

Chapter 4

Eila walked down the rocky narrow path. Rubbing the back of her head and wincing as her hand came across a swollen lump. The path she was taking right now was the only way to cross the red canyons and avoid the blazing afternoon sun that scorched the sky above her. A few hours ago she had jumped off the legendary airship, the Highwind, with her magical flying pet, Nia.

They had a smooth flight away from the Highwind which was supposed to bring her back to Midgar. They headed north-west from Cosmo Canyon to find a little town called Nibelheim to search for answers to the mysterious beast attacks. That flight lasted for a little over an hour and a half. They haven't gone halfway towards the dark gray Nibel mountains when Nia started to shrink in size.

A few moments ago, Eila and Nia crash landed at the side of a rocky plain. Fortunately, they got away with only a few bumps and scratches. The once humongous bird of flight, now reduced to a creature no bigger than the size of her palm, squawked in embarrassment, as it's master lifted it onto her shoulders.

"It's okay, Nia." Eila told her only companion. "I know you're tired already. And I guess, I don't know what kind of super-food to feed you to keep your strength up." The girl reached down into one of her pant pockets and brought out the tattered map she "borrowed" from the Highwind earlier.

They were on the right path to Nibelheim. Using whatever navigational knowledge she had to follow the sun as it sank towards the west. "We should be there by tomorrow." She told the bird. "I hope when the night comes, you'd be able to fly again. We'd be good as dead if wild animals catch us here."

She let out a long sigh, as a very disturbing thought crossed her mind. "I don't have any weapons on me. I didn't bring any food or water either." She slapped her forehead lightly. At that critical moment before she jumped off the Highwind, she didn't think. All that was in her mind was to save Cloud and his friends.

"Some worthwhile hero, I'll be." She said, angrily kicking on a pebble. "I'd probably die of thirst before I get to Nibelheim." The bird squawked, sensing it's master's distress. Eila smiled and patted it's beak gently and laughed at herself. All she had on her were her white tank-top shirt, baggy, green army pants and army boots. She stood out like a sore thumb against the red-rocks of the canyon.

They continued walking and walking. The only signs of progress was the change of landscape. She had to climb up an unsteady, rocky hill, suffering more scratches and earning more rips and tears on her pants. The twenty minute climb was rewarding, anyhow. Instead of the endless red rocks of the desert, she saw a sea of green grass. And a few good miles away were the dark and gloomy Nibel mountains.

"It's almost dark. I wonder if I'll make it?" She thought out loudly, measuring the distance between her and the town that was settled at the foot of the mountains. The sky didn't help calm her in anyway as the sun gradually began to disappear. She had less than two hours to get to the town before everything around her becomes completely dark. At her exhausted state, she'd probably make it there in five hours. If not, she'd collapse from fatigue.

Eila stopped on her tracks and took a deep breath. Beads of sweat rolling down her pale face in spite of the cool atmosphere. She was dead tired and she was nowhere near Nibelheim. The dark sky was making it very difficult to see what lay a few feet ahead.

She wasn't afraid of getting lost. She could easily spot the town with it's sparkling lights. She was more concerned with the wild animals that might attack her and her defenseless friend.

Nia wasn't able to fly yet. Though it tried to grow in size a couple of times already, it too was exhausted. Eila assumed that her pet could only transform into the flying creature once a day. Or, at least it had to have a peaceful six hour rest.

She had no choice but to continue on walking until she reached the town. There were no nearby trees or other places that she could find shelter in. She groaned, thirst and exhaustion making her drag her feet towards the town.

All of a sudden her thoughts were cut sharply by animal growls. There were more than two. She froze and slowly turned around to find herself being trailed by four rhinoceros type animals. They stood taller than she was and their bodies were bulked up with muscles. Steam belched out of their nostrils as they eyed their dinner.

"Oh, god--" Eila cried, taking a cautious step backwards. She scanned the area around her, only finding a thick twig to use as a weapon. It wouldn't do her much good anyway against the steel skinned attackers. Maybe, she could outrun them. They seem bulky enough for them to be slow. It was worth a try. They'd kill her if she'd just stand still, anyway.

Eila looked at the town that was still far away. Without another thought, she closed her eyes and began to run as fast as she could. Jumping over rocks and other obstacles, just to get away from the creatures. Praying, as she took every step.

She kept on running, until her legs felt heavier and heavier. They wouldn't move. Slowly, the ground raced towards her. Her knees went slack and she was falling. Her arms wouldn't move either. She hit the cold grass hard. Tears streaming down her cheeks as numbness took over her. All she could hear, was Nia frantically squawking above her head.

This was probably death. Darkness swallowed her senses and peace took over her entire body. She was no longer lying on the grass, but she was floating through a haze of blue and greens. She could hear echoes of choruses, enchanting and exciting.

Eila could not make out any distinct shapes among the swirls of light that passed her as she floated on that eternal space. She did not feel frightened, even in this strange place, she felt peaceful. This is where she wanted to be. In a place where no sadness or pain could ever touch her. She wanted to stay.

"But you can't, not yet." A scolding woman's voice said.

Eila whirled around the space and found herself looking straight into the eyes of a being of light. The rays of light emanating from the central sphere was too bright for her to see the rest of the figure's body. It radiated with a warmth that made her skin tingle.

"It is not your time to come back to us. You still have a life to live." The voice said, not letting Eila interrupt nor raise a question. "Go back, now!"

There was another flash of light, blinding her momentarily before her head started to spin. At first it was a gentle rocking sensation. Then, it shifted and increased speed, making her head hurt as if her brain were made of dead weight.

When Eila opened her eyes, she was lying down on a sleeping bag. A warm blanket covered her trembling shoulders and she could hear the cackle of a fire. Cautious and curious of what happened, she slowly lifted her body up on her elbows and scanned her surroundings.

There was a campfire that still burned a few feet away. There was a piece of meat being roasted on top of the fire, which looked very familiar. Like the leg of the rhinoceros beast that attacked her. A little further from the camp fire,. she could make out the shapes of two men and two chocobos that they were feeding.

"Excuse me.." Eila called to them.

The two men turned their attention to her. She noticed that they wore long thick robes that covered most of their body and face, exposing only their eyes.

"You're awake!" One man, the shorter of the pair, said. "You're lucky we found you before the stone spell was completed, or you'd be petrified while those monsters attacked you."

"Thank you very much. I owe you my life." Eila answered with a weak smile. As she sat up straight, she heard the familiar 'squawk' of Nia. The loyal bird perched itself on Eila's shoulders. "I'm glad those monsters didn't get you." She told her pet while rubbing her fingers across it's scaly chest. "How far are we from Nibelheim?"

The two men paused from their duties of feeding the campfire with more wood and roasting the meat. Again, the shorter one spoke, "Not very far. Three hours the most. But it's dangerous to continue on at this time."

Eila nodded and brought her knees up to her chest. She knew all too well the dangers that lay beyond the camp site. In fact, the camp site itself didn't appear to offer much safety.

"Don't worry, miss, most of the creatures here are afraid of fire." The man spoke once more, knowing what she was concerned about. "We've camped out here for years, everything we have to go to Midgar or to Gongaga. By the way, I am Rosh and this is my friend, Adrian." The taller man, Adrian only nodded in acknowledgment. The two of them settled down across Eila, that the shadows hid their faces.

"My name is Eila. And this is my pet, Nia." She answered offering them a smile.

"That's a nice pet. Where did you find it?" Rosh asked. "These things are very rare. You can only find them in Mt. Nibel where we infu--"

"Incubated for six months in their nest." Adrian suddenly snapped, roughly interrupting Rosh.

The shorter man coughed nervously and scratched the back of his head. Though she could not see their faces, Eila could sense that there was a stroke of immediate realization. He was babbling about something that was meant to be kept a secret. Perhaps, Nia's origin.

"Right, incubated." Rosh cleared his throat and offered a slab of cooked meat on a large leaf to Eila. The girl accepted the food gracefully, deciding not to press on for the true words that Rosh almost said. The last thing she wanted to happen was to make them expel her from their camp for being so nosy. Even now, she was worried that they might be expecting something from her for protecting and feeding her.

"Nibelheim." Rosh spoke again, taking a bite out of his own piece of meat. "That place has become famous for the guns they sell. Why are you going there?"

"Uh.. I ran away from home." She stuttered, trying to keep a straight face and an innocent looking smile.

"That's not very nice." Rosh answered. "Home...you should be happy to have one."

"I am happy...But there are some things that I have to do that they don't understand." Eila brought down the leaf and the meat on her lap, feeding a little piece to Nia.

"I'm sorry." Rosh said. "Anyway, if you're on your way to Nibelheim...don't go up Mt. Nibel. There's an abandoned Mako reactor there that's been leaking Mako gas. It's very dangerous."

"Mako?" Eila raised her eyebrows. "What happens when you're exposed to Mako gas?"

Rosh shook his head slowly. "In large amounts, it could affect your brain. You may become a vegetable forever. He turned to Adrian who was quietly observing them, "I guess, we could call ourselves lucky."

"Why is that?"

"Because we've been enhanced with JENO--" Rosh blurted out, again receiving another rough nudge from Adrian, stopping his sentence immediately.

It was at this point when Eila's stomach started to do flip-flops. Rosh didn't have to finish his sentence. She could sense from the beginning that they were hiding something from her. Perhaps, the fact that they were also infused with Mako and JENOVA cells, like Cloud and the beasts that attacked them in Midgar.

She shifted uneasily on her seat, trying to hide any traces of the suspicion from her face with an amused giggle. Hoping that they would be convinced that she was laughing at Rosh's reaction to the nudge, rather than her knowing something that they didn't want anyone to know.

"The two of you are funny, you know that?" She giggled, bringing a trembling hand to her lips. "And you're very nice too. I am really thankful for rescuing me. I wish that there was something I could offer in return...but as you can see, I have nothing."

Adrian shook his head. "Think nothing of it, Miss Eila. We want to help those in need. You can trust us."

Eila nodded. There was still some pressing fear at the back of her mind. These two were part of the pack that attacked them. What if they attacked her too? A simple human being that does not belong to their race? And even if they weren't JENOVA beasts, what if they killed her while she slept..or worse...

She immediately scolded herself for thinking so maliciously of the two men who rescued her from certain death. She had to admit, though, if it weren't for their strange clothing, she would have thought that she was talking to merely young men and not like the JENOVA beasts that attacked her in Midgar.

At least one mystery was solved. They could talk. There may be a way for them to negotiate with these creatures without having to rely on force and violence. Which reminded her about Barret's plan of going to Junon, the Military base. What if there were more of these JENOVA creatures that were still human-like? They would be slaughtered.

A new mission was formed in her head. Now, not only did she have to find out where they came from , but she had to convince both them and Cloud not to go into battle and kill each other. She hoped that both parties would resolve to peaceful measures before everything was too late.

A dull pain formed on the middle of her chest which burst out into a sharp sting. She pressed her hands firmly over the spot and bowed her head down in pain. She could hear Rosh and Adrian asking her if she was all right. Nia was jumping up and down on her solder, trying to get her attention. But everything came as a blur to her. Time seemingly slowed down and everything began to fade.

She collapsed on the sleeping bag. Ignoring the pain when her back fell over a sharp pebble. Everything she saw would either spin or fade away. Maybe she was exhausted. Maybe she didn't know that her weak body could not tolerate such torture of traveling for a day and being attacked by monsters.

She closed her eyes, with her hands still clasped over her chest. When she opened them again, the pain was gone, and everything has finally steadied.

"What happened to you?" Rosh was the first to approach her with a canteen of water. He gently lifted her head enough for her to get a sip out of the cool beverage.

"I don't know." She answered. "Those are usual attacks I've been having. Only this time was the worst." Eila sat up and rubbed her head to clear away any traces of nausea.

"Maybe you should get some rest now." Adrian said from behind his friend. "Tomorrow, we'll escort you to Nibelheim."

"Oh, no. Please, I've been enough trouble already!" Eila protested, but both Rosh and Adrian seem to have made up their minds.

"Tomorrow, we'll escort you to Nibelheim and make sure that you get enough rest. I have some friends there that will be willing to take care of you." Adrian continued, settling down on his sleeping bag. "We want to prove to the world that there are sitll people who care. Regardless of your race, species or creator."

As the two men lay down on their beds, Eila caught a glimpse of one of Adrian's un-gloved hands. The skin was rippled. Dark and clawed, just like the beasts. But he was not like them at all.

"What do you mean she's not in her room?" Cloud cried out as the pilot reported his findings. Cloud rubbed his forehead roughly with one hand as he paced back and forth across the operations room. "I knew she'd do something like this--- again!" He said, each word coming out loud.

"Easy, Cloud. Maybe she's just looking around the Highwind." Tifa said, trying to calm him down but without much success.

"She's been missing for hours now, Tif. If she were here at least one of us would've spotted her." Cloud continued to pace back and forth, passing Barret and Cid who sat quietly at the table watching him with their eyes.

Cid shifted in his seat uneasily. He was the last person who's seen Eila.

For all he knew, she may have fallen off the railings of the Highwind when he left her on the deck. Then again, he knew that she was planning something when he was giving her the Highwind tour. She must've thought he didn't see her take a world map from the cockpit. But he knew that he wouldn't be able to stop her from what she wanted to do. Just like no one could stop Aeris from running into the forest by herself.

`No,' Cid thought to himself. 'The girl's tough. She'll be all right.---this time.' He lit another cigarette and hoped with all the damned stuff he knew about praying that he'd see the girl alive.

"I want to go back to the Canyon." Cloud announced, breaking the momentary silence. "If she jumped down, she might still be there."

"What?" Tifa answered, standing up from her seat. "We're already entering Midgar territory. We can't afford to go back to the Canyon. Who knows what might happen if those beast attacks continue?"

"She's right, Cloud." Barret agreed. "We can't just think of Eila now. Whatever she's doing is her problem. We have a bigger mess to solve."

Cloud raised his hands up in the air. "Damn, what if something's happened to her? What if she got hurt, or--Gods forbid--what if she gets killed? How are we going to face Miss Elmyra again?" Cloud slammed his fist against his palm and turned his back on them. "I-I'm not going to lose her like that..."

"Cloud---" Tifa faltered as her heart sank into the depths of her stomach. 'You're still thinking about her aren't you? You still think that she hasn't forgiven you. You think that by protecting Eila, you'd be protecting Aeris all over again. Damn you, Cloud..."

Before any bitter tears fell, Tifa bowed down her head and quickly gulped down the rest of her drink.

"We still can't go back. We'd be wasting too much time." Cid said sternly, standing up and reaching for the PHS unit. "I'll call Red and tell him of what's happened. He'll know what to do." Cid punched in some numbers and the comm unit flared to life.

Cloud nodded. Thinking there was no other way to deal with the two problems at the same time. He collapsed onto one of the chairs beside Tifa and noticed her disturbed expression. "You'd better stop drinking, Tif."

Tifa raised her eyebrows and chugged down another glass of wine. "I'll be fine. I'm just worried."

Cloud smiled and gently rubbed her back. "So am I."

They reached Nibelheim forty minutes after they broke camp. Traveling was much easier on chocobos rather than on foot. According to Rosh and Adrian, the town hasn't changed much. The huge well still stood at the center of town. There were a couple of new houses and definitely more people. They were a little surprised to see the ShinRa mansion left in such shambles. But then again, even they wouldn't waste time re-building that damn house.

"That place was the beginning of my nightmare." Rosh said with a disgusted growl. Eila looked at him in a puzzled way, but somehow she could understand why. If she could prove that the mutations were caused by mako infusion and JENOVA cells, then both Rosh and Adrian, as well as the other beasts did have a lot to be angry about. "Well, that's not important now." He added dryly.

Adrian joined them a few minutes later. He had just come back from the house where his friends used to stay with some bad news. "They don't live there anymore. Maybe after ten years, they moved to Midgar or Mideel." He said with a shrug. "Sorry, Eila, you'll have to stay at the inn."

Eila smiled and shook her head, "That's fine. Thank you very much for your help."

"No problem." Rosh answered back and turned to Adrian. "Well, we'd better get going. We have to get moving if we want to reach Midgar by tomorrow."

Adrian nodded in agreement and they bade farewell to Eila, emphasizing that she had to patch things up with her family and soon. Family, that is one thing that everybody should treasure. Eila stood by the entrance of the town until they disappeared into the horizon. With a heavy sigh, she turned on her heels and stepped into Nibelheim, the beginning of another adventure.

"What am I doing?" She asked the bird. "I don't even know where to start looking for answers." Eila looked at the busy people, running around town under the afternoon sun. Her eyes fell on the battered ShinRa mansion which looked haunted and inhabited. "Let's just hope that we find something to work on in there."

It would be dangerous. From the looks of the mansion, she knew that there were bats and other beasties lurking inside. It wasn't impossible to imagine stray beasts and monsters that may have moved into the deserted place and make it their home. She asked herself why nobody ever bothered to demolish it. Then again, if it weren't there anymore, how would she find out the answers.

She walked towards the mansion and stopped at it's rusted metal gate, which fell on the damp soil as she touched it. She could see the dark interior of the mansion through a window, and shuddered at the thought of it being haunted with ghosts and other restless spirits. The windows and ceilings were made of wood that were rotting from time. She wondered if she should be afraid of the ghosts and beasts or if she should worry more about the whole building falling down on her.

"Maybe a weapon wouldn't be a bad idea." Eila whispered to herself and turned around to look for a weapons store. She found one right across the center well and noted the different kinds of things on the display window. There were armlets,

knives, swords, guns, and some more guns which looked like something Barret would wear on his left arm. She also noticed the glowing green and purple orbs by the weapons.

"Materia!" She whispered. They would be useful, especially for magic. Unlike what she had. The white materia which she kept around her neck was only for communicating with the spirits of the planet. Eila dropped her gaze on her pet bird and entered the shop.

Inside was dark and the musty smell invaded her nose immediately. The walls were adorned with more weapons which sparkled against the light coming from outside and the lone lantern which stood on the counter.

"Excuse me, miss?" A low male's voice startled her. She turned her head to the side to see a tall man enter from the door behind the counter. The shop keeper's face was hidden in the shadows, which made Eila very uneasy. Then again, with all the weapons and materia thrown all around the place, plus the dark atmosphere of the shop made her nervous the minute she entered.

"I-I've come to purchase a weapon." She said, smiling and hiding the tremble in her voice. She had to steel her nerves. Right now, she was only facing a sinister shopkeeper, who may be nothing compared to the dangers she would face inside the ShinRa mansion.

"I see," The shopkeeper answered, he moved closer to the counter and to the lantern, allowing the dim light to illuminate his chin and mouth. He appeared to be quite young, in spite of the deep voice he had. "What do you need the weapon for?" He continued. Though, Eila could not see his eyes, she knew that he was studying her.

"I'm going on a mission." She answered. "It might be dangerous, so I want to protect myself." She sounded dumb. Of course, anyone who wanted a weapon wanted to protect themselves. Even if they were just collectors, the sight of guns made anybody look dangerous.

"You're planning on going into the ShinRa mansion, aren't you?"

Eila looked up at the shopkeeper in surprise. She only nodded slowly, embarrassed that he knew so much. "That's right."

"I saw you standing before the mansion's gate." He said while turning his back to her and opening a drawer hidden behind a stack of books. "There's nothing in there for you."

Eila shrugged, though she remained in silence as the shopkeeper brought out a two-foot long wooden case which he lay in front of her. The man opened the cover and took out three short rods that he skillfully attached to each other. In a few moments he was able to present to her a solid staff, that was surprisingly lighter than it looked.

"This is a retractable staff, just give it a good push." He placed both his hands near the edge of the staff and brought them together creating a short rod that was easy enough to carry. He pointed to the tan handle of the rod and showed Eila the two buttons located on its ends. "Press one of these two buttons to elongate one end."

The shopkeeper demonstrated that by pressing the button near his right thumb and the right end of the staff shot out. He did the same with the left button, and the staff was returned to its normal length.

"Be careful with this end." He said, while showing the slightly thinner section of the staff. "This is a blade." He pulled out the wooden covering of that section to reveal a two-sided blade. The staff was also a spear. He quickly returned it to its wooden sheath and turned the staff over, so that the larger end faced upwards.

"This is a projectile launcher." He pointed to the small hole at the tip of the staff. "Load bullets or rocks in here, and fire them by pressing on the third button on the handle." He opened a small compartment in the staff where projectiles could be loaded, and then pointed at the small lever-like trigger at the base of the section.

He retracted the staff and handed it to Eila, who jumped back embarrassed. "I-I don't have any money, to tell you the truth." She said, bowing her head down. "Don't you just have a stick or something simple like that."

The shopkeeper shook his head and let out a sigh. Eila was afraid that she may have offended the man and at the same time, she was just wasting his time. "I'm sorry. I'll go now." She said and started for the door.

"You cannot go in there unarmed." The shopkeeper growled at her, although he kept his voice low and calm. Eila froze at the doorway and turned around. The man was still standing behind the counter holding the staff in front of him. "Take this. I do not want your money."

"What? B-but...that staff looks expensive." She stammered, moving back to the counter and observing the fine craftsmanship of the wooden staff.

"It is priceless. I made it myself."

"Then, why do you want to---?"

"Because, it is worthless now." He answered before she could finish her sentence. "This was commissioned by a friend for a person he cared for. When she left, he forgot about this." The man handed her the staff, and did not remove his hands until her fingers were wrapped around the handle securely. "It was meant to protect, and not to rot in it's wooden case."

Eila looked at the staff in her hand and in his. For a moment, she knew exactly who the staff was for, and why this man was giving it to her. Aeris again...

"Thank you." She said softly. The man nodded and turned around, entering the room he came from earlier.

Eila hoisted the staff on her shoulder, letting Nia perch up on one end. She stepped out into the town, the sunlight hurting her eyes a little as she stayed in the dark shop for over ten minutes. She headed straight towards the tower. Hoping that by starting right away, she would uncover more answers rather than waiting for tomorrow to arrive.

There was still ample time for her to search the mansion before sundown. Without proper equipment like torches, and sleeping bags, she wouldn't last the night in that mansion. The climate in Nibelheim was cooler than in Midgar or in the Canyon. She shuddered at the thought of how much colder it would be during the night.

She entered the grounds of the mansion and opened the tall wooden doors. There was a very loud creak and a cloud of dust greeted her. After coughing and clearing her lungs of the dust, she turned around and looked back at the town. There were a couple of people who were watching her. Although, they appeared to be amused with her curiosity and encouraging her to continue.

Ignoring that scenario, Eila turned back to her original destination. It wasn't very dark inside. There was a huge stained glass window that provided illumination with some rays of sunlight stealing through the cracks and holes on the once glamorous window. The wooden floors were badly damaged and huge gaping holes were scattered everywhere. There were big openings on the walls which definitely were not doors. Like they crumbled down over time.

Eila took her first true step inside the mansion, listening to the echoes of the creaky floor. She would have to get used to that if she were going to continue into the mansion. She continued walking towards the staircase. Perhaps there was a library upstairs or some study that has been preserved.

She hoped hard that this trip would be fruitful. Otherwise, she would have risked her life, worried Cloud and her mother, wasted Rosh and Adrian's time for nothing.

All of a sudden Nia gave out a loud chirp which startled Eila and a couple of bugs. The bird leapt off the girl's shoulders and ran towards a room. Eila called out it's name twice and started to run after her pet. It flew up the stairs and headed for the East wing of the mansion, entering a small bedroom. Eila found it pecking at a stone wall.

"What's wrong?" Eila said, a bit angry at the birds behavior. As she knelt down to pick it up she felt a gush of cold wind touch her cheeks. It chilled her immensely and goosebumps conversed her arms and neck. It could either be a ghost or the room was drafty.

She turned around slowly, looking if there was anyone there. Finding none, she grabbed the bird, clutching it in her hands, in spite of it's struggle to go to the wall. 'There must be an opening, then. I hope that it's through this wall.' She ran her fingers across the dusty wall, taking note of how wind came out of the cracks. Indeed, it was some sort of opening, but how to get through that was beyond her.

"There is a switch hidden under one of those bricks." A voice said from behind her. Though it was familiar, it startled both her and the bird, making her spin around with the staff in her hands.

"You startled me." She said, lowering her weapon and rubbing her hand across her chest. Before her stood the shopkeeper, looming like some shadow against the wall. He carried a torch with him, which he lifted high enough to let the light touch his face.

Locks of long black hair, fell over his pale cheeks. Some even covered his left eye, making him look more sinister than handsome, as Eila remarked him to be. "Why are you here?" He asked her, drawing her out of her observing trance.

Eila gulped down and stepped forward into the light, smiling as she did. "I am Eila. I've come her to search for answers." She sighed and then decided to continue on telling the man the truth about her mission. "I want to know about ShinRa and JENOVA infusion. There have been attacks by beasts in Midgar and they all claim to be created by JENOVA."

"JENOVA beasts?" The man repeated, without taking his eyes off her. "I have heard of them. I've even encountered some in the past."

"Can you help me then?"

The man stood in silence a while longer before blinking and nodding stiffly. "Just to help you find answers. But, I will not fight them anymore."

"Thank you." She smiled. Truly thankful that for now, she was not alone on this mission. No matter how unclear her goals were, she knew that she had to keep trying. "I didn't get your name, Mr...?"

"Vincent." He answered quickly.

Eila repeated his name and held out her hand. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Vincent." The man reciprocated and shook her hand. Only, instead of shaking his warm gloved hand, Eila was startled to see a sharp metal claw.

Vincent, realizing his mistake, withdrew his claw and held it up before his face. "Does this frighten you?"

Eila shook her head, "No, not really. I've seen one who had a gun for an arm. So, I'm used to it by now." She answered with an embarrassed chuckle.

"I suppose you've met Barret and the others."

She nodded and quickly concluded that Vincent was one of the Midgar heroes. Vincent nodded and moved towards the brick wall. He removed a gray stone and flipped a switch. The door gave an involuntary grunt as it moved away to reveal a spiral stairway.

"Let us not waste anymore time." He said and started to walk down the stairs, with the torch in his hand. Eila took in a deep breath, gathering her courage as she followed him into the darkness.

"We're over Midgar city hall. Get ready to jump down." Cid announced to the crew and passengers of the Highwind. They were floating above the city that was now illuminated with lights. After traveling for one day, the old pilot couldn't think of anything more relaxing than a night out into the new city. Maybe even run into a couple of those beasts and see what they were made of.

"First we talk to Reeve and see what kind of help he can offer us, then we go to Junon." Barret told Cloud, who simply nodded. They have all agreed that their priority was to defeat the Midgar monsters before worrying about Eila or Miss Elmyra.

Cloud was leaning against a console, with both hands digging deep into the pockets of his brown trench coat. He was silent throughout the trip from worrying about Eila. Although he wanted so badly to run after her, he knew that his friends were right. There is no time to worry about personal matters when it's the fate of a thousand people on the line.

The crazy rules of responsibility. Haven't they done enough for these people already? Haven't they risked their lives for these people enough? Now, there is another threat. Another threat caused by ShinRa that he as a former member of that company, and his friends, the heroes had to straighten out.

He looked over to where Tifa sat near a window. She was gazing at the stars that were beginning to show. If there was one person he could trust for comfort and encouragement, it was Tifa. He walked towards her, looking out of the same window in silence.

"Cloud, don't think about her too much." Tifa said, her eyes fixed on his profile. Cloud looked at her with an unreadable expression. A mixture of both a puzzled glance and an irritated one. "I mean, not when we're facing a big mission like this. I'm afraid that you'll have a breakdown again."

"I think, it takes more than just a breakdown to stop me, Tifa." He answered, looking back at the window. "I'm not worried about that anymore. But I can't help but worry about Eila. She shouldn't have been involved in the first place." He turned around sharply and approached Cid who was standing before the huge cockpit window.

Tifa could only watch and regret that she may have said something wrong again. However, every time she saw the girl's face in her mind, she could only remember Aeris. The sensation that followed was always nauseous and choking. Not that she hated Eila for looking so much like the Ancient, but Cloud was right. Everything was already going perfectly. Eila, the girl, should not have been involved.

Minutes later they arrived in Midgar, the Highwind depositing its passengers on the roof of mayor Reeve's office. through an auxiliary elevator that Cid had installed. With a wave of the old pilot's hand, the ship departed to be docked in a hangar on the other side of the city.

"Let's go see Reeve." Barret said, opening the door that would lead to the lower floors.

As the door opened, two soldiers came out, aiming their guns at them. Barret jumped back and in a few minutes the rooftop was crawling with soldiers.

Cid muttered a loud curse, Barret readied his weapon as did Cloud and Tifa. Just then, Reeve, Elena and Rude stepped out of the door, all of them wearing grim expressions.

"Reeve, what the hell is going on here?" Cid yelled angrily stomping down on the ground.

Elena moved toward them until she stood before Cloud. "Cloud Strife, " She said in a commanding tone. "we are placing you under arrest."

"What?!" Tifa yelled, grabbing Elena's arm. "You can't do that! He's done nothing wrong!"

Barret and Cid looked at Cloud. Both of them were surprised, yet curious. Wondering what kind of mess, Strife has gotten into.

Reeve let out a long sigh and bowed his head down. "I am sorry Cloud but, they have filed charges against you. Charges for murder."

"Murder?" Tifa repeated. Barret and Cid both muttered more curses while searching Cloud for an answer. What was puzzling was that he hasn't reacted like any of them have. He kept his face straight and calm.

"For murdering Eila Gainsborough." A new woman's voice called as she entered the scene followed by Elmyra Gainsborough.

Tifa gasped out aloud, tensing her muscles upon seeing the woman. She was tall, extremely sophisticated. Her long thin fingers wrapped around a piece of paper. Her blood red lips curled up in a mocking sneer. Her blue eyes were blazing with a fire that only read as revenge. Even her golden hair was ablaze with an aura of hatred.

Tifa clenched her fists, glancing between Elmyra and the woman. "Scarlet....you're alive.." She whispered disbelievingly.

Scarlet let out a mischievous laugh and nodded. "I am right here before you am I not? But that is beside the point. My client has filed charges against Cloud Strife for kidnapping Eila Gainsborough. Possibly murdered her as well as he did with, Aeris Gainsborough." Scarlet opened up the rolled piece of paper and handed it to Tifa.

"That's bullshit!" Tifa screamed, crumpling the document and tossing it at Scarlet, who simply avoided it. "Eila is still alive and he never kidnapped---"

"Tifa, that's enough." Cloud said, raising his hand.

"But, Cloud...?" Tifa protested, only to be silenced by his serious expression.

"In a manner of speaking, I am responsible for Eila's disappearance. I asked her out on a date when the monsters attacked us." He said, holding his hands out for Elena to cuff them. Tifa began to speak again, through teary eyes this time, but he only shook his head. "I am going to face this trial. If I run and hide, the truth will never be revealed. I hope you understand that." He gave her a reassuring smile, which did not do it's job.

Tifa called out his name again as Rude and Elena lead him away. "Dammit, Scarlet, we'll prove that he's innocent!" She yelled out.

Scarlet looked at the crying girl behind her and smirked. "Oh yeah? Then where is Eila? I don't see her with you." She turned around and pointed at them. "Oh, before I forget, the four of you cannot leave Midgar. You are also being held as accomplices to Strife's crime. Try and escape and Strife will pay."

Before any of them could argue, the soldiers moved in on them, pointing at them with their guns and urging them to obey.

"This can't be happening." Tifa cried. "Damn you, Aeris, why can't you just leave us alone?" She whispered angrily, hoping that somehow in the other life, the Ancient was suffering.