, I just have to iron out the details.” The boy retrieved his collection of ShinRA paperwork from atop the sideboard and plopped into a seat at the kitchen table. “I also need you to sign something, if you wouldn’t mind.”

“Sure.” Wiping her hands dry on her apron, she moved to stand behind her son. “What is it?” Cloud flipped through miscellaneous documents, pamphlets and booklets before pulling out a white form. He pulled a pen from his pocket before laying the paper flat on the wooden surface.

“It says that if I’m under seventeen, I need a parent to sign my application form.” He pointed to the provided area that awaited Claudia’s signature. “Why do they ask for that?”

She paused in thought for a moment before taking the pen from his hand.

“In other places, you aren’t considered an adult until seventeen or so. I guess until then, they need an adult’s permission to send their child into a dangerous job.”

“But wouldn’t parents be proud to see their kids go to work for such a big company? I mean, all the
risks are listed in the paperwork they sent. Don’t they feel like their kids are ready to deal with those things after considering them?"

Claudia chuckled and rubbed his messy head before giving his tiny ponytail a teasing tug. “Not every child is as studious and serious as you, Cloud.”

With a deceptively bright smile and a heavy heart, she signed her name on the dotted line.

… … …

It was a beautiful day and he didn’t intend to waste it. Lately, miscellaneous household duties and his work in the stables usually kept him so busy that it was hard to spend quality time with his best friend. It was imperative that he store away as much gil as possible for his upcoming adventure, but he feared that the girl would somehow get the impression that he was avoiding her. Guilt pooled in his belly. If he wasn’t such a coward, he wouldn’t have risked exposing Tifa to such thoughts. Cloud saw the damage that Mr. Lockhart had dealt to her confidence. Wasn’t it his job as her companion to protect her from and further harm, emotional and otherwise?

Dot wasn’t in her stall when he went to clean the barn that morning, meaning Mr. Lockhart must’ve borrowed her to pull his wagon out of town. Cloud supposed it was just about that time of year when the man was gone often, felling timber miles outside the village to leave lumber worthy trees close by to cut during the winter months when it was hard to navigate the sleigh through the snowy landscape. Knowing that Tifa was alone, it was safe to pay her a visit. Cloud swallowed hard before knocking on her front door. He hoped she had time to spare, for there was another matter in his heart that he needed to tell her. Tifa needed to know how he felt about her: that he couldn’t live without her, that he thought of her constantly, and that he wanted to marry her one day. He needed her to know that he loved her.

The boy inhaled slowly when she opened the door, silken hair flowing like a dark river over her shoulder. The breath only left his lungs when she smiled.

“Hey!” she chirped, eyes sparkling. “Want to come in?”

“Actually, I was wondering if you wanted to go for a walk in the woods like we used to. It doesn’t have to be too long,” he said, shyly averting his face. “The wind has been really gusting, so we can come back if you get too cold.”

“Oh, yes please!” she brought her hands together with excitement. “I’ve been stuck tending the garden forever.”

Tifa thanked him and fetched her shoes before she followed him out of the village and the pair disappeared into the glades. He could see her happiness in the lightness of her gait and smiled when she skipped ahead of him. The shelter of the forest gave them room to breathe. They had left most of their burdens in the village and would once again bear them when they returned home, but for now the pair felt weightless as they played on the well-worn trails. For the first time in a long time, Cloud felt like a giddy child as he romped beside her. Tifa merrily circled through the leaves and he noticed the tender warmth in her eyes, cinnamon colored against the grey of the autumn sky. His heart beat in his throat. It was funny how he was so full of determination to leave Nibelheim and make his dream come true until he saw her. One look at the trust in her eyes and the nerve to leave began to slowly leave him, like the sands in an hour glass.

They panted and laughed as they chased and teased one another, throwing sweet gum seed pods or pinecones. Their hearts thumped as they ran through the groves. When they came to a lush clearing, they stopped to breath, huffing for air as they sported involuntary grins. Oak and maple trees were
sparse amongst the sea of evergreen lining the meadow, and the wind sent leaves of yellow, red and orange drifting over the tall grass like snow. Tifa calmed her breathing and chose a place to sit amongst bare dandelion stalks. Cloud followed without thought.

“I feel like it’s been forever since we’ve had this much fun,” she said, slowly reaching out to collect brightly colored leaves.

“It has been forever. I’m sorry I’ve been so busy.”

She shook her head. “It’s not your fault. We’re growing up, Cloud. We have so many things we have to do that it doesn’t leave a lot of time to goof off.”

They shared a comfortable silence for a few minutes. Cloud watched as Tifa began to tie the stems of the leaves together, forming a colorful loop. The wind whispered through her hair and he stole a glance at her delicate face. The thickness of her dark eyelashes against her porcelain cheeks made a foreign feeling swell in his chest.

“There!” Tifa grinned, placing the bushy arrangement of foliage on her head. “How do I look?”

Elbow perched on his knee, Cloud turned to observe her crown with a smirk. He knew she was waiting for him to tell her how silly she looked, but he couldn’t disagree more. Her cheeks were dusted pink by autumn’s chill and her rosy lips were a delicate contrast against the creamy color of her skin. He wondered what it would be like to kiss them…

“You look beautiful.”

The words escaped his mouth before he could rein his heart in and his eyes immediately flew to his boots. Cloud’s ears took on a pink hue as he inwardly cringed at the silence between them.

“Thank you,” she said quietly and turned her head to look at him. “You really think that?”

He took a deep breath; it was now or never.

“Yes, I do…” The blood drained out of his limbs and he slowly placed a leaden hand on her shoulder. “I think you’re the most beautiful girl in the whole world.”

She blushed, then. Unable to hide her embarrassment and giddiness, she locked eyes with him. “How do you know that? You’ve never been outside of little ol’ Nibelheim!”

“I don’t need to go anywhere to know that there’s no one like you, Tifa.” Cloud tried to keep himself from trembling as he wrapped his arm around her shoulder and pulled her close. “You are beautiful on the outside and the inside. You’re perfect.”

He didn’t feel as if he had full control—his body was acting of its own accord. Her crimson eyes were on him as he closed the space between them, gently pressing his lips to hers in a hesitant kiss. Last time, he had only mustered the courage to plant a quick peck on the side of her mouth. This time, it was different. Cloud kissed her slowly and deliberately, savoring the feeling of her soft lips. He tried to lean back and part their mouths to analyze her reaction to his boldness, but Tifa wouldn’t let him. His eyes flew open in surprise when she cupped her hands on the back of his head to gently pull him back again and pressed her lips to his.

The girl leaned into him and Cloud let his lashes flutter closed, savoring the contact and the excitement of sharing the something so intimate and new. Tifa let them part when she ran out of air. Abashed, she gazed into his blue eyes, face flushed from embarrassment and the rush of emotion. This girl was so precious to him and Cloud couldn’t believe that he was leaving her behind. If all
went according to plan, he could come back as a SOLDIER with enough credentials to convince Mr. Lockhart to let him take her away from all the sadness her mother had left behind. He hoped she’d be alright without him. Would her ornery father fill her head with lies so she wouldn’t wait for him? He felt a bright future in the clasp of their hands as she moved to intertwine her fingers with his. What if he couldn’t save her from the sadness of her bleak home life? He couldn’t fail her again; he wouldn’t let her fall a second time.

The last of the summer crickets chirped slowly with the chill of early autumn and he breathed her in. “Tifa,” he whispered, running gentle palms over her arms. “I love you.” She gently embraced him and Cloud cupped the back of her head. “I want to be with you, always.”

… … …

The nights had always been the worst. Long stretches of silence mixed with insomnia gave his mind too much time to delve into dark places and dangerous paths. Brian was surprised that he had been able to slip into a dreamless slumber the night before. It had been just about midnight when he had finally made his way out of his workshop and shuffled up the stairs to hide in his bedroom and chase the comfort of the blank void of sleep that eluded him so deftly. There hadn’t been any glow of candlelight flickering from the crack underneath Tifa’s door, so Brian thought it was safe to release the strangling feelings of loneliness, self-deprecation and inadequacy in quiet, broken noises. Out of the stillness, a sound drifted into his ears. It had started so quietly that he wasn’t sure he had heard the merry timbre of Lia’s piano until the notes were softly dancing in the air. The calming melodies had marched on and on until he had slipped easily into peace and stillness.

The rays of the sun and a scraping noise had awoken him. The hours of daylight gave him meaning and purpose: building a new cradle for the growing Nelson family or sanding the handsomely carved designs on a commissioned dresser or vanity made Brian feel connected to the lives of the people around him. Being the only child of a once well respected family, he had expected life to turn out much differently than it had. His business was supposed to be booming and he was supposed to have had requests from a few boys for apprenticeships, but money came in slowly and not one bright eyed youngster had darkened his doorway in many years.

*Scrape, scrape.*

Brian rose from his place on the mattress and followed the noise to the window facing the Strife cottage. That skinny little blonde was perched on an unsteady wooden ladder that wobbled and scraped the side of the house as he tried to keep his balance while clearing leaves and debris out of the gutters. The carpenter’s sharp eyes immediately assessed the situation. The rickety ladder needed so much repair, that it would’ve been much less costly just to have a new one made. One of the legs had rotted so that it was a good half inch shorter than the other and one step was missing completely. It was dangerous and foolish to use such a thing, but Brian had never known the Strife boy to show caution in risky situations.

The sight of that unruly pale hair usually made anger boil in his heart. It had always been that way since he had first seen the awkward little thing playing with his black haired toddler. Lia had always seen something in Cloud and his mother that the others hadn’t. The day after Claudia had arrived, the town was abuzz with rumors and the about the blue eyed harlot who had slept with enough men to afford shelter for her fatherless child. Brian was indifferent about it until he saw that they were moving into the house next to *his*, of all places. His friends had laughed with a tsk of mock pity when they found out, teasing at the irony of his upscale family living next to street urchins. It was always easy for him to criticize the young mom as she struggled to raise a small boy and run a household alone, but Lia had always had a sympathetic perspective of the fair haired pair. It wasn’t
until he had ended up as a single father himself that he realized how hard it was to manage the role of two people under the crushing weight of sadness. If he didn’t know the first thing about raising a girl to be a respectable young woman, what would Claudia know about raising Cloud to be a well-rounded young man?

The teen wobbled a bit before catching himself and reaching to pull out another armful of leaf litter and wayward pine needles. Something in Brian’s heart sunk as he watched his daughter’s closest companion try to accomplish his chores with a deathtrap of a ladder. He had two, heavily lacquered ones in the basement that the kid could borrow and avoid breaking his neck. But meddling wasn’t something he was accustomed to and he couldn’t risk the boy thinking he cared for him, or anything of the sort. He had enough to deal with and didn’t want to reinforce the snickering of the villagers who whispered about reclusive Mr. Lockhart taking an interest in his pretty blonde neighbor. Lia had learned a tidbit or two about Claudia’s life, but he had never cared to listen. The Lockhart reputation had already taken a dramatic nose dive and harlot or not, he didn’t need the poison of the Strife stigma to pull them down further.

… … …

The gangly blonde teen was the last person Zangan expected to knock on his door that breezy September afternoon. Cloud Strife had always been a presence that seldom trespassed in his thoughts. The boy had the remarkable ability to exist without being noticed, a trait Zangan knew was the result of a lifetime of undue scorn. Since he was the closest companion of his young apprentice, the man had heard enough about the blue eyed misfit to know that his mother had raised him to be gentle and well-mannered with the exception of the times where Cloud’s bratty peers drove him to throw a punch or two. From what Zangan saw, the kid had a lot of spirit and he liked that.

“Good day, Master Zangan,” he said, nervously shifting a stack of papers under his arm. “I was wondering if you had a few minutes to talk.” The martial artist smiled at the deepening adolescent voice.

“Please, come in,” he invited, ushering Cloud inside the tiny cottage. “Excuse the mess; I haven’t unpacked from my trip yet.”

The kid’s large eyes took in the modest surroundings of the living space. The parlor was barren of furnishings except for a few rolled up mats in the corner and a suitcase and duffel bag against the wall. Cloud deduced that this must be his makeshift dojo during the long winters or rainy days. The grey haired man led him to sit at his kitchen table, where Cloud put down his pile of forms and papers. After pouring his guest a cold glass of water, he sat in the adjacent chair and turned his attention to the boy.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Strife? It’s not every day that we get to chat.” Cloud met Zangan’s gentle smile with big, honest eyes.

“I’m sorry for coming by without invitation, sir, but there’s something important I need to ask you about. Tifa once said that you’ve done a great deal of travelling,’’ he paused, fidgeting in his chair. “Have you ever been to Midgar?”

Zangan’s eyebrows lifted. “Yes, I have. Twice.” The boy’s eyes flashed with hope.

“I’m looking for a bit of advice,” Cloud said as he sifted through his papers and pulled out a glossy pamphlet. “I want to join ShinRA and become a SOLDIER. To do that, I need to get to this building.” He showed Zangan a photo of ShinRA headquarters on the pamphlet’s inner leaf. “Could you tell me how to get there?”
Zagan looked at the photo, narrowing his eyes. Of course he’d seen that building—it was the biggest building both above and below the plate. The city of Midgar had a structure that reminded the man of a cake plate. A round, flat layer of the city sat suspended on an enormous pillar. Divided into sectors like pieces cut from a pie, this ‘upper plate’ was home to the richest and most privileged citizens. The slums underneath had their sunlight, precipitation and hope stolen from them by the massive upper plate that blocked out any view of the sky. Divided into sectors like the upper plate, the slums were a very dangerous place to be, especially for a naïve and idealistic mountain child.

“Does your mother know about this?”

“Yes,” he answered, blue eyes unwavering. “But she didn’t know how to get to the eastern continent. You have pupils around the world, right? I figured you might be able to point me in the right direction.”

“It’ll cost a fortune. Are you aware of that?”

Cloud nodded. “I have a savings. I’m sure it’s enough to get me there. Once I hand in my application, ShinRA will hire me and I’ll make money to live off of.”

Zagan studied the boy who had fire in his eyes, much like the day many years ago when he had pried the child off of Thomas as they fought in town square. Cloud was no longer the timid little waif of his childhood, but his small frame and blindness to the enormity of his career choice made the man uneasy. Members of SOLDIER were usually large monsters of men, purposefully infused with mako to enhance their strength and senses. The little Strife boy was always small for his age and prone to illness: a poor fit for a SOLDIER candidate. Would it be wrong to aid a child’s quest to a tainted, dirty city to serve an even more corrupted company? He was most likely to be rejected by the program and would probably end up bussing tables or something in the hostile slums. Master Zagan sighed as he realized that the boy’s future in Nibelheim was likely just as empty. Cloud watched as the man fetched his leather travel bag from the counter and produced a folded white paper.

“It’s your lucky day. I still have the train schedule from my trip,” the martial arts master said as he flashed a cunning smile. Cloud leaned over the table a little to peek at the lines of print. “When are you looking to leave?”

“As soon as possible,” Cloud said as he thought of the little bruises on Tifa’s wrists and arms. He pulled out a small world map from his pile of papers and glanced at it quickly before his host spoke.

Zagan leaned his chin on one fist as he looked over the schedule. “Trains to the coast usually carry goods. According to the schedule, passenger trains only seldom head north east.” The grey haired man ran his finger over the rows while his young guest curiously looked on. “Hm. There’s one leaving tomorrow evening.”

Cloud’s eyes widened. Tomorrow? That was so soon! He wouldn’t have a lot of time to adjust to the fact that he was leaving his home, pack or say goodbye. He still hadn’t even told Tifa about his plan to leave and the guilt of his secret burned in his chest. If it wasn’t for his cowardice, his friend would’ve had a little time to adjust to the thought of their separation. Now, Cloud felt as if he was running out on her. As much as Cloud was leaving to become a SOLDIER, he was leaving home to help her, too. If he was going to get her father’s blessing to marry her, he needed to become a worthy man. He’d be sure to show Mr. Lockhart that he could take care of his daughter when he showed up in the handsome black attire of a first class SOLDIER.

Noticing Cloud’s hesitation, the man spoke. “If you miss that one, you won’t be able to catch another one for six weeks.”
“That’s too long. I need to get on that train! But I don’t think I could hike to the train station by then —it’s all the way at the bottom of the mountain. It’d take me over a day to get there.”

“It’s too dangerous to take the path by foot. There are monsters lurking in greater numbers than in previous years.” Master Zangan rubbed his thumb over his beard in thought. “Do you know the cobbler?”

“Ted? Yeah…” Cloud said, hoping the older man had some sort of plan up his sleeve. “Why?”

“He’s finished here for the summer. I saw his wagon packed outside the inn; if he’s leaving tomorrow, maybe he could take you down to the village at the foot of the mountain. That would be much faster than walking down the path.”

The blonde exhaled as Zangan handed him the paper containing the train schedules. He carefully added it to his stack of papers while thanking the man profusely.

“It’ll probably take you six days or so to reach Midgar.” Zangan pointed at Nibelheim on Cloud’s map, sliding his finger from point to point. “One day to reach the train station, two days by train, two by boat, and probably one more once you reach the eastern continent. Make sure you write all this down. I’ll tell you what you need to know.”

“Thank you very much for your kindness, Master Zangan.” The blonde lifted his head to fix his elder with a solemn stare. “I have one more thing to ask of you, sir.”

Zangan raised an eyebrow in question.

“Please, watch over Tifa while I’m gone.”

… … …

Papa had scolded her yesterday. They had sat down at the table for dinner when he said that he saw her merrily talking with Cloud at the town gate. Tifa kept her eyes on her plate as her father told her that at thirteen, she was much too old to be running around with a boy without an escort or supervision. Apparently, this sort of thing hurt her reputation and Papa was adamant that she only conversed with the Strife boy while in the presence of others. Tifa wanted to protest, but she decided that she should just be grateful for the miracle that she wasn’t forbidden to see Cloud completely. What her father didn’t realize was that she didn’t seem to have a good reputation to protect.

The man seemed to be distressed over the fact that all of the boys Tifa had grown up with were leaving Nibelheim, one by one. His daughter wasn’t sure why he cared about her well-being at all anymore. It made sense when she realized that losing marriage prospects meant that he might never be able to get rid of her. Since Jim had left town for opportunities elsewhere, there were no suitors of her age group left, except for Cloud of course. And Papa hated Cloud. Tifa never took it for granted that her neighbor was still with her. He had been busy working lately and she thought that maybe he was trying different trades to see which one he liked best. That way, he could make a living and be stable on his own in a few years. She dared to hope that he might even want to take her as a wife, someday.

So when the gentle ring of the jingle bell woke her at half past midnight and Cloud begged her to meet him atop the water tower, she almost declined. If Papa found out, Tifa would have much more than just a bruised spirit. But the desperate look on Cloud’s face and the anxiety in his voice pulled her from her sheets. Thinking it was indecent to be seen in her night dress, she pulled on her blue summer frock and crept out into the night air.
Cloud was already atop the water tower when she climbed up to meet him, the moon illuminating his golden spikes while casting shadows on his face. What was it that he wanted to tell her? It had to be something of great importance if it couldn’t wait until morning. Perhaps it was a secret that pulled at his heart so badly that he couldn’t sleep. Maybe the suffocation of this little, small minded town made him want to ask her to run away with him. Her friend was only a year away from turning fifteen—maybe he was that nervous because he wanted to betroth himself to her! The thought filled her with a giddy anticipation as she let Cloud take her hand and help her onto the wooden platform. If that was true, she wanted to build a bright future with him. Maybe together they could get somewhere in this oppressive life. He gave her a shy smile when she settled beside him.

“I’m glad you came. There’s something I need to tell you.”
The stars were endless in the night sky, stretching out past the mountain tops.

A cool breeze tugged at Tifa’s long hair, warning of autumn’s arrival. She smiled as she sat next to Cloud, smoothing her skirt over her lap. He had big news to tell her and she couldn’t wait! Tifa was sure it was good news, for her friend wore an awkward smile across his face as he fidgeted beside her. There were only a handful of things that her closest companion would appear so nervous to talk about and love was one of them. Tifa felt a bubble of excitement rise in her chest. Although the thought of Cloud being in love with her was new and exciting, she couldn’t help but hear her father’s voice echoing in her head. No one will want you as a bride. Tifa understood that she was nothing to desire. But just maybe, Cloud would disagree. He knew her inside and out and still chose to be her friend. She had done nothing to deserve his kindness and yet there he was, giving her hope day after day. Tifa remembered a time when she was afraid to get married, back in the days where she knew contentment and happiness. But now all she knew were feelings of emptiness and the gnawing desire for fulfillment and acceptance.

“So, what did you need to tell me in the middle of the night?” She giggled as she ran her hands through her sleep mused hair.

Beside her, Cloud exhaled through his nose and clasped his fidgeting hands in his lap. He had to do it fast before he lost his nerve. He clenched his fists so his hands wouldn’t tremble. “I should’ve told you months ago. Tifa, I’m leaving Nibelheim tomorrow.”

“I’m going to Midgar to join ShinRA and become a SOLDIER. Tifa, I want to be a hero.” I want to be your hero.

The breath had left her lungs and wouldn’t return. Fear burst from her core and spread to the tips of her limbs. The one who she loved was leaving for greater things and a better life. Tifa had been able to summon bravery in the face of her father’s assaults on her body and her character through the sense of worth her relationship with Cloud brought forth. Without his presence and quiet encouragement, how could she withstand Papa’s furies? She’d be going into battle without a shield, a tiny ship tossed about on stormy seas without a harbor to shelter her. It wasn’t until that moment that Tifa realized how much she feared being alone. Time and circumstances beyond her control had slowly plucked people she loved out of her life, but she had never been able to imagine a future without Cloud in it.

She released her breath slowly to try to ward off the rising panic.

Tifa looked at their interlocked fingers and a wave of nostalgia washed over her. Hand in hand they had faced the unknown perils of starting school, gotten lost and even made known the fragile parts of their hearts. Every step they had taken to mature, Cloud had been there with a reassuring grip on her hand. If this was the last time she’d feel the curling of his fingers against her palm, Tifa wasn’t sure how she could find the strength to press forward.

“T-tomorrow? You’re leaving tomorrow?” Tifa asked, eyes still focused on the way his hand swallowed her smaller one. She hated how her voice trembled as she spoke.

“Yeah. Tifa, I’m sorry. I didn’t know how sudden it would be, but the train won’t wait! It’ll take me a week or so to get there, then I can start my training in the
SOLDIER program. I’m going to be as strong as Sephiroth, the great hero of the war with Wutai!”

Realization drew her eyes into wide circles. Welling anger made her nostrils flare and she looked up at his face hopeful face. He was joining ShinRA. Cloud was abandoning her to join ShinRA, of all things. How could she have been so blind all this time? For years, her playmate would go on and on about Sephiroth and SOLDIER, though honestly she had never paid much attention to his boyish ramblings about violent glory on the battlefield. SOLDIER was a branch of the same military that killed her grandparents and caused her mother so much grief. A long time ago, her father had told her that Mama’s sadness over their death had made it difficult for her to overcome the illness that put her in the grave. If Cloud was right and Tifa wasn’t at fault for Lia’s death, maybe ShinRA was to blame.

“No, Cloud! You can’t join ShinRA, they’re no good!” She ripped her hand out of his and Cloud flinched. “That company is full of bad people!”

“You don’t know that!” He countered, desperation blooming in his voice. “They provide electric power to help people and they protect us from our enemies. Besides, I want to train to be strong. I didn’t like it when you started training with Zangan but it was what you wanted and it made you happy. Going to Midgar and learning to be a hero is something I need to do.”

The earnest look on his face did little to quell her insecurity.

“Please trust me, Tifa.”

Selfishness and fear coiled around her heart and tightened her chest. The intensity of Cloud’s unwavering blue eyes hampered her ability to form the words to express the anxiety, dread and betrayal that she felt. He wanted her to trust him. Master Zangan had taught her the qualities of trustworthy people and Cloud had always fit that description perfectly. His loyalty had never once wavered through the ups and downs of their less than perfect lives. This moment presented her with a choice: what kind of person did she want to be? Swallowing her fear for the moment, Tifa looked him straight in the eye. Right now, she’d decide to focus on her trust in him over her hatred for ShinRA.

“I believe in you, Cloud.” The girl’s rich crimson eyes met his pale ones and Cloud felt heat creep onto his cheeks. “I trust you.”

When he was honest with himself, Cloud knew he was trying his best to be tough and pretend he was strong in the face of his bold decision to leave home. At fourteen, he was becoming an adult but he seldom felt much like one—especially when the thought of being without his mother’s kind smile and the sound of Tifa playing the piano each night stole away his courage. He wanted Tifa to see that he was brave and capable, a fine choice for a life partner if he ever got the nerve to ask her to be his wife. How could he explain to her that he wasn’t just leaving to fulfill his own dreams, but to come back having earned enough credentials to impress her father enough to allow for the possibility of marrying her?

He couldn’t tell her his plans for that; he didn’t want to get her hopes up. Tifa had suffered too many disappointments in her life—the last thing he wanted to do was give her the expectation of wedding rings and a honeymoon and never be able to follow through. Mr. Lockhart would most likely do whatever it took to keep him away from his daughter. Until he was confident that he could impress the man, Cloud would have to take care to keep his intentions to himself.

Tifa anxiously tugged at her hair, but didn’t remove her gaze from him. There was excitement and anticipation in Cloud’s words, but his eyes told an entirely different story. Was he nervous? Neither of them had ever left the mountain. Although the thought of life elsewhere beckoned both children out of their melancholy little world in the village, it was frightening to go out on one’s own. She
wanted so badly to go with him. They could run far away from this place and everything that had ever hurt them. Together they could start new, where condescending eyes and merciless stares could no longer weigh them down. She could escape her father’s wrath and the empty life she led if only he’d just ask her to come along with him. But he didn’t. The desperation in her heart screamed at her to beg him to take her with him, but shyness and insecurity stitched her lips shut. If he wanted her with him, he would ask, right?

Cloud moved to reclaim her hand in his and let out a breath before speaking once again. “I’ll come back for you, Tifa. We can both get out of here. You have my word.”

A vague smile visited her face. Trustworthy people keep their promises, even the small ones. Hours stretched forth in silence as they held each other close, praying that the sun wouldn’t rise.

When orange sky first began to appear on the horizon, Tifa let Cloud help her off the water tower. Her hands and feet felt much weaker than they did just hours ago when she had run out to meet him, filled with giddiness and that foolish thing called hope. The boy was due to meet the cobbler at his wagon at first light, but he walked her home anyway. Cloud embraced her for long minutes with words of comfort, but all Tifa could feel was numbness. She nodded when he asked if she’d be alright and tried to smile when he promised to write to her often. His hands felt heavy in hers until time pulled him away and he sealed his goodbye a chaste kiss to her forehead. She watched him walk out of her life by his own conation.

It was only when his golden, wayward spikes disappeared from sight that Tifa allowed burning tears to pool in her eyes and flow in endless streams down her face. She quietly turned to enter her house, floating up the stairs like a ghost. Her life seemed to be caving in around her and she was helpless to hold even the pieces of her own heart together. ShinRA had stolen yet another precious person from her side and the thought of waking up each morning without the comfort of knowing Cloud was right next door terrified her.

Tifa was grateful that Papa was still asleep, his door shut against the early morning sunlight of the window in the corridor. The darkness from the crack under his bedroom door told her that he had shut the blinds to allow him to sleep as long into the day as he liked. Hopefully he wouldn’t bother her for a while. Her father’s disdain for Cloud was obvious and the man surely wouldn’t bat an eyelash at his departure. Did he know how much Cloud meant to her? He wasn’t just her playmate or her best friend. In recent months, she’d come to realize that her childhood affection for the boy had blossomed into romantic devotion. She loved him. How could she live without him?

Fatigue pulled at her eyes and her body felt heavy with grief. When Cloud let go of her hands, she felt as if she’d been set adrift. Her friend had cut the tether holding her to him and now Tifa felt insignificant and lost. She yearned for any sense of control in her life. She longed for a purpose and a direction. Maybe if she found a way to be significant like Cloud did, she’d be able to climb out of the hole of worthlessness that she had dug for herself over the years.

The foggy memories of being fussed over as she held onto her mother’s skirts in town square meant little to her. Tifa didn’t need the approval of the villagers to be happy. But she did want so badly to make her father proud of her. She remembered bygone days where he’d come home from cutting lumber and bounce her on his knee and endlessly read books to her next to the hearth. Tifa recalled how loved she felt when Papa rubbed her head or called her his sweet pea. She missed the way his beard prickled as he blew raspberries on her plump little cheek. Were those times ever real? Was her heart ever full and content with her mother’s warmth and father’s devotion? It all seemed like a far off dream.

Gently, the laid herself face down on her bed and felt something solid hit her ankle. It was her jingle bell. Her abdomen twisted and ached as she fixed her carmine eyes on the little piece of metal. The
twine was limp as it hung over the sill of her window and out into the morning air as September drew to its close.

… … …

It was well into the afternoon when the girl stirred from her resting place atop her comforter. Autumn sunlight illuminated the whites of the walls and glinted off the glass candle holder atop the piano across from her bed. Her beautifully carved little wooden horse sat next to it, and Tifa numbly stared at the way the direct sunlight turned the color of the heartwood to a rich, reddish brown. Cloud was gone. It seemed like years ago that she had lain on this very bed in a mourning dress of black lace, wishing with all her might that she could turn back time and somehow prevent the loss of one she was sure she couldn’t live without. Her whole body felt weighted to the mattress; the only thing she had the strength to move was her eyelids as they lazily blinked in the light.

The walls of her happy home had begun to cave in on her long ago, but that didn’t make adjusting to each further crumble of her comfort any easier. Tifa breathed into her pillow, slow and even; crying never brought any solace or solution. She tried not to think of the fact that she’d have to live without the sight Cloud’s crooked little smile, the freckles dotting the bridge of his nose, his beautiful golden hair or his strikingly blue eyes. The thought of it cast aching bruises on her heart and made her stomach ache. It made it ache a lot. Dull pain seared through her belly in waves but it was nothing compared to the painful clenching of her heart.

Her world felt so small compared the adventures that Cloud would now experience. The shy little boy of her childhood with the big eyes and timid spirit had been chased away by a lean, lanky young man with big dreams and lofty ambitions that lead him far, far away from her. Loneliness closed in on her and Tifa gritted her teeth. ShinRA was to blame. They took her mother’s happiness, killed her grandparents and stole one of her only confidences from her. It was easier to point the finger at the giant company than to think that she wasn’t important enough to Cloud to keep him in her life. Life had taught the girl that it was certainly unfair, and Tifa thought that she should expect to never hear from him again. If he fought in the war, he might die. If he survived, he’d be a hero—a big deal in a big city. But Cloud had promised that he’d come back and he’d never broken a promise to her before. And this was the most important vow he had ever made to her.

If Cloud didn’t come back, she wasn’t sure what she would do with her life. The thought of spending the rest of her life suffocating under her father’s thumb made her feel as if death was a better alternative. Maybe death would free her from sadness as it did her mother. She wasn’t afraid to die. Her fists grasped tightly at her comforter, her elbows locked straight as she did her best to hold in screams. Tifa’s insides continued their lament as well, sending twisting pain in the lowest parts of her belly. Just yesterday morning, everything had seemed so normal. And now her world had been flipped upside down, just like that. Nothing would ever be as it had once been. She didn’t want this. Tifa had sought happiness for so long and just when she thought that maybe she could find a bright future with a certain blonde headed boy, hope had been snatched away again.

Downstairs, floorboards creaked under the weight of her father’s boots. He would be wanting his supper soon, Tifa knew, and would be cross if he knew she had been too absorbed in self-pity to fix a meal for him. She forced herself to her feet, almost doubling over from the instant flash of stabbing pain in her pelvis. After hobbling to her wardrobe to pick out a fresh frock, she lifted her wrinkled blue dress over her head and bent to change her underwear. Tifa gasped when she saw it—a thin smearing of blood across the crotch of the little white garment. Running her hands over the inside of her thighs, she looked for a scrape or cut in vain. A small, frightened sob escaped her lips—she was bleeding from inside! Was she sick? This wasn’t an injury you could bandage from the outside like a skinned knee or scraped knuckles. What if she bled so much that she died? Fear forced her limbs to tremble and she swallowed thickly at the thought of bleeding out from such an intimate part of her.
Embarrassment flared in her chest at the thought of telling her father about it.

Maybe she was afraid to die, after all.

… … …

It fascinated Claudia how much the absence of one person could completely change the atmosphere of the house, the village and her world. She ran the rough bristles of the broom underneath her son’s bed before stripping away layer of blankets and linens. Cloud had taken most of his meager belongings with him, packing them into a backpack of worn leather. She had insisted Cloud take the pack with him when he declined her offer to take Aren’s gun along for safety. That bag was one of the only remaining items of his father’s belongings.

Before her son had left to begin his journey eastward, Claudia knew that he would be taking a hefty amount of her heart with him. Cloud had been the light of her life, her very reason for putting on a brave face and smiling in the face of their poverty and the quiet scorn of their fellow villagers. Her bright eyed child had been the best gift that she had ever been given. Through him, the young mother had found the strength to go on after being turned out of her parents’ house and facing the tragedy of Aren’s death. Sometimes, in the stillness of sleepless nights, Claudia found herself pondering if her best was good enough for Cloud. She had been struggling under the burden of taking on the role of two parents since the two of them arrived in the mountains, desperate for welcoming arms and a new start.

The circumstances surrounding Cloud’s conception made it seem like it was meant to be. One night alone with Aren was all it took to send her life spiraling out of control. Frequently, the faces of her mother and father haunted her dreams and she constantly wondered if things would’ve turned out differently if she had returned to them once Aren died. Would they have felt pity for their only grandchild once they had seen how weak and small he was for his age? Would they have fallen in love with his handsome little face and the trademark blue eyes of a Strife child? Would they have felt sorry for her after hearing her story and realizing how high the odds were stacked against a young mother and a frail undersized baby? They just as well may have shut the door in her face.

When she left her parent’s house for a happy life with Aren and their baby on the southern prairie, Claudia had ended up on a winding trail of heartache and isolation. Like she had done, Cloud had chosen his path with idealistic expectations of a better life in the biggest city on the planet. For years, she had noticed that there was always something pulling Cloud away from their foggy home hidden deep in the seldom travelled mountains. He was meant for better things, she was sure of it. The woman had never seen Midgar, but had heard of its corruption and how rough around the edges city folk were. She had tried her best to warn him about that, but she couldn’t help but worry. Cloud was tough; he had grown up in a hostile environment and was accustomed to unfriendly people. His bravado was fragile and born of excitement, mostly. Hopefully the reality of the struggles he would inevitably face wouldn’t hit him too hard.

Oh, how she wished she could have gone with him, although she doubted there was little she could do to protect him. Every time she caught a glimpse of his broad shoulders and sinewy build, she’d sigh with pride and wistful sadness. Cloud was growing up.

She was pulled from her thoughts by a frantic knock at her front door.

“Ms. Strife? Ms. Strife, are you there?” a soft voice called with frantic urgency. “Please, may I come in?”

She recognized Tifa’s voice at once. The woman immediately laid the bedclothes down on Cloud’s mattress and descended the stairs. Maybe the girl was just as upset as she was about her son’s
departure. She opened the door to tussled black strands and puffy crimson eyes that were heavy with fright. Her apron had been sloppily tied over a rumpled brown pinafore.

“Oh, Tifa.” Claudia said with pity and surprise. “Please, come in.”

Timidly, the Lockhart girl crossed the threshold with bare feet and Claudia led her to have a seat at the kitchen table. She gently slid a hand over the crown of Tifa’s head before moving it to tilt the girl’s chin upwards. Hesitantly, Tifa met her neighbor’s calming blue eyes.

“What happened? Are you alright, sweetheart?”

“N-no,” Tifa stammered, shying away and folding her arms on the table before pressing her face into her sleeves. Her words were quiet and muffled. “I think I’m g-going to die.”

“What?” the blonde asked, cocking her head.

“I’m bleeding!” Tifa said, the words trembling out of her throat. Claudia looked the seemingly healthy girl over from head to toe before realizing what was happening.

“Are you bleeding from your private place?” the woman asked with a mother’s tenderness. Tifa’s face flushed with embarrassment and she forced herself to look at Cloud’s mother before managing a small nod. “Oh, honey, it’s normal. It’s alright!”

Claudia felt so foolish. Tifa had been a regular visitor in her house for years now, yet she never thought about informing the growing girl about her changing body. With her mother dead and her father seeming aloof and unwilling to volunteer such information to his daughter, Claudia couldn’t expect anyone to teach the girl these things. She bent to embrace Tifa, wrapping her arms around her trembling frame.

“Don’t worry, it’s just part of growing up. It happens to all of us girls.”

Tifa blinked open her moist eyes. “It does?”

“Oh, yes. It’s a sign that your body is getting ready to have babies. The blood comes from your womb, where maybe one day a baby will grow.”

“Why is my womb bleeding if there’s nothing wrong with it?” the girl asked, wiping unruly strands of black hair from her face. Claudia turned to pluck a dress she had been making off her sewing table. A handful of straight pins loosely secured a slip under the skirt where the seamstress had left off. She turned it so that Tifa could see the skirt clearly.

“Inside your womb, there’s a thick, soft lining made of blood vessels.” Claudia lifted the skirt to reveal the slip underneath. “Even when a lady isn’t going to have a baby, the womb keeps itself ready, just in case. Every month, your body builds a lining, waiting for a baby to grow there.”

Tifa ran her hand over the soft material of the underskirt, imagining the fascinating things going on inside her. Her body was ready to have a baby?

“When there’s no baby, the lining falls out and slowly comes out of your private place.” Claudia tugged the slip free of its straight pins, sliding it out from underneath the skirt as an illustration. Tifa watched with new understanding and the blonde woman smoothed her dark strands where they fell over her back. “It may hurt a little in your belly, but it’s not dangerous and I promise it happens to every woman when they grow up!”

“It happens every month?” Tifa wasn’t sure she wanted to deal with this discomfort every four
weeks or so, even if it meant that she was becoming a woman.

“That’s right. It only stops if a baby is growing in there, though sometimes it can skip a month if you’re ill or stressed out. Until you have a baby, you’ll bleed a little bit every month. There’s no reason to worry. Did you use anything to catch the blood?” Tifa’s cheeks pinkened once again.


“Rags work just as well. Let me show you how you can roll cotton to use instead if you want.”

The afternoon stretched quietly into the evening as Claudia instructed Tifa in different methods to manage her menstruation and was relieved for the distraction, for they avoided talking much about Cloud’s departure. Claudia was relieved, for she wasn’t ready to discuss it. For some reason, it had been easier to give Tifa the awkward speech about her menstrual cycle than talk about her son. It was the second time she had given that talk and Cloud had acted much more flustered and embarrassed than the Lockhart girl had. The black haired teen sat curled up on her couch, seeming much calmer as she sipped her mug of hot tea. Claudia smiled, for just as the parting of her son had left her feeling as if she had little purpose, Tifa had shown her that there was another child who needed mothering.

“Ms. Strife?” the girl asked, shifting on the cushion.

“Hm?”

“How does a baby get in a womb?”

There was much more mothering to be done, indeed.
The train car lurched to the side as it rounded a bend. The sound of the cars clacking as they rode over the tracks had long faded into background noise as Cloud struggled to sit upright in the seat. He had never been more miserable in his life. The ride down the mountain on the cobbler’s wagon was uneventful and calm, and the building anticipation in his chest had brightened his eyes and drew giddy smiles to his lips. The train station had been bustling with activity and Cloud thought that he had never before seen so many people, even at the yearly harvest festivals in Nibelheim. It was all so exciting! He had to take a train clear across the continent, and then board a boat heading west. It seemed simple enough when he looked at the instructions Master Zangan had written for him. He had never been on a train or moving vehicle of any sort, aside from a horse drawn cart.

It was with great excitement that Cloud had stepped onto into one of the passenger cars on the train, but now he would give anything to get off. Luckily for him, there was only a handful of other passengers in the car to witness his discomfort. For the first six hours of his two day train ride, Cloud had schlepped to the car’s small washroom twice an hour to be sick. Now, he had nothing left in his stomach to be rid of, though once in a while he succumbed to fits of dry heaving. Dizzy and exhausted, he slumped against the cushion of his seat. He had taken a seat in the vacant last row of the car and away from the curious gaze of adult passengers who eyed his large leather bag and wayward blonde spikes.

The lilting chug of the train made Cloud submit to the heaviness of his eyelids. Although he was heading forward to a new life and new opportunities, his heart remained with a certain beauty with ruby eyes and a gentle voice. He knew Tifa was upset and unsettled by his abrupt departure and prayed that it wouldn’t put a wedge in their relationship. The hurt and shock in her eyes that night made the guilt hover around him like a thick fog. The last thing he wanted was for her to think that he had abandoned her, but his promise to return seemed to be of little comfort to his beloved friend. There were so many things he wanted to tell her before he left: that she was the best thing in his life, that he loved her, that he wanted to marry her and rescue her from the things that hurt her. But the words had all caught in his throat when he saw shadows swallow the hope in her eyes. But it would be for her own good, wouldn’t it? He’d need money and a secure place to bring her if he was going to get her away from her father. Leaving Nibelheim was a necessity. He’d be sure to write to her the first chance he could.

Mom had given his talks about adulthood and finding his place in the world before running her hands through his hair and pressing a kiss to his forehead. Cloud knew that the woman was also distressed by his plan to go to Midgar, but she had told him that he was growing up and needed to experience the world for himself. Chasing one’s dreams was important. The time on his own would mature him, she said, instilling a sense of pride and excitement in his heart. But already, unforeseen difficulties of his journey had shaken his fragile confidence. Was he meant to be a SOLDIER if he couldn’t even ride a train without being ill? He shuttered when he thought of how his stomach would handle being on a boat.

Getting to Midgar once the boat docked on the eastern continent would be the hard part, because it was the only part of his journey that wasn’t laid out for him. But he was grown up now, right? He could figure it out. Cloud opened his eyes and fingered the smooth strap of his leather pack. Mom had been brave enough to find a home in Nibelheim all on her own when he was very small. If she could do that, surely he could manage taking care of just himself. The world flew by him in a whirr of blue skies and the pale sands of the desert, but he did his best to keep his eyes averted for his stomach’s sake. Cloud faded in an out of sleep for what seemed like an eternity. Dawn was breaking when the train finally came to a halt at a small seaside harbor on the eastern
coast. Cloud nearly missed his stop. He jolted awake when the conductor called and quickly grabbed his pack before jogging to the nearest exit. Stepping out onto the platform, he sucked in a breath of the humid air. Electric street lights illuminated the empty train station and the little town beyond it—so different from the hanging gas powered lanterns back in the village square of his home. Once the train rolled forward and away, a strong wind blew at his back, drawing to him the smell of salt and brine laced with something indescribable. Cloud turned around. Over the tracks and past the wooden boardwalk railing, beyond a moderate expanse of sand, was an endless breadth of water. Cloud drew in a slow, awed breath.

“The ocean!” he sighed wistfully, blue eyes shining with wonder.

The rising sun painted the water in heavenly hues of orange and pink and the sight chased the fatigue from his bones. Cloud ran to the edge of the board walk and hopped the railing, then took off towards the sea when his boots hit the sand. With every bouncing step, the jingle bell tinkled merrily in his bag. Although the first leg of his journey had shaken his confidence, the little charm served him as a reminder of Tifa and his goal to help her find happiness, as well as his own. This is what Mrs. Lockhart had told them about all those years ago—the magic of a body of water so big you couldn’t see the other side! One by one, he abandoned his boots, tossing his backpack to the sand as he pushed forward. Tifa had once told him that it was her dream to see the ocean, even if it was just once. When he came back for her to take her away, that’s the first place he would bring her.

Cloud waded into the waves, absorbing the thrill of the push and pull of the cold, salty water. He had never seen anything so majestic in all his life! Blonde hair whipping in the wind, the boy didn’t realize how wide he was smiling until his cheeks began to hurt. He’d make Tifa’s dream come true, no matter what.

… … …

Tifa was exhausted. It had been a busy day with lessons, tending the garden and pulling the weeds out of the cracks in the pavement of their front walk. Wanting to stay out of the gloomy house, she escaped to stroll in the woods, enjoying the rich smell of pine and the beauty of the orange leaves of scattered deciduous trees. Tifa wasn’t accustomed to walking the forest paths without the company of another. Years ago, Papa had taught her to navigate the paths and identify the types of trees and the calls of the birds. Days ago, she and Cloud had shyly held hands as they meandered under the canopy. Now, she walked the quiet trails alone.

By the time she got supper on the table, she barely had the strength to hold her head up. Propping her chin on her fist, she slowly brought the spoonful of roasted vegetables and potato slices to her mouth. Now that Ms. Strife had explained what was going on in her body, Tifa could understand why she felt so sluggish. A few days had passed and the pain had mostly subsided as the bleeding grew lighter. The initial fear had been replaced by a newborn fascination with her body’s ability to grow a life. The girl had never thought much about the process of how babies were brought into the world. For as long as she could remember, she was aware that a baby grew inside a mama’s belly; but it was more complicated than that. The girl was full of questions that Ms. Strife had been happy to answer. With new knowledge and a new perspective on what goes on between a husband and wife to result in a baby, Tifa felt very grown up indeed. She wanted to be able to have a baby someday, but she’d never want to let a boy do that to her, even if she was married to him. Tifa wished she could’ve asked her own mother about all this, but her kindly neighbor would have to do.

Papa sat across from her, quietly reading the day’s newspaper and reacting to the content with a grunt or audible exhale through his nostrils. His daughter stole a surreptitious glance at his features. There were deep creases at the corners of his eyes and lines in his forehead. His pretty chestnut brown hair had greyed in some spots and many his mustache was peppered with coarse, white hairs.
Though she tried her best to put together nutritious meals, the man had grown thin and wiry. Tifa thought her Papa’s body was too young to look the way it did. He was only forty-four, but the lines of age on his face rivaled those of Master Zangan, who was over a decade older. Maybe grief did that to people. Papa just couldn’t say goodbye to the comforts of days gone by; he dragged the pain of loss and the memories of his late wife around like a bag of wet sand. In the past, Tifa had tried to block out her sadness before deciding to confront it and move on with her life. When she thought of her mother, Tifa envisioned her warm smile and could almost feel the softness of her embrace. Mama would want her family to go forward—to smile and laugh and seek out the richness life had to offer. But Papa was too still in his sadness and it weighed her down like an anchor in the depths of their isolation.

His brown eyes met her crimson ones before she shied away.

“So he’s gone, huh?” Brian sighed as he folded the newspaper and neatly laid it down on the table. “Good riddance.”

Tifa stuffed a spoonful of food in her mouth to keep from retorting. She knew without asking that he was talking about Cloud and it was hard to suppress the need to defend her friend. When Papa expressed further curiosity on the subject of the blonde boy, she was surprised.

“Where’s he gone off to? He hasn’t got enough money to pay the stipend for an apprenticeship.”

“He told me that he was going to become a member of SOLDIER to be a hero,” she obediently answered in almost monotone to hide her feelings on the matter from her father’s judgement. Papa hadn’t hated ShinRA as her mother had but Tifa was still nervous to bring up the name of the mega corporation in front of him—just in case.

“Ha! That scrawny misfit will be turned out on the street. Have you any idea what they do to idealistic young fools who sign up for the SOLDIER program?” Brian looked at her head on, gripping his fork in his fist on the table.

Tifa shrunk in on herself but tried to remain carefully neutral. Learning to never wear her emotions on her sleeve protected her from criticism over her feelings: a little hiding place of her own.

“No, Papa. I don’t.”

“They inject them with raw mako. That same green stuff they pump out of the ground with that reactor on Mt. Nibel. It enhances their senses and strength but they say it makes ‘em crazy. If they survive the treatments, ShinRA makes them do all their dirty work.”

Tifa played with the edge of her frayed napkin. Papa only needed alcohol to make him crazy, not mako. She hoped Cloud knew what he was getting himself into. It surprised the girl that her father even bothered to ask about Cloud and wondered what that meant. He seemed to possess a deep disdain for her best friend while at the same time looking to find out more about him.

“He’ll probably end up in a gutter begging for gil once ShinRA turns him away.” Brian stood, stacking her empty plate on top of his and depositing them in the sink. “Besides, the war is over. ShinRA’s world conquest is complete—what do they need super human SOLDIERs for anymore?”

Tifa watched him disappear to sit out on the back porch where he’d sway on that old wooden rocking chair and smoke his pipe, most likely. She turned her attention to the folded newspaper on the table top and picked it up. Undoing the neat folds, she read the headline.

‘WUTAI SURRENDERS AFTER CAPTURE OF FORT TAMBLIN’
No more war? It had been going on for so long that the never ending conflict between ShinRA and Wutai had just become a part of everyday life. Tifa frowned as she skimmed over the article. Because she had been taken out of school at only eight years old, reading was never one of her strengths. Struggling to sound out some of the more advanced words, she whispered as she read out loud.

εγλ 0000, October 2

Wutai’s last standing resistance had finally fallen. Angeal Hewley, SOLDIER 1st class and Zack Fair, SOLDIER 2nd class devastated the only remaining stronghold of Wutai troops. Using a combination of their swords and assorted materia, together the super soldier and his protégé defeated a large number of what is left of the army of Wutai. Due to the elite SOLDIER division, no further ShinRA troops were put in harm’s way. The fortress was captured at half past midnight and Wutai officially surrendered by daybreak.

Tifa’s fingers tightened around the pages; Mama must be rolling in her grave. ShinRA had finally won. And for what? It felt like the deaths of her grandparents and the grieving of her mother’s heart meant nothing. The article went on to talk of celebration and metals and such, and it made Tifa sick to her stomach. Damned ShinRA and their damned heartless, power hungry hands. The same greedy hands had plucked Cloud from her life. But if this was true and Papa was right about the need for SOLDIERs being obsolete, would Cloud realize this and come home? Her gut told her she wouldn’t be that lucky.

… … …

Every step forward had been more difficult than the last. If Cloud had thought the train ride was tough, the two day journey across the sea had been positively merciless. The boarding pass he purchased had included the use of a bunk in a small stateroom two levels below deck, but he had spent so much time nauseous with his head over the railing that he didn’t get the chance to utilize it for a good night’s rest. He had nodded off sitting against a wall on the deck of the ship, folded over the leather backpack in his lap. It felt like he had been dizzy and delirious for a week by the time the ship finally docked at the port. Cloud resisted the urge to kiss the ground when he stepped off the wooden boards of the dock with shaky legs. The harbor rested on the coast of a large seaside town, and the blonde teenager did his best to stifle the fear that came with realizing that he was an entire ocean away from the only people who knew his name.

It had taken a few hours for the headache to fade away and his stomach to calm. In that time, he had wandered about, politely asking villagers if they knew of a way he could get to Midgar. Most times, Cloud received strange looks before people would shrug or shake their heads. There was so much to look at all around him. He saw carts pulled by chocobos instead of horses, and he couldn’t help but stare at the large yellow birds he had seen in picture books but never in person. Automobiles puttered past. Vendors called out to passersby, selling food, pottery, tapestries and just about anything he could think of. The market place was over a dozen times the size of Nibelheim’s tiny town square and Cloud had immediately felt like he knew nothing about the world.

The blonde had just about lost hope when he entered a small eatery as the sun began to set. Now hungry and tired, he sat himself down at the counter and the gruff looking man behind it immediately plopped a menu in front of him.

“Thank you,” Cloud said, dropping his heavy bag to the floor beside his stool.

He narrowed his eyes at the menu—he didn’t even know what half of the food items were! Coconut curry, fried plantains, shrimp bisque…the unfamiliar food items may have well been written in a different language. He looked around at the other patrons to peek at what they had ordered and
became more distracted by the people than by anything on their plates. In Nibelheim, he and his mother had been the only blondes, leading him to feel like more of an outcast than he already was. Here, there were people with hair as dark as Tifa’s, people with fair hair like him, and even people with red hair! There were lots of babies and children to accompany the adults. He was fascinated by their manner dress, especially the women. Many wore pants like the men, or clingy skirts that showed off their curves or cut off above the knees. If a woman dressed like that at home, it certainly wouldn’t be seen as proper or polite. Things were certainly strange here on the eastern continent…or was it Nibelheim that was strange?

He decided to settle one of the few choices on the menu that he knew.

“What’ll it be, kid?” the man asked after Cloud laid his menu flat.

The boy looked up to look at the server. The man’s manner of speech was so strange that he almost hadn’t understood what he said.

“Uh, I’ll take the chicken and rice soup, please.”

The waiter took his menu before turning to ladle the soup out of a large iron pot on the stove top. He served it to Cloud with a large hunk of bread. The boy immediately began wolfing down his meal.

“That’s one hell of an accent you’ve got. Where ya from, blondie?”

Accent? Cloud suddenly realized why the people he had asked for help had looked at him so strangely. They weren’t the ones who sounded odd, it was him. He was a foreigner and he gave it away every time he opened his mouth. Now self-conscious, he swallowed before replying.

“I’m from a mountain village on the western continent,” Cloud said between spoonfuls. “I just hopped off a boat and I’m trying to get to Midgar. Do you know how I can get there? I don’t have a lot of gil.”

“Midgar, eh? My buddy and I pick up my liquor supply from the Sector Four slums on Fridays. If you want, you can bum a ride.” Blue eyes filled with hope. It was Wednesday evening; he wouldn’t have to wait too long.

“Thank you very much.” Cloud bowed his head in gratitude. “I am so grateful for your kindness, sir.”

His host let out a booming laugh, “What’s with the stiff formalities? Name’s Gareth!”

The boy raised his head as the man stretched out a hand to shake. How was it that here, in such a foreign place, a complete stranger would be willing to help him? Most of the villagers who had watched him grow up in the mountains didn’t bat an eyelash when he and his mother were in need. He supposed it was because he had no idea about the questionable circumstances surrounding his birth. Gareth must’ve thought he was a normal boy who deserved kindness and charity. If leaving his home meant leaving behind his stigma, maybe it wouldn’t be as hard as he thought it would be. He reached out to grip Gareth’s hand with a firm shake and a smile.

“I’m Cloud. Nice to meet you.” The little bell on the door sounded when two more patrons came in.

“If ya help me clean dishes and bus tables, I’ll let ya stick around here until we leave,” Gareth grinned before turning to help his new customers.

“Yessir!”
They had driven through the countryside for hours and the sun was now hot and high in the sky. The kind owner of the little diner and his friend occupied the cab, so Cloud was forced to sit in the bed of the pickup truck. He didn’t mind. The constant rippling of the wind against his face and through his hair helped keep his motion sickness at bay. The climate was much more dry and warm than his blustery home where the mountain breeze and lower temperatures of a high elevation minimized the worst of summer’s oppression. When the lush grasses of the plains morphed into dry, rocky desert turf, Cloud shifted to turn and survey the path ahead. A large, dark structure loomed in the distance and he knew at once that it was Midgar. He was almost there! With every bounce of the vehicle over the rock and sand came the muffled sounding of the jingle bell. Despite his nausea, Cloud grinned from ear to ear. There were so many people back home who had never believed in him. They had always called him weak, and small—the cursed product of a sinful indulgence. But it didn’t matter anymore. They had said he’d never get there alone; but he had proven his resourcefulness, tenacity and determination. Cloud had found the courage to take steps to reach his goals that had only been daydreams in years past. A newfound feeling of pride bloomed in his chest as he turned back around to sit with his back against the cab.

I can do this!

Closing his eyes helped to suppress the disorientation and unease of his stomach, so he rested his chin on the backpack tucked between his legs to wait patiently for the end of the ride. Time passed and Cloud had been so focused on taking deep breaths to battle his nausea that he didn’t realize that they had passed through the gate to Sector Four until he felt the truck rolling on even pavement and the warmth and light of the sun disappeared. The plate loomed far overhead, a hulking mass of steel, pipes and wires with a diameter that stretched almost as far as he eyes could see. A wave of anxiety washed over him. The sight of endless walls of grey and the shocking absence of anything green or organic instilled a sense of fear and emptiness into his heart. Not one thing about Midgar was familiar to any of his senses.

The broad avenues were many times the size of any dirt roads back at home and covered with thick layers of hard macadam. Everywhere he looked was packed with people scurrying to and fro and it reminded Cloud of how insects would scatter at a frenzied pace when one lifted the rock that they hid under. The teen had never thought so many people could exist crowded together like this and he swallowed any feelings of claustrophobia before they could eat as his nerves. Tucking himself closer against the back of the cab, Cloud buried his nose and mouth into the collar of his jacket. The unfamiliar smells were overwhelming; the foul odor of rubber and filth made his lungs burn and he immediately began to long for the crisp scent of pine and mountain rain.

The pickup truck continued forward through the streets filled with gruff looking people and Cloud began to feel exposed and vulnerable to the uncomfortable surroundings. He could see the grand pillar at the center of the city in great detail once they turned onto a wide avenue. There were multiple levels that spiraled upwards towards the looming plate. The sights to his right and left distracted him and Cloud’s eyes went wide at the overwhelming presence of city lights and the big, flashing electronic signs. It was as if they had driven through some kind of portal to another world. The bland, washed out colors of the buildings that were crowded closely together made him feel lost already—everything looked the same!

Gareth finally pulled the truck near a small loading dock outside a warehouse of some sort. The driver’s side door opened and closed and the sound prompted Cloud’s shaking knees to try to stand on the flat surface of the bed.

“Congratulations, kid. You’ve made it to Midgar!” Gareth said as he stretched his arms and back.
The door on the passenger side opened and the other man groaned with relief when he escaped the cramped quarters of the cab. With a word of thanks, Cloud carefully slid off the tailgate and resisted the urge to let out his own tired sigh after their long journey to this strange place. He swung his backpack over his shoulder, he studied his surroundings. Master Zangan had told him to find a train station close to the pillar at Midgar’s center to get to the upper plate where the ShinRA building was located. Cloud took the crumpled SOLDIER pamphlet out of his jacket pocket and studied that small map on the back. The pillar wasn’t that far—a half mile at most—he’d get there in no time. Buying a ticket to take him to the top seemed simple enough. After that, the only thing he had to do was submit his application and join the ranks of ShinRA’s elite!

“Thank you, Gareth,” Cloud said, reaching in his pocket to produce a small handful of gil. Holding his fist toward the dark haired man, the teen bowed his head respectfully. “Here’s payment for the ride and your kindness.”

Gareth took in the sight of the disheveled foreign boy with his worn bag and frayed jacket before turning back toward the entrance to the warehouse.

“Keep it. You’ll need it a lot more than I will, I’m sure.”
Tifa hunched over Claudia’s kitchen table, peeling the skin off of an apple with a paring knife. The muscles in her arms and upper back ached fiercely after an hour’s worth of chopping firewood with Claudia’s dull axe. She made a mental note to ask the blacksmith to sharpen it in the morning.

Over the years, her training with Master Zangan had shown her that her body could go far beyond limits she thought she had. It felt good to be able to help her neighbor heat her home, lending strength that the little blonde woman lacked. Tifa was grateful that her muscle had come in long and lean and didn’t sit in bulky masses on her slight frame; she’d certainly never get married if it did! In fact, she’d been doing a great deal of wood splitting in the week since Cloud had gone. The old farmer’s almanac had predicted a fierce winter and all the signs were there. It was only the beginning of October and the waterfowl had already flown south and escaped to warmer climes. The corn husks had grown in thicker than usual and the coats on Mr. Hansen’s dairy cows had become dense and bushy. It was a lot of work to collect a winter’s worth of firewood for one house, let alone two, and Tifa was beginning to feel the strain on her young body.

It wasn’t just her body that felt tired, but her heart, too. Cloud didn’t understand what he had done when he left their little village. He had taken a piece of her and his mother with him. Everything felt strange and Tifa mused over how the absence of one person could make life seem so empty. When she wasn’t with Master Zangan or utilizing the axe, the better part of the week had been spent lying about and trying to find a comforting thought or two to nurse her bruised spirit. Although she tried to focus on positive things like the excitement surrounding this year’s harvest festival, her mind constantly turned back to thoughts of the blue eyed boy who buried her heart away in that leather pack of his with the rest of his belongings. Crimson eyes focused on the apple slice between her fingers before slowly shifting to stare at the back of the woman who stood at the counter stirring a mixing bowl. A strange feeling crept over her skin and she stilled the swinging of her feet. Tifa couldn’t decide whether it was nostalgia or dejavu, but it wormed into her heart and made her uncomfortable.

“How many apples do you need to make one batch?” Tifa asked, eager to distract herself from the chill that had settled in her bones. Helping Claudia make her apple strudels was a welcome respite from the lonesome atmosphere of her house and the girl had been grateful for the invitation. As was Ms. Strife’s yearly tradition, she was making the pastries to sell alongside her linen wares at the festival tonight.

“Three!” the woman answered with a smile, turning around and wiping flour dusted hands on her apron before taking the seat opposite Tifa. “I know you wanted to bake an apple pie. Don’t worry, I promise we’ll have enough left over.”

She placed a few apple slices on the cutting board in front of her and began to dice them. Tifa drew her knees up to her chest and studied her neighbor carefully. She and Claudia had become close since her mother’s death. Always upbeat and positive, the girl couldn’t help but wonder the source from which she drew her endless positivity. Right now, Cloud was somewhere far away. He was chasing his dreams and making steps towards finding his place in the world. He was running marathons of self-discovery while she was anchored in place, trying to find meaning in the day to day mundanity. It was hard to accept that she had no control over the things other people did that hurt her heart. Would he ever come back? Tifa decided that she had to trust him, even when it was hard. She promised him that she would, and Master Zangan had said a trustworthy person keeps all promises.
For so long, she and Cloud had faced hardships hand in hand. The single road they had traveled together had forked at last, and she could not follow the path he blazed. It left a lonesome ache deep inside her. Didn’t Claudia feel the same way?

Finished with peeling apples, her restless hands needed something to do. The little wooden box holding her mother’s recipe cards sat where she had left it in the middle of the table and Tifa took it between her fingers, running the pad of her thumb over the smooth surface of the cover. Mama’s apple pie could bring cheer to most situations, even if just from the warm memories of sharing the harvest-time treat with her family. Papa had always been scolded by Lia for eating an entire half a pie in one evening and the recollection made her eyes soften as she studied the lines and imperfections of the little pine box. Hopefully, something as simple as bringing home the dessert would satisfy her father’s sweet tooth and quell a little bit of the ache in his heart. Playing the piano for her father when the ghosts came to haunt him seemed to quiet her heart as well as his. Tifa was trying desperately not to lose hope that she could be a source of light on the dark paths that he walked, guiding him home to help her rebuild their broken relationship. The years had been laced with fear and regret, but she couldn’t turn away from the thought that there might be hope for them yet.

Tifa’s eye flicked upwards to watch Claudia’s steady hand as she chopped the apple slices into fine cubes. Though her face seemed serene, the girl could easily see the fatigue and haunted look in her blue eyes, the line of her mouth pressed flat with hidden emotion. She wondered how much the single mother had mourned the departure of her son who had moved to a strange city to start a new life all on his own. Tifa wondered if she possessed the strength and bravery to do something like that.

“You came to Nibelheim all by yourself, right?”

Claudia paused at the seemingly random question and turned her pale eyes upward. “Well, Cloud was a little over two at the time. But aside from him, it had just been me.”

“Was it hard to start someplace new?”

“It’s still hard.” Ms. Strife said, rising to combine the apple bits with the mixture of butter, sugars, spices and other ingredients in the mixing bowl. “But it was out of necessity; I had nowhere else to go and a little boy to take care of.”

Tifa remembered the scant details Cloud had told her about Claudia’s parents turning her out and his father dying when he was still so small.

“Nibelheim is a beauty of a mountain town, but I’m sure you’ve noticed that most villagers aren’t very kind to outsiders. So it’s been hard to get help, and most times Cloud and I had to figure things out for ourselves.”

Tifa played with the lid of the recipe card box. The thought of people turning their back on a woman and child for any reason made her angry. “You must have been so frightened.”

“Of course. I was young. I had Cloud in my belly at sixteen, gave birth by seventeen and found myself in Nibelheim at eighteen. Life was as unsteady as an earthquake and Cloud needed a stable, safe place to grow up.”

The girl folded further in upon herself in empathy at her neighbor’s sad story. Claudia noticed as she circled the whisk around again and again, blending the sweet concoction together.

“But you know what, Tifa? A little adversity builds character and that’s what I told Cloud before he left. As much as I want him to stay, there was always something pulling him away from here. He’ll come up against problems I’m sure, but he’ll adapt and grow and learn. Just like I did…and just like you’re doing.”
It had taken many years, but Tifa was just beginning to understand Claudia Strife. Nibelheim had rejected her since her arrival over twelve years ago and it was hard to imagine that her forlorn neighbor had once been loved and cherished. Cloud’s papa, the man she loved, was dead. And now her son had left her behind. But here she was, moving forward. Claudia’s steps were vibrant as she moved about the kitchen and warmth radiated from her features. Master Zangan had taught her a lot about strength. While the little blonde woman lacked muscle and brawn, she had the strongest heart of anyone Tifa had ever known. Life had taken so much from her, but she never gave up. If Ms. Strife still found the miraculous will to keep going, maybe she could, too.

“Are you going to the festival with your father tonight?”

Tifa closed the lid to the recipe box with a loud clack and gripped the wood in her fingers. “No. He said he’s going with his friends.”

Claudia set the mixing bowl to rest and wiped her hands on her apron before crouching next to Tifa’s chair. Mustering the most genuine smile she could, she searched for the girl’s eyes.

“No matter, we can go together! We can sell our clothes and strudels for a while, then enjoy the sights and a game or two. What do you say?”

A ghost of a smile appeared on Tifa’s lips as she nodded.

……

The water was cool against his skin as he rubbed his face and wrung droplets out of his hair. Cloud knew that this area of Midgar was upscale and felt embarrassed to be washing his head and arms in a public fountain, but it was still early enough in the morning for the streets to be empty and free of judgmental eyes. The ShinRA building sat a few blocks behind him, blocking out the first light of morning and casting a long shadow over the little park.

The monster of a building was much bigger than he had imagined from the pictures on the pamphlets and what he had seen on television. All seventy stories loomed overhead and Cloud wondered how it was possible to build something so tall! But he was grateful for its size since it made it impossible to miss; the sight of the towering mass of steel and concrete brought feelings of relief that his journey had finally come to an end. After leaving Gareth and managing to board a train to the upper plate, he had made a beeline straight to the monstrous sky scraper as the sun began to set. The lady at the front desk had peered down at him over her thick glasses. After regarding him with a bored expression, she had barely let him open his mouth before telling him that the help desk was now closed for the weekend. Annoyed, but not discouraged, Cloud had tucked himself into an alley to get his bearings and make a plan. The upper plate was much cleaner and felt a great deal safer than the slums had. He spent the weekend walking the streets and getting familiar with the area, only having enough gil to spend one night at a hotel and purchase a few lackluster meals.

He had spent the night before sleeping in the small park near the ShinRA building, wrapping his jacket around his shoulders and pillowing his head on his pack. Finally, it was time to turn in his application. He didn’t know what hour the building opened to the public, but he wanted to make sure he was there when it did. He covered the two blocks quickly and smiled when he reached the small plaza in front of ShinRA headquarters. Cloud slowed his steps when he saw two men emerge from the glass doors; one seemed older with black stubble on his chin and layered dark hair that ended at the nape of his neck. The smaller man didn’t seem to be much older than Cloud was and had thick, wild black hair. The younger man was chattering on about one thing or another, but all Cloud could focus on was the SOLDIER uniforms they were both wearing and the broad swords that were strapped to their backs.
The blonde wasn’t aware that he had stopped to stare until the raven haired young man made eye contact with him. There was an otherworldly glow to the SOLDIER’s blue eyes and it made Cloud hold his breath. Turning his head away shyly, the mountain child suddenly felt so lame in his button down shirt and plain slacks. He hurried to enter the building with his eyes focused on the worn leather of his shoes. There were plenty of soldiers milling about, laughing and talking loudly amongst themselves. An electronic bulletin board flashed announcements across a large screen, confirming the news he had seen on the headlines all over magazine stands throughout the area. The war with Wutai was over. The fighting and conflict that had spanned almost a decade had finally come to a stop after Wutai surrendered. It never crossed his mind to think about what elite members of SOLDIER would be doing in times of peace.

Just like she had said, the secretary was at her place behind the help desk. Application forms in hand, Cloud smoothed the fabric of the cleanest shirt he had left in his bag and put on a brave face.

“Good morning. I’m here to hand in my application for the SOLDIER program and take the physical fitness test,” Cloud said as politely as he could, hoping she understood the thickness of his western dialect.

“Another one of you kids, huh? ShinRA makes a fortune off of hundreds of little dreamers.” The woman barely acknowledged him with a momentary upward flick of her eyes.

Cloud’s heart sunk to his feet at her words.

She yanked the application forms out of his hands after prompting the boy to hand them over, then asked for the gil for the application fee. Cloud swallowed hard as he handed over the only money left to his name. What did she mean? Were there really hundreds of young men like himself who applied for an elite position like a SOLDIER? Maybe there were more people in the SOLDIER program than he thought.

“Have a seat over there. I’ll call you when a physician has time to look at you.”

Half an hour later, he was led to a small examination room on the third floor by a tall man in a white coat whom he assumed was would be carrying out his physical. He was asked a few questions about his medical history and had his eyes checked. By the time the physician had him strip down to his underwear, Cloud’s confidence had waned significantly. He was measured, poked and prodded, had blood taken and was embarrassed when asked to provide a urine sample. The boy tried not to notice the doctor’s eyes lingering on the slight visibility of his ribs or the narrowness of his thighs. He had always been small for his age, but Cloud knew that he had been growing. Before he left home, he had noticed the modest swelling of his biceps, small ridges of muscle forming on his abdomen, and that he was now a full three inches taller than Tifa. Would it be enough to satisfy the qualifications? Why hadn’t the paperwork told him what the physical requirements were?

Cloud flinched when the man held the cold stethoscope to his chest to listen to him breathe before moving it to his back to listen again. The cold weather and humid air rarely gave him problems breathing anymore, but Cloud wondered if the doctor could somehow tell that his lungs were weak. If he heard anything poor, he didn’t show it. The man flowed through the exam in practiced movements, pausing every so often to write something down on his clipboard. Cloud got the impression that he did this very exam on dozens of potential employees daily. The thought that he was just one in a million idealistic young men hoping to make SOLDIER made the blonde feel very small.

“Go ahead, hop on the scale,” said the doctor, gesturing toward a little square machine lying on the cold tile.
Blue eyes fixated on the digital numbers, more fascinated by the technology of the little gadget than concerned with the number that flashed on the little screen.

“Ninety one pounds, six ounces,” the man sighed, recording the number on the data sheet. His brown eyes met blue ones with skepticism. “You’re fourteen?”

“Yessir.” Cloud studied his bare toes.

“Hm.” The physician thumbed through Cloud’s file and lingered on his birth certificate. “You’ll need several shots. The records you provided show insufficient vaccination. You may put your clothes on now.”

... ... ...

It was nearly three o’clock in the afternoon when Cloud was ushered into a small office to discuss the company’s evaluation of his application and the results of his physical exam. He had been anxiously waiting for almost eight hours to be spoken with and he was exhausted and famished. Cloud tried not to slouch in the thick leather chair when he was told to sit. A bony looking woman sat behind her desk with a manila folder in her hands, ‘STRIFE, C.’ written in bold letters on the tab. Her dark hair was pulled into a tight bun that was just as no nonsense as her expressionless eyes. It continued to surprise him how almost every person in Midgar he had conversed with treated him with disconnection and boredom.

“Cloud, is it?” she squinted at the paperwork. “We’re sorry, we regret to inform you that you don’t meet the requirements to audition for a position in the SOLDIER program.”

Shock chased the fatigue out of his eyes and he drew in an anxious breath. He didn’t even get to audition for SOLDIER? The woman continued in a monotone voice as if she was reading from a script.

“The program requires that candidates weigh a minimum of 150 pounds and measure taller than 5’5” in order to qualify for the strength, conditioning, and mental analyses of a SOLDIER audition.”

Cloud hung his head in disbelief and hopelessness. They couldn’t turn him away so quickly, could they? Maybe it had been foolish and naïve to think that he could make the elite ranks of SOLDIER, but they didn’t even give him a chance to show what he was made of. Couldn’t he train under the SOLDIERs’ eye until he grew enough to audition? Now he had no money to feed himself, let alone find a place to stay. Going home to Nibelheim would be impossible, even if he had the guts to do so after failing so miserably. Distraught, he took a deep breath. How would he ever get back to Tifa, now? Would he ever see his mother again? If he could grow and gain some weight, maybe he could reapply for SOLDIER in time. He refused to give up hope that he could accomplish his dream because of something so insignificant.

“If you’re interested, you can interview for a position in other factions of the ShinRA Company’s military.”
It had become a daily ritual. Every morning after her lessons, Tifa would pick up the newspaper from the printer’s shop, run to the lobby of the inn to retrieve any mail from the Lockhart cubby on the back wall and rush home to read the paper as she ate her lunch. Although she liked to be informed about the outside world, she had two other reasons for taking in the words from bold headline to the last period on the printed broadsheet. Tifa had begun to realize the importance of practicing her reading skills, which were mediocre at best. But perhaps the true reason lay in the hope that maybe, if she looked hard enough, she’d find some mention of Cloud. There had been no word from her friend since he spread his fledgling wings and flew away from this dead end place. It made her flounder in a mix of concern for his wellbeing and despair that he was off experiencing the world while she remained trapped in her bird cage, singing a weak and lonesome song that fell on deaf ears.

The nights summoned swirling, turbulent thoughts that kept her awake in the old, quiet house. Cloud had been such a blinding light in her life. Now that he was gone, Tifa felt as if she was stumbling around in the dark, grasping for some sort of meaning to her existence. The man who had once called her sweet pea had become a stranger in the shell of her father, a shadow that constantly teetered between silent melancholy and intoxicated anger. Mama wasn’t much more than a fond, faded memory and a vision of an angel buried under snow and soil. Ms. Strife’s kindness and warmth gave Tifa a sense of belonging that otherwise eluded her; the lonesome shadows in the eyes of the blonde woman were always chased away by the promise of her company and some hot tea. But the one thing that made the girl feel like she had purpose was her training. After the departure of the boy who held her heart in his hands, she poured herself into her lessons without restraint. Master Zangan’s praises and the pride in his eyes quenched the burning dryness of her spirit. She was learning to protect herself and others. Maybe someday, she could take on a pupil and teach them everything Zangan taught her—carrying on the cycle of master and apprentice. The thought of being as important to someone as Zangan was to her was intoxicating.

Above all else, though, Tifa knew that the one thing that pushed her forward most was Cloud’s promise to return.

Kicking snow off Mama’s boots, she headed into her empty home and banked the fire in the stove before sitting at the table. Flicking black locks over her shoulder, Tifa set the newspaper aside to sift through the three envelopes first. The first was addressed to her father, as was the second. An electric bill and a water bill—they came at the beginning of every month. Crimson eyes widened as she saw the third envelope had her name on the front, printed in messy black scrawl. The air left her lungs when she looked to the return address:

**Cadet Strife, C.**  
**ShinRA Headquarters, Block C**  
**Unit 100105**  
**966887, Sector 0, Midgar**

Frantically, the envelope was torn into and shaking fingers unfolded the sheets of paper. Not too long ago, Cloud had held these very pages, and that thought alone made her feel reconnected with him. Tifa didn’t realize she had been holding her breath until she decided to read his letter out loud.

εγ 0001, January 7

**Dear Tifa,**
I hope you had a happy New Year’s celebration. I’m sorry it’s taken me so long to write to you but things have been so busy and I haven’t been allowed to send any letters until now. I’m working for ShinRA, but I didn’t get to try out for the SOLDIER program yet. After I got to Midgar, I enrolled in the military and spent two weeks in new recruit orientation and the next four weeks in boot camp. Boot camp was so difficult that my muscles still hurt from the drills. Sometimes it hurt to breathe during the running and endurance tests, but I made it! I bet you could pass the strength and agility exams, no problem!

The sergeants evaluate us during boot camp and place us where they feel we’d fit best. I was placed in the infantry and just started as a cadet in that curriculum. There are twenty five other cadets in the barracks where I sleep. Everything is so different in Midgar. I haven’t seen a single candle since I’ve been here—all the lights and appliances are electric and run by mako energy. I was even given a little telephone that I keep in my pocket called a PHS that I can use to make calls and read any assignments the company sends me. The food here is strange and there are so many people everywhere! Sometimes it’s so crowded out on the streets that it makes me uncomfortable.

How are you doing? I hope you are staying warm and that your dad finally remembered to cut you some firewood. Take care of yourself, Tifa. I know you’re upset that I’m working for the ShinRA Company, but I’ve got a plan. It means a lot that you told me you believe in me…I won’t let you down.

Hope this letter finds you well.

Cloud

P.S. I almost forgot! Tifa, I saw the sea and it is every bit as magnificent as your mother said. One day, I promise to take you to see it.

She was surprised when a drop of moisture hit the paper, blurring the ink of his signature. In the few months that he had been gone, she had missed him terribly. But it wasn’t until he had reached out to her from a world away that Tifa realized just how much her heart bled for him. Since Cloud had gone, she had felt like a child lost on a lake in the fog. Hazy and undefined, the days somehow kept rolling into nights. Blood rushed to her face as she recalled swirling autumn leaves and the dancing dappled sunlight upon his skin as he leaned closer to place his lips upon hers. She didn’t realize she had been smiling until after the third time she read through Cloud’s clumsy scrawl.

Tifa carefully folded Cloud’s letter and placed it neatly inside its envelope. With light steps, she floated up the stairs and into her bedroom. Slowly, slender fingers ran along the tomes on little wooden bookshelf beside the wardrobe. Tugged free by its well-worn spine, the girl flipped through the pages of her old book of elementary piano sheet music; the letter would be safe from her father’s prying eyes if she hid it among the lines of cheerful notes. Tifa wasn’t sure what Papa would think if she knew Cloud had sent her a letter, so it felt best to err on the side of caution when it came to something so precious. She had flipped to the middle of the book when she saw a relic of another life pressed between the pages.

The day of her sixth birthday, the new spring grass in the yard had felt lush and soft under her bare feet. She had spent the afternoon playing with her mother near the garden and the pair had come upon a four leaf clover. Mama had explained that it meant good luck—especially when found on a birthday—and together they had gone upstairs to preserve it by pressing it between the pages of the music book. Tifa hadn’t thought about it since then. But there it sat, still green and whole with delicate dips and intricate webs of veins in each leaf. So many things in her life had changed since then, even the way she looked. But the clover was still as vibrant and charming as the day it had been enclosed in its paper tomb, promising brightness and good fortune. Her eyes traced the gentle
curve of the stem. They were complete opposites, she and the clover. Her entire existence had changed so drastically since that day almost a decade ago while the tiny plant had stayed the same. Tifa brushed a leaf with her fingertips and it crumbled into little flakes across the printed notes.

... ... ...

He was late for lunch. His blue infantry uniform was sopping wet, hanging heavily off his slight frame. Unruly blonde spikes sagged with the weight of the water and wet socks made a squishing sound in his boots with each step. Ears red from embarrassment, Cloud was leaving a trail of water droplets on the waxed floors of the academy, winding a trail behind him to the cafeteria.

When he had failed to meet the requirements to even audition for SOLDIER, any small male ego he had had been crushed. Cloud had no choice but to accept any available employment with ShinRA for survival’s sake, and for a small chance to still have a shot at accomplishing his goal.

He was the youngest and smallest of his barrack mates but also the smartest, which turned out to be a dangerous combination. The fourteen year old had earned the highest scores on their written entry exams. Once the others found out about Cloud’s achievement, the bullies made themselves known. When their instructor had praised cadet Strife for his score on their test in strategy class that morning, the blonde knew that there would be trouble. After class, three of his squad mates had cornered him in the courtyard, throwing his books to the ground and grabbing the short, thick hair at the crown of his head. In that moment, Cloud was grateful that military protocol required his hair to be shorn prior to boot camp. Now that it was growing back, but his harassers had much less to work with than before. They had held his head underwater in the courtyard’s fountain for over a minute before letting him up for air. Then, the biggest of his attackers had picked him up and tossed him into the deep basin, soaking him from head to boots.

Cloud shouldn’t have ever worried about feeling homesick, for he was still isolated and bullied. He was still teased for his name and physique alongside his academic prowess. These bullies didn’t need to know that he had no father to treat him so poorly. Cloud had been small since birth and was still struggling to catch up to his peers, so he was an easy target for physical harassment. But unlike his situation in Nibelheim, Cloud wouldn’t dare raise his fists in defense. Despite the fighting fundamentals he had learned from Tifa, this time his aggressors were stronger and much more skilled than that arrogant Thomas and his cronies. Besides, he’d never be able to make it into SOLDIER if he was written up for fighting. A prime SOLDIER candidate had a clear permanent record.

Quietly, Cloud entered the mess hall, hoping to go unnoticed. He grabbed a plastic tray and let the cafeteria staff ration food onto his plate, ignoring their raised eyebrows at his soggy disposition. The room was packed with soldiers of multiple factions and ranks. The farthest table on the right was always mostly unoccupied, and it was there that Cloud had frequently sat. He snuck over to his usual spot and plopped next to a fellow cadet with wavy auburn hair. Carter was a friendless loser like he was, but in the sixteen year old’s case he was picked on for more than just his slight frame. The wiry teen’s blasé attitude towards his academic and physical challenges combined with his mild cynicism toward ShinRA had made him almost as much of a target for harassment as Cloud was. Cloud supposed that was why they had bonded.

“Hey,” Cloud greeted in a neutral tone.

“Hey.”

Carter stole a sideways glance at his flaxen haired companion. “What happened to you?”

“I got a perfect score on my strategy exam.”
Cloud surveyed the food on his tray with mild interest, mouth watering at the cut of steak. Some of the cadets would groan at the food they were given, but Cloud had been so happy to learn that he got to eat meat every day! At home, meat was so expensive that he and Mom had to go without it unless they could catch a fish or rabbit themselves. Despite his gratitude, Cloud was often perplexed at the foreign food items he was given to eat here in Midgar. Exotic fish from the ocean or strange types of breads had broadened the horizons of his palate and he happily cleaned his plates, for he knew what it was like to trudge through long winters with little to eat but potatoes and preserved carrots.

“What’s this?” Cloud prodded at a cluster of greens with his fork.

“Escarole. And the white bits are bok choy, before you ask,” Carter informed with an amused smirk as he bit another hunk out of his roll.

Growing up in a suburb twenty miles or so south of Midgar, the other boy had become an unexpected source of information about life in the area and Cloud absorbed any helpful tidbits of survival in this unfamiliar place like a sponge. Carter watched a drop of water drip from a blonde spike onto the wooden table surface.

“I scored thirty seven percent. I guess that’s why no one came to bother me.”

“Yikes…” Cloud would’ve grimaced in sympathy, but he knew Carter could care less.

“Yeah, Dad’ll freak. I hope they kick me out before the summer.”

“Keep shooting for the stars!” Cloud’s voice cracked as he let out a chuckle. Carter grinned.

“Then I’ll have my excuse to take that banking job out east. Dad’ll learn that forcing his kids into his failed dreams doesn’t get anyone anywhere.”

Cloud swirled the water in his glass with his straw. If his father was alive, would he have forced him to be a gunsmith? Mom had always told him that Aren was a cheerful and easy going, so it was hard to picture Dad trapping him in any career path. In fact, it was hard to picture his father at all. If he closed his eyes and tried hard enough, he could almost see dark stubble on a stubborn jaw and a flash of white teeth from an enormous grin. The memory of calloused hands rubbing his head and being held in strong arms were so blurry and faded that Cloud was unsure if he was recalling things that really were or if they were just intricate details of his imagination. The thought made him feel empty, so he changed the subject.

“I heard we were going off grounds for training today. I wonder what they have planned.”

“Probably some sort of crowd control drill.”

The ambient murmur of dozens of conversations and clanking silverware grew louder when the door flew open and a flood of second and third class SOLDIERS poured into the room, talking and laughing amongst themselves. Over the past few months, Cloud had learned that it was in his best interest to try to go unnoticed by the elite group. They were haughty, sarcastic and self-righteous for the most part. Quick to gloat and prey on those of lower rank, he loathed being in their presence. Didn’t any of those brutes have the discipline of mind to derive such a high rank? It’s a shame they didn’t filter SOLDIER candidates through a maturity test before promoting them. Cloud decided that when he became a SOLDIER, he’d be serious and honorable like the great Sephiroth.

After getting their food, the herd of brawn and bravado headed towards the pair of misfits. Cloud and Carter ducked their heads in dread as the SOLDIERs descended upon them, closing their eyes.
against the sound of trays plopping on the table.

Why did they have to sit here?

Members of SOLDIER received three times the food ration of normal military personnel. Apparently, the mako treatments they underwent after promotion boosted their metabolism as well as their strength, speed and senses. If one looked closely, their otherworldly blue eyes let off an eerie glow as mako pulsed through their bodies. Cloud let himself breathe when they fell into conversation amongst themselves, barely seeming to notice the pair of scrawny cadets. Stealing a surreptitious glance out of the corner of his eye, Cloud counted seven of them, most dressed in the blue uniform of a third class SOLDIER. There was only one who sported the dark purple attire of a second class SOLDIER, and his lively grin and messy black spikes looked familiar. Cloud quickly drew his eyes back to his plate when realization hit. That was the same guy he had seen outside the ShinRA building walking with a first class SOLDIER, all those months ago!

“Can you believe it? They’re pawning off the cannon fodder on us!”

“That Tuesti fellow sure ticks me off! He wants more security for crime in the slums, but why do we have to train the greenhorns?”

“Babysitting wasn’t in my contract! Their sergeants should teach them.”

The sandy haired third class that sat beside Cloud elbowed the blonde cadet. “We don’t have time to be looking after chumps like these, right Zack?”

Carter kept his head down and Cloud frowned at his tray. The second class SOLDIER seemed disinterested in complaining and determined to focus on shoving food in his mouth.

“No amount of complaining will change it, Brett,” Zack said, straightening his back to look his colleague in the face. “What did you get assigned to?”

Brett huffed with annoyance. “I’ve got to take the cadets in block E to Sector Six and teach them their patrol routes.”

“Ha!” Zack bellowed with an enormous grin. “I’d hate to be you! Your lackeys are going to get distracted by the chicks in Wall Market! I’m taking block C to Sector Seven.”

Cloud’s ears perked up; he was in block C. He was going to learn from a second class SOLDIER! If he could look past the nonchalance of the black haired teen, maybe he could gain any bit of insight on how to stack the odds in his favor when it came to auditioning to be a part of the SOLDIER program. He remembered how dirty and desolate the slums had been when he had come to Midgar in the bed of Gareth’s truck—a sky-less world infested with filth and hopelessness. Cloud hoped he’d never have to venture down there again. It seemed like with his position as a grunt in the infantry, he would be getting much more acquainted with the dark world below the plate.

… … …

εγλ 0001, January 28

Dear Cloud,

I’m so relieved to hear from you! I was hoping you got to Midgar safely, since it’s so far away. Boot camp sounds tough and I’m glad your lungs were up to the challenge. You’re getting stronger all the time! They gave you a phone that’s small enough to fit in your pocket? That’s amazing! The one at the inn is way too big for that. There seems to be a lot of amazing things in Midgar. Their technology
We’ve had more snow so far this winter than I can ever remember having. Papa says that he hasn’t seen snow like this in over twenty years! It’s been so cold that the water in the water tower has frozen solid! We have to heat up basins of snow for drinking and washing. It seems like forever since the sun came out—you know how the skies stay grey all winter long. Don’t worry, I help your mom dig out of her house and I’ve cut enough firewood in the fall to last her until spring (if it ever comes). We keep each other company on most days. She told me that you write to her, too, and that she’s proud of you. Do you get snow in Midgar? I miss you so much, Cloud. It’s been so lonesome without you. Your promise keeps me going, though. Wishing you luck!

Love,

Tifa

εγν 0001, February 19

Tifa,

Thanks for looking after Mom. I sent her some gil to help pay for things, but she sent it right back. She says that I need to save for my future. I guess she’s right but I just want to make sure she’s taken care of.

When I’m not in class or training on the grounds, I’m on patrol duty inside the mako reactors or under the plate. The slums are an awful place to be. The air is so polluted that it smells terribly. It hurt to breathe at first, but now I’m used to it. The people down there are very poor. They can’t even keep a garden to grow their own food because the plate blocks out the sunlight. All the food in Midgar is brought in from places outside the city. Weird, right? There are no farms, and barely any dirt. ShinRA HQ is on top of the plate. It’s much more pleasant up here, with nicely paved streets and neatly dressed people. It’s safer up here, too. Both the upper plate and the slums are like a maze! I know my way around a little bit now, but when I was first taken under the plate to be shown my patrol route I was afraid to get lost or mugged or something. A second class SOLDIER named Zack led my block of cadets through our route. He’s a nice guy—I guess I’m just lucky to have him assigned to our group since most of the SOLDIERs are immature and rude. I hope that when I become a SOLDIER, I can be just like him.

We are assigned to patrol in pairs. Monsters roam abandoned areas between sectors, but luckily I haven’t run into too many yet. The nights are so cold as I walk the streets with my partner, even way over here in Midgar. The gloves the company gives us are too thin for this kind of weather. Within an hour I can barely feel my fingers on the metal of my rifle. Sometimes we get snow up on top, but the slums don’t get any precipitation because the plate acts like a big umbrella. Strange, isn’t it?

ShinRA headquarters has been busy lately. A group of terrorists called AVALANCHE have been making a lot of trouble and the higher ups have been discussing how to deal with them. There have been a lot of meetings, none of which I attend of course. The terrorists recently seized control of the big mako cannon in Junon, saying that harvesting mako is hurting the planet. Sephiroth was sent to deal with them. I don’t think we’ll be seeing the last of AVALANCHE any time soon. When ShinRA
decides to send Sephiroth out to deal with a situation, you know it’s important.

Do you think they’re right about the planet?

Cloud

… … …

εγλ 0001, March 1

Cloud,

Has it been getting warmer? I know you’re used to the cold from living up here in the mountains your whole life, but it makes me sad to think of patrolling the scary slums with frozen fingers. How do you protect yourself from the scary people? I hope you don’t have to use your weapon on human beings.

It’s been such a difficult winter. There’s been snow much snow that we haven’t even been able to trade with any nearby villages and have had to take caution to make sure to ration food properly. But everyone’s fine, we’re making out well for the most part. Papa has been cooped up in his workshop since the snow drifts are too high to bring out his sleigh to cut wood. Mrs. Nelson is due to have another baby next month, and he’s been building her a lovely rocking chair. It’s got fine carvings etched into the wooden backing and it sways back and forth so smoothly. I don’t think I inherited his talent to use my hands for beautiful things. These days, my fists have been used for fighting monsters.

If what Zangan says is right, I think that AVALANCHE may have reason to think that way. Remember how the top of Mt. Nibel was grey and dead? Maybe it has something to do with the mako reactor up there. Papa used to cut wood up that way and over the years more and more of the plant life mountain has withered away. I’m afraid that one day, it’ll reach Nibelheim and we won’t be able to grow any food. You don’t think that’ll happen, do you?

Lately, so many monsters have been coming down from Mt. Nibel and threatening the village. Do you think hunger drives them down towards us? Part of me thinks this is scary and makes me worry about our safety, but another part of me finds a thrill in fighting alongside my teacher. I’m finally using my skills to protect people, just like I always wanted to do! Putting all my skills into action makes me realize why Zangan took so much care in teaching me all the little things that I didn’t understand before. I hope you’ll have a chance to use all the new skills you’re learning in the military. But please, be safe.

Thank you for writing to me, I know it must be hard to find the time.

I miss you,

Tifa

… … …

εγλ 0001, March 23

Tifa,

Things have been busy but don’t worry—I’ll always find time to write. It’s so nice to get letters from
you because it helps to remind me why I’m struggling along every day. I haven’t really made many friends so staying connected with you, even if just by mail, reassures me that my best friend is still invested in me.

Physical training is tough, even after six months. The other cadets are older than me for the most part and they certainly aren’t the friendliest bunch. In fact, most people in the city are distant and cold. On top of the plate, most ignore you when you pass by on the street. Weird, huh? What would be considered rude back home is just the norm, here. In the slums, I’m the one usually trying to avoid speaking to people. Those who live under the plate really don’t like ShinRA. They think that the company is responsible for the state of poverty and disarray down there. I dread my patrol shifts because people see me in my uniform and immediately want to pick fights, even though my rifle is in plain view.

Don’t tell Mom about that. She’s got enough to worry about.

I just came back from my first big mission outside of Midgar. I was told that I was accompanying a SOLDIER operative to Modeoheim and to my surprise, it was Zack! I had my helmet on, hoping maybe he wouldn’t recognize me from teaching my block their patrol routes. But when he told me he was from the middle of nowhere like we are, I finally found the courage to introduce myself. Zack had some business to take care of, and I tried to help but ended up being no match for our enemy—a rogue first class SOLDIER. After being injured, I blacked out and couldn’t see what happened. Zack managed to take control of the situation and everything was alright in the end. I was so groggy after that! I barely remember the trip back to Midgar and before I knew it, I was in the infirmary. Don’t worry, I’m just fine.

When I see how strong and confident Zack is, it inspires me to keep working hard toward my goal of being a SOLDIER, too. I want to be a hero like him, and Sephiroth too. Two first class SOLDIERS were just reported as killed in action. I’m sure you’ll read about it in the papers. Now that I work for ShinRA, I’m beginning to see that what’s published in the newspapers isn’t always true. The company owns the press, so they can spin information any way they want. Scary, isn’t it? ShinRA does a lot of things that they aren’t proud of, then cover them up. Maybe your mother had the right idea about them.

You want me to be careful and you’re the one fighting monsters with your fists? I can’t beat monsters on my patrol without my rifle! You’re doing so well and I’m proud of you. Is your father treating you alright? I worry about that. When I come back as a SOLDIER, I hope it’ll change his opinion of me. I’m sorry it’s taking me longer to get there than I thought. They said I need to gain weight before I can even apply for the audition. Winter is almost over, Tifa. Keep your chin up until then.

Don’t forget—I love you.

Cloud

… … …

She read the last few lines of the letter over and over again, committing each word to memory. Tifa took her time as she neatly folded the letter and pulled the book of sheet music from the self so she could store it in her growing collection. Her soul sighed in contentment, for absence did indeed make the heart grow fonder. She had thought of Cloud constantly since he had left for his new life and had been so excited to know he had seen the ocean and wanted to take her there someday! Only being able to connect with someone by mail was as frustrating as it was romantic. She yearned to feel the press of his palm against hers or see that shy smile upon his face. But for now, the letters would have to do.
Guilt pricked at her heart every time she kept some of the grocery money to pay for the postage of her secret letters to Cloud, but this was important. Cloud was her hope for the future and the positivity of his letters gave her incentive to push through the grey atmosphere of her home and chase away the bitter chill of a hard, mountain winter.

Now early April, there was still snow on the ground that refused to melt and the temperature hovered just above freezing at midday. Tifa had been cooped up with her father more than usual due to the harshness of the season. Papa was drinking less, since many of the mountain roads had been closed off for weeks at a time with the accumulation of snow and alcohol was hard to purchase, even at the tavern. When he did drink, Tifa had learned to start playing piano until her fingers grew tired. Every time the notes danced through the house, the man stayed calm in his inebriation and usually ended up reading or falling asleep. In that respect Tifa was able to navigate through life with her father, watching over him like a hidden sentry, searching for behavior patterns to decide how best to chase away her father’s demons. She wasn’t sure if she was healing him or just keeping him subdued and sad rather than angry. Still, she’d drape their warmest blanket over him whenever she took her fingers off the keys to find him asleep in his chair.

Their house was empty of life and hope and peace, but Tifa still felt like she was suffocating.

Her feet took her to the landing and she called out, “Papa?”

No answer. He was gone.

She wandered into the workshop to make sure. Her father had told her that he wanted to marry her off when she turned fifteen, something normal by Nibelheim standards. But her choice for a groom was far away, across the sea. He told her he’d come back and she believed him. With her fourteenth birthday rapidly approaching, Papa would begin searching for marriage prospects. Tifa shivered at the thought of how he’d react if she told him that she was in love with the blonde that he loathed so much. Imagining being married to anyone but Cloud frightened her.

It all seemed bleak, like it was useless to fight against the things that weighed on her spirit. Cloud was facing hardships with positivity, why couldn’t she?

In the end, her relationship with Cloud had allowed Tifa to find some courage. It had been almost a year since the pair agreed to trading secrets freely without fear of judgement or rejection, but the distance and disconnect between them had made her confidence waver. Tifa didn’t realize at first that she had closed herself up like a clam. In his letters, Cloud was honest and open about both good and bad things in his life, breaking his habit of hiding his weaknesses. Guilt pooled in her gut when she thought about how she hid the bad things from him: the agonizing emptiness in her heart, the nights she silently cried out for deliverance, the hollow feeling when she gripped that jingle bell in her palm and wondered if anything would ever be alright again. Tifa knew she was betraying that promise she had made, but she felt safest that way. Cloud’s letters came regularly enough, but she was afraid that if she burdened him with too many of her problems that he’d stop writing all together. Why would he want to come back to her if all she did was fill her letters to him with the desperation that she felt? And so, she strove to keep the content of her letters as lighthearted as possible.

The usual assortment of bottles littered the workspace, and she reached out to pick one up off the shelf. Whiskey was her favorite. Tifa had learned to swallow through the burn and she enjoyed how just a couple sips would make a slight pleasant haze blanket her mind and relax her heart. The fear of being caught or ending up in an angry rage kept her little tastings to a minimum; yet another dirty little secret that she hid from Cloud. She was learning quite a bit about alcohol. Papa would mix them together sometimes. He liked rum or bourbon with some hot apple cider to chase away the chill in his bones after helping to shovel snow. Ginger ale was a favored vessel for gin or vodka. Something in her was fascinated by the way a simple mixture of liquids could manipulate a person to tranquility or
The smell of wood stain hung heavily in the air. On the workbench sat Papa’s latest order, a large clock that was to run on battery power. She ran her fingers over the numbers, crafted in carefully carved birch wood and sanded to smooth perfection. Other odds and ends cluttered the room: a half finished coat rack, spare wagon wheels, an intricately carved coffee table, among other things. Her father had a purpose. His craft helped people in their daily lives in one way or another. Even though the man spent a good deal of his time sleeping or drinking alone, his talent had never died.

When one day, Papa grew old and died, the fruits of his skills would continue to be useful. As much as she loved learning martial arts from Zangan, Tifa wondered if she had chosen a meaningful craft to apprentice in. She examined her knuckles, bruised and scabbed from fighting off monsters in the icy cold. Would these hands ever make a difference in this world?
Haiku

Cloud had read Tifa’s letter over so many times that the papers were wrinkled and creased in his hands. He was trying not to panic. How naïve he had been to feel like there was some sort of security in his plan. Tifa had told him that her father was looking to arrange her marriage this year and Cloud had been completely unprepared for that. Judging by the manner in which Tifa had written him, it seemed like she had been taken by surprise as well. As much as she tried to reassure him that everything was alright, Cloud knew her well enough to read her distress between the seemingly upbeat lines of handwriting. He loved her, and she loved him. Most things in his life were obscure and shrouded in uncertainty, but this was one truth that shone bright and clear. If Cloud was honest with himself, the gentle girl at home with ruby eyes and enchanting smile was the anchor that held him fast to his resolve. It was always comforting to think of her when the bullying was too much or his muscles felt too sore to endure another day’s training. Carter had finally got his wish and been forced to resign after his intentional lackluster performance in all areas of his training, and Cloud couldn’t fight against the suffocating loneliness of his day to day life. He’d give anything to have Tifa here to welcome him home after a hard day and reassure him in that soothing voice that everything would be alright in the end.

A single rain drop stained the paper and he looked up at the grey sky. From his perch atop an empty set of bleachers, Cloud had a clear view of two dozen second and third class SOLDIERs as they practiced fencing on the grassy field of the training grounds. The men hollered and grunted with exertion, swinging their oversized swords and laughing every once in a while when they managed to fell a comrade or began to goof off. Normally, a first class SOLDIER organized the training sessions and their mere presence kept order among the subordinates. From the handful of these sessions that Cloud had observed, Sephiroth had never been burdened with this task. It was usually the tall, black haired man that he had seen Zack with outside the ShinRA building so long ago. According to the company wide message on his PHS, two first class SOLDIERs—Angeal and Genesis—had been reported to be killed in action after he returned from his mission to Modeoheim. The small handful of first class SOLDIERS had taken a massive hit.

Who was overseeing today’s fencing session?

Cloud looked carefully, eyes running over the troop for a few minutes before he spotted the black garb of a first class SOLDIER on a man almost hidden by the lamp post he leaned against. The sight of black spikes made his eyes widen. Zack! He had been promoted! He hadn’t seen him since their formal introduction during last week’s mission. Since then, Cloud had been meaning to seek him out and thank him for his kindness and to apologize for ending up being more of a burden than an assistant. Shyness had made him procrastinate and he couldn’t seem to find the right words to say. But maybe congratulating Zack on his promotion might be a good way to start a conversation. Neatly folding Tifa’s letter into the pocket of his pants, he decided that he had to try.

“Enough!” Zack shouted, and the troops almost immediately fell out of their battle stances and sparring matches. “Go hit the showers. Lunch is in twenty.”

Helmets obscured their eyes, but the SOLDIERS grinned and happily trotted towards the building, chatting and touting their weapons. Cloud scrambled down the bleachers in hopes of catching Zack before he disappeared as well. After another morning of teasing and the usual mild torture from his barrack mates, the blonde’s heart thudded with optimism in his chest. Zack was always happy and upbeat, and it was very contagious. He sure could use a dose of optimism. Sword firmly on his back, the raven haired man slogged along at quite a distance behind the others. Smiling, Cloud jogged to catch up.
“Excuse me, Sir!”

The first class SOLDIER slowed his steps and turned to look over his shoulder. He stopped and faced the young man striding towards him in ShinRA grunt attire. Cloud tried not to pant as he came to a stop and snapped to attention with a crisp salute. Blue eyes widened as he studied Zack’s features. He barely recognized him! His hair was slicked back and a little shorter than it had been in Modoheim, and there was now a scar on his left cheek. The biggest change, however, was his expression. Usually bright eyed and cheery, the man looked sullen and sad. There were shadows under his eyes.

“At ease,” the SOLDIER said, before putting a hand on his hip and leaning forward and letting a smile visit his face. “Cloud? Hey, how’s it going?”

Cloud let his posture slip into a more casual stance. “I wanted to congratulate you on your promotion to first class…and to thank you for your kindness. I’m sorry I wasn’t of much help on our mission.”

“It wasn’t your fault, those guys were pretty tough. Even I had trouble – mako infused and all. And thanks… it’s been my dream to get here ever since I was a kid.”

“Me, too. I came here to become a hero like Sephiroth, but I’m not sure if I can. I couldn’t even meet the requirements to audition.”

Zack leaned forward and put a hand on Cloud’s pauldron. “Don’t give up, you can do it. Keep trying, Cloud.”

As unprofessional as it was, Cloud couldn’t stop a beaming smile from forming on his face. Since the day he was born, he could count the number of people who encouraged him on one hand. There were even less who truly believed him. Hearing a first class SOLDIER tell him that he could one day become a legend like Sephiroth made him feel like he really could make something of himself. He needed to climb the ranks and he needed to do it fast. He had left Nibelheim to prove to himself and others that he was more than a worthless bastard child.

Cloud left everything dear and familiar behind in hopes of returning a hero and impressing Mr. Lockhart enough to ask for Tifa’s hand in marriage. He had never had the pleasure of living in the household of a happily married couple, but left to his own imagination he pictured the partnership as a blessing and treasure. Coming home to the comfort and encouragement of his best friend after a hard day of bullying and training sounded like bliss. He’d have someone to lie down beside at night, welcoming arms to wrap around him and protect him from the harshness of life. Cloud yearned to be able to talk about the burdens of his soul. Tifa would listen with her patient heart, easing his troubled mind with the warmth of her smile.

What was the point of being a first class SOLDIER if he lost the most important person in his life to another man? Could he really win against almost impossible odds and join the elite operative force by the time Tifa turned fifteen? He had to try, because his life really did depend on it.

Shyly, Cloud drew his eyes off of Zack’s face to rest on the hilt and pommel of the sword over the man’s right shoulder. “Hey, is that a new sword?”

Zack drew back slowly. “Yeah. My mentor gave it to me.”

“Angeal?”

“That’s right.”

Zack’s eyebrows drew together and Cloud immediately regretted the carelessness of his subject
choice. Desperately, the blonde wracked his brain for something else to talk about but Zack beat him to it.

“Hey, let’s get some lunch. You want to be in SOLDIER, huh?” He smacked Cloud on the back and led him forward. “Well, I’ll tell you all about the hell you’ll go through when you get there!“

… … …

εψλ 0001, April 14

Cloud,

The snow is finally starting to melt which is a relief, since I can’t stand being cooped up in this house for much longer. Even though I’ve been out and about with Master Zangan fighting monsters often, I feel restless these days. I’ve been training so much and it’s been a great outlet for my energy. Master has me learning to break through brick with my elbow. I wasn’t sure about it at first, but then I remembered how silly I was to be afraid to break wood boards last year. After all this time, I still get nervous when in an actual battle. Why can’t I have confidence in myself? I’ve been learning martial arts for just about six years now, and I can’t seem to muster up the courage I need when fighting the things that threaten the village. What’s wrong with me? Master says it takes time to adjust. Maybe I’m just a little slower than his other pupils were in this area.

I’ve been walking the mountain paths often—the paths that we used to take together. I miss you so much and I can’t stop thinking about you as I sit at our spot near the creek or watch the new grass growing in the meadow. Aside from random attacks by monsters, life in Nibelheim is as quiet as ever. I’ve been staying at home less and spending more time out on the mountain, with Master Zangan, or with your mother instead. She’s been teaching me a lot of her cooking secrets, and I’ve shared my mother’s recipes with her as well. She teaches me so many things and I’m so grateful for her.

Say, Cloud…when do you think you’ll come home for a visit? We miss you.

Papa looks old, these days. There are little speckles of grey in his beard and in his hair that weren’t there last year. I know that happens when you get old, but he really isn’t that old and it makes me worry about him. It must be hard to be an adult. He works all day and sometimes long into the night on his orders so that we can have money to live by. I’m sure it must be stressful to have such responsibility and that makes him cranky sometimes. I’m afraid to grow up, Cloud. Papa is strong and smart. If growing old did that to him, what would it do to someone like me? I guess I’ve always been a little afraid to grow up. But maybe it won’t be so scary because we’ll do it together, right?

I miss you, my friend.

I’m still waiting here for you.

Your vow gives me hope.

Love,

Tifa

… … …

Cloud loathed helicopters almost as much as he loathed being on a ship. By the time he had taken his first shaky steps onto the helipad in Junon, the world was spinning and his stomach roiled. Why did this always happen to him? None of the other infantrymen seemed to feel this way. The other
members of his squad rushed past him into the chaos of the streets.

Junon was under attack by a strange unknown army, setting ShinRA’s military in a panic. Whether or not the enemy forces were AVALANCHE or some other anti-ShinRA organization, he didn’t know. All Cloud knew was that he and his company were supposed to escort as many civilians to safety outside the harbor city as quickly as possible. There were tank-like pieces of machinery, small scale explosions and enemy forces littering the streets. SOLDIER operatives had been dispatched to fight while low level grunts like him were responsible for less dangerous tasks. If he wasn’t feeling so sick, the battle around him may have frightened him some. Dizzy and unsteady, Cloud did his best to carry out his task with dignity. The glances from his fellow squad mates were less concerned and more annoyed as he frequently steadied his queasy body with a hand against the wall or slowed his steps as the world lurched and spun. Everything inside him screamed for him to be still, but disobeying orders would not be tolerated—especially if Cloud wanted to maintain his perfect record to qualify him for a SOLDIER candidate.

After half an hour of guiding civilians to evacuate the city by ShinRA truck, bus or even boats, Cloud’s knees began to shake as his head continued to spin. There was a lull in the action and the intensity of the battle had waned significantly. The SOLDIERs must have been doing their job well, and Cloud took advantage of the momentary quiet. His helmet felt smothering and he removed it with haste. A wave of nausea washed over him and he leaned an arm against the side of a building, slumping forward and praying for the strength to get through this and carry on before he gave the others more ammo to torment him with. He breathed deeply, willing his stomach to settle down. No matter how hard he tried, Cloud always felt completely useless on his assignments. It was hard to fight against the feeling that maybe he wasn’t meant for this and that he should just give up and go back home. At least at home, there were two friendly faces waiting to see him.

Aside from his own failure to perform, there was additional unease in his heart over his employment with ShinRA. Tifa had written to him about the mako reactor being the possible reason for the deterioration of Mt. Nibel, and he remembered how the brown soil and lush evergreens had slowly degraded into grey gravel and wooden skeletons. Was he really doing the right thing, working for the people responsible for that? Would it be worth it to be a SOLDIER? Cloud was torn between the need to prove himself and the nagging of his morality.

Those last few lines of Tifa’s latest letter echoed through his head. Far away, over the sea, she navigated her lonesome life by clinging to the hope that he’d return. He had spent the previous afternoon asking questions to the secretary of the personnel department before he could begin to formulate a plan. All new recruits had to finish the initial probationary service period of six months before being registered as a full time employee. After a year or full time employment with the company, he’d be entitled to full benefits, including vacation time. Cloud’s probation had ended in March, meaning that he wouldn’t get to take any leave until next April—a whole year from now. If he played his cards right and managed to attract an enormous amount of luck, maybe he would make SOLDIER by then. Then, he’d travel across the sea to hopefully marry Tifa when she turned fifteen and take her away from Nibelheim and all the ghosts that lingered there. Maybe he could eventually rescue his mother from that life, too.

But now, as he leaned against the wall, Cloud’s confidence evaporated like dew under the midday sun. He could barely even carry out the responsibilities of an ordinary ShinRA grunt, let alone a SOLDIER’s tasks. The challenges ahead seemed insurmountable and hopelessness threatened to close in on his heart.

“Hey, are you alright?”

“Y-yeah. On the helicopter, I got a little nauseous.” Cloud answered, still in a queasy haze. He took
one more deep breath before straightening and turning to look towards the voice. His face burned with embarrassment when he saw who it was.

“Hey, Cloud! What do you know! Funny running into you here.” Zack leaned back with his hands on his hips and smile on his face. “I’m happy to be working with you again.”

“Yeah, although my work is a little dull.”

“What are you talking about? Rescue work is an important task! Anyway, once we’re all done, let’s grab a bite to eat—my treat!”

Cloud blinked for a second, unable to comprehend why in the world a first class SOLDIER would continue to be so friendly towards a loser like him. The unending torment by his fellow cadets had taught him to be wary of seemingly innocent kindness.

In the few encounters he’d had with Zack, the man always seemed to be genuine and transparent with his intentions. Swallowing against the lingering nausea, he decided to trust him.

“Really? That’s be great! Once I’m feeling better, I’d love to go. But I can’t even think of food right now…ugh. Sorry, Zack.”

With a bellowing laugh, Zack slapped his back with a grin. “Haha, don’t worry about it! Hope you feel better. Give me your PHS number and I’ll message you about it after all this settles.”

After exchanging numbers, Zack went on his way. Cloud was happy to see that after the sadness of losing his mentor, he was beginning to bounce back to his usual jovial self. The dizziness was fading and he felt a little more steady on his feet, but all Cloud noticed was the lightness of his heart.

… … …

When Zack had invited him out for a bite to eat, he didn’t expect to have company. Apparently, they were being joined by large group of other young SOLDIERs and infantrymen looking to celebrate yesterday’s successful mission in Junon. Now nearing eight in the evening, they all moved in a herd to the station to take the train down to the slums and visit a favorite hang-out spot: The Green Goose.

The popular bar was known amongst the cadets for its scantily clad waitresses and loose carding system. Following along in his military blues, Cloud wisely chose to forgo wearing his helmet at the thought of how being among the others in the hot, packed train car would make his stomach turn.

After a few stops, the train rolled to a halt at the Sector Six station and the rowdy bunch moved out into the chilly, foul air of the slums.

Although Cloud was unfamiliar with Sector Six, his weekly patrols of Sector Seven had conditioned his sensitive lungs to adjust to the oppressive, smog filled atmosphere. The streets were filled with people of all shapes and sizes, pushing past each other on their way to their destinations, and Cloud immediately felt mildly claustrophobic. Half a pace behind the others, he quickened his strides to keep up. Getting lost or left behind in a place like this would be bad news, especially as a ShinRA lackey amongst a sea of people oppressed by that very company. Zack’s towering height and the giant sword on his back made it easy for Cloud to see him. The blonde pushed his way forward until he was next to the first class SOLDIER, who was chatting merrily with a second class next to him.

The second class SOLDIER noticed Cloud first and elbowed Zack in the ribs. “Hey, you know this kid, right?”

Zack’s blue eyes brightened when he saw his little fair haired friend. “Yeah! Kusel, this is Cloud.”

They continued to weave through the crowd as they made their brief introductions. Cloud snuck a
glance up at Kunsel and was almost thankful that the SOLDIER’s mako eyes were hidden under his helmet. There was something eerie about their gentle glow and unnatural brightness that made a feeling of unease settle in his gut. Kunsel just nodded in his direction before facing forward again.

“Man, Wall Market just keeps on getting worse and worse. Why’d I let you talk me into coming here?”

“Aw, come on! We’re here to celebrate! I told Cloud that we’d go out.” Cloud felt Zack give his shoulder an affectionate shove. “You came so I could trust you to take these guys back up top before they get too wasted.”

“Me?” Kunsel balked. “You organized this outing! Where are you going?”

“To see my girlfriend in Sector Five. After a few drinks with you guys, of course!”

Kunsel huffed with annoyance and Cloud’s heart sank. Zack was going to leave him with these clowns? At least Kunsel seemed level headed. What he thought would be a one-on-one outing with someone he looked up to had turned into maybe a few minutes to chat with Zack before he ran out on them.

“Yeah, the bartender will give you whatever you want with your sweet talking. She knows you’re underage.”

“I’ll be turning seventeen soon! Then I’ll only be a year underage! What does it matter, anyway? They never card SOLDIERS.”

The second class SOLDIER sighed and Cloud stole a glance at Zack’s grin. Zack had a girlfriend in the slums? At least Kunsel seemed level headed. What he thought would be a one-on-one outing with someone he looked up to had turned into maybe a few minutes to chat with Zack before he ran out on them.

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“I’ll be turning seventeen soon! Then I’ll only be a year underage! What does it matter, anyway? They never card SOLDIERS.”

The second class SOLDIER sighed and Cloud stole a glance at Zack’s grin. Zack had a girlfriend in the slums? Thoughts of birthdays and girlfriends brought Tifa to mind. The third of May was a date etched into his mind and it was rapidly approaching; she would be turning fourteen in a matter of days.

The hustle and bustle around them seemed to be from shoppers who circled through the haphazardly arranged assortment of stores that were little more than roughly construed tents. Vendors shouted about sale prices, selling everything from food to housewares and even materia. Cloud’s eyes caught on the little spheres of various colors as he passed by. Materia were little orbs of crystallized mako that allowed one to cast spells. As part of his military training, he was learning to use multiple kinds of battle worthy materia—like fire and lightning spells. They were useful for other things, too, like healing of certain wounds. It had all been so new to him when Cloud had first come to Midgar; he had never seen materia used in Nibelheim.

Something was sparkling at the adjacent tent that prompted him to shift his gaze. A jeweler sat behind a table of various necklaces, bracelets and earrings. A few women crowded around to inspect quality and prices. Maybe Tifa would like something? He never knew her to wear jewelry, but maybe that was because she didn’t have any. ShinRA’s salary for their low ranking military employees was modest, at best, but Cloud had been adamant about saving his earnings. Unlike the others, he usually spent his free time working out or studying for exams. Since the scores on his placement exams were so high, he was now taking more advanced courses. Cloud hoped that testing out of the easier classes might help him graduate faster, since the salary of a private was more than the stipend of a cadet, and he’d need money if he was going to take Tifa away from Nibelheim.

“Hey, Zack?”

“Hm?”
“Would you wait for me? I just need to grab something from the vendor,” Cloud said as he motioned toward the jewelry. A smirk slowly lit up Zack’s features.

“Oh? You’ve got a girlfriend, huh?”

“Sort of.”

Zack followed behind Cloud. Watching them go, Kunsel called out to his friend. “We’re going on ahead, see you there!”

Zack smiled and waved them off before turning his attention back to his blonde friend, who was busy running his eyes over the selection of jewelry.

“You never told me you had a girlfriend! For a guy who’d rather study then socialize, you can pick up a girl pretty easy, huh?”

“You didn’t tell me about your girlfriend, either. And it’s not like that—I grew up with her. She’s back home in Nibelheim.” Cloud paused to examine some silver bangles. “It’s her birthday soon. I want to send her a present.”

“What’s her name?”

“Tifa…” The name rolled off his tongue like a sigh. “Tifa Lockhart.”

“How about this?” Zack suggested, picking up a flashy pink pendant. Cloud shook his head immediately.

“Nah, she’s not really the gaudy type.”

The vendor, who had been quietly listening to their conversation, searched through her wares to find something that might be suitable. Boys never really knew what they were looking for when it came to jewelry.

“How about these?” she suggested, holding out a pair of silver teardrop earrings. “Pure silver—they’ll last a lifetime! They’re fashionable and stylish, but still modest.”

After examining the jeweler’s suggestion, Cloud nodded with a small smile. Zack whistled when Cloud forked over the gil.

“Silver earrings, huh? She’s a lucky girl! You’re going to make the rest of the girls back home really jealous.”

Cloud didn’t tell him that there really were no other girls his age back home. Even if there were, he was sure none of them would have ever given him the time of day. He tucked the earrings carefully into a pocket of his fatigues before prompting Zack forward.

“Come on, let’s go catch up with the others.”

“Word of advice: keep your hands in your pockets if you don’t want your wallet stolen!” Zack winked and strode off toward the bar, Cloud scuttling along behind him.

Cloud didn’t know what he expected a bar would be like, but the illustration he had built in his mind based on the descriptions from fellow cadets seemed to be pretty accurate. The Green Goose was a medium sized concrete structure a little off the beaten path of Wall Market. He had followed Zack through the doors and into a large, dimly lit room with a dozen tables and large bar. The crowd was
of a modest size, likely because it was still early in the evening. The music was loud, but not
deafening, and Cloud immediately picked up the sound of the laughter and conversations of his
fellow military men. They were all bunched at the counter ordering food or drinks, but Zack led him
over to table near the wall on the far side.

After some mild flirting with the waitress, Zack ordered food for the both of them at Cloud’s request.
New to life in Midgar, many of the items on the menu were still pretty foreign to him. ShinRA’s
cafeteria usually served the same rotation of items on a monthly basis, all cooked or steamed to be the
most nutritionally sound. Cloud had scarcely eaten a meal that wasn’t given to him by the company,
so the fried foods that were so common underneath the plate were unfamiliar to him. Usually, the
greasy morsels made him feel sick and he often found himself craving his mother’s cooking.

“Have you been here yet? They’ve got the best burgers.”

Cloud shrugged. “I haven’t really been anywhere, if it wasn’t part of patrol.”

“Aw, come on! We’ve got to get you out more. How else are you supposed to get used to the big
city?” Zack asked as their drinks arrived.

“I don’t have time for fooling around, Zack. I’ve been studying and training extra hard so I can even
have a shot at getting into SOLDIER.” He took sip of the drink and the carbonation made him draw
back with surprise. “What is this?”

“Root beer. Good, right?”

“Beer? I can’t have beer, I’m underage!” Cloud said, alarmed eyes snapping up to meet Zack’s.

He was still adjusting to this whole ‘age of adulthood’ thing in Midgar. All of his life, he was treated
as though he was responsible for his own actions and aside from marriage only being for those
fifteen and older, there were little restrictions. It was hard for him to understand why here on the
eastern continent, you weren’t trusted with so many things until one turned eighteen, like that age
magically made an individual mature. But when it came to alcohol, Cloud wasn’t sure if he’d ever
want to try any. His stomach churned when he remembered how it made Tifa’s father act.

“Relax! There’s nothing in it, it’s just a sugary drink.” Zack grinned at Cloud’s frightened face.

“Good. If I got caught, that’d ruin my chances for applying with a perfect record.” The blonde
brought the glass back to his lips while mentally organizing the many questions he had for Zack. He
was so lucky that the SOLDIER had decided to spend a few private minutes with him, forsaking the
rest of the group. He was going to make good use of it!

“Could you tell me what they made you do when you auditioned for SOLDIER? How hard was it?”

Zack paused to think before getting momentarily distracted by the arrival of their meals. He
swallowed his bite of burger before speaking. “The audition was an all day long affair. We had to
run two miles in eleven minutes, do an exhausting amount of pushups, pull ups, situps…the normal
kind of stuff. We had to do a five hundred yard swim in nine minutes, I think. Tough stuff, but you
can do it if you try!”

Cloud stared at his own burger, choosing to eat a wedge of fried potato instead. How did Zack have
so much confidence in him? The dark haired teen was tall and muscular, the perfect SOLDIER
physique. His optimism and eagerness to help others made him a perfect hero. Zack seemed like the
type of man who could change the world blindfolded while someone like Cloud could cry out again
and again without ever being heard. Cloud never expected to fit in, so he was astonished that the
SOLDIER seemed to be ignorant of Cloud’s shortcomings and inadequacy. The blonde tried to take comfort in Zack’s encouragement but always found himself puzzling over why such a popular guy seemed so willing to show him kindness. At sixteen, Zack was huge. Cloud was only fourteen and still had time to grow, but it seemed unlikely that he’d ever get nearly as big as his friend.

“How do they require a certain height and weight for the audition? Why does that matter?”

“Eh, it has something to do with the mako therapy. I guess you have to be a certain size or bigger to handle the mako injections—something like that.” Noticing the strained look on his subordinate’s face, Zack leaned in closer. “What is it?”

“I’m really struggling with my physical training,” Cloud said softly, averting his eyes and playing with his napkin. “I practice and practice, even in my spare time, but it’s not enough. I’ve only got a year to make it into SOLDIER and at this rate, I’m not sure I can do it.”

“What’s the big deal? If you don’t make SOLDIER, no one’s going to behead for it.”

“You don’t understand. I, uh…” he trailed off, absently running his hands over the little jewelry box in his pocket. “Someone else’s future is riding on this.”

The day she turned fourteen, Tifa skipped her daily martial arts training. She let herself sleep until long after Papa had left for the day, wrapped up in the comfort of her blanket cocoon. The night before she had tossed and turned as she faded in and out of strange dreams. The only one she remembered was of her mother, floating on the snow drifts of Mt. Nibel against a grey sky. She vividly recalled the warmth in her wine colored eyes and her long hair swaying as the snowflakes blew in the wind. Her round cheeks were rosy on her perfect oval face as she smiled. Tifa tried to step towards her as she turned away into the storm.

The image remained before her eyes as she rose from her bed to wash her face. She stared at her reflection for a long time after she had put the wash cloth on the edge of the sink. When she was young, everyone would tell her how much she looked like Lia, but she had never noticed how her mother’s delicate features adorned her face until now. There was a gentle Wutaian slope to her deep, red eyes and her thick black curtain of hair was now as long as Mama’s had been before she died. The only thing that was missing was Lia’s serene smile, but Tifa couldn’t muster the strength to wear one herself.

She had been able to push thoughts of Mama to the back of her mind for months, instead focusing on her training and wondering about her future. There had to be more to life than this. She tore herself away from the mirror long enough to comb her hair and get dressed. There was somewhere she needed to be.

Mr. Ackerman had sheared his flock of sheep yesterday. Several large sacks of wool now sat on Claudia’s back steps, waiting to be cleaned and carded. Her neighbor had asked her to stop by and help her if she had the time, and Tifa had agreed in a heartbeat. After all Ms. Strife had done for her, she was happy to give anything back that she could. After a quiet lunch of bread and cheese, she donned a pair of her mother’s shoes before walking out of the house and over to Claudia’s to knock on her door.

“Tifa!” The blonde smiled wide upon seeing her. “Come in! I’m so happy to see you!”

The scent of baked sweets beckoned the girl inside. Claudia momentarily blocked her way further into the house and brought her hand up to cover Tifa’s eyes.

“Alright, I know I said I needed help with the wool—and I do—but this is the real reason why I
invited you over today." She guided Tifa into the kitchen and uncovered her eyes once the girl was in place. “Happy birthday, Tifa!”

Tifa peeked her eyes open to see a birthday cake on the kitchen table. The layered confection sat upon a pretty little plate, richly iced with vanilla and little frosting flowers adorning the top. Tifa opened her mouth to thank her neighbor for her thoughtfulness, but shut it again as she felt tears prickling at her eyes. Fleeting memories flashed before her: her parents singing happy birthday and telling her to make a wish before blowing out the candles, Mama walking Cloud home with two slices of her birthday cake, Papa’s gift of a brightly painted birdhouse. She remembered how much she had been afraid at the thought of leaving her mother and father when she grew up and felt a pang of guilt knowing that now she constantly sought new reasons for staying out of the house. Tifa recalled how the feel of her mother’s body used to heal every trouble of her little soul. She had wanted so much to retain the happy family life that she had all those years ago, yet somehow it had all tumbled out of control. These days, she felt as if she had no control over her circumstances. Sometimes, in the quiet of the night, she would feel as if Mama had abandoned her here to fight alone against her father’s issues.

None of it was fair. How much would she give to have her back again?

“Tifa?” Claudia’s brows furrowed as she put a hand on the girl’s shoulder. “Are you alright?”

“Oh, yes,” Tifa lied, wiping her eyes with the back of her wrist. “I’m just overwhelmed by your thoughtfulness. Thank you so much, Ms. Strife. Thank you for everything.”

“Now, now—today’s a day for celebrating you, not me!” The fair haired woman struck a match to light the lone little candle atop the cake. “I’ll save you the embarrassment of singing for you, but you still have to make a wish!”

Tifa watched the tiny flame flicker atop the candle wick. A wish, huh? What was it she wanted most in this life? Deciding to be selfish, she closed her eyes and wished for three things: that Cloud would come back and marry her, that Papa would love her again and that one day, she and Cloud could have children of their own to treat with all the fairness and kindness they had wished for in the days of their childhood. If such wishes ever came true, maybe she could start to feel whole again. Sucking in a breath, Tifa blew the candle out. Claudia grinned with a little cheer and cut Tifa a large slice of cake.

“Eat up! You’ll need the sugar rush for helping me wash all that wool!”

… … …

The softness of her nightgown felt good against her skin and her long, damp hair draped over her shoulder. Fresh out of the bath and free of the scent of dirty wool and lanolin, Tifa sighed as her muscles relaxed. She curled her legs underneath her on the piano bench, staring at the small package sitting atop the ivory keys.

It had been as enjoyable of a birthday as she could have hoped for. She and Ms. Strife had eaten way too much cake in between sessions of rinsing wool again and again in basins of water in the back yard. By the time they had finished cleaning the last bunch of wool, the first had already dried and was ready for carding. Occupied with tending to the wool, Claudia asked Tifa to run across town square to the postbox to see if the hand carders she ordered had come in. To her surprise, a small package with her name on it was waiting in the Lockhart cubby.

She smiled, for she only ever got mail from one person.
Cloud’s letters came often enough and she took comfort in the positivity and sincerity of his words, but she missed the tangibility of his presence. Tifa yearned for the feeling of his hand in hers and the giddiness in her heart from that small gesture of affection. She wanted to see his shy smile and hear him tug on the jingle bell’s twine, unknowingly chasing away the howling guilt and creeping shadows that kept sleep from finding her in the middle of the night. These days, her connection with Cloud was so drastically different than it ever had been and it left her unsatisfied. Communicating only through writing made Tifa feel as if she and Cloud were blindly reaching out to one another through a thick fog. She couldn’t ever see his face and the inconsistency of their communication as if their fingers were brushing as they searched for the comfort of each other’s presence. It was so hard not to be able to grasp his wrist and pull him back to her, but for now that monthly snippets of his life would have to do.

Reaching out, she took the package into her hands, neatly picking away the tape and unwrapping the thick, brown paper. Inside was a tiny white box and a note on a scrap of paper, written in Cloud’s messy scrawl.

*Happy 14th birthday, Tifa.*

*If all goes well, I should be back by this day next year.*

*I’ll write to you soon.*

*Cloud*

Different feelings fought for dominance in her heart. His kindness and continued devotion to her seemed like something out of a romantic novel and her heart felt light, if only for a moment. But pangs of desperation pushed through the pleasant thrill of enchantment. Tifa had hoped she would see him soon—that one day he’d show up out of the blue and help her forget about her loneliness for a little while. A year was a long time and her heart clenched painfully at the thought of the dull months ahead. On the bright side, she now knew a definite time frame in which to expect his return. Curiously, she uncovered the white box to reveal a pair of pretty silver earrings. Letting out an awed breath, she inspected them as an involuntary grin bloomed on her face.

She’d wear them every day until she finally saw him again.
The smell of disinfectant hung heavily in the air.

Tifa sat on the toilet seat cover, looking out the open door and watching Claudia at the stove with anxious eyes. Attempting to numb her ear lobe with a cloth full of ice, she waited with a racing heart. The earrings Cloud had bought her were sitting in a tiny bowl of rubbing alcohol on the sink. She couldn’t wait to wear them but dreaded the fact that she’d have to actually pierce her ears. The thought of poking a hot needle through her lobes made her stomach turn with unease. In the kitchen, Ms. Strife was boiling a sharp sewing needle before holding it in the flames for a short while to disinfect it.

“There we are!” the blonde said, blowing at the needle in order to cool it. “Did you wash your ear lobes with the alcohol?”

Tifa mustered a nervous nod. This was ridiculous! She fought monsters with Zangan all the time and here she was, afraid of being poked by a needle! The woman must’ve noticed her reluctance and smoothed a hand over Tifa’s head as she placed a cloth in the girl’s lap.

“Don’t worry, it’ll all be over in seconds!” Setting the needle in the dish of rubbing alcohol, Claudia tied Tifa’s hair back with some twine.

“Y-yeah,” Tifa replied in a voice much weaker than she expected. She removed the ice from her ear while Claudia dried the needle with a cloth and stood at her side.

“Here we go!” Claudia sing-songed.

Tifa closed her eyes and hissed at the immediate jolt of pain. The ice had numbed her somewhat, but not nearly enough!

“There, there. It’s all the way through. See? That’s all!” The woman picked up an earring from the disinfectant and dried it before holding it up for Tifa to see. “My son has good taste, huh?”

Tifa felt her replace the needle with the first earring and concentrated on her breathing to ignore the stinging in her ear and ease her anxious stomach. It was alright; the pain was worth it if it meant she could wear her hope on her ears.

Once both earrings were in, she smiled at her reflection. The dangling silver teardrops made her look mature—more like a young lady than a girl. In fact, her body was still changing. Her hips now flared out in a soft feminine curve, changing the way her clothes fit over her torso. Her breasts were no longer awkward little peaks of flesh but had grown round and full, like those of an adult. Tifa harbored insecurities about her changing body, but found comfort in the fact that no one else would have to see it without the concealing security of clothing. Thankfully, under Claudia’s tutelage, she had grown quite knowledgeable in needlecraft over the past few years. Though she had never yet made herself clothes, she knew how to mend and hem well and could modify the garments she had to fit her appropriately as she grew.

Since the day she received her gift from Cloud, she had pondered what to send him for his birthday in August. After re-reading his letters, she decided to make him a pair of thick wool gloves for all those frigid nights spent patrolling the slums. There was still plenty of wool from the shearing earlier in the month and she had begun working on them as soon as she could. A fresh wave of pain made her squint. Returning the ice to the most recently pierced ear, Tifa exhaled through her nose. What a
relief that this was over with! It had taken her two weeks to get up the nerve to ask Claudia to do this.

“Look how beautiful you are! You’re going to knock him off his feet the next time he sees you,” the woman said and Tifa smiled shyly. “Here, how about some candy to distract you from the pain?”

Tifa’s countenance took on a haunted expression as she watched Claudia pull a lemon drop from her apron pocket and hold it out in offering. She pushed away memories of the scent of laudanum and Mama’s gaunt face trying to smile at her, but nausea rose up in her throat anyway. With great effort, she tore her gaze from the little yellow orb wrapped in cellophane.

“N-no, thank you.”

Knowing she had struck some sort of nerve, Ms. Strife immediately sought to change the subject. She freed Tifa’s hair of the twine, letting it spill in a dark rivulet down the girl’s back. Running her fingers through it, she let out an amused hum.

“I’ve always loved your hair. It’s getting so long! Let me trim your bangs while you’re here, they’re hanging over your eyes.”

“Thank you,” Tifa said, trying her best not to focus on her throbbing earlobes. “Cloud was really nice to send these to me. I’ve already written him to thank him.”

The woman smiled at Tifa’s remark as she fetched the scissors and comb and got to work. In a few quick snips, the job was done. Tifa repressed a chuckle at the thought of Claudia attempting to tame her son’s messy mane.

“And do you miss him?” the girl asked, red eyes turning to look at Claudia as she bent to sweep dark hair off the floor with a whisk broom.

“Every moment.”

………

The girl was clever, he’d give her that. But she had grown much too careless with her secret.

Brian’s eyes had immediately caught on the modest pieces of silver on his daughter’s ears when he came home for dinner. She hustled to and fro, hastily setting the table and retrieving a serving bowl of hot noodles and steamed vegetables from the counter. Tifa had tried to act nonchalant and cover her ears with her hair, but her slightly nervous behavior helped give away the source of her unease. His wife had never pierced her ears; Tifa had to have gotten them from an outside source. There was something bigger going on than just a teenage girl finding new ways to be vain.

“Where did you get those earrings?”

She looked like a frightened animal, frozen there with fear in her big doe eyes with the bread pan clutched in her hands. Pulling her gaze away from his, Tifa recovered enough to set the warm loaf on the table and take her seat. She fixed her eyes on her empty plate.

“Cloud gave them to me for my birthday,” she admitted.

“Is that so?” He kept his tone carefully neutral.

“Yes, Papa.”
Letting out a small huff, he spooned some food onto his plate. His first reaction was to scold her for this. Had she been writing to that kid? How she had ferreted the money for postage, he didn’t know. And how was she supposed to marry a successful young man with a good family if she was being courted by a runt of a teen who was thousands of miles away? Really, he should’ve expected his daughter to pine after her lifelong friend after his departure. But the fact that Cloud was still invested enough in his daughter to send her gifts was disconcerting and detrimental to his plan. Pleased as he was that she had chosen to tell him the truth and save him an investigation, this was all quite troubling.

In a year, his daughter would be of age to marry and escape the stagnant life she endured in their home. He was currently in the process of finding her a suitor, but to his surprise it was much harder than he expected. Of all the well-to-do families he knew in the nearby villages that had sons near Tifa’s age, none of them seemed interested in the girl as a marriage prospect. She had Lia’s beauty, but what young man would want a quiet, withdrawn wife with abnormal strength and fighting skill? The girl could cook but she needed more than that to have her feminine qualities outweigh her indecent reputation as a brawler. Had she never pursued that damned apprenticeship, maybe she wouldn’t be such a social misfit. If her mother hadn’t died, maybe his daughter would’ve learned how to be a proper woman instead of running around in tunics felling beasts with her fists. The very thought made anger rise inside him.

“I’m surprised he has the gil to throw away on trifles like that.”

The girl still hadn’t moved to take any food and Brian realized that she was waiting for him to shout at her. The irritation he felt at her using his money without his consent to contact her little blonde playmate did make his tongue itch to lash out, but he reigned the impulse in and feigned disinterest instead. He had a more effective idea. Brian reached over the table to spoon food on her plate and Tifa glanced upwards.

“Eat up. You look tired.”

Once Tifa was certain that she wouldn’t be scolded, she nodded and relaxed her shoulders as she picked up her fork. “Yeah. My lesson with Master Zangan wore me out, and it was laundry day today.”

“Are your chores too much for you? Let me help.” He watched her suspicious expression with an inward smile. “I’ll take care of shopping for what we need at the dry goods store and getting produce from the carts.”

“Are you sure? I can—”

“No, no. It’s alright.”

Tifa nodded as she raised another forkful of food to her mouth. It would be easy to cut off her contact from Cloud but he’d have to do it in a sly manner. If she caught on that it was him who had severed her connection to the boy, she may grow irrational and more unruly than she already was. Brian couldn’t risk her running off on him or doing something as foolish as eloping. If he could have her mail held at the post office, she’d never know if the Strife boy wrote to her. He knew the exact chest the attic in which to hide Cloud’s letters. By cutting off her access to gil by doing the shopping himself, Tifa wouldn’t have the means to pay for the postage to write to him.

A nagging feeling at the back of his mind made Brian wonder if he was doing the right thing. This was all for her own good, he was sure of it. Cloud had no means to take care of her. Brian had no idea what the kid was doing in Midgar that allowed him to be making enough gil to send Tifa silver jewelry, but he doubted he had amounted to more than a ShinRA grunt or someone’s fool
apprentice. His daughter belonged in a prestigious family, wed to a man with wealth and an honorable lineage. The Strife boy could offer none of those qualities. Tifa looked more and more like her mother every day; she’d have no problem catching a husband by looks alone but reputation was everything in this conservative, mountain community.

“Papa?” The sound of his daughter’s voice snapped him out of his thoughts. “Do you think that maybe we could go and see the ocean one day?”

He was caught off guard by her question, mostly because the girl never seemed like she wanted be in his presence more than absolutely necessary. Tifa had never been out of Nibelheim and he remembered feeling trapped and unhappy in this small, remote village when he was young. His mother was the daughter of a wealthy banker and his father was a master carpenter. They had had enough money to travel abroad but his father’s work tethered him to his workshop, where Brian had spent long hours learning his trade. Itching for adventure, he had left to travel after saving enough gil for a cross country trip. He ended up being gone for four months—two of them spent in Wutai courting Lia.

He had first seen her walking down by the docks with a friend, long black hair flowing in the sea breeze as she laughed. It was her ruby eyes that had made his breath catch in his throat when she looked his way, and Brian had quickly swept in to make conversation. Lia was beautiful, but her enchanting personality was what made him fall for her in the end. Their infatuation had been intoxicating and they quickly agreed to marry. Lia’s father had given him quite a guilt trip about stealing his daughter from him, but the arrangements were made and they were married on the shore with their toes in the sand. After the ceremony, she had grabbed his hand with a carefree laugh and dragged him into the water, romping through the waves in her white, lacy gown. His wife had always been spontaneous like that. They had spent hours playing in the surf and walking the water’s edge before attending their wedding dinner. It had been the best day of his life.

He felt Tifa staring at him, waiting for his answer. The deep red of her eyes made his heart bleed and his stomach drop to his feet.

“I never want to go to the ocean again, Tifa.”

Her lips pressed together as he spoke and she bowed her head to look at her plate once more.

… … …

The sound of metal meeting metal clanged again and again in the training chamber.

Zack thrusted forward repeatedly and it was all Cloud could do to keep up and block. Swordplay was the only class in which the blonde felt confident. He was ranked third in his group after their practical exams the week before and his confidence had undergone a modest boost. Practicing late into the night to perfect what he’d been taught and holding his own against his peers was one thing, but going up against a first class SOLDIER was another thing. For the sake of fairness (and safety), Zack had opted to use the same model of thin, practice blade that Cloud had instead of using his Buster sword. He knew that his friend was going easy on him and he was embarrassed to feel so slow and cumbersome. In class, it was simple enough to display stances or attack types when the sergeant called for him to do so. Fighting his clumsy, inexperienced classmates was also much less of a challenge than even trying to visually keep up with Zack’s movements.

“Hyah!” Zack cried, swinging his blade in from the left. Cloud blocked just in time with a soft grunt.

It didn’t help that he was distracted; he constantly worried about Tifa’s silence. Cloud hadn’t heard from her since she had written to thank him for her birthday gift in May. The summer had stretched
forward and he had sent multiple letters, not once getting a reply, and the more he mused over how uncharacteristic it was of her, the more his concern grew. Now that it was mid-September, it had been four months since she’d written him. What happened? Was she hurt? Mom hadn’t said anything like that in her letters.

Zack advanced again, swinging in a diagonal motion towards Cloud’s shoulder with lightning speed. Cloud blocked without a split second to spare and let out an exasperated gasp.

“How are you so fast?” he asked, short of breath. A bead of sweat trickled down his nose.

“I’m used to fighting with an enormous two handed sword! This little piece of tin is nothing!” The SOLDIER grinned. “The mako treatments helped, too.”

Cloud pushed his blade against his opponent’s, using the momentum to gain some distance between them. As quickly as he could, the blonde attacked with an overhead swing. Zack immediately parried and kicked Cloud’s feet out from under him. The cadet let out a startled yelp when he hit the floor and the blunt tip of Zack’s training sword rested under his chin. Blue eyed flicked up to meet mako infused ones. He had hoped that these one-on-one sessions would help him improve, but all they seemed to be doing was exposing his weaknesses. When he thought about it, he was lucky to have the chance to practice his skills with someone as experienced as Zack. Learning from him would definitely boost his chances of getting into SOLDIER.

“I can’t wait to make SOLDIER. Then I’ll get mako injections and be as strong and fast as you are.”

Rumors had been circulating for weeks about the disappearance of certain first class SOLDIERs and disarray within the program as a whole. He could tell this was all taking its toll on Zack, who had been overwhelmed with missions and mentoring some of the second and third class SOLDIERs. The fact that the man still took the time to hang out or spar with him strengthened Cloud’s fragile self-esteem.

“Eh, it’s alright though. Once you make first, you can help me out.”

After all the harassment and bullying from his fellow cadets, Zack’s kindness and companionship rejuvenated Cloud’s battered spirit. He met the older man’s gaze with a smile.

Despite his mentor’s death and the apparent disarray of his career, Zack was always kind, always optimistic and always found the time to spend with him. Although only two years his senior, Cloud felt as if his dark haired friend was in another league entirely. He had such a remarkable spirit that it seemed as if there was nothing he couldn’t do. Zack’s willingness to help others immediately reminded him of Tifa’s soft heartedness and a pang of homesickness made his throat tight with emotion. All this time he had been scrimping and saving to buy her a ring. It was a big decision, and a lot of gil spent in the hope that she’d agree to be his wife, but he had promised to come back to her and he never intended to leave her behind again.

“Hey, Zack…” Cloud said, casting the older man a shy glance. “There’s something important I need your help with.”
Zack opened his mouth to speak when suddenly, the door to the training chamber slid open with a hiss. Both heads turned to look towards the intruder. Sephiroth strode in, cool and collected as ever. Long hair like a silver curtain fell past his waist, a stark contrast against his black uniform. Cloud’s eyes followed his movements as he held his breath. His hero was right in front of him! Sephiroth observed the pair with a bored expression. Zack huffed as Cloud continued to gape. When his senses returned to him, Cloud quickly hopped to his feet and snapped to attention in respect for his superior officer.

Zack rose in a relaxed manner and spoke. “Hey, we were just leaving, Sir. The chamber’s all yours.”

“They even have you training cadets now?” Sephiroth asked, his eerie green eyes on his comrade.

Zack grabbed both practice swords and moved to hang them on their place on the wall. “Nah, this is my friend. We were just sparring for fun. Right, Cloud?”

“Yessir!”

Cloud barely heard the rest of their brief conversation as he studied Sephiroth’s features. He was every bit as tall and impressive as he had imagined he would be. The hero of Wutai was muscular and strong, confidence and capability radiated from his posture. In his hand was his signature masamune, the longest katanas he’d ever seen. Cloud had always been awed by everything regarding Sephiroth that he had read or even seen on the television in Nibelheim’s Inn, though seeing him in the flesh was truly a different experience. But something wasn’t right. The man was a hero of ShinRA, a famed and esteemed SOLDIER, but there was no pride or contentment in his eyes. Cloud saw emptiness and it made unease coil in his chest.

When prompted, the blonde followed Zack out into the corridor and the door to the training room slid shut behind them. Immediately, the larger man let out a laugh and slapped Cloud between the shoulder blades.

“That’s the first time you’ve seen Mr. Big Shot, huh?” Zack grinned. “You should’ve seen your face!”

Cloud frowned and put his helmet back on to hide his exasperated expression. “I just didn’t expect him to crash our training session, that’s all.”

“Sephiroth is always training. Honestly, I don’t really know the guy too well,” Zack admitted as the pair began to walk down the hallway. “Angeal was good friends with him but for the most part, they guy’s a loner.”

“Hm,” Cloud breathed. In all the years he had idolized that man’s strength, skill, fame and heroism, he had never stopped to ponder his personality. It was easy to see that Sephiroth wasn’t a happy man, even when one ignored the absence of a smile or the mechanical manner in which he went through his routine. Although they were both first class SOLDIERS, he and Zack seemed like complete opposites. Zack lacked the fame but instead seemed to know how to enjoy his life and take pleasure in his work and ambitions. The silver haired ‘hero’ just seemed to be on autopilot.

“Anyway, what’d you need my help for?” Zack asked, jauntily moving about the street beside his friend. “You said it was important.”

“It’s really important.” Cloud stopped walking when they reached the end of the hallways and pressed the call button for the elevator. “If you’ve got some time, could you help me pick out another piece of jewelry?”
The mountain summer had been unusually wet and mild. An abnormal number of heavy rainstorms had swept through on most days, making everyone fret over the drowning plants in their gardens and Mr. Hansen was worried about his crops. Mr. Ackerman hadn’t had a dry enough stretch of time to cut his hay fields and wondered if he’d end up having enough time to get everything baled before winter settled in. With his son off learning his trade far away and Cloud in Midgar, he had no help.

September had yet to bring autumn’s chill, and Tifa wiped the sweat from her brow as she knelt in the sodden soil of her garden. It was hard work to keep up with the damage from all of the rain and storms, but she had to try. Covering roots exposed from downpours and making sure to utilize her compost heap to replenish the nutrients that had been washed away was all she could do for the struggling plants. Tifa didn’t know much about gardening, but keeping busy staking the tomato plant stalks and aerating the soil with her hoe served as a distraction from worrying about what they’d eat that winter. It also served as a distraction from the brokenness of her heart.

Cloud had stopped writing to her. At first, she thought that he was simply too busy, but as the weeks dragged by and she was met with silence, doubt and insecurity creeped in. She could do nothing to hide her devastation, just busy herself with enough chores to remain numb and practice her training enough to exhaust herself into dreamless slumber. Had he really forgotten about her? Cloud was sure to get caught up in the excitements of the big city, all of his adventures and his new friends. She couldn’t blame him for overlooking a bland childhood companionship.

Tifa had thought about running away after Cloud a dozen times. She was clever—she could pack light and run down the mountain and board a train to the coast with gil from selling her mother’s expensive silk kimono. But what would happen if she managed to find Cloud once she got to Midgar? Surely, she’d be plain and boring to him compared to city girls. It was hard to imagine the shy boy she had known wooing young women at all, but why else would he have stopped writing? Wouldn’t she be a fool to leave everything behind for a boy who may no longer want anything to do with her? She couldn’t be what Papa needed. If she could’ve been what Cloud needed, maybe he never would’ve left.

A sudden gust of wind rustled pine branches and tossed her long hair to the side. Any breeze was relief in the humid, muggy weather, but Tifa knew better than to enjoy this little respite. She looked up at the darkening sky: yet another storm was coming. All of this rain hadn’t washed away the guilt and loneliness from her heart. It hadn’t washed away Papa’s sadness or anger. It hadn’t cleansed the bleak thoughts from the darkest parts of her or wiped that look of dissatisfaction from her father’s face. And now, it was even ruining the plants. What good did the rain do?

The clip clop of hurried horse hooves on the cobblestone of town square got her attention. Papa had hitched Dot to his cart and left to gather wood to replace the rotting support beams of the water tower. She had hoped that he had returned, for she was afraid that he’d be caught in the storm. But the horse sounded like it was travelling way too fast to be drawing a cart.

“Hey!” An unfamiliar voice echoed through the heavy air. “Beware! Beware!”

Tifa rose to her feet, wiping her dirt covered hands on her apron before hurrying around to the front yard to see what the commotion was about. The hoof beats slowed as the rider slowed his horse to a stop. Other villagers had stopped to listen to the stranger—a traveler from the looks of it. His stallion’s nostrils flared violently as the animal caught its breath. To her surprise, Tifa saw Zangan join the growing crowd across the way. Ben Nelson was the first to react.

“What happened? Are you alright?” the blacksmith asked, stepping forward to attempt to further steady the startled horse.
“There are monsters everywhere on the mountain path!” the man said. Tifa and Zangan looked at each other. The rider continued, pointing a trembling finger back the way he came. “T-there’s a landslide at the cliff face a mile from here! We barely made it out!”

Tifa’s heart beat in her ears. She saw Ben take the horse’s reigns and help the visitor off of his mount, but she no longer heard their conversation. Papa had gone that way. He had taken the dirt road through the pine thickets that lead away from Mt. Nibel. The rain must’ve oversaturated the ground to the point where the soil of the cliff side had finally gotten soft enough to give way. Was he alright? Without a word, she sprinted off towards the path, Zangan following close behind.

… … …

“Papa! Papa!”

Her voice was growing raspy and hoarse as she called and called over the occasional crash of thunder and the pattering of heavy rain. The fog grew thick as Tifa and Zangan climbed in altitude, mud caking their boots as they ascended the sodden path. They had to be careful. They had fought over a dozen monsters already, but they weren’t the true cause for concern. Any further landslides could be fatal if they became trapped—the ground was so supersaturated that there was no way of telling where they were safe and where they weren’t. Tifa was growing frantic—so far there had been no sign of her father. A horse’s whinny sounded out through the rain, and Tifa gasped as Dot galloped past them, dragging wooden poles where the hitch had broken. Both turned to watch her run down the path toward the village.

Oh, no.

Her limbs were shaking with fatigue and dread as she stumbled forward. A frightened whimper tore out of her throat and her knees began to buckle under the weight of her fear. Ahead, she could see where the earth had given way over the road and come crashing down into the valley.

“Tifa!” Zangan grabbed her collar and yanked her backward, away from the unsteady soil. “Look out!”

The ground began to quake beneath their boots. With a mighty roar, the earth shifted once again and the landslide started to move, like a slow river of mud, rocks and debris. Tifa gasped and held on to her master’s arm as the sound of crumbing replaced the hiss of the rain. The earth growled and groaned, but remained still where they stood. Awed by the frightening display of nature’s power, she glanced down the hill where the flowing avalanche met the still bank.

“Look there!” Master Zangan shouted, and she followed his pointed finger to see Papa’s wagon at the edge of the flow, pushed against a boulder by the pulsing earth. Wedged between the bed of the cart and wall of rock was her father. His leg was pinned by the wood and he struggled to keep his head above the moving soil.

“Oh!” she screamed. Throwing caution to the wind, she flew down the hillside towards the landslide. Bushes and branches snagged and tore at the skirt of her dress and hot tears blurred her path. Tifa’s breaths came ragged and uneven as she staggered ahead, wet bangs matted against her forehead. As fast as her adrenaline took her, it was Zangan who reached the cart first. The boulder was the only thing that kept it from being swept away down the mountain.

“Brian!” the old man shouted, carefully stepping out onto the broken planks of the hitch. “Hang on!”

Tifa followed and Zangan reached to grab the man’s arm. Brian looked up at them with wild, fearful eyes. “I- I’m stuck! My leg—“
There was a vulnerability in his voice that Tifa had never heard before. It frightened her so much that she almost wished to hear familiar anger or indifference instead. Zangan shifted to get a better grip on him as Tifa frantically searched for something to help free her father’s leg from the press of the cart against stone. Tossing aside the bow saw and the wedge, she grabbed the familiar handle of the axe. Tifa raised it above her head, confident in her aim from countless hours spent cutting firewood, and brought it down upon the lumber beside Papa’s leg. It split well, and Brian cried out. She balked, afraid to have hurt him, until Zangan instructed her to keep going. With frightened sobs, she hacked away at the side of the wagon again and again until her teacher pulled Papa free.

“Good girl!” Zangan praised as he wrapped one of Brian’s arms over his shoulders, supporting the man as they made their way across the cart and onto solid ground. Tifa followed, still gripping the axe in her shaking hands. Once safe, Brian looked wearily to his rescuers.

“Thank God for you,” he whispered. “Thank God for you…”
An uncharacteristic growl tore from Tifa’s throat as she swung her leg in a wide roundhouse kick aimed for Zangan’s neck. He swayed his head to the side in an artful dodge as he grabbed hold of her leg and spun it, sending her tumbling to the grass below. She caught herself by shifting her weight to balance on her grounded foot and pushed into the momentum set by her master. Recovering control of her body before she hit the ground, she used the forward motion to send an elbow toward Zangan’s abdomen. He blocked it easily with a sweep of his sturdy arm and let out a pleased laugh.

“Excellent recovery! Good!”

The crickets chirped in the meadow, the predawn light softening his features. Normally, she would’ve smiled at his praise and reflected upon how far she’d come as a martial artist. But not today. Impatience and disappointment blocked out any rationality and frustration broke through her carefully constructed mask. All these years and it was still almost impossible to land a hit on the old man. She was sure that out of all of his pupils, she was the slowest learner. Master had never said anything like that, but how could it not be true? She had spent six years as his apprentice and Tifa still hadn’t felt like she was as skilled as she could be. The thought of disappointing him made anxiety rush like high tide through her chest. She felt rotten to admit it, even to herself, but Zangan was the closest thing she had to an approachable father figure. If he no longer felt she was worthy of being his apprentice, how could she bear losing such a pillar of comfort in her shrinking world?

Grunting, she rushed forward in a blur of black hair. Her bangs were matted to her forehead with sweat and there was a wild look in her normally soft, wine colored eyes. Tifa swung at him with a right hook, which he deflected like lightning. He spun to tap a light kick to her back as she stumbled forward from the force of his deflection.

“Watch your back. Don’t be careless!” he instructed, tone firm yet gentle.

Instantaneously, she struck again. Choosing to aim low this time, she spun quickly into a sweeping kick at his feet. Master Zangan was too fast. He avoided her with a well-timed jump and stomped a boot down onto her ankle, locking her in place. With a scowl and a grunt, she tried to twist free. He had noticed her atypical irritability since the beginning of their session, and it wasn’t helping her learn in the slightest. Zangan let her go and she immediately hopped to her feet.

“Enough for today. Your father will wake soon and need your help.”

With a small cry of frustration, she folded into a heap on the grass, catching her breath and trying to still her heart. Tifa knew she was acting childish and undisciplined but she couldn’t help it! Nothing was going right and she had never felt so worthless.

It had been two weeks since the landslide incident. At first, she had thought herself useful as she helped Papa and his healing leg. The doctor had had to have two of his young apprentices help set his broken femur and the man had been in a great deal of pain since. Because the landslide had blocked a good deal of the eastern mountain path, certain goods were impossible to ship in and had left the doctor with few options to prescribe for pain management. She’d give him the measured dosage and play the piano to help relax him into complacency and the void of sleep. The medicine made Papa drowsy and helped numb the aching for a while, but it made Tifa anxious. The smell of the laudanum drew up visions of bloody handkerchiefs and the sound of wheezing from the well of her memory. Tifa had hoped that all this might draw Papa closer to her and make him realize that she was a good girl who loved him, but that was not the case.
Master Zangan moved to sit calmly beside her and Tifa turned her head away, embarrassed. She had allowed him a glimpse of an ugly side of her that she had tried so hard to contain. If she had little worth when she was polite and patient and kind, what worth could she possibly have when she let her control slip and was ill tempered and petulant? Until now, Tifa had thought herself a master of controlling the expression of her feelings. But lately, swallowing the turbulence of her heart was like trying to place a lid on pot that boiled over the sides. She was a mediocre student learning an art that seemed worthless to her now, with no friends to protect. Cloud had left her, had gone off to bigger and better things, and his silence haunted her every moment. Her mother lay in the earth half a mile up the mountain path: an angel sleeping in the ground who had abandoned her to fight Papa’s furies alone. Her father was angry and lonesome, bitter about the unfair hand life had dealt him. There was nothing she could do about any of it.

The early morning breeze whispered through the grass as orange streaks of light began to burst through the horizon. What hope was there for her future? Tifa wasn’t even sure how to picture how she would escape this mundane and miserable existence? There wasn’t any where to go, nor any money to get there with.

“You’re restless, Tifa. What happened?”

She pulled her knees up to her chest and kept her face averted. What could she tell him to make him even begin to understand? There were so many layers to her frustration that she wouldn’t have known where to begin even if she did feel like letting him see the extent of her unhappiness. If she told him about how much she wished Cloud would choose her over his career, would he think she was self-absorbed? If she told him about how she wasn’t good enough to deserve her father’s affection or approval, would he think less of her? Would Zangan finally realize that he’d be better off moving on and finding a more worthy apprentice? She didn’t want to know. Tifa decided to keep her answer vague.

“I’m not centering my mind properly,” she said, fingers twining through blades of grass. She felt her master’s eyes on her, but didn’t move. “I’ve been tired. Papa has been up at night because of the pain. He needs my help sometimes.”

The old man exhaled audibly and nodded, looking toward the rising sun. A few moments of comfortable silence stretched out before them.

“Master?” A lump formed in her throat as he hummed in response. “When are you leaving Nibelheim? You told me that you traveled around the world reaching martial arts, but you’ve been here for a long time.”

Tifa was surprised at the sound of his hearty laugh and her head finally turned to face him.

“You want to get rid of your master that badly?”

“No! It’s not like that. I’m just—I’m afraid you’ll go. I don’t want you to leave.”

The old man smiled at the wide eyes of his apprentice, for he had wondered the same thing himself. He had grown to love the mountains and the isolation from the fast pace of the outside world. He had made good friends and felt fulfilled in his niche as a guardian of the small village, a sort of jack of all trades to aid the townsfolk and a mentor to a certain child who needed to know that an adult was capable of kindness and compassion. When he had first come to Nibelheim, Zangan hadn’t expected to stay for more than a year or two but the quiet atmosphere and the crisp mountain air had quelled his wanderlust for a time.

“Well, I guess it depends on a few things: one of them being you.” He smiled as her eye brows rose.
“I’ve never had anyone train under me for as long as you have, Tifa. Most of my students lose interest and move on to other things or start preparing for their careers after a few years. But not you; you’re the most resilient pupil I’ve ever had. I’m proud of you.”

Her shy smile made a warm feeling spread through his chest. His relationship with Tifa was unlike any that he had ever had with previous students. Until now, everything was strictly business. He would be paid by the parents to teach their child, and while Zangan was always fond of the children he had never become that invested in them. With Tifa, it all had changed. He had agreed to train her mostly out of pity when her mother had passed away, but over time he began to see that to her, he was not just a teacher or source of entertainment. The girl held on to every moment in his presence and absorbed his soft encouragement like a dry sponge. Her big red eyes held a sense of pain and loss and desperation that she should be too young to understand and for once, Zangan felt truly needed by his pupil. He had taught her martial arts, but Tifa had taught him that first impressions aren’t always right and that displays of remarkable perseverance can be made by even a lonely little girl.

“You’d stay here until my training is complete?”

“I’ll stay until you grow tired of it. Maybe start a business or family of your own and no longer have time to spend with this old man.”

Tifa remained silent as she griped the blades of grass between her fingers, tightening and pulling to uproot a clump of earth. She painted a fake smile across her face before standing, brushing her palms on the sides of her tunic.

“You know I’ll always make time to spend with you, no matter what.” She carefully kept her eyes averted. “Papa will wake up soon—I’ve got to get home. Thank you, Master, for…everything.”

He nodded. “Take care, Tifa.”

… … …

Papa was still asleep when Tifa crept into the house. Limbs still heavy with fatigue from sparring, she hurriedly scrambled some eggs and toasted some bread in case her father should call for breakfast. It would only a matter of time before the man howled for pain relief. The laudanum helped, but he preferred liquor to numb the incessant ache. The doctor had said a shot of whiskey or vodka a few times a day would be alright as long as it wasn’t mixed with any medicine, so Tifa complied to her father’s wishes without question. Liquor was also cheaper than laudanum or morphine; until Papa began to heal and was somewhat mobile there wouldn’t be any money coming into the house.

Tifa had quickly learned his preferences when it came to the mixed drinks that eased her father’s pain. He enjoyed whiskey mixed with ginger ale and orange juice mixed with vodka, but rum and apple cider seemed to be what he asked for most. When the pain was bad enough, he’d just ask for the alcohol straight. Tifa was afraid he’d get drunk and shout or even strike her when she came near, but she had come to understand that he needed much more than a shot every couple of hours to transform into that slurring, angry monster. For now, she held the control over his addiction and it was both frightening and empowering. She dumped a shot of rum into a small tumbler before filling the rest of the glass with cider and set it on the wooden breakfast tray with the rest of the food.

She fingered the cap of the dark rum bottle, considering taking a sip to distract her from her disconcerting thoughts. As quickly as she could, she sucked in a breath and capped the bottle before shutting it away in the cabinet. Her master had taught her that problems can only be solved by facing them head on. Even knowing that, it was hard to turn away from the thought of even temporarily
drowning out the deafening screaming of her heart with the burning and numbing of the dangerous potion. With a sigh, she moved from the kitchen to the back door. Leaving it open a crack to better hear her father’s eventual calls, Tifa sat on the worn wood of the back porch stairs and let the autumn breeze whisper comforts across her skin.

Sometimes, Tifa didn’t understand herself. She certainly dreaded coming home to deal with her irate father, but something had made her want to run from Zangan’s serene kindness that morning. Maybe she had dealt with Papa’s sharp tongue for so long that she didn’t know how to handle his gentle words or quiet understanding. Everything was such a jumbled up mess in her heart, and Tifa felt as a pebble must feel as it’s tossed around in the ocean’s crashing waves: pushed and pulled over rough sands as it is worn down over time. She had no control over which path life would force her to walk upon, and it was a very hard lesson to learn.

Tifa let her gaze wander across the yard to where her tire swing had fallen in a fierce summer thunderstorm. The branch holding the childhood relic had become brittle and snapped when the stormy gales had blown against it. The leaves on the old oak tree had never budded that year, even when summer was in full bloom. Its bark was as tough as ever and its limbs were wide and unchanged, but the soft green leaves had never appeared. She had asked Master Zangan about it and he had told her that it was most likely dying from the inside out. When she looked in the mirror, she saw that old oak tree. On the outside, she was unchanged. But inside, her once joyful heart had decayed into a wasteland of doubt, fear and hopelessness as she waited out the seasons. Cautious anticipation of a sign that maybe her life would turn in a positive direction continued to fade as the days kept turning into nights.

The heaviness in her chest made her weary and she slumped against the splintered wood of the railing, the old birdhouse on the corner post catching her attention. The once brightly painted yellows and blues had faded and chipped away, exposing weather-worn wood.

Cloud haunted her in all the worst ways. The memory of him lingered in the corners of the silent house and in between the blades of grass. The smoldering excitement of discovering life together had been doused in an instant when he left for Midgar and the embers had died with each passing week without word from the boy. There were no longer any birds living in the birdhouse, and there were no longer any reasons for her to expect her friend to come back. Cloud had flown away, and fledglings never returned to the nest. Once upon a time, she had spilled tears at the thought of leaving her home and family to grow up. Now, all she could think of was how to escape. Tifa wanted to fly. She wanted to fly endlessly towards light and hope and peace. But doubt and loyalty and fear had stretched around her like iron bars and though she sang and sang, her savior had never come.

But he promised, right?

… … …

A gust of wind shook the window panes of the empty barracks, an eerie howl echoing through the large room. It was dinner time but Cloud had purposely snuck back to his locker instead, hoping for some privacy while the others were gone. A grin adorned his face as he checked his certificate once more, just to be sure.

A new year, a new start.

He had graduated the necessary training program for ShinRA military personnel. His academic scores were some of the highest in his class, but he had barely managed to scrape by the physical aspects of training. Thanks to Zack, he had earned satisfactory marks in fencing and swordplay, but had barely managed to pass with his lackluster scores in things like marksmanship and hand to hand combat. It had taken all of his patience and courage, but he had finally graduated! Cloud was no
longer a cadet, but a full-fledged member of ShinRA’s infantry.

Folding the paper and tucking it in the pocket of his blue fatigues, he turned back to the task at hand. His locker was a bit of a mess and he had to have all of his things packed and transferred to his new living space in the military dorms. The thought of leaving the barracks was a welcome relief. It was so easy for the others to pick on him in this arrangement, for none of them had any privacy or room to breathe. All of his personal belongings that he feared the others would tamper with had been stuffed into his locker for safe keeping. Starting tonight, he’d be living in a small suite with three other soldiers, each having their own tiny bedrooms and a shared living space and kitchenette.

Opening a large duffle bag, he sat on the floor to begin packing. At the very bottom of the metal locker was a cardboard box. He took it in his hands and removed the cover to stare at the carefully preserved stack of paper inside—Tifa’s letters. On top of the papers sat a black, velvet box and an old, rusted jingle bell. Cloud took the bell in his hands and smiled at the merry tinkling noise it made before stuffing it in his duffel bag.

Next, he picked up the little jewelry box and opened it with a sigh. The modest diamond of the engagement ring sparkled in the electric light as Cloud ran the pad of his thumb over the white gold band. Zack had helped him pick out the little piece of jewelry, which Cloud was able to purchase for a reasonable price along with both matching wedding bands.

Oh, how he couldn’t wait to see her face when he knelt down on one knee and asked her to be his wife! Tifa's voice was so serene that he had always found it as enjoyable as a good night's sleep. Cloud missed the way she’d wrinkle her nose and bow her head slightly as she laughed. In his dreams, he recalled the way the dappled sunlight illuminated the deep red hues of Tifa's eyes as they wandered the forest together. Her gentle laughter was like soft rain patters on the windowsill—gentle and cascading—lulling him into peace. He’d be her hero for sure. Or at least, he could try. Cloud still sent letters bi-monthly, and the lack of response gnawed at his resolve. His deepest fears lay in the possibility that her father had already managed to arrange a marriage, resulting in forbidden contact between his daughter and any man who wasn’t betrothed to her. After all this time, was it still him that she pined for?

Regardless of any doubt regarding whether or not she still loved him, he had a promise to keep.

Absentmindedly, he flipped the ring box open and shut again and again. Zack had teased him again and again about getting engaged after they had made a hasty exit out of the jewelry store with grins on their faces. His friend had said he was way too young to settle down—that he wasn’t even an adult yet and he had a whole number of girls out there who he had yet to meet. Cloud had disagreed wholeheartedly. He was an adult. Back at home, he'd be of age to start courting a girl to marry and would be learning his trade in which he’d make a living. If he was still living in Nibelheim, it would’ve been high time for him to start providing for himself and seeking a life of independence.

Here in Midgar, one wasn’t legally considered an adult until age eighteen and it was evident in the behavior of his peers. The other cadets from the area were immature and flaky, only taking strides to better themselves if they were told to or if it was strictly required. They seemed perfectly content to let their parents or superiors make the decisions in their lives, lacking the drive to apply themselves or commit to responsibilities. Maybe to them, life was easier that way. Perhaps growing up in an environment where society didn’t trust them to make any decisions until such an old age had left them without the confidence to commit to something as big as marriage. Cloud saw them all as immature, even Zack to an extent. But Zack was at least kind hearted and encouraged him, wishing him luck and demanding to know more about the girl whom Cloud was ‘throwing away his youth’ for.

He closed the ring box and gripped it in his fist before stashing it into the innermost pocket of the duffel bag. Zipping it shut, he slung the strap over his shoulder and stared at the empty locker.
Surely, fate had been cruel in almost every aspect of his life. Cloud closed his eyes in a silent prayer that this time, the universe would send luck his way. He’d need a lifetime’s worth of good fortune if he was ever going to make it into the SOLDIER program and convince Mr. Lockhart that he was worthy of his daughter’s hand.

Standing, he stiffened his spine with resolve and turned on his heel. The sound of Cloud’s boots echoed loudly with his confident footsteps as he left the barracks behind.

… … …

The infirmary had that stale smell of rubbing alcohol and latex that drew his intestines into a tight knot of nervousness.

Cloud shifted in the plastic chair in the small white waiting room, knee jiggling up and down with edgy anticipation. April had blown in fast; time seemed to be slipping through his fingers like sand before he had time to collect his thoughts. Now that his schedule had changed, adjusting to the life of an infantryman had distracted him from the troubling thoughts and homesickness for his best friend that used to make time crawl by. These days, he was too exhausted from his patrol routes and continued physical training that the only thing he anticipated was the feel of his pillow underneath his head. But today was different. After a year and a half, Cloud was back to be evaluated for SOLDIER pre-qualifications.

Mom was not a tall woman and like most of her traits, he had had inherited that as well. Cloud didn’t know how tall his father had been, but he knew he had to be taller than Mom by now. Good food and ample amount of protein in ShinRA’s meals combined with natural growth spurts had him rocketing up like a bamboo shoot. Cloud felt taller, but he wouldn’t know for sure until he was measured. When it came to his weight, the teen could only hope that he’d magically been able to gain enough meat the requirements. He had eaten as much as he could at every opportunity but military rations were never particularly large and the lankiness of his limbs and thinness of his waist made him fear he’d never make the cut. He had to—both his and Tifa’s futures depended on it.

“Private Strife?” A bespectacled man with a clip board in hand and stethoscope hung over his shoulders was looking straight at him. Cloud stood when addressed, sucking in a breath. “Come with me.”

This was it.

He stripped to his undergarments as instructed and let the physician carry out his evaluation. His heart thudded so quickly in his chest that the man had given him a strange look after raising the stethoscope to his chest and checking his blood pressure. Cloud stood as straight as an arrow as his height was measured, holding his breath and looking straight ahead.

“Five feet, five inches,” the doctor said, scribbling onto his chart as he boy let the air quietly gush out of his lungs.

He had just made the minimum height requirement. Cloud’s heart continued to hammer against his ribcage, for he knew what was next. Maybe the doctor would just forget about it?

“Step on the scale, please.”

Damn. Cloud obeyed, gingerly placing his feet onto the little square machine and closing his eyes. Fluctuating numbers danced across the digital screen as it calculated his mass and the blonde said a silent prayer as tense seconds ticked by. Please, please, please…
“One hundred twenty six pounds even.”

Double damn.

Cloud’s brain immediately flooded with panic and he blindly followed orders to step off the scale and redress. What would he do now? It would be impossible to gain another twenty four pounds in the three weeks before his scheduled trip home to the mountains. Even if he did, it would be at least a month before he could audition for SOLDIER and undergo the physical evaluations necessary. He felt the small bit of remaining hope melt away like a snowflake upon his skin. Who would’ve thought something so trivial would halt the progress of his dream?

The doctor escorted him out the door with a few half-hearted encouragements, telling Cloud that he’ll grow more in time and that he had plenty of time to try making SOLDIER. The blonde nodded as politely as he could, thanked the physician for his time and strode down the hallway, face flushed from embarrassment and frustration.

Was becoming SOLDIER really his dream after the dark truths he’d discovered over the past year? The benefits of befriending a SOLDIER first class were innumerable. Zack not only rejuvenated Cloud’s battered spirit by showing him that he was worthy of friendship and kindness, but his companionship had served as a protective social barrier when it came to being bullied. While he hadn’t earned the others’ respect, he was certainly enduring much less torment and grief. But perhaps one of the most valuable aspects of this unlikely partnership was that the raven haired man had opened his eyes to the realities of life as one of ShinRA’s weapons of war.

Zack was ALWAYS out on a mission or busy doing other things for the company. It had shocked Cloud to see someone as laid back and resilient as him becoming tired and stressed by his harried schedule. Currently, he’d been sent out to Icicle Inn for one secret reason or another and it had been weeks since his departure. Zack said he had a girlfriend in the slums, but Cloud was sure he couldn’t spend as much time with her as he would’ve liked to. The life of a SOLDIER seemed unstable: they seemed to always be running around, never rooted to one place. Maybe being like Sephiroth wasn’t was great as he thought it was. Was it a blessing that he couldn’t even meet the pre-qualifications? He couldn’t help but think of his little wife suffering of fear and loneliness if he was always out fighting the world’s most dangerous enemies as a SOLDIER.

Other infantry men would tease SOLDIERs out of jealousy, saying they weren't human with their incredible powers. Was it true? With mako injections that enhanced their strength, speed and senses, was the supposed loss of humanity worth it? According to Zack, the SOLDIER program was in the midst of a mass desertion; everything spiraling out of control after Angeal’s death. The raven haired warrior had confided in Cloud that, right now, it was hard for him to trust anyone but Sephiroth. There were rumors of SOLDIERs flying off the handle with rage and using their incredible strength irrationally. That wouldn't happen to Zack, right? Cloud had always sought the glory of heroism and the resulting comfort of approval as a boy, but seeing the toll the SOLDIER program had taken on its members had begun to shift the subject of his ambition.

Had that very ambition caused him to make the biggest mistake of his life? What if Tifa hadn’t waited for him? He’d write her again. Maybe this time, he’d get a response.

Cloud navigated the winding hallways and stairwells, looking forward to a half hour alone in his room to sulk before he had to leave on patrol duty. He couldn’t get her out of his head. Those flowing black locks and warm, crimson eyes haunted his dreams and pulled at his waking thoughts. The feel of her lips on his was an oft visited recollection and Cloud fought to remember every detail of that day: the colors of her crown of leaves, the way the autumn sun had illuminated the rich colors of her eyes, the gentle press of her hand in his. He stopped in front of his room, key in hand, when a
realization hit him: SOLDIER or not, she had loved him anyway. Since his earliest memories of childhood, she had always sought his company. He never had anything to give before and yet it was always enough for her. It had taken him so much time to realize that all along, maybe the hero he really wanted to be was just Tifa’s hero. Sephiroth’s eyes had been cold and dead despite ardent praise from a million people around the world. Maybe, Cloud had just wanted to be good enough for her to love.

Perhaps in the end, that plan wouldn’t involve SOLDIER. But without it, how could he earn Brian’s approval? Had he blown his savings on the ring for no reason? He had to try; he had to rescue Tifa from that oppressive existence. She had told him that she loved him. Uncertainty pooled in his gut whenever he thought about what could happen when he showed his face back in Nibelheim. If Tifa didn’t want to marry him, was betrothed to another man, or was forbidden to be with him by her father, Cloud didn’t know what he would do. With his romantic and career ambitions up in the air, Cloud felt untethered and insecure. Together, they had created hope for their future where there previously was none. Had they lost what they’d found because he foolishly left to chase a dream?

He pushed into the suite and found solace in the privacy of his room, bypassing his bed and slumping into the hard wooden chair at his desk. A bitter, humorless chuckle escaped his throat: after all this time, it was really just Mr. Lockhart whom he’d been striving to impress. Perhaps it would do him good to try writing to him. To ask for a girl’s hand in marriage is quite a big deal. If Cloud was to hope to get anywhere, he knew that he’d have to formally make his interest in Tifa known to the hostile man. Just showing up next month out of the blue to try to win Brian’s favor would be foolish, at best. If Tifa was already betrothed, Mr. Lockhart would be more than happy to let him know.

The plain stationary pad beckoned to him and he answered its call. He was full of regrets, but there was hope yet.

... ... ...

Guilt and remorse pooled into the cracks and corners of the empty house. It collected between the cold stone tiles of the kitchen floor, between the wooden floorboards and under the broad, fraying rugs.

A creeping darkness had permeated the once merry atmosphere and Brian couldn’t decide whether it felt like a lifetime or just yesterday that laughter bounced off of the white walls. The air of the Lockhart house was stifling and oppressive: stagnant, bleak and devoid of all the things that make a house a home. Being bedridden for weeks after breaking his leg had forced him to face his long denied conscience; the following months of hobbling around the house had made the results of his negligence unmistakably apparent.

It had been quite a long time since he had been able to be out and about in the village, which meant there were a quite a few items in the Lockhart mail slot at the inn. There were a few bills, but the majority of the envelopes were all from a certain cadet in Midgar. All were addressed to Tifa, except for one that was addressed to himself.

Astonished, Brian sat at the kitchen table and turned the envelope over in his hands.

Cloud Strife had always been a thorn in his side. Yes, the boy had been born into unfavorable circumstances that were no fault of his own—existence poisoned by shame and contempt. His presence had been harmless enough until big blue eyes had captivated his little girl and the venom of his stigma had spread to her veins as well. She had followed him down a lonely path of public scrutiny and now faced a potentially fruitless future.

When he thought of how Lia had been so adamant on kindness as a cornerstone of their family’s
values, Brian felt shame wash through his gut. In the back of his heart, he felt immense remorse over how he treated Claudia and the boy. He used to judge the woman next door for her inability to provide sufficiently for her son and fate had twisted his life into an unrecognizable prison in some type of spiteful karma. Now, he was the struggling single parent who had no idea how to handle his grief and figure out how to raise a daughter alone. It was no secret that he had failed miserably from day one.

His contempt for the Strife boy was another thing that long days in the solitude and stillness of his bedroom had forced him to explore. It was hard to remember what it was like to be fifteen years old. At fifteen, he had longed for freedom from his parents and the boring life in a hum drum village. The blonde boy’s departure from a town that never warmed to his existence was no surprise. He knew how Cloud felt about his daughter if her birthday gift and the growing stack of letters he kept hidden were any indicator of the kid’s affections. He hadn’t had the heart to be rid of them, so he hid them in the old wooden trunk in the attic where Lia had stored her summer frocks and sandals. He knew Tifa missed hearing from the boy and had taken the lack of word from him to heart. Every time Brian lied to her when she asked if she had any mail, her round face would crumble into misery and she’d fade back into the shadows.

Carefully, Brian tore the envelope open and quickly read the short, formally worded letter. The kid had elegantly written a request for consideration to court Tifa and take her as his wife.

At first, anger had panged in his chest. But if he was honest with himself, he wasn’t surprised by this proposal. This was exactly the reason he had kept Tifa’s mail from her. He thought it was necessary to put distance between them if he were to marry her off to a respectable man, but the ample amount of time he’d had to analyze the situation had made the girl’s predicament clear. There would be no suitors waiting for the isolated daughter of a once respected man who had lost himself to sorrow and alcohol.

No, there was hope yet. The girl was still young.

He couldn’t let Tifa know that Cloud had displayed interest in her as a wife. The boy would lead her into a life of poverty in the filth of the Midgar slums and he couldn’t have that. Brian had villainized the boy’s cowardice as a display of defiance and disrespect for him—for wooing of teenage girls was not something done without supervision. But when he himself was a love struck teen, he had been guilty of the same practice. He had swept Lia off her feet without prior approval of her father and after weeks of whirlwind romance had slunk to her father with a marriage proposal, tail between his legs.

But now, the Strife boy had written him—the only formal declaration of interest in courting his daughter. How ironic. He had tried so hard to get rid of that weed but despite his effort, Cloud had grown in, bright and strong. It had been almost a year since Brian had arranged for Cloud and Tifa’s communication to be cut off, but somehow the boy had remained persistent. Despite his efforts at keeping them apart since the earliest days of their childhood, the universe seemed to stop at nothing to keep them together. The boy’s enduring will was like an awful itch that crawled underneath his skin.

With a weary frown, Brian folded the letter and stuffed it back into the envelope before tossing it into the woodstove to burn.

…………

It was out of necessity, really. Sneaking around to collect a garment or two from Mama’s closet to add to her own wardrobe always weighed heavily upon her conscience. Every time she had slid the wooden closet doors open, an eerie feeling would settle upon her, as if she was disturbing something
sacred. But what else could she do? Her clothes didn’t fit well anymore—not at all! Papa had said he
didn’t want to give Ms. Strife any of his hard earned money, and that she had plenty of clothes to
wear. He didn’t seem to understand her predicament. Her body was continuing to grow: long, coltish
legs made even her lengthiest skirts brush just below her knees, her hips and breasts continued to
morph into their adult proportions, making her appear to be more and more like a young woman and
less like a little girl. It was about time, too, for soon she would be considered an adult. But what did it
matter? Her fifteenth birthday meant nothing if Cloud didn’t come back. Being a woman meant
nothing to her if she’d remain tethered to her father’s house.

Flipping through her Mama’s hanging clothes she quickly grew disappointed in the selection: they
were all winter clothes. It was abnormally warm for late April and Tifa had hoped to find something
light and thin to wear. Mama had died in the cold of early spring and hadn’t taken her summer
garments out of storage. She remembered how her father always used to help Mama bring the trunk
filled with clothing into the attic as the seasons changed. Maybe it was all still there?

Quiet as a mouse, she moved out into the hall and climbed the attic steps.

Over the past year, she’d learned the danger of focusing only on what wasn’t there. What if she came
to the end of her life and realized she’d spent every day waiting for a blonde haired boy who would
never come for her? What if she was old and grey before she understood that Mama and the Papa
she used to know were long gone, and she was wasting the precious days of her life chasing traces of
a long vanished childhood? Tifa couldn’t let that happen. Her father didn’t know how to move
forward. Papa was so helpless in the face of his grief that he had simply stood by as it stole each day
from him. She didn’t want her life to drift away from her by thinking of nothing but Cloud and what
could’ve been. But if she drew her thoughts back from him, what hope did she have for her future?
Tifa remembered the tiny note that had accompanied the birthday gift he had sent her—the last words
he had written to her.

It was almost time: he said he’d return by her birthday. The third of May was only two weeks away
but after a year of silence, she wasn’t sure if it would be wise to anticipate his arrival.

Did she still cross Cloud’s mind, wherever he was?

There was only one tiny window in the attic. Rain of a spring shower pattered against the glass and
the dim light of late afternoon made it difficult for Tifa to see at first. Eyes adjusting, her gaze
wandered over haphazardly stacked cardboard boxes and small crates before it landed upon the
notched wood of an old chest that seemed to have been recently disturbed. Fingerprints had dotted
away the layers of dust on the flat lid and the heavy piece had been shifted so that it was easily
accessible from the top of the staircase. Curiosity drew her fingers to the iron latches in an instant and
she pulled back the top. Tifa’s mouth dropped open as wide eyes took in the contents. Amongst her
mother’s neatly folded garments were a dozen or so white envelopes, her name written each one in
Cloud’s familiar chicken scratch. The air flew out of her lungs as her hands began to shake. Before
she knew what she was doing, she gathered up the letters in her arms, heart thumping loudly in her
ears as her pulse raced.

Cloud had been writing to her! Papa had hidden them! All this time, she had tortured herself with the
thought that the one she loved had lost interest in her when in reality, she was the one who left Cloud
hanging. Anger burst like fireworks in her chest. The very thing she had been so desperate for had
been hidden over her head all this time.

A growl rose out of one of the deepest parts of her soul and split the blanketing silence of her red
roofed prison. She flew down the stairs. White walls and picture frames passed by in a blur, but all
Tifa saw was red. She refused to stay silent any longer.
The door to the workshop flew open and crashed against the wall with a bang. Startled, Brian dropped the sheet of sandpaper he had been holding as he looked toward the sound of rushing feet on the cellar steps. Tifa flew in like a demon, clutching a pile of envelopes to her chest. Her black mass of hair flowed behind her like the stroke of an ink brush. He had taken a heavy dose of laudanum to ease the ache of his healing femur that the rain had brought on. Sluggish and drowsy, he was slow to react as his daughter raced toward him like a dark streak of lightening.

“You!” she roared, whipping a thick white envelope at his head. Dumbfounded by the atypical display of anger from his normally passive child, Brian was frozen in his place as he let the projectile hit him in the chin.

“What have you done?!?” Tifa shrieked, throwing one envelope at a time. “How could you? How could you?”

Like his late wife, Tifa had soft, sloping eyes that were the color of comfort and warmth. But for the first time, Brian saw fire smoldering in the depths of her irises and his foggy mind scrambled to form words to address this fury.

“Why? Why do you hate him? Why do you hate me?” Another envelope bounced off his neck and with a great heave of her arms, she threw the rest to the dusty floorboards at his feet.

Snapping out of his temporary paralysis, Brian grit his teeth and grabbed Tifa’s wrists. There was no fear in her face when she met his fiery gaze. The defiance in her features made him snarl and he pressed forward with all his weight.

“Who do you think you are, talking to me like that?” Brian growled, squeezing her wrists until they turned white. “You little savage! This is what I get for letting you run wild!”

Tifa tightened her hands into hard fists.

“Yes, I do! I know exactly who I’m taking to—a selfish man who has forgotten his daughter! All this time you’ve been so wrapped up in your own misery that you’ve been blind to mine!” Her breaths came in short puffs and her tongue stumbled over her spitfire. For years, she had bottled up her sorrow and sealed her mouth from saying what was in her heart. Enduring life with such pent up pain felt much like bowing her head in the fierce winds of a winter storm. Now that she had begun to release the turbid thoughts inside her, she couldn’t stop. The truth surged forward like a raging river.

“Don’t you think I miss Mama, too? I’ve tried so hard to take care of you and the house and make you as happy as she did. But I’ve never been good enough, have I?”

Tifa’s eyes burned, but she did not cry. She stared, unwavering, at her father’s face. His breath was heavy with the scent of his medicine and there were tiny flecks of wood dust in the short stubble of his beard. The wrinkles at the corners of the man’s eyes deepened as his brows drew close together. Contempt swam in his gaze but she didn’t look away; she wasn’t afraid anymore. There wasn’t much left to lose between them.

“You may look like Lia, but you’ll never be who she was!”

It was a low blow and he knew it. Papa had spit this particular venom at her before, knowing how much it ate at the aching wounds of her heart. Of course it was impossible for her to do anything but fall short of Mama’s perfection, but she had hoped that she could reflect even a small amount of
thelight that her mother had brought into people’s lives. Papa was right: she couldn’t help anyone. All the kind medicine in the world wouldn’t help if everything else she did was wrong. Frustration burst like fireworks in her chest.

“Shut up!”

“If anything, you’ve disgraced her! You’ve neglected your duty to be a proper young woman to pursue unorthodox hobbies and a bastard child!”

Papa pushed against her as his sharp words splintered through the air. Zangan had taught her that the size of an opponent meant very little, and Tifa wasn’t afraid of her father’s towering figure. Fighting monsters three times her size had bolstered her confidence. Her father was slow, injured and unskilled in hand to hand combat—intimidation was his only attack.

“Stop it!”

Brian’s bitter laugh made her throat constrict. “You’re a failure, like your old man! Why do you think Cloud left you? If he cared so much, he wouldn’t have taken off the first chance he got. He went to another continent just to get away from you!”

Rage boiled dangerously in her blood. Tifa clenched her teeth and steadied her feet as her father continued, shooting him a poisonous look. Center your mind, center your mind, center your mind! They’re just words. Her mantra wasn’t working and it took all of her strength to cling at her fading sense of control. He shook her by her wrists as his sharp words splintered through the air.

“Tifa, Cloud abandoned you!”

That was it. She couldn’t stop it. Like a cobra, she struck in the blink of an eye.

“You abandoned me!” she screeched as she expertly broke free of his grasp and snapped her fist upward to collide with his jaw. Time seemed to slow as Tifa watched her father stumble backwards from the force of impact. Unable to counter the momentum with his healing leg, Brian folded into a heap on the floor.

Tifa’s face softened as if the angry sky had broken. The girl stood motionless but for the trembling of her hands; her limbs went numb when she realized what she had done. Shock snuffed out the inferno in her eyes like a candle in the wind. Tifa had broken the cardinal rule of her training. She had vowed to never abuse her power or harm anyone unless in a manner of self-defense. A wave of nausea washed over her as she realized that she had attacked an injured person without any fighting skill—her own father, in fact! Boneless, she sunk to her knees.

“P-papa?” she reached out a shaking hand to try and touch his shoulder. He slapped it away immediately. Crimson eyes watched as Brian shifted to sit upright, cradling the side of his face with his palm.

“I’m sorry, I’m so sorry!” Tifa voice trembled as she finally broke. Fat, hot tears welled up and spilled over onto her cheeks, flushed from emotion. “I didn’t—I just—“

His silence frightened her.

Brian slowly turned his head to regard his daughter, brown eyes rimmed with shock. Her incredible strength and uncharacteristic aggression had left him dumbfounded and speechless. In the years since Lia’s death, father and daughter had drawn many borderlines between them, making it possible to dance around sensitive topics and conflict. In the span of a few minutes all of those lines had been crossed, and it was all they could do just to sit there and stare at each other in disbelief. The sight of
the purple welt forming on her father’s jawline triggered another surge of uncontrollable emotion that she normally kept neatly hidden away inside her. Desperate words, long buried, forced their way out of her mouth like a garment bursting at the seams.

“Please, love me,” Tifa begged as she hung her head. “I know it hurts and you’re sad. Show me that you’ll fight it! I don’t want to feel so alone anymore in this house. I need you, Papa. Please…help me.”

She counted the tense moments under a sweep of breath, shrinking against the silence that stretched out between them. When her father finally did speak, it brought little comfort.

“Help you? You’ve dug your own grave, Tifa.” Brian said, eerily calm as his gaze met her own. “I told you to stay away from that Strife boy. I told you not to train under Zangan and when you didn’t listen, I told you to never let anyone find out.”

The volume of his voice was rising with each accusation, anger beginning to boil up within him once again.

“I told you to wear your damn coat that winter Lia died and every time you’ve defied me! What did you expect to happen to you? Now, neither of us have a future in this place. You’ve shown me that you think you’re too clever and wise to need me or do what I ask!” Brian shakily rose to his feet, favoring his healing leg. “Don’t blame me for any of this. You’ve stolen your own future.”

Tifa’s dark lashes fell closed against her cheeks as she realized that he was right. She had made all those choices, too young to know how they would dismantle her life before it had really begun. She and Papa were trapped in a self-spun web of despair. She kept trying to escape and forge ahead while he had resigned himself to be consumed by sorrow and loss. It was in that moment that Tifa understood that these wounds would never heal. Her father had chosen to forever wallow in the past and there was nothing she could do to bring him back from his suffering. They had buried his heart years ago in the graveyard up the path when her mother's wooden coffin disappeared into the earth. She couldn’t have her Papa back any more than she could have her mother back, for she couldn’t have the former without the latter. His refusal to move forward or accept his current reality hindered Tifa’s efforts to keep from drowning in regret. Papa’s unmoving sadness was like a weight around her ankle, pulling her into the depths. If she could somehow shake herself free of him, maybe she could reach the surface and breathe again. It had been so long since she had felt the freshness of hope like air in her lungs or the warmth of the promise of a bright future.

Picking up his dignity, Brian dusted off his trousers and left his daughter sitting in the dust. Tifa watched him limp up the stairs and couldn’t bring herself to move until long after he was out of sight. Dirty envelopes littered the floor around her. Blinking the moisture from her eyelashes, she steadied her breathing and reached out to pick up an envelope marred with Papa’s large boot print. Slowly, she broke the seal and opened the flap to pull out Cloud’s letter. The first line of the letter made her breath rush out as hope rushed in.

*My leave got approved! I’m coming home to Nibelheim! I can’t wait to see you, Tifa. I’ve got a question that I need you to answer.*

*… … …*

Cloud was exhausted.

In his excitement to get home, he had forgotten how ill-suited his body was to handle travel. He had spent most of the trip across the sea retching as he leaned his blonde head over the ships railing or cradling a bucket as he hid away in the hull. The dizziness and weakness persisted long after he had
emptied the contents of his stomach. Even now as he waited on a bench in the harbor’s train station, he felt shaky and frail. Taking deep breaths of the early morning air seemed to help. This torture would all be worth it in the end.

Seeing his only family after being gone for well over a year was an exciting thought. Every aspect of his life had been so difficult since he left home that he couldn’t wait for the comforting sound of his mother’s merry voice. He craved her cooking (though it was still hard to imagine eating anything right now) and her familiar scent of lavender and linen. He missed the sound of the wind through the trees and the feel of soft grass underneath his bare feet. After living in a jungle of concrete, steel and mako, Cloud had learned to appreciate the freshness of nature and the clarity of the mountain air. But most of all, he missed Tifa. The thought of seeing her again after so long was both pleasurable and terrifying.

How much had she changed? How much had he changed? The light press of the tiny velvet box in his pocket felt like a lead weight and it was all he could think about.

It wasn’t that he was unsure. In fact, marrying his best friend was the only thing in this life that he was certain that he wanted to do. But what if she had changed her mind about him? Was she angry with him? She hadn’t responded to his letters in almost a year—what if she had grown disinterested? It wouldn’t surprise him; the circumstances of his life had taught him that he was inadequate. Cloud had been surprised that even after he had escaped to a different continent, the stigma of worthlessness followed him around like a shadow. He had hoped that once he found a new life for himself, he’d be able to show the world that he could make something of himself and be a hero like Sephiroth. In actuality, his venture to join the military had made Cloud realize how mediocre he really was. If Mr. Lockhart hadn’t been poisoning Tifa’s mind against him, maybe she had finally come to realize he was undesirable.

The ocean breeze rustled his flaxen hair and felt comforting against his cheek. His heavy eyelids threatened to close as the boy rested his head upon his duffel bag. With a sigh, he fought to stay awake.

Tifa would never think that way, right? After all, she was the one to tell him that he had always been someone, back when he was less brave and experienced than he is now. It was really facing her father that he feared the most. Cloud had rehearsed the words a thousand times in his head, trying to predict the inevitable hostility from Mr. Lockhart when it came to marrying Tifa. Would he be enough? An ordinary ShinRA grunt wasn’t an impressive sight to behold and wouldn’t help him convince the man that he could take care of his daughter.

Cloud had spent the past few weeks weighing his options if Tifa did agree to marry him. He could go back to Midgar for a time and secure a place for them to live before coming back at a later date for their wedding ceremony. That way, Tifa could prepare for her wedding and he could work out the specifics of temporary housing in Midgar and submit a request for permanent transfer to a seaside post. He’d love to save up some more money and take her on a blissful honeymoon before whisking her away to a new, bright future together. It would be difficult on his salary, but they’d make it work.

The sound of a train whistle approaching the station made him flinch awake and he sat upright, stretching and willing his body to get ready to endure another round of motion sickness. Wearly, he made himself stand as the train rolled into the station. With anxiety and excitement fighting for dominance in his chest, Cloud boarded the west-bound train.

… … …

The sun had already dipped below the horizon when Cloud’s tired feet finally carried him to the village gates.
He had managed to pay for a ride in an automobile up most of the mountainside. He was surprised to find out that a landside had knocked out the path on the eastern side, knocking out the road that was in the process of being cleared. It was still impassable by automobile, so he ended up walking the remaining four miles to the tiny village of Nibelheim. Candle lit lamp posts cast a dim glow on the cobblestone of the street and summoned nostalgia from parts of his heart that he had seldom visited since his departure from his childhood home. Town square was empty, but a mixture of candle light and electric light dotted the windows of homes and businesses.

Cloud was relieved that there was no one there to see him. After so long, he wasn’t sure how the villagers would react to his presence and he was too physically and emotionally exhausted to face any unwanted attention. Had he really only been gone for handfuls of months? It felt like decades since he had lived a lonesome life in is mother’s little cottage, free from responsibility for the most part. Now, his days in the iron city were filled with strict schedules, mass produced meals and aching muscles. Cloud had never particularly felt like he belonged in Nibelheim, but he certainly felt out of place now.

These people were so small. They held him down and made him feel inferior, but after seeing more of the world, Cloud finally realized that the residents of this village were nobodies: small people doing small things. They weren’t any different than he was. In Midgar, he may have been picked on but wasn’t followed around by his stigma. No one cared whether or not you had parents or a rich family or even morals in the big city. The look on Tifa’s face the night he had announced he was leaving had made Cloud doubt his decision. Now, it was clear that he wouldn’t have had a future if he had stayed. There was nothing for him in Nibelheim.

Quietly, Cloud crept through town square, making sure to stay out of the warm glow of the lamp posts. The rising feelings of insecurity and inadequacy were soothed instantly with the soft sound of a piano as it carried the notes of a melancholy tune into the evening air. Blue eyes came to life and he smiled at the familiarity of the sound. Tifa. Cloud’s heart pounded in his chest. The tiny velvet box in his pocket burned constantly in his mind. It bothered him as he swayed on the boat, as the train car rocked him gently to and fro, and as he walked the mountain path. The entire trek westward had been plagued with nervousness and uncertainty regarding this whole marriage thing. Would she say yes? Did she still even care for him? It hadn’t been too long, but it had felt like an eternity since he’d last seen her face.

Despite his trepidation, Cloud’s feet led him to the Lockhart house. The building looked gloomy against the darkening sky and he tilted his head, recalling what a jovial place it used to be. Memories of spending feverish days sitting at his window seat and studying the immaculately painted white siding and neatly tended lawn bubbled up from the depths of his mind. He used to wish with all his heart that he could join the laughter and music tumbling from Tifa’s room as a lonely child, but there was no longer any laughter and he wasn’t so helpless anymore. The gentle wind rustled a shingle that dangled from the red roof. White paint peeled from the fence and the yard was unkempt and full of weeds. There was a strange unsettling feeling in his chest as he rounded the side of the house, following the sound of the piano until he was peering up at the open window to Tifa’s room.

He could see the thin curtains blowing gently in the spring breeze as candlelight flickered from within. The tune was a familiar one that had comforted him in the hours of loneliness when he was too weak and sick to leave his bedroom. Cloud let out a shaky breath and set his bag on the grass before fishing through it. The familiar press of rounded metal against his palm drew a smile upon his face and with a well-aimed heave, he tossed the jingle bell through her bedroom window. The melody stopped abruptly and Cloud waited there with his heart in his throat. It was this very spot where he had stood after he had let her fall from the bridge, looking up at that same window and wondering if she was alright and if he’d ever speak with her again. It seemed that time didn’t change as much as he thought it did. This time, it would be different. He’d save her, if only she’d let him.
Slowly, shyly, Tifa’s head appeared in the open window. In the twilight, he could just make out her features. Wide eyes met his blue ones with surprise and relief and Cloud’s heart skipped in his chest. The crickets’ constant chirping broke the silence that stretched between them. Her eyes grazed over the military uniform he was wearing, taking in the blue garb and the gun holstered at his hip. He kept his voice low, just above a whisper.

“Tifa, I’m back…I’m home.”

An enormous smile split her face and she exhaled her relief into the mountain wind. Cloud echoed her expression with a sheepish grin of his own, unsure of what to do with himself under her gaze. With a quiet, happy squeak, Tifa disappeared from the window. In a heartbeat, she flew out the front door and toward his open arms.

“Cloud!”

Her bare feet pounded the earth as Mama’s cream colored night gown fluttered behind her. They crashed together in a desperate embrace. She squeezed him as he held her close, her head flush against his chest. Her long hair brushed over his arms like black silk and the press of her breasts against him made his cheeks burn.

“Tifa…” he breathed, her familiar scent whispered comforts to his heart. Unlike the town, she felt like home.

“Oh, how I’ve missed you!” Tifa gasped into his shirt. She let her hands wander to cradle the back of his neck, running her fingers over the soft, short hair at the base of his head. He looked grown up. He was taller and his shoulders had broadened. She assumed ShinRA had his hair cut and she could feel the hard muscles of his biceps hidden beneath his uniform. Deep voice and inches taller, Cloud was very grown up indeed. The sight of his adult body made her long to be held by him and yearn for his hands on her body. Embarrassed by her own thoughts, shyness finally caught up with her and she released him. Cloud looked different for sure, but those big blue eyes were the same and it comforted her. His awkward smile reassured her that inside, he was still the boy she’d grown up with. Stepping back, she tucked one bare foot around the opposite ankle and looked away, smiling.

“I’m so sorry that I didn’t write you back. I thought you –uh, my father…” Nervously, she shook her head before glancing back at the house. “Let’s go in the backyard.”

Tifa grabbed his hand and led him through the gate and behind the large trunk of the oak tree. The anxiety in Cloud’s chest began to melt away as her fingers laced with his. More comforting than the fact that she wasn’t mad at him was the fact that he couldn’t feel an engagement ring on her finger. He had to try to win her father over; he couldn’t wait any longer. Once hidden behind the tree, Tifa sat and urged Cloud to do the same.

“You have no idea how good it feels to see you,” Cloud said. “I was worried about you. When you stopped writing, I thought something happened to you.”

He sat back and for the first time since his return, he really looked at her. Her body had taken its adult shape and her hair had grown down to the small of her back, but the biggest difference Cloud noticed was her eyes. The warm, wine color of her irises used to sparkle with youth and zest for life, but now they looked tired and sad. Tifa had always been one of the toughest people he had ever known, but he supposed that even a stone could be worn down by enough rain. Cloud hoped that he could chase the shadows out of her eyes with his proposal. The way she was smiling at him made him feel like the hero he’d always wanted to be. Perhaps he could still be a hero, even if he wasn’t in SOLDIER.
“My father kept my mail from me,” Tifa admitted, gaze fixed on their joined hands. “I thought maybe you’d lost interest in me.”

“No, never!” Cloud shook his head. “I made a promise, remember?”

A long time ago, Zangan had taught her the qualities of a trustworthy person and so far, Cloud had met every single one. With so much disappointment concerning her relationships with others and growing nature of distrust, Tifa knew she could lean on Cloud. He had been faithful and loyal to her every day of her life and it was overwhelming to have such a comfort return to her.

“I remember. You always keep your promises.”

A lump was forming in her throat but she kept her emotions in check. She closed her eyes as waves of comfort and relief washed over her. Cloud nodded and gulped as the velvet box in his pocket screamed for attention. Steeling himself, he looked her in the eye.

“I will always keep my promises to you. I promise to love and protect you every day of my life, and I never want to feel this way about anyone else. I want to take you away from here and I want you to be happy. Tifa, I never made SOLDIER; not even close. I’m a low level infantry man—nothing special. But if you think that you could be happy with someone like me, then there’s something I need to know.”

Cloud shifted to reach into his pocket as Tifa looked on, holding her breath.

“Tifa, will you marry me?”

It wasn’t a traditional marriage proposal: he wasn’t down on one knee and she wasn’t in her finest dress. There wasn’t a period of supervised courtship or long discussions of approval between parents nor a celebratory supper waiting for them inside. Despite that, nothing had ever felt so right. In his fingers was a tiny open box proudly displaying a beautiful little engagement ring—modest diamond twinkling in the twilight. Her jaw slackened as she stared at the elegant piece of jewelry, the enormity of the moment sinking in. Carmine eyes flicked upward to meet cerulean ones and she watched as his throat convulsed with a nervous swallow. There was nothing but sincerity in his eyes and she felt ashamed for ever doubting that this boy—her best friend—loved her. A smile broke out across her face at the thought of spending the rest of her life with gentle hearted Cloud.

“Yes…” she breathed as her eyes glistened. “Yes, I will!”
“Mom, I have enough eggs!” Cloud protested with a smile as Claudia heaped another helping onto his plate. His mother couldn’t stop grinning and there was a definite bounce in her step as she poured his glass to the brim with apple juice.

“Nonsense! You’re growing and you need your protein. You need to feed these giant muscles!” she said, squeezing his bicep as she placed the pitcher down on the table top. “Besides, you don’t want to face Mr. Lockhart on an empty stomach, do you?”

He would have replied if he wasn’t so nervous. Mom had been expecting his arrival since he had written to tell her he was coming home. She had welcomed him with such excitement that it made him feel guilty for leaving in the first place. Though a grown man like him could never say it out loud, he had missed his mother and found that being around her again had eased his anxieties—except one. After proposing to Tifa last night, Cloud thought it would be best to seek Brian out in the early morning. This way, he was more likely to be home, sober and level headed. Tifa would be out for her daily training, so he could properly approach the man alone to ask for his formal permission to marry his daughter. Cloud had never been so nervous in his entire life; gathering the courage to move to Midgar was nothing compared to facing the object of his childhood terrors.

Slowly, Cloud nibbled at a piece of toast feigning hunger while fighting nausea. He wished Zack was here; he’d know how to handle this situation. Zack was never nervous. Confidence radiated off of the man like warmth from the sun and Cloud wondered if he’d ever be able to believe in himself the way his friend did. He glanced up as his mother took her seat at the breakfast table.

“So why didn’t you tell me you were going to propose?” Claudia asked as she raised a hefty forkful of eggs to her mouth. The way she was smiling made Cloud feel like she had known this would happen all along.

“I didn’t know if she’d say yes or not…or if she was betrothed already or something.” Cloud shrugged one shoulder. “I guess I didn’t want you to be disappointed if it didn’t work out.”

She sat back in her chair, smiling as she held her glass of juice up to her lips. “It’ll work out. Brian knows how much you love each other and honestly, just look at you! You’re a handsome, responsible young man with a career in the big city! What more can he ask for in a son-in-law?”

Cloud didn’t look convinced. He put down his toast and stared at his plate, leaning his head on his fist. “Mom, I really don’t know the first thing about being a husband. What if I can’t make her happy?”

“Look at me,” Mom coaxed, and he reluctantly raised his head. When her son had started preparing to leave for Midgar and followed through on chasing his dream, it was easy to see Aren’s rock hard determination in the boy. But now, he seemed to be stumbling, and she wasn’t about to let him fall. “I know you feel like you’re unequipped for this because you didn’t grow up with your dad, but you have everything you need to make her happy. I promise.”

“How do you know that?”

“I’m a woman, aren’t I?” She snorted. “All she needs to be happy is your love, your loyalty and your support. Not a billion gil or a superhero. Sweet heart, you’re more than enough.”

With a sigh, he pushed his food around with his fork. “I hope Mr. Lockhart knows that.”
“After watching you grow up I’m sure he does, even if it doesn’t seem that way.” Silence passed for a few moments between them until she prodded him under the table with her right foot. “He’d better approve. I want to be a grandmother soon!”

“Mom!”

… … …

After donning his uniform and boots as slowly as possible, Cloud dragged his feet out the front door. In the last letter she had sent to him, Tifa had said how afraid she was of growing up, but Cloud hadn’t felt that way until he considered the enormity of marriage. It felt good to have some control over his own life and circumstances, although it did frighten him to realize that he would be responsible for Tifa’s wellbeing as well. It was one thing if he messed up his own life, but to take her down with him was a scary thought. Tifa had always felt like home to him. Once they were bound together by law, she’d be his home wherever they ended up, and that fate suited him just fine.

One clammy hand tightened into a fist to knock on the Lockhart’s front door. Cloud had thought that wearing his military blues would give him some courage or impress Brian, but now he just felt ridiculous and out of place as he stood there on the landing. Military training aside, he felt like a child beckoning a dragon from his lair and it took all his might to will himself not to tremble. There was too much at stake here to let his anxiety ruin his slim chance at victory. Cloud felt his limbs go numb as he heard heavy boot steps on the other side of the door. Every word of the speech he had practiced in his head vanished as he heard the doorknob turn.

Brian Lockhart looked much older than Cloud remembered. Grey hair dotted his short beard and streaked through his dark hair, and he wore the same defeated look in his eyes that his daughter did. With a grunt, his eyebrows drew together in a frown.

“Strife! You’re in town?”

Cloud took a deep breath, steeling himself and strengthening his resolve. He was an adult; he could do this! Zack wouldn’t be intimidated, and he wouldn’t be, either!

“Good morning, Mr. Lockhart. I’d like to discuss something with you regarding your daughter.”

The man leaned back to look at him properly, gruff expression laced with skepticism and judgement. Begrudgingly, he stepped aside and waved Cloud in with a quick flick of his wrist. Still stunned that the door hadn’t been slammed in his face, the blonde hustled past him with a quick thanks. Brian gestured toward the couch and Cloud nervously took a seat as Brian sat across from him in his armchair. Swallowing mild panic, the boy put on a patient mask of serenity as Mr. Lockhart glowered at him.

“Go ahead, ask.” The man fixed his dark eyes on Cloud. “We both know what you’re here for.”

Cloud cleared his throat before nervously returning Brian’s gaze. “Now that Tifa is fifteen, I’ve come home with the intention of marrying her. I wanted to get your permission and blessing so that she can be my wife.”

Silence followed. Cloud waited so long for a reply that he began to wonder whether the words that had been gathering in his heart had even passed his lips. He was about to speak again when the older man spoke.

“No.”

Blue eyes widened. That was it?
“But sir, please consider it. I want to take care of her and make her happy and comfortable for the rest of her life!”

“And how can you do that working as a military dog in Midgar, of all disgusting places? That school teacher always talked about how bright of a student you were, but I beg to differ! Did you really think I’d be happy with you taking my little girl to a despicable, dirty city?”

An understandable point, but he didn’t plan to keep her there long. It would only be temporary.

“I plan to file for a transfer, sir.” Cloud kept his voice steady and eyes trained ahead. After dealing with drill sergeants and bullies in the military, Brian’s insults bounced off of him easily. “If you approve, I plan to move to a post near Junon—near the sea. Tifa always wanted to see the ocean…”

Brian tapped his fingers on the arm of his chair. His first reaction was to think of Cloud as a foolish child for thinking it was a good idea to take Tifa from her home, but then he remembered how he had swept Lia away from her family, friends and culture to start a life in a foreign place. He remembered how guilty he had felt that she had chosen to give up so much for him, even when she reassured him that he was all she needed. The boy stared at him, unmoved by his resistance. Brian recalled how uncomfortable it felt to beg Lia’s father for his blessing upon their marriage and he could almost hear his late wife screaming at him to finally do something that would make Tifa happy. Cloud’s willingness to marry his daughter had left him mildly angry, but secretly relieved. If she could get out of here and live her own life, maybe it would silence the howling guilt that echoed in his mind day and night.

“How do I know you will take care of her?”

Cloud almost frowned at the question, for it was obvious that this man hadn’t done anything to take care of his best friend. The years of neglect showed on her face and in the way that she carried herself. Aside from his biological relation to Tifa, he had no right to ask that question.

“I love her, sir.” He lowered his gaze to the worn carpet. “Protecting her and treating her well are what I have always strived to do, even if you couldn’t see it. I’ll provide for her and look after her, I promise.”

If Cloud took Tifa away from him, he’d be alone in this town. His friends were there and he had his job to keep him busy, but the girl was his only remaining family. The rational side of him knew that girls weren’t meant to live in their father’s house forever, but had he really squandered the time he had with her as he waded through his own misery? The crushing weight of regret and sadness made him sag further into his chair. There was no guarantee that anyone would marry Tifa if he denied the Strife boy. The boys her age had left Nibelheim for lives elsewhere, and there had been no interest in her from the young men of nearby villages. The truth that Cloud was her only real option made Brian’s wounded pride bristle and he grimaced as he faced the only conclusion that made any sense. Cloud pushed and pushed his way further into his life, despite all attempts made to ward him off.

Lowering his head and rubbing his temple, Brian Lockhart admitted defeat.

“Take her.”

Cloud lifted his head to stare with wide eyes, lips pressing into a straight line. “Sir?”

“Take her, and get out of my sight.”

… … …

Cloud stepped out of the inn, blue eyes glancing at the hustle and bustle of town square.
It had taken much longer than he had expected to meet with the Mr. Taylor in his hot, cramped office on the second floor of the inn. Nibelheim was such a small village that there really was no proper mayor. Thomas’s father lacked the official title, but carried out many of the duties that one would associate with a town official including the officiating of marriage ceremonies and the distribution of marriage licenses. Cloud had swallowed his nervousness, replaced it with steel will and pride in his decision to marry Tifa and his strides forward into adulthood.

Despite the fact that he and Thomas had never gotten along, Mr. Taylor hadn’t given Cloud a problem and regarded him with more boredom than irritation. In the span of an hour, the necessary paperwork was filled out and the time and place of the wedding ceremony were set. The only thing the officiant found more strange than the hasty timing of the wedding was the fact that the bride and the groom wanted to keep it a secret. The young couple decided that the less prying, curious eyes and judgmental faces present, the better. It was the only way they could feel completely relaxed and happy as they melded their separate lives into one. The only people who would attend were those who truly wanted to be there.

Tifa was supposed to meet him here, but a quick sweep of his eyes across the cobblestone street told him that she was running late. Cloud’s PHS vibrated in his pocket and he flipped it open, leaning against the wall. What he expected to be a message from ShinRA with the latest company updates was actually a text message from Zack. His friend had agreed to help him find off campus housing and Cloud hoped there had been some good news. Blue eyes scanned the little screen:

*Hey, buddy! I hope motion sickness didn’t kill you on your way home. Are you hitched yet? Knock her socks off on your wedding night!*

Blushing furiously, the blonde shoved his PHS back into his pocket. In the past, Cloud never had much luck befriending anyone, let alone other males. But Zack had shown him what it meant to be valued no matter what his family life was like or how weak or strong he was. The SOLDIER inspired Cloud and showed him that he was worthy of companionship and a life free of judgement or disdain. Townspeople passed, occasionally glancing his way to stare or nod at him with a ‘good day’. Cloud always answered politely, wondering if they had even noticed he was gone until now. He didn’t care whether they did or not. He hadn’t made SOLDIER or even gotten close, but inspiration from Zack and the unconditional support from Tifa and his mother had given Cloud confidence that he never had before.

Neither he nor Tifa had made their wedding plans publically known but he knew that word spread extremely fast in Nibelheim. His return had set quite a fire in the ever burning social hearth of local gossip and their upcoming union would all be public knowledge soon enough. Weddings were usually a multi-day affair. Even if they wanted it that way, there simply wasn’t enough time for that. He had planned to go back to Midgar and make living arrangements for them before coming back once again for his bride, but Tifa had begged him to take her with him. She seemed so desperate to escape and he didn’t have the heart to do anything but agree. On their first night as a married couple, they’d begin their trek back to the eastern continent. Cloud was happy to be engaged, but now his mind was working on overdrive trying to prepare for their trip to Midgar and how he could sneak her into his dormitory until he found them an apartment.

“Sorry I’m late!” Tifa’s voice snapped Cloud out of his thoughts as she bounced over to him. “How did it go?”

He immediately folded his hand into hers, intertwining their fingers. “It went perfectly. Come on, let’s get some supper and I’ll tell you what happened.”

The way she smiled and nodded with vigor summoned bright childhood memories of laughing and
running along forest paths and swimming in the creek. So much had changed since those days except the way she made his heart beat wildly in his chest.

“You know what?” Tifa tugged gently on their joined hands as they walked toward the Strife cottage. “I think you picked up an accent in Midgar. You sound so different!”

Blonde eye brows rose in surprise. Had he really? “The dialect is a little different over there. Sometimes it was hard to understand exactly what people were saying at first.”

“Do you think I’ll have trouble, too?”

“Nah, I’ll be there to translate for you.”

Her answering smile made Cloud’s heart flutter in his chest as they approached the front door of his home.

“Hey, you’re back!” Claudia called out from the kitchen as Cloud led Tifa inside.

The air was thick with a savory scent that made Cloud’s stomach growl. His mother’s cooking would be one thing he’d be very sorry to leave behind for military food. But now that he would have a wife of his own, maybe he could finally look forward to flavorful, familiar meals.

“Hi, Mom. Everything is all set for Friday—Mr. Taylor will be there at noon.”

The table was already set with fresh rolls stuffed with cheese, lettuce and tomato slices and Cloud eagerly took a seat, prompting Tifa to do the same. Claudia left her place at the stove to greet the couple.

“Where exactly is there, Cloud?” she asked, picking up the pitcher and pouring icy water into the glasses. “I don’t remember you telling me where your ceremony was being held.”

“I chose the spot, ma’am.” Tifa piped up. “I wanted to get married in our favorite spot by the stream.”

“That way it’s a little more private, too.” Cloud finished her thought. “It’s a little ways down the forest path, but it’s not too far.”

“It’ll be beautiful,” she said, finally taking her own seat across from the couple-to-be. “I can’t believe you two are all grown up.”

Cloud took a bite of his sandwich and watched his mother carefully. There was a giddy smile on her face, but he wondered what she was really feeling underneath. When he thought about it, there were few times that he had ever seen her look tired or sad; his mother was always vibrant and optimistic. She had lost so much, but still smiled through it all. Guilt pricked at his heart as he thought about leaving her behind for good without even Tifa to talk to on a daily basis. Ideally, he would’ve spoken to her privately about his uncertainty but before he could control himself, concern came bubbling out of his mouth.

“Mom…” Two pairs of blue eyes met. “Are you sure you’ll be alright here?”

Her expression never lost its merriness and she answered without hesitation. “Of course I’ll be alright. I’ll miss you kids, but you’ll come and visit, right?”

“Yeah, but—“
“Cloud, I’m not your responsibility. Tifa is.” She smiled lovingly at her son, who continued to stare at her with uncertainty. “You should spend your energy focusing on your future together, right?”

He nodded, but didn’t fully agree. He couldn’t imagine his mother in Midgar, even though she was smart, adaptable, and had a tailoring skill that was useful anywhere. The city was dangerous and he knew she’d be safer in the quiet of the mountains, but something still felt wrong. After a few moments of silence, Tifa tried to turn the conversation in a more lighthearted direction.

“Ms. Strife, what is that delicious smell?”

“I thought you’d never ask!” she said, clapping her hands together in excitement. “I’m working on your wedding dinner—it’s only two days away! I’ve already whipped up some gravy on the stove. Look forward to a delicious chicken dish with mashed potatoes, vegetables and plenty of bread!”

Tifa grinned and bounced in her seat, her fiancé wearing a look of concern instead. “Oh, thank you! Ms. Strife, you’re so generous!”

“Chicken is expensive, Mom. Let me help you pay for it.”

“Nonsense, Cloud. Your wedding celebration is a big deal!” She playfully pinched his cheek. “You need that money for your new life together. Plus, I can’t send you off on your journey to Midgar without a hearty meal in your bellies.”

… … …

“Master Zangan!”

The early morning birds were calling loudly in the pine trees as Tifa rapped on the door to the old man’s house, smiling so wide that her cheeks were sore. She had spent the past day or so with her head in the clouds, dreaming of her promising future with the love of her life. Her sighs were still laced with hope and happiness from trying on her mother’s wedding dress an hour before. The way the gown hugged her curves and draped from her hips made her feel like a person of value—a wife, a woman! No longer was she the forlorn daughter of a despondent man; she would soon be the treasured bride of her closest companion. She’d leave this town, and her past would no longer define her.

Everything would be fresh and new.

“I’m coming! I’m coming.” Master Zangan said in mock annoyance, voice heavy with amusement. Opening the door, his mustache lifted as he smiled. “What is it? I haven’t seen you smile like that since you were small.”

“I have big news!” Tifa said, shifting her weight from one foot to the other again and again.

“Is it big enough news to explain why you’re late this morning?”

“Yes, it is!”

Master Zangan stepped aside and the girl bounced into his home, hastily removing her shoes and heading straight for the makeshift dojo. Calmly, he followed, heart feeling lighter than it had in ages. Tifa couldn’t sit still as she kneeled in her designated spot on the mat. She was like a child, fidgeting and shifting with impatience and excitement as he took his seat before her. Zangan couldn’t hide his amusement as his apprentice desperately tried not to start gushing her story before he allowed her to speak. She reminded him of a balloon about to pop.
“Alright, why were you late?”

“I was trying on my mother’s wedding dress,” she said, eyes shining. “Cloud came back, Master! He asked me to marry him!”

Indeed, there was an engagement ring twinkling proudly on her finger. Tifa stared at it, mesmerized, a contented smile on her face. Zangan’s gentle smile spread into a grin and he leaned forward, ruffling her dark hair and scooping her into a brief hug. He released her when she started to giggle and he watched her fix her tousled locks.

“Congratulations, Tifa. You’ll make a fine wife. Cloud is a lucky young man.”

She blushed at the praise, remembering how happy Cloud had been when he met up with her at their secret place to tell her about her father’s decision. It was one of the few times she had seen Cloud with a genuine smile that wasn’t laced with uncertainty or bogged down by doubt. She was comforted by the familiarity of Cloud and his genuine nature, the sound of the flowing brook and the realization that there was a light at the end of this suffocating tunnel. He suggested that she gave him some time to make living arrangements for them in Midgar before getting married, but desperation had gripped her fiercely and she begged Cloud to take her with him now. Tifa couldn’t bear even one more day in her father’s house; there was no way that she could wait months for Cloud to return, even if it meant that they wouldn’t have the time for a proper honeymoon.

“So, when is the big day?”

“Friday—uh, tomorrow,” she answered as her smile faded a fraction. Folding her hands in her lap, Tifa let her gaze fall to the worn wood of the floorboards. “We are leaving the night of our wedding. I’m going to live with Cloud in Midgar.”

“Why do you look ashamed?”

“I’m not ashamed, I’m just—” She swallowed before slowly looking up at her master. “It’s a lot of change and I’m going to miss you.”

“Change is good, especially in your case.” He put a hand on Tifa’s shoulder, his bright smile urging her to reflect it. “Are you ready for this? As wonderful and beautiful as marriage is, it also takes effort and endurance. You and Cloud love each other, but sticking together through everything life throws at you is no small task.”

Head bowed slightly, she nodded as she absently played with the ring on her finger. Mama and Papa were so happy together before she died. Her parents had rarely argued about anything and seemed to live in harmony and contentment. Was there more to it all behind the scenes? Perhaps she had been too young to notice how the mechanics of marriage actually worked. What did it take to be a good and supportive wife to Cloud?

“It’s only the beginning, but it feels like we’ve made it through so much already,” Tifa admitted.

“That may be so. I know you are mature of mind enough to understand that marrying him involves giving up your freedom as an individual to walk beside him. He will be forsaking his freedom as an individual to love, protect and provide for you. You must learn to work together as an efficient team. It’ll take a little getting used to but I know you’ll do fine.”

Tifa let his words sink in before leaning backwards with a smirk. “You sure know a great deal about marriage for an old bachelor!”

“Ha! That’s my apprentice: smart as a whip, as always!” Zangan laughed. “I guess you won’t need
me for much anymore. I’m not sure there’s much else I can teach you about martial arts.”

“That’s not true! I’ll always need you, Master.”

There was a brief silence as teacher and student came to understand that their relationship was about to change. The girl shifted uncomfortably as the man smiled wistfully.

“You were my best student. Did you know that?”

She looked up at him, disbelief on her features. “Me? But you’ve had so many!”

“I’ve watched you grow and push past your limits. You have remarkable physical and emotional strength and I’m proud of you. You’ve completed your training. The sun has set on this phase of your life and is rising upon another.” He rose to his feet and beckoned her to follow him. “Come, I have something for you.”

Tifa followed him to the large closet where he produced a little burlap parcel. With his encouragement, she undid the knot of twine holding it together and unveiled a beautiful pair of leather fighting gloves. Before she could protest, Zangan spoke.

“They’re a gift for all your hard work and dedication. You’ve earned them.”

Tifa launched forward to embrace him in a grateful hug, trying not to wonder if this would be the last time she’d feel the comfort of his embrace. “Thank you. This means so much to me.”

After a moment he stepped back, fixing her with a cheeky grin. “Use them to protect that husband of yours in Midgar!”

He didn’t even try to block Tifa’s playful punch in the shoulder.

“So you’re coming tomorrow, right?”

“I wouldn’t miss it for the world.”

… … …

She sped back home, muscles fueled with excitement and satisfaction. The house felt empty, even though she knew it wasn’t. Papa was ignoring her now, barely acknowledging her presence except for when absolutely necessary. He didn’t respond with anything more than a grunt or two when she had crept into his workshop the night before, inviting him to her wedding ceremony.

Tifa yearned to make up with him; guilt ate away at her heart and she couldn’t stop thinking about how he looked crumpled on the floor after her attack. Two sides of her mind fought for dominance over one another. One half whispered in her ear that she was an awful excuse for a daughter who didn’t deserve the attentions of her one surviving parent. The other half screamed that it wasn’t her fault: that Papa had been cruel…that life had been cruel.

Life had been cruel, indeed. Photographs lining the upstairs hallway reminded her of all that had been lost. On her way to her room, Tifa tried not to let her eyes fall upon faces that were framed and frozen in time. Years ago, she would have pointed out the exact spot where Mama would’ve hung their wedding photo. There was a space closest to Papa’s room that would’ve been a perfect spot for a family portrait once she and Cloud had children of their own. When Tifa closed her eyes, she remembered Mama holding her on her hip and pointing out each family member or friend who had a space on the wall in their home. Now, it was just a hallway of ghosts and memories; Tifa knew that Papa no longer considered her family nor friend.
Her room was in a bit of disarray, for she was in the middle of packing for her new life over the sea. Tifa decided to take only what was necessary, for there wasn’t much room in her small suitcase. She could always come back when they visited and take more with her. For now, she’d be taking a few sets of clothes, her undergarments, Mama’s cream colored night gown and her lacquered wooden comb. Mama’s little wooden recipe box was already packed, covered by her maroon sparring tunic. Something made her pick up the carved wooden horse that sat upon her piano. Crafted by her father’s skilled hands, it had been a favorite toy of her childhood. Tifa pondered if she should try to fit it in with her other chosen belongings.

Papa wouldn’t be attending her wedding: she was sure of it. There would be talk around town about it, but he wouldn’t care. At one time, her father had been so concerned about how the Lockhart family appeared to outsiders and now he just seemed to have given up. Had she really shamed him so much in her life that he couldn’t even be there the day she was wed? Wasn’t he supposed to walk her down the aisle and give her away to Cloud? She expected Papa to act this way, but it didn’t make it hurt any less. Oh how her heart ached. That ache threatened to bubble into anger but she snuffed it out with a loud exhale. She could get bitter and let it ruin her life as her father had thrown away his own, or she could turn her focus to hope and promise that had finally begun to bloom in her heart.

Frowning, she placed the toy back onto the piano lid, deciding there was no room for childhood baggage in her new life.
Papa wasn’t home on the morning of Tifa’s wedding day. She wanted to pretend that it didn’t bother her as she ate breakfast alone and found herself fighting to keep her thoughts positive. This was the happiest day of her life, right? Cloud was going to marry her and take her far away from all of this hopelessness, disappointment and suffocation. By this time tomorrow, she’d be on a train heading far away from the only life she’d ever known. Tifa sipped from her juice glass as she slowly looked around the spacious kitchen, studying everything from the flowered embroidery on the curtains to the cheerful patterns on the colorful dishware. The chip in the wood at the corner of the table, the crack in the tile in front of the stove and the broad hands of the wall clock all called out to her. She could no longer stand the sight of this familiar place: every square inch held one memory or another, both joyful and melancholy.

A lifetime ago, Tifa supposed she would’ve felt anxious or even panicked at the thought of leaving her home for the uncertainty and unfamiliarity of the unknown, but too much had happened since then. She wasn’t a little girl anymore. The veil of youthful ignorance had been taken off and the young woman was finally able to see her world in Nibelheim for what it really was: a twisted and dangerous dead end. She smiled as she set the glass down gently. It was alright; everything was about to change. She didn’t face an empty future, but the days ahead promised adventure and acceptance. The young man whom she loved fiercely was about to rescue her from this place where neither of them belonged. They’d finally be together without any barriers and the thought filled her with relief and thrill.

Tifa bathed and packed the last of her things into her suitcase as she waited for Claudia to arrive. She came knocking at half past ten just as the bride-to-be zipped her bag shut. Her heart jumped with excitement when she knew her neighbor was at the door. Ms. Strife had been the biggest comfort in the world after her mother’s death and the woman had been nothing but helpful and encouraging. The bond she had forged with her was a precious one indeed.

“Happy wedding day!” Claudia sing-songed as Tifa let her in the door. In her hands was a small make up bag and a small bundle of vibrant wildflowers held together with a purple ribbon. “Come on, let’s get you into that dress! We’ve only got an hour to primp and pamper you.”

Tifa grinned and greeted her before leading the seamstress up to her room. Two days ago, she had tried on Mama’s dress with Claudia’s help. It fit like a glove except for the bust. Ms. Strife had been kind enough to let out the seam of the bodice a bit so that the girl could breathe.

“You think it’ll fit, don’t you?”

“Of course it will! Don’t worry, I brought along a seam cutter and some thread just in case.” The woman motioned for Tifa to take a seat in the chair at the desk in her bedroom. She opened the little bag, producing a bottle of foundation, a case of powder, two brushes and a tiny container of pink blush. A small vial of perfume, a tube of mascara and a cylinder of lipstick were the last things Claudia settled onto the desktop before looking Tifa over with a chuckle.

“I didn’t have much, but it doesn’t matter. You don’t need any make up in the first place.” She grinned as she tapped the girl on the nose. “But that doesn’t mean we can’t experiment a little bit. You are an adult now, after all.”

Tifa smiled, eyeing the assortment of cosmetics. “I’ve never worn make up before.”

“Well, it certainly is a good occasion to start!”
It felt strange to let someone pamper her. Tifa had been independent for as long as she could remember and the feeling of having another person brush out her hair or rub moisturizer into her skin was foreign. Hazy memories of Mama braiding her hair floated to the surface of her mind as Claudia gently combed her black tresses. One snowy evening when they were young, Cloud told her that Mama’s death wasn’t her fault. Up until now, she hadn’t truly believed him. She wanted so badly for this day to be the start of a new, bright existence: one free of guilt and sadness and sorrow. In order for that to be possible, she needed to let go. Papa let the anguish eat away at his soul. Tifa needed to make a choice: would she follow that path or strive to break free from her guilt?

“Ms. Strife?”

“Hm?”

It surprised Tifa how much courage she had to summon to ask a simple question. “Now that I’m marrying into your family, may I…call you Mom?”

Claudia paused before giving her shoulders a loving squeeze. “You could’ve always called me that.” Tifa let out a quiet breath as the woman began to pat liquid foundation onto her cheek with a tiny sponge.

“No, I mean…is it really alright to call you ‘mother’? Would my mom be sad if she knew I called someone else that?” She fidgeted her hands uncomfortably in her lap and tried to still the shaking of her voice. “My heart has called you mom for a long time, but when I hear it come out of my mouth I can’t help but feel guilty.” Ms. Strife let out a soft hum of understanding as she smoothed powder over Tifa’s face, tickling her with the soft brush. “Lia will always be your mother, no matter what you call me.”

The girl looked up at Claudia, who frowned in concentration as she gently applied blush to her cheeks. It sounded so simple when she said it like that.

“Tifa, your mother loved you with all her heart and knew how much you loved her. You are precious to me as well, but you don’t have to feel pressured to address me with any specific title. Do what feels right, okay?”

What was it that felt right? Papa was always frozen in the past, refusing to move forward, and Tifa saw just how that led to a life of emptiness and isolation. But it felt so strange to think about just letting go of the guilt that had weighed her down for so long. Cloud told her that Mama’s death wasn’t her fault. Could she trust that he had been telling the truth? She had to trust him. Her marriage would be a fresh beginning: a chance for renewal and hope. She was going to be a spouse—a partner. If Tifa was going to be able to live her life to the fullest and give Cloud her best self, this burden had to be laid to rest. Otherwise, she’d end up like her father.

When Claudia finished with her make-up, she helped the young bride slide into the beautiful gown. She closed her eyes as the corset was pulled and laced tightly across her back, heart thrumming with excitement. This was really happening! In less than two hours, she would be a wife. Bodice secure, Ms. Strife circled around to paint on some rose colored lipstick. Once her masterpiece was complete, she stepped back to admire her work.

“Oh, Tifa…” Claudia breathed, moving in a slow circle around her. “You are simply stunning!”

“You really think so?”

Her feet carried her to the full length mirror in her father’s room and she studied her reflection, jaw slackening and chest tightening. Tifa knew that she was looking at herself, but the girl gazing back...
seemed so unfamiliar. She had never worn make-up or worn such a magnificent garment in all her life. A modest veil was fastened behind her head and her long, black hair spilled over the lace on her chest. Without blinking, she reached out to touch the stranger with pink cheeks and red lips. Fingertips rested on the flat pane of the mirror.

“You look just like a doll.” Claudia smiled as she brought over the little vial of perfume. “How does it feel?”

“Incredible. I feel beautiful.”

The dress was one garment that she felt no fault in taking, for Mama had told her that it would be hers to wear on her wedding day. Maybe now, she could help Cloud earn some money in the city and buy clothes of her own instead of wearing the altered fabric of a ghost. The more she tried to let go of her grief and try to make peace of it all, the better she felt. It was easier than she thought to trade shame for pride when she donned her mother’s bridal gown.

“You’re the most beautiful bride I have ever seen!” the blonde chirped, hastily spritzing Tifa’s neck and wrists with perfume. “Be careful not to smudge your make-up. I’ve got to run and make sure my son is presentable. I’ll see you at the ceremony in half an hour!”

Tifa followed as Claudia packed up her small assortment of belongings. When the woman moved toward the staircase, the bride gently grabbed her wrist. Blue eyes met carmine ones and they mirrored each other’s smiles.

“Thank you, Mom... for everything.”

Claudia placed a kiss on the crown of her head before winking at her daughter-in-law. “You are worth every moment, Tifa.”

A feeling of peace rushed into her bones as she watched the seamstress bounce out the door. Maybe everything really would be alright. She had made so many mistakes in her life, but it was becoming more and more clear that her faults didn’t stop good people from loving her.

When the time came, Tifa picked up her wildflower bouquet and let the merry assortment of purple, yellow, white and orange chase any lingering shadows of gloom from her heart. She wouldn’t have asked Papa if he was coming, even if he was home. He was aware when the ceremony was taking place; there was no point in trying to persuade him to attend. Fighting Papa’s temper and pride was as tiresome and fruitless as trying to row upstream in a raging river’s rapids, and Tifa certainly didn’t have the energy to waste on that now. Slipping on Mama’s white sandals, she gathered the train of the dress under her arm and walked out the back door, letting it slam shut with a BANG.

… … …

It was a windy spring day; the sun was bright in the blue sky and large, puffy clouds lazily rolled past. The shade of the pine trees did little to stop beads of sweat from forming on Cloud’s forehead as he waited for his bride. The familiarity and tranquility of the atmosphere did little to calm his fraying nerves. Mom spoke with Mr. Taylor and Master Zangan, thanking them for coming and exchanging other pleasantries. It wasn’t the long sleeves of his military formals or the warmth of the spring air that made his face flush; the importance of this ceremony was what made his heart hammer in his chest and his breath uneven. How could he be sure that he could take care of Tifa? A city like Midgar was no place for a girl who grew up where there were no locks on the doors and one could walk through the streets at midnight without fear. He was certain she’d adjust, but it would be his job to keep her safe and warm and fed. Could he do it? They didn’t even have a place to live yet.
Together, they would step out into the unknown: taking aim and shooting toward their goal of happiness and a quiet life together. But what if they missed? They’d always been friends, but how much would marriage change things between them? For years, all he could think about was how much he waited for this very moment. But now that he’d gotten what he wanted, he was afraid. What if he failed her and ruined it all? What if his fumbling steps into adulthood weren’t enough and they’d lose the lifelong bond they had built over all these years?

One frightened thought tumbled out after another, until an avalanche of fear threatened to crush him. But it was all swept away in an instant when his watchful eyes caught a glimpse of white gliding over the pine needles on the forest path. He sucked in a breath and tried not to tremble as Tifa moved closer. The chatter of the adults behind him died down as the bride approached, characteristic shy smile upon her face. Cloud’s clammy hands told him how lucky of a man he was. Not only was his bride so wonderful and sweet, but flawlessly gorgeous as well. He forced himself to swallow as he watched her black hair sway in the breeze. Zangan and Claudia were the only witnesses, but that was all they needed: the two pillars of support in their lives.

Cloud held Tifa’s hands as the officiant read the ceremony repertoire from a small book, trying and failing to focus on the words. The fullness of Tifa’s eye lashes and the smoothness of her skin awakened a longing inside of him, and he struggled to focus on the task at hand. Once in a while, his bride would catch him staring at her and smile shyly. Occasionally, she’d bounce on her heels, impatient with giddiness and excitement. The officiant repeated the vows, addressing her this time. He had barely finished before she gently adorned Cloud’s hand with a ring of his own.

“I do!” The blonde smiled brightly at his bride as his shaking fingers slipped a pale wedding band next to her engagement ring. Tifa continued to bounce and bob, shifting her weight from one foot to the other as the officiant repeated the vows, addressing her this time. He had barely finished before she gently adorned Cloud’s hand with a ring of his own.

“My lips met: his tentative and gentle, hers impatient and excited. A barrier had broken. Never again would they have to worry about being seen holding hands or spending unsupervised time together. She was his, he was hers, and it felt just as strange as it did wonderful. The giddy couple stood for a moment, hand in hand, unsure of what to do next. Zangan shook Cloud’s free hand and Tifa was instantly enveloped in a hug from her new mother-in-law. There was plenty of laughter and happy chatter, which was both soothing and invigorating to the attention starved couple. The officiant had the bride, groom and two witnesses sign the marriage license, binding them together under the law. Cloud watched the ink flow out of the pen as he signed the paper. He had done it. Against all odds, he married the love of his life and would sweep her away to a new place. While Midgar may not be the most romantic of locations for a new life together, at least he could be sure that Tifa would be loved.

“Who’s hungry?” Claudia asked with a radiant smile. “I’ve got to put the finishing touches on your
wedding supper! Well, wedding lunch, I suppose. It should be ready in half an hour or so.”

“Perfect!” Tifa chirped. “There’s something I need to do first. Would you come with me, Cloud?”

The young groom nodded without hesitation.

… … …

The feeling of two rings on her finger felt strange and wonderful as Tifa led Cloud down the dirt path. She’d sweat and her make up would be ruined, but she didn’t care. Her body hadn’t felt so light in many, many years, and she couldn’t resist the thrill and feeling of freedom that running brings. Her husband let out a small chuckle as he gripped her hand, his legs doing their best to keep up.

“Tifa!” he panted. “Slow down!”

In her haste, Tifa hadn’t thought to bustle the train of her gown or draw it up under her arm as she ran. Flowing white lace billowed out behind her like foam on an ocean’s wave, rising and falling with gusts of wind and fluttering of her feet. In their haste, neither stopped to take in the beauty of the rolling green meadows on either side of the path. Hands clasped and mouths panting, they came to a halt at the open graveyard gate.

“I’ll be right back! I just want to give my mother one last visit.”

She smiled as Cloud nodded. “I’ll wait here.”

It wasn’t until Tifa stopped in front of the marble tombstone that it occurred to her that she had rarely visited this grave over the years. She loved her mother and always missed her terribly, but stopping at the graveyard always seemed more like a formality than something felt from the heart. Tifa constantly visited Mama in her thoughts and fond memories and it had always been enough. But now that she was unsure of when she’d be able to visit again, stopping by to say farewell a necessity. Gracefully, she sat in the grass before the tombstone, arranging her dress so that it wouldn’t be soiled.

“I’m going now, Mama.” She tucked a strand of hair behind her ear as she spoke to the stone stab. “Now I’m a wife like you were, leaving my home like you did.”

The wind rustled through the trees and bent the grass in the meadow. Tifa watched as weeds and wildflowers bent forth like ripples on a pond as billowing clouds blotted out the vibrant blue of the sky. She closed her eyes as peace rushed in on the breeze.

“Papa didn’t come and watch, but that’s alright because I know you were there with me. I know better now—I can still be happy, even if he isn’t. You’d want that, wouldn’t you?”

Tifa opened her eyes and gently placed her bridal bouquet before the grave. “I want to make you proud. I promise to be a good wife; I’ll take care of Cloud like you took care of Papa.”

Long minutes of silence passed as she reflected on her decision to marry Cloud, to move on from this dead end life, to put her guilt and sorrow behind her while never forgetting the ones she loved. It would be alright now, she was sure. Life had taught her that one was never truly in control of their circumstances. Bad things happened to good people, and good people could change to bad people if pushed far enough. But Zangan had told her that when faced with adversity, you had to decide: you could drown yourself in your anger and sadness, or you could learn from it and choose to make the best of it. Happiness was attainable, even when everything seemed dark and hopeless.

“I’ll be back to visit, I promise. I love you, Mama.”
Cloud leaned on the picket fence, watching his wife say goodbye. It was surreal to see her there: the white wedding dress a cheerful contrast to the drab, lonely grave stones. She looked like a symbol of hope and happiness amongst the remnants of death and the sight left an eerie feeling in his chest. It would be good for her to get out of here and be her own person instead of her father’s captive. Cloud hoped that he could make her comfortable and happy in Midgar, but he could only do his best with what he had. His salary and housing situation would leave much to be desired, but he’d get another job if he had to. It was a relief to think that he wouldn’t be facing life in Midgar alone anymore. Sure he had Zack, but there was a certain comfort in having your best friend since childhood with you in a foreign place. He hadn’t many friends, but he would never feel lonesome with Tifa by his side.

The bride stood, smoothing the fabric of her gown, and the groom watched her run her hand over the top of the marble stone. She turned to look at him and smiled that smile that always made warmth spread in his chest. She bounced over to him, and for a moment his mind flashed a memory of a little dark haired girl running to take his hand as they walked to school. They’d come so far. Despite all the hardships, they had made it. He reached a hand out to her as she approached and she took it, rubbing her thumb over his wedding band.

“Are you ready for supper?”

“Yeah, I’m starving!” She squeezed his hand as he began to lead her home. They walked in comfortable silence until Tifa spoke, eyes on the sky. “Thank you, Cloud, for marrying me so quickly.”

“I would’ve done it earlier if you didn’t take so long to turn fifteen!”

The bride laughed. “What I mean is—I know that you expected to go back to Midgar without me for now. I don’t think I could stand being here without you for even one more day. Thank you for changing your plans to take me with you.”

He stopped walking for a moment and waited until her curious gaze met his. Slowly, he leaned in to press a shy kiss to her cheek.

“You won’t have to be without me ever again.”

Tifa stood on her front step, inhaling deeply through her nostrils as dread spread through her bones. Though Cloud was right there beside her, she was not prepared to say goodbye to her father.

The small wedding supper had been pleasant and relaxed; there was ample food and ample laughter as the four of them shared merry conversation. It was hard for Tifa to bid farewell to Zangan. She promised to write to him, continue to practice her skills, and visit when she could, but her teacher was so dear to her that her chest had constricted until tears threatened to fall. It was equally as hard to leave Claudia’s embrace. As excited as Tifa was to begin her new life with Cloud, it was so hard to face the reality that visits with her dear friend would be few and far between. How had Mama found the courage to leave her parents behind on her wedding day?

Living away from her father, on the other hand, would be a welcome relief. However, saying goodbye to him would be the most difficult task of the day. It was a necessary evil. No matter how much she’d rather flee, talking to Papa was the right thing to do. Besides, her husband was with her; he wouldn’t let anything bad happen to her. Scraping up ashes of her withered courage, she turned the handle and stepped inside. Her suitcase was just inside the door, where she had left it.

“Papa?”
The sun was starting to set, but she could see him clearly across the parlor in the soft glow of the electric lamp. Brian was slumped in the seat of his desk, bent over what seemed to be maps and order slips.

“What do you want? Aren’t you leaving?” He didn’t turn to face her. He didn’t move at all, except for the finger that traced lines of mountain paths on the map. “Don’t tell me you haven’t any money for the train fare, because I haven’t got any to give you.”

“Cloud and I just wanted to say goodbye before we leave for Midgar.”

Brian grunted, scribbling his notes on a small pad. The blonde watched anxiously as Tifa struggled with the silence that followed and a protective anger churned in his chest. The stubborn man had been a source of much childhood terror, but now that Cloud was grown he could see the situation with clarity that only age and experience could provide. Nothing that could’ve gone on between the father and daughter should have resulted in such treatment. The man was acting like an obstinate child, allowing his bitterness to consume him and lash out at his only daughter.

Tifa swallowed her distress and pressed on. “I know you don’t want to talk with me. But before I go, I just wanted you to know that I’ve always tried hard to please you, Papa.”

He finally turned his head in her direction, his face devoid of all affect. It was impossible to gauge what emotion—if any—lay behind his mask of apathy. Brian’s voice was flat and toneless as he spoke.

“You’ll never be able to do that. Why are you still trying? Is that the reason why you’re here?” The words ripped through Tifa’s charade of confidence.

“That’s not fair!” Cloud interjected, sensing his wife’s recoiling bravado. Brian finally turned to his attention to his son-in-law, a spark of anger flashing in his brown eyes as he stood. “Tifa’s been good to you and you never bother to see it!”

“What did you say?” Papa growled, facing Cloud. “How dare you come in here after taking my daughter away and insult me?” Tifa moved closer to draw her father’s attention away from her husband.

“You’re hurting!” Unbridled truth flowed from her chest. “That’s why you say these things. You’re grieving and in pain. You need help, even if you won’t admit it.”

“I can speak for myself!”

The volume of his voice no longer made her flinch. Tifa tried to understand the reason why he couldn’t just let go. Why he couldn’t see that he was being selfish and that she and Cloud meant no harm. He had sacrificed any future happiness by chaining himself to ghosts and memories, choosing to wallow in his past instead of stepping forward and coping with the direction life had taken. Papa was very much like the trees he cut down, unmoving and rooted to the earth. Things changed around him, but he remained the same, year after year. Instead of resentment, she felt only sadness, and tried one last time to reach out to him. She was moving on and inviting her father to come with her into peace.

“I’m here for you, Papa. I love you.”

“You’re a fool, Tifa! Go on—run off to Midgar! You’ll regret it; I know you will! But it would take you getting mugged, kidnapped or killed before you pay your father any heed, won’t it?”

Cloud bristled. “She’ll be with me. I’m going to take care of her; everything will be fine. She’s done
“You should keep your mouth shut, if you know what’s good for you!” Brian pressed his pointer finger into Cloud’s chest. “You’ve been nothing but trouble for me since you and your whore mother came to this place! No one wants you here! I thought you had the good sense to leave, but you came back! You came back to take my only child away from me.”

Cloud stood straight, taut as a bowstring. His military training was evident in his rigid posture and the discipline to fall silent.

“You know that isn’t true,” Tifa said softly, just above a whisper. “I love him. None of this was meant to bring you any harm.”

She was so confused. Did Papa really care for her wellbeing or was he trying to manipulate her? Brian’s pain was evident in the alertness of his eyes and the threatened posture of his body. After years of neglect and abuse, Tifa found herself wondering if it was still possible that he loved her. Would he feel so alone when she left that he’d miss her? Was that why he was so angry with Cloud? All this time, her father had all but ignored her when she lived in his home, but now that she was leaving, he couldn’t handle the thought. In her heart, she longed to believe that he wanted to protect her and have her near him, like a father should. But experience had taught her that since Mama died, her father had scarcely looked out for anyone but himself.

“This is your revenge, isn’t it?” Brian seethed, fixing his eyes on her once again.

“Revenge? N-no, I—“

“This is your pay back because I haven’t been indulging you and spoiling you all these years! Just wait ‘til you get to Midgar! If you think life here is tough, you’ll be in for a shock when you get to that hell hole. You’ll end up hating him more than me.”

“Papa…” Tifa shrunk in on herself, her face finally crumpling into misery.

Cloud held his ground, bright blue eyes boring into his father-in-law. He wasn’t raised to be disrespectful or rebellious, but seeing Tifa falter gave him the courage to speak. “Why do you turn her away every time she attempts to reconcile? You’re hurting her. Don’t you see what you’re doing to your daughter—to Lia’s daughter?”

Immediately after the words left his mouth, Cloud knew that was the wrong thing to say.

“Get out of my house!” Papa roared, wounded pride and resurfacing pain making him lash out. He stepped forward and placed a hand on both of their shoulders, giving them a hefty shove towards the front door. “You’re both fools!”

Tifa let the momentum take her, carmine eyes wide. She looked as if she might try to speak, but Cloud took her hand before she could summon her voice. It was then that she knew that she’d never have him back. Papa would never again hold her close or call her his sweet pea. The memory of holding his hand or bouncing upon his knee would remain just that: a fond recollection that seemed more like a dream, dulled by coatings of time and dust. The man she had known with the soft brown eyes and merry laugh had been stolen away. The time had come to admit that all of these things were now long gone and that no amount of wishing or hoping would ever bring them back. Detached, Tifa watched as her father stomped back toward his desk and slumped unceremoniously into the chair.

“Take your husband and go to hell!”
There was bitterness in his voice, and perhaps a little regret.

Cloud led her to the door and picked up her suitcase. Although her feet followed obediently, her heart was troubled. Would Papa be alright without her? Was she being selfish to leave him alone? For years, Tifa had tried to see through his anger and identify what it was that was hurt him enough to make him act this way. After all this time she still was unsure, but knew that she couldn’t be who he wanted her to be. Searching for solace, she looked to meet her husband’s eyes and the brilliant blue filled her with reassurance. Cloud had always loved her for exactly who she was and in him she knew she could find healing and purpose. He picked up her suitcase and gave her hand a squeeze as he led her out into the night.

“Come on,” he encouraged softly. “We’ll miss the train.”

After so much pain and sadness, Tifa was ready for her new life to begin. Don’t look back, she told herself. Her childhood home had become nothing more to her than wood and pipes and pain. The bright memories of her early days were tucked neatly into her suitcase. Her injuries, she left in the dust.
The chugging of the train felt like a smooth lullaby as metal wheels glided over the rails.

The constant *clickety-clack* and gentle rocking had soothed Tifa into a dozed state as she cradled Cloud’s head in her lap. By the time he had decided to inform her of his condition, he was already beginning to succumb to the effects of motion sickness. She was frightened to see him become so pale and weak, and wondered if the same fate would befall her since she had never been on any sort of transportation (aside from Papa’s wagon, but that didn’t count!). Tifa leaned her head against the window pane, the darkness of the early morning hours obscuring her view of the world passing by. It was exciting to be on a train and heading out on an adventure with her best friend. Finally, there was life beyond little Nibelheim. Finally, hope, renewal and a sense of escape could descend upon her after years of suffocation and darkness. As refreshing as it felt to leave her sadness behind, Tifa couldn’t ignore the pull of guilt on her heart.

Was she fleeing her problems instead of facing them? Had she really abandoned her father and left him alone to battle his demons? What about Ms. Strife? Would she be alright?

Tifa adjusted the thick blanket around her shoulders. Cloud’s mother had hidden her distress at their parting by presenting the new couple with their wedding gifts: 1000 gil and one of her beautiful cotton quilts. It was a bit cumbersome to travel with, but wasn’t so big when rolled up properly and provided some comfort for the pair on the stiff seats of the passenger train.

She looked down at the peace on Cloud’s face as he slept, smiling as she ran her fingers through his golden locks. The lack of a thick blonde ponytail tied at the base of his neck was so strange at first; she was still getting used to how ShinRA had cut his hair. Her palm smoothed along the short, feather soft hair at the base of his head. Displaying this sort of affection felt clumsy and unfamiliar, for it was improper to freely touch a man if he was not your husband. Now that Cloud was her husband, it felt strange to shed the old trepidation surrounding proper physical etiquette that she had been taught to rigidly uphold until marriage. Now, the barriers had disappeared and she wasn’t sure how to handle the sudden change. If stroking his hair made her nervous, how could she be expected to be brave enough to do other things?

Brief flashes of an old conversation with Ms. Strife rose up out of her memory and Tifa felt her face get hot. Embarrassed, she averted her gaze to Cloud’s military uniform. All this time, it hadn’t seemed real that he was working for ShinRA. The fact that her husband was tied to the very organization that murdered her grandparents and caused her mother so much heart ache still left an unsettled feeling in her gut. Would it be selfish to try to convince Cloud to consider a career change? Was it her place to have a say in this matter? Would he feel betrayed if he knew how much his dream to make SOLDIER stirred up conflict in her heart?

Tifa hadn’t realized that she had begun to fall asleep until the sound of the intercom sounded throughout the car.

‘*Next stop, Port Somers. Next stop, Port Somers. Estimated arrival time: five minutes.*’

“Did you hear that?” Tifa gently shook her husband’s shoulder. “We’re just about there!”

Groggy and disoriented, Cloud shifted to look at his watch. He sat up slowly before rubbing the back of his disheveled blonde head. “We made good time. It’s one in the morning.”

“We did, didn’t we?” She gave him a sleepy smile. “How are you feeling?”
“A little better.” He admitted sheepishly before stretching. Cradling his forehead with his palm, he took a deep breath. “I can’t wait to get off this train.”

Tifa folded up their blanket and rubbed his back as the train rolled to a lazy stop. He reassured her with a brief smile as he gathered up their luggage, leading his little wife off the car and out into the dim light of the station.

“So we get on a boat next, right?”

“Yeah, but not until Tuesday morning. So we'll have a whole day here in the port before I have to get sea sick!” He winked and she giggled. “I know it’s not much of a honeymoon, but it'll have to do.”

“As long as I'm with you, every moment is a honey moon!” She sing-songed—teasing and yet completely serious. It was so exciting that their relationship had changed in such a drastic way after such a long time apart. Cloud was familiar and foreign, the same yet changed, and all hers now. It would take a while to learn how to adjust her behavior to that of a wife. Tifa knew she should feel grown up and sophisticated now, but when it came to Cloud she felt nothing but childish infatuation and glee. She heard him chuckle beside her.

“You've been reading too many romance novels.” He squeezed her hand as he led her into the sleeping village. “Come on, let’s find a place to stay for the night.”

The couple made their way into the quiet square, hustling through the deserted streets. The air was humid and thick with salt and a pungent scent that Tifa couldn't identify. A steady wind blew from the east, tugging at her hair and the loose skirt of her modest blue frock. He seemed to know where he was going, which reminded her that Cloud had been here before—probably more than once. It was so exhilarating to be in a place she had never been to. However, if she had been alone, she would’ve been a bit frightened.

How had Cloud managed when he travelled away from home alone? It was really amazing how much he had change and grown over the years. Once too frightened to join her out in her backyard, her shy, timid neighbor had morphed into a strong young man who was confident enough to face her father and make the heavy decision to marry her. If he could change so drastically for the better, maybe she could too. Maybe she'd come back to visit having finally learned to love herself and be able to make her father proud. She’d do her best to be a proper wife and show Papa that she was capable. She’d grow and show him that she could get on well as an adult, even in a foreign place like Midgar.

Weary and travel-worn, the pair found their way to a hotel on the edge of town. Still fighting the last of his headache from his motion sickness, Cloud paid for a room and took the keys. He was grateful for his mother's monetary wedding present, which was a godsend. He hadn't expected to marry Tifa so quickly and hadn't factored the expense of additional fare for transportation into his savings for the trip. The extra money from Claudia allowed him to spend a little more on decent accommodations and meals for him and his new wife. He couldn't afford a honeymoon, but Cloud was determined to give her a day near the sea that she wouldn't forget. He couldn't wait to see her face when he brought her out to see the ocean in the morning! But for now, they both could use some much needed sleep.

It didn't escape his notice how Tifa lagged a half step behind him as they climbed he stairway to the third floor and down the corridor. Her fatigue was evident in the drooping of her eyes and the slight dragging of her shoes against the carpet. He could sense some unease in the way she kept her eyes averted and spine straight, and immediately wondered whether or not he was to blame. He knew her mannerisms like the back of his palm after years of being inseparable. Cloud gave her a gentle smile as he unlocked the door to their rented room and ushered her inside.
“Thank you, Cloud,” Tifa said, sounding formal and polite. Setting her suitcase on the bed, she looked around the small room. Her husband came up behind her, rubbing her back with his palm as he dropped his duffel bag on the floor.

“You must be exhausted,” he said, hand climbing up her back on over her neck to massage the back of her head.

The pleasurable feel of his fingers rubbing soothing circles on her scalp made her shiver. Everything had been relatively comfortable up until now, when she realized that the two of them were about to be alone as husband and wife for the first time. The thought overwhelmed her. For years, there had been social walls between the two and knowing the rules had provided a sort of comfort. The strict formalities surrounding courtship in Nibelheim were all she knew. Tifa supposed that Mama would’ve taught her about how to behave after her wedding day, but now she felt lost without guidance. What did Cloud expect of her? Would he be disappointed if she was awkward and unsure of herself?

“Yeah. But I think I’d like a soak in the tub before bed.” She turned to flash him a sweet smile before rummaging through her luggage for a change of undergarments and her nightgown. “I’ll be quick, okay?”

He nodded and watched her disappear into the tiny bathroom before collapsing on the bed. He pulled the ShinRA issued PHS out of his pocket and turned it on, weary eyes squinting as they adjusted to the electronic blue glow of the screen in the dim room.

Inbox: 8 new messages

One was a company update from ShinRA; the rest were rambling texts from Zack, telling Cloud about random details of his latest mission or what a mess SOLDIER briefings had been lately. The last message caught Cloud’s attention.

Hey buddy! I’ve been looking fora place that you and the wifey can rent out. No one on the plate seems willing rent to a 15 year old. Especially on your budget! I’ll have to check out what they’ve got underneath. Beggars can’t be choosers!

Down in the slums? His exposure to the slums had been largely limited to his patrol routes or the infrequent times that Zack had taken him to the hang out spots frequented by ShinRA servicemen. Luckily, Cloud had been sheltered from the worst of Midgar because he lived in the academy on top the plate. The slums were dangerous and dirty—the last place he’d want to bring Tifa. She deserved so much more than that. But for now, he supposed it would have to do. Cloud fought to keep his eyes open as he typed out his reply.

Thanks, Zack. I already talked to my commanding officer about moving out of the dorms. I’m sorry to make you run around looking for an apartment for me on such short notice. I know how busy you are. Tifa and I should be in Midgar in three days or so. See you then.

Placing is PHS on the night stand, he dozed off against the pillow until he heard the sound of the bathroom door clicking open. Cloud pried his eyes open. Tifa emerged, nightgown gliding over her hips, the lace trim ending just past her knees. He swallowed nervously as his wife climbed onto the bed next to him. Her wet hair was pulled into a dark braid that draped over her shoulder and his fingers ached to touch it. It took a moment before he realized that he could. She lay next to him with a soft smile and he reached to smooth the hair on the back of her head, sliding his palm down until it rested on the back of her neck.
“Cloud…” she whispered, blushing furiously.

“Hm?” His eyes were heavy and his heart was full.

Though weary, her ruby eyes were shining with affection and excitement. “Thank you for taking me on this adventure.”

“Thank you for wanting to come with me—for wanting to be with me.” He leaned in to plant a kiss on her lips. “You have no idea how lucky I am that the most beautiful girl in the world wanted to be my wife.”

Her smile bloomed briefly until it was tugged from her lips. Tifa had learned to hide her feelings out of fear of backlash from her father. Talking about the troubles of her heart was simply out of the question with Papa, who would usually tell her that she was a spoiled little thing with nothing to be troubled about compared to his woes. Over the years, it had become second nature to burrow her sorrows deep where no one could see them. If she could appear strong, maybe one day she actually would be. Tifa was young, but she knew that to keep silent wasn’t something she could do in marriage. Mama used to tell Papa everything: from the minute details of a cooking mishap to her deepest concerns and fears. There was nothing to be afraid of with Cloud, so why was it still so hard? They were two people who had been hurt in different ways over the course of their young lives. Now that they were husband and wife, they had to walk side by side. Both had come from brokenness: broken homes, broken relationships, broken dreams. But the very brokenness that could have destroyed them had morphed them into gentle people. Quietly, Tifa let out a small breath. She had learned to protect her heart by keeping it shrouded and vague, but marriage meant transparency and honesty. She was quiet for a long while as she summoned the courage to let out her dark thought.

*It's alright, it's alright. Cloud loves you, even if you're weak.*

“Do you think I’m running away? Am I a bad daughter to leave my father in that house, all alone with his thoughts?”

Drowsy blue eyes sparkled with alertness and he propped himself up on one elbow to look at her squarely. “No. You got married, Tifa, and you’re moving with your husband overseas. You didn’t do this to hurt your dad, even if he makes you think you did.”

“I hope you’re right,” she said, stifling a yawn. “I just want him to be okay.”

Gently, he pulled her close. For the first time in so long, she felt safe and secure. The pair snuggled beneath the sheets, enjoying the novelty and comfort of having each other for peace and warmth as sleep pulled at their consciousness.

… … …

“Tifa, wake up!”

Bright light flooded the room and she stirred from her cocoon of blankets with a soft sigh. She felt a warm hand on her shoulder and she opened her eyes to see a familiar face with an unfamiliar expression. Normally reserved and quiet, Cloud was absolutely beaming. She found herself staring at the whiteness of his teeth as she sat up.

“What is it?” He was practically bouncing on his heels as she pulled back the covers. Intrigued, she stood.

“Get dressed! There’s something I’ve got to show you.”
“Right now?”

“Right now!”

His grin was infectious. She giggled as she hustled to the bathroom to change into a light summer dress. She pulled on her sandals as she reached for his outstretched hand and he led her out of the building and into the morning air. Overcast skies did nothing to deter them. She felt like they were children again, hearts light as their feet thudded through the streets. When Cloud told her to close her eyes, she broke out into a grin, heart thumping wildly in her chest.

“Where are we going?” she giggled.

“You’ll see. Watch your step, ok?”

The solid pavement of the walkway changed to something soft and malleable as she felt herself being led over a small hill. The feeling of coarse grains between her toes and the sudden rush of wind made Tifa’s breath catch in her throat. Salt and moisture clung to her skin as the sound of crashing water rumbled to her ears. It felt both foreign and familiar, like something she had once visited in a dream. A swell of emotion that she couldn’t identify welled up inside her. He tightened his grip on her hand when he finally stopped. When he spoke, she could hear the thinly veiled excitement in his voice.

“Okay…open your eyes!”

The breath left her lungs in an instant at the sight before her. A stormy sea surged forward again and again as dark clouds drooped heavily in the sky. The call of gulls pierced the air as they soared overhead, swooping over the waves and out toward the endless expanse of water. All she could do was stare in awe at the beauty and power before her.

“Oh, Cloud.” She whispered his name like a sigh. “It’s just like my mother said…”

Blue eyes fixated on her face, soaking in the joy and wonder in her expression. “I promised I’d take you to the ocean, even if I had always imagined it would be under different circumstances.”

“I’m so happy—Cloud, thank you so much! Thank you, thank you!”

Fingers still laced with his, Tifa stripped off her sandals and stepped forward until the tips of her toes touched the edge of the surf. Clumsily, Cloud followed suit and tossed his boots aside with his free hand. The water was cold, but her eagerness kept her from shivering and she plunked forward into the water as a wave retreated. Cloud let go of her hand to roll his pant legs up before joining her as she waded around. For half an hour, they romped around the shallows: splashing and playing. The waves danced and rolled around them until they surrendered to cold, their goose bumps and bluing lips chasing them back onto the sand. Cloud squeezed out the dripping fabric of his slacks as Tifa stood, looking out once again at the restless sea. She filled her lungs with the thick ocean air and stared into the waves.

Is this how Mama felt when she left home after she got married—happy and full of hope?

She was so in love with Cloud, with the thought of a new life, with the romanticism of a marriage to the one person who knew her better than anyone else. How wonderful, how amazing, how promising her future seemed. In this moment, nothing else seemed to matter. She and Cloud would be together forever, chasing their hopes and dreams and ambitions hand in hand. Together, they could overcome any sorrow or challenge—they certainly had enough practice. Everything was going to be alright. Tifa let peace settle on her heart as she listened to the music of rushing water.

The pair eventually decided to walk the shoreline together. Cloud watched as Tifa periodically
stooped to pick up a sea shell or two, saying how she wanted to keep them as a keepsake from her very first visit to the sea. Blonde spikes whipped in the wind and he couldn’t pull his eyes away from the smile on her face. Her cheeks were flushed from chill and excitement, her hair wet and stringy from salt and moisture. The way her features were glowing with excitement made him proud that he had been able to make her feel that way. He wanted to see Tifa like this all the time.

“Let’s buy a house by the sea, Tifa.”

She stacked a shell neatly on top of the growing pile that she cradled against her chest before turning to look at him. “But what about your job in Midgar? Can SOLDIERs live outside of the city?”

“I’m not in SOLDIER yet, and I don’t want to stay in Midgar forever. But I really want to have a happy life with you. If we lived on the coast, you could see the ocean every day!”

“That would be nice…”

“Then let’s aim for that: a little place all to ourselves! We could live away from the pollution and noise of the city, and raise our children there.”

Crimson eyes sparkled as he filled her head with dreams of little blonde children and the long forgotten feeling of comfort that comes with being part of a happy family. Cloud smiled as he continued, “Let’s save up as much gil as we can and make it happen! We can do this, if we try.”

Enchanted, Tifa leaned over to plant a kiss on his cheek. “We can do anything, as long as we have each other!”

… … …

The hum of the vehicle’s motor and the constant chattering on the radio made for enough white noise to lull Cloud’s weary body into a placid state. He wasn’t sure how many hours it had been since he and Tifa had gotten in this ShinRA transport van, but the sun had just about set and dusk was already blanketing the desert landscape around them. The cool glass of the window felt refreshing against his pounding head. Though his eyes were shut to keep dizziness at a minimum, he could feel Tifa bouncing anxiously in the seat next to him. Somehow she was still bright eyed and excited despite the past two days on a boat with her seasick husband, and Cloud was increasingly grateful that his queasy disposition didn’t dampen her enthusiasm to reach their destination. He felt the warm, comforting press of her thigh against his and took a deep breath to keep his nausea at bay.

He couldn’t stop thinking about how Tifa had looked, enraptured by the majesty of the sea. She was the happiest he had seen her in many years his small, newfound sense of pride made him revel in the fact that he had brought her that joy. Cloud had watched her, black tresses swaying in the wind against a grey sky, as a repressed memory emerged. It had been a blustery day when she had climbed Mt. Nibel. Her dark curtain of hair had been tugged to and fro as she tried to cross that bridge. He remembered falling, the terror of finding her bleeding and motionless, the overwhelming wish to die. It wasn’t until now that he realized that he couldn’t have saved her from a life trapped in the gloom of her father’s house if he had died that day in the gorge. If he wasn’t around, who would’ve rescued her from her desperation and loneliness?

It was in that moment, as he stared at her back, that he realized the strength it had taken for him to accomplish all this. He had been brave, had worked hard, had scrimped and saved and tried his absolute best for this reason: to free the love of his life from her chains and to find purpose in his life.

“Oh, Cloud! Look!”
He lifted his head and opened his eyes as Tifa leaned over him to peer out the window as Midgar came into view. The city lights were laid out before them like a thousand stars and she giggled, wrapping her arms around his shoulders. The gesture stirred up a surge of emotion in his chest. He had done it. He was a making his way forward as an adult. Despite what everyone at home thought, despite having the odds stacked against him since his premature birth, despite his lifelong ostracism, things were turning out alright. Cloud grinned as Tifa squeezed him against her. He never thought he could do any of this, but in the end he was stronger than he knew. He had Tifa now. She was his and he was hers.

Cloud leaned back into her chest, reveling in the feel of her embrace. For once, he was sure of his place in the world.
“This is it, our home!” Tifa laughed, collapsing on her back on the floor of what would be their living room.

Cloud gave a weary smile. The place was sparsely furnished with whatever the previous resident decided not to take with him. He was ashamed that he couldn’t provide a better place for them at the moment, but was grateful for her optimism and enthusiasm. The tiny place was on the third floor of a four story apartment building in the slums of Sector Three. Not only was the building on the verge of being condemned, but it was in a particularly shady area and the young husband was concerned about the safety of his little wife and his ability to protect her. The way things were here, Cloud would keep her locked away in their apartment if he could: away from the gangsters, prostitutes, muggers and thieves. But he couldn’t do that. He had no idea how long it would take them to save up enough money to move out of Midgar—it could be any number of months or years before he built a sufficient savings or was able to transfer to another military post.

Anxiety and inadequacy swelled inside him, making his throat tight.

Cloud scratched his nose and looked around. “Do you like it?”

There were three rooms: a modest living space with a kitchenette, a tiny bedroom, and an even smaller bathroom. His mother’s cottage had been small, but this place seemed to be less than half the square footage of his old home. Tifa was used to living in a spacious house with plenty of room to breathe. Cloud felt like he had done her wrong to drag her from a sea of evergreen to the grey of the slums, taking her from her little castle to hide her away in a shoebox. But it wouldn’t be forever, right?

“I love it! Your friend did a great job!” she said, stretching out on the dusty hardwood floor. She lifted her eyes to the ceiling where there was peeling paint and water stains. “It just needs a little love, that’s all.”

“A lot of love,” Cloud chuckled. The landlord had given them a quick tour before they agreed to rent the place. He had accepted immediately, because he knew that no one else would rent to a pair of fifteen year olds. Oh, how he wished he could afford a place on top of the plate! They were going to be living in a dangerous place and the unease in his chest was unrelenting.

During his scheduled patrol routes in the slums of Sector Seven, Cloud’s eyes had been opened to the awful reality of life under the plate. Everywhere, people were desperate and poor. On more than one occasion he and his patrol mate had broken up bar fights, caught thieves and even been shot at. Down here, most people weren’t fond of ShinRA. They felt oppressed and ignored, their pleas to the mega-corporation always falling upon deaf ears. The constant power outages, the outrageous crime rate and lack of supplies had driven away all respect for President Shinra and confidence in his leadership. People didn’t stay in the slums because they wanted to, unless they were criminals looking to disappear. The opportunities for well-paying employment were few and far between. Some of the richest people under the plate were involved in drug dealing or sex trafficking—things that he never wanted Tifa to even know about.

He had to get her out of here as soon as he could.

Tifa hauled herself to her feet and began to bounce around their flat, exploring their little kitchen in detail. Cloud moved into the bedroom where a twin bed sat alone against the far wall, the mattress discolored and lumpy looking. A single window cast orange glow from a street light into the gloomy
little room and he sighed upon seeing the large crack in the sheetrock below the sill. He heard Tifa’s bare feet pattering up behind him.

“ Aren’t we lucky?” she giggled. “ We didn’t have to buy a bed. Or a tea kettle—there was one under the sink!” She flopped onto the bed and took his hand in both of hers.

“You’re something else, you know that?” He teased, moving to sit beside her. “You’re the only one who could live here and think that they were lucky.”

“It’s not like Nibelheim, but that’s alright. This is our home, all to ourselves! No one can tell us what to do or what to cook or how to act!” She bounced a little on the mattress.

“Maybe that’s the best part of it all: it’s NOT like Nibelheim.”

It had only been about a week since she left home, but homesickness and a feeling of displacement had been rising in her heart since they crossed the city border. But the busyness of finding a place to live and the overwhelming infatuation with her new husband were enough of a distraction for now. She swallowed at the vision of mountains and rivers and the memory of the scent of pine. How could anything be better than that beauty? She looked to him for clarification.

Seeing her unvoiced question, he continued. “Back at home, everything we did was under public scrutiny. Here, no one cares. Everyone minds their own business. Here, you could be yourself and not have to worry what everyone thinks.”

What a freeing concept.

She opened her mouth to reply, but shut it again when there was a pounding on the door. They stared at each other for a moment before the knock sounded again. Cloud stood, posture stiff. You never know who could be at your door in Midgar, and he had a wife to protect. Blonde eyebrows drew together in a frown when he realized that Tifa could probably better protect him than he could protect her.

“Hey! Open up, it’s me!”

Cloud’s shoulders slumped with relief and a smile tugged at the corner of his mouth. He moved to the front door and Tifa followed, lingering shyly at the far end of the living room. The door was opened to reveal a tall man with a mane of disheveled black hair that was somehow more tame than Cloud’s unruly locks. Tifa sensed that his presence alone made her husband feel at ease and her manners screamed at her to be polite and introduce herself. But his eyes…his eyes. Something was wrong, and it froze her feet to the floor.

“So how do you like it, buddy?” He clamped a strong hand on Cloud’s shoulder before his gaze landed upon her. “Oh, hey! You must be Tifa! Cloud hasn’t stopped talkin’ about you since I met him! It’s nice to meet you in the flesh.”

He moved as he spoke, crossing the distance between them in two large strides. Tifa put a smile on her face as he grabbed her hand in a firm shake. She squeezed back.

“Woah, quite a grip you’ve got there, little lady! She’s a strong one, Cloud!”

Cloud smiled and shook his head, “You have no idea.”

The man was so friendly and jovial with a smile and demeanor that made Tifa believe he could befriend a dragon, if he tried. But something about him was synthetic and disturbing and it intimidated her. The need to be courteous swallowed her hesitation and she summoned her friendliest
smile. “A pleasure to meet you, Mister—“

“Zack!” he offered. “Zack Fair! First Class SOLDIER, at your service!”

Oh. She took in the black uniform from pauldrons to combat boots. So this is what Cloud wanted to be? A warrior with haunting, icy eyes that were so bright they seemed to glow. Wait—were they actually glowing? Tifa wasn’t sure how long she had been staring into his eyes before she realized how rude she was being. She jerked her gaze away as Zack let out a hearty laugh.

“You like ‘em?” He flashed a toothy grin as he pointed to one cerulean eye. “Mako infused—cool, right?”

Cheeks dusted pink from embarrassment, she kept her face mostly averted. “…They put mako into your eyes?”

“Nah, they inject it into our bodies. Part of the SOLDIER program. It enhances our strength and all our senses!”

Tifa glanced at the bare lightbulb on the ceiling. How could the same substance that brought electric power to the world be coursing through a human body? How was that safe? If Cloud became a SOLDIER, he’d be subjected to the same treatment, and she wasn’t entirely sure she was comfortable with that. Cloud moved to stand next to his wife, grinning up at his best friend.

“Thank you so much for helping us out—the couple of nights we spent in my cramped dorm were awful. We would’ve been stuck there for much longer if it hadn’t been for you.”

Looking around, Zack couldn’t imagine that his ShinRA dorm could be much more cramped than this tiny place. But he was always eager to please, and if he knew any way he could make Cloud’s life any easier he’d certainly aim to do it!

“Thank you, Mr. Fair. Please, sit down.” Tifa gestured to the beat up sofa against the wall. “I’m sorry we don’t have any refreshments to serve you, we just got here.”

“No, no—it’s alright! ‘Gotta report to HQ in half an hour. I just wanted to check on you guys and make sure you two didn’t need help movin’ in.”

“We really don’t have many things to move in.” Cloud shrugged. “Everything we have fit in Tifa’s suitcase and our duffels.”

“Well, if you need anything else, there’s a second hand place in the Sector Four market. Just hop the train over there and it’s right past the station. You can’t miss it!”

“I know the one. Thanks, Zack.” Cloud reached out to shake his friend’s hand. “See you at work tomorrow?”

“Bright and early!”

Tifa gave a polite bow of her head. “Take care, Mr. Fair. You’ll join us for a meal one day, won’t you?”

“Home cooked food and good company? How could I resist!” The large man stepped towards the door. “See you love birds later!”

… … …
It was her first time out and about in Midgar, and she was truly terrified. After Zack left, the couple had made a short list of apartment necessities and set out to search for them.

Tifa feared that in taking her on as a wife, Cloud will feel as if he was lugging a bag of sand back and forth across the city. She was wholly dependent on him, and while Tifa knew he would take care of her, she resented herself for her bewildered state. How could she be a useful partner if she couldn’t do her duties? She hadn’t the slightest idea where to acquire food, a washboard, or material for clothes.

Everything was dark. Tifa couldn’t understand how the people could live here, never being able tell the time of day by the position of the sun or feel the pleasant patter of rain drops on their skin. Worst of all, there wasn’t a plant in sight! There were no trees, no grass, no wild forest vines. An anxious pit formed in her stomach as Cloud had led her around by the hand. All of her senses were immediately overwhelmed. There was so much noise: automobiles, music, people. The sound of traffic rumbling past was a constant backdrop. Wooden cart clamored past as shop owners shouted at passersby, advertising their goods. The shrill screeching of trains pulling in and out of the stations made her wince. There was concrete in every direction and the thick scent of smoke and fumes and filth hung heavily in the air. Her chest burned when she breathed and she wondered if this is what Cloud used to feel like when he was sick as a child, since his lungs had been so weak. But the most startling thing to Tifa was the overwhelming number of people bustling around. She had never seen so many people in her life! Bright electric lights and big screens flashing advertisements lit up the busy avenue. It was like another world.

Tifa had no trouble matching Cloud’s swift strides as they made their way off the train and into the market place. At first, she had smiled and greeted everyone she could with a quick ‘hello’ until Cloud had gently suggested that she keep her head down and avoid eye contact. She obeyed, trusting her husband, but couldn’t understand why: it felt strange to be so rude! It wasn’t until they had reached their destination when Tifa realized that no one wanted her to greet them. In fact, no one looked like they wanted anything to do with anyone. Everyone was in a hurry and no one was smiling. She kept her eyes on the back of Cloud’s blonde head, trying to mimic his demeanor. The faster she learned to fit in here, the better. Having her husband to guide and protect her made her feel a tiny bit less afraid.

People shoved past them as Cloud pulled his wife into a shabby wooden structure—a thrift shop of sorts. Tifa was shocked by how many people had run into them or bumped her shoulder without so much as a ‘pardon me’. Maybe it was because they were young?

“Cloud,” she whispered, now that they were inside. “Do you think people would’ve let us through easier if you were wearing your uniform? Military personnel should get more respect.”

“It’d be worse.” He shook his head, biting back a sigh. “People living in the slums aren’t really fond of ShinRA, so let’s keep it quiet that I’m a serviceman. It could get me in trouble down here, especially if I’m alone.”

It made Tifa dizzy just how much she needed to learn. Cloud was busy looking for second hand silverware while all she could do was discreetly stare at other customers. The men wore strange, sleeveless shirts and shabby trousers worn at the hems and knees. The women made Tifa blush with their bare midriffs and pants even shorter than the bloomers underneath her dress. If Papa had been ashamed of her wearing her pants and sparring tunic, he would’ve turned white as a sheet if she had ever worn something like that. Didn’t the women feel exposed, embarrassed, or at least cold? It was indecent to be so scantily dressed. She strained her ears to pick up on snippets of conversations and she found herself struggling to understand their foreign dialect.
“Look what I found.” Cloud held up a plain dinner plate. “Three plates for 1 gil! There’s a pot and a skillet here for cheap, too.”

Right. She was supposed to be helping him shop. Tifa ran her gaze over the crowded shelves of housewares and gadgets.

“What’s this?” She slowly read the handwritten tag, self-conscious that her literacy level was nowhere near her husband’s. It had been ages since she had read aloud, or practiced in the presence of others. Sure, she scoured the newspapers at home during Cloud’s absence but she hadn’t had any guidance since she was eight. Would he regret marrying her if he knew about how lacking her ability to read was? “A m-microwave…”

“Oh, that’s a machine that heats up food for you. You don’t even have to use the stove!”

“Woah.”

“It’s almost as cool as the little washing machine in our bathroom. It washes clothes for you if you put the soap inside.”

“You mean, I don’t have to do it by hand?”

He grinned. “Nope! Unless you want to rub your fingers raw! Midgar definitely has its downsides, but you can’t beat the convenience.”

It took them half an hour to buy the basics they needed. Carefully, they packed them into Cloud’s leather pack before heading off in search of a few groceries to stuff in Tifa’s satchel. She felt so foolish and naïve as she followed him around the convenience store. Discovering that they didn’t have to make their own soap or can their own food was shocking! There was neither sun nor fertile ground, so no one in Midgar could be expected to keep their own gardens. But it was so hard for her to imagine a life where one didn’t at least grow some of their own food. Tifa had never lived in a world where everything had to be purchased. It made her feel both secure and vulnerable. Food was always available, as long as you had gil to buy it. If you hadn’t enough gil, you had no alternative option to feed yourself.

This wasn’t just a change in location, but a change in every aspect of her lifestyle. At home, if she ran into trouble, she could always reach out to a fellow Nibelheim resident. They hadn’t been the most friendly of people, but compared the inhabitants of the slums they were absolutely angelic. Here, she was on her own if it wasn’t for Cloud. She’d get used to it, right?

………

Cloud sighed as he leaned back against the worn couch cushions. His eyes ran over the scrap paper in one hand as he tapped his knee with the pen in the other.

*Monthly stipend: 3800 gil*  
Rent: 2000 gil  
Estimated mako and water bills:600 gil  
Monthly train fare:200 gil  
Food/Savings/Misc. Expenses: 1000 gil

How had Mom managed to do it? Cloud had no idea how hard it was to strike out on his own and fund a household. It was so hard to afford basic amenities. In Nibelheim, having one thousand gil per month to spend on food and household goods would
mean easy living. But here in the big city, everything was much more expensive. With his income, Cloud would’ve been able to have a house built and have more than enough to buy ample food and whatever else they needed. The inflated prices of everything in Midgar made his wages a pittance, really. Even if they only spent two hundred gil on food every week (which wouldn’t be very much), that would only leave them with two hundred to put aside each month—they’d never save enough to leave the city! He’d have to work some overtime or sign up for as many missions as possible for the extra money. Sure, he had a small savings, but Cloud still felt insecure.

A savory smell reached his nostrils and he looked up to watch Tifa happily buzzing about the kitchen as she prepared dinner for two. She felt his eyes on her and flashed him a smile. They’d figure it all out, right?

“Sorry if I’m taking too long! I’m trying to get used to the electric stove.” She giggled, adjusting the burner knob. “I keep reaching for the wood box when I can just turn the thing!”

“Pretty cool, huh?”

“Uh huh! I can’t wait to try out the washing machine for our clothes.”

“There’s an electric dryer, too.”

“No way!”

Cloud folded the scrap paper, shoving it into his pocket. Tomorrow would be his first day back at work, and he’d have to catch the early train to make it to the upper plate on time to report for duty at five in the morning. By the time he got home, it could be well past six in the evening, and his stomach churned at the thought of leaving Tifa alone for so long. Would she be alright?

The conversation over cheap pasta on mismatched plates was light and cheerful, full of hopeful discussion about their future together. Exhaustion from such an eventful week brought frequent pauses, which were filled with the ambient sounds of people and traffic in the city. Tifa commented on how strange it was to live in such a loud place, wondering why so many people were still wandering about instead of eating dinner with their families. He remembered what it had been like to be shocked by the noise pollution upon his arrival to Midgar and wondered if she’d be able to find sleep easier than he had. Nibelheim was a slow moving village even during the day. In Midgar, the hubbub never seemed to stop. Without sunlight, the only way to tell the time was by the clock.

Before long, the tired couple moved to their little bedroom and lay side by side on the mattress, bare except for Claudia’s thick woolen quilt. The narrowness of the twin size bed and the addicting feeling of proximity kept them pressed close together: her cheek against his chest, his arm over her shoulder. Tifa felt Cloud rest his chin on the top of her head and she tangled her legs with his.

“You have to go back to work tomorrow, right?”

“Mm. I don’t want to leave you here alone, though.” He took a deep breath, considering the situation. “I want to get you a PHS, so you could call me in an emergency, but we don’t have the gil for that right now.”

Tifa turned her head to kiss his Adam’s apple. “It’s alright. You taught me how to get to the ShinRA building. If I needed to reach you, I could ask for you at the front desk.”

“But what if you get lost in the slums?”

“I’d just need to get to the train station, and that’s only a few blocks away. I know how to get there.”
“What if someone tries to harm you?”

“Then I’ll show them why they shouldn’t mess with student of Zangan’s!”

Cloud smiled and rubbed her back. Leading Tifa through the slums of Midgar had reminded him of a lifetime ago when he had held her hand when they were lost in the woods after dark. Although he was now grown, he wished he had the confidence of an adult. Cloud constantly fretted over whether or not he could really keep Tifa safe in this dangerous city. He hadn’t forgotten that his wife could turn her body into a deadly weapon, but his protective instincts wouldn’t let up. She was tough—mentally and physically—but she was also new to this dirty place. No amount of physical strength or prowess could counter the deadliness of naivety in the slums. He’d have to do his best to show her the ropes as soon as possible. Gently, he took her hand and brought it up towards his face.

“You have beautiful hands, Tifa. I don’t want you to have to fight.”

Tifa felt her face heating up, both from Cloud’s praise and from the embarrassment of her knuckles, rough and scarred from years of sparring with Zangan and protecting her home town. How could he possibly think her hands were beautiful?

“O-oh, no. My hands are all beat up…”

He locked eyes with her before placing a gentle kiss on the ridge of her knuckle. “They’re perfect. I want you to use your beautiful hands for beautiful things. I don’t ever want you to have to worry about defending yourself. It’s my job to protect you.”

Her cheeks burned with shyness and at the unrestrained affection between them. Cloud saw her color and his smile widened. The proximity of their bodies and the earnestness of his words made her heart flutter in her chest. Tifa was never much of a lover of fairy tales. As a child, she’d preferred when her mother sang or played the piano until she fell asleep. She had never much cared for such lofty stories of the good always triumphing over the bad, of magic and bravery, of happily ever afters. But her prince was right in front of her, kissing her hand, her face, her lips. As much as Tifa hated it, she had been a damsel in distress, waiting day after day for her knight to come save her from loneliness and despair. And he had come. They were about to live their ‘happily ever after’ together, forever. He breathed sweet sincerities into the air.

“I always want to protect you. I love you, Tifa.”

Gently, he rolled her onto her back, placing tentative kisses down her neck. She responded with a tiny, irrepressible moan. Her eyelashes closed as her body relaxed in response, encouraging him by kneading her fingers through blonde spikes.

“I love you too, Cloud.”

It all happened so fast. Tifa knew she was safe, but had been so nervous to be bare before him. Fear kept her eyes closed and breathing unsteady: fear that he wouldn’t like what he saw, fear of her inexperience, fear of the unknown. Pleasant tension coiled in her body, making her writhe under his tentative fingers as they moved across her skin in timid exploration. He had stiffened when she sighed his name, apologizing at once with a flushed face for overstepping his boundary. Tifa was almost too shy to ask him to continue. Cloud strained to recall anything from his days in the barracks when he was forced to be exposed to the perverted conversations of his fellow cadets and their sexual escapades. Carefully, he lavished her body with his gentle touch, carefully reading her reactions. He wasn’t sure if it was her small noises of approval or the way she eagerly pressed her body into his that made his brain switch off his ability to think. Her quiet moan when he kissed her neck awakened something primal inside him. When she arched underneath him and wrapped one
lean leg around his waist, instinct took over.

Tifa remembered how Claudia had told her about all this and how she could’ve never imagined doing this with a man. But her heart was brimming with love for her husband and her body was acting of its own accord, aching for him so strongly that it allowed her to overcome her trepidations. An unfamiliar, overwhelming feeling ignited in her veins. She’d never forget the pinching and burning sensation when it finally happened. He was slow and gentle, nervousness returning as he heard her stifling a whimper. She kissed him to chase his guilt away, and he only moved when she was ready. Their coupling was short, but left her body sated and heart full.

Cloud wrapped the quilt around them and held her in his arms. Peace and satisfaction washed over him as he pulled her against him. His precious, precious friend—his wife and partner—is this what it felt like to be loved? Is this the acceptance and freedom he had always been searching for? It was as if she was the missing piece to that void inside him, calming the overwhelming need for approval and disarming his fear of rejection. His body felt as relieved as his heart. He needed her in every way. Without her, where would he find the drive to make something of himself in this life? She eased every trouble of his mind and yearning of his body. If she never existed, he would have no purpose.

He kissed her head and she rewarded him with a sleepy smile and a gentle palm on his cheek. He wanted to be able to lead her through life with strong hands and an unwavering step. Could he be the dependable, confident husband she deserved? He wanted to be strong enough to stand up when she couldn’t, to make her feel safe and secure. But Cloud was still learning what it was to be strong. How had his father felt when he had taken his mother away from her home? The good intentions were there, but what if something happened and he couldn’t protect her?

Dad had tried to lead Mom to a better life and died protect her. Now, Mom was still alive but not truly living, wasting her days in a village that would never return all the love she had given. As they drifted off to the lullaby of passing automobiles and the constant hum of electric cables, Cloud promised himself that he’d never let that happen to Tifa.
Harbor

Spring moved forward and stretched into the heat of summer. Tifa wondered if Midgar’s weather in the tepid months of the year would be similar to that of Nibelheim. Like home, the air was thick with moisture, but compared to the generally breezy mountain summers, the city heat was unbearable at times. The muggy humidity couldn’t be swept away by a late afternoon thunderstorm and the air constantly felt stagnant and suffocating.

Head resting on her pillow, she lay staring at the alarm clock beside their tiny bed. The red electric digits were glowing brightly against the darkness: 4:12 AM. A rare, merciful breeze brought the caress of moving air and the thick smell of exhaust into the room from the small window above the headboard. There were small sounds as Cloud shuffled about in the bathroom: showering, brushing his teeth, blowing his nose—she had long since memorized his routine. Next, he’d come in and bid her goodbye before leaving her for the day. Tifa pitied him for having to wake up so early every day. To make ends meet, her husband frequently volunteered himself for overtime, leaving in the wee hours of the morning and returning past supper time. He’d come home so tired and drained that Tifa didn’t have the heart to ask him to go out into the city with her so she could get out of the apartment for a little while. The truth was that she was scared to go out and about without him.

Midgar was fascinating and terrifying. During her first few weeks in her new home, Tifa was more than happy to stay shut away in the little apartment, protected from the unfamiliar alien planet in which she had found herself. She had occupied herself with scrubbing the dirty living space from top to bottom, mending broken door knobs and uneven furniture legs, and trying to make the place homey with the little that they had. Now that they had settled in, she longed for more. There was only so much that a teenager could occupy herself with in a sparse apartment and Tifa felt as if she’d go mad if she spent one more day trapped in this little place. Most of all, she was lonesome.

The light from the hallway flooded the room as Cloud quietly opened the door and she counted the soft boot steps as he approached the bed. She felt his fingers reach out to brush her bangs aside, tucking a dark lock of hair behind her ear before leaning in to kiss her temple.

“See you later, Tifa.”

“Mm.”

Smiling, she rolled onto her back to look up at him. Her prince mirrored her expression, blue eyes laced with fatigue as his lips curved upward. She cupped his cheek with her palm and let out a small gasp of surprise.

“Oh! Cloud, your chin is prickly!”

He blinked in surprise, withdrawing to feel the scant stubble dotting his jawline. “Huh. I guess the others were right when they said that being in the military ages you.”

“Don’t get old too fast.” Tifa sat up, gently ruffling his blonde mess. “The best SOLDIER candidates are young men, aren’t they?”

Cloud snorted. “Well, I guess I don’t have much to worry about then. I’d never get in— I don’t even qualify to audition for the physical tests.”

Half of her heart felt relieved; the other half felt selfish and wicked. Making SOLDIER was her husband’s dream, even if she wasn’t entirely comfortable with it. What kind of partner was she to
secretly hope that Cloud wouldn’t succeed in his ambitions? As his wife, it was her duty to protect his dreams and do her very best to encourage him to achieve them. How could she fulfill her marital vow to commit herself to his happiness if she wished with all her might that he’d abandon ShinRA and work for a less controversial organization?

“You’re still growing, Cloud. Give it some time, and you’ll see.”

“I’ll need a miracle.”

“According to your mother, you are a miracle.” She smiled at the blush that crept across his cheeks, freckles barely visible in the dimly lit room. “Besides, it’s a miracle in itself that Zack passed the academic requirements!”

Tifa hadn’t known Zack for very long, but in the handful of visits he had paid them in the past few weeks, she could tell he was a man of street smarts. Academic matters seemed to go right over his head, whether it was calculating his share of the restaurant tab or answering Cloud’s questions regarding military strategy and the science behind mako enhancements of SOLDIER members. It was plain to Tifa that the raven haired man was a walking weapon, and although he was incredibly friendly and charming, her unease around him had never completely left her. However, Zack was an unwavering companion and inspiration to her husband and for that she was incredibly grateful. Cloud had never had male friends in Nibelheim. Now, he had finally had a peer to relate to: someone to help her lift his spirits and boost his confidence. Though he was an indirect enemy to her mother’s family, Tifa would make sure that Zack always felt welcome in their little home.

“Maybe there’s still hope for someone like me.” Cloud said, letting out an amused chuckle.

He ran a gloved hand through her hair once more and she leaned into his chest in a lazy embrace. “I love you. Good luck today.”

“Thanks, Tifa. Get some sleep.” He coaxed her down onto her pillow. “I’ll see you tonight.”

One more kiss and she pretended to go back to sleep. Tifa listened until the front door clicked shut before she threw the blankets back and slid out of bed. This was how it was every morning. Cloud would insist she rest, but it was hard to fall asleep without the warmth of his body snuggled beside her as the pair shared a bed meant for one. Besides, she felt lazy and unproductive snoozing the hours away while her husband worked hard to provide for them. Shouldn’t she be working hard, too?

Everyday life had taken on a sort of mundanity that left Tifa restless. She felt her muscles getting weak and lazy without her daily martial arts training, but practiced and exercised as best as she could in their cramped living space. There was a lot to get used to. Everything was powered by electric energy—from their little alarm clock to the ice box (which Cloud said was called a ‘refrigerator’). After months with the luxury of machines and purchased food, Tifa began to feel unsure of her role as a housewife.

Mama had always worked hard. Growing up, Tifa had always risen long after her mother had in the mornings. She often woke with the first rays of the sun, rolling fresh dough for breakfast and setting the dirty clothing to soak. Between making soap, scrubbing the laundry, mending clothes, tending the garden, fixing meals and cleaning the house, Mama had little time to herself. Any time she had a spare moment, she had made sure she spent it playing with her daughter. When Cloud had proposed, Tifa felt very sure that she knew what her daily duties as a wife would entail. But in Midgar, she felt totally lost. Everything was so much faster in the big city with its technology and convenience. Cleaning clothes was a breeze with the washing machine (after one small mishap where she used soap instead of something called ‘detergent’), making meals was a relatively quick endeavor with the
rarity of fresh produce (everything was canned and pre-cut), and there was no garden to tend. She had no children to take care of, and because Cloud was gone for much of the day he never left much of a mess to clean up after. How could she fill up her days and aid Cloud at the same time?

She made the bed, pulled on an airy sundress, and set out into the kitchen to fix herself breakfast. Despite being a little unsure of the proper conduct of a city wife, Tifa felt that she had been adjusting rather well to her new surroundings and life with Cloud. Sex had been a bit painful at first, but was becoming more pleasurable with time and experience. It was an exciting and new layer to their relationship that they had just begun to explore and it left her feeling more bonded to Cloud than ever before. She felt safe and loved and free to be herself now that she lived with her husband in their own little home. The neighbors weren’t very friendly and had replied with a grunt when she tried to introduce herself, but Cloud had seemed unfazed and she did her best to mimic his apathy. He had been here long enough to know better. It didn’t matter—they wouldn’t be in the city for long, anyway. One day, they’d move far away to their house by the sea. For the first time in a very long time, Tifa felt unguardedly happy. Sure, things in Midgar were less than perfect, but as long as she had Cloud nothing else mattered. She made sure to repeat that to herself like a mantra whenever homesickness pulled at her heart.

After the days spent in the quiet of the apartment had almost driven her mad, Cloud had come home one day with an old radio for her to listen to when he was gone. The music and news reports would drown out some of Midgar’s ambient sounds of traffic horns, shouting and the occasional gunshot. It helped for a short while, but as the hours would tick by without much to do other than clean and re-clean the same three rooms, Tifa realized that she was desperately lonesome. She missed Zangan, his instruction and his kindness. She missed her daily visits to Claudia, who taught her so much about life, integrity and the importance of kindness. Tifa longed for the freedom she had taken for granted: the ability to walk outside in the pine groves and feel the warmth of the sun whenever she wanted. Here, she was too frightened to go out alone. When Cloud would come home and take her out for a walk or to pick up some supplies, they never lingered anywhere for long. The city streets were dark and grey and filthy, but the air didn’t hurt her lungs as much anymore and anything was better than being cooped up in the apartment.

Tifa curled up on the couch with her bowl of oatmeal, staring at the heap of scrap wood on the floor the living room. The kitchenette was much too small for a table of any kind, so Cloud had come home one day with his arms full of salvaged wood and the idea to build them a little coffee table. This way, they could sit on the floor and have a proper place to put their dishes as they shared meals. The couple had spent the rest of Claudia’s monetary wedding gift on bed linens, pillows, kitchenware and other home necessities. They hadn’t had enough gil left over for a table, so building one seemed to be the next best option. Lately, Cloud had been so tired after work that his project had gone neglected. Perhaps she could continue his handiwork today as she waited for him to come home?

She chewed a mouthful of oats as she glanced at the calendar on the nearby wall, the blank spaces filled in with Cloud’s chicken scratch. Despite his messy handwriting and the way his dirty clothes never seemed to make it to the hamper, her husband was actually a very organized person. He had marked the patrol routes he had been assigned for each day of the work week and noted the exact hours he would be on duty. Bright red marker circled a particular date, drawing her eyes to it. In the little square for August 11th, she had written *Cloud’s 16th Birthday* in bold letters. That was only five days from now. Cloud had blocked off August 9th through August 13th with a black marker, indicating his short deployment for a mission in Junon. Her heart sank when she realized that her overworked spouse would be gone during his birthday. He had told her right away when he learned that he would be leaving for a few days, but Tifa had done her best to put it out of her mind. She was so lonesome during the day. How could she deal with Cloud being gone for so long?

Breakfast dishes washed and drying, Tifa tied her fraying apron behind her back and flipped the
wooden top off of Mama’s recipe box. If Cloud was going to be working on his birthday, they’d just have to celebrate it early. She’d bake him the best cake he’d ever eaten! Wine colored eyes searched as she quickly flipped through the handwritten cards.

“Aha!”

Vanilla Butter Cake
3 cups flour
1 tsp baking soda
2 tsp vanilla extract
3 eggs
2 sticks butter
2 tbsp cinnamon
1 tsp salt

There were only two eggs left in the refrigerator, but she was sure they had everything else. Maybe the cake would still be alright if she only used two eggs? Maybe she could cut the recipe in half? If she wanted to surprise Cloud with the sweet treat, she couldn’t wait until he got home to escort her to the market. Tifa stood there and stared at the little card, wondering what to do. She had never gone out into Midgar without Cloud before. He hadn’t forbidden her to, but she felt insecure without his protection and guidance. The market was just a short train ride away; she had been there a dozen times and was certain she knew how to get there and back. It would only take half an hour, and it would be so worth it! Cloud was exhausted and she was lonesome. A delicious dessert and some time together were much needed.

Sucking in a breath, she made her decision.

Tifa laced up her boots and grabbed her train pass and the small amount of gil Cloud had left her, then stuffed her leather fighting gloves in her apron pocket as an afterthought. Just in case. Apartment door locked securely behind her, she put on a brave face, left the apartment building and stepped out into the bustling slums.

She was careful to remember what Cloud had told her to do when she was walking around in the city. Don’t look anyone in the eye. Keep your head down. Stay alert. Keep your hands in your pockets so no one steals your things. Don’t answer if someone tries to talk to you. The streets were dark even though it was morning. They were always dark, even in the middle of the day. Even though she had been in Midgar for almost three months now, she still had trouble getting used to the lack of sunlight. The disruption of her day-night cycle had made it hard to sleep sometimes. The train station was only three blocks away, but her anxiety made it feel as if it were ten blocks away. It was busier than usual, being the morning rush hour, and Tifa was immediately overwhelmed by the sea of people moving to and fro. By some small miracle, she was able to squeeze into the right train and get off at the correct stop. Buying eggs at the grocer’s shop was simple enough. Ignoring the clerk’s comment about her accent, she thanked him and scurried back out into the streets. Grinning at her small victory, she trotted back toward the station. Cloud was going to be so happy!

Clutching the paper bag against her chest, she weaved her way through the crowd to reach the station’s platform. When the train pulled up, the car was filled to the brim with passengers. Tifa hesitated to enter, thinking she’d wait to see if there was more room on the next one, but she felt herself suddenly get pushed forward into the car by the surge of people. The door shut behind her. Eyes wide and lips nervously pressed together, she stood as straight as possible to avoid touching the other people crammed into the overstuffed car. Behind her, the man who must have pushed her into the train was pressed up against her. Tifa tried to creep forward a few precious centimeters to get some space but he followed, his presence a firm pressure against the small of her back. Out of the
corner of her eye, she could see him: a dark haired man in a business suit. It was hard not to feel anxious as she felt his burning gaze on the back of her head. Swallowing, Tifa tried to calm the rising fear. It’s alright, it’s a short train ride. Everything’s okay. You’re just paranoid.

Suddenly, she felt his hands snaking up the back of her thighs—under the modest skirt of her blue sundress. They stopped to cup her backside and she began to tremble, feeling the calloused hands through the thin layer of her underwear. Slowly, the man worked his hands around to the front of her thighs, pressing his body into her behind. Desperately, she looked at the other passengers, silently pleading for help. No one bothered to look her way. Say something, Tifa! You’re a martial artist! Shove him, elbow his chest, anything! But she was frozen.

Long seconds ticked by as electronic announcements fluttered by on the overhead screen. Tifa inwardly cringed as one rough hand snuck upward to cup one breast through the material of her bodice. She tried to let out a cry for help, but nothing came out. The heavy weight of the leather fighting gloves in her pocket called to her, a reminder that she could crush this guy’s windpipe in a millisecond. So why wasn’t she moving? Why was she paralyzed? Shaking with shock and fear, Tifa closed her eyes and held her breath. Mercifully, the train finally pulled into Sector Three and she exploded forward, pushing past the other passengers and into the crowded chaos of the station. She had to get away! What if he was following her? How foolish she had been to go out on her own. Stupid, stupid, stupid!

Fearful tears had transformed the world into a swirl of grey and black and brown as she stumbled forward, scurrying through the crowd as fast as she could go. Tifa was tempted to turn around to see if the man was pursuing her, but she was afraid. Would she have to defend herself? It had been a while since she had practiced her martial arts. Cloud would’ve made a decent sparring partner but he was always so tired after work and their apartment was much too small to allow for any rough housing, anyway. Tifa hoped she’d be able to avoid a confrontation and lose him in the rush of people hurrying about the square.

Speeding forward, she suddenly collided with a passerby. Off balance, Tifa’s ankle rolled and she heard a pop as she plummeted to the ground, egg carton pitching forward and spilling out onto the concrete. Adrenaline allowed her to get to her shaky feet, but shooting pain from her ankle made each step agony. Not one person stopped to ask if she was alright. No one batted an eyelash at her obvious distress. No one even looked in her direction. Abandoning the ruined dozen of eggs, Tifa limped and dragged herself until she got to the station wall, eyes wild as she watched for any sign that her attacker had followed. She slumped against the stone wall after long minutes of waiting, waiting for the man to appear. She let out a small cry of relief when he never did, but she knew that she was far from safe.

Why had she been so foolish to leave the apartment? How was she supposed to get home with an injured ankle? Cloud came through this station on his way home from work. Would he see her? Maybe if she just rested for a while, her ankle would start to feel better and she could manage to limp the rest of the way back to the apartment. But as hours passed, her ankle swelled as the crowd thinned. Frightened, she curled herself into a ball and hid behind an overflowing trash bin. Tifa tried her best not to make eye contact with people as they passed, knowing how vulnerable she was. Without fear, she dispatched horrible monsters with her fists. But it wasn’t until now that Tifa realized that people and their cruelty were what she feared most in this life.

It wasn’t until the station clock chimed at 5:00 that Tifa picked up her head. She was hungry and tired, frightened and embarrassed, but a new hope had bloomed in her heart. Cloud would pass through here soon. If she could manage to find him in the sea of commuters, he could help her home. Leaning halfway out of her hiding place, she carefully watched each train unload its passengers.
Train after train passed with no sign of her husband. She was just about to lose hope and wonder if he had decided to pick up some more overtime when she spotted it: that unruly head of flaxen spikes. She had never seen a more beautiful sight in all her life.

“Cloud!” she called at the top of her lungs as he disappeared behind taller passengers. Desperate, she got to her feet and started limping forward, biting back whimpers as she put weight on her injury. “Cloud! Wait!”

She continued to call his name, convinced that he wouldn’t be able to hear her over the crowd. Still about four yards away, Cloud froze. The fatigue on his features was chased away by the sound of her voice. Tifa wanted to cry in relief, but continued calling him instead until their eyes met over the noise. She watched as startled blue found her familiar face amongst the flood of strangers.

“Tifa!” His expression showcased his bewilderment as he ran towards her outstretched arms. Pale eyes widened in alarm when he realized she was injured. Cloud held her tightly when they crashed together. “What happened?”

How could she tell Cloud about what had happened to her? Should she? He’d be furious and blame himself for bringing her here. It was no one’s fault but her own: she had told Cloud she wanted to marry him and come to Midgar; she had decided to go out into the city on her own. Her poor husband was so stressed out about work lately that it didn’t seem worth it to burden him with the consequences of her weakness and inability to handle city life. After all, she was still in once piece, wasn’t she? A little ice and her ankle should be back to normal in a few days. She’d had worse injuries while training with Master Zangan.

Cloud always wanted to hide his weaknesses. Was it okay for her to do the same?

Tifa buried her head into the blue fabric of Cloud’s uniform so she wouldn’t have to put on a brave face. “N-nothing happened. I was careless and hurt my ankle when I got off the train. You’re being deployed for an assignment soon. I went to get eggs from the market so I’d have enough to make you a birthday cake.”

Although his embrace comforted her, she was still so rattled by the day’s events that it was all she could do to keep from trembling. When Tifa finally raised her head to look at him, she hoped her smile didn’t look as fake as it felt.

“Oh, Tifa…” He returned her uneasy smile. “Let’s get you home.”

Cloud turned and prompted her to lace her arms around his neck. He bent so she could lean onto his back and looped his arms behind her knees, picking her up to piggy-back her home. Testosterone pumped through his veins as his protective nature surged into overdrive. Once Tifa was holding on securely, Cloud pushed forward through the crowd, eyes constantly scanning his surroundings for any further danger. Strands of black hair tumbled down his right shoulder as his wife gently pressed her face into the side of his neck. The feel of her soft breaths against his skin dissolved some of the doubt that always seemed to worm its way into his heart. Maybe he could do this. Despite having the odds stacked against him since his birth, perhaps he could be a good husband. He could protect Tifa; she depended on him. He’d do anything to make sure she felt safe.

“Thank you,” Tifa whispered into his hair.

She breathed in his scent and tried to let relief replace the dread and anxiety that gripped her heart. Inhaling deeply and telling herself she was safe did little to get rid of the panic in her heart. Instead of ebbing away, anxiety rose and rose inside her with each passing car, with each of Cloud’s steps, with each flashing light. Tifa was so preoccupied with keeping her feelings at bay that she barely realized
it when they passed the threshold into their apartment building. By the time Cloud had climbed the steps to their floor, her heart was pounding so hard in her chest that she was certain he felt it. It was too much; it was just so overwhelming. Tifa’s breaths quickened and she stifled a whimper as he turned the key in the lock. If Cloud felt her start to tremble as they crossed into their apartment, he didn’t say anything about it. He hurried to the bedroom and gently placed her on the bed.

“Let’s take a look at your ankle. I can get you some ice, and—“

She broke. Tifa barely caught a glimpse of his eyes before an unstoppable whimper escaped her control, breaking the dam that held back a tidal wave of anxiety, fear and sadness. With a broken noise, Tifa began to sob, bringing her head down into her hands. She had never wept so openly in front of anyone before, let alone Cloud. But she was so frightened: this place was so drastically different from her sleepy mountain home and she was having so much trouble emotionally adapting. She used to think that living anywhere would be better than Nibelheim, but she had been naive and foolish. Was her father right after all? How could she ever make it in a place like this? It felt so strange to be expressing negative feelings so freely, and she found herself desperately trying to stop. The more Tifa tried to find a way to regain control, the more it eluded her and the harder she cried. Papa would have told her to quit blubbering and to stop embarrassing herself.

Would Cloud be disappointed in her for being so weak?

Tifa felt Cloud’s gentle arms wrap around her, encouraging her head to rest on his chest. Her husband was never one to be eloquent with words, but every movement of his body seemed to communicate what was in his heart. Silently, he held her. His hand cupped the side of her face, thumb delicately stroking her cheek and wiping away any stray tears. Cloud rested his head upon hers and curled his body protectively over hers, sheltering her in his warmth. The desire to inhale the comfort of his scent helped Tifa to eventually still her breaths, the steady rise and fall of his chest prompted hers to find a smooth rhythm.

A long time ago, she had wondered why her mother had acted so strangely when she said she was homesick. Tifa had worried about how she would ever bring herself to fly away from her childhood home. This was so hard. How could she ever stand the harshness of this place? Weren’t there any friendly faces in this oppressive, scary place? She missed the sun. She missed the ‘how-do-you-dos’ as you passed someone on the street. She missed the freedom of being able to go where she wanted to whenever she felt like it without fearing for her safety. She missed morning fog, the clean air and the gentle sound of the babbling brook.

_Ba-bump, ba-bump, ba-bump._

Ear to his chest, she listened as Cloud’s heart pumped slowly and steadily. His scent was familiar and comforting—reminding her of how he had always been a beacon of hope and security, even before her life went spiraling out of control after Mama’s death. Tifa continued willing herself to calm down as her husband ran his hand through her dark tresses. Here in Midgar, they had each other and that was all. No matter how hard and daunting life was in this dark and dangerous place, the fact that she had Cloud meant that she had a reason to push forward. After a while, this homesickness would pass, right? Time would stretch forward and she’d adapt, just like she always had.

When her mother died, Tifa realized that one had as little control of the world around them as an autumn leaf decides its path in the wind. And so, the wind blew and she adjusted. It was just easier that way. The overwhelming changes of getting married and moving to Midgar had blown her about until she was too tired to get back on her feet. Her eyelids grew heavy as she focused on Cloud’s warmth and the evenness of his breathing. She wasn’t alone anymore. Tifa had worked so hard to adjust to this life that she was finally collapsing under her own fatigue and heartsickness. But just as
she was about to fall, Cloud was there to pick her up again.

She had only been married for a handful of months but she supposed that maybe this was one of the greater rewards of marriage. It was really difficult for her to learn to let her weaknesses show and to convince herself that Cloud would still love her, even when she couldn’t stand on her own two feet. Everything would be alright with Cloud by her side. He brought vibrant color into her life, a shock of hope in the grey whir of the slums. Lacking the money and circumstances to escape to a better life outside the city, they were forced to do their best to thrive in the oppressive atmosphere of the slums. Tifa felt as if they were two little flowers trying to bloom in the snow, with no one to adore the brightness of their petals. But one day, it would all change and they would shine all the brighter. This was all temporary, just a passing phase. The comfort of that thought and the warmth and protection Cloud provided let her exhaustion pull her into the oblivion of sleep.
Blurry Vision

The ninth of August came too quickly.

Tifa had been anxious for Cloud’s departure, even though it would only be for a few days. Sleep had eluded her the night before and she had tossed and turned next to her husband until the wee hours of the morning. What if something happened to him? The war was over, but ShinRA troops were still battling groups of protesters and small uprisings in different areas of the world. She was glad that apparently, there were others who were upset with the cold, tyrannical company and were brave enough to do something about it. Whether it was revenge or just change that they wanted, Tifa didn’t know.

At some point, sleep must’ve taken her. The next time she opened her eyes, the vibrant red display on the alarm clock read 8:45 AM. Cloud didn’t need to report to headquarters until eleven to catch his flight to Junon, so he could enjoy the luxury of sleeping in that morning. He shifted behind her and Tifa felt him stretch and yawn. Burrowing deeper into his side, she exhaled: she wasn’t ready to get up. She had been rising early in the mornings with Cloud for months now, but lately her body protested to the point where not even her husband’s encouraging kisses could coax her from her comfy heaven. When she first arrived in Midgar, it had been hard to sleep. On top of the mild insomnia that comes with being in an unfamiliar place, the fact that it was as dark at midday as it was at midnight in this city didn’t help things. She had adjusted after a few weeks, but now it seemed that she had regressed and her body screamed for rest late into the mornings. Sometimes her stomach was upset and other times she’d suffer from a headache.

Could homesickness actually make one feel physically ill?

The couple lounged in their cramped bed together, quietly enjoying each other’s presence before their brief separation. Tifa planted a sudden kiss on his ear and giggled as he flinched with surprise. Her body felt sluggish and heavy, but she threw back their quilt and willed herself to rise.

“I’ll make you a big breakfast,” she said with a sleepy smile. Cloud, who was always pleased by promises of food, grinned and sat up. “We can have giant pancakes, if you want.”

“Oh, I’ll eat anything.” He slowly got to his feet and Tifa stifled a giggle at his comically sleep mused hair. Cloud rubbed her head as he headed toward the bathroom for a shower. “Thanks, Tifa.”

Gently, she put weight on her ankle. It was feeling much better now and barely bothered her at all. A few days of ice and rest had done the trick. Running would be painful, but she could walk without too much trouble. Tifa was still embarrassed over the incident and felt guilty about making Cloud worry. He had been so attentive and caring: fetching her ice, helping her wrap her ankle in a compression bandage, and reminding her to keep her foot elevated. The poor guy was so busy and tired; shouldn’t she be the one to be pampering him? Her husband was the type of person who was very conscious of his duties and responsibilities, but constantly afraid to fail.

Cloud was perceptive and ambitious, and she did her best to be a source of peace and encouragement. Tifa wished he wouldn’t be so hard on himself, but then again, she was her own worst critic as well.

She heard the water begin to run in the bathroom and stepped lightly into the tiny kitchen, collecting cooking utensils and ingredients. By the time Cloud was clean and dressed, she had just finished mixing the pancake batter. Out of the corner of her eye, Tifa could see him putting the finishing touches on the little coffee table he had put together. He ran a piece of sandpaper over the sides,
carefully smoothing away any rough edges as he waited for his food. She closed her eyes at the smell of the fresh wood dust and thought about her father alone in his basement sanctuary. Cloud had proven himself to be quite a handyman, but his rudimentary woodwork wasn’t anything like Papa’s fine works of art. Was her father doing alright now that she was gone? Who would cook for him and tend to his laundry? Would anyone take care of him if he got sick?

Guilt pricked at her heart. Had she run away and abandoned her only flesh and blood? Tifa had written to him twice, but he had never replied. She could only assume that it was because he was still so angry with her. Claudia would’ve sent word if her Papa was ill, but none of her letters had mentioned him at all.

“That’s looking great, Cloud! I can’t believe you made that all on your own.” Tifa sent a brief smile his way before using the spatula to flip a pancake. “You would’ve made a fine apprentice for my father if he wasn’t so…picky.”

“That’s one way to put it.” Setting the sandpaper down, he blew the dust off the table. “I still need to put a glaze finish on it, but we can finally eat on a table!”

“We’re living like royalty, now!” She tittered, placing two towering plates of pancakes, toast and eggs on the freshly sanded table. Tifa sat across from him, drying her hands with a red dish towel before taking her first bite of pancake.

“I’m going to miss you, you know. What am I going to do without you?”

“Hopefully you’ll get a hold on your clumsiness and avoid injury,” Cloud said with a little smirk. Tifa let out a mock angry huff and tossed the dish towel at his face. “After making a fool of myself in the train station, I’ll definitely be more cautious.”

Cloud smiled briefly as he placed the towel on the table before wearing a more serious face. “Seriously, be careful. Okay?”

“I will. I promise.”

Halfway into her first pancake, she felt her stomach churning. Am I that nervous about him leaving? Tifa spent the rest of the meal picking at her food. Cloud eyed her suspiciously.

“Are you sure you’ll be alright on the helicopter? I know it makes you feel sick.”

“I hope so. I thought I’d be used to it by now.” Cloud finished the last forkful of food on his plate, eye brows drawn together in thought. “I was hoping it was something I’d grow out of with time.”

Tifa swallowed down her nausea. “Maybe once you get promoted to SOLDIER and get your mako injections, you won’t get motion sickness anymore. It’s supposed to make you an ultimate fighter, right?”

She noticed the slight slump of his shoulders as he shook his head, staring at his empty plate. “The truth is, I don’t know if I’ll ever be promoted. I’m still too skinny and weak to even qualify to audition for SOLDIER.”

He was too thin? It was her responsibility to feed him. Maybe she could stretch their budget or rearrange their spending so that she could afford the meat and protein he needed to grow and build muscle. If she was honest with herself, Tifa was never very comfortable with the idea of Cloud becoming a member of SOLDIER. Imagining her kind hearted husband with the haunting glow of mako eyes sent a shiver down her spine. He was only a ShinRA grunt now, doing small things at
generally low risk. But if he were to become a SOLDIER, he’d be constantly sent on dangerous missions so that ShinRA could milk as much as they could out of their human weapon.

Tifa tried her best to push her fear aside to support Cloud and his dream as much as she could, but her apprehension and anger at the company held her back a bit. Despite her uncertainty, she could never bring herself to ask him to find another job. Cloud never praised ShinRA, but never seemed to complain about it either. Should she rethink her bias against the company and believe they’d take care of her husband? Cloud seemed comfortable in his current position. Shouldn’t she trust his judgement? Standing behind his decisions would demonstrate her trust in him, something Tifa strove to do. He was aware of how much she hates that he works for ShinRA, but was doing what he felt was necessary to secure a promising future for them.

His job was to lead, her job was to support. Maybe if she got a job, they’d make enough money to eat well. She could even help him save money to move out of the city! Being employed would also distract her from loneliness while Cloud was gone.

She turned all of these thoughts over in her head as she collected the dishes and washed them. Tifa tried not to let her apprehension show as she talked with Cloud, dressed and eventually followed him out into the city to see him off at the train station. He protested, but she donned a second hand pair of women’s pants and a maroon blouse she had bought to fit in and linked her arm with his as they walked through the busy streets. No one wore modest dresses or girlish frocks around here, and she had felt embarrassed when she finally realized how out of place she looked. She didn’t want to be noticed or stand out—her husband had warned her about that. Even though the frightening events of the week before were still fresh in her head, Tifa braved the slums anyway. If she was going to learn to thrive in Midgar, she’d have to be courageous.

The scent of fried food, exhaust and the light trace of urine in the air forced a wave of nausea into her throat. Careful not to look anyone in the eye, Tifa let her gaze take in the monotone atmosphere. She had dreamed of green grass and blue skies often now that everything had faded to grey and black. The overwhelming need to get out of this place thumbed at her chest with each beat of her heart; a girl like her who used to live under the sky felt like a trapped bird among the walls of buildings and the looming plate. Just how much did they give up to live this way?

“Cloud, I was thinking that maybe I could look for a job.”

He regarded her with those striking blue eyes, but didn’t slow his step. “Huh?”

She loosened their linked arms to twine her fingers with his as the train station came into view.

“Yeah. I’m lonesome at home when you’re gone, and I want to help make money to pay for things. Maybe then, you won’t have to work so much. I miss you.”

Cloud stopped then, guiding her to sit with him on a bench near the tracks and boarding platform.

“It’s my job to provide for you; I don’t want you to feel like you need to work. But really, I just want you to be happy. If getting hired somewhere would make you happy, then I’m behind it.”

A grin split her face. “It really would! I want to feel…useful. But, the only problem is that I’m not really sure what to do. I don’t really have any skills.”

“Sure you do. Mom taught you some sewing skills. And you’re an amazing cook!” He scratched his head. “There are a lot of things you could do. What would you think of working for the company? They have so many different positions.”

Her nose unintentionally wrinkled at the mention of ShinRA. Cloud sputtered an explanation.

“I know you’re not crazy about ShinRA, but the pay is steady and it’s less dangerous: there’s
security everywhere and it’s on top of the plate! Plus, we could go to work and come home together every day.”

The thought of commuting with Cloud daily was tempting, as was the lure of seeing the sky every day. But reluctance concerning the company still held her heart captive. Tifa found it hard to look anyplace but her lap. There was no logical reason to reject the prospect of a job with ShinRA, yet she felt like she was betraying her mother and herself by even considering such a thing.

Cloud’s thumb rubbed over her knuckle. “Think about it while I’m gone, okay?”

“I will.”

The train rolled into the station at exactly 10:35 and the pair stood to embrace one another. Cloud felt Tifa’s head sink into his chest. It would be the first time in their three months of marriage that he wouldn’t come home to her at night. Something about that felt so wrong. He kissed the top of her head and held her close.

“I love you. Take care of yourself.”

His wife turned her head upward to look him in the eye. “I love you so much! Good luck, and I’ll see you when you get back.”

*Be brave.* She told herself. *Be brave for him!*

They walked to the train hand in hand. Tifa spoke after one more quick peck on the lips. “I’m so proud of you. You’re so strong and brave and you work so hard. Remember: you don’t need to be a SOLDIER to be my hero.”

Somehow, she always knew what to say. Cloud always felt like he was mediocre at best, but Tifa always reassured him that he was on the right path. Everything was fine; he was doing okay. He loved the way her body felt against his and the way she fit perfectly in his arms. He had registered for this mission for the gil and would be signing up for more. Tifa had been so shaken up about falling in the train station that it only strengthened his drive to earn enough to get her out of this place. The whistle sounded and he kissed her nose before thanking her for her kind words and bidding her farewell. She didn’t let go of his fingers until his feet were already inside the train car.

“Bye Cloud!” She waved at his pale face in the window. “Be careful!”

He gave her a small smile through the glass as the train lurched forward and slowly chugged away. Cloud watched her round face until it disappeared behind the crowd. He turned to face forward and slumped in his seat, pulling the jingle bell out of his bag and rolling it slowly between his fingers.

*Good luck, she said.*

Sighing, he closed his eyes. He wasn’t sure how long it would take, but somehow they’d find better days.

……

“Hello, my name is Tifa. Are you hiring?”

The girl did her best to hide her western accent as she politely inquired about a paid position. Her dirty, worn sneakers looked out of place on the shiny while tiles and Tifa was careful not to put her hands on the marble counter top. Behind the desk was a sinewy looking man with a stiff button down shirt and thin set of glasses. He stared at her with indifference after looking her up and down.
“No.”

“Oh. But the sign out front says—“

“Are you aware that this is a bank?”

The friendly smile fell from her face like the string holding it up had been cut. “Y-yes.”

“Little girl, do you even have your high school diploma?”

Little girl? She was fifteen years old, for heaven’s sake! Tifa gritted her teeth. She was a grown woman with a husband and household to take care of. In Nibelheim, she’d be treated like an adult. Why was it so different here? Tifa opened her mouth to protest his judgement on her maturity, but realized that she didn’t have what he was looking for. She cast her gaze downward.

“No, I don’t.”

“Can’t help you, then. Sorry.”

Large carmine eyes watched him move behind the desk. Growing up in such a rural setting, she’d never imagined being pulled out of school so young would’ve had a real impact on her future. Advanced reading was a weakness, but she could ask Cloud to help her with that. She could count and write just fine! What did she need a diploma for? Surely if they just let her try…

The teller sighed when Tifa didn’t leave. “Look, come back if you graduate, okay? Until then, you don’t meet the requirements.”

Defeated, she bowed her head and thanked the man for his time before making a hasty retreat out into the bustling crowd. It had been an exhausting day. After seeing Cloud off, she had roamed businesses on the upper plate to inquire about employment before giving up and trying in the slums near her apartment. Every place she tried was a dead end. The most promising thing Tifa had heard all day was ‘come back with a résumé’. If she could somehow get a job offer by the time Cloud came back, she’d have an excuse not to work for ShinRA. The smell of gasoline was overwhelming in the thick summer heat and she felt herself getting light headed. Her healing ankle was beginning to ache and for the first time all day, she was beginning to feel hungry. Maybe it was time to resign her search for the day.

The dark, empty apartment made her remember just how alone she was here. With Cloud gone, she had no friends. Sure, she’d hung out with Zack a bunch when he’d visit the apartment or treat her and Cloud to dinner on top of the plate, but she couldn’t say they were more than acquaintances. Back at home, she’d pass the lonely hours by visiting with Claudia. Was the seamstress just as lonesome as she was now that they were separated? Tifa hoped that she’d somehow find a fine husband and be happy somewhere she’d be appreciated. Cloud’s mother was such a strong person and Tifa admired her more than ever now that she knew how difficult it was to start life over again in a hostile place. She made a promise to tell her the next time she saw her.

An hour after dinner she settled into a light exercise routine that wasn’t hard on her weak ankle. The stretching and flexing felt good, rejuvenating her tired muscles and bringing her peace. Despite her concern for Cloud, the woes of adjusting to Midgar and an unsuccessful day of job hunting, Tifa breathed deeply and centered her mind. She practiced her blocks and punches, coiling the muscles in her arms until they snapped outward like lightning. The kicks, she took more slowly. Moving with precision, she flexed her toes upward and extended into a front kick. She didn’t expect what happened next. The moment she snapped her head to execute a side kick, the room suddenly began to spin. She stumbled backward onto floor boards as the world violently whirled around her.
Squeezing her eyes shut, Tifa swallowed against the rising nausea and gripped the side of the coffee table until it passed.

When she opened her eyes, everything was still again.

Her body felt heavy and her head pounded. The last thing Tifa wanted to do was move. What was that? This had never happened to her before, not even when she was sick! Was she just tired? Was Midgar’s polluted air finally getting to her? Exhausted, she laid her head down on the smooth surface of the table and let the familiar smell of freshly sanded wood lull her into an uneasy sleep.

— — —

The mission to Junon wasn’t a particularly exciting one. Officials were dealing with the aftermath of an attack on the port, where AVALANCHE was to blame for planting some sort of explosive. Extra military reinforcements were called in to help move rubble and put the minds of the civilians at ease.

Junon used to be a small fishing village, but thirty or so years ago ShinRA built a large military installation on the cliff overlooking the tiny harbor town. Since then, the population exploded and the city expanded rapidly. Junon’s elevated air field was built directly about the village and blocked out the sun’s light, reminding Cloud of a mini-Midgar. He wondered if ShinRA did this on purpose. Was their intention to make the people feel oppressed and submissive to their power by blocking out the sun? Did they know that the surrounding seas were now polluted and the livelihoods of the fisherman in the little village were at stake? If they did, they didn’t care.

Junon’s military installation was so big that it became the secondary headquarters for the ShinRA Corporation. The immediate area surrounding headquarters was littered with buildings that served as dormitories for soldiers and other military personnel. The port was heavily defended by retractable artillery batteries and its garrison, as well as the enormous Mako Cannon that was powered by Huge Materia.

Cloud huffed as he leaned against the stone wall, watching people walking about in the dark, sleepy village. The orange glow of the setting sun was fading fast, and he tried not to shiver from the chill of the wind off the water.

Though he had kept his eyes closed during most of the helicopter ride, he couldn’t help but stare at the endless shoreline as they approached the city. He had to get Tifa out of Midgar. The city wasn’t treating her well. Her skin had paled and she seemed lost without the sky. She’d always smile radiantly for him and deal with whatever life sent their way, but deep inside was she really happy? She seemed so tired lately. He wanted to see her black hair flowing in the sea-side breeze and walk barefoot in the sand beside her. He wanted Tifa to always have fresh air and blue skies.

Could he have both that and military grandeur if he ever managed to make SOLDIER? Why was making first class so important, anyway? All of his life, he felt like he was nothing. Maybe what he wanted was just to prove, even if only to himself, that he could be a somebody after always being unwanted and cast aside. Cloud wanted to know that he had lived a life worthy of all that his mother sacrificed to ensure he had a decent childhood. If he could save lives, prove his physical strength and mental prowess, and excel at his job, wouldn’t that make his loved ones proud? Would that convince his father-in-law to love him and treat his daughter with respect?

Maybe it would, maybe it wouldn’t. Even if it did, would Tifa really be proud of him?

It was no secret that she hated ShinRA, she was just kind enough to stay quiet about his employment. But what else could he do? He had no marketable skills. Heck, he was even having trouble making it as a lowly infantryman. There was so much work to be done at the port and they
had given him the lowly task of guarding the damned elevator to the airfield. Did they really value
him that little? He had passed all of his classes in flying colors, except for marksmanship and some of
his physical challenges. Cloud sighed and shifted his rifle from one shoulder to the other, enjoying
the feel of the salty air on his face. Several spikes of unruly blonde hair poked out from underneath
his helmet, making his head itch.

If he never got promoted, there was no way he’d be a SOLDIER or a military strategist. But he
knew that AVALANCHE could strike again. Apparently the eco-terrorist group was made of up
several subgroups around the world. Junon was a target because of its underwater mako reactor and
the canon. What motivated this resistance group? Was what ShinRA doing really threatening the
planet so much that people would risk their lives to try to stop it, or was AVALANCHE just a bunch
of extremists? It seemed that fighting for the planet was just as destructive as fighting for ShinRA.
There had been a company-wide message sent to everyone’s PHS regarding the attack, along with
photos of the suspects. None of the higher-ups seemed too concerned with anything but putting the
damaged section of the city back in order, but the threat of a follow up attack pressed constantly on
Cloud’s mind. What if that bomb was just a distraction for a bigger attack while ShinRA was busy
cleaning up? There weren’t even any SOLDIER operatives here. How careless.

Cloud looked at his watch: four more hours on patrol, two more days until he could see his wife
again.

Cloud looked up when he heard merry chatter and footsteps approaching on the gravel. Two men in
trooper uniforms and helmets came to a stop in front of him, rifles strapped lazily over their
shoulders. One was much taller than the other. The sight struck Cloud as strange: there hadn’t been
any military presence in the village all morning. Where did these two come from?

The larger soldier spoke.

“Access to the upper level, please.” The smaller one stayed silent, staring ahead.

Cloud ran through the protocol in his head. “Military ID, please. And remove your helmets.”
Blue eyes scanned carefully over their identification cards as they revealed their faces. The first red
flag was that Cloud their squad numbers didn’t align with the infantry squads that had been sent on
this mission. If the smaller man’s ID was correct, he’d be in Cloud’s squad, and Cloud was only here
because he volunteered for this mission. If any other trooper was assigned to check IDs down here,
he was sure they wouldn’t take it half as seriously and probably would’ve missed that detail. The
second red flag raised in Cloud’s head was the fact that the smaller man didn’t seem to look like a
man at all. Either it was a woman with a freshly shorn head, or a very feminine looking guy.

Suddenly, he connected the dots. The photos ShinRA had sent out of the AVALANCHE suspects
flashed in his head. Two of the six of them could very possibly be standing right in front of them.
The large soldier looked a lot like suspect number four, just lacking a beard. The smaller soldier
could very well be suspect number one, her once full head of blonde hair now no longer than a few
centimeters. Cloud felt his heart race. This was it. They were going to try to strike again! Not if he
could help it.

“Thank you.” Cloud said, returning their identification cards. “Step right in.”

“Thanks, bud!” The larger soldier grinned. “We’ve got to report for duty in ten minutes!”

*The only thing you’ll be reporting to is my superiors.* Cloud punched the button to close the door
behind the pair. He bolted it behind them before pressing the ‘emergency stop’ button on the outside
panel. With a shaking hand, he pulled his radio from his pocket.
“Private Strife to Commander Fraser, come in.”

The radio crackled with white noise before he heard a clear response. “Go ahead, Strife.”
“I’ve got a pair of suspicious individuals on lock down in the air field elevator. I believe they may be criminals, sir.”

“Copy that. Stand by, I’ll be down there with back up soon.”

He stood there, heart hammering in his ears. If Cloud was mistaken, the worst he’d get was a loud berating by his commanding officers. If he was right and they were terrorists, he doubted their punishment would be anything but severe. ShinRA didn’t seem to tolerate opposition very well. Did he just condemn two people to death? He was just doing his job! If he didn’t, they could’ve hurt more innocent citizens, right?

If it was his responsibility to look after civilians and obey his orders, so why did he feel so guilty?
“Cloud!”

Tifa jumped into his arms with an excited squeak, spatula still in hand. He embraced her tightly, enjoying the feel of her hair brushing over the back of his arms and the smell of a home cooked meal waiting in the kitchen. Blonde hair falling forward, he buried his face into the crook of her neck to breathe in her comforting scent. She kissed the side of his head over and over again. It was so nice to be home.

After a few long moments, he pulled back to look her in the eye. His wide grin was infectious. “Tifa, I’m a hero!”

Her crimson eyes were bright with joy. “What happened? Did you get promoted to SOLDIER?”
“No, I caught some fugitives trying to sneak into the military base. They were the ones who blew up part of the port the week before!”

“Oh, Cloud! You’re amazing!” She squeezed tighter. “Your dream came true!”

Inspired by a moment of childish giddiness, Cloud lifted her off the ground and spun her around with an uncharacteristic chuckle. He had experienced a tiny taste of his goal and it was intoxicating. Tifa laughed as her long hair spun around them before they crashed onto the couch. It was just as intoxicating to his wife to see the brightness and hope in her husband’s eyes. She cupped his cheeks and kissed his forehead, grinning as a blush crept across his cheerful features.

They sat side by side as they ate the large ‘welcome home’ dinner that Tifa had prepared, savoring the feel of each other’s presence after being apart for almost a week. Cloud told her all about the helicopter ride and how all he could do was stare out the window at the miles and miles of coastline south of Junon. He promised he’d apply for a transfer to Junon HQ when he went back to work the next day. The harbor city was much nicer than Midgar, and they could probably get a much nicer apartment for the two thousand gil they paid to rent their slum shoebox each month. The cheaper cost of living outside of Midgar would help them save for a down payment on a house. Once they’d saved enough, they could move out of Junon completely and find a small coastal town to the south where they could live their quiet life by the sea. He’d worry about figuring out his daily commute to work later.

Tifa washed the dinner dishes while entertaining daydreams of white sand and blue skies. Hand in hand, they walked out into the cooling evening air. Cloud had received a monetary bonus for aiding in the capture of two members of AVALANCHE, and he thought it would be best to put that money into their savings account right away. He handed the receipt to Tifa after submitting the check.

“C-Cloud, this is…” She blinked at the little piece of paper and swallowed. She turned her head up to whisper in his ear. “It says our current balance is over eighteen thousand gil! Is that right?”

He grinned.

“Your bonus was ten thousand gil?” She gaped quietly. “My hero is amazing! All of your hard work is finally paying off.”

She put the slip into her pocket and pecked him on the lips. He gave her hand a little squeeze and led her back out onto the street. It was starting to become real! Their goal didn’t feel so much like a far
off dream anymore. If she could get a job somehow and help him beef up their savings account, they
could get out of here much sooner than she thought! They stopped to buy a bottle of sparkling cider
on the way home, popping the cork to celebrate Cloud’s success.

They spent the evening talking and sipping their drinks while music played on their little radio. Tifa
couldn’t stop fantasizing about the future. She could just feel the grass underneath her bare feet!
They could have a garden with fresh vegetables. They could spend their days playing in the waves
and spend their nights talking side by side in the sand instead of on the hardwood floor of their stuffy
apartment.

When her eyes grew heavy with sleep, Cloud escorted her to bed. She pouted with disappointment
when he didn’t lie next to her.

“Aren’t you coming to bed?”

He gently shook his head. “Not yet. I need to write up a report of the incident to submit to my
commanding officer. If I don’t get it in by tomorrow, I’ll be in trouble.”

“Thank you for celebrating with me. You’re the hardest worker I know and I’m so proud of you.”
Cloud’s ears started to turn pink from the praise and he leaned down to kiss her and tell her he loved
her. Tifa watched as he shut off the light and turned to leave. “Cloud?”

His silhouette froze in the doorway and he turned his head to face her.

“Before you go to sleep tonight, I just need you to know that you’ve always deserved praise. I’m
sorry that the world took so long to realize that.”

… … …

Before she opened her eyes, Tifa knew she had slept much later than she should have. She didn’t
remember Cloud performing his ritual of kissing her forehead and whispering his goodbye before he
left for work that morning. An overwhelming feeling of dizziness and nausea enhanced her
confusion as she slowly sat up. The apartment was quiet aside from the busy noises from the street
below. A lonely feeling enveloped her when she realized she hadn’t bid Cloud farewell. As soon as
her bare feet hit the cold floor, she started to tremble as her face paled. Her shaky legs barely made it
across the hall before she vomited into the sink, a cold sweat forming on her brow. Tifa was afraid to
leave the bathroom until she was sure she wouldn’t be sick again, taking deep breaths to calm her
body.

Shaken, she brushed her teeth and dressed herself, feeling much better now that her stomach was
empty. What was wrong with her? Was it a flu? Tifa hoped that she hadn’t infected Cloud. She ran a
comb through thick ebony locks as she walked into the kitchen to look for some crackers to nibble on.
A stack of white papers caught her attention as she walked by. Cloud’s report was on the coffee
table, the pages neatly stapled together. Tifa glanced to the hall next to the front door: his boots were
gone. Cloud couldn’t have possibly meant to leave it, could he have? He was probably so tired from
writing it so late last night that he forgot it. She couldn’t let Cloud get in trouble! Her boots were
laced and she was out the door in minutes.

The muggy air of late August combined with the thickness of the rush hour exhaust made it hard to
breathe. She rushed through the streets, only slowing her pace when her ankle protested. Since that
incident in the train station, Tifa had done her best to summon bravery in the face of the danger the
slums presented. She had gone out into the city without Cloud many times since, and she hadn’t had
any further problems. At first, she was afraid that she’d run in to the man who had harassed her on
the train, but quickly realized that it was unlikely.
Nowadays, she kept her back pressed to the wall if she couldn’t find a seat on the train. The air above the plate was significantly less humid, and Tifa breathed a sigh of relief as she exited the train station. There were signs everywhere directing commuters to ShinRA HQ, but the giant, looming building a few blocks away made it easy enough to find her way.

She’d never been to Cloud’s workplace alone before. Tifa hesitated before going through the revolving glass door, taking a deep breath. Somewhere in this very building were the people responsible for Wutai’s demise. This place was responsible for the housing and training of the military that killed her grandparents and thousands of Wutaian citizens. There was evil here that had caused the tremendous sorrow that plagued her mother’s heart before she died. She didn’t want to go in. Each step forward felt like a tiny betrayal to Mama, and she stopped in the grand entryway.

Moments later, when the plaza clock chimed to signal the beginning of the nine o’clock hour, she pulled herself forward again. Cloud needed her. This was no time to let her ghosts anchor her in place.

The sharp blast of cold air hit her like an icy wall. The receptionist at the front desk had thick glasses and an unfriendly face that made Tifa nervous to approach her.

“E-excuse me, ma’am.” The girl whispered, nervously pressing Cloud’s report to her chest. “My name is—”

“Identification card, please.”

“Oh, right.” Tifa fished the plastic card out of her pocket and placed it on the counter. “My husband left his report at home and needed to hand it in today. If he’s in the building, would you be able to call him to meet me? His name is Cloud Strife.”

“Sure. I’ll look him up and page him.”

Thank goodness. Tifa breathed a sigh of relief as she waited, but stiffened when she felt her light headedness return. Had she pushed herself too much? Maybe she was still a little queasy and weak from getting sick earlier this morning. Her fingers gripped the marble countertop of the desk and she closed her eyes as the room began to spin. Maybe she finally had to admit to herself that she was sick and let Cloud know, in case he started feeling ill himself. After feeling off for the past week or so, Tifa had hoped that with some rest, she’d feel better. Despite Cloud’s bonus, they were still pressed for money and she hated the thought of making him worry about her. But after this, maybe it was time to pay to see a doctor. She wasn’t sure how much time passed before the sound of her name hit her ears.

“Tifa?”

Weary eyes opened to see a trooper jogging up to her. Cloud removed his helmet, revealing his wild hair. “Tifa! Thank you so much for bringing this, I—hey, are you alright?”

Her face was pale as a sheet. He stepped closer to her, putting a gentle hand on her bicep. Tifa blinked a few times. What was I doing? Oh, right, the report. With trembling hands, she held the stack of papers out to him. Cloud took the report and laid it on the countertop before trying to look in his wife’s eyes. She couldn’t see the concern on his features as she stared at the polished grey tiles.

“Hey…what’s wrong?”

Why did he sound so far away? As soon as Tifa opened her mouth to reply, she felt her knees go weak. She wasn’t aware she was falling until she felt Cloud’s arms around her. Her vision clouded before the world went black.
The bright lights of the infirmary were blinding when Tifa blinked awake. She groggily looked around the room.

“Tifa?”

She turned her head toward the voice. Cloud’s big blue eyes were heavy with fear and he immediately grasped her hand. His blonde locks were extra messy and she immediately knew it was from his nervous habit of running his hands through his hair. The sight of his military uniform made her remember where she was.

“What happened?” she croaked before clearing her throat. Cloud’s shoulders visibly slumped with relief as he let out a breath he’d been holding for the past few hours.

“You brought me my report and you fainted in the lobby.” He rubbed the back of his head nervously. “You’ve been out for a few hours. The doctors took a blood sample to run some tests; the results should be back soon.”

His eyes met hers and he gave her a shaky smile. “You scared me to death.”

“I’m so sorry.” Tifa sat up as guilt pooled in her belly. “That’s the last thing I want to do. You’re the one working so hard lately and I’m the one who fainted.”

“You shouldn’t apologize for fainting, Tifa! It wasn’t your fault.”

A few moments of silence stretched between them before Tifa spoke again. Knotting her hair between her fingers, she peeked at him from underneath her bangs. “Isn’t a blood test expensive?”

“No, the company covers the cost. It’s part of the benefit package for employees and their families.”

“Oh. That’s good. Because…” she swallowed and studied the floral pattern of her hospital gown. “I think I’m sick.”

“You look so pale and you haven’t been very hungry, either. They said you don’t have a temperature, though.” He gently ran his hand down her arm. “What’s going on, Tifa?”

“I don’t know. I just don’t feel like myself.” She bowed her head. This whole thing was so embarrassing! “But I’m alright, just a little dizzy lately.”

“I’ll take you out of here as soon as the doctor says it’s alright. You can rest better at home. I’ll take care of you, I promise.”

Home…with bright blue skies and familiar forest paths. Please, Cloud. Let’s go home.

Movement in the doorway caught both of their attention. A nurse approached with a clipboard and a pink stethoscope around her neck. She flipped her wavy brown ponytail over her shoulder as she smiled at Tifa.

“Hey, you’re awake!” She engaged the couple in some light chatter as she took her patient’s vitals and logged them on Tifa’s chart. The nurse sat at the foot of the bed as she flipped through the paperwork on her clipboard.

“Blood pressure is looking good. Temp is fine. Heart rate is normal.” She tapped her pen against her knee. “What we should talk about is your blood test.”
Tifa gulped. Did they find something really bad?

“According to the bloodwork, you’re a little anemic. Also, you’re below the normal level for vitamin D, but that’s pretty status quo for residents of the slums. If I had to guess, I’m pretty sure your pregnancy is the reason for your affliction.”

Tifa wasn’t sure she had heard that right until she heard Cloud stuttering his response. “W-wait, say that again?”

Two pairs of wide eyes were on the nurse as she nonchalantly read from the blood analysis aloud. “As of nine thirty this morning, you have a blood HCG level of 1286, indicating that you are approximately six weeks pregnant.”

“So, I don’t have the flu?”

“She doesn’t have a disease?”

The nurse’s lips quirked upwards in amusement at the childlike wonder on their young faces. “No. If all goes well, the baby should be born in May.”

For a long time after they were left alone in the room, the couple sat in awed silence, hands joined atop Tifa’s abdomen.

… … …

It had been a long morning and the sun felt good on Cloud’s cheeks. Despite a random attack or two from a certain eco-terrorist group, it was still peace time and soldiers were hard at work training their bodies and their minds. When Cloud wasn’t on patrol, he was enduring harrowing physical training or sitting in on classes to keep his mind sharp. While he enjoyed his classes, combat training really challenged his slight frame. That morning, he had spent hours running, climbing, and conditioning his body at the mercy of his drill instructor. Cloud would’ve collapsed if it wasn’t for the sweet relief of the whistle that signified their dismissal. It didn’t help that his mind was anywhere but on his work.

He had escaped the crowded mess hall with a tray of food, preferring to sit alone in the sparse grass outside the cafeteria. Now that September was drawing to a close, the temperature and humidity had dropped significantly and the teen couldn’t help but soak up all the light he could. Living in the slums made you appreciate fresh air and the warmth of the sun’s rays. Taking a large bite of his sandwich, Cloud shifted to pull a wrinkled paper from his pocket. He glanced around before unfolding the pamphlet he had swiped from the infirmary labelled ‘So You're Going to Be a Father’.

It was all Cloud could think about. It seemed as if he had just started to get used to being a husband when he and Tifa learned that they were going to start a family. He was always a man who did well with a well-drawn out plan. He and Tifa had discussed their steps forward in detail: moving to Junon in December, living in the city while they saved money, buying a house in near the coast, then starting their family. Now that things were happening out of order, Cloud’s thoughts had been a little disheveled. He had been so worried about how they’d be able to afford a baby and how Tifa would take to traveling and relocating while pregnant that he was missing out on some of the excitement of this life changing news. Cloud wished that he had Tifa’s ability to keep his eyes on what was in front of him instead of worrying about the big picture.

Having a baby seemed like an abstract idea until he had heard the heart beat during their first ultrasound appointment. Once the technician pointed it out, he could clearly see the baby’s little head and the outline of its body in the blur of grey. Cloud’s blue eyes had fixated on the sight of the tiny
heart beating inside the chest cavity. This was real. He couldn’t wipe the smile off his face if he tried. Tifa was absolutely over the moon about being a mother-to-be and the joy on her features made her more beautiful than ever. Energy renewed despite her frequent spells of nausea, she went about her days with newly refreshed vigor. Her husband was proud that he had helped to bring her that joy and that she was just as excited as he was to be expecting their first child. The way her eyes shined with hope and the infectious way her laugh rang through their apartment made his heart soar. She was becoming a little more like his jovial neighbor from early childhood. Was he watching her heal from those terrible years after her mother’s death?

To both Cloud and Tifa, the idea of having more than one biological relative was beyond exciting in their lonely lives. They were starting their family, he was set to transfer to Junon in December and their life was about to get off the ground. Things were finally looking up.

Cloud felt more excitement and positivity than he ever had before, but still there was doubt quietly gnawing away at his heart. He and Tifa had never had the benefit of helping to raise any younger siblings or cousins—would they know how to take care of their own child? He had no idea how to be a father, since his had died when Cloud was too young to remember him as more than a voice and a shadow. Cloud wanted more than anything to be there for the baby and Tifa and give them everything they needed. He’d keep them safe, like his own father did. But unlike Aren, he’d stay alive. His life had been hell without a father and there was no way he’d let his wife and child suffer as he and his mother had.

Tifa tried to bury all of her doubt just as she had tried to bury the sadness of her past. Cloud wasn’t sure it would be so easy for him could do the same.

“Hey, Spike!”

Cloud stuffed the rest of his sandwich in his mouth and quickly pocketed the pamphlet while hurriedly chewing. Zack was smiling and approaching quickly, but without the usual bounce in his step. A pang of guilt burst in his chest. He hadn’t told Zack about his plans for transfer at the end of the year and it pained Cloud so much to hide such news from his best friend. He had been in this situation before, hadn’t he? Waiting until the last minute to deliver big news never was a good plan, but every time Cloud wanted to bring it up, Zack would unload one upsetting thing or another about the state of SOLDIER on him and he’d lose his courage.

Cloud swallowed before smiling at his friend. “Zack! How’d you find me here?”

“I know all your hiding spots by now.”

Zack groaned as he collapsed onto the grass, back flat against the earth. Cloud watched and let his smile fade. As one of the only remaining first class SOLDIERs, he had been very busy lately too busy for their weekly dinners at Cloud’s apartment and too busy to meet regularly for lunch during the week. Once in a while he’d stop by while on his way to see his girlfriend in Sector Five, but otherwise visits had become few and far between. While still happy and optimistic, he seemed noticeably more pensive and distracted. How could Zack stay so positive after all the chaos of his career? His goal of becoming first class had been met, but by the time he had attained that status, SOLDIER was in shambles. Zack’s position had been gained at a great price, but he loyally pressed forward. Cloud wished that he could have the same remarkable spirit as his friend.

How does one look past all the bad things and focus only on what is good? Is that what true strength is all about?

“Where were you? Training?”
“Nah, I had a meeting with Sephiroth.”

Cloud’s eyes widened. He couldn’t imagine ever being important enough to be called into the same room as the man. “What did he want?”

“He was briefing me on our next mission.” Mako infused eyes closed as he stretched and sighed. “Apparently, tons of monsters have been spawning near a mako reactor in the mountains out west and the workers have all gone missing.”

“When are you leaving?”

“Bright and early tomorrow—headed overseas by helicopter at seven sharp.”

Cloud leaned his back against the concrete wall of the cafeteria. “Me too. I’ve been registering for extra assignments lately, since Tifa and I could really use the gil.”

“Wait, what’s your mission ID number?”

The blonde pulled out his PHS and scrolled through his digital assignment folder. “Number 452.” Zack sat upright and grinned. “No way! We’re together again!”

“Awesome!” Cloud and Zack bumped fists. “I didn’t get my briefing yet. Where are we going?”


…”

“At eleven weeks of g-gest-at-ion, almost all of your baby’s organs are functioning. It is about two inches long: the size of a fig.” Tifa smiled and smoothed a hand over her flat belly. “Wow, it’s so tiny!”

It was almost six in the morning. Tifa was curled in Cloud’s lap on their threadbare little couch, his head resting on top of hers. It had taken some courage, but she had confessed to Cloud that she sometimes had trouble with big words after being pulled out of school at such a young age. He had just smiled in that kind way that reminded her of Claudia and suggested that they practice together as much as they could.

“Almost an inch bigger than last week,” Cloud mused. “And you’re reading so well. I barely need to help you anymore.”

She beamed and he encouraged her to keep reading. The coffee table was littered with maternity pamphlets from the infirmary and several pregnancy related library books. Every day, the pair of excited teenagers would look for signs of the growing baby, but Tifa’s belly was just as flat as it ever was.

Tifa finished her narration of fetal changes and gently closed the book, laying it on top of the others. “I feel like you just came back from your mission to Junon and now you’re heading out again.”

“I wish I could take you with me. We could’ve told our parents that you’re expecting together.” She stood to collect their breakfast dishes and he followed her to the sink. “My mom will be thrilled, but I’m not so sure about your dad.”

“Maybe it’ll be the news he needs to start feeling better again.” The sound of her voice betrayed her veiled pessimism as she began to work the dish sponge over a plate. “Maybe he’s had enough time to calm down and be rational.”
“He’s had six years to start being rational again, Tifa.”

“If not for us, then maybe for the baby.” She sighed as she gently set the dish in the rack to dry. Even she didn’t believe her own words. “I guess I’m the one being irrational now, aren’t I? I mean, he hasn’t even answered any of my letters. I haven’t even seen the face of our baby yet and I already have no idea how a parent could ever ignore their child.”

Cloud wrapped his arms around her waist and gently pulled her away from the sink. She relaxed into the feel of his chest against her shoulder blades, running soapy hands over his forearms.

He kissed the side of her head and rested his cheek against hers. “We may not have any parenting experience, but we know better than to repeat our parents’ mistakes.”

He felt her cheeks rise as she smiled. “You sound so sure of yourself, Mr. Strife.”

It wasn’t long before Cloud had gathered up his things and bid Tifa goodbye. He tried to reassure her, but his own doubts swirled in his chest. The mission is only supposed to last for a week. *That isn’t too long. She’ll be okay, right? Can I really leave her all alone in her condition?* It was hard to decide between the husbandly need to provide and the fatherly need to watch over his wife and unborn child.

“I am sure of myself.”

Tifa saw him off with a smile and reassuring ruffle of his hair. He tried to pull himself from the doorway, but something felt so wrong. Cloud was frozen in place, staring at Tifa with wide blue eyes and uncertainty written all over his features. *This is wrong. Something feels terribly, horribly wrong.* Tifa could recognize the panic behind his solemn stare. As always, she knew just what to do. Stepping forward, she gently pulled his head down towards her shoulder, cradling blonde spikes in her arms. She cooed gentle encouragements as she stroked his soft hair.

“Don’t worry, I’ll be fine. Everything will be alright.” She kissed the top of his head before smoothing a palm over his cheek and lifting his chin so he could meet her eyes. “Make sure you bring back one of your mom’s apple strudels. I’ve been craving one like crazy!”

A nervous smile appeared and he nodded.

“When you come home, we’ll have a big dinner to celebrate! You’ll be back faster than you think.”

After several more minutes of coaxing, one long goodbye kiss and a pair of ‘I love you’s, Cloud managed to pull himself away from his wife. Something inside him screamed to go back as he made his way down the hallway of their apartment building. Doubt pulled at his chest with each boot fall on the staircase. Fear and dread hit him like a bullet, pulsing at the seams of his heart as he boarded the train headed for the upper plate. Something felt very, very wrong. But Cloud couldn’t let apprehension get in the way of providing for his family. If there was one thing in this life he was certain of, it was that nothing would stop him from being the best father and husband that he could be.
It was long past midnight, but she couldn’t sleep.

Tifa hummed along to the soft song on the radio as she sat curled into the corner of the couch. She was slowly working soft green yarn into a blanket for the baby—green like the sea foam, green like their forest home.

Knitting kept her fingers as busy in tedious distraction as her thoughts flowed forward like an endless river. Cloud was gone and she was lonesome, but she could deal with that. The long handful of years she spent without him in Nibelheim had made her accustomed to that. What was growing harder and harder to withstand was the crushing homesickness that refused to leave, no matter how much she tried to accept her current situation for what it was. Tifa was trying her best to be happy in any circumstance, counting her blessings and holding them close to her heart. Just months ago she would’ve done anything to escape the prison of her father’s house. Now, she was lonesome but safe Papa's harsh words and the judgmental eyes of the villagers. But still, her heart sighed. October was on its way and her heart pined for the smell of dying leaves and crisp autumn air. Her skin craved the feeling of the mountain breeze and her fingers ached to press along ivory keys. When Mama had been homesick, she had played her piano and it seemed to help her feel better. What could Tifa do to soothe herself in the tiny apartment?

She was so worried about Cloud. He had seemed so upset about leaving on this mission, but was the trip and time away from her really what was bothering him? Was he unsatisfied in some other aspect? Her husband was happy in their marriage, right? Tifa just wanted him to feel content and secure. Since the news that they were expecting, he had been increasingly concerned for her wellbeing in the oppressive atmosphere of Midgar. Cloud had bought three plants for the apartment from a vendor on the top of the plate—for fresh air, he said. They didn’t thrive very well in the artificial light of the living room, but they were still green and that’s all that mattered. Afraid that she wouldn’t be able to contact him if she had any issues or went into labor once she was due, Cloud wanted to get her a PHS. Their budget, however, didn’t allow for such a luxury.

To Tifa, sunlight had become a luxury. Often, Cloud would take her topside on his days off so could get a glimpse of the sky, but it wasn’t enough. She wanted to be able to wake up next to Cloud as the morning rays shined on their sheets and she could hear the birds singing in the early hours of the day. Tifa dreamed of their future in a little white seaside home where they’d raise their baby and laugh alongside the gulls. Visions of long afternoons walking the shoreline with her little family kept her sane as she waited for Cloud to return home. Last time he had been sent out on a mission, Tifa had wanted to find a job to keep her occupied. But now, employment no longer seemed important. No one would hire someone for six months or so, would they? Besides, her job was to take care of Cloud and the apartment, prepare for the baby, and care for the newborn after its birth. She wouldn’t have time for a job and her wifely duties with an infant. Once the baby was born, she wouldn’t have to worry about being so lonesome while Cloud was at work. The thought brought out a toothy grin. A family of their very own—how exciting!

Tifa rested her knitting needles on her lap and smiled as she rubbed her flat abdomen. She remembered what it had been like to watch Mrs. Nelson outside the school house with her swollen belly as she called her students inside. For so long she had wished for a child of her own and now she was only months away from being a mother, herself.

Lately, her mind had been swirling with thoughts of Lia and she wished with all her heart that Mama could be here with her now, comfort her when she gave birth, and help her learn how to care for the
new baby. Tifa longed for the smooth silk of Mama’s voice and the comfort that would’ve come with having the woman present when questions regarding pregnancy arouse. Did she get sick as often as Tifa did? Did Papa sigh with wonder like Cloud did as he rubbed her belly and thought of the life within? What did it feel like to be in labor? It occurred to Tifa that she could write to Claudia with such inquiries, but it wasn’t the same as hearing it from your own mother. Mama would’ve been so happy to hear that she was going to start a family with Cloud, but what would Papa say when Cloud told him the news? She wanted so badly for her father to be proud of her, to accept Cloud, and to be excited over the thought of his grandchild. She knew that Cloud also longed for the security and emotional anchor of family. Maybe the baby would be a way to help repair what was broken.

Or maybe it wouldn’t.

She sighed as she set her knitting aside and stretched out across the couch cushions, letting her long hair drape over the side. Closing her eyes, she breathed deeply.

What if her father never came around? After all this time and all that had happened, she knew that there would most likely be nothing she could do to earn his affection again. Papa wouldn’t ever attend the baby’s birthday parties or visit with them on holidays. It hurt, but Tifa could live with it. What bothered her was: how would she explain to the baby why its grandfather didn’t want anything to do with it? At least they had Claudia to celebrate the good things in life with. Maybe, when they bought their house south of Junon, she’d come to live with them. Cloud’s mother deserved to escape Nibelheim more than Tifa had and yet there she remained: a victim of a cruel fate. She made a mental note to ask Cloud about bringing their mother to live with them once they had a big enough living space to accommodate her.

As gentle music drifted to her ears, Tifa finally let sleep take her. Her dreams were restless and full of memories that she thought had long since faded in the far corners of her mind.

… … …

Somehow he had survived the six hour long helicopter ride only to be ready to die inside the back of a large ShinRA van. Sheets of rain patted loudly against the frame of a vehicle, accompanied only by the sound of the motor and windshield wipers. Cloud and another trooper sat close to one another, sent by ShinRA to accompany Zack and Sephiroth on the trip to Nibelheim. It had been an enormous shock to learn that the first class war hero and object of his noble ambitions was leading their trek out into the middle of nowhere and he had a hard time recovering from it. Cloud was so embarrassed over his motion sickness that he couldn’t bring himself to even glance at Sephiroth out of the corner of his eye. The silver haired swordsman sat on a crate, staring with an unreadable expression out into the storm as Zack paced around, full of anxious energy. Cloud squeezed his eyes shut and swallowed back the urge to vomit as the truck bounced and rocked its passengers. He concentrated on the sound of the rain and tried to take deep breaths through his nose, imagining how good the fresh air outside might feel.

“Hey, are you okay?” Zack crouched next to him. “If you’re feeling sick, why don’t you take that mask off?”

Cloud didn’t turn his head to look at his friend. “Yeah…”

He obeyed and took his helmet off, cradling it between his arms as he drew his knees up to his chest. Zack pitied how pale Cloud looked, a thin sheen of sweat dotting his forehead. Maybe a distraction would help curb his motion sickness?

“Midgar sure is different from out here in the sticks.” Zack began, running a hand through his own
black spikes as he shifted to sit next to his blonde friend. “I’m sure you’re excited to get out to your home town on the company’s gil! Do you miss it?”

Blue eyes studied the grooves in the floor mat. “No. It’s nice to see my mom, but Tifa’s father isn’t very fond of me. Neither is anyone else.”

“Why not?” Zack’s eyebrows furrowed in confusion. “You’re a nice guy, what’s not to like?” Cloud shrugged and frowned at the floor, which urged Zack to shift the conversation into something a little more light hearted. “You should bring your wifey back someday. You think she’d like that?”

“I was thinking of bringing her to stay with my mom for a while.”

“Why’s that? She doesn’t like Midgar?”

“Not exactly. I’d like her to be in the clean air and in a familiar place for a while.” Nervous fingers tightened their grip on the helmet and Cloud finally rose his eyes to Zack’s face. “The slums really aren’t the safest place for an expecting mother.”

After a moment, the SOLDIER balked and it was one of the only times that Cloud had ever known Zack to be momentarily speechless. It wasn’t long before a grin split his face like lightning in a summer storm.

“Congratulations!” He bellowed, smacking Cloud on the back with a loud whack, startling the younger man. “Holy crow, you’ve been married for like, two weeks!”

“Four and a half months.” Cloud quietly corrected.

Zack tittered on and on before finally slumping backward to recline against a duffel bag. “A father at sixteen! You country folk are always in a hurry!”

“You're from the country too, Zack.”

“Heh, yeah. Guess I've been running with the city kids for too long! I've been with ShinRA since I was fourteen.”

“Did you ever think about marrying your girlfriend?”

“I'm in SOLDIER, I can't just run off and get married!” Cloud watched as Zack untied and kicked off his boots. “You know how it is: the company constantly has us running around. With all this work, I've got enough responsibility as it is. Besides, I'm never home! What kind of awful husband would I be?”

Cloud turned over Zack’s words in his head as a comfortable silence claimed the air.

It wasn’t until late in the afternoon that the van reached its destination. Cloud had thankfully fallen into an uneasy sleep, only to be roused by Zack’s excited chatter once they reached the familiar dirt road that lead to Nibelheim’s little village gate. After parking a respectful distance away from the town, the small group of ShinRA personnel moved toward the place that held so many mixed emotions in Cloud’s heart. Technically, he was home. But recently, he had begun to realize that home was wherever Tifa was and he wanted nothing more than to return to their little apartment and lay beside her. After initially being gone for about two years, the five months since his last visit seemed like nothing. The familiar red roofs and white washed buildings coming into view made Cloud feel uncomfortable and out of place. The thought of seeing his mother, however, brought some relief. But it wasn’t enough to ward off the dread of facing Brian. How would the man react when he learned that his well-hated son-in-law had gotten his daughter pregnant?
He shivered at the possibilities.

Suddenly unnerved, Cloud pulled his helmet down firmly over his head. He wasn’t ready to talk to Mr. Lockhart if he happened to see him. If he could disguise himself for now, maybe he could buy some time before he faced the stubborn, angry man and avoid any impromptu interactions. He had yet to carefully plan how he was going to break the news to his father-in-law.

Zack elbowed him seconds after he secured his head gear. “Hey, you’re home! What are you wearing that for?”

Cloud glared until he realized the SOLDIER couldn’t see it with his helmet on. Hadn’t he just told Zack about what a failure he was? Did he have to tell him again just how unlikable everyone here found him? He certainly couldn’t admit to his cowardice to talk to Brian in front of Zack, who wasn’t afraid of anything.

Cloud tried not to let his shoulders sag as he sighed. “It’s personal…”

“ Weirdo.” Zack teased as gloved hand disappeared beneath ebony spikes as he scratched the back of his head. Sephiroth waved them forward, a hint of impatience on his normally expressionless face, and the pair of teens hustled to catch up with their superior.

They passed into town square and Cloud could feel every pair of eyes on the small band of ShinRA employees. He was sure there were faces in the windows, peering at the outsiders through cracks between curtains and drapes. His eyes lingered upon the sight of his childhood home and a smile tugged at the corners of his mouth when he saw Mom still kept a pot of brightly colored mums outside the front door. Sephiroth lead them straight to the inn.

“We head for the reactor at dawn. Make sure you get plenty of sleep.” The tall man blinked lazily, but his back was straightened with authority. His aquamarine gaze landed on the pair of troopers. “Only one of you needs to keep watch. Make sure you get some rest as well.”

The blonde stiffened as Sephiroth turned to face him. “You have permission to visit with family and friends if you so wish.”

Surprised that the great Hero of Wutai could know something as trivial as his hometown startled Cloud. Sephiroth had always seemed like a machine: serious and calculating. But this small detail had given him a human side that most people probably never saw. Maybe there was more to him than Cloud thought.

… … …

He had waited until the sun set to knock on his mother’s door. Cloud kept his helmet firmly on his head as Claudia squeaked with excitement and squeezed the familiar slight frame of her son. It wasn’t until after she had pulled him inside and had served him a heaping bowl of steaming soup that he freed his unruly head of flaxen spikes. Mom bounced around with light steps, eyes glittering as she fussed about to prepare for her visitor: fetching clean bedding from the linen closet and sifting through the pantry for ingredients for oatmeal cookies.

“What a surprise to have you back so soon! I still can’t get used to the sight of you in a military uniform.” She tossed her blonde hair over her shoulder as she grabbed some eggs and butter from the ice box. “You’re sleeping here, right? It doesn’t make sense to pay for the inn when you have your own bed here!”

“It depends on what my superior allows.” Cloud spoke between mouthfuls of bread as he wolfed
down his meal. He had been afraid to eat much on their journey due to the ever looming threat of motion sickness, and wasn’t sure what he was more starved for: familiar, home cooked food or his mother’s hospitable presence.

“Look at you, you skinny thing!” Claudia stopped to pinch his arm on her way to plop her mixing bowl on the counter. “Doesn’t ShinRA feed you?”

“Well enough.” Cloud stopped to take familiar sight and gestures of his mother. The merry sway of her slender hips and the familiar cascade of her blonde ponytail put his heart at ease. When she turned to smile at him, something made his chest constrict with an unknown distress and Cloud found it difficult to tear his gaze away. “I’ve really missed you, Mom.”

The color in Claudia’s cheeks made cloud realize just how beautiful she was. Time away from her and the maturation that comes with coming of age opened his eyes to see his mother for what she was: a woman, still young and full of dreams, surrounded by people who couldn’t see that she was a treasure among them. A great sadness blanketed him for a reason he couldn’t understand and he tried and failed to mimic her brilliant smile.

“What’s gotten into you? Are you alright?”

He nodded into his empty bowl. “Just tired from the trip, I guess.”

Cloud gathered the dishes from his impromptu meal and headed toward the sink to wash them. Out of the corner of his eye, he watched her prepare dough with practiced ease. If she could live in a place that pretended she didn’t exist for this long and still maintain a soft, generous heart, how much would she thrive in a welcoming environment? Cloud watched the soap run over his calloused hands.

“How is everything here? Are you doing alright?”

“The same as it’s always been, I suppose. Business has been good and I’ve had a lot of wool to card from the spring, so I’ve been very busy.” She shrugged as she swirled the mixing spoon. “I’ll admit, I’ve been a bit lonesome without you kids, but it’s alright.”

He wanted hope and freedom for her, but he had never possessed the gall to tell his mother what to do. She was clever enough to raise him on her own in the harsh mountains; surely she was clever enough to find life elsewhere? His mother didn’t mean to make him feel guilty, but for the first time Cloud felt as if he had abandoned her and robbed her of Tifa’s company as well. But maybe he could change that. Claudia quickly tried to change the subject.

“Too bad Tifa couldn’t have joined you, I would’ve loved to see her! Does she like the city?” She watched as Cloud grabbed a dish rag to dry his bowl.

“She’s doing well. Midgar was a huge change for her and she’s still learning to adjust. Honestly, though, we’re looking to move as soon as possible. I’ve been approved to transfer to Junon’s headquarters at the end of December.”

“You’re young! What’s the hurry?” She stooped to find a baking sheet in the cabinet. “You should enjoy your time in Midgar while you can! Take her to see some shows, dine at some fancy restaurants…”

“I was hoping that maybe Tifa could stay here with you for a while, until I can get our new living quarters set up. I’d like to get her here right away, if I could.”

Claudia fixed him with a puzzled stare.
“She could really use your company. Besides, the polluted city air isn’t good for someone in her condition.” His blue eyes searched to meet hers. “Mom…we’re going to have a baby.”

The empty baking sheet clattered to the floor.

“W-what? Really?” The wideness of her smile had Cloud’s own cheeks lifting with mirth. “I’m going to be a grandma?”

He nodded. A flurry of blonde hair and dough dotted hands attacked him and Cloud felt himself being pulled into a crushing hug. A chuckle escaped him as his mother cried out and gushed with glee. She reached up to ruffle his hair before picking up her fallen tray and twirling about the kitchen, squeaking with delight as he told her about the sonograms and informed her of the baby’s due date.

“Oh, how exciting!” Her eyes twinkled as she tried to return to her original task. “I’ll take care of Tifa, here. I promise! She won’t want for anything, except you.”

“We haven’t really discussed it yet. I just thought it might be a good option.” Cloud sighed and slumped back in his chair. “She’s alone for so much of the day and when I’m sent out on missions. I just want to make sure she’s around someone she can trust in case something happens.”

“Have you written to Mr. Lockhart about it?”

He swallowed a lump in his throat at the mention of Tifa’s father. “I have to tell him before I leave in a few days.”

He cast his eyes at the worn wood of the table, intimidated by the thought. In that man’s eyes, he had never been good enough. He wasn’t good enough to befriend Tifa as a child, wasn’t good enough to marry his daughter, and he certainly wouldn’t be worthy of being the father of his grandchild! But maybe Brian was right about this one. Cloud had no father in his life and thus had no one to teach him how to be what his wife and baby would need. Tifa had expressed this concern about herself as well, for she had never soothed a crying infant nor had any siblings to carry about on her hip. As excited as they were, the young couple was feeling a bit vulnerable in their inexperience.

As always, his mother saw right through him.

“You make me so proud. You’ll be a wonderful father, I’m certain of it.” She leaned forward to cup his face. His jaw was stubborn and defined like a man’s, but his cheeks still retained a small trace of childish softness. “Smile, Cloud. Your future is a bright one.”

The kiss she placed on the crown of his head soothed his insecurities, at least for the moment.

… … …

They left for the reactor at dawn. Sephiroth and Zack led the way, leaving Cloud and his fellow trooper feeling useless and unnecessary. Their map of the landscape was an accurate guide through the winding, dangerous paths to Mt. Nibel. Delayed by encounters with monsters and hostile wildlife, they didn’t reach the mako reactor until half past noon. Sephiroth had led Zack inside, assigning both troopers to guard duty outside. Cloud was unsure why he wasn’t allowed inside this particular reactor after patrolling Midgar’s reactors regularly, but had obeyed his orders until his feet were sore from inactivity. The grey, arid earth under his feet reminded him of what AVALANCHE was fighting for and whether or not he was really meant for this profession.

By the time the SOLDIERs finally emerged, he and the other infantryman had begun to worry. Sephiroth was tight lipped and short with them all, a small amount of foul temper breaking through his usual calm demeanor. Zack was quiet and pensive, two things that were a worrisome contrast of
his usual behavior. The trip back down was agonizing between the monster attacks and the tense silence of the pair of first class SOLDIER operatives. Cloud’s mind was fogged with worry over talking to Mr. Lockhart, his future with the company and ability to provide for his growing family, and pondering over how to free his mother from Nibelheim’s chains. Unfortunately, fighting for your life while distracted didn’t bode well for the blonde, who sustained a few moderate injuries before being rescued by Zack. Limping down the mountain with his fellow trooper’s assistance had been embarrassing at best and the blonde was more grateful than ever to see the village come into view in the late afternoon sun.

Sephiroth dismissed them for the night, putting the healthy trooper on patrol while Cloud was ordered to rest at the inn and make use of a cure materia. The room they had rented was large, with enough beds to sleep their group of four comfortably. After Sephiroth disappeared, Cloud was left alone with the remaining SOLDIER. He reclined on one of the beds, exhausted from the day and the lulling after-effects of the cure spell. Watching Zack out of the corner of his eye, he unclipped his pauldrons and pulled off his gloves. The older man sat on the bed next to his, elbows on his knees and head bent forward. Zack seemed confused and almost agitated, both emotions as foreign to the jovial man as the furrowed brow was on his face.

“Are you alright? What happened in there?” Cloud asked. The dark haired man’s silence frightened him and he ducked his fair head, pulling his knees up to his chest. “If only I were SOLDIER, then I could’ve helped you out.”

Zack didn’t raise his head as he blinked slowly at the ground. “SOLDIER is like a den of monsters, Cloud. Don’t go inside.”

To hear Zack speak poorly of SOLDIER was disturbingly strange, and it filled the younger man with a sense of dread. Cloud put an elbow on his knee and leaned toward his friend. “What happened?”

“I don’t know, man. I thought I knew, but…”

Zack let out an enormous groan and flopped backward onto his bed. Cloud watched in silence for a few minutes, wondering there was anything he could do or say to make him feel better. What had gone on inside the reactor to make him say something like that? SOLDIER seemed to be having a lot of problems lately, but so far none had seemed bad enough to change the way Zack looked at the program. He and Sephiroth must have seen something terrible, or had an argument or something. Never one to stay dormant for long, Zack hopped to his feet and crossed the room to where the buster sword was leaned against the wall. His voice was tense when he spoke.

“I’m with SOLDIER, so fighting is what I do. Sorting things out is someone else’s job. What’s going on, who’s the enemy…” The tall man stretched an arm out and he picked up the sword, gripping the handle firmly as he held the blade out in front of him. “It makes no difference to me!”

A great sigh rushed out of Zack’s lungs as he raised the sword into a vertical position, resting his forehead upon the metal blade.

Cloud watched in respectful silence. Was a SOLDIER really just a pawn of ShinRA? Did Zack really have no moral say in what he did as an employee? The wide sword was a grand weapon, one that captivated him since he had first seen it months and months ago. As a cadet, he’d earned high marks in fencing and found that wielding a sword was much easier for him than struggling through marksmanship training. If Cloud was ever lucky enough to make SOLDIER, he’d want a sword just like that. It created such an intimidating profile on Zack’s back. After so many years of being picked on and bullied, the blonde almost smiled thinking that no one would mess with him with a weapon of that magnitude! But when he thought about his friend’s actions in combat, Cloud realized that Zack
rarely ever attacked with the blade.

Old memories of lectures from his mother surfaced to the front of his mind. When she had taught him how to use his father’s pistol, Cloud had received a lesson in what it meant to be powerful and strong. Mom told him that having a powerful weapon meant he required a powerful mind. Zack had that wisdom and control not to abuse his power as a mako-enhanced being. The buster sword could slice through most anything, but he couldn’t remember a time where Zack hadn’t tried to avoid a confrontation before choosing to defend himself with the blunt side. It was evident that he knew the secret to true power and that made Cloud look up to the man even more than he had before.

“Hey, Zack.” Blue eyes searched for mako enhanced ones. “You know, I’ve never seen you use that.”

Slowly, a look of realization dawned upon Zack’s face as he gazed at his reflection in the broad piece of metal. Mako eyes blinked slowly, as if a great memory had seized him. “This is a symbol of my dreams and honor. No…it’s more than that. Thank you, Cloud.”

“Huh?” Cloud cocked his head, unsure of Zack’s meaning.

Zack had changed since they had first met. Cloud saw it in the man’s eyes and the way he held his body. How hard had this all been for him? He was watching SOLDIER fall apart around him and lost his mentor as his confidence in the company slipped away. By the time he became first class and accomplished what he had strived so hard to reach, it didn’t feel like much of a victory. And yet, he somehow had the strength to hold steadfast to his dream. When he had first met Zack, Cloud thought he was a childish, excitable man who lacked focus and seriousness. But now, he could clearly see the ambition that had allowed him to get into SOLDIER in the first place.

Toothy grin finally back in place, Zack moved to the space between their beds. He stretched his shoulders and arms before performing a few of his trademark squats. Cloud watched, confused, as his friend suddenly flopped on the bed.

“I’m gonna crash. G’night!”

Although he was a hero in the blonde’s eyes, Cloud was certain he had never met a stranger fellow.

… … …

All was still inside the Lockhart house.

Brian sat at the kitchen table, reading the newspaper long after his tea had gone cold. The air was brittle with that familiar, suffocating silence that had moved in after the girl went off to Midgar. Things had been alright: he enjoyed going out drinking with his friends and several construction projects in the town had pumped new life into his career. He was working more, selling more, and making money, but nothing seemed to fill the void in his chest from day to day. Without the distraction of his daughter, there was nothing to protect Brian from the gnawing of his long denied conscience. He would never admit aloud that he missed his daughter or was lonesome without her company, but Brian couldn’t hide from the ever present howls of his family’s ghosts.

The tire swing lay where it had fallen to the earth years ago. Upon the night stand, Lia’s jewelry box sat caked with dust. The sand pit in the backyard was almost invisible now, covered with weeds and long, unkempt grasses. The piano slept in its undisturbed silence. The dozens of photographs lining the second floor hallway called out to him and mocked him each time he passed. Each picture displayed someone whom he had failed in some way or another and every portrait of his small family reminded him of just how much he had lost by living this way. He had been foolish—so foolish. Tifa
was gone and Brian doubted she would come back after how he had treated her, the words he'd said, and the way he hated her wiry blonde husband.

A flash of bright color through the window caught his eye and he raised his head to look out toward the Strife backyard. Claudia was floating about, taking freshly laundered clothing off of the line. Because his little world was so quiet, Brian could easily hear her soft humming as she went about the mundane duties of her own small universe. Her bright, summery dress and golden hair matched the brilliant hues of the sunset; the smile on her face reflected the brilliance of the pre-twilight glow. How did she manage to remain so positive after how unfortunate her life was? She had no husband or parents to take care of her and her son had escaped from his invisible life in the mountains to tough it out in the largest city on the planet. The worn, threadbare clothing on the line and the thinness of her body reflected how meager her income was. There was no future in Nibelheim for the single mom and no hope to fit in among the citizens of this close knit community. What reason did she have to be humming a merry tune?

The red pattern of Claudia’s frock and her gentle demeanor reminded Brian of how Lia would float about in her crimson kimono. On days like this, they’d sit on the back porch hand in hand, watching the sun go down as Tifa curled up in his lap. The memories of fond times seemed as if they were from another life, and Brian realized that he had wandered so far from the man that he truly was. Lia’s death had unchained awful insecurities, which had morphed into anger at the unfairness of it all. Sometimes, in his heart, he could hear his late wife remind him: You aren’t the only one who has suffered loss. It was a sense of utter defeat that made him admit to himself that he had more in common with Claudia than he originally thought. Maybe, somehow, there was even something to learn from that woman. How did she find it so easy to move on with her life?

Knock, knock, knock.

Startled out of his thoughts, Brian stayed frozen in his seat. Who on earth would be coming to look for him? After a few minutes, the knocking sounded again. Eventually, a muffled voice called from the other side of the thick wooden door.

“Mr. Lockhart? It’s me, Cloud.”

He held his breath. What was that boy doing here? Was Tifa with him? That’s right: ShinRA had sent some employees to deal with the malfunctioning of the mako reactor up on the mountain. He must’ve been one of those chosen with that unpleasant task.

“Please, Mr. Lockhart. If I could just have your attention for a few minutes…”

Brian buried his face in his hands.

If he was honest with himself, it was pride that kept him from reconciling with Tifa or his son in law. He felt guilty for so many things, not the least of which was sending Cloud away without acknowledging him as his only daughter’s husband. It was hard to remember, sometimes, what it was like to be sixteen, but thinking about it now it seemed like such a young age.

True, Brian himself had been married in his teens, but he had been more privileged than Cloud and brought Lia home to a fully furnished home in a community that welcomed him and his wife. It was in his teens that he had become the head of a household and began his own business; but he had also learned how to ride a horse and tasted ice cream for the first time. If he had been a child in a man’s body, then it was not inconceivable that the same was true of Cloud. He wished that that had occurred to him before he had driven him and his daughter from the house.

Brian had been forming a wedge between himself and Cloud since he could remember. He had put
so much distance between them that it seemed impossible to cross. The years of bitterness had made him like a stone, and he did not move to answer his son-in-law’s calls.

… … …

“SOLDIER *is like a den of monsters, Cloud. Don’t go inside.*”

The night stretched forth slowly as Cloud took his turn to patrol the town. Tracing the old paths he had come to know like the back of his hand was just the sort of thoughtless activity he needed while he turned over Zack’s words again and again. It had been about a week since they had arrived in Nibelheim and Cloud thought he’d be back in Midgar by now. He had written to Tifa to let her know about their delay. Hopefully it would reach her before he actually came home. The entire situation was strange. Something had happened in the mako reactor that Cloud didn’t have the authority to know about, nor was it his place to ask about it. Sephiroth locked himself up in the old ShinRA mansion, for research reasons, apparently. Restless, Zack took to making a nuisance of himself in town during the day and sleeping in the manor at night, hoping to keep an eye on his superior.

Was Zack right about SOLDIER? There was no reason he would lie about this after being Cloud’s primary source of encouragement aside from his wife. The more he thought about it, the more he realized that maybe this goal just wasn’t right. He was going to be a father, after all. According to Zack, SOLDIER members lead busy lives under the close eye of ShinRA. Cloud wanted to be there for his family as much as possible, not out on dangerous missions that took him far away from what he held dear. To him, the baby was his chance to prove himself. He’d protect Tifa and his child from suffering a bad reputation and life of desperation like he and his mother had lived through. He was excited to be a dad and make up for all that his father wasn’t there to do with him. When Cloud thought of the future, he felt like he was in a little bit over his head. But with Tifa, he could do anything. He’d never be alone, and she wouldn’t let him fall.

Tifa would be disappointed to learn that her father refused to talk to him, but she sure wouldn’t be surprised. He had been so afraid when he had knocked on Brian’s front door, old anxieties of childhood bubbling up with the memory of how he had been scolded for getting lost in the woods with her all those years ago. At least at that time, Lia had been there to be rational and kind. Without his wife, Brian was an untethered, spiteful creature who caused more chaos of the heart than he knew.

Rifle resting snugly against his shoulder, Cloud kicked a rock down the dirt path that led up the mountainside. If SOLDIER wouldn’t be a fitting career, what could he do to make a living? Tifa hated ShinRA all along, citing her mother’s grief and the death of her grandparents. But it wasn’t just that—what about the constant mako drilling? Was it really the planet’s life source?

Guilt still twisted his insides when he thought about turning over those AVALANCHE operatives at Junon, most likely to their deaths. The company hadn’t even given him a promotion or any show of public appreciation for his acute observation and quick thinking. The whole thing was kind of swept under the rug after they had given him a monetary bonus. How could he feel like a hero if he wasn’t acknowledged as one? Now that he no longer was a starry eyed child, it wasn’t fame he was searching for. Cloud craved respect above all else, but no one had ever learned of his accomplishment and the bullying never stopped. Did he really thwart an AVALANCHE mission to save the planet? Whose side was he on, anyway? ShinRA gave him a paycheck, but not much else. The people of AVALANCHE fought for something beyond themselves: they fought for the future and for the planet, which couldn’t speak for itself.

Cloud climbed to a hill just outside the village and plopped down on the grass. He ignored the chill
of the mountain wind as it blew from the north, choosing to focus on the warm glow in the windows of the houses. Electric light or candle light, they twinkled just the same. Would the earth he sat upon be ashen and lifeless in the future? What would the planet look like once his child was old enough to appreciate it? Was ShinRA sucking away the quality of life for generations to come?

He lay back upon a bed of green, watching the stars and remembering his many nights with Tifa atop the water tower. It wasn’t long before he had slipped into a gentle sleep, dreaming of his wife and unborn baby.
The smell of smoke and the shrill sound of screams made him gasp awake.

Startled, his sleep laden body trembled as Cloud stumbled to his feet. Eyes wide and jaw slack, the young man took in the sight before him. Down the hill, brilliant flames stood like quivering giants, enveloping Nibelheim in a blinding glow.

“Mom!”

Although his feet felt numb, he abandoned his rifle and sprinted toward the inferno. Upon reaching the village gates, Cloud ran into a wall of heat that made him recoil momentarily. Adrenaline and concern urged him forward. Blazing towers of orange licked at the sky and he blinked, breath coming in short puffs as his heart raced. All around him there was crackling and snapping of wood as it turned to ash. It didn’t take Cloud long to reach his childhood home. Smoke billowed out of the house that built him, pluming upwards into the black night. He called out to his mother, but the sound was drowned out by the glass of their living room window shattering from the heat of the fire inside.

Pulling his uniform scarf up over the bottom half of his face, Cloud pushed through the front door to his mother’s house. Though his nose and mouth were covered, the smoke made his lungs burn and he coughed until his eyes were tearing. It was hard to see through the black shroud, the only light coming from the orange glow of the flames. The kitchen table had collapsed, its legs long eaten away. Cloud tried to steady himself with a hand against the wall, but the white paint was crackling and chipping from the heat. It seared his palm and he drew back, panting in fear. He never could’ve imagined witnessing such a horrible sight and every time he blinked, he hoped it would disappear like a fleeting nightmare. But it wouldn’t go away. Cloud saw the gaping mouths of ghosts in the wall of fire, their screams disguised as the hissing of wooden support beams submitted to the flames. He held back a sob as his childhood burned around him.

“Mom!” He called out in desperation. He inhaled and it felt as if he had breathed in a thousand needles. “Mom! MOM!”

Cloud’s breath caught in his throat when he saw her. The vibrant fabric of her orange dress was splayed against the floor, the rich color vivid in the glow of the fire. He approached quickly, desperate to see more of her through the smoke. When he finally did, he regretted ever stepping into the house. Claudia lay face down on the ground, crushed by a heap of wood and metal. Her escape had been thwarted when the ceiling had crashed down, structural integrity weakened by the ruthlessness of the flames. Her long, loose hair pooled around her head as lifeless eyes stared apathetically into the inferno. Splintered wood had pierced her small body in several places, the worst of which was a large plank that had run her abdomen through, pinning her to the floor of the corridor.

He stumbled backward as if he had been struck and he fled, through the flames and back out into the sweltering air of town square.

Mom… Mom…

Countless memories flooded his brain all at once: memories of the comfort of her warm lap when he was still small enough to sit in it, memories of how the sound of her voice as she hummed a tune made him feel at peace, memories of her soft lips laying a kiss upon his head as she uttered encouragement and praise. His beautiful, wonderful, kind mother was dead, and the emptiness that
accompanied that knowledge seized him with unbearable grief. Cloud fell to his knees upon the cobblestone, coughing and gasping and whimpering. His head spun and his lungs burned. It was getting hard to breathe.

*Get up! Get up! It isn’t safe here!*

He tried to stumble to his feet, but the smoke and the screaming and the heat were too much and his knees buckled. Cloud fell backwards, only about ten feet from the front steps of his crumbling home. The vision at the corner of his eyes began to blacken and he struggled to rise, only to have his head fall back once more.

*This is terrible. Much, much too terrible.*

The world faded away before Cloud had the chance to scream.

… … …

There were two voices, but they sounded far away. Why were they shouting so loudly?

Slowly, Cloud blinked. What was all the fuss about? His head felt heavy and his thoughts were muddled and groggy. But he was warm and comfortable where he lay.

*What’s going on? Where am I? …Zack?*

He recognized Zack’s voice, though it was clipped and harried instead of bright and friendly. What was he upset about? Something about going up to the reactor? Cloud tried to move his limbs, but he couldn’t summon the strength. Soon, the voices faded away and the warmth surrounding him was starting to get a little too warm. A bead of sweat rolled down his neck and he suddenly remembered his predicament, blue eyes shooting open.

Cloud drew in a ragged breath and a whimper escaped as he tried to stand. His head was whirling and his limbs felt slack, but the hissing of burning wood and the rumble of a collapsing wall had pumped enough adrenaline through his veins to get him to his feet. All around him was the brightness of raging fire and thick, oily smoke that made his lungs constrict and his eyes sting. Town square was now vacant of life. The only other people in sight were his fellow trooper, lying still in a pool of his own blood, and Mr. Taylor, who was motionless on his back in front of his inn, his glazed, lifeless eyes turned up toward the heavens. A dozen needles danced across Cloud’s forehead. Had the roar of the flames drowned out the screams, or was there no one left alive to be screaming?

Black smoke billowed into the heated air and he could feel the intensity of the inferno as it ate at his skin. Through the rainfall of embers and charred flakes of wood, Cloud could clearly see the hellish glow against the night sky. Metal support beams of houses lay twisted on the ground as the fire smoldered on. Nibelheim had never been very kind to him. He had grown up anticipating the day he escaped the sleepy village and seldom looked back once he had. But now that his hometown was disappearing before his eyes, all Cloud could recall were fond memories and the warmth of the few kind people he had encountered in this place. In those ashes lie peoples’ photographs, artwork, and family heirlooms.

How did this happen? Was it an accident? He should have been watching! How careless he had been to fall asleep! If he hadn’t, maybe Mom would have…

He had to get out.

Zack had gone to the reactor? Were the other survivors headed up the mountain? What was going on? On shaky knees he fled through across the cobblestone, past the flaming skeleton of the
schoolhouse and up towards the mountain path. Acrid smoke still curled across the way, the wind spreading across the trail like a thick blanket. The night was dark and the light from the moon was dim beyond the murky air, but Cloud could trace these familiar paths blindfolded. Up and up he went, boots scraping on loose pebbles. There was no way of knowing how quickly he had climbed, but when Cloud stopped to look back, the village was far enough away to look like a small bonfire in the distance. The lights of the reactor lay ahead, casting shadows that reached out into the barren wilderness like slender arms. Just ahead, glinting in the moonlight was the metal of an axe imbedded in the ground.

Cloud quickened his pace, adrenaline fending off any fatigue as he closed in for a closer look. The axe stood uselessly in the dirt beside a familiar figure that lay with his back to the ashen gravel.

“Mr. Lockhart!” The call tore from Cloud’s throat before he had a moment to think. He covered the remaining distance between them in wide, desperate strides. “What happened? You’re hurt!”

He was afraid to touch the man. All of his life, all Cloud had associated Brian with was anxiety, fear, and the feeling of worthlessness. But the father of his wife was suffering and dying alone, white shirt soaked with crimson blood where he seemed to have been injured by a thin blade of some kind. There were only two people with swords in the area at the moment: Zack’s giant buster sword and Sephiroth’s grand longsword. Did Sephiroth do this? Brian’s breathing was ragged and uneven, his eyes squinted shut with pain. Feeling frantic and lost, Cloud knelt beside him, pushing aside previous apprehension and lifting his head to cradle it in his arms.

“C-Cloud…” Brian managed as a gargling cough wracked his chest. “Sephiroth…”

The man tried to focus his swimming vision on Cloud’s face. Those damn blue eyes that he’d resented were locked on him now, and he shivered under their desperate gaze. There was no time left for regret. There was no time to make amends or tell his daughter’s husband that he was a good kid that he had been foolish to reject. Brian didn’t have the energy left to tell him that Tifa had chosen wisely and that he should’ve trusted her judgement. Tifa had always been an intelligent one, after all. The man realized with surprising clarity how foolish he had been to isolate himself in his grief and to judge those who were really not so different than himself. But now, there was no time. There was blackness pooling at the edge of his vision and a metallic thickness rising in his throat.

If only he could see his sweet pea once more…

“There was an awful trembling of his body and a frightening, gurgling noise before stillness came over Brian. The silence stretched out around Cloud as he held the limp body of his father-in-law. He thought he felt the man move, but it was really only the trembling of his own hands as he stifled a tortured scream. He had thought that he had seen enough of the world to be mature, calm and collected in a situation like this. There were few things he hated more than when his mother would fuss over him, her overprotective nature making him feel as if she saw him as nothing more than a child. But for the first time, Cloud suddenly saw himself with his mother’s eyes. He was helpless, young and inexperienced, floundering in his fear in the face of tragedy. The young man shuttered as he gently lay Brian’s head to rest on the dirt and closed his eyes against this world forever.

Emotions swirled inside him like a violent summer storm as he stumbled to his feet. Bile he had been swallowing back finally surged forward and he retched, emptying his stomach onto the dry earth. What had happened to Sephiroth? He was a hero! Good men really could turn into bad men, it
seemed. Sephiroth had abused his power; his strength was nothing without wisdom. If you couldn’t trust someone like that, then how could you ever be sure of whom to put your faith in? Cloud had idolized Sephiroth, but now those feelings had all been burned to dust. Childhood aspirations and fondness had gone up the smoke of his home town.

"Z-Zack!" he called to the air after he had caught his breath. His calls rang out into the stillness. The cold mountain wind churned up dust that stuck to the tear tracks on his face as he stumbled toward the entrance of the mako reactor.

Inside, an eerie dim light illuminated rows of white pods with a staircase leading up the middle to an upper floor. Cloud crept forward, senses on edge as he looked around. His heart tumbled to his feet when he spotted Zack’s head of black hair out of the corner of his eye. His body was sprawled out atop one of the pods: bloodied, broken and still. Eyes wide with fear, the blonde quietly approached his friend only to find him motionless and unresponsive.

His hometown was burning to ashes. His mother had died a reasonless death alongside Tifa’s father and the other villagers. In a span of hours, most everything that had made up his entire childhood had disappeared in a cloud of smoke. Though there were many unpleasant memories of being bullied or snubbed, there were also starlit nights and Mom’s home cooked meals, Lia’s fluffy birthday cakes and brightly painted bird houses. He couldn’t lose Zack, too. Anger bubbled in his chest and festered under his skin. This was wrong. None of this was fair! He felt betrayed so intimately by the man he had looked up to since boyhood. Sephiroth will pay for this…

He crept like a cat up the stairs. Before him was a large chamber with lights and several grates along the walls. An assortment of pipes and tubes fed a cylindrical glass holding tank in the center of the room, one large red pipe serving as a pathway to the container. Sephiroth stood before it, running his gloved fingers over the glass. He was too mesmerized by whatever it was that was inside that glass tube to notice Cloud’s stealthy entrance or hear the scrape of metal on metal as the blonde picked up the buster sword from where it had fallen. Sweat beaded under his helmet as Cloud raised the sword into position. It was rage that pushed him forward and he sprinted up the pipe, speeding toward his ex-hero like a freight train.

At the last second, the Hero of Wutai spun around to face his opponent, but it was too late.

It was surprisingly silent as Cloud drove the tip of the blade into Sephiroth’s abdomen, running him through completely and cracking the glass of the glowing tank behind him. Blood spurted from his mouth, droplets landing in his silver hair and across Cloud’s helmet.

Sephiroth let out a strangled cry before looking into the face of his attacker. “Who…who are you?”

“Mom…my hometown…Zack…” Cloud hissed through clenched teeth. “Give them back!” There was another cry as the blonde withdrew the blade, and Sephiroth’s body slumped to the ground. Cloud took a few steps back, overwhelmed by what he had done. Hateful tears burned at the corners of his eyes as he threw his weapon to the ground in defiance. “I had so much respect for you! I admired you!”

Head spinning, Cloud backed down the walkway. His rapid breaths were fogging his mask and he ripped his helmet off his head as he ran out of the chamber. He had just about reached Zack when he heard the scraping of lazy boot falls upon metal grates and the wheezing of labored breaths. Pressing his body against the far side of a storage pod, Cloud watched in horror as Sephiroth limped down the stairs, masamune in one hand and with something resembling a human head in the other. How the man was still walking, he didn’t know. The silver haired demon dragged himself out of the room, toward the enormous mechanical room near the reactor’s entrance.
“Cloud…”

The blonde jumped, turning his head toward the familiar voice. He breathed a silent sigh of relief when Zack let out a quiet groan. He was still alive! The older man peeked at Cloud from under heavy eyelids.

“Cloud…” He begged, voice gravelly and thick with pain. “Finish him off.”

Cloud nodded. It was all he could do. The pleading look in the eyes of his dear friend rekindled the fires of hatred and revenge for the man who had taken so much from so many. Mind addled and foggy with rage, he took off after his enemy after reclaiming Zack’s weapon. Sephiroth was crossing the catwalk over an enormous vat of mako, but Cloud couldn’t let him escape. Panting with exertion and unbottled emotion, his shout came from the depth of his spirit.

“Sephiroth!”

As he approached, Sephiroth whirled around, eyes glowing with anger and mako. Cloud felt his body jolt as the masamune pierced his chest and the young man cried out as the sword ran him through, exiting just below his right shoulder blade. The SOLDIER’s leather gloves creaked as he gripped the handle fiercely and lifted the infantryman into the air, his body skewered and dangling.

“Don’t…test…me,” Sephiroth growled, fixing his prey with a wicked stare.

Gasping and trembling, Cloud shook his head. I’m going to die. I can’t die! Tifa, the baby…they need me. His mind flashed with memories of his less than privileged childhood and he knew that he couldn’t leave his family like Aren had left him and Claudia. Gripping the blade with his gloved hands, Cloud struggled to place his boots back on the ground. Adrenaline and desperation pumped through his veins as he snarled, regaining his footing on the metal walkway.

“It can’t be!” The SOLDIER breathed as Cloud—masamune still embedded in his body—lifted Sephiroth up off the floor. Too shocked to let go of his weapon, Sephiroth could only gasp as Cloud used an incredible surge of strength to thrust him off the catwalk. The blade slid out of Cloud’s chest, his opponent still gripping the handle as he plummeted down into the mako far below. He almost didn’t hear the splash as the SOLDIER’s body hit the liquid mako. Cloud slumped against the railing, blood pouring out of the hole in his chest. His vision was swimming and his body suddenly felt weightless.

Maybe if he lay down for a minute, he could find the strength to get Zack out of here. If he could just rest, first…

He closed his eyes as he collapsed, cheek hitting the metal grate.

… … …

Tifa swallowed nervously as she held the receiver against her ear.

Ring, ring, ring…

The pay phone at the corner store cost one gil per call and she had spent an embarrassing amount in the past week. Cloud had written to her to say he’d be home later than he thought, but it had now been two weeks since she had received that letter without any further word. He hadn’t been answering his PHS, and Tifa was really starting to worry.

Now fourteen weeks pregnant, her belly was just beginning to swell and every part of her ached to share it with Cloud. Aside from some muscle cramps and a few episodes of lingering morning
sickness, her body was feeling better than it ever had in the past few months. Physically, things seemed to be improving. Emotionally, she was becoming a great mess. How was she supposed to wait patiently at home if she had no idea where her husband was or if he was alright? After listening to the endless ringing for much longer than she should have, Tifa finally hung up the phone.

Rumors of a mountain town being destroyed out west were floating through the slums. Tifa didn’t want to believe that it could be Nibelheim. After all, how would anyone know about such a remote, tiny place? The newspapers were silent about any such event and she really had no idea how these rumors had started. It was hard to imagine that anything out of the ordinary could ever happen in Nibelheim, really. Or maybe it was just a sense of denial. The fact that her bi-weekly letters from Claudia had stopped and Cloud hadn’t written with an update haunted her.

Tifa pushed through the crowds of people sifting through the slums during the afternoon rush hour, scuttling back to her apartment building. It was her safe place, now. While it drove her crazy to be cooped up inside, she knew her husband wouldn’t be around to help her out if she got herself into trouble. Now that she had a little one depending on her health, she had to be as careful as possible. Tifa dug her mailbox key out of her pocket as she stepped into the lobby and crossed over to the wall of little square cubbies. She grabbed the small stack of letters with haste and darted up the stairs. A weary sigh escaped her as she tossed her keys onto the tiny table in the entranceway. Pulling off her boots with one hand, she looked through the envelopes in the other, desperately praying one of them was from Cloud or his mother. There was an electric bill, a credit card advertisement, and an envelope from the ShinRA company.

Thinking it was Cloud’s paycheck, she slowly tore it open. The world stopped as she read the brief, typed letter.

To Whom It May Concern,

We deeply regret to inform you that Private C. Strife, MP, has been killed in action on October 1 during a routine inspection of the Nibelheim mako reactor. His service to the ShinRA electric power company will be appreciated and remembered for generations to come.

Like a marionette with its strings cut, Tifa’s body crumpled to her knees. Her hands were trembling terribly as she read the letter again and again. Eventually, the paper dropped to the floor as tears began to flow from her eyes like water from a pot that boils over. To learn in a single moment that the most precious person in her life had been lost forever was too much to comprehend. She wrapped her arms around herself, gently rocking to and fro with her eyes squeezed shut. No, no, no! This can’t be real! With a broken sob, she let the rest of her body collapse onto the hardwood.

Hours passed and Tifa couldn’t find the strength to move. Endless tears seeped from her unseeing eyes as they stared at the wall. Her husband was gone. After only half a year of marriage, Cloud had been taken from her. Something terrible had happened in Nibelheim after all, it seemed. Did he slip and fall from a cliff face on the way up the mountain? Was he overtaken by a monster? Why hadn’t ShinRA’s letter told her exactly what had happened to him? Maybe Claudia had been too grieved to write to her. Hopefully, this was just all a bad dream and she’d wake up with the warmth of the man she loved snuggled closely beside her. How could it be that she’d never see Cloud’s face again? His shy smile, his unruly golden hair, the freckles across his nose…were they really all just memories now? Would those beautiful, striking blue eyes really never look upon this world again?

Swirling thoughts raced around and around, like a bee in a jar, as her heart thrummed wildly in her chest. It was just too terrible to comprehend. Her best friend was gone; his constant comforting presence in her life had been swept away like an angry ocean tide. Tifa felt lost, adrift in rolling, tempestuous wave without the stability of her anchor. Cloud had always been what had tethered her to hope. The love of her life was the source of her happiness and security since she was very small.
Now that he was gone, what was there to hold onto? What about their marriage? What about their plans to move out to the sea? What about the baby? Their happy life as a family was a dream that had dripped through her fingers. How could everything she had built her life toward disappear with a few printed words on a paper? It had to be a nightmare, it just had to! Her precious, precious friend...he couldn’t be dead! Squeezing her eyes shut, she tried to make the world fade away.

_Wake up, Tifa! Wake up!_

The hours all faded together in a blur of visions and silence.

She was still alone when the clock read eight in the morning, unable to focus on anything but her grief. A crushing loneliness and desperate sadness wrapped around her heart and she whimpered, craving the security of a loved one’s arms around her. But her mother was dead and her father wanted nothing to do with her, perhaps she and Claudia could grieve together? She needed to go home. She needed to get far away from Midgar and never see this dark and dirty place again! If she could get back home, she and Claudia could raise the baby and they could all make a living for themselves. Perhaps they could even move away from the mountains and live out their lives in a friendlier place. But for now, she just longed to be near her mother-in-law, to comfort and be comforted by someone else who had loved Cloud.

But how in the world would she get there?

Curling tighter into a ball, she whimpered. Tifa’s body ached from the hours she had spent paralyzed on the hallway floor, but she couldn’t find the will to move. For as long as she could remember, Cloud had always led her forward in this life. Whether he had realized it or not, he had always been there to give her the strength to push through the most difficult times in her life. Tifa had shared such an overwhelming amount of her life and heart with him that she couldn’t imagine a future without Cloud in it. She still remembered the weight of his hands in hers as they said their marriage vows. _Till death do us part…_

The paper lying a few feet from her face said that they had indeed parted ways, so why didn’t her heart feel that they had? Was she in such severe denial that she forsook all sensible thought? She remembered that a long time ago, Cloud had told her that ShinRA wasn’t always the most trustworthy source of information. She knew that they were responsible for the content in the media, and according to her husband they often twisted truths and led people astray. Could they be lying? Something was fishy about this, and she had to get to the bottom of this.

With puffy eyes and unkempt hair, Tifa marched out into the slums with ShinRA’s letter in hand. If this was true, she was going to find out the details surrounding her husband’s demise and whether or not his body would be buried at Nibelheim or sent back to Midgar. She needed closure desperately, and the sparse information in that letter wasn’t enough to set her on the path to any sort of peace. Tifa didn’t smooth her wrinkled blouse as she sat on the train or attempt to fix her hair as she marched toward the ShinRA building. Her eyes were focused and clear as she pushed through the revolving glass doors. The grand lobby was alive with employees hustling every which way, all of whom were lavishly dressed and well groomed. Tifa immediately felt inadequate in her rumpled, second hand clothing and plain hairstyle, but it didn’t matter. She was on a mission.

_“Excuse me, ma’am.”_

The secretary regarded Tifa with a detached look as she peered at her over the rim of her glasses. She was a boney woman with thick dark hair and a harsh looking face. Tifa could almost hear the woman’s inward sigh at her presence.
“What can I do for you?” the secretary asked, barely taking her eyes off of her computer screen.

“I-I got this letter last night. It says that my husband, Cloud Strife, was k-killed in action.” Tifa swallowed before handing her the paper with trembling hands. “I need to know more about what happened to him. The letter didn’t tell me how he died.”

She didn’t move to take the letter from Tifa’s hand. “Miss, such information is classified.”

“Classified?” Tifa was sure her whole body was trembling now. Hot tears pricked at her eyes as she rummaged through her pocket for her ID card and thrust it out towards the secretary’s face. She slapped the letter down on the desk in front of her.

“I’m his wife, see? Tifa Strife!”

“I’m sorry, Mrs. Strife, I’m not authorized—“

“Please!” Tifa keened, bowing her head and wiping at her eyes with the back of her sleeve. “Please, help me. I need to know what happened to him!”

There was silence for a moment. The clack-clack-clack of fingers on a keyboard made Tifa raise her eyes once again. The woman fixed her with a pointed stare and turned the computer monitor around so that Tifa could see the screen.

“Here, I’ve looked up his company profile. Strife, C. It says he was killed in action on October first during a deployment to investigate the mako reactor at Nibelheim. That’s all it says.”

“But—“

“If you have any problems with it, take it up with the personnel department on floor six.” She pushed Tifa’s letter and ID back toward her with two fingers. “Take the elevator to your left.”

After muttering her thanks, Tifa found her way to the correct office. After an hour’s wait for little more than a dry ‘our condolences for your loss’, she was escorted back to the lobby and left alone with a stapled packet of papers in her hands. She would’ve started walking, but she didn’t know where to go. The flood of people in the busy lobby flowed around her as a stream rushes around a rock in its path. No one paid her any mind. Why didn’t anyone care? Cloud was a human being who lost his life in service to this company. Tifa had pleaded with every employee she could, but no one could tell her more about her husband’s demise. They refused to print up his death certificate or give her a more detailed report about what had happened. No one could even pretend to be saddened over the loss of her brave young husband. When Tifa had summoned the bravery to voice her disbelief about how cold everyone was, she was told she could file a complaint about it.

The employee who had spoken to her in the personnel department said that she’d receive a letter when ShinRA had worked things out and decided where Cloud was to be buried. It seemed so wrong that Cloud was something the company had to ‘process’ before she could make sure he had a proper burial. The death of a human being was something to be handled delicately by their friends and loved ones, not callously dealt with by a faceless super-corporation. Her blood boiled and her nostrils flared as she thought of the injustice. Feeling utterly insulted and immeasurably frustrated, she fled out into the sunlight.

To her, Cloud was the world. But to the world, she and Cloud were so insignificant. In the grand scheme of things they were absolutely nothing. No one cared that her beloved friend was dead. No one cared that she was frightened, alone and suffering.

Tifa couldn’t enjoy the rare opportunity to feel warmth of the midday sun. Everything in her life was
spinning out of control and there was nothing she could do to fight against it. With nothing left to hold onto, she felt like she was lost in space without gravity to keep her grounded. They told her nothing had happened to Nibelheim. But Cloud had said Zack was assigned to that mission as well; surely he would have come to tell her about Cloud if he could. Zack was a familiar presence in their little apartment and Tifa had bonded with the dark haired man. He knew exactly where to find her, so why hadn’t he come? Her heart was pounding; something wasn’t right at all. There was a payphone outside of a drugstore one block from the train station and Tifa rushed to grab the thick phone book. Mr. Taylor’s Inn was the only building in Nibelheim that had a telephone. She remembered the number, but checked it against the phone book anyway as she popped a gil into the slot.

The breath caught in her throat when a man’s voice answered.

“Hello, you’ve reached the Inn at Nibelheim. How may I help you?”

“H-hello? Mr. Taylor?”

“No, Miss. The name’s David Fusco—would you like to make a reservation?”

Who in the world was David Fusco? Was it even possible to have a new face working for Mr. Taylor? It was unlikely, but she supposed it could happen. “Mr. Fusco, could I please speak with Mr. Taylor? It’s very important…”

“Who is Mr. Taylor? There’s no one by that name here.”

Tifa’s jaw slackened as her eyes went wide. How could that be? What in the world was going on? “H-Hans Taylor owns that inn, he had it built a few years before I was born.”

“Miss, you must have the wrong place. This business has been in my family for generations!”

Lies! Thomas’s family had always owned that place—where had they gone?

“Sir, my father’s name is Brian Lockhart. He lives just across town square—is there any way I might speak with him? Please, it’s an emergency!”

“Brian, you said? It’s a little hard to understand your accent.”

She felt sick. “Y-yes, Brian.”

“I’m sorry, there’s no Brian in this village. Did you mean Brendan, the physician?”

Wrong, wrong, it was all wrong! There was never a physician in Nibelheim, at least in her lifetime. There was never anyone named Brendan, and if this David fellow had lived there for his whole life than why did he think she

had an accent? Tifa stood there, dumbfounded, unable to hear the man speaking to her through the receiver. She felt as if the entire world was playing some cruel trick on her. Something very strange had happened. Everyone in Nibelheim knew the Lockhart family. Papa was born to a well-to-do couple that had once been at the top of the social ladder. Things had obviously changed since then, but her surname was still well known in her hometown and the surrounding villages. It was almost impossible that an employee of Mr. Taylor’s Inn wouldn’t know of her. There was something seriously amiss. All of this combined with the silence from Cloud and Claudia was extremely eerie.

Her thoughts circled and circled with nowhere to go, on a track with no beginning and no end. Was Cloud really dead? Were the rumors about Nibelheim true? There was a feeling of dread growing in
the pit of her stomach. What about Thomas or the others? Would they be alive? Would they know the truth about what happened? Even if they did, she had no way to contact them. If Tifa had a way to contact them, she doubted that they would reply to her anyway.

There was no big ceremony when you became a widow. After the song and dance of a wedding and ceremony and necessary social procedures regarding the start of a marriage, being widowed was every bit as empty and disconcerting as it sounded. The world was a different place now that her place in it had changed. She was no longer a best friend, a wife, a confidant and comforter. She was no longer a cherished companion who lit up someone’s eyes and spirit. As she walked back to the train station, as she rocked with the movements of the train, as she pushed through the dirty streets of the slums, no one gave her a second glance. Was she truly alone in this world?

Numbly, she made her way back home.
The Crumbling Path

A frigid January wind whipped through the concrete canyons as Tifa made her way through the slums. It cut through her tunic and she shivered, instinctively wrapping her hands protectively around her growing belly. Flighty and timid, she made her way through the streets as quiet and stealthy as a mouse. These days, Tifa was afraid to leave her apartment. If she got into trouble, it seemed that there was no one to come to her rescue. No one would come looking for her if she didn’t make it home, and the thought made her feel more desperately lonesome than she ever had before.

She had good days and bad days.

Weeks turned into months. The days spilled one by one into an endless muddle and Tifa could only remember snippets of things, aside from a constant feeling of misery and fear. On good days, she found the strength to get to her feet, check her mail, and maybe even get a few groceries. But most days were bad days, where she’d let herself remain buried in the darkness of her sheets with no comprehension of time without the rise and fall of the sun. She’d lay in one of Cloud’s sweatshirts and savor any trace of his scent that still clung to the cotton. A cold, black wind had ripped the dreams of rolling waves and laughing gulls out of her fists and Tifa felt hopelessly lost. Day after hopeless day, night after desperate night, she silently called out for him again and again. But Cloud never came home.

She had been left behind.

All she could think of was her loved ones who were lost, just like Mama. Cloud, Papa, Claudia, Zangan…what had happened to them? She was alone, thinking of her husband, numbering his wonderful qualities and silently praising his virtues. There just wasn’t enough room in her heart for any other thought. She felt as if she was suffocating under the weight of her grief and a newfound claustrophobia as she pined for the familiar safety of her mountain home. A girl who once lived under the sun felt like a trapped bird within these concrete walls. But did home even exist anymore? No one in Nibelheim answered the dozens of letters she sent and it frightened her to the core. Tifa endlessly called the number to the inn, but every time there was a new employee who answered. None of them knew the names of any of the townspeople of the village that raised her. Tifa didn’t know what to do. She had no closure concerning the fate of her loved ones, no place to go and no money to get there. Would she ever keep her promise to return to her mother’s grave?

The wind tore Tifa’s hair out of her jacket collar, making it whip behind her like a wild black river. She kept her eyes on the uneven sidewalk, only peeping upwards to check for any help wanted signs.

Fear had paralyzed her for the past two months, but today she needed to be out. She had a purpose and a goal. ShinRA had given her some paper work when she tried to investigate Cloud’s death, including the notice of the severance of her medical benefits. Cloud’s last paycheck had been mailed to her weeks ago, and she now had no means of income. With a limited amount in her savings and a baby on the way, finding a job was imperative. There were two issues with this. One was that her nausea had never let up, even though she was now well past her first trimester, and she constantly felt weak and tired. It was distressing to spend precious gil on food only to waste it when it came right back up again. The second problem was that she had no marketable skills for Midgar’s environment. Tifa could card wool, make soap, tend a garden and follow patterns to make clothing, but what use was any of that here?

Cloud’s suggestion to try working for ShinRA as a secretary crossed her mind once or twice, but she never would dwell on it for long. Even if she was practiced with telephones and computers, she
would never *ever* work for that monster of an organization! ShinRA had taken everything from her and she’d rather die than serve such a corrupt, calloused company. Instead, she had taken to roaming the streets in Cloud’s winter jacket, desperately searching for help wanted signs in shop windows or outside vendors’ tents. She hadn’t had any luck thus far, every employment opportunity she came upon required heavy lifting or a special skill set—neither of which she could provide at the moment. When she had tried to apply as a maid in a nearby doctor’s office, the woman who interviewed her had turned her away when that analytical gaze landed on Tifa’s belly. She had been so sick and sad that her bump was smaller than it should have been, but it was still sizable enough for a keen-eyed stranger to notice. No one wanted to hire someone who would soon be disabled by the size of the baby growing within her and who would need time off to recover from birth. Tifa hated to be deceitful, but she was incredibly desperate. She would be more careful to hide her stomach from this point on.

When she first found out that she was expecting, the baby was all she could think about. Joy had filled up her spirit and she’d smiled without effort, because what more could she want from life? Starting a family with the love of her life had always been a dream, a goal, a vision. Now, her pregnancy frightened her and thoughts of the baby were laced with fear. Tifa had never been a mother before; she had never even had a pet to take care of! Was she even capable of parenting a small human being? How could she teach her baby how to survive in this place when she herself felt so lost? She had thought that by the time one had children, they would be secure in their place as an adult. But she still felt like a child and in Midgar she was still legally one.

If Cloud was here, they could’ve figured it out together. Cloud would have had a plan. He would have kept them safe and happy. If Cloud was still alive, they wouldn’t even be in Midgar anymore. *Cloud…*

She couldn’t let her hope that he was still alive be snuffed out. It was against all rational sense, but she couldn’t help but ponder over the strangeness of it all. Her financial situation was so grim that it was in her best interest to try to find a cheaper apartment or rent out a single room somewhere instead of keeping their tiny home. But what if Cloud was alive after all? What if he came home and she was gone? What if he couldn’t find her? Tifa knew she had to stay put for as long as she could.

Her sharp eyes caught the messy scrawl of a hand written sign taped to the glass pane of a shop: NOW HIRING BARTENDERS. Bailey’s Pub was a small little tavern on the border of Sector Three and Sector Four, only about a half hour’s walk from her apartment. She wasn’t a bartender, but she did know a bit about alcohol. How hard could it be? If they were willing to teach her, she could handle it. When it came down to the truth, Tifa didn’t really have a choice. She had to try. Taking a deep breath, she pushed through the front doors.

The smell of cigarette smoke hit her like a wall and she stifled the urge to retch. The place was loud and packed with patrons, talking or singing loudly to celebrate the arrival of the New Year. There were clinking glasses and the sound of utensils against ceramic plates. The air was stifling in the overcrowded space and Tifa pulled off her jacket, holding it against her stomach as she looked around for an employee. The long bar was packed; every stool was taken with tipsy customers that were made jaunty or sullen by their drinks. A large, middle aged man with a dark beard stood behind the bar, his blue eyes relaxed despite the seemingly chaotic surroundings. The girl gathered her courage and approached him, squeezing into a small vacant space to stand at the end of the bar.

“E-excuse me, sir,” she squeaked, surprised when she got his attention so easily. “Do you know where the owner is?”

“Yer lookin’ at ‘im, Miss!” The man plunked down two shot glasses on the bar top and took a bottle
of brandy off the shelf. It was hard for Tifa to decide whether he was friendly or just lackadaisical.

“Name’s Bailey. What can I do fer ya?”

She swallowed against her nausea. “I’m here because of your help wanted sign.”

It was then that Bailey finally stopped to really look at her. Tifa tried not to cringe as she felt his gaze washing over her. Her black shirt hid her stomach well in the dimly lit bar, but she still held the jacket tightly against her abdomen. She was glad it was a man, since they were usually too busy staring at her swelling breasts to notice her baby bump. His booming laugh cut through the chatter of the others.

“How old are you?”

She kept her head down. If her cheeks weren’t already red and chapped from wind burn, her face would’ve definitely been colored with embarrassment. “Fifteen.”

“Missy, you got a license?” A license? She looked up at him then, and he sighed when he saw the confusion on her features. “You need a license to tend a bar, ya hear? You can’t just waltz in here and start pourin’ out liquor.”

“How do I get a license?”

“There’s a test you have to take, but forget about it, kid. You have to be eighteen to apply for a license.”

The small glimmer of hope Tifa had had rushed out of her like water from a toppled bucket, and desperation took over rational thought. She gripped the edge of the bar, as if to hold on to any fleeting chance of success.

“Please, Mr. Bailey. I need a job so badly. I-I can cook or clean—anything you like! Please…I’ll do anything.”

The man was no fool. He stopped to look her up and down, taking in her pretty face, slim shoulders and supple chest. Most of Bailey’s patrons were young men looking to relax and drink away their pay after long, unsatisfying work days. All of his waitresses were young women (though not quite as young as fifteen) and that was no coincidence. Beautiful women were great for business, whether they knew it or not. If this girl’s desperation mirrored her work ethic, she may be worth the trouble.

He sighed, running a hand through his thick brown hair.

“Listen,” Bailey said softly as he leaned in close, studying the unique ruby hue of her eyes. His face was fixed with the false smile usually reserved for adults trying to fool a child. There was false honey on his tongue as he spoke, eyeing her figure as she waited for his offer. “What do you think about being one of my waitresses? It’s an easy job and you can keep all of your tips. Our customers will love a sweet lil’ thing like you.”

Tifa could hardly believe what she was hearing. Was he actually offering her a job? She blinked and nodded, fingers still pressed against the polished wood. Snapping out of her spell, she quickly bowed her head with gratitude.

“Thank you, Mr. Bailey. I promise I won’t let you down.”

“Can you start tomorrow?”

“Absolutely.”
“One slip up and you’re out—understood?”

“Yes, sir.”

After a brief discussion about her temporary work schedule, she was given a ‘uniform’ of black spandex shorts, a black t-shirt with the pub logo and a small apron that tied at the waist to hold straws and napkins. Bundled back up in Cloud’s jacket, she headed out into the frigid evening air after thanking Bailey profusely.

Traffic in the slums was always hectic; there was never a shortage of bikes, buses or cars clogging up the streets. However, most couldn’t afford any sort of transportation, so the number of people on foot always made walking anywhere a challenge. Although it was past rush hour, there were more people on the streets than usual. Many clutched large packages of food and rushed off toward their destinations. Adolescents hung out in alley ways, lighting small fireworks and smoking cigarettes. Colored lights flashed in shop windows, attempting to entice customers with sale prices for the special occasion. It seemed like everyone was celebrating the arrival of the New Year. Although she had been victorious in finding a place to work, Tifa didn’t feel like there was anything to celebrate at all.

The holiday was a time to be with loved ones and family, and she regretted any time she had taken them for granted. Her eyes welled up with tears as Cloud’s written words from one of his letters resurfaced in her head: Don’t forget, I love you. Tifa sniffed and scrubbed at her face before the world could blur into swirls of grey and black. She wanted so badly to feel loved by someone, anyone. She was tired of dancing between anger and sadness, hopelessness and pain. What had become of her life? Did it really mean anything?

As if in answer, she felt a flutter in her womb. Startled, Tifa stopped in her tracks, eyes wide with wonder. Hands reached under her jacket and she pressed her palms against her abdomen—waiting. When it happened again, she sucked in a breath. The third time she felt the tumbling feeling, like butterflies inside her, a grin broke free. Her baby was moving! Tucking herself into the privacy of a small alley, she waited for any more small flutters, eyes wide with awe and wonder. Her days had been so laden with sadness; each dark hour rolled into the next, heavy with feelings of loneliness, hopelessness, and worthlessness. In her despair, all she could think of was how there was no one left who found value in her. Tifa had forgotten that to one person, she was everything.

The baby wasn't just a concept. The beginning of its life wasn't the day it was born, but the day it had been conceived inside her. It had been alive all this time and depended on her for everything to sustain it, though she had only felt it move now. Tifa realized there, in the bitter cold of the dark alleyway, that she would need to be this baby’s beacon of hope in the dark world of Midgar. She couldn't give up.

Closing her eyes, she promised herself that her grief over the loss of her husband (and most likely her father and Claudia) would not turn her into the monster her father had become after her mother had been laid to rest. She needed to be like Cloud, who had been a constant source of love and dependability. She needed to be like Lia, who had led her through early childhood with benign guidance and gentle hands. Tifa needed to be like Claudia, whose companionship had brought her peace and security in her turbulent world. She needed to be like Master Zangan, who showed her that she was capable of much more than she knew. If she could be those things for the child within her, maybe it would be alright in the end.

Cloud would have wanted her to try. He had never given up, despite all he frightening things he faced. Tifa knew that she had no choice but to press forward: in her life there had never been another option. But oh, how hard it was! She was so worried about whether or not she would keep this job or be forced to wander around again, looking for a way to earn some desperately needed gil.
Tomorrow would hold its own challenges, but Tifa was more concerned with concealing her progressing pregnancy in the work place. He hadn’t asked her if she was expecting, so she hadn’t told him. It wasn’t lying, but she wasn’t being honest about it either, and it left her feeling uneasy.

Besides, what would she do after the baby was born? A bar was a terrible environment for any baby, especially a newborn. She wouldn’t be able to work there with an infant sling against her chest, would she? Her heart pounded with anxiety and she stepped out of the alley to continue her trek home.

One day at a time, she chanted to herself. One day at a time.

… … …

"New girl! Table six!"

"Yessir!"

Balancing a tray with a half dozen mugs of foaming ale, Tifa carefully wove through the rowdy crowd of young men. She had been training for three days and in that time, she had made a few mistakes that she was sure would get her fired. Once, she had confused drink pricing and overcharged a patron for his alcohol. Another time, she had been cleaning off a table and dropped a glass mug. Yesterday, she had been scolded by one of her fellow waitresses for taking too long to deliver a table’s food, which had gone cold. Tifa had hidden in the restroom to be sick at the time, but wasn’t something she thought would be wise to tell anyone. She had recently developed nasty, throbbing headaches that refused to let up, even with pain relief drugs. Once in a while, her vision would blur and she’d vomit shortly after. Were these normal pregnancy symptoms? She had no friends or mother to ask, and no time to spend researching these things at the library. Tifa was always worried that her physical ailments would cause her to make more mistakes. Although she had been threatened to be outed with a single slip up, somehow she was still here. Despite all of her shortcomings, Bailey continued to ask her to come back each day, and she was very grateful.

It was hard work. The pub was opened at four in the afternoon and closed at two in the morning. Most days, Tifa would finish cleaning the tables and scrubbing the floor about an hour later. Walking through the slums at three in the morning was frightening, at best. The strange hour brought all sorts of strange characters out of the darkness, and Tifa did her best to remain unseen. She’d sleep until it was time to wake up for her next shift. Each day, she’d dress in her uniform, carefully using her apron to hide her tiny baby belly. The disguise wouldn’t last forever, but it might buy her some time.

Table six had half a dozen young men in threadbare work clothes, cackling loudly as they crammed appetizers into their mouths. Carefully, she placed the drinks on the tray in front of their respective owners and smiled politely. "Is there anything else I could get for you?"

"How much for a piece of that ass?" asked the one with a scruffy jawline before he laughed and elbowed the man next to him.

Tifa just stood there, unsure of how to handle such blatant crudeness. No one in Nibelheim would ever dare be so crass, but she was in a different world now. Red eyes looked puzzled as she searched for an appropriate response.

"She's married, jackass. Look, she's got a ring."

"So what?" His white teeth flashed with his smile. "He doesn't have to know! What's wrong with earning a little gil?"
Tifa felt her face flushing with embarrassment. Were these men really discussing these kinds of things in public? Flustered and unsure of what to do, she swiped up her tray and bowed her head to hide her eyes behind her bangs.

"Your food will be out shortly, thank you for your patience," she said before scuttling back towards the kitchen. Her heart wouldn't stop hammering against her ribcage as she tried not to get upset. She couldn't do this. Since that stranger had touched her behind on the train that one day, she had known that she was in a different world where respect and chivalry were nonexistent. But it was still hard to adjust to, and it still frightened her.

Trading the empty tray for one with table three's orders, she glanced at the rings on her finger. No girl should have to endure this sort of objectification, especially a married one. Technically, she wasn't married anymore, but she still felt married. She still felt bonded and loyal to Cloud. In her mind she was still faithful to their union, but it was all pretend. Her wedding and engagement ring were now just for show, but she couldn't bear to take them off. It felt like betrayal to do such a thing.

Cloud would've been so upset to see her working in a place like this, surrounded by smoke and booze and strange, handsy men. He would've been heartbroken to know she was so uncomfortable under the leering and wandering of strangers' eyes and the crudeness of their remarks. Cloud would've suffered greatly over the knowledge that she worked such long hours with less than kind coworkers who ignored her except to correct or scold her. The other waitresses, to Tifa's surprise, were as rude and crass as some of the customers. Her cheeks had reddened to hear how they'd talk to customers or accept physical advances from patrons in exchange for gil, leaving with them at the end of their shift. A few of them told her it was a great way to earn some extra cash on the side, but Tifa could never imagine doing such a thing no matter how desperate she got.

Every once in a while she'd hear Papa’s voice echoing the back of her mind, haunting her.

*You’re a fool, Tifa! Go on—run off to Midgar! You’ll regret it; I know you will!*

Maybe she had been a fool. Maybe she could’ve convinced Cloud to quit his job at ShinRA when he had proposed to her. Cloud could’ve taken on an apprenticeship somewhere and they could’ve escaped Nibelheim, taking Claudia along as well. Maybe, she could’ve convinced Papa to come, too. What if her naiveté had led to the demise of everyone she loved? Day after day, week after week, Tifa worked her hardest despite her meager earnings. No amount of labor or toiling could earn back everything she had lost, but her exhaustion made it much easier to slip into the peace of dreamless sleep in the hours that she didn’t have her job to distract her.

…the…

Floating, floating, alone in the endless void. It’s not so bad here, in the quiet and stillness. Nothing hurts in the dark. There’s a pleasant numbness in his body and he welcomes the gentle tingling feeling. But soon, he knows, the bad things will come. Their velvety voices whisper to him in foreign tongues that he can somehow understand. He’s frightened, unspeakably afraid, because they speak only of darkness and despair and ruin. Calamity. Devastation. Destruction.

*Click. Click. Click.*

Cloud gasps awake abruptly, feeling momentarily disoriented. But he’s right where he always is, encased in his prison—a cylindrical specimen tube full to the brim with mako. He’s too weak to scream, but there would be no use for that, even if he could. No one could hear him through the liquid mako and the thickness of the glass. A mask covered his mouth and nose, allowing him to receive oxygen as he marinated in a sea of unnatural green.
That noise! Cloud knew that noise. He moved his weary eyes to find the source of the sound. The spectacled man with the black hair: his captor—his keeper, was there, rigging something up to his pod. Cloud knew what it was: tranquilizing gas. The clicking noise was always followed by a drug induced haze, making him helpless and vulnerable. The man called Hojo was a sadistic bastard, who treated him with a terrible coldness as if he wasn’t a human being. No matter how much Cloud begged for freedom, for an end to the ruthless, painful experimentation done on his body, the professor remained unfazed and unflinching. Never once did the man address him directly or look him in the eye.

A final click and Cloud’s body tensed as a surge of dread and adrenaline pulses through him. No, no, no! It would happen again. He'd be drugged and dragged out of his cage to be cut and poked and prodded and worse. There was never any anesthetic or pain relief. He held his breath so that he wouldn’t breathe in the sleep inducing gas, like he always did, but it was never any use. He flailed his arms outward and his hands brushed over the scratched up glass, the work of his fingernails as he pawed at his tank like a trapped animal. There was movement out of the corner of his eye, behind Hojo, and Cloud stopped thrashing long enough to look. Zack was there; laid flat on the examination table, out of his own mako cylinder. He couldn’t hear his friend, but he could see his brows drawn together in pain as he lazily tugged at the restraints on his wrists and ankles. Zack writhed, blood seeping from his mouth and chest and abdomen. Cloud released his breath to draw in a shaking sob. He knew that he would be next.

He wasn’t sure exactly what Hojo was doing to them or why. Cloud knew that he was being injected with mako constantly, but also something else, and he wasn’t sure whether it was the treatments or his captive environment that were driving him out of his mind. Why were they cut open again and again? Why did they constantly have their blood taken and tissue samples collected? Cloud had lost count of how many times he had watched Zack endure this torture, and yet every time his body was thrown on the examination table, he had no scars. Was his body regenerating from all the mako energy? Cloud knew that his body was capable of the same thing, for no matter how often he was mutilated in the name of ‘science’ he would never stay mangled and broken. Painful as it was, his body rebuilt itself. It rebuilt itself no matter how much he wished it would just let him die.

It happened quickly, like it always did. Cloud wasn’t aware how much he had slumped forward until he felt his forehead gently brush against the cool glass of the cylinder. Hojo always knew when he had administered enough gas to leave his experiments incapacitated. The professor drained the mako in the tank and Cloud slumped lifelessly to the floor of his prison, where two of Hojo’s assistants took off his mask and brought him out into the lab to lie upon his own torture table. Two others wheeled Zack’s stretcher past him, his body bruised and bleeding.

“Zuh…Zack…” he croaked, hoping to see any response from his companion.

But there was none. The blonde could only stare, raw fear flashing across his face. What if Zack didn’t wake up this time? His best friend was his sole remaining link to sanity in the face of this endless torture and Cloud couldn’t bear to think of enduring this alone. How long had they been here in this nightmarish place? Where were they, anyway? Had there ever been life before this? Yes, yes there had been.

A girl with dark hair who gladdened his heart like a sunrise. A tiny baby yet unseen in the womb of his beloved. A dream of the wide freedom of the sea.

With a broken groan, Cloud tried his best to lash out at his captors, but his body felt sluggish and heavy. At this point, it was all he could do to try to stay awake and remember his name. He tried to
struggle, tried to cry out, but his body did not respond to the demands of his mind. He was so tired.
Was he going to die here? The smell of rubbing alcohol and sterilized equipment caused a new wave
of anxiety to surge through his body, but he was frozen there on the table, barely able to blink. His
mind was hazy, but Cloud tried to sort his way through that fog and hold on as long as he could. The
odds were against him, but weren’t they always? He had defied the odds again and again and again.
He overcame illness and frailness as an infant, survived in an unwelcoming village without a father
to guide him, found his way to Midgar, married the love of his life, fathered a baby…

Somewhere in his drug addled mind, he could hear Hojo barking orders.

“A tissue sample is required from the small intestine. Get to work prepping him; he won’t be sedate
for more than an hour.”

Somehow, some way, he could overcome this, right? Half lidded eyes watched numbly as the other
’specimen’ was returned to his prison. Zack was his last tether to anything good and right. Zack was
the last comfort Cloud had aside from escaping into the recesses of his mind and blocking out as
much as he could. He was sure he would’ve died long ago without the presence of his friend.

A sudden, searing pain cut through his thoughts as he was opened with a scalpel. Cloud somehow
found the strength to wail. He was surprised at how his voice cracked and how his sobs degenerated
into childlike whimpers. He had no control over himself as he lay there, keening cries flowing from
his throat, slicing through the silence of the windowless chamber. Eyes clenched shut, he called out
with the last of his strength.

“Zack!”

They had done nothing to deserve this. The pain was as blinding as the bright lights above his head
and Cloud couldn’t help but continue to sob brokenly, even as a gag was shoved into his mouth. Too
weak and drugged to writhe, he tried to focus on breathing through his nose. The air was still thick
with the metallic scent of Zack’s blood and sweat. He could see the other man from where he lay,
floating upright once again in his prison, head limply settled against his bloody chest. Of everything
Cloud had faced in this nightmarish hell, the idea of losing Zack was the most frightening. It was too
much, it was just too much. White hot pain shot through his body until he was sure he would die. His
breathes came quickly and unevenly, and he coughed and choked into his cloth gag.

He tried to retreat into his mind to ease his suffering. He closed his eyes, drawing up memories of
playing with Tifa in the surf. He longed to bathe once again in the bright rays of the sun and watch
how it filtered through the canopy of trees. He wanted to feel the roundness of his wife’s womb,
protective palm over the life they had created. His visions were shaped by the murmurs of scientists
and a fresh, searing pain made his eyes fly open once again. Would he ever get back to her? Would
he have left Tifa alone in the slums, trying desperately to care for their baby? After the lengths he had
taken to avoid it, would he end up condemning them to the same fate he and his mother had shared?
History repeats itself. Cloud was the same as his father, after all. The overhead light was bright, but
blackness began to cloud at the edges of his vision. His desperate noises began to subside as his
consciousness started to fade. Once again, Cloud welcomed the sweet escape of oblivion. There, he
could dream of the one who was still halfway across the world, waiting for him to return.
The neighbors were arguing again and it wasn't helping her headache. Tifa huffed as she stood at the counter and stirred her oatmeal into a thick mush. Her neighbors were always loud. If they weren't arguing or laughing noisily, they were romping around their apartment with that little dog that would bark at all hours of the day. She used to put her radio to use to tune them out, but she didn't have that luxury anymore. Tifa turned and almost sat down to eat before thinking better of it. She opened the pantry door once again, taking in just how barren it was before reaching for the container of brown sugar and sprinkling a heaping spoonful on top of her meal. The baby liked it when she added brown sugar. It would wiggle and move within her, making her sigh with wonder and joke to herself that it had inherited its father's sweet tooth. Every time she felt her little one shift in her womb, it reminded her that she wasn't alone, no matter how isolated she felt. The candle on the coffee table flickered as she settled on the floor beside it, resting her bowl on the wood.

Now mid-March, it had been five months since Cloud had gone. Money was so tight that Tifa had to dip into her savings, even after she had resorted to cutting off her electric to avoid the bill. It still seemed strange to her that she was eating her breakfast at two in the afternoon and could barely see in front of her without the help of a candle. The orange glow of the streetlights didn't help as much as she hoped they would have and her eyes started to grow accustomed to the dark. Along with her precious radio, the clock in her bedroom was now useless. She had panicked before realizing she could look out the living room window and read the large, digital clock above the bank on the corner when she squinted. Washing clothes by hand wasn't a big deal, but Tifa missed being able to bathe without need of a candle or flashlight.

An ache rolled through her abdomen and she sighed. Lately, her body was full of new pains. Tifa rubbed her growing belly and groaned; she didn't want to go to work. The past three months hadn't been easy, but she had pressed forward. She had adjusted to her new work environment and gave work her all despite her constant spells of fatigue, dizziness and nausea. Her baby bump was still tiny for being two months away from delivering, but it allowed her to be quick on her feet and hide her condition for longer than she should've been able to.

Tifa finished off her small bowl, pushing it away to rest her head on the table top. She was so tired. The night before, she had been restless, her stomach aching and her mind racing. Working six or seven days a week was hard on anyone, but being on your feet hour after hour with a baby in her belly was really taking its toll on her feet. Now seven months pregnant, it was getting very difficult to hide. Her belly grew more foreign to her each day, swelling gently outward with a thin line running south from her navel that was slightly darker than the rest of her pale skin. The other girls would give her odd looks when she opted for a uniform two sizes too big or choose to wear her apron higher up than the rest of them. She used the dim light of the bar combined with her black attire to her advantage. A few times, she had thought about telling her boss, but had always shied away at the last moment.

Bailey wasn't the kindest man. He would shout at the girls if they couldn't keep up with his ever changing standards and cut their pay whenever he was dissatisfied. He wasn't sympathetic when a guest mistreated a waitress and didn't bat an eye when he fired a desperate employee. Tifa knew it was likely that, after exposing her condition, she would be fired or at the very least scolded for being deceptive. If she let the truth out and lost her job, she'd be in a real financial dilemma. The only positive outcome would be if Bailey was kind and took pity on her. Maybe no one would yell at her for spending some time in the bathroom if they knew she was always feeling sick.

She'd have to find the courage, somewhere. The truth had to come out eventually.
Cloud haunted her constantly. He was in the empty seat beside her on the train and curled next to her as she slept. His presence lingered in the memory of his laugh and taunted her in every young blue-eyed man whom she waited upon. She should’ve made him stay that day. She should’ve begged him not to take that extra assignment. If she had, he wouldn’t be dead. She missed all of the little things that used to be meaningless: the sight of the sun on his golden locks, the way he’d rub the back of his neck while he stressed over their bills, the way he’d sigh gently in his sleep. The beating of his heart used to lull her to sleep, but now she was met by silence and cold sheets. She heard his name in the wild whispers of the wind and saw his face in fitful dreams. Even after all this time, his death (and the disappearances of Papa and Claudia) had seemed so strange to her; the circumstances of it all made little sense. A tiny shoe box on her dresser was full of newspaper clippings concerning Nibelheim, which ShinRA claimed to have a massive business boom in recent months following the renovation of its mako reactor. There was never any mention of any conflict there at all, so why would Cloud have lost his life? Why hadn’t Zack come back? Why wouldn’t Claudia write to her if life in the mountains was apparently better than ever? The only thing that outweighed her uncertainty was her sadness and fear for the future. But she couldn’t let it eat her alive. She had to be strong for the baby.

The baby...

It hadn’t moved despite her heaping helping of sugar and her stomach flip flopped with unease. Tifa had learned from Master Zagan that your mind and body were intricately connected. Maybe her sadness and stress in addition to her pregnancy had made her feel so ill all the time. Maybe the baby wasn’t moving so much anymore because it felt her sorrow. Its kicks used to wake her as she slept or made her gasp when taking a customer’s orders. But now it was hard to remember the precise last time that she had felt the baby move. Had she been too tired and busy to notice? Was her child as tired as she was?

"Are you okay?" Tifa lifted up the hem of Cloud’s baggy sweater to peer at her bare belly, stroking her fingers slowly over it. "Today’s the day. I’m going to tell Bailey about you..."

The baby never answered her, but it made Tifa feel better to talk to it out loud. Life seemed a little less lonesome that way. Slowly, she moved to stand. Tifa washed her dishes, bathed and donned her uniform before heading out for another work day. Another pulling pain rippled across her stomach but she tried her best to ignore it as she walked along, carefully avoiding eye contact with strangers. The pub was quiet when she walked in. Tifa had been ready to tell Bailey about her pregnancy first thing, but he was in a bad mood after his meeting with a food vendor and she decided that it might be wise to wait until later in the evening.

It was the most uncomfortable shift of her life. Tifa felt lightheaded and sick as her headache intensified. Her abdomen ached from time to time; making her run to the restroom to try and find relief, but it was of no help. Strong pangs of pain were followed by long pauses of relief, but the time between the pangs was getting shorter and shorter as time went by. She wanted to go home. By midnight, Tifa felt so ill that she could barely smile for her patrons. Something was definitely wrong and she was terrified. Sweat was beginning to mat her bangs against her forehead, the intermittent pains causing her to shift along with an awkward gait. The other waitresses would cast concerned looks her way and Tifa was mortified that her discomfort was so obvious. Her hands trembled beneath the weight of the tray when she realized that these weren’t the ordinary aches of a stomach bug. They were twisting, pulling, and squeezing pains in the muscles of her abdomen that sometimes made her belly tense and hard. What if the baby was coming? It couldn’t be that, could it? It was too early!

Fearful tears burned at the corners of her eyes as she distributed her patrons’ orders and her voice faltered as she thanked them for their business. She needed to tell someone. She needed to get out of
here before another contraction tore through her. But what if her boss got angry? Would he think she was a poor worker? What if he shouted and wouldn't let her go? What would she do then? Empty tray in hand, she limped over to the bar.

"E-excuse me, Mr. Bailey?" She squeaked, legs quaking with fear of the next wave of pain.

Her boss glanced in her direction before turning to fill drink orders. "Yeah?"

"I--um..." She swallowed, trying with all her might to keep herself composed even as her voice shook. "May I please g-go home? I don't feel well."

"Can you hold out for another hour? "

"I don't--ah!"

The feared contraction finally came. Tifa doubled over as her tray clattered to the hardwood floor. Her long hair shrouded her face as she bent forward, biting her lip to keep from crying out. In a moment, Bailey had come around the bar and put a hand on her shoulder. He called out for a waitress to watch the bar as he slowly lead Tifa to the privacy of the back room. White hot bursts of pain spread through her abdomen like lightning and she whimpered as she tried to stand on shaking knees.

"What is it?" Bailey asked as he searched for her face beneath her dark curtain of hair. "What happened?"

If she hadn't been desperately frightened and in excruciating pain, she would have been amused that this man could actually sound as if he genuinely cared for her. Tifa’s face was flushed with the great effort of reigning in her response to her body’s current struggle. She kept her gaze on his boots as she whispered to the floor.

"I-I think I’m in labor…"

When an especially fierce pain grabbed her belly and robbed her of breath, panic set in. Each contraction took Tifa up and wrung her out like a cloth, leaving her panting and fearful of the next pain. It seemed like an eternity that she had been in this room, memorizing the grey tiles on the floor as she paced and paced along the white walls.

She had been taken away from the pub by an ambulance. The medical technicians who helped her into the vehicle gave her looks of pity when they checked her identification cards and saw that she had no medical benefits to her name. She had been taken to a small clinic in Sector Four. It had been the closest facility with enough space available to admit her, but Tifa didn’t find comfort in the cold rooms that smelled of bleach and rubbing alcohol. She wasn’t reassured by the unfamiliar people who came to take her vital signs and murmured to each other with words she was too distracted to try and understand, like hypertension and preeclampsia. Left alone for long stretches at a time, she both feared and anticipated the appearance of a nurse or doctor. A sob broke from her mouth as her water broke and washed down her legs in a slow yet steady stream.

"Mama!" Tifa cried, feeling the absence of a beloved face and a pair of tender hands. She leaned against the wall with a whimper, eyes clenched shut. "Cloud...help me!"

How far away they were. How she longed to hear the comfort of their voices. Why had no one told her that her body would become a battlefield, a sacrifice, a test? Why did she not know that birth is the pinnacle where women discover the courage to become mothers?
As if her cries were a cue, a midwife gently knocked on the door before quietly entering. Tifa hugged herself against the wall, trembling and panicked. The woman named Emi was young, perhaps not too many years older than herself. She was petite and a little plump; her short black hair was pulled back into a ponytail. Emi’s almond eyes were soft and kind as they looked her over, lifting her hospital gown to examine Tifa’s progress. She saw the laboring mother’s youth and fear and made sure her hands were sure and gentle. Time passed so slowly, but Emi tried to keep Tifa’s spirits up. She blew into her face so that Tifa couldn't hold her breath when the pains came, and even made her laugh a little and blow back at her. She gave her fruit juice to sip, wiped her down with sweetly scented towels, and massaged her legs.

Normally quiet and reserved, Tifa was surprised at how freely audible moans spilled from her mouth. She wept and yelled. She gave up all hope and prayed. She vomited and her knees buckled. Her midwife's brows furrowed in response to her pains, but didn’t seem anxious. So Tifa fought on, reassured. She began to push because there was nothing else she could do. She pushed and pushed until she thought she would faint, but still the baby would not come. Emi said she was so close; the baby was right there! Finally, the midwife reached up to move the baby’s shoulder to help ease its passage. The pain was blinding, but in an instant, the baby was out. The cord was at her neck and her face was blue. Emi hurried, trying to suck death from her mouth with a bulb syringe and blow life into her nostrils. She summoned help and a handful of nurses and a doctor rushed in, sweeping away her baby in an instant. Tifa wanted to scream, but all she could do was lay there, sobbing and shaking. Emi returned to hold her as she watched the medical staff work, obscuring her view of her baby.

There was a great flutter of activity lasting for a stretch of minutes that felt like hours and hours. Their voices were clipped. The doctor shouted his orders, the nurses talked amongst themselves in hushed whispers. The only one in the room that remained silent was the baby. Why wasn’t she crying? What was wrong? For fifteen minutes, the medical staff worked and rushed around, until finally everything was still again. Emi stroked Tifa’s hair as the doctor shook his head and approached the young mother on the hospital bed. Wide carmine eyes looked to him for reassurance, but there was none. With two words, she knew.

“I’m sorry.”

A keening cry broke forth from her throat as her heart bled out of her chest. Her long hair was tangled and matted against her sweaty shoulders and dark strands stuck to the tear tracks on her flushed cheeks. Exhausted and heartbroken, she collapsed back into Emi’s arms.

“No, no, please! She’s all I have left in this world!

The baby was brought to her swaddled in a thin cotton blanket. Just as there is no warning for childbirth, there is no preparation for the sight of a first child. The nurses looked away from the tiny doomed girl, but Tifa saw only her perfect beauty. Her eyelids were veined like a butterfly's wing, her toes curled like the petals of a flower. She wasn't afraid to hold that small death. Her face was peaceful, her hands perfectly clean, and it seemed like she would wake up at any moment. The tears from Tifa's eyes fell upon her alabaster cheek, making it appear as if the baby mourned the passing of her own life. It looked like she was simply sleeping. In the midst of her trance, Tifa barely realized that she had been left alone to mourn the still birth of her baby.

Pallid and shaky, she clutched her daughter. Tifa fixated on her perfect little nose and the fan of her eyelashes on her round cheeks. The newborn’s downy hair was light brown with flecks of gold that glimmered in the artificial light. A small tuft of feather soft hair stood out like a cowlick on her little head, making the new mother reminisce about Cloud’s crazy locks. It was easy to see that the baby was small and underweight, even at seven months gestation. Tiny and perfect from the little shells of
her ears to her miniature fingernails, she was the most beautiful thing Tifa had ever seen.

All this time, she had been too distracted to think of what she would call her baby. After all, she thought she had at least two more months to decide. Perhaps, Tifa realized, she had put it off all along in hopes that Cloud might return to help her pick a suitable name. But Cloud wasn’t coming back. The baby was dead, just like Mama and Papa and Claudia. Everything was all jumbled up in her head, thoughts and emotions whirling together like a hurricane. But in the eye of the storm, there was one thing she knew for certain. Her daughter’s name rolled smoothly off her tongue like the gentle press of a piano’s keys.

“Don’t go without me, Aria.” Tifa held the baby’s head to her chest as she whispered her plea. “Take me with you, please…”

It was a way to honor her mother’s talent, a way to remember the only thing that had brought Papa peace, and a way to reflect upon the melodies that Cloud had found so comforting in his youth. Aria: her little song. She was a jaunty little tune that had passed through quickly, spreading merriment towards those who had been aware of her small presence.

"You're with your daddy now,” she whispered to the little girl with trembling breath. “You’re with your grandmothers…and your grandfathers, too. They'll take care of you, I promise.”

There was nothing left for her. Her entire family had left this life and now the baby had gone, too. Why was she still here? Tifa felt like a little girl, lost and alone in a nightmare that was impossible to wake from. But she wasn’t a child anymore. She had crossed over from girlhood when she became a mother, she realized. But could she still be called a mother if her baby had never even taken a breath? Tifa shifted Aria to lie cradled in her arms and stroked her smooth hair with the pad of her thumb. A morbid thought crossed her mind. Was it better this way? The baby would be peaceful forever, eyes never once opened to the cruelty of this world. Aria won’t have to suffer an uncertain future of destitution and desperation in the slums. She won't be subjected to living without a father and a mother too young and lost and inexperienced to give her a chance at a decent life.

Tifa had always thought that they would make it. That somehow, she’d find a job where she could make enough money to get out of this place and take the baby to live by the sand and surf under the warm sun. But everything went wrong, and everyone who had ever known her was dead. Was there anyone left in the world who knew her name? She swallowed at the rush of utter loneliness that thought had summoned.

Tifa’s throat tightened as she stared at her daughter’s face and thought about how she’d never know what her voice sounded like. Quietly, softly, the young mother began to sing a song she hadn’t heard in many, many years.

‘Sleep, my child, and peace attend thee,
All through the night
Guardian angels God will send thee,
All through the night
Soft the drowsy hours are creeping,
Hill and dale in slumber sleeping
I my loved ones' watch am keeping,
All through the night’

In the short hours that the baby was in her arms, she told her of a sleepy mountain village surrounded by a sea of evergreen and described the beauty of the ocean that was as blue as her father’s eyes. She told Aria of her Lia’s apple pies and Claudia’s hearty stews. She described Cloud’s gentle heart and protective spirit. But most importantly, Tifa told her that she loved her, over and over again. She held
the baby tight, since she was her only comfort and her only blood link to Cloud. Tifa told her that she would always love and remember her. Mind foggy with fatigue and sorrow, she whispered sweet promises to her baby until she could no longer keep her eyes open.

Exhausted from labor and the overwhelming heaviness of despair, Tifa fell asleep, intoxicated by the smell of her newborn.

… … …

She woke in the darkness, a single dim light softly glowing next to the door. Her daughter was gone. Frightened, Tifa tried to stand, but the overwhelming post-birth pains kept her pinned to the bed. Tears welled up and seeped from her eyes as she took in her surroundings. Emi was there, monitoring her bleeding, speaking kind words and mercifully holding ice packs between her legs. But her presence didn’t soothe the girl, who lay broken and silent in the bed. Hours stretched by. The midwife could not bear the emptiness in her eyes, or the despair that hung about her like a fog from the world of the dead. She took to visiting her every night to whisper words of encouragement into her ears and brush her long hair. But she only laid there, deaf to any hope. Tifa was alone in her own black night.

On the third day, she left the clinic holding a plastic bag with the blanket Aria had been swaddled in and her birth and death certificates. Tifa was in anguish as she struggled to leave without her baby. Since she had been aware of her daughter’s existence, they had been literally connected. Being separated, even though Aria was no longer living, was overwhelming. She lingered in front of the clinic for a while, unable to rid herself of the thought that she was leaving her baby behind. But her daughter was no longer there; it was just her little body. She would be cremated and that would be it. What a terrible mother she was not to have enough money for a plot of land for a tiny grave or a pretty urn for her ashes. Facing the street, Tifa realized that the world would never again be the same.

Nothing on the outside had changed: people hustled along, oblivious to the death and blackness in her eyes. But to Tifa, everything had changed. Any scrap of happiness in her bleak life had evaporated into smoke. She wanted to scream out in her pain, to call for her mother, for Cloud…

But she was wholly and completely alone.

The walk home was agony. Tifa didn’t have the gil for a taxi on her, so she had no choice but to limp her way to her apartment in the next sector. Her healing body screamed in discomfort, but it was nothing compared to the suffering of her heart. The abandoned areas between sectors were always the most dangerous; monsters and thugs crept like shadows among the debris, waiting for their next victim. It was these streets where the crowd thinned to nothing and Tifa found herself alone. Most of the street lights were dark due to disrepair, a few flickering in the dark. The black world stretched out before her, the only sound was the clack-clack of a train in the distance. She could walk into a hole and be swallowed up forever, and she never would’ve known it was there. But at this point, she didn’t care. Tifa slowly trudged forward and limped through the pain; she was easy, injured prey. But the monsters never attacked. Thugs never came for her. Maybe they all knew she was wretched and cursed and unworthy of love and happiness and peace. Even they knew she wasn’t worth the trouble.

Hours later, she reached her destination. Her eyes burned with tears and Tifa tried not to cry out as she climbed the stairs of her apartment building, each step stretching tender flesh between her legs. She hid away in her bedroom, reading her baby’s birth certificate again and again by candlelight. She discovered that Aria had been just over three pounds, was fifteen inches long, and had red eyes: like Mama’s, like her own. It was unbearable to think that these two sheets of paper would be the only proof that her daughter existed. For the handful of days that followed, Tifa fought against the
irrational fear that she had forgotten her baby somewhere. Her mind was coming to accept that Aria was gone, but her body did not yet understand, and she constantly whimpered at the hot ache of her full breasts. This was her punishment for getting Mama sick. This was her punishment for escaping Nibelheim. This was her punishment for abandoning her father. Had anything ever been right in this life? Had there ever been a time where laughter bubbled freely from her heart? She began to doubt her memories as the grey of the slums washed over her heart.

*Mama’s slender fingers against ivory keys. A lone daffodil against grey gravel. The tinkling of a jingle bell. A brightly colored bird house.*

Nestled in Cloud’s sweatshirt, she curled into herself in the cold bed. Aria’s blanket was squeezed tightly against her chest as she chased after dreams of the sound of a piano and the smell of pine. But sleep often eluded her, and Tifa’s mind would slip into dark places in the stillness. She lay there alone, counting her hatred and screaming in silence. She had been defeated by grief, exhausted past seeing, but hatred had stiffened her spine. Any thoughts of ShinRA would jolt her into a rage that fed upon itself as she lay on her blanket, rigid and alert. They had taken everything from her: her home, her family, her hope.

If everything that gave her purpose was gone, why was she still alive?
Drowning

The layers of grease on the kitchen floor did not come off easily. The steel wool and cleaning chemicals had rubbed her fingers raw after a few hours, but she didn’t have the strength to care. Numbly, Tifa blinked at the way blood pooled under her fingernails.

Even in the midst of her grief, Tifa Lockhart was not an idle person. Days after she had been released from the hospital, she donned her ill-fitting uniform and set out for work. Bailey had let her have it when she had come slinking back to the pub. Bailey told her that no man wanted to be serviced by a waitress with empty eyes. In fact, he had said that she was lucky she was so beautiful, since it gave her the opportunity to be quite a commodity for his business. If she wasn’t so fortunate looking, he said he would’ve thrown her out on the street for what she had done. Tifa certainly didn’t feel beautiful. Sleepless, torturous nights had left bags under her eyes and her skin was clammy and grey. Her hair was thinning and her swollen stomach was still shrinking back to its pre-pregnancy size. With a three week deadline to ‘get over herself’ and ‘act normal’ for the customers, she was punished with grueling kitchen duty.

But she didn’t mind. The monotony of endless dishes to wash temporarily filled up the empty space in her chest as constant chores kept her brain empty, yet occupied. The cook ignored her except to give her orders, and she was grateful that she wasn’t forced to endure small talk. She didn’t feel like talking to anybody. The positioning of the stove kept his back to her, and she was grateful that she was mostly free from his gaze. Her meager earnings never left much room in her budget for food, and she sustained herself by discreetly eating the half-finished meals left by patrons that came back to the kitchen in bussing trays. Tifa downed discarded glasses of liquor when she could; the whiskey caressed her like a long lost friend. Numb. She just wanted to be numb.

Stack the dishes. Sweep the floors. Clean the endless beer mugs and shot glasses. Each day washed into another in a blur of tedium.

Two weeks had passed since she had returned, leaving her one more to pick up the pieces of her life and act cheery for Bailey’s customers. In those two weeks, Tifa had tried her best to quell any emotion and leave her head as empty as everything else: empty belly, empty arms, empty crib. The only thing that hadn’t been empty was her breasts, which were painfully full with milk for a baby that didn’t exist anymore. They ached so much it would make tears prick at the corner of her eyes, and Tifa took to hiding in the walk in freezer with a frozen bag of vegetables on her burning chest. She was no longer part of a symbiotic union and was dizzy with despair and confusion over this separation from her baby. Aria was just one more pair of hands that pulled Tifa’s heart and mind away from the living world and into the next.

It occurred to Tifa that she was far from the only mother who had lost a baby. But how did people recover from such devastation? In Nibelheim, the harsh mountain winters and the resulting illnesses claimed many a baby’s life. The community would rally together and try to comfort the grieving parents with attention and sympathy and small gifts. There’d be a tiny grave stone to place flowers on. But for Tifa, there were no arms to embrace her, no arms to hold her as she mourned the loss of her baby, her husband, of everything. The loneliness was maddening and depleted her drive to seek out a reason to move forward. If she had been a better mother, Aria would still be with her. She should’ve done something different. Maybe if she had researched more, had somehow found the means for proper food to nourish the baby inside her things would’ve turned out different. If she wasn’t always sick and vomiting, would her daughter had been strong enough to make it? Maybe if she hadn’t taken a job full of cigarette smoke, the baby would’ve been okay. Maybe if Aria had had
a different mother, she would’ve lived to take a breath.

But regret was as useless as it was painful.

Putting aside the steel wool, Tifa reached into the bucket of soapy water for the rag. She rung it out before leaning forward to wipe at the grease she had loosened, taking small satisfaction when she saw the smooth, clean tiles underneath. She felt so drained, so lost. Aria had been her purpose now that Cloud was gone. Her tiny daughter, with her evidence of her father’s golden locks in her light brown hair and red eyes, like her mother. Tifa’s heart constricted when she realized that was all she’d ever know about her. What kind of mother was she, knowing so little about her own flesh and blood? What would her baby’s voice have sounded like? What kind of foods would she liked to eat? Would she have been an artist, a musician, a book worm, a rebel?

What did it matter now?

The other waitresses weren’t very sympathetic when they heard what happened. They told her it was better off that way, now that she had no ‘baby-daddy’ to help her. The words had initially stung her chest like a thousand bees, but over time she realized how right they were. All Tifa could think about was how she ruined everyone’s life that she touched. Her mother died because she got her sick. Her father never recovered from Mama’s death and hated her for it, spending the rest of his days haunting their house like a vengeful ghost. Cloud had been taken from her while on an assignment he had volunteered for to make ends meet for their tiny family. Aria never opened her eyes to this world because Tifa was inadequate as a mother, even before she could give birth. Surely, her daughter would’ve suffered more if Tifa had been given a chance to actually mother her. The little girl would’ve followed a bleak path here in the slums: without a chance, without hope.

How could she have ever provided for a baby if she couldn’t even provide for herself? The amount she owed for rent was always very close to exceeding her earnings each month. The lease would be terminated in a month’s time. After that, she’d have to figure something else out. Desperate, Tifa had felt something die within her when she sold her engagement ring to help pay off her hospital bills. After that, she had slid her wedding band off of her finger, hiding it under her shirt on a cord around her neck. Cloud wasn’t coming back. No matter how many times she hoped and wished and fantasized, he’d never be waiting for her when she returned home. Cloud was dead, and that was that. She was alone, now. The only comfort in all of this tragedy was that Tifa didn’t have to go around telling her friends and family that she had failed and her baby was dead. It was a small consolation that came at an enormous price, and she constantly longed for comforting arms to hold her.

The door to the kitchen banged open and she jumped, the rag dropping from her hands.

“Tifa!” Bailey’s stern voice made her eyes snap upward. “Wash up and get out there, the girls are swamped. Try to be pleasant, will ya?”

Obediently, she collected her cleaning items and stood moved into the cramped employee bathroom to wash the grease and blood off her hands. She stood at the sink, but didn’t look in the mirror. She couldn’t stand to see herself. She didn’t deserve to be alive when everyone else had died. Tifa was alive, but it didn’t feel much like living. She was alone and empty, like a grave looking to be filled with the peace of death. Her heart used to be so full of love and life, but now it had been turned over and emptied, left hollow and broken. How could she mask the emptiness and hopelessness in her eyes to please her boss and her patrons? Taking a deep breath, she tried to smile. Long ago, Tifa had learned how to appear cheery despite the further crumbling of her life, but it wasn’t working any more. Her carefully constructed mask had gone missing.

Trembling, she stepped out into the pub. It was packed with customers. Every booth, table, and bar
stool was occupied, and the handful of waitresses hustled to and fro with trays piled high with soiled dishes. A blonde waitress named Rona was the first to spot her in the chaos. Arms full of plates of appetizers, she brushed past her with a huff.

“Table five, they just sat down.”

Tifa nodded and pushed her way through the crowd. Voice soft and eyes averted, she took orders and collected checks. Hours passed as she weaved through crude, drunken men and their groping hands. She was glad Cloud couldn’t see her now, for she was sure he wouldn’t even have recognized her. She observed the patrons with detached interest. Tifa watched normal people do normal things, knowing that there was no chance she’d ever feel normal again. Her world ended the day Aria was born to her, lifeless and silent. Around her, everyone’s worlds kept spinning on. Tifa felt like a stone must feel as the tide recedes around it: feeling stagnant and cold while the ocean carries on its merry way. Each breath felt like an effort. She never heard her baby laugh, never heard her smile, was never able to rest her hand on her tiny chest and feel the flutter of her little heart…

Tifa didn’t cringe as a broad hand palms the curve of her rear, her hands too preoccupied with a tray to swipe it away. But what did it matter anymore? She wasn’t a married woman. She wasn’t a mother. She wasn’t even a respectable human being.

She didn’t have any value.

… … …

The slums of Midgar were a strange place for a man of the desert.

Barret Wallace had willingly traded sand and stone for iron and mako, trekking across the ocean with little else but the clothes on his back and a tired infant in his arms. He was an outsider, but fit seamlessly into this rough environment. No one gave him any trouble and he knew it was because of his large, muscular build and the hefty gun he recently had grafted to his arm, replacing his missing right hand. Once in a while, Barret would consider how strange he must look: an enormous, gruff looking man with dark skin carrying a tiny Caucasian baby. But nobody asked any questions, and he liked it that way. Sector Four was busy, especially for two in the morning, but he supposed that in a place like this people just ran by their own schedules. When you live under the sun, your life revolves around it. But denizens of the slums didn’t rely upon the sun for light or food or their schedule. Without the use of mako powered electricity, the slums would remain almost as dark during the day as they were at night—especially this close to the pillar.

Barret was exhausted, but two things kept him marching. The first was anger, and it was directed at ShinRA. It was his thirst for revenge that had brought him here, to this dirty place of poverty and desperation. It was easy to strike out at your enemy when you hid right under their noses. The slums were a giant maze where people can disappear if they wanted to. He’d show them that no one double crossed Barret Wallace! Believing the company’s lies had cost him everything.

His home, his reputation, his friends, his wife…

A small whine from the little girl in his arms made him sigh. “I know, Marlene. I know. Jes’ a little further an’ we’ll find somewhere to rest.”

The second thing that inspired him to keep going was this baby. She wasn’t his and it was obvious enough just by the stark difference in their skin color, but Marlene was so very precious to him. The only daughter of his deceased best friend, Dyne, Marlene was his chance to atone for the mistakes he had made, for the lives his ignorance had cost. The little girl was miserable. Travel wasn’t easy on a four month old, and traversing across the sea had definitely taken its toll on her. Barret knew she was
hungry, and always managed to locate some milk to feed her. Marlene would suck it down greedily, but almost always end up throwing most of it up again. The baby was weak and Barret felt guilty and lost. If she had been left in anyone else’s care, she probably would’ve been well cared for. Was it selfishness that stopped him from leaving her to be adopted by a new set of loving parents? Barret wanted to think that he was doing this for his best friend, but was he really doing it for himself? Marlene was all that remained of his home, of his life before ShinRA burned it away. Her presence comforted him in a way nothing else could.

Hidden beneath his jacket flap, Marlene listlessly chewed on her fist and whimpered as she sagged against him. She needed to eat. Barret pushed through the crowd, eyes scanning the electric signs of shops lining the street. One of these places had to have food, right? His gun arm ached, still recovering from surgery and he grunted in frustration. Sector Four was full of materia shops, liquor stores and gentleman’s clubs, but not a damn grocery store in sight! Most businesses were closed anyway, due to the late hour.

“It’s ‘bout damn time…” Barret grumbled, finally seeing a glowing sign that caught his interest.

The pub was crawling with people and he scowled, hoping for a somewhat quiet environment for Marlene. Not waiting to be seated, he plopped himself into a dim corner booth and sagged against the worn leather backing. The waitresses were buzzing like bees, sweeping around with skill and purpose. Barret tried to get their attention, but they’d rush past before he could. After ten minutes without luck, one particular waitress caught his eye. She was standing still as everyone else whirled around her, barely flinching when someone bumped her shoulder on the way past. Her wide, dark eyes were almost hidden under her black bangs, but Barret could easily see that she was staring: fixated on the baby in his arms.

“Hey, Miss,” Barret called out to her over the volume of conversations and the clinking of cutlery on plates. She didn’t budge, eyes glued to Marlene’s little head. Protectively, he curled her under the flap of his jacket. He growled when the waitress’s gaze didn’t lift. “What’chu lookin’ at?”

Baby mostly out of sight, she snapped out of it. Her long, black hair fell over her shoulders as she bowed her head apologetically.

“S-sorry, sir. I’m so sorry.” With shaky hands, she pulled a notepad out of her apron. She kept her eyes averted.

“Your darkest beer, the curry plate and some milk for the baby.”

“Yessir.”

She quickly scribbled down his order, cautious eyes running over his gun arm before she scurried away into the crowd. Barret watched her disappear before shifting Marlene to a more comfortable position. His gun arm ached, still healing from surgery, and his feet were sore. He had been walking all day, looking for an apartment. He ended up signing a one year lease for a tiny hole in the wall above a tobacco shop. His background in the coal mines of North Corel had proven valuable and had landed him a job in construction, which he had hastily accepted. Barret had been so desperate for work to put a roof over their heads that he had forgotten a very important thing. In the long hours that he was working, who would watch over Marlene? No wonder he and his wife had never been blessed with children in their ten years of marriage. He was good at knowing exactly where to place dynamite for the maximum blow and how to determine small yet crucial weaknesses in mine shaft lining, but Barret was lost knowing what a tiny baby needed.

Annoyed, he pawed at the bread basket on the table. Barret occupied his mind with his pressing problem as he occupied his mouth with bread and rich butter.
Thud, thud, thud.

Her heart pounded in her ears. Despite constantly telling herself to calm down, Tifa’s mind raced. It was just a baby—another person’s baby. A baby girl in a stained pink dress. Tifa swallowed the lump in her throat as she hid in the kitchen, scrubbing and scrubbing at dishes that were long clean. **Get a hold of yourself, Tifa scolded internally. Don’t let your mind wander those paths.**

As soon as the cook barked at her that her table’s order was ready, she took the tray and dutifully stepped forward into the crowd. Fear and doubt and irrational dread pooled around her limbs, pulling her backward like the raging ocean tide. Tifa longed to hide from that little baby with dark eyes and fuzzy light brown hair. She wanted to hide from the emotions she’d been stifling, the desperation and rage and grief that threatened to spill over at the sight of plump little cheeks. With her head down, she marched ahead, dancing around waitresses and patrons.

“Here you are, sir.” Gently, she slid the plate of food in front of him, followed by the foaming mug of beer. She paused with the glass of milk, knowing the baby was far too young to drink from a glass. How would she get her milk? The man didn’t seem to have a bottle on him. **It’s none of your business, Tifa.** She put the glass down on the table beside the mug. The little girl burbled. Tifa looked away. **Bleach and sweat, pain and fear. Dark little lashes on ivory cheeks. Silent, peaceful angel.**

“Is there anything else I could get for you?”

Before he could answer, the baby started to cry. It started low but intensified quickly, and Tifa felt her breasts ache in response to the hungry infant’s cries. The man cradled and cooed to the child, rocking her with his good arm. It was easy to tell that he felt helpless and clueless. Tifa’s addled brain didn’t know what to do. Her arms yearned to reach out and comfort the infant, her body longed to nurse the little one like her clueless caretaker couldn’t. But even she couldn’t, not anymore. Her milk had dried up a week ago as her body finally understood that she had been the ultimate failure. Each wail from the infant was hot knives into her broken heart. **Make it stop. Make it stop!**

Finally, the man withdrew a small dropper from his pocket. “Aw’right, aw’right, here’s your milk.”

He sucked up a dropper full and carefully deposited it into her mouth. The baby greedily gulped at the dropper full of milk, instantly calming her cries. Tifa watched, fixated, as she drank each offering of white sustenance. A new flock of customers plopping at a nearby table made Tifa pry her gaze from the pair, but she continually found her gaze landing on them frequently for the next half hour or so. She couldn’t help but be distracted. Even if she hadn't been grieving over the loss of Aria, a baby was a rare sight in these parts. The big man was finished feeding the baby and was now feeding himself. The little girl was quiet, but looked far from content as she writhed with a faint whine. A wave of white bubbled out of her little mouth, soaking into her collar. Almost on instinct, Tifa pulled a cloth out of her apron and rushed over. But when she got to the table, she didn't quite know what to do.

The man eventually realized she was standing there, and turned his dark head to glower in her direction. **"What'chu want? You stare at all yo' customers like this?”**

Tifa flinched and took a step back. She hadn't meant to be rude, and Bailey would be very cross if he knew she was making patrons uncomfortable with her lapses in mental stability. **"N-no, excuse me. I'm sorry." Nervously, she swallowed. "But sir, she's...”**

"I ain't looking for no 'scuses. Bring me the check an' leave us alone."
Then, he heard it. The baby sputtered and coughed, bringing up another wave of undigested milk.

"Marlene!" He held her upright to be sure she didn't choke. Tifa held out the rag and he readily took it, gently wiping the baby's mouth and neck. "C'mere, it's aight. You gonna be fine."

Tifa watched as he lifted her to rest her head on his chest. Marlene sagged into him, a weak keening sound coming from her throat. The baby looked lethargic and sick: too weak to cry. Her eyes were little slits against the fabric of the man's shirt. The sight echoed back dark memories and she breathed against the tightness forming in her chest.

"Is she sick?"

"The milk doesn't always agree wit' her...but she's got no mama to nurse her anymore."

"When I was born, my mother had trouble nursing me." Tifa closed her eyes as long buried memories rose to the surface. "Her milk dried up when I was just a month old, so the doctor told her to feed me with goat's milk. It's easier on the stomach than cow's milk. We have some in the back...we use it to make our butter and cheese. Would you like to try some?"

"Yeah...thank you." He glanced at her sideways with a dark eye before extending his hand. "Name's Barret."

"Tifa..." she took his hand and it swallowed hers. "It's nice to meet you."

"Likewise."

She turned, weaving her way back to the kitchen. Tifa knew exactly where the goat milk was. In the past few weeks she watched the chef, silently stealing his secrets, and watched him churn butter and make cheese dozens of times. But it wasn't a menu item. Surely she could give some to Barret and just ask her boss what to charge him. Quietly, she went to the walk-in refrigerator and filled a tiny mason jar with a ration of goat's milk. Tifa snuck back out before anyone could find her and discreetly pressed the jar into Barret's hand.

"Take that home and give it a try. Hopefully it'll be easier on her little stomach." Her reward was a tiny smile on the man's gruff face.

"Thanks."

Clearing the dirty dishes from the table, she flashed him a small smile of her own. "I'll be right back with the bill."

Bailey was tending the bar, somehow distinguishing each order the customers barked at him over the noise around them. Tifa waited for the opportune time to interrupt during a momentary lapse, and went around to the swinging door leading behind the bar. All of a sudden, she felt overwhelmingly shy and unworthy to speak with him. After all, the last time she was in this very situation was when she was going into labor and trying to tell her boss what she'd hid from him for so long. But this situation wasn't about her, and she found her voice when she thought of that desperate little baby.

"Excuse me..." she squeaked, surprised when he swung his head towards her. "I have a customer who needs goat's milk. What would you have me charge for a glass?"

"It's not for sale." He grunted. Tifa waited for him to elaborate, but he didn't.

"But there's a baby who needs it..."
"Listen, do you know how costly it is to get goat’s milk around here? I ain't givin' it away for charity!" He wiped down the counter with a little more force than necessary. "Don't ask me again."

Tifa nodded before slinking away. What was she going to do now? She had already given some to Barret—would the cook notice and rat her out? Would he tell Bailey and get her fired? She couldn't afford to lose this job: her housing situation depended on it. Bailey had a few rooms he rented out to the girls once in a while, maybe she could manage to afford one after her apartment's contract was up. Tifa wanted to stay, but didn't have the gil for it without the help of Cloud's savings, which was dwindling. If she damaged her relationship with her boss even further, she'd have no hope of a place to stay.

Tifa hated the thought of stealing from her boss as much as she hated the thought of that sick little baby starving to death because she didn't have her mother's milk. She felt that her shortcomings were the reason that Aria was dead, but maybe she could somehow make up for it by helping this little one that looked so much like her. Fetching Barret's check, Tifa made her way back to his table.

"You didn't charge me fo' the goat milk," he said, scratching his nose as he looked over the bill.

Tifa looked at Marlene's little doll face as she slept against Barret's chest. Surely if she only gave it to him this one time, it would be alright. "It's...on the house."

... ... ...

"Mama, where do all the paths go? I mean...what's at the end of them all?"

Tifa looked up to search her mother's face. They stood hand in hand at a fork in the pine forest trail, autumn wind tugging at their black hair.

"I'm not sure, my dear."

"What if they lead to nowhere?"

"Oh, surely they must lead to somewhere."

The path to the left of them went forward into the woods and got darker and darker the further it stretched. Naked branches of trees loomed across the path and there were no birds singing. The breeze made her shiver and she pressed herself against Mama's leg. The path to the right led westward, toward home. Tifa turned her head to look down that comforting trail, where the warmth of the sunlight beckoned her back to safety. Mama smiled down at her.

"Let's try this way, shall we?"

Obediently, she followed as her mother began to lead her down the dark path. At a crow's caw, Tifa stiffened and froze in place. She tugged on her mother's hand. "Mama, let's go back."

"What's wrong? You're not afraid, are you?"

Tifa frowned. "A'course not! I just wanna go on the other one."

"Are you sure? They say there's a waterfall down this way."

Tifa looked down the eerie path where the trees thickened and blocked out the light of the sun. She couldn't imagine ever wanting to walk down such a spooky trail, especially without a lantern. "Someone really walked that way?"
Mama laughed. "Of course! Who do you think made the path, Tifa?"

The girl paused in thought as she watched the dead leaves fall beside them in the breeze. Did the people who blazed trails ever come back? What if they were lost out there forever and no one came to rescue them? What if they went so far only to come upon a dead end or a cliff and couldn't get home? It filled her belly with a lonesome feeling and she tightened her grip on her mother's hand.

"Can we go home, Mama?"

"Yes, we can." In that moment, Lia's soft smile quelled all of the fears in Tifa's heart. "There will always be other days to be brave."

... ... ...

"Tifa, are you done? We're closin' up."

Snapping out of her memory, she dried the last glass and wiped her hands with the dish towel. "Yessir."

Quietly, Tifa hung the towel up and shrugged on Cloud's jacket. The path of her life seemed to have arrived at a dead end. She had been foolish, thinking her course would stay bright and sunny when it had morphed into an unfamiliar, treacherous journey. She hadn't her mother's hand to hold, nor Cloud's, and with each step she took, the world became darker and darker. One misstep could be fatal. The voice of her soul had disappeared—sucked away into the void—where all was empty and dark. But unlike last time, she couldn't turn back. Tifa was too far down this road and there was no option but to press forward and it frightened her.

At least here, at the pub, there was something to concentrate on to keep her from her thoughts. She liked to stay later than the other girls: rinsing and mopping and scrubbing. They didn't really talk to her much, anyway. The other waitresses were all older than her by quite a few years. Most were in their twenties and had lives and boyfriends of their own, slaving away at this place to help make ends meet or save for the next semester of college. She envied them and the opportunities they had. Tifa wondered if she could make friends with the others by trying to make conversation, but her grief filled heart had made her hesitant to open up and become vulnerable to any further wounds. When she thought about it, it had been hard for her to be completely open since Mama left this life. Before Cloud had died, she had diligently practiced openness of each thought, since she knew how important transparency was in marriage. Now that the comfort of her best friend had disappeared, she hid back in her shell like frightened clam. She had rediscovered safety in being separate and opaque, drawn into an orbit of which the other girls had no knowledge. They didn't pay her much mind, anyway. By then, misery had made Tifa almost invisible.

Tifa's body screamed for sleep, but her mind wanted to be distracted with mundane tasks. When she was in her dark apartment, there was nothing to keep her from remembering just how alone she was. She preferred to be working in the bustling pub, where the noise of so many lives drowned out the static in her head. The dishes always needed cleaning, the patrons always needed to be fed, and there was always new liquor stock to put away. After failing at everything else, she had finally found a purpose here. Maybe her purpose was to allow others to have merriment. Her place in this world was a cog in the machine, and she could endure it as long as she didn't have to suffer any more. But her heart was so full of longing, no matter how hard she tried to snuff it out. She felt like an apparition, floating through the days, struggling under her fruitless labor. Tifa had spent so many years as a servant to her father that she didn't know how to make herself happy. Did she really depend on other people for her happiness and sense of worth?

It was early April, but a bit of winter chill still hung in the dense, smoggy air. Tifa slumped into the
raised collar of her coat as she headed out into the street, still crowded for such an early hour of the morning. Time seemed to make little difference in this place, where the light was all artificial. Still, after all this time, her eyes would automatically scan the crowd for a particular blonde head of unruly hair. Tifa would be listening for Cloud to call her name from the shadows of crowds, her ears straining to her the comforting familiarity of his voice. If he found her in the maze of the slums, everything would change. Hope would rush back in and she’d be able to pick up the pieces of her life. But Cloud was dead. Her hope was dying a slow death as the days kept fading, falling to the ground like autumn leaves. Cloud had left her so abruptly that she had no closure, no chance to say goodbye.

Tifa’s apartment was as dark as it always was, but seemed much emptier these days. She and Cloud had never had many possessions, but lately Tifa had been so strapped for money that she had sold everything but the essentials. She showered to wash the stench of grease and cigarette smoke out of her hair, stopping to run a hand over her deflated belly. What would life be like if Aria was with her now? Undoubtedly, the baby would be suffering due to her mother’s inability to provide sufficiently. The shower spray beat against her face and she closed her eyes and imagined how life would be more bearable if she had her daughter to love and hold, a warm little one to cradle against her and chase the darkness away. Old thoughts of childhood belief flooded her mind: did Aria cross over the mountain? Can someone become a ghost if they never really lived? Reminders of her broken family were everywhere she went. A shrill wail of an infant in a passing car, the blue eyes of the pale haired man at the bus stop, the smell of fresh lumber at a construction site.

Exhausted, Tifa combed out her hair and hid away in her bed. She’d have to be sure to wake up early enough to hunt for a new place to live. So far, she had been unsuccessful and the lack of certainty for her future frightened her. No one seemed remotely interested in renting anything to a fifteen year old, especially one who was alone and broke. Tifa closed her heavy eyes, trying to remember the way Cloud’s body had felt beside her. Sometimes, sleep would set her free of this misery, but other times she was plagued with haunting dreams of Cloud, asking for help. Dreams of her daughter, alone and frightened without her mother. Visions of a bird’s feather, drifting to the ground after its owner took flight. Baby birds never came back once they left their nest. Not so long ago, her foolish self had pined to fly away from Nibelheim, and she had gotten her wish. Watching the birds leave her bird house each year made her envy their freedom. But Tifa never considered where the birds went once they left; was it really a better life away from home? Fledglings never came back to the nest. Did they ever regret leaving the safety and security they once had? Tifa was trapped here in the dark, so far away from home—a home that didn’t exist anymore. Would life always be this hard?

Her dreams kept her company through those nights. As the noose tightened around her neck, when the silence became too hard to handle, she’d picture how Cloud’s eyes would sparkle when he smiled and the way his chuckle would sound clumsy, as if he was uncertain that he could really be full of such merriment. Tifa would think of Claudia, humming her jovial tunes as she measured, cut and sewed. She’d think of Zangan’s hearty bellow of a laugh and the kindness in his pale eyes. She’d reminisce about long walks with Papa and the way her mother used to comb her hair before tucking her into bed. And often her final thoughts were of Aria’s perfect little round face, born asleep, before she drifted off into oblivion. As sleep mercifully tugged at her consciousness, a question burned like an ember in the dark.

*What am I fighting for?*
Kindliness

It wasn't just the one time.

Goat's milk was almost impossible to find in Midgar, and when Barret could finally track down a vendor, he wasn't always able to afford it. Fortunately, Marlene had taken to it incredibly well. She ate heartily without getting sick and seemed to be in a better mood, now that she was feeling better. The little girl had gained a little weight in the past few weeks and color had returned to her chubby cheeks. It filled Barret with relief. He was clueless at how to care for a child, but he was learning, and Marlene was finally starting to behave and look like a normal baby. He and the dark haired waitress had worked out a schedule: they’d meet at the pub’s back door that led to a narrow alley twice a week for the milk at 8 o’clock sharp. Barret felt like he was doing something right, at least. He had been leaving the baby with his reluctant landlord’s daughter during his long hours at work. He paid the girl what he could, but Barret knew he’d have to find someone else to look after Marlene eventually. Letting a stranger care for the baby made him uncomfortable and he worried about his little angel while he toiled away, but at this point he had no other choice.

Glancing at his watch, he strode down the busy avenue with Marlene against his shoulder. Her little head was up and alert, big brown eyes glancing out at passersby. Barret knew that he and the baby stuck out like a sore thumb in the crowd: a large, dark-skinned muscle man and a tiny, pale little girl in pink. But he didn’t mind. He’d do anything for her.

“Ready to pick up yo’ milk? The nice lady is gonna meet us soon.”

The baby babbled with a smile, wrapping her chubby arms as far as they could reach around his thick neck.

One good thing he had going for him was his job. He had settled into his construction gig over the past month and it felt good to make some money, even if it was a pittance. But now he had enough to put a roof over their heads and food in their mouths, which was enough. With some careful management, he was even able to put some gil aside in savings. He knew quite a bit about structural support and design, due to his background setting mine shaft frames. With the plate looming overhead, sometimes the only way to expand living space was to dig underground: his specialty. There was a surprising amount of requests for this sort of thing in the slums, leaving Barret feeling secure in his employment when he felt insecure about everything else. He adapted quickly to the slums, despite being born and raised in a rural area. He spent nights memorizing maps and seeking out ShinRA’s vulnerable areas, like reactors and corporate buildings. If he wanted to cripple this company, he’d have to know every in and out of this city: escape routes, trooper patrol schedules, and even areas of interest to the Turks, ShinRA’s specialized force that carried out their ugliest business.

Most of his coworkers were young men. At thirty one, Barret wasn’t old, but the teenagers and twenty-somethings under his management made him feel ancient. Few took their job seriously, slacking off when no one was watching or teasing Barret about his gun arm, which he threatened them with in order to get them back to work. Barret quickly came to realize that this sort of job was tricky with one hand. As a supervisor, it was his job to give direction, but he still helped with the manual labor when he could. His wound (and subsequent grafting of the large weapon) was only a few months old and it still ached often. The boys would ask him why on earth he had a huge Gatling gun for a hand, and he’d answer truthfully without elaboration: revenge.

His burning rage against ShinRA had all but consumed him. The company had left him and Marlene without a family, without a home, without a hope for a normal life. They stole his wife, his friends,
his confidence and his hopeful spirit, replacing it with anger and a thirst for vengeance. Not just for him; Barret wanted restitution for the baby as well. Her mother and father were gone, and now she was stuck with him. His fumbling attempts at fathering her were barely enough, and she’d never be able to grow up with the safety and security of her family. ShinRA had stolen it from her helpless little hands and it broke him to know there was nothing he could do about it. Marlene deserved so much more. What kept Barret from despair was realizing that if he didn’t do something about it, ShinRA would destroy this planet before Marlene reached adulthood. They were pumping life out of the earth so quickly that in mere decades, there was likely to be nothing left. Didn’t anyone else see this? Wasn’t there anyone else who had a problem with the dead end the planet was racing towards?

Barret found hope over the handful of weeks in a young guy who preferred to be called by his surname. Jonathan Biggs, who typically laid wood floors and placed insulation and sheet rock, had been put on Barret’s team during this latest project. He was a friendly, lively kid with a dark side that only crept out when they’d grab a beer after work. He knew he’d be friends with Biggs when he didn’t even blink when Barret had met him at the bar one night with an infant. But he knew right away they’d build a deeper sort of bond when they got on the topic of ShinRA. Biggs was young and seemed carefree, but he had grown up in the slums as the eldest of his six siblings, working hard to help his mother make ends meet. At the tender age of ten, his father—a ShinRA employee—had been killed by a stray bullet on his way home after work. The company never paid the family any of the allotted amount from his father’s life insurance plan, forcing Biggs and his mother to take any job offered to a tired mother and a prepubescent child. He was angry at ShinRA, but hid it much better than Barret, whose face seemed to constantly be contorted in some sort of frown.

News reports concerning terrorist attacks on Junon were how Barret had first heard about the ShinRA resistance group, AVALANCHE. He hadn’t thought much of them until after his life had turned to ash. Immediately after his displacement by ShinRA, full of hatred and thoughts of justice, he had asked everyone he knew in the surrounding villages about what they knew of AVALANCHE. Barret even travelled with little Marlene to Cosmo Canyon, AVALANCHE’s birth place, before settling in Midgar. He had heard the original group had fallen apart after two of its founding members had been captured and sentenced to death in Junon a year or so ago. Maybe with the help of people like Biggs, AVALANCHE could be reborn. Maybe he didn’t have to fight against ShinRA alone.

Upon reaching Bailey’s Pub, he ducked around the back to stay out of sight at the far end of the alley, waiting for Tifa to emerge from the tiny door. The waitress was a sweet little thing, though quiet and a little sick looking. She reminded Barret of a mouse, timid and always seeming like she was ready to run at the drop of a hat. Uncertainty screamed from her delicate features and she very rarely met his eyes, making the man wonder what had damaged her so much that she seemed like such a mess. But then again, broken people were a common sight in the slums. In fact, it was almost impossible to run into a person down here whose life hadn’t been ruined by injustice, anger, poverty or desperation. Like the rain dripping between gaps in the plate, all sorts of ugly people fell through the cracks and ended up here in the dark, collecting like puddles of waste and ruin. What made this girl different was that, despite her circumstances, she still had some kindness to spare. Barret certainly couldn’t see how giving Marlene nourishment was of any benefit to her, and the thought had made him suspicious at first.

The baby jumped in his arms when the door rushed open and clattered against the concrete wall with a BANG. Hiding behind the corner, he rubbed Marlene’s back while he peeked his head around the wall. There was the waitress, being dragged out into the alley by the large bartender who gripped a fistful of her dark hair.

"Thieving rat!" Bailey bellowed. The girl cried out as he yanked her head, tossing her to the gravely pavement. "You came in here begging for a job and I gave it to you! I even let you come back after
you lied to me and this is how you repay me?"

Tifa didn't move from her spot on the ground, kneeling on bloody knees. Wrapping scraped palms over her arms, she curled into a protective ball and hung her head, face hidden by long black hair. Barret almost couldn't hear her quivering voice as she whispered apologies and begged for forgiveness.

"I was t-trying to help someone. Please--I have nowhere else to go!"

"You're not my problem anymore! Get out of my sight!" Enraged, he kicked the debris beside her, showering gravel and bits of plastic against her curled back. “Don't you ever show up on my property again or I'll have you arrested!"

With that, Bailey turned and burst back through the back door of his pub, leaving her alone in the alley. Tifa heard him turn the heavy lock behind her, finalizing her exile from her workplace. As soon as she thought she was alone, the girl slumped forward, letting out a pitiful sob. She belonged here, in the trash and dirt and broken glass. Deep inside, she had always struggled with her worthlessness, and now life had showed her the undeniable truth. She was nothing. Tifa never thought she’d end up here. She and Cloud were going to get out; they were going to escape where they’d be lulled to sleep by the sound of the waves and the caress of the ocean breeze. But her dreams had evaporated like a morning fog, displaying with clarity the truth of her situation.

Before, the feelings of despair and sadness and anger had been so loud within her that they’d nearly drowned out everything else. But here, alone in the alley, everything swirling within her had come to a temporary stop. Tifa had been spun out so far from her old self that she didn’t know if she could ever return to that happy child who sang nursery rhymes with her mother and tickled her Papa’s beard. She had gone from her husband’s cherished wife from the mountains to an angry, miserable slum rat in rags. There was no way out, no matter how hard she searched. There was nothing left of yesterday. Tifa had to be out of her apartment in two days’ time and she now had no prospects for a place to stay. She had been hoping to ask Bailey to rent out a room to her, but that was no longer an option. Homeless and hopeless, Tifa would grasp at any thin thread of hope.

When she had first arrived in Midgar, she and Cloud had passed by the red light district of Sector Six on their way home from picking up some goods from Wall Market. There were a cluster of houses along dimly lit avenues—sad houses that smelled like sweat and sadness. When she expressed her curiosity, her husband had bashfully explained what kinds of things went on in that area. Tifa had wrinkled her nose in disgust, wondering what woman would choose to sell her body to a man. She had been too naïve to realize just how far desperation could push a person. Prostitution was not a rare occurrence in Midgar, especially around Wall Market. Had those girls surrendered to that life because they were trapped, like she was? Was it all worth it in order to have a roof over their heads and food to eat? Her heart bled at the thought of lying there, day after day, letting herself be taken and violated and used. What would Mama have thought of her? Would Cloud have felt betrayed? Tifa didn’t know if she could ever sell herself to that life, no matter how hard things got.

She winced at the pain in her palms, where little shards of glass were embedded, thinking that this wasn’t the only time she had sat in the dirt of the slums. Last time, Cloud had been there to save her from where she had injured herself at the train station. This time, no one would come to her rescue. There was no hope for better days, no safe place to rest her head. Her eyes stung and she hung her head. There simply wasn’t anything else to do.

"Tifa!"

Barret would never forget how she looked, a thin, forlorn little figure in the dark and filth. Her head spun toward him, eyes wild with fear and heavy with despair. Barret tucked Marlene close against
his body and hurried toward her. He knelt beside her, looking over her injuries.

"Damn! What happened? Are you aw’right?"

She stared at the ground, looking exhausted and hungry and hopeless. For a minute she said nothing, her silence throbbing with pain. Barret reached out to grasp her wrist and she finally raised her wine colored eyes to his face, filled with silent panic.

“S’alright, Missy,” he spoke, trying to banish the frightened silence that had made a wall around her.

In her eyes, he saw the same look of brokenness and defeat as he saw in his own reflection, when he was too exhausted to be angry. Feeling the tension fade from her muscles, he turned her hand over to reveal her marred palm. With a grunt of displeasure, he shook his head before trying to pick the debris out of her skin. Tifa didn’t flinch, despite the blood pooling in her palm and dripping to the pavement. Awkward, fumbling attempts at comforting words fumbled from Barret’s mouth. He wasn’t used to this sort of thing. His wife had been tough as nails, and he hadn’t yet had enough practice with Marlene. What in the world was he doing here, kneeling in an alley with a girl whom he knew nothing about aside from her name?

Blissfully unaware of the seriousness of the situation, Marlene cooed and babbled happily. She pawed at his stubbly beard as he picked out each piece of glass, one by one. He wiped Tifa’s palms with his handkerchief before glancing at her face, which was fixated upon the baby.

“He wouldn’t let me sell it to you…” she whispered, eyes dropping to her lap as she slowly pulled a mason jar of milk out from her apron. “But she needed it, and—I couldn’t just let her—he found out and—"

“You stuck out your neck for me? For Marlene?”

Tifa kept her head down, the fringe of her bangs cloaking her eyes. Barret sat back for a moment, awed by how far a stranger would go to help a gruff person like him feed his dead friend’s orphaned child? It didn’t make sense. Midgar was full of selfish, corrupt people who would do anything to avoid being involved in anyone else’s problems. How was it that in his two months in this city, he’d come across the one person in the slums that gave without thought of return? Maybe, he could repay her for her trouble, even if in a small way.

“C’mon, lemme walk you home.”

“No, it’s alright. I haven’t anywhere to go anymore.” She whispered as she shook her head, black curtain of hair swaying. Tifa studied the gravel as she held the milk bottle out to him. “But please, take this for her.”

Barret knew that sights like this weren’t totally unusual in Midgar. Orphaned children roamed the streets, surviving by pick pocketing or being rounded up by local traffickers for illegal labor or prostitution. This girl wasn’t his responsibility, but she had lost her job to help Marlene and he was endlessly grateful. He couldn’t leave her here to be swallowed up by the slums. Barret gently turned her chin upwards and she slowly met his gaze with weary eyes.

“Tsk…” Barret’s expression went soft as he studied her face. This miserable little creature seemed so young to be so lost. His exterior was rough, but his heart was soft. He sighed at the depth of the sadness on her features. “You jes’ a baby.”

It was then that Tifa realized that she hadn’t been a child in many, many years. How long had it been since she had skipped merrily to school with her lunch pail and books? Had it really been a lifetime
ago that Papa had pushed her to and fro on the tire swing? The concern in Barret’s eyes was too much to bear and to her horror, fat tears welled up in her eyes and spilled over onto her cheeks. She bit her lip to stifle a whimper and pulled her head away. She wanted her mother. She wanted Cloud, Claudia, Zangan, any familiar face and comforting set of arms to hold her as she sobbed. Tifa had failed. She had failed to protect Cloud from ShinRA, failed to give life to her daughter, and failed to survive on her own. There were so many ways to die in the slums, but she knew that when it finally came to find her that it wouldn’t really matter. There was no one left to miss her, was there? She’d curl away in some hidden place and wait to die. At least then, she could see her loved ones again. She could cross over the mountain and finally see what was on the other side.

“Up you go,” Barret said, gently tugging Tifa’s arm to help her to her feet. “Come with me, I’ll take you to my place.”

Her legs were shaky as she stood. What did this man want with her? Would he harm her? Would he sell her to one of those sad houses full of girls in the red light district? Tifa didn’t want to go. The thought of letting someone else close enough to hurt her held her rooted to the ground, even as Barret gently tried to encourage her forward.

“N-no, please…I can’t.”

“Look, you don’t havta stay if you don’t want to.” Barret released her wrist and turned to face her. He sighed, rubbing his temples as Marlene sucked loudly on her fingers. “But lemme feed you at least, since you’ve been feedin’ her all this time. And if you’re interested, I got a job for ya.”

She continued to protest, but her heart pounded its own yes. It wasn’t until he mentioned the baby that he had her complete attention.

“I need someone t’ watch her while I work during the day. I can’t pay ya much, but I’ll feed you.” Barret ran his big hand over his short black hair. “An’ you can sleep in her room if you want. Like a nanny or somethin’.”

She collected her thoughts one at a time, carefully and gently, before coming to a resolution. Nervous, Tifa wrung her hands. The rational side of her screamed in defiance and shouted warnings into her ears: this was a man she didn’t know, taking her to a place she had never been. But her emotions swirled and toiled in their own chaos, sending forth waves of keening hope. She was being offered somewhere to stay when she had no place to call home. Her arms still ached to hold a baby, even after two months without little Aria.

“Thank you.” She scrubbed tear tracks from her cheeks. “I’ll take good care of her, I promise.”

“I know.”

She slid the mason jar of milk into his hand before following Barret out into the noise, hoping to find the strength to meet any approaching storms on her horizon.

… … …

Tifa felt so out of place. Upon waking, her unfamiliar surroundings reminded her that she was an intruder in Barret’s private life. Wrapped in a worn comforter on the floor, she wondered if the man would know she was awake if she moved. Tifa hoped there wouldn’t be questions, for she didn’t feel much like talking.

It was with relief that she realized there was no longer warmth beside her. The noises in the nearby kitchen told her that he had gotten up for breakfast, taking the baby with him, and the girl was grateful for a few minutes alone to take in her situation. It was embarrassing to have no home to
return to and no people to call loved ones in her life. Somehow, she knew that her loneliness and misery were no one’s fault but her own—a sort of punishment for always being insufficient in some way or another. In her heart, Tifa wanted so badly to stay here. Something told her that the man wouldn’t hurt her, and she radiated toward any small act of kindness like a moth to a flame. But fear spread across her heart like a winter frost when she realized how rash her actions had been. What was she doing? Tifa had put herself in a very vulnerable position, lying here in a stranger’s apartment. When she agreed to follow Barret and Marlene here, she had been so apathetic and drunk with despair that she was convinced there was nothing left to lose. Tifa supposed that what brought her here was not only her desperation for shelter and a sense of purpose, but the little baby who had slept between her and Barret the night before.

Today was the day that she would be evicted from the apartment she used to share with Cloud. After she watched the baby for Barret, she planned run back to Sector Three to retrieve any belongings worth keeping. Eyes closed, she could count on one hand the things she would take with her: Mama’s recipe box, her fighting gloves from Master Zangan, a few pairs of clothes, and Aria’s blankets—both the one from the clinic and the one she had knitted for her. She supposed that was all she could carry with her, anyway. Anything else would stay. This way, if Barret still decided she was worthy enough to stay in his tiny home, she wouldn’t clutter the small space they shared. If he wanted her to leave, it would be easy to pack up her life and be adrift once again.

Tifa wanted to get up and thank Barret for his kindness in giving her somewhere to sleep, but shyness held her in place. It had been such a long time since she had shared space with another human being simply because they wanted to be near her. She’d woken up alone for half a year, only to slave her days away around people who couldn’t be bothered to care if she lived or died. What if she went into the kitchen only to have Barret change his mind and kick her out? What if during the night, he had realized what the others had: that she wasn’t worth his time, resources and heart? Tifa sat up and slowly folded the blanket as she gathered her courage. With apologies waiting on her tongue and her ears prepared for rejection, she gently stepped out into the hall and made her way to the kitchen. Barret spotted her in the doorway immediately.

“G’mornin, missy! Have a seat.”

“Good morning…” Tifa blinked in surprise at his happy tone, but did as she was told.

There were only two seats for the tiny table and she took the one closest to the doorway. There were two plates on the table, with eggs and a small helping of steamed potatoes. Tifa couldn’t help but almost salivate over the food. It had been so long since she had a decent meal that it took all her restraint to be polite and stop herself from digging in. A baby bottle sat on the edge of the table, halfway filled with milk. She was happy to see the man had a proper bottle to feed her with, instead of just a dropper. Marlene prattled on from her spot on the floor. She was lying on her back in a small bundle of blankets while Barret was busy at the stove. Tifa found herself smiling as she watched Marlene chew on her toes.

“Here y’go.” Barret slapped a piece of toast on each plate before taking the vacant chair and digging into his breakfast. “So, what's this about havin' nowhere t'stay? Aren't your parents gonna be upset if you ain't home?”

"My parents are gone." Tifa whispered, head down and eyes on her lap. Was it dangerous to admit that she was alone? "I-I'm getting evicted from my apartment today."

"Why's that?"

"I can't afford it. Well, I can't afford anything, now. But even before yesterday, I didn't make enough to keep it."
"Why did you get something so far out of your price range?"

It occurred to Tifa that she could spill out her entire story now, but she couldn't find the strength. Talking about it would make her relive each horrible detail and she couldn't face it all again, not when she was so weak and lost. Letting Barret into her world so completely wouldn't be wise, for she didn't really know much about him at all. "My situation was different when I first got to Midgar and it changed pretty quickly."

Barret watched the girl shift in her seat. She seemed uncomfortable but he wanted to know as much about her as possible if he was going to trust her with Marlene. "Where are you from? Yo’ accent tells me you ain’t from ‘round here."

"A small village in the mountains out west."

"Hmph. How’d ya get all the way to this hell hole?"

"My husband was working in the city, so I moved here with him after we got married."

"Bullshit! You're too young t'be married!"

Shaking her head, she pulled the chain around her neck out of her shirt, revealing her wedding band. "I'm not married anymore. H-he died in October."

"Sorry to hear that." Startled, Barret let it fall silent for a few moments. He studied the defeated spirit before him, saddened by the fact that she wouldn't look him in the eye for even a second. "And I'm sorry you lost your job givin’ me milk for Marlene."

Tifa let her gaze wander to the little girl, giggling and rolling in her soft playground. "It was worth it."

Barret made up his mind as he watched her stare lovingly at the baby. He'd be taking a chance, but if this worked out he wouldn't have to worry about Marlene's wellbeing when he was away.

"Alright, listen up." He said, gaining Tifa's attention. "I work six days a week from eight in the morning and should be back by six in the evening. I can't pay you much but I'll feed you and let you stay 'till you get on yo' feet." He stuck his open hand across the table. "Deal?"

Tifa stared at his hand for a moment before grasping it and shaking. "Deal. You have my word, I'll do my best for her."

"Good." Barret said, satisfied. "Now eat, you boney thing! I've gotta get going. Marlene's already had her breakfast."

He stood, collecting his dish and utensils and setting them in the sink. He cooed at the baby as he stooped to put on his boots, and Tifa watched how wide Marlene made the man smile. Barret had learned a little about her, but she still knew almost nothing about him and this little girl. She didn't feel like it was her place to ask her new employer about his personal life. She was to do her assigned duties as best as she could and be thankful that he had saved her from complete destitution. Besides, what better job for her than to spend each day caring for a little one? Isn't this what Tifa had been dreaming about since before she had found out she was pregnant?

She watched as Barret placed a kiss on the baby's tiny head before standing and fishing out his keys. He started toward the door and paused once his hand touched the knob. He looked back at her, still frozen in her chair. "After I get back, we can get your stuff from your apartment when you give your key back. You'll be alright 'till then?"
"Yes," she nodded, looking him straight in the face for the first time that morning. "Barret?"

"Yeah?"

"Thank you..."

The week passed in a blur, and Tifa wasn’t sure what she had done to deserve all of this.

There was always food in her belly, light for her to see by, safety from the streets and a warm place to sleep. But most importantly, she had finally found an escape from her crushing loneliness. She would awaken every day in the bedroom she shared with Barret and Marlene. None of them had a proper bed yet (though Barret said that would change soon), so they all slept in blankets on the floor for now. The first few nights, she had slept away from them with her back to the wall. Tifa hadn’t been sure if she could trust Barret despite all of his generosity, and she definitely didn’t feel like she belonged. But each night, she’d rest her head a little closer, until eventually Marlene was nestled happily between them. The man never chastised her for being shy and withdrawn, but encouraged her whenever she took a step forward in making herself at home.

Even now, the old social rules of Nibelheim burned in her brain. Was it right to move in with a man who wasn’t her father, brother or husband? How scandalous this would seem back at home! But she wasn’t home. Nibelheim was gone. Tifa was quickly learning that there were no rules here in Midgar, just one necessity: survive.

Tifa had lived so much of her life in isolation that she relished Barret’s positive attention. He’d greet her in the mornings with his smile and light chit chat and would return in the evenings with food to eat and stories to tell. His booming laugh eased her heart and his tenderness toward her and the baby made her feel like she might actually be safe here, with a complete stranger. While she wondered just how long her happiness here could last, Tifa began to thrive in the company of the others. The color had returned to her skin and life had filled up her eyes once again. Every night, as she chased after the freedom of sleep, she wondered just how long it would be until this particular happiness was swept away for her. If Tifa had learned anything in her life, it was that tomorrow is never guaranteed. Despite Barret’s kindness, nothing quite soothed the ache in her soul like holding the baby. In her first days alone with Marlene, Tifa had wept as she slept in her arms, overwhelmed with the memory of Aria. She fought to keep her mind from focusing on what could have been. Instead, Tifa studied the perfect features on the little girl in her lap and ran her fingers gently over feather soft brown hair and round little cheeks. Many times since she had met Barret, she wondered about his relationship to Marlene. He acted like her father, but never verbally confirmed that he was. Even if the baby’s mother was light skinned, Tifa doubted any baby of his could be this fair. Who was this baby’s mother, anyway? Where was she now? Would she be angry that Tifa was looking after her daughter?

She turned over all of these things in her mind as the days passed. As curious as she was, she could never ask Barret such things. If he didn’t volunteer the information, Tifa knew it wasn’t her right to ask for it. He wasn’t hiding something awful from her, was he? What if he kidnapped this child? Was there a dark side to him that she didn’t see? If there was, it really wasn’t her business. She was here to take care of the baby and that was all.

But until she could be sure, Tifa would sleep with one eye open.
“Shh... it’s alright.”

Marlene was restless and upset, her whines threatening to escalate into wails. Tifa gently bounced the baby at her hip, walking slowly between the four rooms of the apartment. Over the past few weeks, she had gotten to know the child well. Sometimes, she’d calm down when Tifa took her to look in the mirror or when she tickled the crook of her neck, but not tonight. The kid was cranky and tired, but Barret was late and Marlene didn’t want to go to sleep without him. He had let Tifa know he’d be home much later than usual, saying that he was meeting some friends for a drink after work. Tifa could only nod and wish him a good time, but in reality, the thought terrified her. What if he was like her father? Barret was a large, muscular man. What would she ever do if he came back here angry enough to strike her or kick her out? Tifa had her martial arts, but she was out of shape and never wanted to raise her fists against a friend.

She shook her head to be rid of those thoughts. It would be alright, wouldn’t it?

Another whine from the baby reminded Tifa to focus on the task at hand. “Okay, okay! Where’s your pacifier?”

Tifa continued to gently bounce the baby as she paced around, combing each room with her eyes. The plastic pacifier sat on the coffee table, among a small mess of Barret’s papers and receipts from his job. She did her best to keep the tiny apartment spotless, scrubbing floors while Marlene napped and dusting whenever she could, but she never touched Barret’s things. One sheet of paper was a different color than the rest and stood out in the pile. Absently, Tifa placed the pacifier in the baby’s mouth as she picked up the little yellow slip. Most of Barret’s handwriting was almost illegible (since his dominant hand was now a gun) but there were several things she could understand. There were numbers and coordinates, crudely drawn diagrams and lists of numbers. What did all of this mean? Was it just construction notes for a new project? Scribbled in capital letters in the corner of the paper was a word that drew out hazy memories of hand printed letters from her late husband.

AVALANCHE.

Tifa remembered what Cloud had said about them: that they were terrorists who struck out at ShinRA because they believe harvesting mako was killing the planet. Was Barret a member of AVALANCHE? Did he want to save the planet, too? She had always thought that terrorists were bad people who just wanted to hurt others, but was it true in this case? Barret had a soft heart; he would never hurt anyone. Would he?

A whine turned into the shrill beginnings of a wail, and Tifa once again turned her attention to the baby. Her face crumpled as she spit out her pacifier.

None of the usual tricks would work, and Marlene let forth one loud cry after another. Her little face was growing pink with exertion and tiny tears had begun to stream down her cheeks. After half an hour of failing to soothe her, Tifa was beginning to grow teary eyed herself. From someone else’s perspective, it may have been comical to see her get so worked up over a cranky baby. But to Tifa, she was a failure. She failed to calm Marlene, just as she failed to bring Aria into the world alive. Occasions like this one reminded her that she wasn’t resourceful or clever enough to be a mother, and that’s why her own daughter had been taken from her. The gaping hole in her heart stung like a thousand bees and she gasped at the sensation. Knees suddenly weak, Tifa moved to the bedroom and sat on her neatly folded blanket. She shifted Marlene off of her hip and into her arms. Without thinking, Tifa began to raise up her shaky voice, gently singing a song of which she only knew a handful of the words. The rest, she hummed, or substituted her own lyrics.
Marlene continued to fuss at first: stretching her little legs out and bowing her back. But after a long minute, the baby began to relax. Her cries wore down into keening sobs and Tifa caressed her head. Marlene looked up at her with big eyes. Her cooing voice made Marlene fixate on her, like Tifa had summoned a memory in her little head. Her brown eyes glistened in the dim light and she quieted, staring up into her caretaker’s face. Did this baby’s mother sing to her like this? Her reaction gave Tifa the will to keep singing, voice now strong and sure. She remembered how much it comforted her to be held in Mama’s arms as a child, but she never imagined that holding someone might feel just as soothing as being held. Her heart felt so full as she cradled the little girl in her arms, moving to rest the baby’s head on her chest.

The cats yowled in the alleyway and there was a blare of a car horn or two, but Tifa didn’t stop and the baby didn’t stir. She sang and she sang until Marlene’s eyes grew heavy and her body went limp in her lap. It felt good to sing. There was something so freeing and beautifully expressive in using one’s voice to comfort, and Tifa reveled in her new discovery. She could sing to Marlene and yet honor Aria at the same time, her little song, spreading peace as she passed through. Once she was sure the little one was asleep, she unfolded the blankets and lay down beside her, swaddling the baby against her chest. In the time that she’d been here, she’d poured out her heart and soul into Marlene. Tifa wasn’t quite a mother, more like a nanny of sorts, but she’d take it. It made living with a stranger worth it, aside from food and shelter of course. It was hard not to feel selfish, for she felt as if she was being given more than she earned. Watching Marlene every day was hardly any work at all when Tifa considered how it quieted the screaming in her heart.

Barret gave her so much, how could she even begin to express her gratitude? Would it change things between them if he was aware she knew he was a terrorist? She was just starting to feel comforted and safe here, with this baby who gave her purpose and this man who was slowly becoming less and less of a stranger. She continued to hum her melody softly, breathing in the scent of the child in her arms. Tiny fingers gripped her thumb and Tifa smiled faintly at the feel of it. Marlene would never understand what a wonderful blessing she was, caressing and healing the gaping wounds of her heart. With this baby in her life, she no longer needed customers’ leftover liquor to chase away the shadow of hopelessness and death that watched her from the corner. The lullaby of the city sounds held Tifa close and stole her away, into a deep sleep.

Grey ocean waves rolled underneath a stormy sky. Papa was wading away into the sea; much too far away to call out to him even after she followed until the water was up to her knees. Claudia wasn’t far behind him, with her long bright hair tossing in the wind, a vibrant contrast against the dark water. A voice, smooth as silk, called out her name and a shiver snaked over her body. Ahead and to her left was Mama, smiling softly, as she held the hand of a little fair-haired toddler. Both sets of eyes shared the same deep red.

Aria?

Tifa called out to her mother again and again. She ran forward into the frigid waves, desperately trying to reach them, for she knew that they’d soon disappear. Mama’s black hair whipped wildly in the gales, but her eyes were warm and gentle as she moved her mouth and spoke. Tifa strained her ears to hear her words, but they were lost in the roar of the surf. She couldn’t wade through the water fast enough, screaming and begging for her mother to stretch out her hand and pull her closer. Aria’s crimson eyes watched her struggle. Mama just lowered her head, and Tifa was afraid that if she blinked, they’d both be gone. Sea-spray and tears coated her eyelashes as she pushed forward against the rising tide.

“Mama!”
Something made her gasp awake. She lay motionless, Marlene still tucked into her chest, as she listened. Heavy boot steps fell upon the floorboards and Tifa immediately relaxed, knowing at once that it was only Barret. Heart still hammering in her chest, she listened as he prepared for bed, thoughts busy with the analysis of her dream. Was Aria safe with her mother? Were they all in paradise together with Papa and Claudia?

Eventually, Barret came to lay down beside her and wrapped himself in his own blanket cocoon. His scent was heavy with smoke and sweat, much different than the usual smell of cigarettes and alcohol from one of his nights out with his friends. What had he been up to? Though he came back late some nights, he had earned some of Tifa’s trust through his behavior. Barret never made her feel uncomfortable or unwanted, even though she knew she didn’t belong here. He’d go out for a few drinks, but never come back drunk or angry; if anything, he was more light-hearted and cheery when he returned. Tifa was starting to think that maybe she could be safe here. The warmth of his body comforted her and she shyly gravitated towards it as she sorted through her thoughts, hoping he could heal some of her troubles with his presence alone. As she desperately tried to fall back asleep, she replayed her vision over and over again in her mind. She had dreamt of her mother a handful of times, but she was always walking away. What did that mean? Tifa pondered this as another question pulled and tugged at her relentlessly.

Why hadn’t Cloud been there with them?

Plastic bag of take-out food in hand, Barret stepped out of the restaurant.

There was an extra bit of pep in his step these days. Things were finally coming together, and Barret felt better than he had since arriving in this hell hole of a city. Marlene was happy under Tifa’s care, he was making enough money to get by, and his plans to revive AVALANCHE were beginning to take off. At first, it had surprised Barret how easy it was to meet people that shared his hatred of ShinRA. Here in the slums, the people felt so oppressed and exploited for their gil by the mega-corporation that it was common to hear other’s grumbling about it at the bar or on the street. But he had to be careful to keep a low profile and keep mostly silent about his feelings on the matter and his intentions for revenge.

Biggs and his friend Wedge were the first to officially join as members so far. Wedge had been schoolmates with Biggs and the two had remained close friends over the years. He was a stocky guy, shorter and heavier than his friend. His happy-go-lucky personality brought lightness to the otherwise serious meetings where they’d discuss their ambitions and tentative plans regarding their miniature coup against the ShinRA Company. Wedge was fascinated by all sorts of life, flora and fauna alike. As a child, he had lived out east on a farm with his parents and little brother, spending the days collecting bugs and caring for livestock. ShinRA personnel bullied his parents into selling their farm (which was apparently on a prime piece of land for mako drilling) and promised them a happier, more comfortable life in the city. Even as a boy, he saw through their lies. But his parents couldn’t, and he never quite forgave them for their decision to move to this dirty place. Wedge missed the blue sky and the fresh earth, and would do anything to defend it from ShinRA’s destruction.

Barret felt that he could trust these two, but his third and final member seemed to have the most potential of all. He had met Jessie on the construction site of an apartment building he was working on. His company had hired her to rig up the electric wiring and install security systems into each unit. The way she had seethed and bristled at any mention of ShinRA had caught Barret’s interest,
knowing her passion and skills would be valuable for AVALANCHE. Jessie was born to two wealthy ShinRA scientists and lived on top of the plate for most of her life. She was fascinated with computers and the like, but her parents were never very involved in her life and failed to see that their daughter was just as much of a genius as they were. When Jessie turned nine, they fired her nanny and sent her away to boarding school. She was turned out of school when her parents had stopped paying her tuition at age seventeen. There was another family living in her old home, and ShinRA personnel said her parents had ‘relocated’ when she’d asked. Apparently, ShinRA considered such information as ‘classified’ even when those in question were your biological parents.

Jessie seemed just as trustworthy as the others, but twice as smart and resourceful. Her knowledge of the upper plate and computer hacking abilities were invaluable with the sort of things they hoped to accomplish. She was a mechanical genius, with a plethora of dangerous knowledge from questionable sources. With her, they’d be able to pack a punch and cripple ShinRA with everything from exploitation of digital coding to devastation of their property with explosives. With Jessie, they were in business. Things were starting slow, with meetings at a low-key bar twice a week. But now that their discussions were starting to get more serious and intricate, he thought about starting to have them gather at his apartment for a more private setting. Barret couldn’t help but smile: they were going to completely blindside ShinRA!

He pushed through the crowded street and hurried up the stairs of his apartment building, smiling at the sound of Marlene’s happy chatter on the other side of the door. He heard Tifa giggle her own response to the baby as he turned his key in the lock. The girl was getting more comfortable it seemed. He hoped Tifa would choose to stick around, even if she managed to make a plan and get back on her feet. In his mind, a fifteen year old was much too young to be on her own in a place like this—especially a pretty thing like her.

“Hey, ladies. Who’s hungry?”

Both of them were on the floor of the tiny living room. Marlene was climbing on Tifa, testing the strength of her little legs while being steadied by the older girl. The baby immediately looked in Barret’s direction, face splitting into a huge grin and voice cutting forth with a loud: “Paaaa!”

“C’mere my little angel!” Barret swept forward to scoop her up after setting his bag of food on the couch. “Papa’s home!”

It was strange to call himself ‘Papa’, for he wasn’t her real father. But Tifa had taken to referencing him as Marlene’s father, and the baby was picking up on everything she said. Was it wrong to have the baby call him Papa? He was the closest thing in this world that she had to one, so Barret decided that he’d accept the title and try to give her the closest thing to a normal life that he could. He gave the baby a little squeeze, making her squeak with delight, as Tifa watched with a small smile.

“Take out noodles.” Barret turned to look at her, motioning toward the plastic bag with his gun arm. “I know I didn’t give ya anythin’ to buy groceries with and the pantry’s almost empty. I’ll give ya some gil tomorrow.”

Tifa nodded, watching the baby grabbing at his ear and face. “We went out and got her goat’s milk today. That vendor we’ve been using is still at the market, but he says he’ll be relocating in a few weeks."

“Gotta wean you soon, girlie.” He tickled the baby and she laughed. “At 50 gil a bottle, your food is more expensive than ours combined!”

Tifa took the bag of take-out and placed it carefully on the kitchen table before setting plates and utensils. Barret smirked: the girl was getting more comfortable and he liked it. Before, her silence had
made him want to shake her out of her sadness and despair. It was amazing what a little company, work, and food did for the skinny kid. Tifa was a pretty little thing, now that she didn’t hide her face. Her hair had taken on a bit of a shine and the color had come back to her once ashen skin. The bags had disappeared from underneath her eyes and she stood straighter these days. Maybe, in time, he’d really see who Tifa was before she had faced whatever misfortune had landed her alone in the filth of the slums. She had been quite blessing to him these days. Although such things weren’t part of her job description as Marlene’s caretaker, she prepared food for him, cleaned the place spotless and even did the laundry. Barret began to feel a sense of order returning to his life and it was a huge relief.

He cradled Marlene in the crook of his arms. Tifa offered him her bottle before moving off to set the kitchen table with mismatched plate ware and cutlery. This was Barret's favorite part of the day: bonding with Dyne's little girl. Most days, he'd take her into the bedroom and feed her her final bottle of the night as she drifted off to sleep. The baby knew this routine well. She'd cling to his shirt and adjust herself in his arms so she could look at his face as she drank her milk. Marlene had her father's brown eyes and her mother's gentle little nose. There was something about the trust in her gaze that made Barret's chest constrict and his jaw tighten. Dyne and Eleanor would never see their little girl grow up. He had failed to protect them, yet here their daughter trusted him with her life, unaware of how he had failed her. Would his best friend be happy he was taking care of his daughter or would he have hated him for bringing his helpless baby to a place like this?

Marlene sighed with contentment, heavy eyelids sliding closed. He smiled and thought about how much Myrna would love to be here, holding this little one. He and his late wife had despairsed over their inability to have a family. But after all that had happened, Barret was convinced that their infertility had saved him even more grief and possibly Marlene’s life. If they’d had a family, would they have all perished in ShinRA’s attack? Would he have found Marlene there among the flames if he had been busy evacuating his own children? As carefully as he could manage, he wrapped the baby up in a soft blanket and made her snug among the pile of bedding they shared.

"G’nite, Marlene," he whispered as he shut the door, leaving it open just a crack.

He hoped he knew what was best for that child in this new world of concrete and darkness. The slums of Midgar were an awful place to raise a baby. Did he have enough understanding of what she needed to raise a happy, well-adjusted little girl? Barret paused in the dark hallway, feeling suddenly unsure of himself. Tifa was waiting for him in the kitchen. She was just a kid; too young to be alone in the big city. He planned on taking care of her until she was old enough to secure a bright future for herself. His conscience didn’t allow for any other options. Until she did, Barret knew he’d do his best to ensure her safety. But would he end up failing her, too?

He stepped into the kitchen and took a seat as Tifa unwrapped the food from its packaging. She quickly fixed a heaping plate for him and a sad little helping for herself before settling into the chair across from him. They ate in comfortable silence, peppered with little questions about each other’s days. Tifa was finishing her last forkful of food when she noticed Barret grunt as he rested his gun-arm on the table. Their conversations were always about topics that surprisingly revealed very little about themselves: Marlene’s antics and needs, how things were on the construction site, or how much they both missed the sky. In this handful of weeks that they had been together, Tifa had grown to trust him a little more each day. There was something about Barret that made her seek out his fatherly affection and crave to know more about his heart and his life before their worlds had come crashing together. But she struggled under shyness and the burden of formalities, knowing that asking deeper questions really wasn’t her business. Mercifully, he hadn’t asked her much of anything about her past and she was grateful. She yearned to trust him completely but she was so afraid to let anyone close enough to hurt her. Did he see her as more than Marlene’s caretaker? Could they ever evolve from business partners to true friends? The softness on his face gave her the courage to ask
him a personal question.

“Does it hurt?”

Barret looked her in the eye. For a moment she thought that he might be angry, but his features remained soft and her answered her quietly.

“Yeah. The doc said somethin’ bout phantom limb pain happenin’ for quite a while.” He let out a short, humorless laugh. “Guess my body ain’t quite figured out yet that its hand is gone.”

"I think I may be able to help," she said, peeping up at him through her bangs. "Would that be ok?"

"Sure."

Barret watched as she moved to the sink and soaked a dish towel in steaming water from the tap. After wringing it out and folding it in half, she approached and gently wrapped it around his arm where flesh met steel. He closed his eyes at the feeling of muscle relaxing under heat. Tifa exhaled quietly as she pulled up her chair to sit beside him. Gentle yet firm, her small hands softly worked his aching flesh. Lithe fingers moved fluidly over the hot towel, slowly evaporating pain and tension. Barret didn't realize he had closed his eyes until he heard the girl hum softly with amusement.

"Any better?"

“Mnhhm.” He slumped in his chair as she continued her massage and watched her work. “Where’d ya learn t’do that?”

“I learned from a dear friend of mine.” Tifa blinked back memories of Master Zangan tending her strained muscles dozens of times. Taking in a quiet, slow breath, she willed away the vivid recollection of his calloused hands soothing her physical and emotional aches. Looking for a distraction, her eyes focused on the shiny metal of his gun attachment. “Why did you get that, anyway? Wouldn’t you rather have a prosthetic hand?”

Barret set his jaw and looked her right in the eye. “ShinRA did this to me. Thought I’d use how they disfigured me to strike right back at ‘em!”

She noticed the carefully controlled rage boiling just under his skin and it made Tifa wonder if her assumptions about AVALANCHE were correct. Maybe if his life had been ruined by ShinRA, he could understand her pain. Tifa continued her massage as she spoke.

“My husband died working for ShinRA. They killed my grandparents in the war and did something terrible to my home town, I think. They’ve taken everything from me.”

Barret gave her a sympathetic nod before speaking through grit teeth. “That monster’s gotta be stopped. Trust me, Tifa. One day I’ll bring ‘em to their knees and we’ll all have a little justice.”

Tifa paused in her ministrations for a moment, choosing to shyly look up into his eyes. It felt freeing to tell someone about Cloud’s death and have them care. The only information Barret knew about Cloud was that he had died, and Tifa had never breathed a word about Aria to anyone. She prayed that he wouldn’t press on the subject of her family, for she didn’t feel like she possessed the strength to revisit their memory. Her quality of life these days relied upon her ability to push away the ghosts that howled every time she’d trace her fingers over a stretch mark or fiddle with the wedding band she kept around her neck. Tifa was grateful that Barret never pried about her life before she had come to stay with him.

Bothered by her silence, Barret shifted in his seat. Seeing such a young girl look so lifeless and
apathetic made him angry. What if Marlene ended up that way?

"You've been such a little ghost since I've met ya. You there but you ain't at the same time. This is probably the most I've heard ya talk since y'came here."

She kept her eyes downward, toward her hands. Her knuckles were scarred from her years of training and her fingers and palms were calloused from endless scrubbing of dishes and glasses. Tifa felt like a failure. She had thrown away hopes of a normal life in Nibelheim when she'd become Zangan's apprentice, focusing instead of her dreams of protecting the ones she loved. Instead, every last person she had come to love had been snatched from her life as she stood by, helpless. Now, she was hiding away from the world in a tiny apartment of a kind stranger who needed a babysitter. The baby would grow up and eventually, Tifa would no longer be needed in their lives. What would she do then?

"Listen, missy. What happened to you was bad, but mopin' around about it ain't gonna help none."
Barret searched for her eyes, but they were hidden behind her bangs as she bent her head forward. "You can choose to let it eat at ya--your sadness and grief. But you don't gain nothin' from it. You gotta step forward, however y'can. Understand?"

Ruby eyes widened. At first, she thought the man was being cold, but then she realized how correct he was. Mama died and Papa never moved forward from that grief, choosing to drown in it. Tifa had chosen a different path and pushed ahead in her life, holding onto fond memories and shaking away the gripping fingers of depression. But moving forward was much harder than standing still. Tifa was so tired and shaken from all that had happened and she wasn't sure she had the strength or courage to rise above her sadness and emptiness. How exhausting it had been to navigate each day, even when she had Claudia and Master Zangan and Cloud in her life to lift her up. Now, she was alone and desperately sad, living in fear of her bleak future.

Since Cloud died she had been stuck with her face in the past, fixated on a window where a string and jingle bell connected her to her only hope in this life. Now that string was severed and Tifa felt adrift, spiraling out of control into the blackness. Mercifully, she had found Barret's kindness to hold onto and found some small purpose in the way Marlene clung to her. How on earth was the man so strong?

"Barret?" His name came out sounding breathless, barely audible as she kneaded his aching muscles. "Are you helping AVALANCHE? Is that how you're moving on from the bad things that happened in your life?"

His silence put her on edge. Was he angry that she'd suggest such a thing? Was he upset that she found out about his plans? Would he threaten her to keep her quiet? To Tifa's surprise, he let out a chuckle.

"What made you think that?"

"I-I saw your notes on the table to other day. The ones on the yellow paper." She swallowed nervously and kept her eyes on her work. "When I went out to get Marlene's milk, there was talk in the market and headlines on the newspapers about a pipe bomb that went off in a mako pump on top of the plate. You came back so late last night and I just thought--I was just wondering..."

She didn’t see the wicked grin form on his face. "Damn. I guess I shoulda been more careful, huh?"

Tifa held her breath. Was he really admitting to this so easily?

"AVALANCHE has been dormant since their top men were executed after getting caught while
undercover in Junon. You're lookin' at the leader of the new AVALANCHE right here."

It was then that she found the courage to lift her head. Barret found inspiration to move forward by getting revenge on those who had hurt him. Could she find such fulfillment with that kind of a plan? Her anger towards ShinRA had been dormant for so long, sleeping underneath the heaviness of despair and destitution. The thought of lashing out was attractive after remaining submissive for so long. In her father's house, Tifa withstood her father's abuse and isolation with obedient silence until she had cracked that one rainy day. She had felt guilty, but it had felt so good, like justice had been served, like she had a shred of control over the circumstances of her life. Now, maybe she could choose to channel all of this hurt and rage into something productive as well.

Barret watched her closely, surprised that the girl didn't seem the least bit shocked or bothered by his confession. Instead, he saw some life return to her unusual eyes.

"Are you accepting new members?"

"Tifa--"

"I want to help AVALANCHE. Please...they hurt me like they hurt you! Maybe it can help me move forward, too."

"I can't let you do that."

"Why?"

He fixed her with a stern look, but to his surprise she held his gaze. How could he communicate to her that this was serious business? It was dangerous, and certainly not a suitable environment for a young girl like her. If she got caught, she could be killed. Barret couldn't justify putting her in this sort of extreme danger, even if she wanted revenge on ShinRA as much as he did.

"Because I don't want anything to happen to you. You're here to help me with Marlene, not to risk your neck. You're too young and I don’t want your blood on my hands."

Tifa unwrapped the towel and withdrew her fingers from Barret’s arm, faint smile forming when she heard the man sigh in contentment.

“Better?”

“Yeah. Thanks, girlie. You’re a Godsend, y’know?”

She blushed under his praise and sat back in her seat. “I promise I won’t say anything to anyone about AVALANCHE. But do you think when I get older, I can join, too?”

“We’ll see.” Suddenly, he reached across the table. He grabbed the carton of noodles and dumped the rest of it in a heap onto her plate. “If you wanna be strong enough to fight ShinRA, you’ve gotta eat up, string bean!”
Grit and Merit

Living in the slums of Midgar could be hard and unforgiving, but Tifa was grateful for every moment under Barret’s roof. She never voiced her fear of being turned out, and he never mentioned anything about overstaying her welcome.

For two years, she floated on and blocked out the memory of any life before she came to live with him and his little girl. Reminiscing, even when unintentional, sent a raging river of emotion washing through her, weighing her down like a stone. Happy, sunlight filled days of childhood were so far away; the future she saw then had shone much brighter than anything she could imagine ahead of her now. So Tifa chose to wrap her memories up, neatly folding them away in a forbidden part of her mind, in a desperate attempt to erase her slate and start over. She couldn’t be disappointed in the present if she had no pleasant recollections of a past life or lofty dreams to fall short of.

It took concentration to keep her focus on the future; it was much too costly to keep looking over her shoulder. How could she swim to the surface if she let her past drag her into the depths? With Marlene’s chubby fists gripping her clothing, she could turn away from the burning agony of Aria’s quiet death. With Barret’s kindness and generosity, she was distracted from the suffocating grief that seeped from the gaping hole Cloud had left in her heart. Once in a while the dark hands of sorrow would grasp at her limbs and pull her back into her torment, but as weeks and months passed Tifa was getting better at turning her attention towards the future. Barret taught her that one couldn’t advance when wading around in misery, and she had unnerving memories of Papa as a testament to that proof.

Papa was an empty man. That emptiness inside him had swallowed up the kindness and love and light she had shown him, never reflecting it back. She couldn't be like that.

When her mother died, Tifa had come to terms with it as time went by. But back then, she had had Cloud, Claudia, and Zangan to guide her and boost her confidence. Without those dearest to her by her side, it was impossible to accept the loss of her husband and daughter. She didn’t have the bravery to face such heavy sadness alone, and so Tifa buried it deeper and deeper within her to focus on other things. Her muscles deteriorated and skills had dulled from disuse and she felt heavy with hopelessness, exhausted from all the years and their small victories and overwhelming misfortunes. It had been raining for so long in her life that all of her best attributes had turned to rust.

But that had to change; she couldn’t remain as a shadow that wanders the endless dark.

Tifa trained her body as Marlene napped or was otherwise occupied, practicing her katas and exercises to rebuild the muscles and skills that she seldom visited since she had left her master. Not only did working out serve as a distraction, but one needed to be tough to survive in the slums. Tifa was determined to be able to protect Marlene when they were out and about, which was often these days. Equally important was the intention of joining AVALANCHE. Following Barret’s example, she traded sorrow for rage and misery for revenge. ShinRA had ended the lives of those dearest to her, leaving her choking on the ashes of what could have been. If there was something she could do to cripple them, and help the planet in the meantime, Tifa would do it. These days, her secret thoughts were bitter and heated, blowing the embers of her spirit into a crackling flame.

Seeking privacy, Barret had started holding AVALANCHE meetings once a week in their shoebox of an apartment. They came in the evenings, twice per month, and Tifa would greet the crew and serve them something to drink before slipping away with the baby. At first, she was frightened, thinking that these people would be gruff and angry, like most of the people in the city were, and tried to stay out of the way. She kept Marlene occupied, but now that she was walking and talking
some, it was easier said than done. Thankfully, the curious toddler was just about ready for bed by the
time Biggs, Wedge, and Jessie came to call and Tifa could whisk Marlene off to the bedroom.
She’d lay down beside the little girl, listening to the sound of her deep breathing as she slept and
delicately stroking her soft brown hair. Tifa had passed so many hours of so many nights buried in
Claudia’s quilt in the dark, listening to their friendly banter and the serious planning that followed.

She didn’t know much about the AVALANCHE trio at first, but she collected snippets of
conversations like coins in a jar, putting these strangers together piece by piece. Some long lost part
of her began to overcome fear and shyness, and Tifa found herself yearning to reach out to them.
Barret never forbid her from being around them or coming out of the bedroom during a meeting (he
never forbade her from doing anything except joining AVALANCHE), but she chose to stay tucked
away, straining her ears and pretending like she could be part of them, too. If she could somehow
prove her worthiness to Barret—make him see that she wasn’t just a lost soul—maybe her chest
wouldn’t feel as empty as it did. Tifa imagined how wonderful it would feel to avenge her family,
shedding grief like a snake skin, and finally feeling like she had made something of herself in this
world.

The name, AVALANCHE, rolled fondly off her tongue. She remembered the day Papa had broken
his leg and how in awe she had been of the power of moving earth. Avalanches brought devastation,
wreckage, and ruin. If together they could bring such a powerful torrent of destruction upon ShinRA,
that terrible company could feel just a fraction of the pain she felt. Tifa longed to suck away their
power and livelihood, leaving them as grey and dead as their mako extraction had made Mt. Nibel.
All of the negativity from her loneliness, sadness, guilt and regret manifested themselves in the
bitterness that burned behind crimson eyes. ShinRA would suffer, and she’d be there to help make it
happen.

Until then, all she could do was take life one day at a time. Making hearty, home cooked meals and
beating her makeshift punching bag made her strength return. Barret was kind, praising her,
encouraging her, and buying her clothing and other small necessities. Her heart swelled when
Marlene clung to her legs and felt complete when the baby cried in the night, only calming when it
was Tifa who held her. On hot summer days, they’d spend a few extra gil on ice cream, which Tifa
had never had before, much to Barret’s delight. On cold winter nights, the three of them would
huddle together in their heap of blankets. She’d listen to Barret tell her stories of his days in the coal
mines as Marlene drifted to sleep in her lap. It was strange: a teenage girl living with an adult man
and a little girl, but it was home now and that was all that mattered.

… … …

“Is that the place? That little one on the corner?”

Barret looked over the newspaper clipping once more before nodding. “Yeah, that’s the one.”

It was a tiny cottage on in a quiet area of Sector Seven. The newspaper ad had made it seem much
larger, making the requested rent amount seem more reasonable than it actually was. They had no
choice but to try and apply to rent the place: it was the only building of a respectable size in their
measly budget. It was the last day of the open house, so they had taken the train through the slums to
catch a glimpse of the place while they still could. Barret wanted something with at least two
bedrooms and enough space to serve as an AVALANCHE headquarters of sorts. Jessie’s equipment
required more space than their current housing arrangement allowed, and Tifa and Marlene deserved
their own bedroom. The toddler was growing quickly and Barret wanted something better for her:
some space for her to run and stretch her little legs and a home that didn’t resemble an over packed
shoe box.
A real estate agent greeted them as they opened the door. She was a thin woman with her hair tied back in a tight bun, touting a clipboard in her manicured hands. The woman showed them around, walking them through the living room, kitchen, then upstairs to the tiny bedrooms and bathroom before returning to the ground floor. Barret’s grin told Tifa all she needed to know. When he disappeared with the agent into the study at the back of the house, Tifa put Marlene down and let her explore.

“Ti Ti!”

“Yes, Baby?”

She toddled over to a large piece of furniture against the wall, draped over almost completely with a fabric covering. With a giggle, Marlene crawled underneath.

“I’m hidin’!”

Tifa turned around to see the toe of one little shoe peeping out from under the draped cloth. She gasped in mock surprise.

“Uh oh, where did she go?” Slowly, she walked around the room. “Is she behind the curtains? Is she under the coffee table? Did she hide beneath the rug?”

Quietly, she bent beside Marlene’s hiding place, stealthily curling her fingers on the hem of the furniture cover. Pulling it upward with a sudden movement, Tifa roared as she exposed the girl’s hiding spot. The baby shrieked and crawled away, but Tifa was frozen in place, mesmerized by what she had discovered. What she had thought was a sideboard or cabinet was actually an old piano. Slowly standing, she ran her fingers over a dusty key. An endless flood of memories threatened to rush in, but they weren’t welcome and she suppressed them, erecting her dam and closing off the part of her mind as best she could.

“Oooh, look!” Marlene ran back, tiny shoes scuffing along the hardwood. “What’s that?”

“It’s…a piano. It makes music.”

To demonstrate, she gently pushed on a key. Marlene’s big brown eyes widened with awe as the sound softly spread throughout the room. She quickly broke into a grin, tugging on Tifa’s pant leg.

“Again!”

Giggling after each time a note sounded, the baby asked for Tifa to continue again and again. With a soft sigh, the older girl smiled. “Alright, but only if you dance!”

“’Kay!”

She inhaled, resting her fingers in position and willing a long forgotten skill to return. A happy squeak sounded from Marlene when Tifa suddenly began to play. Slender fingers gracefully brought to life the jauntesti rond o she could remember, sending the carefree tune bouncing through the stale air of the old cottage. Enthralled, the baby jumped and skipped, her little laugh tinkling through the air like a merry little bell. She twirled about in the clumsy way toddlers do, captivated by the way the skirt of her dress plumed outward as she spun. Marlene loved that little yellow dress, which Tifa had artfully pieced together with some fabric scraps and an old sheet. She had spent many dull afternoons embroidering tiny pink flowers on each pleat.

Tifa craned her head around to watch as she danced, committing to memory the way her smile turned up those chubby cheeks and made her brown eyes squint with glee. The joy of having Marlene in
her life lifted years from Tifa’s eyes and chased the weariness from her bones. The light radiating off of the little girl helped Tifa scrape up pieces of joy scattered throughout the days. Like that little yellow dress, she sewed them together, creating a protective cloak of patchwork happiness that she could hide within when unwelcome memories knocked at the door. For now, it was enough.

She stopped playing suddenly when she heard the door to the study click open and Barret’s heavy footsteps. Marlene may have pouted at the abrupt lack of music if she hadn’t been so excited to tell him about the instrument.

“Dada! Look!” She ran to him, wrapping her tiny fingers around one of his large ones. “Music!”

Barret humored the baby and feigned interest in the piano, but Tifa could instantly see that things hadn’t gone as planned. The adults took turns thanking each other for their time before Barret, Tifa and Marlene stepped back out onto the dirty street. The tension in Barret’s shoulders told her all she needed to know.

“She turned us down, didn’t she?” Tifa reached a hand out to rest it on her friend’s shoulder.

“Yeah,” he snorted, scooping up Marlene. “Askin’ too much for a deposit an’ her realtor’s fee was ridiculous! Back in Corel, you could buy a giant house with the kinda money they’re talkin’. All these damn fees and she warned that the rent would go up after the end of a one year lease. We don’t got that kinda giI.”

Tifa followed alongside him as the man marched in the direction of the train station, mumbling about losing another whole day on the fruitless mission of finding a new home. She felt so powerless. Even though she had refused taking payment from Barret years ago, she wished that she could help him earn a living. Maybe if she could watch Marlene during the day and work at night once Barret came home, Tifa could finally feel useful and worthy of the precious security she had these days. Experience had taught her that here weren’t many respectable jobs she could get without a high school diploma, and after what had happened last time she was afraid to try to waitress again. Any time she brought up the idea to Barret, he’d snort and shake his head before asking if she was a glutton for punishment. The truth was that she wanted to help their financial security. Tifa yearned to show Barret that his kindness wasn’t taken for granted. Every time she tried to express her gratefulness, she always felt like it wasn’t enough to show how much it meant to her.

Barret had saved her life, in more ways than one, and she’d be forever grateful.

Marlene didn’t seem to be discouraged by the situation. She turned this way and that in Barret’s arms, waving and smiling and calling out to most people they passed. Her merry, sing song voice was such a contrast to the grey world around her, like a brightly colored bird singing amidst a gloomy fog. It was fascinating to watch Marlene develop from an infant into a small human being with her own personality and unique characteristics. As a baby, she had been tired and cranky (until her body recovered thanks to the goat’s milk). Her big brown eyes had first mirrored Tifa’s uncertainty, but as time passed she was able to see the baby’s true nature emerge. Now that she was two years old, Marlene was joyful and ambitious, hoping to spread her happiness to everyone she saw. Tifa couldn’t help but wonder what Aria’s personality would have been. Would she have danced to the piano or would she have shyly clung to her mother’s leg? Would she prefer apple to Marlene’s favorite snack of banana? Would she have lost those golden highlights in her light brown hair as she aged? It was impossible to know these things, but Tifa still felt like a bad mother for knowing so little about her own child.

Forcefully, she tore herself from those thoughts and focused on the street. Aside from the rush hour foot traffic of people heading to and from the train station, this area of Sector Seven seemed to be quite calm and full of residential buildings instead of clustered businesses of Sector Four. Tifa
glanced at the assortment of dilapidated houses lining the dirt road. They were all dull in color, made of warping wood or crudely constructed tin or metal siding. Before she moved here, she could never have imagined such a place, since it was so different from the red roofs and white washed walls of her vibrant hometown. Nibelheim seemed like a distant memory; it was like a guilty pleasure that was hard to abstain from indulging in. Nothing good would ever come from longing for her past, and so she pushed and pushed to keep the memories safely shut away.

Tifa thought that repressing these things would get easier as time went by, but keeping it all to herself made her feel like an ever inflating balloon. She didn't want to think of the possibility of popping and losing all of the progress she thought she'd made. Besides, if Barret knew the details of her life, would he suddenly decide that she wasn't worth the trouble of keeping around? If she told him that she had been responsible for getting her mother sick, driving her father into despair, and being unable to give life to her daughter, could he ever find any value in her aside from Marlene's babysitter? She wanted to be more to him. She wanted to be close friends and a partner in AVALANCHE. If he saw how ugly she really was beneath her desperation and sadness, Tifa was sure he'd fire her on the spot. Would he really want someone like her influencing Marlene? And so, she made sure to swallow every haunting memory and painful thought, praying that he'd never ask too much about her past.

"The hell's goin' on over there?"

Tifa raised her eyes to find what Barret had seen. They were almost to the train station when they saw a large group of people gathered in front of a building. It was a two story structure made of splintering wood and some haphazardly laid bricks. Despite its somewhat sloppy appearance, it seemed sturdy and was one of the largest buildings on the block. There was a burly man on the wrap-around porch, facing the crowd. His biceps bulged as he stood with his hands on his hips, his thick beard splitting where his teeth flashed in a grin.

"Owen is sellin' his bar, but he doesn't want money for it. He's lookin' for the thrill of throwing his weight around and wants to fight someone for it."

"You mean, like a fist fight?"

"I guess so."

She had heard of unorthodox things like this happening in the slums. Cloud used to tell her stories of the strange situations he'd happen upon during patrol, but she'd never seen very much of it first-hand. Maybe this was the saving grace they were looking for?

Tifa turned to smile at Barret, who frowned as he read her thoughts. "If you think I'm going up there, you've got another thing comin'!"

"The place certainly looks big enough to live in. If it's an old bar, I can cook food and serve customers to help you make money! Come on, Barret! You're just as big as he is!"

"If he's basically giving this place away to anyone that can beat 'em in a fight, it must be a piece a'shit."

A challenger approached, and the crowd surged with excitement. Owen's opponent was a lean
young man with wiry muscle and short black hair. They decided to fight right there on the wide porch, and everyone watched as the he took hit after hit, seemingly intimidated by Owen's size and agility. Tifa memorized the larger man's attack pattern.


She bit her cheek to keep from crying out of frustration as the young man failed to block, failed to yield when struck, and failed to catch himself when he fell—all elementary lessons as far as she was concerned. Owen was fast for his large size, but Tifa knew of a dozen ways to take him down. He was swift, but Tifa knew that she was swifter: in body and in mind.

It wasn't long before the young man gave up, enduring Owen's triumphant cackle as he walked away with a bloody nose, cradling his injured shoulder.

"Who's next?!" Owen boomed in a show of arrogance and brawn.

Tifa turned to flick her eyes up to search Barret's face. He looked back at her with a hard face, but she could see the wheels turning in his head. If there was one thing he hated, it was arrogance. If there was a chance he could knock this guy off his pedestal, he would! And a big place to live would be a huge bonus.

"Can we at least ask about it?" Tifa asked.

Barret huffed, keeping his stubborn frown. "Fine."

He shoved Marlene into her arms as he barreled through the crowd, Tifa following closely behind in the path he cleared. She could feel dozens of pairs of eyes upon them as they marched up to the porch steps. Tifa halted at the bottom step as Barret strode forward, purpose and pride in his posture.

"Think you got what it takes big guy? Entry fee to fight me is five hundred *gil.*" The man grinned and took of puff of his cigarette before looking Barret over from head to toe. "Wait--you're disqualified! Use of a weapon is against the rules."

"I don't need no weapon to kick your ass!"

"Unless you can detach it, I ain't fightin' you! So turn around and go back where you came from."

"I'm not gonna use it. You have my word!"

"I don't trust your word!" Owen snapped, twirling his finger to cue Barret to turn around. "Come back tomorrow without your gun attachment or it looks like you're outta luck, pal."

Tifa was sure if Barret got any angrier, steam would come out of his ears. Seeing his muscles tense and his jaw tighten with rage, she stepped forward and grasped his arm. "Come on, Barret. Forget him, he's not worth it."

"I can't just let him talk to me like that!"

"You can and you will!" Tifa tugged his arm so that he spun to meet her smiling face. "Don't worry, I've got a plan."

... ... ...

"Please, Barret!"

"Are you crazy? He's three times your size!"
She had pleaded with him since they’d boarded the train back home, over their dinner of canned soup and well into the night. Barret couldn’t understand why this girl would walk so willingly into injury and humiliation. Tifa was always willing and ready to help with anything, but this is where he drew the line. He had no idea where she got the notion that she could do any damage against a burly oaf like Owen, but her tiny physique had him doubtful and his protective instinct forced him to refuse any serious consideration of her request. However, it didn’t seem to deter her. Hour after hour, she politely petitioned her desire to fight for the dilapidated bar. He was a bit perplexed, since Tifa rarely ever expressed want for anything, and certainly never carried on about it like she was doing now. Marlene had been put to sleep hours ago. The pair sat on the worn couch: Tifa’s knees were curled up to her chest with her back pressed against the armrest and Barret was sunken into the cushion on the other side, slouching with fatigue from the day’s work and arguing with his babysitter.

“I know I can take him! We need this, Barret. We could fix that place up and run a business to support us and AVALANCHE. We’d have a place to ourselves and more room for meetings!”

He looked her head on and took in her scrawny limbs. The lean muscle he found there didn’t inspire much confidence in him. It was so strange that Tifa, who seemed to have such little confidence in herself in almost every aspect, suddenly thought she could fight and win against a large brawler. The more he thought about it, the more absurd it seemed.

“You’re gonna get hurt and I’m gonna be responsible. We’ll keep lookin’ for a place…”

“But we’ve been looking for months and we can’t afford what we need. I can do this. I know I can.”

Her eyes found his and demanded understanding. It occurred to Tifa that this involved two great risks. One was that if she could convince Barret to let her try, there was a precious five hundred gil at stake. The other risk was that in revealing her fighting abilities, he could ask where she had learned these things, and Tifa was afraid to give up such information. She had started anew, here with Barret. Thinking of what was before was unbearable, speaking about it was inconceivable. Not only would her heart be bleeding, but she would be revealing just how wretched she was, and Tifa couldn't bear that. Could she trust that he'd still care about her?

She had to. Barret had done so much for her that if she could do even one small thing to help him, it would be done in a heartbeat. Now this large possibility loomed before them, and she couldn't back down. Not only could she help out a dear friend, but perhaps proving her worth in this way could convince Barret to let her join AVALANCHE!

"I know it seems strange, but I can fight. I can win, Barret!"

Barret rubbed the bridge of his nose with his fingers and let out a breath. "Why are you so sure y’can take on that jackass an’ beat ‘em?"

"Because...because I grew up learning martial arts. I trained under my master for years, practicing on monsters and the like." Crimson eyes flicked downward to study her scarred knuckles. "I studied his movements when we watched him today. I'm confident I could defeat him."

"How come you never said nothin' 'bout being a martial artist?"

"You’ve never asked."

He fixed her with a mock scowl as he ran his fingers over his short, dark beard. A brief silence stretched out between them, and Tifa fixed unwavering eyes upon him. She hoped he would say something, anything, to quell the anxiety rising in her chest. Did he think it was improper of a lady to
have such a skill? Would it change their relationship now that he knew?

Finally, he spoke.

"It's a lot of *gil* for the entry fee, you know."

"I know. I have three hundred left in my savings, that's it. I'm willing to use it if you can let me borrow the rest." She shifted where she sat, leaning closer to him.

"Do you trust me, Barret?"

Tifa wasn't used to asking such direct questions. Her face was growing hot and her fingers clenched and unclenched in her restlessness. Barret remained still, staring at the wall, before slowly turning his head to look at her. Defeated, his shoulders sagged and a dramatic sigh escaped his mouth.

"I trust you, little lady."

With a small, relieved laugh, Tifa grinned. "Alright! I promise, I won't let you down!"

"But if he lands one hit, I'm draggin' you outta there. You hear me?"

They settled down in their makeshift beds for the night. Tifa was tired, but could barely close her eyes with excitement. Long after Barret began to snore, she lay awake, staring into the blackness. This was her chance to prove herself! She could finally use what she spent so many years learning to help the people she cared about! After the devastation she had experienced, she was finally starting to feel a bit secure. No longer was she floating in space, hopelessly grasping at nothing without gravity to keep her grounded. Barret seemed happy to keep her around, and they had built a friendship out of loneliness and pity. But she loved him, like she loved Master Zangan, like she had loved her own father, and hoped that he held her in the same value. Marlene looked at her like she would her mother, and Tifa's heart sang with each show of affection from the little girl. She had this little rag tag family going for her, didn't she? Surely she could face tomorrow's fight with confidence that, no matter what happened, she'd be alright.

... ... ...

The crowd was smaller today, Tifa noticed.

Owen was back on his porch throne, mocking the gathering of people and demanding a challenge. It wasn't until this moment, as she cut through the crowd, that she felt nervous about the whole ordeal. But with Barret at her back, and so much riding on this opportunity, she couldn't let fear get the best of her. She waded through the indistinct murmur of the people, trying with all her might to keep herself from succumbing to her trembling heart. She could do this. Fighting this man would be a piece of cake compared to her master or the monsters on Mt. Nibel, but it had been so long since she had sparred with anyone else that she couldn't help her uneasiness. Master Zangan’s voice called out to her from a long buried place in her mind, telling her that she would never win if she focused on her doubts instead of victory. She clenched her fists, snug in her leather fighting gloves, and steeled herself before climbing the porch steps. When the crowd saw her, chuckles and muffled laughter rippled among them. She centered her mind, letting the jeers and cackles bounce off her as she locked eyes with Owen.

“Well, well, well! What do we have here?” he snickered. “You're the first little girl to challenge me! Shouldn't you be in school? Turn around, sweetheart! I don't fight children.”

“I'm eighteen. I'm no child.”
She watched the spit fly from his mouth as he bellowed, laughing theatrically. No smile tugged at the corners of her mouth as she calmly endured his ridicule. Tifa continued to watch as Owen tried to rile up his audience, pointing out her tiny hands and feet, lean limbs and young face. Before long, she tossed a small satchel of *gil* at his feet.

"Enough, Owen. Here’s the *gil* for the entry fee."

Despite his surprise, he bent to pick it up and counted it in front her. “You’re serious about this?”

Tifa stretched the muscles in her arms in response, closing her eyes in concentration. She inhaled deeply, then exhaled slowly as she moved into a fighting stance: hands raised to guard her face, knees bent, weight forward on the balls of her feet, head lowered.

“Dead serious.”

The crowd whooped with excitement, and Owen fixed his face with a cocky grin. “Alright! Don’t come crying back to me when I knock your pretty teeth out.”

Wooden boards creaked beneath her as she shifted her weight and she held her breath as she waited for him to strike first. When he did, it was lightning fast. The punch was aimed at her face. She felt his fist swish past her skin as she tumbled forward, dodging and swinging out her legs to try to kick his out from under him. He seemed to predict this and swung his torso around towards her, reaching out and catching a handful of her black hair. Using the momentum from her sweep at his legs, she spun, arcing her back and sending her right leg upward to collide with his jaw.

He staggered back, the shock causing him to let go of her hair. Owen raised his hand to where she had struck, slack jawed and wide eyed. The man bristled with anger and embarrassment; he had learned the hard way that there was a surprising amount of force behind her delicate looking limbs.

"Why you little--!"

He approached again with a cross punch, aimed for the side of her head. Tifa admired his speed, but his movements became more and more sloppy as he tried to outpace her. After fighting with the swift and agile master Zangan, Owen's movements seemed clumsy and elementary. He continued aggressing her, sending out punch after punch in a flurry of meaty fists. She panted as she dodged, for as easily as she could read his movements, she was still out of practice. The relatively confined space of the porch made her feel claustrophobic and trapped. Tifa tried her best to center her mind and focus of Owen and how she could make the best of her environment.


Anticipating the opening he left behind when he threw his right hook, Tifa dodged and swung her leg in a powerful roundhouse kick, grunting as the heel of her boot collided with his neck. With a roar of shock and pain, Owen crashed to the wooden floor boards, shaking the porch with the force of his impact.

"You little bitch!" He snarled as he jumped to his feet. "I'll kill you!"

She heard Barret cheering for her among the sea of voices and it gave her the nerve to continue. Someone believed in her, despite the many things about her that made her feel like she had no value. So much was riding on this! She couldn’t let Barret, Marlene and AVALANCHE down! Adrenaline and courage coursed through her veins as she stood at the ready, waiting for her opponent to bear down on her again. When he did, she was ready. He advanced in a barrage of attacks, feet and fists striking out again and again. Tifa blocked as many of the blows as she could, her arms jarring in their
sockets every time she did, narrowly dodging injury every time she didn’t. She panted with effort, fatigue starting to pull at her muscles, despite the adrenaline surge. The porch railing was almost behind her now as he continuously pushed her back, cornering her against the edge of their makeshift arena.

But Tifa knew what to do. She caught a glimpse of the hate that emanated from Owen’s eyes as he continued to rush her in a blur of motion. His anger blinded him and he threw caution to the wind, giving Tifa the opening she needed. She thrusted her left arm between them, trapping Owen’s arm against his own chest before elbowing him in the face. He stumbled backward, pawing at his bleeding nose, but Tifa didn’t relent. With a cry, she threw a powerful uppercut at his chin. There was a crunching sound and a spurt of blood as he grunted with the force of impact. Before he could completely recover, Owen threw a wild punch in her direction. She caught his arm and used his momentum to flip him over her head and send him hurtling through the air. Floorboards smashed into his back, forcing the air from his lungs in a rushing wheeze.

Her breath came in short puffs, taking in what she had done. Owen tried to sit up, groaning. His jaw was already starting to swell and his white teeth were bathed in crimson. She watched as he spat out a mouthful of blood and a tooth, looking at her with a stunned expression. The roar of the crowd pulled Tifa from her daze. There were cheers and laughter crackling through the air. Tifa expected Owen to try again, fueled by humiliation, but he didn’t rise to his feet. He wiped a forearm across his lips, leaving a thick red smear across his bare skin.

“Freak!” He cried, slowly finding his footing. He swayed where he stood and cradled his injured face with his palm. “Get the hell away from me!”

“Not without the deed to this place,” Tifa said, relaxing out of her fighting stance and holding her chin high. “I won fair and square.”

Fists planted firmly on her hips, her chest swelled with a fragile sense of pride. Owen finally looked at her, the weight of defeat and embarrassment weighing down his features. Vulnerability pulsed in his brown eyes as he looked her up and down, taking in how he had lost to such a small opponent. He had felled a dozen men as large as himself, but he was helpless against a tiny young woman. She seemed more like a cat than a human being, with her impeccable balance and movements so fluid and precise. How could someone with such a childlike face and petite frame best a man like him?

“Who are you?” He asked, incredulous.

“I’m a student of the best martial arts master in the world.” She commanded respect as her eyes locked with his. “My name is Tifa. Tifa Strife.”
The decision that the bar would remain a bar didn't come right away. Tifa and Barret kept tossing ideas about how to use the shop between them, coming up with possibilities like a diner, a seamstress’s workshop, or even a convenience store. But when they considered the proximity to the train station and the local clientele, a bar would really be a perfect place to intercept the working man on his daily commute home. But there was much to be done before they could open their business.

The building was a complete mess. If Owen had owned this place, Tifa doubted that he had set foot inside it in at least half a decade. Cobwebs and dust coated the surfaces and corners, the piping was rusted and there were multiple lines and cracks in many of the walls. After moving their meager possessions to their new home in Sector Seven, they wasted little time assessing what needed to be done. Together, they painted the walls, baby-proofed as best they could, and replaced most of the rotted wood in the ceiling and floor. Luckily, a plethora of useful things were left behind in the building for her use: pots, pans, cutlery, dishware, glasses, cleaning supplies and even some towels and linens. While Barret was working, Tifa tirelessly scrubbed sinks and floors. At first, she had been discouraged by the unsightly look of their new home. But as she cleaned, Tifa began to see the beauty of this place hidden beneath the dust and grime: the tile mosaic in the bathroom and the carvings etched into the hardwood of the banister and bar top were charming and made it feel a little more homey.

Owning a bar meant the purchasing of a liquor license, as well as obtaining a bartending certification from city government. With the extra financial stress that comes with moving into a new home that needed repairs and furnishing, Tifa decided to skip the fifty gil bartending class and study the free workbook and materials provided instead. At only one hundred gil, the fee to take the license exam wasn’t too outrageous. It was a necessary expense if they were going to start making any money. Furnishings in their living space could wait until she was actually making a profit. Barret worked with her to find a reliable liquor vendor in the area, and Tifa felt relieved to have his help when it came to bargaining for things. Her soft spoken nature would make it difficult to barter, but Barret was intimidating and somehow knew just what to say every time.

The building had a small second story, which consisted of a bathroom and two bedrooms: one for the girls and one for Barret. It was decided that the large basement space would be used as AVALANCHE’s headquarters, since it was the only non-customer area large enough to hold meetings comfortably once Jessie moved all her gadgets in. The only way to access the basement was through a door in the floorboards against the far wall. Barret was currently thinking of a way to obscure the basement door from the public’s view, but hadn’t yet come up with any solid ideas.

Because Barret now had a longer commute to work, Tifa was alone for most of the day with Marlene. The little girl was a gift: an outlet for Tifa's irrepressible instinct to mother and a source of joy in the craziness of adjusting to their changing world. Marlene’s excitement made her scarcely able to sleep once they moved into the bar, her little feet running this way and that, exploring every nook and cranny of their new home. The baby was so excited for this change in their lives, just like Barret, and a small amount of pride swelled in Tifa’s chest. By fighting and winning this place, she was giving back to the man who took her in, making life a little better for a precious little girl and providing a place for AVALANCHE to meet. Maybe she could make something of herself after all. Concentrating on these feelings and pouring herself into cleaning the old building from top to bottom prevented Tifa’s ghosts from having much of a chance to haunt her in her waking hours.

Even now, as she scrubbed grimy floorboards on her hands and knees, her focus and thoughts were on the future. With a weary sigh, Tifa rested her scrub brush in the bucket of sudsy water and wiped
her brow with the back of her arm. The pattering of little feet kept her from thinking about how different the lemon scented cleanser was from the baking soda and vinegar she had cleaned with in Nibelheim.

“Ti Ti, I find this!”

She turned her head toward Marlene, who rushed toward her, clutching something in her tiny hands. The toddler seemed so excited to show Tifa her treasure, but all her guardian noticed was the dust coating her little dress and pale skin.

“Marlene, you’re filthy!”

“Look!” She shoved her fist in Tifa’s face, opening it to reveal two coins.

“Oh, look at that! Where did you find those?”

Marlene turned to point to the back wall where an old pinball machine sat, covered in dust. No one had paid it much mind, since there were so many other things to fiddle with. But the baby left no stone unturned in her exploration of her new home.

“O’there!”

Tifa ruffled Marlene’s chestnut hair, which had grown to brush her shoulders. “Well then, let’s put them in your treasure box before I give you a bath. Look how dusty you are!”

Marlene giggled as Tifa poked her nose, then rushed up the stairs with the older girl behind her. She ran to her room and grabbed an empty tissue box that sat on the little bookshelf under the window sill. Plopping herself on the floor, Marlene emptied the handful of contents in her treasure box on the floor in front of her: two paper clips, a tin ring, a red marble, a broken key, and a tiny mirror. While the baby arranged her treasures, Tifa grabbed the shampoo bottle, a towel and a bar of soap from the bathroom. She couldn’t bathe Marlene there, due to the malfunctioning hot water heater, so Tifa had no choice but to wash her down in the bar area.

She lead Marlene back down the stairs, letting her scribble on a sheet of paper as she heated a large stock pot of water on the stove. When it was warm enough, she plugged the sink and dumped the water in. Always eager to play in the water, Marlene allowed herself to be washed with little complaint, and Tifa allowed her to play until it was too cold for her to stay in. A set of plastic cups and a wooden spoon for makeshift bath toys kept her busy for a while. Tifa sighed, sitting on a bar stool nearby to look over the material for her license exam. She had a rudimentary understanding of liquor, thanks to her father’s bad habit. She knew signs of inebriation, the content of multiple mixed drinks, and how to tell a poor quality drink from a top shelf item. But still, she drilled the information into her brain until she knew it backwards and forwards. It was a bit difficult with Marlene’s constant distractions, but Tifa managed.

Silently, she recited the words again and again, wondering if she and Barret could really pull this off. He had faith in her that she didn’t have in herself, and it was both encouraging and terrifying. There was so much that needed to be done to the dilapidated building before they could even think about opening in addition to the lengthy legal process of registering for and purchasing a liquor license. Acquiring alcohol and a stock of food would be a huge hit on their shoestring budget, even though team AVALANCHE had offered to help when they could. In short, this was an enormous financial risk, and Tifa was terrified that she’d fail these people who depended on her success.

Over the past week, she had contemplated what to call her bar when it finally opened. Tifa discussed a half dozen ideas with Barret, but the only one that seemed to stick was ‘Seventh Heaven.’ When he
asked her what her inspiration had been for that name, Tifa said that this business was their new hope and she wanted it to be a source of comfort and light in the darkness of the Sector Seven slums. Tifa didn’t tell him that her real inspiration was her desire to see all of the people she had loved, who she liked to imagine were residing in heaven.

Cloud, Aria, Claudia, Mama, Papa, Zangan…

The harder she tried to push them out of her conscious thoughts, the harder they fought to climb to the surface of her brain.

“A, B, C, D, E, F, G,” Marlene sang, swirling her cups in the water.

Tifa continued in automatic response, not taking her eyes off her booklet. “H, I, J K…”

“L, M, N, O, P!” she shrieked, tossing a plastic cup into the air and laughing when it landed in front of her with a splash.

“That’s it! You’re so smart, Marlene!”

After being pulled from school at such a young age, Tifa knew the value of a good education. She vowed that as long as she was around, she’d each Marlene everything she knew and send her to school when she came of age for it. That precious little girl wouldn’t be stuck bussing tables as an adult if Tifa could help it. She flipped a page in her booklet when she heard a key in the lock of the front door. Her head came up in alarm and she stared at the doorknob as it wiggled. A quick glance at the clock told Tifa that it would still be about an hour or so until Barret came home. Who was here? What did they want? Protectively, Tifa grabbed the towel, scooped Marlene out of the sink and held her head to her chest. She was fretting over whether she should hide the baby or not when the door opened, revealing a familiar face and brown hair pulled into a ponytail.

“Jessie…” Tifa breathed. “You scared me!”

“Ah, sorry Tifa!” Jessie adjusted the large box she was carrying before stepping through the door. “Barret gave me the key so I could drop off my computer.”

Shifting the baby into one arm, she held open the door so Jessie could squeeze through. The older girl smiled and thanked Tifa before putting down her load to greet wet little Marlene, who grinned up at the visitor from her towel cocoon.

Jessie looked around with a low whistle, taking in the wide bar space. “Wow, nice place. Barret told me about how you kicked some guy’s ass and won it! I didn’t know you were a fighter!”

Tifa felt her face flush. “Oh, it was nothing…just lucky I guess.”

“You certainly don’t look like a brawler. I’d like to see you in action someday!” Jessie smiled as Tifa looked away, ears turning pink at the praise.

“Wanna get down! Please?” Marlene squirmed in her arms.

Secretly grateful for the excuse to retreat, Tifa peeked up at Jessie. “Oh, let me take her upstairs to get dressed. Make yourself at home!”

Tifa let Marlene pick out which little dress she wanted to wear before laying her down for her midday nap. She hummed little melodies to lull the baby to sleep, and lingered in the bedroom much longer than she needed to. Out of the trio of AVALANCHE members that Barret had taken under
his wing, it was Jessie who sparked her curiosity most, and Tifa found herself longing for her attention. Jessie was smart and beautiful, with rich brown hair and sparkling chestnut eyes that made her feel so plain in comparison. For some reason, Tifa found herself becoming painfully shy in the other girl’s presence and wasn’t completely sure of the reason behind it. Growing up, she had never really had any female friends her age, and wondered if she would say the right things. Although Jessie was a few years older than she, Tifa couldn’t quell her desire for a bond with another young lady. Unlike her fellow waitresses at Bailey’s Pub, Jessie was always kind and treated her like an equal instead of someone to be ordered around. She wanted something more—something deeper, like the bond she had had with Claudia—but had no way of telling if Jessie could ever share that desire. Barret was wonderful, but she couldn’t talk to him about love and life like she did with her mother or Claudia. There were some things that boys just didn’t understand.

Eventually, she crepted down the stairs. The hatch door to the basement was open and she could hear Jessie rustling around, probably setting up her computer and arranging her workspace. Tifa stooped by the side of the pinball machine, checking for any coins Marlene may have missed. She had never seen anything like this machine, for any games that she grew up playing in Nibelheim were certainly never powered by mako electricity. Did it still work? She fetched a rag to wipe to dust away and polished the plastic and metal. Tifa bent to plug it in, excited to see the machine light up, but nothing happened. She removed the plug again, running her fingers over the prongs to remove any dust she may have missed.

There was a knock on the door and it immediately cracked open, Wedge’s round face peering around the frame. “Hello? Anybody home?”

Biggs appeared behind him and pushed Wedge over the threshold. “Of course someone’s home. Barret wouldn’t have asked us to come if no one was here, would he?”

Tifa barely breathed a greeting when she heard Jessie’s footfalls on the basement stairs. “Wedge! Is that you? Finally!”

“What do you mean, finally? You said two o’clock.” Biggs whined.

The girl rolled her eyes and they landed on Tifa, still crouched beside the pinball machine with the plug in her hand. She froze, feeling exposed and insecure as the trio stared at her.

“Oh, hey! Does that thing work?” Jessie chirped.

“N-no…” Tifa gulped, feeling incredibly uncomfortable. “I plugged it in, but it didn’t light up.”

Biggs elbowed Jessie in the arm. “I’m sure our genius over here could fix it!”

“I hope so. That way, Tifa could have something to keep her busy so your arguing doesn’t drive her crazy.” Wedge grinned at his own zinger.

Jessie sighed and tried to hide her smile as she moved to crouch beside Tifa, who immediately handed her the cord. “This is important. Barret wants to use this thing to conceal the entrance to our basement HQ. If I could get it to work, no one would question the presence of a pinball machine in the bar.”

“But how do we get to the basement if this heavy piece of tin is covering it?” Biggs asked, leaning against the machine.

“Well, I had a cool idea. If we could rig up some hydraulics and if I tamper with this machine, we could have this thing rise up and down, kind of like an elevator. I want to install a panel underneath
that we could punch a code in to get downstairs. Barret doesn’t want it to even look like there’s a basement entrance at all.”

Wedge bent to the floor to inspect the underside of the pinball machine. “Sounds good to me—can’t be too careful. Do we have what we need to do that? It seems complicated.”

Jessie rose to her feet to head toward the basement steps. “I brought a whole bunch of stuff—it’s in the basement. Biggs, help me with this. Wedge, lock the door and make sure no one comes in, alright? We’ll be right back.”

He gave her a quick salute before she disappeared with Biggs. Tifa stood and retreated back behind the bar, anxious for something to do with her hands. It was exciting to watch these three in action. How cool! A secret entrance to AVALANCHE’s secret headquarters: it was like something she’d read about in a book. She felt Wedge’s eyes on her as she returned to her studying.

“May I get you something to drink, Wedge?”

“No, no. I’m fine, thanks.” He slowly paced around tables. “You’ve really done a fantastic job fixing this place up. It was in awful shape when you guys moved in.”

“Thank you,” Tifa said, shyly ducking her face toward her booklet. “We have a long way to go, but it’s coming along.”

“Barret says you’re going to bartend. I think you’ll do great.” He leaned on the bar top, fixing her with a friendly smile. “You know, we really owe you for this. The basement is perfect for us!”

“Really, it’s nothing.” She swallowed, overcome with shyness. Tifa felt her cheeks pinken as she struggled to keep her eyes on the polished wood of the bar top. “I like having you here.”

She saw his wide smile out of the corner of her eye and her heart fluttered in her chest. Tifa was so flattered that these three chose to talk with her and treat her like a friend when they certainly didn’t have to. Eventually, she found the strength to flick her crimson eyes upward to meet with his brown ones. His expression was soft and inviting, and she found herself unable to pull her gaze away.

“Say, Tifa…”

He was interrupted by the sound of a clatter from the basement steps. “Ouch! Wedge, can you help me with this?”

“Coming!”

Tifa watched him rush to Biggs’s aid before she hid away in the privacy of the kitchen. What was wrong with her? She wanted so badly to feel loved, like she belonged, but once the others tried to get to know her she clammed up and shut down. She dreamed of feeling like one of the crew, but were her social issues and lack of self-worth thwarting her chance at finding contentment? It was easy to hide. It was easy to cower behind the walls she had built in her heart from years of anguish and hopelessness. But now, she had hope. Was healing waiting just around the corner? Did she have the strength to face the frightening task of opening up to these people who waited to befriend her?

She distracted herself with the task of scrubbing chipped tiles and preparing dinner while Biggs, Wedge and Jessie talked and laughed and worked. Maybe one day, she’d find her voice and courage again.

… … …
The sound of glass shattering broke the silence.

“Uh oh!” Marlene cried.

She left her spot amongst her toys on the floor to run toward Tifa, who stooped to pick up shards of glass behind the bar. Barret skillfully caught her little wrist as she ran past and scooped her up into his arms. “You alright, Tifa?”

“Y-yeah, just dropped a glass.”

Tifa was so nervous. Tonight was opening night for Seventh Heaven and she felt anything but prepared. The bar top and wooden tables had been sanded and refinished, there was a fresh coat of paint on the walls, and there wasn’t a speck of dust to be found. Glass liquor bottles glistened behind the bar and clean rows of glasses were stacked neatly underneath. Jessie had fixed the hot water heater, the kitchen was clean and the pantry was stocked with food and ready to feed their customers. Fresh rolls were baking and stock pots of soup, rice, and chili sat upon the stove, hot and waiting to be eaten. But it was Tifa who wasn’t ready. What if her customers weren’t satisfied with her selection of food and drinks? Did they have enough stock? What if someone started trouble? What if no one came at all? Her shaking hands and nervous clumsiness may be for nothing if people failed to notice the grand opening flyers she and Barret had hung up outside shops and in the train station.

It had been a few months since she had passed her exam. She and Barret had been working constantly in that time to make repairs and prepare the bar for business. The pinball machine now sat perched atop the hydraulic trap door that served as their only entrance to the basement—AVALANCHE headquarters. It was designed so that even the sharpest eye had difficulty seeing the outline of the door in the floor. Tifa was constantly surprised by the incredible talents of Biggs, Wedge and Jessie, who all seemed to be jacks-of-all-trades. She hoped that someday she’d gather the nerve to ask them to teach her some of their skills. The trio had shown up as support for opening night and their show of affection made her heart swell in her chest. Jessie was currently fiddling with a pair of old speakers in the corner, which she had somehow rigged up to the jukebox she had salvaged. The boys were seated at one of the handful of tables, playing a game while continuously glancing up to watch the television on the wall behind the bar.

“Let me help you clean that! I’ll grab the broom,” said Biggs, who was currently losing his game of checkers against Wedge. Grateful for a distraction, he hopped to his feet. “Sorry, Wedge!”

Barret tickled the side of Marlene’s neck before carrying her toward the stairs. “Alright, little miss. Bed time.”

“No, Papa!”

“Yes, Marlene.”

She was carried up the stairs, whining all the way. Tifa may have smiled if she wasn’t petrified. Numbly, she thanked Biggs for his help and tried not to pace. She glanced at the clock: only five minutes until her seven o’clock opening time. The plan was to have the bar open daily at four in the afternoon and close at midnight, keeping the bar closed on Tuesdays for some time to rest and restock. Today, however, Tifa justified a later opening since Barret didn’t typically get home until around six. The thought of starting her first day as a bartender without his presence had frightened her, so she had no problem waiting until he made it home. Letting out a nervous breath, Tifa steadied her hands long enough to plug in the fluorescent ‘OPEN’ sign in the window.

There was no going back now.
“Hey, Tifa!” Wedge piped up, swirling his glass of soda. “I bet this place will be packed tonight. Your name is buzzing around the slums like crazy.”

“Really?”

“He’s right,” Jessie said, returning the speaker to its proper place. “People heard about you besting a buff dude in a fight and thought it was awesome. I bet you’ll have a steady stream of clients.”

Tifa moved to her place behind the bar, grabbing a rag and polishing the lacquered wood to keep her hands busy. “I hope I can handle it. I used to waitress, but I wasn’t alone.”

“You aren’t alone now, either,” said Biggs.

An awed smile tugged at the corners of Tifa’s mouth. She watched Biggs return to his seat and promptly start accusing Wedge of moving his checker pieces. It occurred to her then that maybe she wasn’t so different from the others. Everyone in this house was broken in some way, the victim of bad fortune and wronged by ShinRA. Perhaps, she really could fit in. It was risky to dare to hope that her heart had finally found a safe place, but she couldn’t help it. Tifa grinned as she swiped the rag over the counter one last time. After years of loneliness and desperation, had she finally found the place she belonged?

Her head snapped upward at the sound of the front door swinging open.

Jessie sent music tumbling out of the jukebox as a group of young men, some with girlfriends in tow, entered the bar. A knot of anxiety formed in Tifa’s throat and she shot a frightened look toward Biggs and Wedge. Biggs nodded his head encouragingly and Wedge winked at her, reassuring her that she could do this. They weren’t going anywhere. It would be alright, wouldn’t it?

“M-may I help you?” Her voice shook as a few patrons perched themselves on bar stools.

… … …

Her draft beers were the most popular by far. Patrons came and went in a constant flow, seemingly enjoying their time at Seventh Heaven. They cheered and jeered at whatever sport was broadcasting on the television, they sang along to the juke box, they mingled and drank their fill before heading home. So many patrons wanted her attention that she quickly felt overwhelmed, juggling food orders and conversations and gil. Once in a while, Biggs and Wedge would take a break from their planning to help gather soiled plates and wipe down tables as Jessie washed dishes. Tifa was immeasurably grateful, and their quiet companionship made her heart flutter with hope. Did they find value in her?

They were correct in saying that she was a source of curiosity among her customers. Most patrons admitted to stopping by for a peek at the half Wutaian girl who defeated an iconic muscle man of Sector Seven, and Tifa wasn’t sure if this helped her reputation or hurt it. At the request of several guests, she had told and retold the story of Owen’s defeat as modestly as possible. They’d ask her to demonstrate how she flipped him or tell them how she had the strength to lift a man at least three times her weight. The praise and inquiries made Tifa flush. Bashful and flabbergasted, she kept her answers polite yet vague, weary of having such a private part of her open to dissection from strangers.

The 'foreign' cuisine was a hit, along with her fresh baked breads. Tifa had Mama to thank for her culinary success, and every time she opened that little wooden recipe box, she prayed that there was some part of her that her mother would’ve been proud of. Within a few hours, she had sold all the food she had made, and had to make do with serving some frozen snacks she could heat up in the
little oven. There were a few men who tried to flirt with her, and Tifa would’ve remained oblivious to their advances if Barret didn’t stand nearby and intimidate them. It occurred to Tifa that she could take her wedding band off the chain around her neck and wear it to discourage this type of behavior, but that would stir up questions that she definitely wasn’t ready to answer.

Tifa didn’t want to be reminded of what had been. She had done her best to tear out the pages of the past and start writing this new chapter of her life. Running and running away from the things that used to define her was so tiring. But Tifa was afraid to stop. She knew what happened to those who stood still in their grief, and it terrified her.

AVALANCHE filtered out one by one: Jessie at ten, Biggs at ten-thirty, and Wedge an hour later. Tifa’s confidence may have wavered once her support team left if it wasn’t for Barret, who stood off in the corner like a totem: arms crossed and eyes sharp as a hawk. Though he was now well aware of her ability to defend herself, he watched over her, and it made Tifa feel safe in her place in his heart. It was a relief to see the cash register fill up with gil, even though Tifa knew the majority of it would be spent on restocking supplies and covering bills. She was giving back, helping in some way, and she knew it would give her the momentum she needed to swing from one day into the next. Exhausted, Tifa closed the bar at midnight. Barret, despite his fatigue, stayed with her until she had bid a cordial goodbye to the last customer and slid the deadbolt on the thick wooden door.

“You did it, Teef!” he said, scooping her into a bear hug.

She tried to laugh, but he squeezed and it came out sounding more like a wheeze. “Thanks to you! You’ve done so much for me.”

Barret let her go and gazed around the room, taking in the mess left behind. “Psht. The paperwork sucked, but everything else you did on your own. I just watched you work your magic.”

She considered his words. When she thought about it, she knew that she had no ‘magic’, luck or charm that ever brought her success. It was all borne of suffering, grit and tenacity, and any good thing she’d accomplished had always been with the help of another. If it wasn’t for Barret, Tifa would’ve never been able to open this business, even if she had won the building on her own. A small smile graced her mouth as she moved to gather dishes on the nearest table.

“Do you think we made enough to cover the cost of the liquor license?”

Barret scoffed, retrieving a broom from the closet. “Like hell! Cost us an arm and a leg.”

He grinned wickedly, holding his gun arm up in the air, and Tifa couldn’t help but laugh out loud. It felt good to laugh, especially after such a stressful day. The mixture of Barret’s baritone cackle and her own high pitched giggles made her feel so light, in spite of all of the weight she carried daily upon her shoulders.
The broad hands on the wooden clock turned slowly. Perched on a bar stool, Tifa waited. She had closed the bar at two in the morning but didn’t feel tired at all. AVALANCHE left for a mission at half past nine with promises to be back before closing time. Now that she’d adjusted to running the bar on her own, Tifa felt confident enough to handle everything without Barret and the others while Marlene slept soundly upstairs. The crew hadn’t been able to progress with their anti-ShinRA plans in recent months, with the distraction of the bar’s renovations and the influx of work in their own day jobs. For now, their efforts were mostly surveying and espionage: gathering information on reactors, guard patrol routes and using Jessie’s skills to hack into computers to reformat key cards and collect passcodes.

She looked at the clock: two forty-five. They should’ve been back an hour ago, at least. Fear gnawed at her insides and her eyes burned with unshed tears as she watched the ice melt in her glass. It bubbled up from her core, tightening her chest and throat, and her breaths became unsteady as she succumbed to mild panic. If they got caught, ShinRA may come for her, too. If she was arrested for assisting AVALANCHE, what would happen to Marlene? What if she never saw their faces again? What if today had been the last time she would hear their voices? How could she survive without Biggs's goofy laugh, Wedge's soft voice or Jessie's quirkiness? How could she ever find the will to move forward without Barret's comforting presence and unbending companionship?

She shifted atop her stool, praying and worrying as she sipped at whiskey in an attempt to calm herself. What would she do if something happened to them? How could she get by? Raising Marlene alone would be so difficult— looking after her while making a living without help, not having enough money to send her to a good school, explaining to her how her father died...

It would've been the same with Aria, wouldn't it?

She was afraid of the stillness around her. That awful, suffocating quiet that made it so hard to keep the shards of the past from rising like nausea in her throat. The incessant electric hum of the refrigerator and the slow whirr of the ceiling fans wasn’t enough and Tifa felt herself start to shiver as a cold sweat dotted her forehead.

People in her life had a habit of disappearing, and the thought of losing the people she cared about again made the alcohol churn in her stomach. Tifa bit her lip to keep it from trembling as she watched the ice melt in her glass. All it took was one little accident to get them caught by Shinra, one tiny misstep to remove them permanently from her life. How could she ever bear starting over again? The thought of coping with more loss was overwhelming. She was a skilled martial artist—surely there was more she could do than sit here and wait. What if they needed her help? What if they were in trouble, hoping that she’d come and help? Even if they were, she couldn’t leave Marlene alone. Tifa felt so vulnerable there, swaying on a bar stool, bent over hard liquor and taking gasping breathes to try coping with her anxiety.

Instead of dissolving her fear, the alcohol seemed to be making it worse, and she didn’t know what to do. Tifa wished she could just fall asleep and wake up feeling safe and secure. In Cloud’s arms…

Her body shook with the force of a hiccup and her hands trembled as they clutched the sides of the stool. Tifa’s thoughts whirled and whirled, like water swirling down a drain, and she threaded her fingers around the hair at her scalp and pulled. When her eyes were open, she saw the emptiness of the bar and struggled to breathe under the crushing weight of her desperation and loneliness. When
her eyes were closed, she was haunted by golden hair and brilliant blue eyes. But she couldn’t let herself remember. She had to run away. Her life was different now; she had left her past behind, hadn’t she? Tifa had let go, but everything she wanted to leave behind relentlessly chased her. It was too much!

"Daddy?" A small voice whispered before calling out into the dimly lit corridor. "T-Tifa?"

Tifa pressed her lips together to still them from trembling. She slid from her seat, careful to keep her balance as the world wavered at the corners of her vision. "I'm here, Marlene. What's wrong?"

"Where's Daddy?"

The wood of the banister felt cool under her fingertips as she ascended the stairs. Little Marlene stood at the top in her little yellow night dress, face calm though her brown eyes were wide with fright. She reached out to take Tifa's offered hand, and the pair slowly made their way back to their room.

"He'll be home soon, sweetheart. He's just running a little late."

Marlene rubbed her eyes when Tifa lay down beside her in their bed. She stared into her guardian's tired face and seemed bothered by the unhappiness she found there. It was so difficult to hide anything from such a perceptive child; a fact that unnerved the older girl. Tifa kissed the top of Marlene's head before tucking it under her chin. Wrapping her arms around the little one, she began to hum and stroke one chubby cheek with her thumb. Tifa wasn't sure if Marlene would ever know that in times like this, it was the little girl who was doing most of the comforting. The toddler's even breaths drew Tifa into her own uneasy sleep soon enough.

... ... ...

Water. Water was all around. The endless blue enveloped her in peace and tranquility. She was suspended, floating, her long black hair fanning out around her. The silence made her feel at ease for once and she is calm, closing her eyes against the comforting feeling of weightlessness. It is here that she can finally be at peace, resting her weary body and soul. Tifa is rocked by the water's current, letting herself sink into the depths. Though the waves of doubt and unease might riffle the surface of the water high above her, they would never reach down to the bottom where she lived. Perhaps she had sunken so deep that even her troubles couldn’t reach her.

Suddenly, a sound of anguish rips her from her lofty passive state: the familiar voice cutting through the boundless quiet. Cloud is crying, screaming, and crimson eyes fly open to search the void. Deep blue morphs into an emerald green. Tifa swings her head wildly in every direction, swimming uselessly forward, pumping her arms against dense liquid. Once crystal clear, the liquid slowly became murky and thick, obscuring her vision. His whimpers and keening sobs became louder, clearer, and she thought she could see his dark silhouette through the turbidity. Tifa reached out to him, but her hand collided with a glass wall, as if a window separated her from Cloud.

She tried to call out to him, frantically clawing at the glass between them. Again and again she screamed his name, until the liquid filled her lungs like lead. Her body screamed for air. Tifa pawed towards the surface, hoping and praying that she’d get there before her lungs burst. Climbing, climbing, her chest tightening. Her body went numb as she broke through the surface.

... ... ...

Tifa gasped awake, sitting rigidly amongst tangled sheets. Her breath was ragged and uneven as she whimpered freely into the cold night. Beads of sweat dampened her forehead. Curling over herself,
she let out a broken moan into the blanket that covered her knees. She’d had this dream a handful of
times. It gripped her, her heart refusing to leave it behind. Time and time again, she pushed it away,
but troubling visions of Cloud found their way back in her sleep. The loud pounding of her heart
threatened to drown her thoughts away, but Tifa knew deep inside that she could never let it go.
Hearing his voice never failed to stir up memories of her beloved. She sat alone for a while, thinking
only of Cloud, numbering his qualities and imagining his virtues. It had felt like a lifetime since

Tifa had been a cherished little wife to a gentle young man who valued her more than life itself. But
as years went by since their parting, she began to doubt her memories as the grey of the slums
washed over her heart.

She sat up straight, hugging herself tightly, letting tears stream down her face. There was so much
Tifa wanted to say to Cloud, if she could just see him one last time. She’d tell him to hold on to those
times they spent together in the sheltered mountain groves. She’d tell him how much regret burned
inside her: that she didn’t stop him from working for ShinRA, that she didn’t hold him in her arms
longer and savor the last traces she’d ever feel of his warmth, that there were words she couldn’t
voice that day.

She felt so alone, so utterly alone, and she couldn’t stand it.

Marlene stirred beside her, rolling over in her sleep. Delicately, Tifa picked her up and rose to her
feet, cradling her little body to her chest. She felt weightless, like a white spectre, drifting out the
doors in the still blackness. Bare feet ghosted over the cold floor as her hair brushed over her
shoulders and the goosebumps on her arms. Her body moved of its own accord down the short
 corridors and into Barret's bedroom. To Tifa's great relief, he was there: a dark mass within pale
sheets. He was safe; he was home. She tried to stifle a whimper, managing to restrain it so that only a
small squeak escaped her throat. Crawling into bed beside him, she set Marlene snugly in between
the bodies of her guardians. It was an indescribable comfort to hear Barret's soft breathing and feel
his warmth just inches from her. These things were tangible--real, evidence that his presence wasn't a
vision or a dream.

She wanted to stay forever like this, bound to the only two people in this world that made her feel
like she had purpose. Tifa wanted to pretend that nothing would tear them apart, though life had
taught her that she had no control over such things. In the busyness of each day, it was easy for her
fragile heart to rest. Chasing after a toddler, cooking, cleaning and running the bar exhausted her to
the point that she'd normally drop off into a dreamless sleep seconds after her head hit the pillow. But
it was nights like these that struck terror in her bones and drew out the unrelenting fear that festered
under her skin. When sleep eluded her and refused to set her free of the welling panic, there wasn’t
much she could do to comfort herself. So far, the only solution Tifa had found was the reassurance of
Barret's bicep resting against her shoulder and the warmth of Marlene nestled between them. It was
only then that the visions of blue eyes ceased and she could let herself fade into the black.

… … …

She wasn’t sure when it was that she began to submit to her bad moods. Was it because of her
recurring dreams? Was it her fatigue? Was it the stress of running a blossoming business or the
dissatisfaction of trying to search for meaning amongst the everyday mundanity? Tifa was normally
masterful at hiding her feelings, but lately they’d been finding their way through, like water seeping
through cracks in a dam. She usually wore a carefully constructed mask of tentative optimism and
quiet patience around others, afraid to let them see everything that swirled like a hurricane inside her.
Perhaps Biggs and Wedge and Jessie would think she was just a burden if she let it show how much
she was hurting. If Barret knew her twisted past, would she cease to hold value in his heart?
Tifa finished putting the groceries away and closed the door to the pantry with a little more force than necessary.

Was it really these fears that held her back? Or was she afraid of talking about Cloud and Aria and Nibelheim because it meant that she’d finally have to face the reality of her current state? As much as Tifa liked to tell herself that she wouldn’t look back and her deceased loved ones would never return to her, but still, she felt like she was always searching for them in the crowd or waiting for them to come home. If she talked about it—discussed it with someone—that mean facing that fact that every last thing that had bound her to the girl she was has been swept away? Seventh Heaven’s patrons were usually messy, pushy, and far from polite, but one thing Tifa loved about bartending was listening to their problems as they attempted to drown them in alcohol. Focusing on other’s peoples’ problems distracted her from dwelling upon her own.

“Tifa!” Marlene’s voice called out from the bar space. “Tifa, look!”

With a weary sigh, she headed out of the kitchen. The toddler was crouched on the floor near the front door, head on her knees as she studied something on the floor. “What is it, Mar?”

“Bugs!”

She pointed a chubby finger at the crack under the door where a stream of ants was marching through. The two girls took a minute to stare, watching where the parade led to. “Why are they coming inside, Tifa?”

“Maybe because it’s cold outside, or they know we have yummy food to eat.” Tifa said, rising to her feet. “Where do you think they’re going?”

“Dunno…”

The ants stretched along the wall, like a living black string, winding their way around toward the kitchen. After the handful of structural problems and the plethora of repairs the building required before they opened for business, an insect infestation was the last thing that they needed. They certainly couldn’t spare the gil for an exterminator, but luckily, Tifa didn’t think they would need one. Growing up in the country had taught her a trick or two.

“Well, we can’t have them getting to the food and making the customers upset, can we?”

“No, no!” Marlene came to stand at her side, tiny arm wrapping around Tifa’s bare leg. Her big brown eyes were filled with concern. “If bugs are here, they won’t come!”

Tifa ruffled the little girl’s dark hair. “Don’t worry. I know how to get them away. My mother taught me that ants don’t like cinnamon.”

Scooping Marlene into her arms, she made her way to the spice rack in the kitchen. She let the toddler carry the little glass bottle of cinnamon back to the front door, where she crouched once again to observe the insects.

“Look! The bug is lost!”

Tifa followed Marlene’s pointed finger where there was one ant out of line by a few feet. It weaved left and right, wiggling its little antennae as it frantically searched for the others who were marching steadily along with purpose. Together, the girls used their hands to corral the bug back toward its kin. They giggled as it ran this way and that before finally rejoining its colony, falling into step. Tifa thought that perhaps her life was something like that ant’s. As a child she had been walking along,
secure and safe, until one misfortune after another had spun her out into chaos and frantic, desperate loneliness. For so long she had suffered. But if a wayward ant could find its way back to security and safety, surely she could. Right? All she needed was a little guidance. But this sort of healing required her to allow others to help her, and Tifa wasn’t sure she could do that. The thought of exposing the most vulnerable parts of her to anyone filled her with an icy terror. She took a deep breath and folded up her fears, hastily tucking them away behind a smile.

“Ready? I’ll show you how to sprinkle it.”

Marlene watched as Tifa laid a neat line of cinnamon along the length of the ants’ path. She was amazed as the ants began to fall out of line with one another, tumbling into a small disorder, but refusing to cross over the line of cinnamon. They seemed confused and began a hasty retreat. The toddler laughed, clapping her hands and wiggling with excitement. She ran along the wall to the front door.

“It’s working! It’s working!” she cried, hopping from one foot to other. “Bye bye, ants! Bye bye!”

Heavy boot falls sounded on the wooden porch right outside the entryway. Marlene fell quiet, looking up and waiting to watch the door knob turn. Though she was certain of who it was, Tifa went to stand by the little girl, just in case. With a jingle of keys and the sliding of the lock, the door opened to reveal Barret’s large frame. Biggs and Wedge followed directly behind. Marlene squealed with delight, throwing her little arms up toward him as he scooped her up and led the others inside. Tifa gasped in surprise as Barret laughed, pulling her in for a squeezing hug with his free arm.

“Ain’t nothin’ like comin’ home to my two best girls!”

Marlene giggled and rubbed her hands over his scruffy jawline. “Missed you, Papa!”

“I missed you, too, little lady!” Releasing Tifa, he crouched on the floor and set Marlene on her feet. “Look here; I got somethin’ for your treasure box.”

Big brown eyes gleamed as the girl grinned. Barret shifted to pull something out of his pocket and she peered curiously at his closed fist. Slowly, he opened it to reveal a little sea shell. Marlene let out a small, joyful noise as she reached out to take it. Tifa’s heart dropped out of her stomach as she stared at the alabaster piece against the dark skin of his palm. She swallowed compulsively, watching the little girl turn it over and run her little fingers over the ridges and grooves. It seemed stupid, really, that such a small thing could cause her to lose her cool. But it wasn’t just a little shell, was it? It was the memory of frolicking in the waves with the love of her life and a dream of a house near the roar of the surf. That insignificant trinket represented the hope for the future she and Cloud had once had: the hope that had evaporated so quickly before her eyes as she watched, helpless.

“Welcome home, Barret, Biggs, Wedge…” Tifa clenched her fists and breathed deeply in an attempt to still the pounding of her heart. “There’s dinner on the stove. Please help yourselves.”

She didn’t let them see the tears that burned at the corners of her eyes as she disappeared into the basement.

Hastily, Tifa ripped off her cardigan and tossed it over the chair in front of Jessie’s computer. She marched over to the punching bag in the corner and reached for her leather gloves, equipping them swiftly. One punch was quickly followed by endless others. Sometimes, when she was overwhelmed, it helped to vent her frustrations in this manner. Tifa enjoyed the feeling of adrenaline through her veins. When she focused on just the motion of her body, the precision of each impact, she could forget about everything for just a little while. In this way, she could achieve a small bit of normalcy in her strange life. But after only a few minutes, Tifa knew that this session would be
different than the others. Her mind refused to yield to blank serenity and instead ran forward with as much fury as her flying fists. One fear exploded forth into the next, like fireworks in a night sky, and she exerted herself even harder to try and outpace them.

Barret was here, tackling each day alongside her, when everyone else she needed had left her. What if he died, too? Barret had seen her at her worst and welcomed her into his life at the lowest point in hers. He was truly heaven-sent, taking pity on someone as broken as herself. Tifa hoped that she had paid back even a small amount of his kindness by obtaining and maintaining the bar. But it wasn’t enough; nothing was enough, because she wasn’t enough. She was nothing but a source of misfortune and disaster. Everyone who had come to value her in this life had experienced significant misfortune; what made Barret and Marlene safe to be around her? Was she putting AVALANCHE in danger by simply being a part of their lives?

Her breath hitched as she sniffled, trying to bite back a strangled, miserable whimper. Long, black hair whirled behind her as she swung, landing a kick with her heel.

Every time things seemed to be going well for her, something would come and destroy that security. Happiness and hope would shine through only to tumble into despair shortly after. Tifa was sure that as long as she was alive, there’d always be something to drag her down. Comfort would come only to be followed by ever mounting ordeals and it hurt to think like that, realizing that it would always be this way. This constant fear was like a disease that had wasted her inner strength, refusing to be healed by all of life’s little joys.

That damn little seashell. She wanted to crush it into a fine powder under her heel, scattering pieces as her hopes had been dispersed upon the wind.

It was hard to face the fact that as hard as she tried, nothing would erase memories of all that came before. Tifa wanted to believe that Cloud was just a mark on the complicated map of her life; a ghost that could be buried in the rotting splinters of her memory, forgotten and blurred as time stretched forward. He didn’t deserve to be forgotten, but if she dwelled, she’d drown. Just like Papa. With Cloud, Tifa buried her youth, her strength, and her better self. Zangan had once told her that when faced with hardship and disappointment, one could choose to be bitter or to be better. Tifa wanted to believe that she could rise above it all, that she could defeat the sadness and rage that threatened to consume her. But when she took a step back and analyzed herself, all she saw was resentment and the desire to for retribution. She knew it was wrong, but fighting against these feelings was like trying to swim against a raging current. It was alright to be sad. It was alright to lament. It was all right to feel anger. But it was not all right to lash out like she wanted to, and she felt like a stranger in her own skin as she yearned for retaliation. Zangan would surely have been ashamed of who she’d become.

Papa would’ve shaken his head, muttering: I told you so.

If only she had stayed. If she had convinced Cloud to quit and the two of them could’ve stayed in Nibelheim to vanish like the rest of them. That way, she wouldn’t be stuck, lingering here and wondering why she was alive after all that had happened. That way, she wouldn’t have given birth alone in foreign place. That way, she wouldn’t have had to suffer the crushing loss of her husband and infant daughter only to live on, stumbling forward like an empty vessel.

The chain of the punching bag rattled with the force of her heel.

But it there was something else that ate at her heart all this time, though she couldn’t put her finger on it. It wasn’t until that moment that she realized what was bothering her. Tifa paused and caught her reflection in the large television screen on the opposite wall. She panted, studying her silhouette, and she felt her throat get tight. It was as if the joyful little girl, running barefoot from their secret spot by
the stream to her red roofed house in Nibelheim, no longer existed. She felt that this new girl, with her sad eyes and bleeding knuckles, had destroyed her. The child with a cherry red bow in her hair had been replaced by a brawler in a short skirt and a crop top. What a contrast she was to Mama’s beautiful, flowing robes. Tifa remembered being embarrassed by the scantily clad women in Midgar, but now it seemed she was one of them. She was running so far from her past that the very thought of wearing a bloomers and a frock made her sick to her stomach.

Was she ever the prized child of a small mountain village? Did she ever spend hours with her head out of her bedroom window, giggling with Cloud over childish nonsense? Or maybe that, too, was only a dream. Maybe she would never be like that again.

With a sharp exhale, Tifa turned back to her punching bag, smashing clenched fists against the worn leather once more. She had lost everything that had made her who she was, and she felt so desperately lost. Why couldn’t she shake this despair after so long? Would she be like this for the rest of her life, succumbing to agonizing dreams and boundless fear and anxiety in her waking hours? If you lose yourself, what is there to do? Every time she blinked, she saw their faces, and it drove her mad. Tifa had lost all control to her fears. What was she fighting for? Was it just a distraction as she waited for her own eternal sleep? Holding on to a dream of home had surely only hindered her, but she needed help letting go. This was her home now. Nothing remained in Nibelheim that made it home anymore.

She beat the punching bag with all her strength, trading the discipline of precision for anger. Fists drove into the bag again and again, faster and faster, as Tifa blinked against the sting of sweat and tears in her eyes. For so many years, her cries for help were met with silence, and it was just as well. She didn’t deserve a helping hand. Mama would’ve cried to see her in such a state. Papa would’ve been angry in his shame of what she had become. Cloud would hang his head, for surely he had thought she was stronger than this. Aria, if she could have known any better, would have been grateful that she didn’t have to suffer with such a mess of a mother.

Grief rose out of her throat, manifesting in a cry of rage as she landed a final blow, hitting the punching bag so hard that it lurched, the chain snapping as it hit the wall and landed on the floor. Tifa sunk to her hands and knees, drawing in ragged breaths before crumpling into a ball on the floor. Her hair fanned out around her and stuck to the tear tracks on her cheeks, bangs matted to her forehead with perspiration. Shaking with sobs, Tifa succumbed to her burning anguish. She didn’t move from her place on the floor when she heard the hydraulic whir of the pinball machine lift as someone came down into the basement. Barret rushed over to her, afraid she had hurt herself during her exercise.

“Tifa! Tifa, are you aw’right?” he sputtered, looking over her for an injury. It quickly became clear to him that it wasn’t a physical wound they were dealing with.

“What is it? What’s got you like this?”

Barret had rarely seen Tifa cry. From the handful of years they had spent living with one another, she had two moods: cautiously ambitious and passively content. She was always quiet, always grateful, treating him and Marlene like precious gifts. Melancholy was always laced in her countenance, her movements, intertwined in everything that she did. He knew she had been through a great deal, thought he knew very few details of her past. Something inside him broke seeing her like this, and Barret gently tried to coax her up and into his arms.

He stroked her head and spoke to her patiently, as one talks to a child. “C’mon, now. You’re aw’right. Tell me what happened.”

“I-I can’t f-forget them!” she stuttered. “I w-want to forget!”
Tifa continued to try to speak, but her erratic breathing and uncontrollable hiccoughs prevented her from communicating clearly. She dissolved into further sobs, and Barret had no choice but to let her cry until her tears ran dry. For a long while, they sat there: Tifa curled into him, clutching at his shirt as he kept an arm around her, attempting to soothe her with encouraging words. He wasn’t sure how much time had passed when her breathing became slow and even. Then, softly, she spoke.

Tifa told him everything; it was the most he’d ever heard her speak since he’d met her. She spoke of her mother’s death, her father’s downward spiral, her marriage and the shock of moving to Midgar. Barret learned of her loving husband and the bond that they shared, his mysterious death and how she struggled to get by and ended up at Bailey’s Pub. With a trembling voice, she told him of her beautiful baby girl who had never had the chance to open her eyes to this world. He held her the whole time, encouraging her and rubbing her back like an anxious parent. Barret had no idea how much Tifa had held within. So much had been compressed under her timid exterior that it had become too much for her to bear and he couldn’t understand it. He’d always worn his emotions on his sleeve. He boiled over like a frothing pot but always felt better afterward. Maybe this explosion and someone to listen were what she needed. His heart broke for her. How much she had endured for someone so young.

When she was finished, he tilted her chin up to look at him. “Listen to me, Tifa. You’re an awful sweet thing—an’ strong as hell, too. You’ve been walkin’ around all this time with this burden on yo’ back. You wanna forget them, but they’ve all given you somethin’ that’s made you into the amazin’ girl you are. S’up to you to use what you got. Your life is important, Teef. They knew it, I know it. They’ve given you what you need to keep goin’ in this world. Your life is important. Don’t you ever forget that, and don’t you ever forget them.”

His own words surprised him. Barret was not one for encouraging speeches, especially when the girl’s insecurities reflected many of his own. But like Tifa, he had kept his past to himself. Maybe it was time to share it with her, like she had shown her bleeding heart to him.

“How do you do that, Barret?” she asked, lowering her eyes and pulling away from his chest to sit neatly in front of him. “How do you deal with remembering what you’ve lost and still move forward? My family is dead…everyone I loved in Nibelheim is gone.”

“Nibelheim? The little place out west that burned to the ground a few years back?”

Tifa’s head snapped up. “It burned? A fire?”

“That’s what the rumor was in Corel, anyway. Said the whole place went up in smoke, but ShinRA rebuilt it like new.”

She slouched under the weight of the truth about her home, and Barret watched as a number of expressions fought for dominance on her face: shock, sadness, despair, grief and finally anger. Her fists clenched, tugging at the hem of her skirt. She spoke through grit teeth. “They did this. They destroyed Nibelheim! Didn’t they? They covered it up. Why would they do that?”

He snorted. “Dunno. Maybe th’same reason they set my hometown ablaze.”

“What?”

“Yep, killed just about all of us. Some members of AVALANCHE attacked the mako reactor they built there, causing a big explosion. To punish them, ShinRA made an example out of Corel, blaming us and burning the town to the ground.” Barret grazed his fingers over his gun attachment as he continued. “My best buddy Dyne and I were a few miles outside of town when it happened. ShinRA attacked us, too, before we could get back to the burning village. He died, I got my hand
blown off. When I managed to get back to town, my wife was dead. The only survivor I found in the flames was Dyne’s little girl, Marlene.”

“Oh, Barret. That’s terrible.” She hung her head once more. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t know…”

He let out a humorless laugh. “Looks like we got more in common than hatin’ ShinRA and lovin’ Marlene.”

Tifa pulled her hair over her shoulder in a nervous gesture, running her hands over smooth ebony locks. She dragged her knees up to her chest. “They all suffered so much and it’s my fault. Cloud, my baby, my parents…”

“Ain’t nobody’s fault. Nobody’s but the ShinRA,” Barret said, placing his hand on her bare knee. “S’not fair, but life’s that way. Not all of us can be together in the end.”

“I miss them so much.”

“You’ll always miss ‘em. But they’re always part of you if you hang on tight to what they gave you, what they taught you.” He tilted her chin up so that her eyes met his. “You’ve been so busy lookin’ at what you’ve lost that you haven’t let yourself be happy with what you have left. Don’t worry about them—you’ll never be apart if you keep ‘em close to you. You’re feelin’ too much and thinkin’ too little.”

Tifa bowed her head, leaning forward to press her face against his broad chest as she circled her arms around him. She knew he was right, and it felt so liberating to finally understand that she didn’t need to block out their memory completely to function normally. Drawing from the strength she had gained through her hardships was the key to possessing the ability to look her fear and sadness in the face. She had lived through countless horrors; certainly she could stand like a stone against the next hardship that came along. Tifa could push forward with the knowledge that she and her loved ones would never truly be apart, because as long as she welcomed the memory of them, they’d always be part of each other. Her family may be dead, but they’d live on inside her if she let them. Tifa cherished the thought of never truly being alone, knowing that it would give her the courage to continue doing things that she never thought she could.

The passing of her loved ones had closed the door on her dreams of a normal life with a normal family. But Tifa had been staring for so long at the door that had shut that she didn’t clearly see the others that had opened. Life wasn’t just about her or Cloud or Aria. She could choose to waste away her life, like Papa had. But her eyes had finally been opened to the tools of healing in front of her, and Tifa would definitely choose to use them. Until now, Tifa had been blind to the fact that hope for her future lay in people just as ravaged and heartbroken as herself.

Wine colored eyes closed as her friend rubbed soothing circles on her back.

If Corel hadn’t burned, she would’ve never met Barret. If Dyne and his wife didn’t die, Tifa couldn’t be healed by Marlene. If Cloud was alive, she wouldn’t have snuck goat’s milk and Marlene would be without a mother figure. If her parents didn’t leave this life, Tifa wouldn’t understand what it was like to be an orphan and coach Marlene in her eventual struggles. Life wasn’t a straight line; It was many tangled lines all woven together. So many lives were intertwined, depending upon one another to meet their individual fates. One small thing affects everyone else. If she could help AVALANCHE take down ShinRA for the good of the planet, maybe she’d help endless lives in their quest for happiness and peace. And at the same time, for her, bringing ShinRA to its knees would help her feel better by taking vengeance for her loved ones.

“Barret…” she blinked, eyelashes still heavy with moisture. “I want to be a member of
AVALANCHE. I want to avenge my family. I want to save the planet.”

He stiffened, then sighed, reluctant to revisit this frequent argument. How could he guarantee her safety if she wanted nothing more than to put herself at risk? The last thing Barret wanted was for Tifa to get involved and end up injured, arrested, or dead. But at eighteen, she was considered an adult, able to make life decisions on her own. He knew he’d be furious if anyone stood in his way of the desire that burned in his heart.

“You’ve got guts and muscle and fists,” he said. She lifted her head, face full of hope. “But you know I need help with Marlene.”

Tifa knew she should’ve been content with that task; grateful to be protected by Barret and given the chance to live, but her heart burned with fury and the thirst for vengeance. She wiped her eyes with the back of her arm, her voice unwavering. “I know. She’ll be my first priority. I just…I need to feel like I’m using what everyone has taught me to knock ShinRA’s feet out from under it. They’re evil, Barret. They’ve got to be stopped and I can’t stand not doing anything about it.”

His smirk drew a tentative smile upon her lips. “You’ll never give up, will you?”

“Never.”

“We’ll start you out slow. Don’t get into any trouble, y’hear?”

Tifa let out a small, incredulous laugh. “Oh, Barret! Thank you!”

She almost knocked him backward with the force of her embrace, and he let out a hearty guffaw. “That’s my brave girl!”

In befriending this man, she had changed from a girl facing a lifetime of despair and emptiness to someone who had purpose and direction. He had found her, trapped in her cage of fear and hopelessness. Back then, she hadn’t had the strength to even rattle the bars, let alone break them. But now, she was free. Spreading her wings and flying toward a fate decided by her own hands, no matter how questionable her ambitions might be.

Courage welled up inside her, like the rush of high tide, and she welcomed it as it washed over her.
Fleeing the Dark

Cloud was dreaming.

He dreamt in fragments that seemed to come and go as they pleased as he remained motionless in his prison. How long had he been here? His dreams followed no logical path, nor could he be sure if they were dreams in his sleep or waking dreams in his mind. Often, he'd relive the same dream many times. As death and oblivion were closely related, so too were death and dreams. Who can truly say that a dead man doesn’t dream? Was he dead, dreaming of life? Or was he alive and dreaming of death? Cloud told himself that it didn’t matter, for he couldn’t remember a time before he had been contained here. He told himself that he was safe in this glass case, suspended in the quiet. It was a gentle, soothing lie that blocked out the memory of the horrors that lie outside.

There was a jarring sound as time lurched back into motion. It boiled up, whirling around fiercely, arcing like lightning, regaining the pace it once knew in the past that felt like a distant memory. He could feel the warm mako being drained from around him and though he was too weak to move, Cloud felt his heart begin to pound with fear. Pain always followed when he was brought out into the open and he shivered with dread and anticipation as he heard the door slide open with a hiss. He hadn’t even the strength to whimper as he was pulled from his mako tomb and into the cold, damp air of the laboratory. Overwhelmed by a flood of sensations, Cloud shivered. A weak groan forced its way out of his throat and he was frightened, for his eyes felt too heavy to open.

Everything was so loud: the hum of electric as it pulsed through machinery, the scraping of boots along the floor, the ragged breaths of the person supporting him with strong arms. A deep, gentle voice spoke to him—a man’s voice—but Cloud couldn’t concentrate. He felt dizzy and disoriented, as if he was falling, and his fingers tried and failed to cling to the one holding him. The light, though always dim when the laboratory wasn’t in use, was blinding to his over-sensitive eyes when he tried to squint. The smell of disinfectant hung heavily in the air, the intensity of it sending nausea rising into his throat. But it wasn’t just the disinfectant that assaulted his nose. He could smell everything: the worn pages of old books, dried chemical residue, and warping wood. Even his sense of touch was heightened. Each individual cell on his skin seemed to tingle where his clothing chafed against it.

Trembling violently, Cloud wished with all his might that he’d be shoved back into his container. There, he’d be safe and warm in the quiet of his glass cocoon.

He felt himself being carried on and on by the man. Cloud wasn’t sure who this man was, or why he was carrying him so far. Normally, he’d just be thrown on the cold examination table, stripped, and experimented upon. That was routine, but this was different, and he didn’t like it. Where was he being taken, now? Were they finally going to kill him? But the voice that spoke calmly to him wasn’t like that of any of the people who hurt him and made him scream until his voice was hoarse and his chest was sore. The voice was soothing, like a forgotten memory from infancy, quelling his anxiety as he was taken away from the dark place where it felt like an eternity within. His head was laid to rest upon something soft. Cloud felt himself being changed out of wet clothes and into something dry, replacing the scent of mako with stale, old linen. The entire time, the man cooed encouragements, but his mind was too muddled to make out what he was saying.

There was no way to tell how much time was passing. Cloud remembered the shock when the snap of fresh air finally hit his skin for the first time in so, so long. He remembered how overwhelmed he was by the brightness of the sun, barely able to flutter his eyelids against the blinding rays. There were so many smells and sounds as the sun would rise and fall again and again. Days would pass, though Cloud couldn’t count their number, but he knew that the air was getting more cold and crisp.
than it was before. Sometimes, he’d regain consciousness to find himself alone. He didn’t like it
when the other one was gone. He was always there, bringing him forward and letting him rest.
During the days, he was fed and kept clean. In the cold of night, the other man kept him warm and
 lulled him to sleep with the sound of slow, even breaths. When the other one was near, he felt safe,
protected, and content.

When he was gone, there were usually frightening noises like metallic clashing and gunshots and
groaning. The metallic scent of blood would make him shiver. But the man was never gone for long,
and he always came back. The thought that he might not return was one that terrified Cloud. What if
he got hurt and he’d have to stay here, alone, with the sky and the dirt? He’d be cold and hungry and
frightened and so, so lonesome. That would be awful. Just when panic started to rise in his chest,
he’d hear the heavy boot steps and the friendly voice and warm relief would spread through his
veins. Every time, Cloud would try and try to move, to speak, to do anything that might let the man
know how happy he made him and that he was listening. But he was without even the strength to
raise his eyes from their half lidded stare where they studied blades of grass. He was afraid the other
one would get angry when he didn’t respond, but he never did. Instead, he ruffled Cloud’s hair and
spoke kind things to him. The skin of his hands was calloused and rough, but it still felt good and
made him happy. He thought that maybe someone had pet his head like that once before, a long time
ago. But when he tried to remember anything before the smell of rubbing alcohol and bleach,
crushing fear and bright, swirling green, a great pain would bloom in his mind and he’d shrink away
from it. And so, he could only go forward.

Day after day, he was carried forward. Cloud wondered where it was they were going before he
decided that it didn’t really matter, as long as they weren’t separated. The man talked and talked as
they went along and hearing his voice meant that things were alright—they were safe and fine and
that was good. Cloud knew the one with him had a name, though he couldn’t recall it, and it didn’t
seem important, anyway. When he thought too hard about it, there’d be flashing white light and static
in his brain that made his head hurt and frightened him. He didn’t need to know his name. It was nice
enough just to listen to him talk, even if he didn’t understand the words. It was so hard to stay awake,
and so Cloud slept often, making it impossible to tell how many days were passing or where they
were or why they were there. But he figured that if he was safe, it didn’t really matter, did it?

Sometimes, he’d be able to open his eyes when the sun wasn’t so bright. He’d watch the ground
move endlessly below as he was carried upon the other one’s shoulder, closely observing the grass
and the rocks and the dirt and seeing how the terrain would change as they’d move forward. Cloud
memorized the scent of the one caring for him, taking in the aroma of dirt and sweat and old leather.
Sometimes, he tried to speak so that the man knew he was listening, but he lacked the strength to
open his mouth. He wanted to hear what his own voice sounded like, and wanted to tell the other
one so many things. Once in a while, when he was put down to rest and stared into the distance, he
tried to smile at the man with the cheery voice. But it never worked, and he hadn’t the strength to
move his head toward where the other one was sitting so that he could see the awkward twitching of
his lips.

Resting was nice, but there was usually more talking than there was when they were on the move.
Cloud hated when he asked him questions, because words meant something, maybe something
important. He always felt so inadequate when the other one sat there, waiting for a response, then
sighing when none came. When they were making their way forward, further and further from the
bad place, it was fine because it was nice enough to hear the kind voice that soothed him. But when
they were sitting together, and he could almost see the man’s face, it felt so much more important to
be able to talk, too. Before, it had been enough to sit and listen to the other one talking to him and
breathing. Now, Cloud wanted more than ever to say something, even though he didn’t know what
to say or how to do it. Maybe if he spoke, he could make the other man feel as good as he made him
feel.
But he couldn’t speak. He was too weak and the words he heard didn’t make any sense in his head until he really thought about them. As the sun rose and fell many, many times, Cloud found that it was becoming to recognize the meanings to certain words. If he didn’t know the exact meaning, sometimes there was a feeling that was linked to them instead. Something deep inside him shrank away from the word ShinRA. It was one of a few words that made his skin feel prickly and a shiver run through his body, even though he wasn’t sure of the meaning. Meaning was still lost in the swirling fog in his head, and when he tried to retrieve it, the blinding, sharp pains in his head would seize him. He didn’t like that, not at all, so it was best to try not to remember the words that brought hurt and fear.

The sun was beginning to set once again. Cloud knew this because it was getting darker and therefore easier to open his eyes. The chill of evening was beginning to creep into the air, and the other one’s footsteps were beginning to drag. He knew they’d stop soon, and when they did, Cloud was gently propped against a thick tree trunk so he could see the dark haired man properly without having to move his head. He offered him water and cleaned his face as he talked to him. Cloud listened, eyes focused on the side of his mouth, which was curled into a gentle smile.

“Don’t worry, buddy. We’re getting there.” His voice was warm and bright and full of hope. “Soon, we’ll get to Midgar. We’ll find Tifa and start a new life: you, me and our girls.”

_Tifa…_

Something came to life inside him, like a shooting star flying through the night sky. Tifa was a good word, he knew. When he had said it, several images flashed through his mind: _a night dress fanned out upon ocean waves, a silver band upon a finger, black hair against grey gravel, red eyes that twinkled, a tiny metal bell…_

But as shooting stars do, the visions left him in an instant and all he could do was stare and blink with wide blue eyes. Cloud’s breathing increased as he continued to grapple for the meaning of that word. It was an important word. But memories faded so quickly. No matter how hard he tried to hold onto them, they slipped away from him, like water through his fingers. Before, he had been content. It had been enough just to be there with the other man, listening to his voice and letting himself being taken wherever it was they were going. But now, something had changed within him, and he was no longer satisfied with the simplicity of his mind and the little it was able to retain. Frustration coursed through his veins, but he did not yet have the ability to do anything about it.

"You’ll be alright, you’ll see. We’ll work together and help you get better.” The man ran his fingers through his black hair with a sigh. When he spoke again, his voice was quiet and soft. Cloud thought that perhaps he was sad, but didn’t know why. “Don’t worry, buddy. I won’t leave you, okay? I promise.”

Of course he’d be alright. As long as the other one was with him, Cloud knew he would be just fine.

… … …

Tifa thought that by the time she was twenty, she’d have a little house, a husband, and a few children of her own. In early childhood, she’d been free to let herself dream wildly about her future, fantasizing about bright sunny mornings cooking breakfast for her growing family and nights laughing with each other near the hearth. But reality had twisted her hopes and dreams, delivering them in a manner in which she’d never expected. The little girl who she used to be would’ve never imagined a future quite like this one. But it was all she had and she’d cling to it with all her strength.

It was New Year’s Eve. Everyone was bustling about, excited to ring in the new year at parties and celebrations. Tifa was hiding away in the basement, preparing to wrap a gift for Marlene’s birthday celebration the next day. The little girl was a constant source of hope and joy in their lives, giving off
her radiant warmth even in the frigid temperatures of her birth month. It was difficult to believe that she’d be four years old: hardly the small, sickly baby she had met in the smoke and bustle of the pub. It was fascinating to watch her physically and emotionally develop as her personality continued to bloom. Tifa admired Marlene’s spunk and joyful spirit, despite how little they had to offer her. Vague memories of her own childhood would surface whenever she’d watch the girl play with wine corks or dolls carefully constructed from fabric scraps and twine from beer crates. Tifa recalled the handsome toys she’d had as a little girl: a lacquered wooden horse hand-carved by Papa, an expensive wax baby doll, ornately illustrated story books... Her heart squeezed with guilt when she realized just how spoiled and privileged she had been.

Every year, it was the same. She and Barret would do their best to scrape together some gil for her birthday gift and some sweets. This year, they had no money to spare after the recent legal fees required for Barret to officially adopt Marlene as his daughter. This decision helped Barret to embrace some sort of reconciliation for what had happened to his home town and the people he loved. It’d be a gift that Marlene wouldn’t understand the significance of until she was older, but Tifa felt that not having her open a physical gift just wouldn’t do. And so, inspired by the adoption, she had a daring thought. She agonized over it for a week, turning the idea over and over in her head until she came to her conclusion. Tifa knew that she wasn’t Marlene’s mother, no matter how much she felt like (and wished) she was. Caring for that little one had been a major point of healing when it came to dealing with the loss of Aria. As a gesture of her gratitude for that particular solace, Tifa had pulled the green blanket she had knit for Aria out of its hiding place in her bedroom.

She picked it up, running her fingers over the soft, thick yarn before gathering it in her arms and hugging it against her cheek. At first, she worried that it would be disrespectful of her daughter’s memory to give away such an intimate object. But reason settled upon her as she opened her heart to peace. Marlene had no mother, and Tifa swore to herself that she’d always be there to love and guide her. The knitted blanket would serve the little girl well on the cold nights in their drafty bedroom, and it would let Tifa breathe a sigh of relief to know that Aria would be a part of their daily lives in this way. No longer would the blanket be tucked away in a box in the closet, no longer would her daughter be a hidden topic that she refused to willingly visit. With a deep breath, she smiled softly and folded the blanket into a little square before wrapping it neatly in newspaper. As a finishing touch, she adorned the little package with a cheery red ribbon that she fashioned into a bow.

Tifa knew that she had to trust that Aria’s short presence in her life had a purpose. Preparing her for her role in Marlene’s life was one, but she knew more would reveal themselves in time.

There was an eruption of laughter upstairs, where Biggs, Wedge, Jessie and Barret were playing a card game. Tifa’s smile widened as she heard Barret complaining about an unfair hand as the Biggs hollered that he was a sore loser. Despite the noisy adults, she could still hear Marlene’s muffled giggles through the floorboards. Since it was Tuesday, her business was closed, and the crew had the entire bar space to all to themselves. New Year’s Eve was usually a good night for business, but Tifa couldn’t bear to lose her only day off and sacrifice a night of fun for her friends. But they weren’t just friends, were they? They were so much more. After hiding Marlene’s gift, Tifa used the pinball machine lift to join the others upstairs.

“Hey, Tifa!” Jessie greeted. “Grab a seat and I’ll deal you in! Better take the opportunity while it lasts—Barret is the worst at poker but he won’t stop until he wagers away everything he’s got!”

Wedge snorted. “He’s got nothing to gamble with in the first place!”

“Shut it, Wedge!” Barret barked in mock anger. Marlene bounced happily in his lap, not understanding what exactly the conversation was about, but knowing that all of her favorite adults were happy.
“None of us have any _gil_,” Tifa giggled, keeping her cards close to her body. “What could you guys possibly be betting with?”

“That’s Wedge’s cracked fire materia on the table there.” Biggs explained. “Barret wagered a bottle of your pinot grigio, Jessie figured she’d put down fifteen _gil_ and I’m betting a chocolate bar.”

She made a mock angry face at Barret (who crossed his arms and grunted) before considering her options. “Alright, if I lose, I’ll cook lunch for all of you every day for a week.”

The boys’ eyes brightened at that, and Biggs pumped a fist into the air. “You’re goin’ down, Teef!”

The game lasted for about fifteen minutes. There was laughter and lightheartedness that Tifa had come to associate with this crew over the past few years. It had been so long since she felt this happy and free that she almost didn’t know how to act. At first, she was cautious about feeling joy and trusting that these people were in her life to stay after everything she used to love had turned to ash. But as time stretched forward she embraced it and thrived under the support of her friends. As she bonded with AVALANCHE, she realized that it was the saddest people smiled the brightest. Every one of these people had experienced sadness, trauma and loss in their lives. If they could all move forward, then she could, too. These broken people were slowly filling in the cracks and empty spaces of her broken heart, and she felt a sense of belonging that she hadn’t felt in a very long time.

There was more to this world than she had originally thought as a naïve child from a closed off village in a remote mountain. Her life was not over because she lost her home, her family, her husband, and her child. Tifa felt that when she lost those things, she had lost her identity, for nothing about her remained the same way that it did before. When she thought of herself as a small child, there wasn’t one thing that she had in common with her anymore. But the circumstances of her adult life in Midgar had taught her that she needed to evolve. Changing and shifting her perspective was essential; learning to flow around the obstacles that arose was the key to not just surviving, but thriving. No longer did Tifa feel crushed by all of the longing that had welled up inside her. Now, she knew that the burning drive within her had a role to fulfill, and a sense of purpose had settled upon her at last. It had been a long time since she’d felt the way she did before her world had fallen apart around her.

Operating as a member of AVALANCHE helped her to feel useful, though at times it seemed as if they were playing some sort of kid’s game as they snuck around, gathering information and making plans. In theory, when all of their efforts were put together into an elaborate plan, the mako reactors would be made inoperable. Jessie estimated that in less than a year, they’d have everything they needed to begin setting up explosives into the core of these reactors to take them out one by one. But now, it didn’t seem like they were making much of a difference. Sometimes, she’d feel guilty as she thought about the destruction AVALANCHE would soon cause. Tifa would think of her mother and wonder if she’d be disappointed to see that her daughter neglected the kindness she’d been taught to express and let her anger and sadness and desperation thrive instead. Could she really have raised Aria to be a good person? How much of a hypocrite would she be to have told her daughter to be forgiving and kind when she herself was striking out in revenge against ShinRA? Was she even good enough to help raise Marlene? Tifa told herself revenge wasn’t the only reason: she was trying to save the planet and help others who were continuously hurt by the mega-corporation. But were they truths or just poor excuses for her dissident behavior?

But when she thought about everything that had happened, Tifa realized that morality in life was not always black and white, good and evil. It seemed that sometimes, a little evil had to be done for the greater good. Would Mama be proud that her daughter was helping to make sure ShinRA wasn’t responsible for any more needless deaths? Would Cloud have been honored to know that his wife was working to preserve his honor and strike back at the organization that was responsible for his
death and the slow decaying of their planet? She knew that her loved ones would have encouraged her and thought of her as brave to give all she had to survive and fight against the ugliness of the truth regarding the ShinRA electric power company. The thought that they’d commend her for refusing to hide behind ignorance or cowardice only heartened her desire to fight against all the suffering ShinRA had caused.

“Read it and weep, boys!” Jessie said, displaying her royal flush, and a collective groan of defeat sounded from around the table.

“Jessie, that’s the third time in a row!” Biggs slumped in his chair.

Barret shook his head. “I tol’ ya she was cheatin’!”

They all laughed, and Tifa let herself feel all of the positive sensations overflowing in her heart.

Feigning haughtiness, Jessie held her palm open to Biggs. “Come on, hand it over!”

With a huff, Biggs pulled the chocolate bar out of his pocket and placed in Jessie’s hand a little more dramatically than necessary. The brunette smile and turned toward Marlene, sitting in Barret’s lap beside her. “Here you go, little lady. Happy early birthday!”

Brown eyes wide, Marlene grinned. She took the candy and turned her head up toward her father. “Can I eat it, Papa?”

“You can eat it tomorrow. It’s bedtime an’ I can’t have you bouncin’ off the walls now, could I?”

“Please, Papa? Pleeease?”

Tifa put her cards down and made her way around the table to pluck the little girl up into her arms. “It’s special birthday chocolate, Marlene. You have to wait until your real birthday to eat it!”

The child’s mouth turned downward, but she did not protest. Biggs caught her eye, and stuck his tongue out in an attempt to make her smile. She stuck out her little tongue right back, making them both giggle. Tifa rubbed Marlene’s back and began to move toward the stairs. “Come on, bath time.”

Before disappearing out of sight, Tifa cast a glance at the precious people gathered around the tiny table, reflecting on how much they’d taught her in their relatively short friendship. Time moved forward, and nothing lasted forever, but it didn’t mean that holding onto the past and refusing to let anyone in was the answer to the pain of loss. She decided that it was simply too costly to let fear, doubt and regret make her waiver in her ambitions. No longer would she hold onto feelings that made her forget that she was destined for more than hiding away, and that at least some of her future was in her hands. Tifa felt as if she’d travelled so far from the helplessness she’d experienced and it filled her with confidence.

Filled with a momentary rush of glee, she turned Marlene in her arms and attacked her neck with a slew of playful kisses, eliciting a cascade of laughter from the little girl. If there was one mistake that she was going to fix, it would be to cherish every day with the good people in her life. Tifa had come to realize that her life wasn’t over; she could create her own tomorrows and reach for goals that she hadn’t thought possible before. Those precious days of happiness that she thought she’d lost really didn’t come to end.

After a quick bath, Tifa was helping Marlene change into her pajamas when a loud boom startled the pair. One sounded after another in staccato bursts of sound. Frightened, Marlene clung to her guardian as the older girl moved toward their tiny window to see what was happening. Tifa had only seen fireworks once in her life. As a young girl, her parents had taken her to a festival in a nearby
village, where bright explosions of many colors lit up the summer night sky. It was a vivid, magical memory that she had tucked away into a far corner of her mind. She remembered sitting on Papa’s shoulders as Mama stood beside them. Tifa had been so mesmerized by the display, she paying no mind to the jarring loudness of the blasts. Here in the slums, the fireworks weren’t nearly as impressive. Despite the fact that they were illegal, there were a handful of people who couldn’t help but ring in the new year with small rockets fired low enough to avoid the looming plate.

"Come look, Marlene! Fireworks!"

She smiled and held her arms out to the little girl. "They're not scary. I promise."

"Fireworks?" Marlene let go of Tifa's leg to let herself be lifted onto her hip. The girl gasped when she spotted a small blue pop of color in the dimly lit space below the plate. "Oh! Pretty!"

Tifa smiled as Marlene clapped and laughed, watching her brown eyes sparkle with awe and wonder. But her smile quickly faded as it occurred to her that this little girl probably had no idea what it was like to look at the sky. It frightened Tifa to think that she herself had almost forgotten what it was like to have to simple freedom of finding shapes in puffy clouds or watching each star appear as the sun set. These things were such fond memories of her childhood that a great sadness came over her when she realized that Marlene may never experience those simple joys.

"Tifa, why are there fireworks?"

Crimson eyes lowered to examine the child's face, taking in the beauty of her round cheeks, doe eyes and innocent countenance. Would it always be this hard to feel like she was raising the girl properly in this environment? More than anything, Tifa wanted her to grow up into a happy, well-adjusted young adult, it could she really do that when they had so little? She smiled at the girl, ruffling her chestnut hair affectionately.

"Everyone seems to know it's your birthday tomorrow. See? All of Midgar is celebrating for you."
After the Rain

He was hidden like he always was when the other one went to fight something. Cloud had found the strength somehow to raise his head and watch him leave. The man didn't notice, and Cloud had lifted a heavy arm as if to call him back, but he was too slow and it was too late. He waited and waited and no one came back, even long after all the bad, loud noises had stopped. Panic swelled in Cloud's chest and he felt his heart begin to pound. Something was wrong.

Moving his head to look around was agony. Using limbs to crawl over the earth was like wading through thick, wet sand. But fear drove Cloud forward and he slithered out of his hiding place, both relieved and terrified when his hazy eyes landed on a familiar figure lying in the dirt a short distance away. His throat tightened and a strangled mournful noise emerged without his consent. It happened, it finally happened: the bad thing. The worst thing. The other man was hurt—bleeding—and laying very, very still. By the time Cloud crawled to his side, the man's mutilated chest was heaving with the great effort of breathing. All the blonde could do was stare as he came to kneel beside his friend, eyes wide with disbelief and wild fear.

No. No, no, no! This couldn't happen, it just couldn't! One rain drop fell, then another, then another. "Z-Zack..." Cloud croaked, voice hoarse from thirst and disuse.

Zack was his name, wasn't it? That had been his name. Saying that word and hearing it come out into the air echoed some clarity into the foggy, muddled pace that was his brain. Zack was the one who had helped him all this way, who broke him out of the bad place, whose voice was kind and happy and cheerful. Zack was his friend, his dear friend, his only friend in the world aside from the girl with the red eyes and the laugh that made him think of music and gently falling rain.

Rain...

The rain was hitting Zack’s face, diluting the blood that had pooled around his hair line and washing it down the sides of his face. Blue eyes were so fixated upon the spreading crimson pool that had formed around his fallen companion that Cloud almost didn't notice that the other one was speaking. Zack was talking to him with strangled breath, but Cloud’s brain and heart and soul were screaming and he couldn’t understand the words, no matter how frantically he groped for their meanings. It was all he could do to repeat what was said to him in an attempt to assure the dying man that he was indeed listening.

Over time, he had gotten better at understanding words and remembering their meanings, but right now, everything was lost in the scramble of his panicked brain. It was almost as if he was looking at him for the first time in a very long time, and the warmth of familiarity and comfort spread within him, mixing with the icy fear that pooled in his gut. His head was so groggy and sluggish, but there was one word that he understood. Zack reached up to pull the blonde head to his chest.

“Live...” the fallen SOLDIER said, holding Cloud’s cheek against his broken body.

Cloud understood. He was telling him to keep going, to continue walking away from the bad place to find freedom. But how could he ever do that without Zack? Zack had always been there, had always taken care of him, had always reassured him with kind words when he had been frightened. If it wasn’t for him, Cloud would still be stuck in his glass prison where the bad people would hurt him and make him scream. If he didn’t have Zack, how would anything ever be okay again? Slowly, he raised his head as his companion’s gloved hand lifelessly slid away from him. And then, Zack was talking again, and Cloud struggled to listen as the handle of the buster sword was placed into his
empty palms.

All this time, his hands had been empty. He had nothing to live for, did he? For the endless days he had been carried on and on, Cloud never thought that there was really anything before his days in the bad place. But now, something tugged at his consciousness, screaming from the lost, forgotten parts of his mind. There was something important that he needed to do, something so very urgent that his heart began to beat wildly in his chest, but his scrambled brain couldn’t remember what it was and it frustrated him. But Zack had filled his empty hands with a sword and a command. Live. He would live and fight with everything he was, for Zack and for his freedom. Cloud looked down at his friend to try and tell him that he loved him and was grateful for his kindness and companionship, but his eyes were already closed and a peaceful smile already upon his lips. His chest, littered with bullet holes, wasn’t heaving anymore. The pool of blood had stopped expanding.

Cloud trembled violently as rain pounded the earth around him in a loud, unrelenting hiss. For a long moment, he stared at Zack’s face in disbelief. Any second, he’d start moving or talking again, wouldn’t he? This couldn’t be the end. He had told him to live, but didn’t say how. Zack was always okay. He kept walking and fighting and talking no matter what, and that had always made him feel better. But it had been a long while, and his chest wasn’t moving anymore, and Cloud felt so incredibly alone in this world. It was a desperate, heart shattering loneliness that made him quiver at his very core. After it always being the two of them, how was it possible to go on without the other one? Though Cloud was able to move his body better than he had before, he wasn’t sure that he had the will to trudge forwards. He wanted to lie down beside Zack and beg for death, too. For what good could there be in this life if his friend was no longer a part of it?

His breath hitched as he felt a crushing sadness well up in his chest and constrict his throat. Cloud breathed unsteadily as a stream of frantic whimpers sounded into the air. Lips trembling until he could bear it no longer, he let out a broken cry with all of the strength his tired lungs could manage. Wide blue eyes turned upward toward the heavens as the rain soaked his flaxen spikes and blended with his tears. Memories flooded back into his brain, making the thought of never hearing Zack’s voice or feeling his warmth or seeing his smile again simply unbearable. He cried out again and again into the empty wasteland where they had fallen. Cloud remembered befriending Zack as a ShinRA grunt. He remembered training sessions together, the handful of missions they shared, and dinners they had had together with his wife in his tiny apartment.

His wife…?

But the memories left almost as quickly as they had come, like a lightning strike in the murky darkness of his mind. Cloud lowered his head enough to look out to the horizon. Midgar stood in its looming enormity across the flat desert wasteland, like a black cloud marring the landscape. Gloved hands clenched the handle of the sword where it rested in his lap as he stared at the massive city in the distance. The rain washed over him, rinsing away some of Zack’s blood that marred his cheek. He needed to live. He needed to press forward. Cloud sat for a long time, long after the rain stopped and the heavens opened up to reveal the golden sun. It seemed that many, many hours had passed, but he wasn’t good at measuring the passage of time. He wasn’t sure when he had closed his eyes, but it was hard to open them again when he tried. The smell of moist earth and wild wind were all around, tinged with the metallic scent of blood. Slowly, tired eyes moved back to the body lying beside him.

“Thank you.”

His voice was soft and gentle as he gazed at this man, who had carried him for so long and had always spoken with a kind voice. It seemed as if they had been headed to Midgar, and while Cloud wasn’t sure what was there, there was nothing else he could think of to do. Legs trembling with
effort, he stood. It felt so strange to be on his own two feet, since he couldn’t remember the last time he had been able to stand without assistance. Though he was wobbly and unsteady, he refused to loosen his grip on the sword handle. What had happened to cause them to end up like this? Everything was so mixed up in his mind but Cloud knew that this wasn’t right. He knew they had been mistreated and hunted down like animals, but couldn’t remember any details. The only thing he was certain of was the pain in his chest as he stood there, feeling helpless and alone. Tears threatened to well up in his eyes, but Cloud closed them instead, dipping his head in respect to the one who had helped him escape from the bad place and made him a free man.

“Goodnight.”

Slowly, he turned, putting one foot in front of the other as the clouds continued to disperse.

… … …

One step, another step, and another…

Cloud panted as the sun rose high overhead. It was beginning to scorch his scalp as he shuffled along through the wasteland. There was not a tree in sight to offer him shade, nothing around to give him relief from the unrelenting heat. Panting, he pressed forward on his path to Midgar, dragging the buster sword behind him. The world would spin and his head hurt, but he had no choice but to keep marching on. He was following a gravel path that seemed to be leading him in the right direction. Sweat beaded under his hair and fell in thick droplets down his face and into his eyes, but he didn't mind. His thoughts weren't on his discomfort or the threat of the large birds that circled overhead. The tangled web of thoughts and memories in his head held Cloud's strict attention. There were too many things flashing through his brain and his attempts to sort them out occupied his consciousness.

Images flashed through his mind of a black haired beauty with twinkling red eyes and a shy smile that made his heart rise into his throat. The frequent fever-dreams of this particular ghost brought him peace and happiness, and he welcomed them wholly. He felt warmth and rest as she lingered about on the edges of his thoughts, and she was reclusive even though he continued to invite her inside. Was this girl the reason why he was traveling this way? It was hard to tell with the mess in his head, making it impossible to distinguish truth from fantasies he had woven in his mind.

Wait—no.

A pink bow tied into thick brown waves. Eyes as green as maple leaves. A voice that sing-songed merrily as it teased him for one thing or another. Soft hands dancing over his skin. She was waiting for him, wasn't she? Her first class SOLDIER was coming back to see her. She'd be thrilled and proud when he returned to her, taking her in his arms once again. His lips would find hers and she'd be lost within him, saying that her hero had come back at last.

Something was wrong, but Cloud couldn't figure out what it was. A harsh wind sent grains of sand forward, blowing into his face and bare arms and stinging every inch of exposed skin. Why couldn't he remember her name? It seemed that as soon as some detail of these visions bubbled to the top of his mind, he'd only have a second to process them before they vanished. Cloud found himself becoming increasingly irritated and confused.

**Who am I? Where am I going?**

Every time his eyes caught sight of one of his pauldrons or he glanced down at his black fatigues, he deduced that he was an elite member of SOLDIER. Something inside him shivered at the word ‘SOLDIER’ and the thought of ShinRA. He wasn't sure he wanted to work for them anymore. But how did he get here? And why was he going to Midgar?
Cloud grit his teeth and closed his eyes, for he lacked the strength to shield his face from an onslaught of wind. It was alright, because he was almost there. The gravel road joined paths with a paved one that seemed to go directly into a city gate on the edge of the Midgar slums. A car whizzed by every so often and startled him, making his tired muscles tense and his pulse quicken. All he wanted was to get into the city. Maybe once he got there, he’d remember why he needed to be here in the first place. Maybe then, he could sit down and rest. His head was pounding and what strength he had left was rapidly ebbing out of his body.

Cloud’s feet carried him forward even as his consciousness began to fade. No one bothered him as he crossed the city border and trudged through the streets, for few people were brave enough to mess with a mako enhanced warrior. Like a spectre, he made his way through crowds of people. His body was present, but his mind wasn’t. Cloud followed the flow of people into a transit station and onto a train, collapsing into the first empty seat he saw. Blue eyes, glowing with mako, closed at once. He welcomed the blackness with a soft sigh.

… … …

“Marlene! Don’t wipe your nose on your blankie! Here, have a tissue.”

The chill of late September had brought the first batch of illness to the slums, and unfortunately it was Marlene who had come down with a mild flu of sorts. Barret was in quite a mood, his concern for his adopted daughter spilling over into his temper, and Tifa thought it was best to send him off to work with a bagged lunch and promises to call if the girl took a turn for the worse. Despite the man’s concern, he was useless when it came to caring for an ill child, and it wouldn’t do anyone good to have him around while Tifa was trying to nurse the girl back into a more comfortable state. It was a relief that Marlene’s fever had broken the night before, after hours of reading her children’s books again and again, continuously replacing the cold cloth on her little forehead.

Snug in her bed, Marlene was beginning to get a bit restless now that she was feeling a bit better. Tifa moved to sit next to her and offer the tissue for her runny nose. She gathered the little one in her lap with a smile, cradling her head to her chest. The toddler pulled her blanket tighter around her as she nuzzled her cheek against her caretaker. Brown eyes wandered over the intricate stitching of green yarn that brought her so much comfort in times of sickness and fear.

“You said you made this for your baby?”

Tifa closed her eyes. She had run and run, but could never get away from the memory of Aria, Cloud, and visions of what could have been. But here, with the stability and companionship of friends who were like family, Tifa found the strength to turn and welcome thoughts of those she had loved. Trying to forget about them only brought about more sadness and struggling in the end, and Tifa was learning that embracing the freedom to talk about them was healing her broken heart, one stitch at a time. With their help she had accepted that part of her life, had accepted the loss of her daughter, and understood that life still moved forward.

"Yes. The baby that was in my belly died, and I was very sad."

Marlene turned her face downward, eyebrows drawn together in a thoughtful frown as she ran her little fingers over the soft fabric.

"Why did she die?"

Willing her heart to be still, Tifa exhaled as visions of Aria’s perfect little face and tiny curled fingers flooded her brain. She had to remind herself to welcome them calmly. But how was she supposed to explain a stillbirth in a way a small child could understand?
"I don't know. She wasn't supposed to die, but she did, and I miss her very much." Tifa smoothed her palm over the child's head before using her index finger to lift Marlene's head. "But then, when I thought that I could never be happy again, I met you."

"I make you happy?"

"Oh, so very, very much. I know I'm not your real mama, but I love you with all my heart, Marlene. And that's why you should have that blanket."
Marlene grinned, wrapping her little arms around Tifa’s waist. She squeezed the younger girl back before tickling her neck, making Marlene giggle.
"Alright, love. Lay down a bit more, alright? You still aren’t well."

Marlene snorted, puffing out her cheeks. “But I don’ wanna lay down anymore. I wanna play with you!”

“I know, sweetie,” Tifa said, caressing her soft hair before moving to stand beside the bed. “But if you rest now, you’ll feel much better tomorrow and we can play all you want.”

With a huff, she put her head back down onto her pillow. While the baby was sick, Tifa read her fairy tales of different varieties. Marlene was curious about the forests and environments of these stories, since the child had rarely seen a living plant aside from the small fern her father had bought for her birthday one year. It would be impossible to buy many flowers and plants, with lack of gift and vendors, so Tifa came up with her own solution. Paints were way out of budget, so she made her own by mixing flour, water and salt with food coloring. With a few spare basting brushes, Tifa decided to decorate the white walls of the bedroom as Marlene watched from the bed.

“Look, I’ve got a surprise for you.” Big brown eyes followed her as she moved from her bedside to a paper bag on the top of the bookcase. Tifa pulled out several plastic cups and a handful of brushes before turning to smile at Marlene. “Paints!”

“Paints?” the little girl squeaked as a grin chased away her previous pout.

“That’s right! You loved the forests and flowers in your story so much that I thought I should paint them for you on the wall here.” She carefully arranged her tools on the floor beside the wall opposite of their bed. “That way, you could see them any time you’d like! What do you think?”

“Yeah!” The toddler clapped her hands and wiggled where she lay. “Paint something pretty, Tifa!”

“Alright…” Tifa positioned herself and closed her eyes, churning up memories of lush landscapes she had known in her childhood. With a slow exhale, she dipped a brush in the deep green paint. “When I was a little girl, I lived in the mountains, where there were many plants and trees.”

She told Marlene about her home as her brush strokes formed lines of evergreen trees. The girl listened intently as she was told all about the seasons and their changes: of the icicles and frozen creeks in winter, of the bold colors of spring’s wildflowers, of the bright endless blue of the summer sky and of the orange trees that looked like fire in autumn. Tifa explained what it felt like to roll down a grassy hill as she painted a small meadow. She described the way the warmth of the sun felt on one’s face and how pleasing it was to hear the birds chitter away in the trees. Marlene was fascinated, and Tifa’s chest felt tight long after the little girl dropped off into an easy slumber. Dunking her brushes into a cup of water, the young woman stood back to admire her work. While she was no artist, the mural was satisfactory enough for a child’s entertainment.

It wasn’t until she had tucked the girl in and shut off the light that Tifa realized the source of the sadness that was welling up inside her. She had painted scenes from her childhood home, but it
wasn’t the memory of brighter days that caused this feeling. Rinsing her makeshift paints down the sink, Tifa watched as swirls of color ran down the drain. The cause of her distress was Marlene. It had been so heartbreaking to try and explain things that every child should have the right to experience. What sort of life would Marlene have if she could never understand the simple pleasure of feeling raindrops on her face or smell the freshly thawed earth in spring? The very highlights of her childhood were playing outdoors, exploring the wilderness and taking pleasure in the wonders nature had to offer. It was inconceivable to Tifa that a four year old girl had never had the chance to play in the dirt or splash about in a stream.

She promised herself that she’d give everything she had to help get Marlene out of Midgar as soon as possible. She wanted the girl to have hope and happiness as much as Barret did. The terrible thought dawned upon her that if AVALANCHE was not successful, there may soon be no beautiful nature left for Marlene to enjoy. Calloused fingers tightened around the chipped porcelain of the sink basin as Tifa grit her teeth. Jessie had made a bomb. Barret and the others had been discussing at length what they wanted to do with it, and the group had concluded at their last meeting that they would be using it to destroy the mako reactor in Sector One on top of the plate. Everyone had seemed so gung-ho about it, but Tifa’s morality pulled at her heart strings. By disabling the reactor, they’d cripple ShinRA’s energy output and halt a large amount of mako drilling, at least temporarily. But an explosion of that size would put any number of civilians at risk. Would the end result really justify the means? What would Cloud think if he knew the things she was involved in?

Cloud…

Lately, she had taken to slipping her wedding band back on her finger whenever she felt particularly lonesome. Feeling that familiar weight on her left hand was soothing and spread peace throughout her body like gentle warmth. Thoughtlessly, her hands reached back to untie the cord around her neck and she welcomed the flood of memories as white gold adorned her ring finger once again. Tifa watched for a moment as the metal gleamed in the light of the kitchen. AVALANCHE and Marlene were her only family now. At first, she had felt like she was betraying Cloud and Aria by feeling this way. But Barret had helped her shift her mindset by reminding her that it was healthy and beneficial to accept the fact that Cloud wasn’t coming back. With his guidance, she was able to realize that he wasn’t really dead, because the pleasure and joy of their time together still lived in her. Wasn’t it true of everyone else who had left this life? She began to feel as if all the people she’d ever known hadn’t in fact gone away, but continued to live on as long as she decided to remember them. It was a small way to quiet the growing unease in her heart.

Tifa felt change was coming, like the way the tide pulls the water in before a wave rushes forth, and it left her unsettled. Life had been steadily getting better. What if something came to take away the happiness she had found?

Suddenly, the lights flickered before they surged, then went out completely. Tifa stood in the dark for a moment, listening as the hum of the refrigerator ebbed away into silence. With a sigh, she pulled a flashlight out of the drawer next to the stove as Barret bellowed a string of curses from the basement. Rolling blackouts were common in the slums. So common that Marlene was starting to not be so afraid anymore and that Tifa and Barret could repair electrical problems in a matter of seconds.

She moved out into the bar space and called out. "Barret! Do you need a light?"

There was grumbling and shuffling below before he answered. "Naw, I got one. Damn fuse blew again--third time this week!"

"Did you find the box with the extra ones? I left it right beside the breaker panel."

"Yeah...we only got one left. Imma use it now."
Biting her lip in thought, Tifa reached into her pocket to count the measly amount of gil in her wallet. She wasn't sure her tip money would be quite enough, but it was all she had. It wouldn't do to be out of replacement fuses, especially when she had a business to run and food to keep cool in electric refrigeration units.

"Barret, I'm going to run out before the bar opens and but some more. Marlene is asleep in her room, so keep an ear out for her, alright?"

There was an audible click. And light flooded the building once again. The platform with the pinball machine rose with Barret in tow. His mouth was drawn downward in a frown, but he ruffled her hair affectionately.

"Aight, you be careful out there, Ti. Watch out for them weirdos on the train. Kick their ass if any of 'em try anything on ya."

"Of course." Tifa winked and shrugged on her jacket. "Also, don't make fun of my paint job when you go to check on Marlene."

"Can't make any promises."

Tifa stuck her tongue out at him and giggled, then pulled on her boots. A quick peek out of the window confirmed that it was still raining in the world above, so she pulled her red umbrella from the nail it hung on beside the door. “Be back in a jiffy!”

… … …

Dirty rainwater poured through gaps in the plate in small torrents, washing debris down into the slums. There was a quite a chill in the air now that September was rolling to a close, but even in the dead of winter it would never get nearly as cold in Midgar as it did in the mountains. Tifa hustled through Sector Seven, smiling at the way people bundled themselves up as if they were expecting a blizzard and shivered in what would’ve been balmy spring temperature in Nibelheim. Midgar had much more of a mild climate than where she had grown up, and though the city had been her home for quite a few years now, her body was still tough like the mountain child she was born to be. As always, there were people scurrying to and fro, although it wasn’t quite rush hour yet.

Fatigue pulled at her body, making Tifa feel sluggish. It was hard to admit, but she was still afraid to sleep sometimes. When she was awake, she could find reason and chase away her anxieties. In sleep, she was vulnerable to whatever visions decided to reveal themselves. Frightening dreams of Cloud, wailing in pain, did their best to shake her newfound confidence and positive outlook. She wished that somehow, her voice would carry the distance to heaven, so she could just tell him one last time that she loved him. That she tried to give their daughter life. That she’s still trying to piece her life back together and make him proud. Weaving through the crowd, she pressed her thumb against her wedding band as she approached the train station.

It had been late September four years ago when she last saw Cloud, bidding him farewell on what should have been a short deployment. If Tifa knew that would be the last time she felt him breathing, if she knew she’d never be with him again, she would've kissed him endlessly and run her hands through his beautiful flaxen hair. She would have told him how much she admired him, that he had the most beautiful heart, and how he was the strongest person she had ever known. She heard the train pull up to the station before she saw it, and a flood of passengers poured out onto the pavement and down the handful of steps. Their murmurs almost drowned out the roar of the water thundering through the drainage pipes and the sound of rain splattering the ground. Tifa pushed through the crowd, sheltering her head under her umbrella. Tifa had lived in the slums for five years and never once had run into a face she knew on the street. For the first few years after
Cloud’s death, her eyes still flicked upward at the fleeting sight of a head of blonde hair with full hope that just maybe, it was him. Now, she had resigned herself to his death, but the instinct to search desperately after each golden head had never quite left her. Especially lately, as the dreams of him became more and more frequent and her idle thoughts were consumed by her childhood love and late best friend. Splattered droplets from cold puddles tickled her ankles as she hurried toward the station platform, but it was a head of blonde spikes that distracted her.

All this time, she had agonized over the fate of her husband. And, as if by magic, there he was.

A man was sitting slouched against the station wall, his head bent forward and face obscured from view. Surely it was a trick of the eyes, or a fevered manifestation of her desires. Perhaps she had caught whatever illness Marlene was suffering from. Cloud was dead, that was that. This man was wearing a SOLDIER uniform; Cloud had only been a trooper. Homeless people lingering around the train stations and bars were a common sight in the slums. It couldn't be him. Could it? She held her breath as she fixated her gaze on a ghost from what seemed like a lifetime ago.

Tifa didn’t notice until someone brushed her shoulder that she had stopped in her tracks in the middle of the thinning crowd. Crimson eyes stared and stared until the train boarded its passengers and slowly chugged away from the station. Minutes passed and the man didn’t move, like a dark statue in the monotone slums. She noticed an enormous broadsword resting on the cobblestones at his side, his fingers wrapped around the handle. Cloud was just a trooper with a rifle, not a SOLDIER with a sword. With trembling knees, she stepped forward to investigate and knelt down before him. Gently, timidly, she reached out the rest a hand on the top of his head, the other hand squeezing the umbrella handle until her fist turned white. His arms were boney and alarmingly thin as they draped into his lap and one white knuckle brushed the pavement between his legs. The fingers on his other hand were loosely curled around the handle on an enormous broadsword, and it amazed Tifa to think that such a scrawny looking man could even hold such a weapon, let alone fight with it. Heavy, leather boots adorned each lifeless foot.

“A-are you alright, sir?”

He groaned, slowly lifting his head until his weary eyes met hers. Blue. Vibrant, unending blue met her gaze and time seemed to stop as limitless memories flooded forth. Childhood had been full of brilliant colors of the sky and autumn and earth, but now all that remained was electric blue and a bright red umbrella in that grey scale world. Tifa’s chest heaved as shuttering breaths escaped her. Her husband was right in front of her: older, taller, but gaunt and sick. Unnatural muscle bulged over bone, his skin stretched taut to show the advanced state of his emaciation. Dark bags hung under each eye, glowing a luminescent blue as they stared lifelessly at her. They were like Zack’s eyes. Like mako eyes. But they weren’t jovial and lively like Zack’s were. They were heavy lidded and glazed with pain. What happened to him?

He spoke, his voice a sound familiar to her bones.

“T-Tifa…”

A whimper escaped her throat as she stared at his pale lips and face. The veins in his arms were prominent and visible and he looked like a skeleton under the bulk of his uniform. She ran her hands over his face, in disbelief, as she brushed dirty bangs out of his empty eyes.

“Oh, Cloud.” She wasn’t aware of the hot tears that had begun to stream down her face as she searched his eyes for understanding. There was something very wrong. He was injured, it seemed, and his eyes were empty and blank. It took a moment to find her voice, and the lump in her throat made it hard to speak. “Cloud, what happened?”
He made a keening noise before groaning once again, squeezing his eyes shut as if he was in pain. Cloud blinked several times before his head mechanically shifted and his eyes moved to meet hers. Something happened in that moment and he gasped with a great inhale, eyes wide and glowing brighter than before. Brilliant blue came to focus on her face.

“Tifa!”

He grabbed at her shirt, her arm and she broke. Somehow, Cloud’s stumbling, faltering mind allowed her name to continue to roll off his tongue. Body caked with sand and grime, he grasped desperately at her. She fell forward, wrapping her arms around him and supporting his heavy head against her chest. Half formed sentences tumbled out of her mouth, but she couldn’t finish a single one without dissolving into tears. Dozens of questions bubbled out of her mind, boiling over into a mess on her tongue until she gave in to her emotions and let a sob break free. Against all odds, he had returned to her. Life had always seemed intent to separate them: by social class, by her father’s scorn, by nearly fatal falls and dreams of military grandeur. The shadow of death seemed to have finally separated them for good when Cloud disappeared while on a mission to Nibelheim. But somehow, fate had reunited them once again.

Tifa had never been sure just what it was that guided her along in the turbulence of her life. But now, as she cradled his head to her breast, she was sure it was the same magnetic force that had kept her and Cloud falling towards each other, just as a stone falls toward the earth. No matter how hard the world tried to pull them apart, here they were, back in each other’s arms once more. Her miracle moved, shakily trying to get to his feet and failing. Cloud threaded his hands through her hair until they were tangled in thick knots. Her heart broke as she heard his broken whimpers and cracking voice spewing forth apologies. Her own flood of tears and staccato sobs hindered her from verbal comfort, and so she stroked his back, his head, his face.

For so long, Tifa had been so busy trying to survive that she had forgotten what it meant to be living. Life wasn’t lived by holding onto sorrow and grudges. Her father had been alive without living, and had chosen to throw any chance of happiness to the wind. To be living wasn’t hiding and waiting for death. Surviving was putting aside emotion and a sense of self in order to sustain herself from one day to the next, a numb and sad existence. But living was an entirely different thing. Living was hearing Marlene laugh as her little bare feet thudded across the floor boards. It was Biggs’s goofy jokes and Jessie’s warm smile. Living was hearing Wedge praise her cooking skill and knowing that Barret was proud of the young woman she’d become. It was learning to have faith that things could somehow be okay after so much bad had happened. Living was adapting to circumstances she never dreamed she would face and conquer. It was believing that miracles could indeed happen to someone her. To live was to find kindness after so much unkindness, to find happiness after so much misery.

Tifa endured the greatest struggles one could face during such tender years of her life, and found strength in the hearts of those who loved her. She understood that Cloud was still her rock, still her anchor, still her harbor. Love and loyalty could survive impossible odds, couldn’t it?

As the rain continued to thunder around them, Tifa pulled back to gaze deeply into Cloud’s eyes. Together, they had lost so many of the blessings they had once enjoyed. Now, even his health had been taken from him. But Tifa would do everything in her power to revive and sustain him, no matter the cost. Together, they’d face the hard road: fighting illness, fighting poverty, and fighting ShinRA. They’d fight for the memory of their families, for their hope of their future, for their precious Aria. It was enough to know that, here in each other’s arms, the pain and burdens of their past could bleed into a wash, fading away in the perfect happiness of this private moment.

Hope was more than just a rusted jingle bell or an alabaster sea shell. Hope was a living, changing thing that lived on in the precious people in her life. Hope was tangible, though not quite material. It
was in the feeling of Marlene’s little hand curled around her leg, and in the way Barret ruffled the
hair on her head affectionately. It was in the friendly smiles of the AVALANCHE trio when she
welcomed them ‘home’. And now, it was in the warmth of clouds body in her arms. It was internal
—a flame that burned on despite all of the darkness in her life. One that burned bright at the sound of
her name on Cloud’s lips.

Together, they’d press forward against the strength of the current, against the darkness of the waves,
to close the distance between where they were and where they dreamed they’d be.

... ... ...

Thank you very much reading! If you are interested in a sequel to this story, please check out 'In This
Cage' by The_Ocean_Deep! :)

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