

On the Way to a Smile: The Story of Barret

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

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

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

"Rrraaahhhhhh!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"So? Who are you trying to be?"

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

"Shit! Th' hell should I know."

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

"Fine. While you're doin' that, I—"

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

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

"Well, I'll think of something."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"There you go—I'm right, see?"

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

"You plannin' to be our bodyguard forever?"

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

"You're not cut out for it?"

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

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

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

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

Whaddaya know. Maybe I do.

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

"You make me sound like an idiot."

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

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

"Can I hit you up for some advice?"

"Depends on the advice."

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

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

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

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

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

"I was afraid you'd say that."

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

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

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

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

"You know, man, the monsters' den might be somewhere inside me."

The boilerman wasn't kind enough to answer.

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The truck's destination was a small village that made its collective living growing potatoes in the fields. One after another, hemp sacks full of potatoes were packed onto the truck bed, which had gone through half the coal since their departure. As he helped with the work, Barret wondered, *When they sell these potatoes in town, how much do they go for?* No question the truck team's wages were tacked on to the village's asking price for the potatoes. Food prices were a problem in Midgar. *Too high, even for a time of crisis.* But seeing so many folks hard at work, he started to realize there wasn't any way around it. Once the mako supply stopped, most engine-powered farming equipment was rendered useless. Raising potatoes without it had to be more than arduous.

Barret soon found himself deep in thought. *If they can't use machinery, people have no choice but to move their bodies. Well, we got plenty of people. In Midgar, there are all kinds of folks with no jobs, struggling just to find food, right? Sure, they could just gobble up whatever's growing at their feet, but then they'd just run out of food. Yeah, they gotta sow some seeds, or get some plants in the ground and take care of 'em. For that matter, they gotta raise some livestock.*

Ah, bingo, he thought. If we all had a mind for it, the day is bound to come when we can live without want—at least not for food. When we need machines, we can use coal, like with the truck. All we gotta do from now on is go back to the way things were before mako. Times might be a little tight. Things might move kinda slow. For someone impatient like me, it might even be unbearable. But that's how it's gotta be. More like, that's how times change.

Barret smiled, pleased with how quickly he'd arrived at his own idea. Then he got to pondering what he could do. First, he'd attach a hoe to his right arm and start plowing the fields. He'd make the best of his powerful body and do the work of five men. *But wait—new times call for a new leader. Is that my role?* Barret's thoughts picked up speed. He imagined himself firing off orders, his friends straining to catch each and every one.

"On it, Barret!" Jessie would say as she flew out of the room, with Wedge and Biggs close behind. But then scenes from his days as Avalanche's leader came to mind, and for a moment his vision of a bright future changed to deep regret.

"Grrrrraaaaaahhh!" cried Barret.

Damn, there I go again, he thought, and glanced around. But no one was looking at him. The whole lot was gathered in front of a house, watching as Old Man Sakaki's nephew spoke with a middle-aged man who must have been from the village. Barret stepped forward to listen to the conversation.

"I haven't got any problem taking your daughter to Midgar. But she looks awful weak... We might not make it in time."

"But..." The middle-aged man carried a young girl upon his back, who slumped lifelessly. She was a beautiful girl. But from one arm dribbled a black liquid—the horrid geostigma, and an awful case at that. Barret had walked into the kind of moment he hated most: *Right now, there's a crisis in front of you and you can't do a damn thing about it.*

Barret knew that even if she went to Midgar, she wouldn't find any decent treatment. Maybe it would be best to tell her that. *Shouldn't you spend your last days quietly, in the village?* But saying that would rob father and child of their hope. *Is this all I can do? Shut up and let matters take their course?* Barret wanted to scream.

"Wouldn't goin' to Midgar just be a waste of time?" asked a voice. Barret looked beside him and saw the familiar face of the boilerman, scowling.

"Prob'ly," replied Barret.

"Then I better tell 'em," said the boilerman, and he started to walk toward the man and his daughter.

"Hold up," Barret called.

But the man wouldn't listen. Barret went after him, hoping to stop him before his words brought despair to the man and his daughter. The boilerman sighed, turned around, and said to Barret, "You think we should just let her go to Midgar, so long as it makes her happy, right? Even if there's no point?"

"Yeah."

"Well, that's all well and good if you got an airship, but all we got ourselves is a truck. The bed gets hot. It's a hard ride. You know that. What do you do if she ends up dyin' even sooner 'cause of that?"

"Still, come on, man..."

"Don't worry, I'll be the one to tell 'em. Maybe I kill her pop's hope. But the girl should be at home for the end."

Barret didn't know if he or the boilerman had the right. He had to think. His mind started to whirl. Again he wanted to scream, but held it in.

After a time, the boilerman came back without even joining the conversation.

"She just drew her last breath."

"What!?"

"You... wanna hear what her last words were?"

No, he thought, but the boilerman continued.

"Please, take me to Midgar."

The boilerman clenched his fists. He knew he had been wrong.

"Rrrrrraaaaaahhhhhh!" cried Barret. "*Nobody's* wrong!" He gave in to rage, lifted his right arm to the skies, and fired the gun.

The *ratta-tatta* echoed throughout the quiet village.

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Barret stayed in the village to witness the girl's burial. He asked her haggard father if there was anything he could do.

"If only we'd had an airship," the man muttered. "I used to be a crewman aboard the Gelnica. If she was still flying, maybe my baby girl wouldn't have had to die. It's just a short hop from here to Midgar."

"Listen, man." He knew he had to say something. "I know how you feel, but they can't cure the stigma, not even in Midgar."

If only this. If only that. As soon as you started thinking about what the world of what-ifs had over reality, tomorrow became hard to ascertain. Barret had experienced that himself. And lamenting what you never had any control over in the first place—the way this father was—was even worse. While Barret searched for the right words, the man started to speak.

"It doesn't have to be Midgar. Anyplace. The moment we heard they could fix the stigma there, we could be en route with the sick. If we had an airship, we'd be ready."

"Ready?"

"My daughter's not the only one suffering from geostigma."

Though he'd only just lost his child, the father's eyes were fixed on what was ahead.

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The future Barret had painted in his mind while packing potatoes onto the truck had faded entirely. *Why can't we run just a few of the airships and the other useful machinery? Hell, in Midgar they use work vehicles and other machines. Why not an airship, then? So long as we don't waste the mako. Times have changed, and I'm gonna do the same.*

Not far to the east of Rocket Town stretched a desert region where hardly any vegetation grew. Situated there was an oil derrick about fifty meters high, and a small, aging refinery built next to it.

Several men and women stood beneath the weathered derrick. One of them was Shera, dressed in a white lab coat.

The engineer standing next to her shook his head. "It's down seventy percent compared to last month. Bad news, that's what this is. So how are things goin' on your end?"

"We're done. I can't say it compares to mako, but we've managed to take the refining process quite a ways."

"Knew you'd pull it off. Now we just need the stuff to refine, huh?" The engineer directed his stare toward the ground. Shera couldn't help but follow his gaze. She thought of the milling drill pipe, whirring away to dig up any oil left underground.

"Just a little more." Shera clapped her hands together in prayer, but the stain on the back of her left hand wasn't oil. It was the stigma.

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ocket Town was once the base for the Shinra Electric Power Company's space program. The engineers had eventually settled down there, turning it into a bustling village.

When Barret arrived in the town, he saw children playing. Some were the same age as Marlene. His eyes lit up immediately.

"What you kids playin'?" he asked. The children looked up, their eyes slowly taking in the sight. "How 'bout you let an old guy join in?"

The children bolted. Barret clicked his tongue and looked at his right hand.

"Just gotta put up with this till my hand's done."

"You're scary even without the gun," someone called out from behind him.

"Wait a minute, you're—" He couldn't put a name to the face.

"I doubt you'd remember me. I'm from the Highwind crew." The Highwind was the name of the airship Barret and the others wound up boarding during their journey to save the planet.

"Oh, I gotcha. Well, thanks for helpin' out back then."

"You're very welcome."

Barret wasted no time in asking the man to take him to Cid. As they walked, he heard a dull metal pounding.

"Break time's over, y'know. We better get a move on."

"Whatcha all up to?" "What do you think? This is where Cid's gang comes home to roost, after all."

"An airship?"

"See for yourself!"

Past the long line of houses, a large area opened up, and Barret could see an enormous airship—*yeah, just like the old Highwind!*—under construction.

"Well, shit! Wouldja lookit that."

The airship was girdled by a crude scaffold. On top of the scaffold—which didn't look like it would earn any applause for its safety precautions—worked about twenty townsfolk. All Barret could hear was the shrill retort from the metal armor plating being hammered into place. The airship looked all but finished.

"Hey, she's all done!"

"Yeah, but just the trimmings. Take a gander." The man pointed to an empty engine bay. "It's because we can't use mako anymore. The engine is gonna take some time."

From out of nowhere came the earth-shaking crash of an explosion. Barret panicked and hit the dirt.

"Cap'n's over there," laughed the old comrade, pointing to a garage behind the airship.

Inside the garage, a single engine that looked like it would fit an airship sat upon a massive workbench.

Several men peered at it from a safe distance, and all of them wore goggles. Again, the sound of an explosion. Barret flinched. One of the men shucked off his goggles and ran up to the engine.

"Sonofabitch!"

Cid leaned in to examine the engine, gnashing his teeth as if he were about to tear off a piece.

"Goddamn piecea *shit*! I'm gonna flatten you into last week's scrap!"

Barret grinned. He hadn't heard such foul language in ages. *He ain't changed one bit, this one.* Cid sauntered over to Barret, spouting profanity with every step.

Barret greeted Cid with a laugh. "Talk like that and God's gonna get on your case!"

"*God?* You haul his ass down here," snapped Cid, not missing a beat. "I gotta have words with him."

* * *

The two quickly filled each other in on recent events.

"I left Marlene with Tifa. Since she's taken to her and all."

"Good for you. Whole world's clappin' you on the back. So Cloud's with Tifa?"

"Yeah. Tifa opened a bar, just like the old days. Cloud was helpin' out, but it sounds like he's got his own business keepin' him tied up now. A delivery service."

"Cloud? Run a business?"

"You can bet it's Tifa kickin' his ass into shape."

"I see. In the end, it's the women wear the pants."

"How's Shera?"

"Meh, she's about the same," dodged Cid.

After that he steered the conversation away by talking about how Red XIII kept dropping by, how Yuffie was teaching the wushu fighting style to the kids of Wutai, and how Vincent had stayed completely out of touch.

"So whatcha need? I'm a busy man."

"You're buildin' an airship, right?"

"That I am."

"Would you let me help out?"

"*You?* What's a tenderfoot like you gonna do?"

Normally Barret would offer an enraged retort, but he let it bounce off and told Cid about what he'd been through.

"If you had an airship, man, you'd have all kinds of saved lives on your hands. Like folk with the stigma. If they found a cure somewhere, you could bring 'em there in a flash. You could even fly guys in from all over the place who could treat it. Deliver loads of food. Anything people needed to live, ya know?"

"Well, now, you like to lay it all out." Cid brought his face closer to Barret's. "We're talking about using mako. *Mako!* You know how much mako energy it takes to make one short hop with an airship?"

"Hell no. But listen." Barret recounted what he'd been thinking about on his way there. *Just can't be greedy. Use mako and you shorten the planet's life. True enough. But I'm not talkin' enough to change things down the line. Just a little. The planet oughta forgive us takin' just what we need to stay alive.*

Cid's reaction: "Hooey. What happened to Avalanche's leader?"

Barret had nothing to say to that. As far as coming to terms with his past, he thought he'd had his own answer. But now that someone was calling him on it, he searched for the right words. The gloom took over deep inside, and he raised his right arm. He was ready to open fire, then realized he was indoors and stopped short. But he did scream.

"Grrraaaaaahhh!"

Everyone in the room turned to stare at Barret.

"Sorry. Uhh, as you were," he said to the people around him, faking his best smile. Then he hung his head, searching for the words to explain himself. Instead of words, tableaux from his past

sprung to mind. *That way-too-serious look on Biggs', Wedge's, and Jessie's faces. C'mon, say something. Go on, guys, blame me.*

He shook his head as if to shoo the three figures away, then glanced up. Cid looked blurry.

"What the hell's with you? Cid asked, surprised.

"Cid, you gotta tell me. I dunno what to do. My past's like a minefield full of mistakes. But there had to have been things that were right. But what, which of 'em was right? Which was wrong? Which me am I supposed to be from now on? No, I wanna change. Am I not allowed, 'cause of my past? Huh? Am I supposed to keep this gun stuck on my arm, scarin' kids? Is that how I make up for my sins? I don't know anymore. Help me, Cid... What am I supposed to do?"

And in the end, Barret did open fire at the ceiling, tearing several holes in it.

Cid looked up at the ceiling and said: "Well, for starters, you can fix that."

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Cid sauntered over as Barret was working up a sweat fixing the holes in the ceiling. Out of embarrassment, Barret chose to ignore him and continued the repairs. Cid sat himself down a short distance away.

"You all calmed down now?"

"Scuse me."

Cid shook his head to say *no worries*. "I want your help with somethin'."

Barret stopped working and peered at Cid.

"First, mako. You hit the nail on the head. We'll take just a little from the planet, just what we need. We had the same idea. Truth is, airships are useful. 'Specially when the world's in the middle a' tryin' to pick itself up. If someday they tell me they don't need mine anymore, I guess I can just find me a spot with a nice view to set her down, and turn her into my house."

Cid went on to tell him about the current energy situation. As things stood, mako reactors around the world were at a halt. And that was by no means because the general public felt remorseful for mako usage shortening the planet's life. There was a more practical problem: upkeep was difficult without Shinra, who had run the mako reactors.

But the real reason no one restarted the reactors?

"By now, everybody knows that mako energy sucked out the Lifestream and consumed it," said Cid. "And that day, they all experienced firsthand how terrible the Lifestream could be. They're scared. Scared of pissin' the planet off."

Barret remembered the sight of it vaporizing Meteor closing in on Midgar, just moments before it would destroy the planet. The Lifestream's power was overwhelming, surely far beyond anything man could ever produce.

"Ain't nobody wants to touch mako with a ten-foot pole."

"So you're sayin' there's no way to make mako energy now?" asked Barret.

"Ayup. Prob'ly not. There's still some mako left that got sucked into Midgar's reactors and never got used. Right now, those mako reserves power every mako engine worldwide. Area leaders are managin' it, divvyin' it up to the people they figure need it. Mainly it's to get machinery runnin' that'll help with reconstruction."

"Yeah, I know. I was in Midgar. But c'mon, what's wrong with spinnin' just one of them reactors now and then? Forget how scary it is." *Forgive me, Biggs, Wedge, Jessie.*

"Won't get another drop of Mako outta the ground there. The flow of the Lifestream's changed."

"You checked it out?"

"Red told me. If he says so, it must be true enough."

Barret was at a loss for words. Was the planet telling them not to use mako anymore?

"Now, if we were to throw together a mako reactor in some other place, that's a whole 'nother story. But first we gotta find that place, transport all the materials... No tellin' when we'd finish. Then there's the matter of how to transport those materials in the first place."

"That's no good at all!"

"Ayup, once those mako reserves run out, it's all over. The world'll revert back to the age of coal. We'll just have to poke along in the good ol' steam trucks again. Go back to chocobos-are-the-fastest-form-a'-ground-transportation-thank-you-ma'am. Not that that's so bad, really."

"So you wanna live as a quitter? You say we gotta go through life facin' backwards? Yeah, we effed up big time, I know. Maybe it is best we don't go walkin' down the same path. So what? We just gonna tread water? Why can't we search for another way?"

"Which brings us to *oil*," Cid said with a grin.

"Oil? That useless goop?"

To Barret, who worked in coal mines, the mention of oil was a surprise. All it was ever good for was burning in lamps.

"It's only been useless since mako came along. Truth is, oil was supposed to usher in a new era. We even had us some respectable technology to produce different fuels from oil. But once mako showed up, the technology was carried over to mako applications. And so oil had up an' vanished from history."

But Cid continued, explaining how he and his team had pulled out old records and located an oil field. Luckily, it wasn't too far from Rocket Town. On site, they'd found facilities to drill for oil and refine it into gasoline—half-collapsed, maybe, but there nonetheless. Cid and his companions had restored the facilities to an operational status. But gasoline didn't yield enough power.

They needed a more potent fuel. They had persisted in efforts to that end, and at last prospects for making jet fuel were looking bright. In tandem with that, work was underway to revamp the engines to run on the new fuel. But that work wasn't going quite as well.

"When did you fools ever find the time—"

"After it happened. Right after."

"Well, damn, Cid! That's incredible!"

"Like I said, we had the records. There ain't a speck a' new technology. All we did was bring the old tech back to life."

"Whatever you did, this means the end of coal, don't it?" Barret, having grown up in a coal miners' town, had mixed feelings about that.

"Times change. We just happened to be born on the cusp, that's all."

"Can't say I feel one way or the other about that."

"Then how 'bout you feel lucky? The comin' age is our chance to try all kinds a' things."

"True that."

"The only unlucky part is..."

"What?"

"With so much to try, we're all gonna run outta time. Ain't that a bitch?"

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Cid and Barret set out east from Rocket Town. They walked a full day before reaching their destination. Shera came out to greet the two of them.

"Yo!" called Barret, who was happy to see her again after so long. Shera looked like she hadn't changed at all. But Barret noticed the stigma on her hand right away. She must've sensed it, as she made an attempt to hide her hand beneath her coat.

"Well, does it hurt?" Cid asked gruffly. "Don't push yourself."

We're all gonna run out of time, thought Barret.

Cid looked up at the oil derrick. It showed no signs of operation.

"Why the hell isn't this—"

Shera quickly explained the situation.

"We shut it down this morning. We might have gotten more, but output had dropped all the way to ten percent of when we started drilling, so we had to shut down the pump."

Cid slumped his shoulders and muttered, "The first day it came spurtin' out even without the damned pump. We turned jet black from all the oil rainin' down. Laughed our asses off."

Barret let out a great sigh.

"The planet ain't gonna give us *nothin'* else, huh."

"That's not true," Shera said in a firm voice. "The planet has all kinds of things in store for us. Like coal, oil, mako, you might say. There might even be things we don't know about yet. We'll be okay, as long as we don't misuse them. As long as we don't get greedy. If we're resourceful. The planet must be concerned about us. After all, the Lifestream that courses through it was once the lives of people who lived right here where we stand."

Cid and Barret ruminated on those words.

Shera—she'll always be concerned about Cid, whether she lives, or returns to the planet, thought Barret. Same goes for Cid. And the same for me.

"Shera..." was all Cid said before falling silent.

After a short time passed, he opened his mouth again. "Shera. How's the fuel?"

"Fine. It partly depends on your engine efficiency, but you should be able to fly once around the planet. More than enough for a test flight, I'd say, but what do you think?"

"The engine's not ready. Nothin's workin'. The end's nowhere in sight. Listen, Shera..."

"What is it?"

Cid had fallen silent. Barret chimed in despite himself.

"Cid just wants you to, to help out with the engine development. Kick his ass into shape, ya know? Just 'cause the fuel's all done—there's still heaps of work to do."

"I know." Shera looked at Cid. "I can't throw in the towel yet."

Barret needed to say more.

"And after you build the engine, there's still lots for you to do!"

Shera answered only with a smile.

The three of them looked up at the derrick in silence.

"Barret," said Cid. "Know about any oil fields?"

"You just leave it to me!" Barret had no more doubts. *Hey, planet. Hey, all you lives that course through it. If you wanna punish me, you go ahead and do it. But I'm gonna fight back with all I got. The only ones who get to punish me are the folk who are still living. I'm gonna live, so the living have a tomorrow.*

When Barret returned to his workshop, Old Man Sakaki held out a new prosthesis made just the way he'd ordered it. The hand was made of wood, and had a warm feel to it. It wasn't meant to fit an adaptor, but attached directly to the arm instead. Barret looked at the hand, then at the old man and said, "I still got journeyin' to do. I gotta find some land that yields oil. I may end up goin' places nobody else would dare enter, dangerous places. There's no tellin' what monsters I'll find. So I still need a weapon. And not just to defend myself. I'm not allowed to stop fightin'. If my fightin' means somebody else doesn't have to, then that's my calling. No, my penance."

After listening to Barret's uncharacteristically coherent words, Old Man Sakaki went into the back, and then returned with some sort of parcel. When he opened it, Barret saw a prosthesis inside with traces of rust upon it. It was an exquisitely made steel hand. Even the fingers looked like they moved.

"With practice, you could even write with it. How well you do depends entirely upon you."

"This..."

"...was to be a payment of sorts for helping my nephew. But since you don't seem to need it, I'll hold on to it."

"I'm sorry. You went through so much trouble to make it."

"No trouble. I made it for you years ago."

"Come pick it up when everything's over," the old man said. "I'll have the rust all polished off."

After leaving the workshop and walking a while, Barret thought, *I shoulda written a letter to Marlene. Maybe I oughta call her, too. No. Once it's all over I'll come back here and write it with that hand the old guy made me. And I'll take that letter to Marlene myself.* Barret wanted to scream. So, at his heart's behest, he did.

"I'm comin'!"

* * *

Case of Barret
Fin