

On the Way to a Smile: The Story of Denzel

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Come closer and sit over here."

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

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

"Is it a date? Good luck."

"Coffee please."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Sit."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"They don't have chicken?"

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

"Ewww... Sounds disgusting."

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

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

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

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"What mean parents."

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

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

"I know. I know about it well."

"Oh? Did something happen?"

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

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

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

"She went shopping."

"When she gets back, tell her to call me back right away. Nevermind, I'll call her."

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

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

"Where's your mum?"

"She's not back yet."

"I'm going to look for her."

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

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

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

Eber looked around him and lowered his voice.

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

"They're going to destroy this place?"

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

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

"Is it true?"

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

But they weren't going to move.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Denzel, lets go to the Fifth Sector."

"No! We have to go after her!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

"No!", Denzel cried.

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

"We'll go together."

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

"Of course it is, sir."

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

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

"Dad..."

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

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

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

Denzel was about to run off but Arkham stopped him.

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

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

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

"I'm hungry."

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

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

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

"An urgent news bulletin."

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

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

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

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

"Where's your home?"

Denzel pointed out at the empty space.

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

"And your parents?"

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

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

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

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

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

"Did Shinra do it?"

"Yeah."

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

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

Denzel shook his head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He threw away the model as he thought out loud.

"I hate everyone!"

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

"Who done that!"

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

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

Denzel nodded with a guilty face.

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

"Are you crying?"

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

"Where's your home?"

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

"Come inside."

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

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

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

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

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

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

"They were in the Seventh Sector."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And that was how Denzel came to live with Ruvi.

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

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

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

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

But Ruvi didn't seem like she could fight. He wondered if he'll end up fighting it himself. Could he do it? Could he win?

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

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The sunlight grew strong and Denzel was soaked with sweat.

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

Denzel took out a handkerchief to wipe away his sweat.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Lets go outside."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Is it all right if I stayed here?"

Ruvi looked up from the book and smiled at Denzel.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Miss Ruvi, I'm scared."

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

"Cover yourself with the blanket."

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

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

"Denzel! Go back to your room!"

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

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

"Denzel, stop it!"

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

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

"Keep it closed!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Mrs Ruvi."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"And where's your family?"

"Mrs Ruvi is inside."

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

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

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

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

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

Reeve nodded as he listened.

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

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

"Is Midgar dangerous?", someone asked.

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

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

The truck done a U-turn and left. A large crowd was gathered at the station. That white light affected the whole of Midgar. Those who had their homes destroyed and those who thought the town would collapse soon all ran here. Even so, there was a lot of people who hesitated about following the track to the ground. Instead of hearing the voices of joy now that Meteo is gone, disatisfied shouts could be heard about the incomplete shelter advice they were given. Denzel thought himself that he was glad his father wasn't here. The crowds were dispersed and split into groups heading to the homes, blending in with the flow on the track. We didn't know what lied ahead but the only person leading was Gaskin. It was obvious that we had no other choice but to obey him.

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

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

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

"Where's your mama?"

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

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

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

Denzel had no idea what they were saying.

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

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

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

"My back hurts."

"Your back hurts huh?"

"Yeah."

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

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

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

"He's dead."

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

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

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

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

"Wear this."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

* * *

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

"You're right. Especially with children."

"Yeah."

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

* * *

Denzel absentmindedly watched the people that fled to the station in the Slums. One after the other they were descending from the upper levels. There were people who thought it would all be over if they stopped. I had to do the same too but I couldn't abandon the hope that I would see a

familiar face by staying. It was hard for Denzel to forget about his hunger with that half-hearted effort.

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

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

He wasn't someone Denzel really wanted to see.

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

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

Denzel ate some cookies too. He was glad at how good the sweetness of the cookies felt. He turned to the bag and said, "thanks".

Gaskin gave Denzel's head a good ruffle.

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

He also made friends quick. They were all children who had lost their parents. Gaskin's friends also increased in number. He called them good-for-nothings who weren't very good at thinking and who didn't feel right if they didn't exercise. They were the first group to start doing burials. Denzel sometimes noticed himself laughing. He felt he could be himself again. However, about two weeks later, the number of people coming from Midgar to take refuge was decreasing while there were no more people being forced to go to their area. Their role at the station was closing to an end. Denzel went through many sleepless nights worried about the future.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Mr. Gaskin, do you feel unwell?"

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

* * *

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

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

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

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

* * *

Denzel laughed with a smile.

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

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

Reeve laughed.

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

"You should be grateful to her."

"She's not around anymore."

* * *

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

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

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

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

"Hey, wait a sec."

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

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

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

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

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

Suddenly, Denzel remembered something his father said.

"Shall we catch rats to eat?"

"Rats?"

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

"You serious?"

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

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

"We'll catch them with spears."

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

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

"...I didn't know."

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

"No way!"

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

"Rix..."

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

Saying that, Rix left Denzel behind.

* * *

Denzel sighed.

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

"And why was that?"

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

"And Rix?"

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

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

* * *

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

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

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

* * *

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

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

"Yeah, you're right."

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

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

* * *

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

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

"All phones in Sector Seven are offline."

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

"All phones in Sector Seven are offline."

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

"All phones in Sector Seven are offline."

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

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

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

Denzel listened to the woman's voice silently.

"Cloud?" the woman asked suspiciously.

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

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

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

"...Are you crying?"

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

* * *

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

"Sort of."

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

Reeve understood and nodded.

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

Reeve was silent.

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

"No. No no!" said Johnny.

"You keep quiet!"

"You're still just a kid!"

"That has nothing to do with it!"

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

"You see!"

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

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

"...What do you mean?"

"Draw out the power in adults."

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

"Oh, and..."

Denzel looked at Reeve hopefully.

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

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

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

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

"Cloud he..."

"What about him?"

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

"Times... Have changed you know."

"In what way?"

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

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

* * *

Case of Denzel
Fin