

On the Way to a Smile: The Story of Red XIII

Oh, Gilligan please begone. Just who are you? Nanaki who was also known as Red XIII faced the moon and howled as he tried to spit out the pitch black monster that had nested itself inside him. His howl echoed across the cold plateau of the night. The burning flame at the tip of his elastic tail lit up the red fur that covered his entire body as he shook and howled.

There was nothing around to answer Nanaki's distant howl. It had always been the same but just this time, he thought there was a sign. It was one that told him he will most likely have to resolve this problem alone. Gilligan was inside him and was his enemy alone.

It was just a few days ago that he realised its existence. Gilligan was born after Nanaki was— Or so that was the order it happened as he thought back.

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After the journey with Cloud and the others to defeat Sephiroth and save the planet ended, Nanaki returned to Cosmo Canyon. The people of the valley warmly welcomed the return of Nanaki who helped end the battle and listened to the story of his travels with deep interest. Nanaki was filled with pride.

Then Nanaki went to see his father, the brave warrior who fought the Gi Tribe and now stood petrified watching over the valley.

"Father, you and mother were fine warriors who watched over this valley. That's why I tried to protect it just like you did. And I think I managed to do it. That's why I will be travelling again, father. This time it won't be about fighting. I will look at life around the world. Chocobos being born, trees withering and hmmm— I don't know what else but, I'll look at all sorts of things, everything. Grandpa told me. He told me that it's my errand to continue watching such things, remember it all and tell my descendants all about it. Oh and—" Nanaki's gaze ran over his father looking at his petrified eyes and ears as he thought, "And I will tell you everything too, father. Yes, I'll do that."

Nanaki then told the people of the valley the very same things. That he was going to obey the last words of his deceased grandfather Bugenhagen—And make "the journey to record the world" his new errand. They all encouraged him saying it will be very meaningful. And reassuring him that they will always be here for him, they saw him off.

Leaving the village through the plateau, Nanaki looked back after going down a steep path. The people of the valley were still waving to him. In answer, he sat back and raised his front legs, head high in the air and howled. *Farewell. I will be back. Take care.* With that, he ran down the rest of the path in a single breathe. Before long he arrived at a crag. It was the spot he would always stop to look back whenever he left the village. After he leaves it, the village will be out of sight. Just like those times he looked back up—but he couldn't see it. A giant boulder that he was sure wasn't there before blocked his view. *Ah yes,* Nanaki thought to himself. *The lifestream passed through here. That must have caused the boulder to fall down from somewhere. When I made my way back here, I noticed the geography has changed in many places.* At the very least when he went to check nearby, he found layers of rocks and parts that had once protruded out of ledges had all collapsed. *It can't be helped,* thought Nanaki. The changes weren't troubling anyone. When compared to say Midgar's reconstruction and its destroyed cities, this was nothing. Nanaki leapt off a small boulder and moved on. He took care as he walked on his feet. He took one step. Then another. Then he realised something was wrong. It had nothing to do with his surroundings but his body—No, inside his heart. Nanaki stood still and closed his eyes. He looked deep into his heart. *There it is. This must be it. How to describe it,* thought Nanaki. This

was the way Nanaki looked at and tried to understand matters. *This was—pitch black.* It was as if a hole had opened up in his heart. No it wasn't a hole. It was like a black "soul of memories" sitting there. Something was attached to his heart very firmly. Before long he could feel it starting to vibrate violently. He believed it was changing shape. *I wonder what's it changing into—*Just as the thought came to mind, Nanaki trembled all over with fear.

"—" He shuddered so much he couldn't even make a sound. Nanaki grit his teeth and tried to endure it. No, he couldn't endure it. Letting out a deep breathe he turned round and ran back towards the village, leaping over the cliff.

The people of the valley who had just saw Nanaki off were surprised to see him again and gathered together.

"What's wrong, Nanaki?"

"Hmmm—" he started. He knew the black soul had disappeared.

"Don't tell us you were already missing your home," someone jeered. The others laughed.

"Yes, that maybe so."

"Nanaki, you have to be firm with yourself! It's not like a brave warrior at all!"

"Yes, you're right."

For a while, Nanaki exchanged words with the poeple of the village. Then once again, he said his goodbyes and started his journey. He could have went a different way but he challenged himself to go down the same path again. He thought it was necessary to ascertain whether the reason for the fear he had felt was because of that very place. However, nothing happened.

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Nanaki named the "something" that suddenly appeared and struck him with fear, "Gilligan". There was no meaning to the name but by giving it a name, he won't forget about it at the very least. Names were what reminded him of various matters. And so it was, Nanaki continued to raise this Gilligan as he travelled. Sometimes when he remembered about it he would think about finding out what it truely was but every time he did, he would be gripped with fear. Until he could deal with it calmly, he thought he will leave it for the time being.

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Leaving Cosmo Canyon, Nanaki made a rough plan of his journey. First he will go west where Yuffie's hometown Wutai is and then he will travel around and see the long narrow islands to the north south. After that, he will go east. On a big island there was Rocket Town where Cid is, Barret's hometown Corel and, Tifa and Cloud's hometown Nibelheim. Then he will try going north. He's also thought about visiting the uninhabited borders as well as every nook and corner which was going to take a lot of time but, Nanaki wasn't worried about that at all. To Nanaki whose tribe has a lifespan of five hundred or even a thousand years that no human could ever have, what meaning could it have?

"Being rash is forbidden. I will be living on much longer than everyone else after all."

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Wutai was Nanaki's destination . If it was possible, he planned to go see Yuffie. Yuffie would always come to him and treat him as if he was her pet but, Nanaki accepted it thinking it was Yuffie's way of being friendly with him.

"It's easy to understand what Yuffie's thinking," thought Nanaki. Surrounded by comrades who were older than her, Yuffie would always be challenging them. Outside of being in the same battle together, she would insist the difference in age didn't matter. Nanaki understood those feelings very well. She was probably referring to one's psychological age. However, he had very mixed feelings when it came to not understanding the fifteen or sixteen year old Yuffie's behaviour very well even though he has lived for close to fifty years but, because humans matured in a different way than he did, he just had to give up in understanding her better.

As Nanaki reached close to Wutai, he found Yuffie by coincidence. Mischievously he was planning to give her a fright and pretend she was being attacked but, looking at Yuffie from the plateau, it didn't seem like a good time for that. Her back was facing Wutai as she dragged a young boy around her age by his ankles. *She's probably been doing that for a long time.* A long trail was made behind the boy in the grassy field. He didn't know whether the boy was still alive but Yuffie was desperately speaking to him. Before long, Yuffie stopped. Just as Nanaki thought she was taking a break, Yuffie lifted up the boy and was somehow trying to get him on her back. However, Yuffie wasn't strong and it looked like she was having some difficulty.

"Guess it can't be helped," said Nanaki to no one in particular and headed towards Yuffie. The feeling of going to help someone who wasn't expecting any help didn't feel too bad. Nanaki quietly crept towards Yuffie who didn't notice him at all and asked:

"Shall I give you some help?"

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Yuffie's friend was a young boy named "Yuri" who had suddenly caught an illness in Midgar. It was a horrifying illness that had a black substance running down his legs as if he was going to die. Apart from repairing the damages in Midgar's towns, the illness was a much bigger problem. Nanaki heard that it was infectious but Yuffie was in contact with Yuri as if she didn't care. He started to worry. *Maybe she should have thought about that.* However, while talking to her about it, he learned that Yuffie already knew that the illness was possibly infectious. *What's with this carelessness? No wait,* realised Nanaki. *It's not carelessness. It's kindness. Yuffie—I don't know how close they are but— she couldn't just give up on her friend.* His thoughts turned to hate towards Yuri. He just couldn't understand how Yuffie could be kind when she knew she could get infected. *Somehow, it makes me angry.* However, there was nothing Nanaki could do. It was Yuffie's friend after all. But as if to get revenge, when Yuffie talked about using materia to heal the illness, he told her bluntly there wasn't such a thing. Yuffie was angry. He was expecting that. However, he never expected the sadness he saw in her eyes. Nanaki deeply repented and regretted what he just said to her.

Soon, they reached Wutai and stayed there for several days. Yuffie began to look after the patients that were quarantined there. Nanaki would help whenever he was ordered to but usually he would just be observing the illness. He thought he should keep it within his memories too. It was part of life.

"Hey you. Is it true you can really speak?" asked one of the patients.

"That's odd. Why would Shinra create something like him? They must have made a mistake and gave him a heart. Don't you think it would have been better if they created something for humans?"

"Hmmm—" At that moment, Nanaki realised it. He realised that being able to have the same feelings and thoughts as most humans was surely to allow him to understand them. It was his errand to let his people know in the future how humans have evolved. *Now I've learned another thing*, thought Nanaki.

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Nanaki wanted to stay with Yuffie longer in Wutai so that he could watch over the situation in Wutai and its patients but, Yuffie ordered him to go gather information regarding the illness and so it was he left Wutai behind him. As he was about to enter a hollow from which Wutai would be out of his view, Nanaki turned back and gazed at the town. He was sure he'll be able to see Yuffie's little figure working at the small hut built before the town. It looks like he had gone further into the hollow than he had expected.

"Oh well. I'll just have to come again sometime," thought Nanaki but at that instant he could feel a sudden shock inside his heart. Gilligan. It appeared again. This time Nanaki concentrated on Gilligan to ascertain its true identity. The black soul vibrated and before long something floated to its surface. It was the faces of the people from Cosmo Canyon. Their faces looked at peace but before long, they disappeared as if they were sucked back inside the black surface. *Those faces just now—huh?* When he realised he couldn't remember their names, he started to tremble all over. The trembling was so severe he couldn't stand and had to lie down. *Remember, remember their names.* Nanaki encouraged himself. Not long afterwards, Yuffie's face floated to the surface of the black soul. She looked calm but her expression was of one he had never seen before. Then her face too disappeared as if it sunk back into the black sea. Suddenly, the image of death floated to the surface. Were the people of the valley going to die? Fear attacked him.

"Help me!" cowered Nanaki on the ground, his body trembled as he called out to the stars for support. Just as he was going to call out to Yuffie, Gilligan disappeared. Nanaki struggled to get up and stood looking around him. He ran up the sides of the hollow and saw Wutai. He saw Yuffie working away there too.

One day, Yuffie will grow old and die. And there are many elders amongst the people of the valley so they too will disappear even earlier than her. It was sad just thinking about it. As he shed tears, there was no doubt it was going to take him a long time to calm down. But why did Gilligan release fear inside him when it made him think of death?

Was Gilligan's true form the fear he felt when everyone dies? Nanaki shook his head and forced the misfortunate idea from his mind. *One day the time will come but even so, I don't want to think about my friend's deaths*, he thought.

Nanaki changed the plans for his journey and decided to investigate the "Midgar illness" Yuffie and the others had mentioned.

The best place to gather information about it was Midgar itself. The more information he had, the more confused he will probably get. However, Cloud who thought about everything deeply and the intelligent Tifa were there so if he was to spend some time there, he had no doubts that he may learn something.

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Making his way round Mount Nibel, Nanaki entered a forest that he didn't know existed and ended up lost. At first, he continued through on foot relying on his animal instincts but the forest appeared to be deeper than he had imagined. Even so, he continued to search for an exit thinking it was nothing to be worried about. It maybe a deep forest but, just by looking up he could

tell which direction he was going in from the movements of the sun. Nanaki walked on using the knowledge about directions he acquired from humans. He should be exiting from the east of the forest soon.

A gunshot was heard. Nanaki couldn't tell which direction it was coming from because of the echoes from the woods but he ran in the direction that he guessed it came from. He found a ten year old boy being attacked by a monster. The monster was in the shape of a bear with a long tail. No, perhaps it was a bear. Its body was covered in a grey rusted metal colour and its front legs were bleeding.

It must have been shot. The wounded monster circled around the boy who had fallen back sitting scared. It appeared it was thinking what it should do with the boy. Before long, it went berserk, its eyes burning red with rage as it slowly approached him. Nanaki leapt out from the undergrowth he was hiding under and biting onto the boy's clothes, they left the area together. After taking the boy to a safe thicket, he stood facing the bear. As if the bear didn't care about who his new enemy was, it naturally ran towards Nanaki. The claws on its two paws could be seen under its fur. *I'm going to be in trouble if I get slashed by those,* thought Nanaki.

"Nibel bear's throats are their weakpoints! Go, Red!" The boy suddenly said. Nanaki was perplexed by the command but, it was true that many beast's weakness was their throat so he focused his attacks on the Nibel bear's throat. It's been a long time since Nanaki roared, raising his voice as he intimidated his opponent. The Nibel bear froze in its tracks and for the first time, was trying to gauge its enemy's strength. They glared at each other.

"What are you doing! Go Red!"

Stop saying whatever you please, thought Nanaki. *Humans shouldn't say anything in battles where the beasts have no weapons but their own bodies. The forest is a beast's place.*

That moment, he heard another gunshot. At the same time, blood burst out from the Nibel bear's throat as its massive body fell to the ground. Immediately out of the thicket came a human—it looked as if he was a hunter—jumping towards the fallen Nibel bear and firing a finishing shot. The Nibel bear stopped breathing.

The hunter then turned round and aimed his gun at Nanaki. It looked as if he was just on his guard and didn't intend to shoot yet.

"Dad, don't shoot. It saved me. It's fate. God has granted him to me. I want to bring Red back home with me," said the boy as he cut in between Nanaki and the hunter.

"Red' you say?" the hunter asked back.

"Yeah. He's red so he's 'Red'."

What a disgraceful name, thought Nanaki. It reminded him of the mad man who once gave him the same name. He raised his voice and gave out a roar to show his dissatisfaction. The father and son backed off a few steps cautiously.

"You can talk, can't you?" the hunter said with his gun still aimed at Nanaki. "Long ago the Shinra Company put a load of prize money on your kind. A giant wolf-like appearance. Red fur and a tail that burns. Damn! If I had caught you one year earlier I would have been rich!"

"Red can talk?"

Yeah, it's true that I can talk. And I am most likely more wiser than you two too. But I don't want to open my mouth to the likes of you. Those that leave their guns poised and say whatever they feel like can't be friends. Nanaki turned round and made a little jump into the thickets.

"Damn it!"

Gunfire. The round bullet grazed pass Nanaki's ear. See, you fired in the end. You're the kind of humans that would throw me in a cage if you caught me. Then you would try to force me to talk. And you thought you could get along with me.

After putting some distance between him and where the hunters were, Nanaki checked and found they didn't pursue him any more. He returned to where the father and son had been. They were still there and had started to dissect the Nibel bear's corpse.

"Dad, I want Red."

"Yeah—Looks like he would make some money. Shinra maybe over but we can put on an exhibit with him. Might be best if we took him to the Golden Saucer."

"No, I want to be friends with him."

"Don't be silly," the hunter said as he used his knife to cut off the Nibel bear's tail. "It's not a cat or a dog. You won't be able to tame it."

You can't tame me either, thought Nanaki.

"Right, now to get some people here."

"What are you going to do?"

"The only things that's been of use to us are the Nibel bear's tails right? The Shinra bought it from us at high prices because they used them as stimulants for the soldiers. But from now on, the bear's meat will be of use too. It's not tasty but it doesn't really taste horrible either. Depending on how you cook it, it *can* be pretty good."

"Oh! So we're going to eat it!"

"Yeah. The world's going to be lacking food. I don't know it will go on forever or end soon but I'm sure we can make money from this opportunity."

The father and son left the Nibel bear's corpse as it was and went away. That hunter wasn't a bad person. He was just staying strong so that he could survive in these times. If Nibel bears can be mankind's food then it can't be helped. All living things had to eat or they would starve.

Once Bugenhagen had told Nanaki something. What differentiates between animals and monsters is the way they treat their opponent's corpse. Animals kill others to eat but, monsters only kill. Then they find their next prey. When you think about this difference, humans are close to monsters. If the Nibel bear's tail was all that hunter was after then you could probably call him a monster. But it's a different story if he must eat it to survive. It's kind of unfair that he possessed a gun but, this was how the food chain worked. *Even the father and son shouldn't be allowed to do as they please but I can't get involved in the problem,* thought Nanaki. Nanaki has spent much of his time with humans since he was very young and for that very reason he didn't hunt much. So little that he had tried it when he thought about hunting. When he thought about how he was

going to take his prey's life not because he wanted to eat it, he had thought of himself as a monster. Yes, thought Nanaki. I'm not one to judge them. Many humans are unconsciously taking the lives of other animals and eating them to live. Even if they were conscious about it, they would avoid thinking too deeply about it besides the ones that made a living hunting for food. Nanaki too was the same. There no point puzzling over matters here. Even if there was a correct definite form of behaviour, he probably wouldn't be able to arrive at that answer just now.

"Geeeeee!" An ear deafening high pitched sound came from two small Nibel bears as they came running to the dead corpse. All the smaller animals ran away panicking. The small Nibel bears snuggled up to the corpse—most likely their mother—and nuzzled their nose and paws against it. *They're probably trying to wake her up.* Nanaki just gazed at them helplessly. Then he remembered. *That hunter said he was going to get some people here. If those cubs stay here they will be in danger too.* The idea to just watch over the situation suddenly disappeared from Nanaki's mind. He left the thickets and appeared before the cubs.

"I understand how you feel but it's dangerous here. Come, this way."

Nanaki jumped back into the thicket as he tried to lead the cubs away. However, his words didn't get through and the cubs stared at him with an expression that he couldn't understand.

"This isn't good. The humans are coming you know."

After taking some time to think, he leapt towards one of the cubs and picked it up, carrying it in between his teeth..

"Geeeeee!" As the cub Nanaki held cried out, the other cub howled in answer, "Geeeeee!"

Good, thought Nanaki as he turned round to make his way into the thickets with one of the cubs still in his mouth. The other one followed.

"Yes, that's right."

Nanaki continued deep into the forest. Sometimes he would stop so that he waited for the other cub to catch up, pursuing all its strength. Once their distance closed, he would run off again. And so as he repeated those same movements, he eventually arrived at an open area. There were old stones laid out and Nanaki clearly knew it was the work of humans. Surveying the surroundings, Nanaki could see that many stone materials were piled up without any order around the place. *Was someone trying to build something here?* However, that was the only signs that humans had been here. The air lingered as if it had all been abandoned long ago.

Nanaki laid down the cub he held in his mouth. He was surprised it wasn't moving but when he listened closely he could hear the sound of it fast asleep. *Such carefree little creatures*, Nanaki thought. The brother cub arrived too, letting out a single cry "Geeee!"—and without any suspicions—came running to them. It sniffed. Perhaps it was curious about the familiar smell that Nanaki had. It then sniffed about its younger brother. Soon as if it was satisfied or had enough of sniffing, it let out a huge yawn and slept, cuddling up to its brother.

"How cute," thought Nanaki. But then he was troubled. *What should I do now? I have some responsibility towards these cubs.* Nanaki laid down and gazed at the brothers. *Will they be able to survive without their mother? What do these Nibel bears eat?* At a glance they may look like ferocious canivores but these kind of beasts have a varied diet much like Nanaki. If that was the case then the forest should be filled with food—Nanaki reached a decision. He will gather some food for them before leaving the forest. He was concerned about the brothers' future but he can't

care for them forever. It was best they parted before they got too attached to one another. But before that—Nanaki too let out a big yawn and closed his eyes.

Moments later, Nanaki opened his eyes again. There were no signs of the cubs before him. *So they've gone off somewhere. Live well.* But just as he thought so, he noticed an odd feeling at his side. Looking there he found the brothers had buried themselves between Nanaki's side and the ground, sleeping soundly.

"This isn't good—Not good at all."

At that moment, Nanaki noticed his heart was filled with feelings that he had never had before. They were feelings that forced out all reason from his mind. He was determined to look after them until they became independent.

Nanaki taught the brothers—that he named "Pazu" and "Rin"—how to hunt. He himself wasn't that good at hunting but he made them listen carefully, acting as if the skill was of great use. He had no guilt taking the lives of other creatures. This was a fair fight to survive. Sometimes they would meet encounter other Nibel bears. Nanaki would try to convey to them that he wasn't hostile but was always just ignored. Everytime that happened, the thought that he really shouldn't have got involved pierced through his heart. No, perhaps he's been accepted as a friend in this forest. All sorts of thoughts came and left his mind. Everyday he would discover something new and even though he had his worries, the days were generally peaceful. Sometimes he would question if perhaps such a life might be good. Everytime he thought that way, he would tell himself that it was part of his errand but at the same time, he was aware that he enjoyed it.

Before long, many humans could be seen coming into the forest to hunt almost everyday. It appeared Nibel bear hunting was becoming regularised. They had accepted the bear's meat as food. Nanaki thought to himself that he can't just teach Pazu and Rin how to hunt but also how to flee from humans.

Nanaki no longer knew how many days and months he had spent in the forest. *Keeping track of time is a characteristic of humans*, thought Nanaki. *I can live with humans or beasts but as of now, I live in an age of beasts. I'm concerned over the promise I made with Yuffie but that's about an illness. It has nothing to do with beasts.* At first, it hurt Nanaki to say something like that but he could now think about it firmly. *I will talk about this story once the times have returned to the human world. I spent my time in a forest as a beast. It was necessary to have the emotions of a beast to survive. That's what I'll tell.*

Gilligan appeared many times inside Nanaki. Amongst the faces he knew, Pazu and Rin's were also added. The faces of the brothers would appear in the soul filled with dark emotions before sinking back into it as if they were disappearing, making Nanaki tremble with fear. However, his fear would disappear immediately as he ascertained Pazu and Rin were cuddled up against him. Nanaki now understood what Gilligan truly was. It was the fear of loss. It was the fear of losing loved ones that made Nanaki tremble. Now that he knew, he no longer feared Gilligan. Nothing can be achieved through fear of loss.

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The days in the forest suddenly ended. Pazu and Rin who had grown to the point where they could stand shoulder to shoulder by Nanaki, had established a place to stay and were living together. There was nothing particular that triggered it but one night, the two Nibel bears had started to sleep away from Nanaki. *Something has ended*, thought Nanaki. He was sad but he thought as it as part of growing up. The next day, the brothers were no where to be seen when Nanaki woke up. He guessed they had gone off to hunt for food on their own just like they had

decided to sleep away from him. At that moment, he heard gunfire. The roar of Nibel bears followed. *That was Pazu.* Nanaki who could now walk through the forest blindfolded, headed in the direction where Pazu stayed. Before long he saw something that he had once seen before.

That day, the boy had fallen back, sitting down scared. A Nibel bear was loitering around nearby. It was Pazu. He had taken an interest in the thickets nearby. It looked like he was waiting for Rin. Pazu stood up on his hind legs and raised his paws towards the sky as if making an offering then roared. Rin's voice could be heard in reply. The boy was scared as he searched for an escape route. When he saw Nanaki, his eyes glowed with hope.

"Red! It's me! You remember me, right? You saved me here long ago."

That day, Nanaki couldn't just watch him get killed. However, he knew what he had to say this time.

"This is the forest. You will have to abide by its rules."

Hearing Nanaki's voice, the boy's face was filled with joy. It appeared he was happy to find out Nanaki really could talk. *He has some courage*, thought Nanaki.

"I understand, Red," the boy said as he immediately got up quickly on his feet, running towards his gun that Pazu seemed to have retreated from. *I didn't come to cheer you on*, thought Nanaki. Unexpectedly, the boy was reaching towards his gun. Just as Nanaki thought Pazu was going to get shot and was going to leave the thickets, Rin appeared. With a single swoop of his front paws, the boy was knocked away. He lay there limp, motionless. Nanaki never watched but he told himself that the boy had fought by the forest's rules and it couldn't be helped that he lost. Pazu and Rin started to circle around the boy. Moments later they once again stood up on their hind legs and roared into the sky. *That's enough.* Nanaki leapt out of the thickets and stood before the boy's body, hiding it.

The two Nibel bears swung their claws down towards the boy but ended up cutting into Nanaki's back, ripping through his skin.

"Geee!" "Geee!" Pazu and Rin made the same pitiable sounds when they first met Nanaki and withdrew their paws.

"Don't worry about it. Go."

He turned the two Nibel bears round and they disappeared into the forest.

"Ugh—" The boy could be heard groaning below Nanaki.

"Hey, where the hell did that kid go? He shouldn't get ahead of himself like that when he's still inexperienced."

It must be that hunter's voice, thought Nanaki. He left his spot and hid in the thickets.

"Hey, Goddy! What happened!"

Sure enough, the hunter came running. But the figure that followed behind surprised Nanaki.

"A Nibel bear did this to him, right?"

It was a young woman dressed in the Turks uniform—Elena took out from her suit some kind of small bottle and with what was most likely a potion, she began to nurse the boy.

What is going on, thought Nanaki. *Does it mean Shina Company was still active?* Nanaki regretted that he didn't pay more attention to gathering information about the humans. Elena watched the hunter carry the boy out of the forest on his back before she was heard contacting somewhere on her mobile.

"I found one. I will try again tomorrow."

When Nanaki returned to the home made of stone in the forest, he found Pazu and Rin walking round in circles there. Then when they saw Nanaki, they hid themselves in the thicket.

"I'm not angry."

Nanaki said lying down. He wasn't angry but the wound hurt. He'll take a rest before concentrating on recovering. Tomorrow, Shinra will be in the forest again. It seems the Nibel bears are their target. It will be a busy day tomorrow. Nanaki could sense Pazu and Rin closing in towards him but he remained quiet, eyes closed. Soon, he could feel the brothers licking his wounds. *Thank you, Pazu, Rin.*

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He woke up again in the middle of the night. The pain from his wound had lightened quite a bit. Filled with the recovery abilities of a beast, Nanaki got up. As he looked around him, he couldn't see any signs of the brothers. Usually they would be sleeping somewhere within his line of sight. Thinking something was odd, he searched in the thickets but couldn't sense their presence anywhere. It was unlikely that non-nocturnal Nibel bears would be active at night. Nanaki began to panick and began his search in the forest.

He felt he heard gunfire somewhere far away. It was outside of the forest. Nanaki began to tremble all over. It's been a long time since Gilligan appeared. He covered as he trembled with fear. It's been so long that he's forgotten how to deal with it. *What was I supposed to do again? I know. Pazu and Rin. Those brothers stopped the trembling for me.* But neither of them were around. Clenching his teeth, Nanaki stood up and headed out of the forest.

Staring down at the ground as he walked, Nanaki endured the trembling. He knew he was out of the forest because the air felt different. He looked up. A grass plain sloped downwards. The grass was trampled where the hunters made their path. As Nanaki followed the path with his eyes, he could see a number of lights in the distance. It was a small village. One of the lights, the biggest of them all was swaying with a crackling sound. *That must be fire*, thought Nanaki. *Was it being used for cooking?* He took in everything in sight and thought to himself, trying to force Gilligan out of his mind. But there was no effect. Nanaki walked on with determination towards the lights.

It is, thought Nanaki. The lights lit up Pazu and Rin. The two of them were hanging downwards from a pole. They didn't look good. Their arms were stretched up into the sky, a sight that Nanaki have been used to seeing. Their tails had been cut off. Nanaki could feel himself calm. Gilligan had disappeared. He didn't have the courage to look at the Nibel bears closely so he surveyed the surroundings instead. There were three mountain huts. They were lit individually. Listening closely, he could hear the laughter of men and women. Perhaps they were having a toast. It appeared there was no lookout. Nanaki still couldn't look directly over at the brothers.

Did I come to avenge the brothers? Such emotion didn't belong to beasts. *Humans and Nibel bears may have long been enemies but that was in general, nothing personal,* thought Nanaki. *Humans are the only ones that can possess hostility and grudge.*

Perhaps it was the air outside the forest but Nanaki became aware that in his heart, he wanted revenge. This wasn't a beast's feeling. It's human.

"Geee" Nanaki heard the brother's voice. He was surprised. It sounded as if they were telling him they were in pain. Even though they were big in size, they were still children who were only just born a few years ago. Deep black emotions expanded inside Nanaki. It wasn't Gilligan but they were gradually devouring his senses. They were taking over his mind as much as he wanted to suppress his desire for vengeance.

The sound of a baby crying could be heard from one of the huts. *I see. There's a baby here. It must be very cute. A baby— Babies have no sin. Maybe it means you should bear with it, Nanaki.*

Nanaki's heart was being torn between being human or beast.

Pching!

A bullet hit the ground right next to Nanaki. He realised that he was so enraged he couldn't even recognise the sound of gunfire. He looked at Pazu and Rin again. Their voice had only been his imagination earlier. They had died a while ago. He looked at their eyes. He could see their eyes were bright red underneath the eyelids of their closed eyes. The lights were being reflected in them. He could feel the flames in his own eyes spreading as they burned. His eyes were growing hot. The scenery around him was dyed in bright red so much that he couldn't see any more.

He heard another gunshot ringing through the air. He followed the sound the enemy made and burst into one of the huts. The broken glass from the window scattered inside. There were a number of armed men. *What moved me was human emotion but in here right now, I have the instincts of a beast.*

He could no longer distinguish humans.

The sound of gunfire is heard and a sharp pain ran across his cheek. It was the sign. Nanaki leapt onto the closest man.

He couldn't remember what happened afterwards. All that he could remember was the pain of a bullet piercing his body and the cry of a boy.

"I wanted to become friends with you!"

Nanaki woke up. It looked like he had collapsed on a bloodstained wooden floor. He turned his head to look around him. At the side of a room sat a familiar man dressed in red, looking at him.

"Can you get up?"

Asked Vincent who sounded as if he had little concern.

"Vincent? Vincent! What are you doing here?"

"That's what I want to ask you."

Vincent replied as if he wasn't really interested.

* * *

Vincent didn't talk much but, it seems he has been living a life travelling where he felt appropriate. He said he was waiting for something to happen as if it was self-derision. During his travels, he coincidentally saw the Turk's helicopter and followed it, arriving at the village afterwards. It was where the helicopter stopped too. Elena from the Turks was seeking something and had gone into the forest with the hunters. Not long afterwards, she returned carrying a wounded boy and at night, two Nibel bears appeared. There was a lot panic amongst the hunters but they shot and killed the bears. After obtaining what she was after, Elena left in the helicopter. Just when Vincent was about to leave for some place he didn't know, Nanaki arrived. He heard the hunters firing their guns and Nanaki breaking into one of the huts. When he came to see what was happening —

"You had a hunter pressed down and was about to bite into his throat. A boy was crying and saying something about being friends. I don't know what happened to you. But when I looked at you, you weren't the Nanaki I know. You were like a beast attacking humans. That's why I fired."

After shooting Nanaki, there was confusion and knowing that it was a dangerous situation for the hunters to possess guns, he forced them out of the hut. He then bid them goodbye.

"I gave them a little scare. I transformed."

After that, Vincent treated the unconscious Nanaki and waited.

Nanaki looked around the inside of the room. There was blood all over the floor here and there.

"Did I kill someone?"

"No."

"I see. I'm glad."

There was a moment of silence between them. Nanaki tried to get up to look outside. He struggled but he managed to stand up somehow. Vincent began talking again as if he remembered something.

"They took away the bears that were outside. Maybe I should have stopped them?"

"No. They will probably be of use. It's the rules of the forest. No, perhaps it's the rules outside the forest? Vincent. I just don't understand any more. I just don't."

"I don't mind listening."

Hearing those words, Nanaki began to talk as Vincent remained silent. He told him all about what happened from the ear piercing "Geee! Geee!" baby bears to the point he reunited with Vincent.

"What should I have done?"

Vincent stayed silent. Just as Nanaki thought he wouldn't get an answer, he said.

"In my opinion. When you recall these past events again—you'll have an answer. But when you think about them again, the answer maybe different. There is an answer but there isn't only one. You should just continue living to think about it."

What's important is that you don't forget about these events, said Vincent.

"Hmmm—"

Nanaki felt as if he half understood and half didn't. His feelings were half and half.

"Maybe you will understand if I told you this," Vincent added as if he saw right through Nanaki's mind. "What you thought was good that time was one hundred percent wrong. All wrong."

"That doesn't tell me what I should do. No matter how much I think about it, I just can't decide what the correct course of action should be."

"That's just it," Vincent said standing up as if that was all he had to say. He then went on as if he remembered, "You can also choose not to do anything. I have chosen that way once."

"How did it turn out?"

"It may have been best for my retribution."

Vincent's mantle flailed dramatically as he turned and left the hut. Nanaki hastily got up and followed.

It appeared Vincent was going east. But before long he entered a secluded wasteland that was just off the road.

"Where are you going?"

"What are you going to do if I told you?"

"Can't I come with you?"

"Why."

"Because—" *I long for the company of others*, thought Nanaki. I want to be with someone. They were at the end of the wasteland—the two of them were walking underneath a cliff that was about the height of a small building—and he didn't want to be left alone.

"Your answer is one hundred percent wrong."

Vincent casually made his way up as if he was going to jump.

"Vincent!"

But it was too late. He could no longer see the red mantle or hear an answer.

"—You maybe wrong too, Vincent."

As he shouted that after Vincent, he realised something. No matter who was right or whether you think about what you should have done or not, worrying yourself was meaningless. The past can't be changed and what lies before you is only the future. What was important was that you never forget and keep thinking about it. If you do that, perhaps you will find an answer. And once you find it, it maybe of use to you. That was all there is to it. It's a very small matter compared to the days of life. *Neither I, Pazu or Rin had any worries when we were in the forest. The days there were fun.*

Nanaki lay down as if he was trying to get closer to the cliff and thought back over everything that happened in the forest. He remembered how bad the brothers' sleeping posture were even though they were beasts. Then the time when Pazu was drowning in the spring. Rin who fell from a tree. The first fish the two brothers caught. They ate it all in an instant. Nanaki smiled. But his tears wouldn't stop. *Farewell. Beast world.* Nanaki got up and began to walk east. After walking for a moment, he changed his mind and turned north.

* * *

Cid seemed to be busy developing a new airship in Rocket Town. Even so, he told the wound covered Nanaki that he should rest well and heal up. Nanaki spent his time gazing at the airship that was close to completion from afar so that he wouldn't get in the way of others. Nanaki was surprised that it has almost been two years since he lived with the Nibel bears in the forest. Even Cid too was surprised that it's been two years since they last met. Living a fulfilling life makes you forget about the flow of time.

One day, Cid was in a very good mood because the airship had been completed and he invited Nanaki for a test flight. Nanaki happily went for the ride.

"If it falls then that'll be that. Don't hate me for it ya hear," said Cid.

That'll be that. That's a good saying, thought Nanaki.

When flying in the sky, everyone will realise what a small place the world is. To Nanaki who travelled around the land, it was even more so. *I must thank Cid for giving me the chance of this special privilege to see the world from this point of view,* thought Nanaki. *This is the world that I will be spending a few hundred years in or even more. There are still many things about life that I don't know about yet. I'm sure there are many things that I should see and know.* It was an everyday thing that he would lose his way in the vast lands and feel bewildered. But he knew the world wasn't such a big place now. That little piece of knowledge gave him the courage to know that it wasn't impossible to learn about everything.

"The world's waiting for me."

"What did ya say? Quit exaggerating— Huh? Hey, hey! Look over there— "

"What's wrong?"

"Look. It's Yuffie. What the hell is she doing out here?"

Nanaki was a little guilty reuniting with Yuffie. After Yuffie had told him to go gather information regarding the illness, he hasn't done anything. He tried to hide his guilt by acting cheerfully. Soon, Cid flew off leaving Yuffie and Nanaki alone. Of course, Yuffie said what she would always say and that was to go look for materia together. She hasn't changed since the last time he met her. That time, he was angry at the friend named Yuri she was carrying and had told her the materia

she wanted didn't exist out of anger. But he felt different about it this time. He felt fully confident that there was no materia to cure the Midgar illness—Or "Geostigma" which he learned it was called in Rocket Town.

If Yuffie's been searching during all that time he was in the forest and never found any cure then, it really doesn't exist. When he told Yuffie that's what he believed, she looked at him with a sad face.

"I'm sorry. I'll help you look," promised Nanaki.

* * *

Yuffie and Nanaki went into a cave in the northern snow fields where materia could be found. Their efforts returned fruitless in the frozen cave.

"Ah... There really isn't any here! I'm done!" said Yuffie.

"Are you giving up?"

"No, we're going to keep looking. Their hopes rest with me."

"What do you mean?"

"This is the last cave we know that has materia in it. But, lets go through them one more time because we might have missed a spot—You know. There's something I understand now. While we're here, lots of time is passing by over there, right?" Yuffie said as she looked into the distance.

Yuffie taught the patients in Wutai martial arts. At first, there were only children but now, there were a lot more patients and they were all consulting and exercising their bodies under Yuffie's guidance.

"You see. That illness really is contagious. But it doesn't spread to just anyone. It enters the space in people's heart that are worrying, suffering or have given up on their own lives. So if they study martial arts and exercise their bodies, they wouldn't think about such things would they? Just by being busy everyday, they'll fall asleep in an instant at night and won't be able to trouble themselves with strange thoughts. That's why I want us to do our best here too."

Yuffie looked at Nanaki and smiled.

"What do you think?"

"I agree. I agree very much."

"Of course you do!"

Yuffie wrapped her arms around Nanaki's neck and rubbed them roughly against him.

"Stop it!"

"Huh? I never noticed all these wounds on you. What have you been doing?"

Nanaki thought about how he was going to explain before he answered.

"I've been on a journey to record the world."

It was different from the way he had imagined but in the end, he was caught up in life and lived it to his fullest. And he memorised it all. He has experienced things that he no doubt wouldn't have understood just by watching from the sides.

"Stop acting cool, you silly thing~"

Yuffie wrapped her arms around his neck again and gave him a strangle. But she stopped almost immediately and said, "Keep at it, Nanaki."

* * *

Separating with Yuffie, Nanaki wandered around the world just as he said. When he encountered other beasts, he would wonder if he could live with them somehow. And when he met humans, he would take the initiative to talk to them. He felt that he should learn the truth from everything—whether it was right or wrong. With that, the number of names within Nanaki's memories increased. Kira Kira, Dolly Thief, Kai, Kumo Nagare, Love, Cries of the Trees—he gave every precious experience that would sometimes bring pain with them a name.

Within those fulfilling days, there was one thing that worried him. Gilligan reappeared as he spent the days alone. It seemed it was growing bigger as the days passed by. Surely it was because the more you experience, the more you had to lose. *That was why Gilligan was growing bigger*, thought Nanaki.

Gilligan's true identity was the fear of loss. Nanaki was sure he wouldn't be afraid of it if he knew what it was. Regardless, he still found himself trembling and it took a longer time than he did before to recover.

Why? thought Nanaki. Soon, he began to think whether he had mistaken Gilligan's true nature. He began to think over what Gilligan was again. It was fear that spread and froze his heart. There was no doubt about that. But he didn't know what was the true cause of that fear.

* * *

"Gilligan huh."

After a long time, Nanaki had reunited with Vincent again near the small lake in the Forgotten City who murmured as he talked.

"I know something about it."

"What? Can you tell me more?"

Nanaki pressed Vincent on.

"One day you will most certainly experience loss. You will be sad and imagining that moment is because of fear. However—it's something you can laugh at—you'll get used to it."

"Hmmm—You maybe right."

"Gilligan came from the far distant future. The future you are unconsciously afraid of."

"Huh?"

"It knows everything about you. Imagine the moment that you will lose everything that only you have experienced, seen and named. There is nothing else that shares all that with you."

"Hmmm—"

Nanaki imagined. That moment, Gilligan began to appear again. Nanaki endured the trembling and recalled everything. Then he imagined himself running up the high grounds that overlooked Midgar. Beyond that, he saw Midgar covered by plants that he didn't even know the name of. There was the presence of humans.

However, there was no one he knew. Maybe if he went there and talked to people they would show concern and listen to him. But no one would say, "Ah yes, so that's how it's been for you."

"I'm all alone."

Nanaki said as he trembled.

"I have such a long lifespan that one day I will experience loneliness—It's my fear of being lonely. Is that what Gilligan is?"

"I call it exhaustion from over-anxiety."

"Don't make fun of it!"

Smiling at the anger Nanaki showed, Vincent replied back.

"Then imagine this. You won't become lonely. You may even have children."

"Me have children? I just can't imagine that. I can only imagine the Nibel bears."

"Then how about this? Every year you visit Midgar once. There, I will be waiting. And I will be listening to your worthless stories as if I have no interest in them at all."

Nanaki thought of that. Vincent's solemn face appeared. And the trembling stopped. It seemed Gilligan had disappeared.

"Looks like you've stopped trembling."

"Yes. But one day, even you Vincent will—"

"That day will never come. I am immortal. Whether that is fortunate or misfortunate for me."

"I—"

Nanaki thought about the loneliness that wrapped itself around Vincent. Even though he may have a long lifespan, one day he will die. But Vincent he—

"Hey. While I'm still alive, be sure to meet every so often so we can talk."

Vincent looked at Nanaki as if troubled and began to speak.

"Just once a year. You'll have to pardon me if you want to meet any more often than that."

Saying that, Vincent hung his head and buried his face in his mantle. His shoulders were shaking a bit. It was the first time Nanaki saw Vincent laughing.

"Gilligan. Gilligan did you say?"

"Heh. Laugh all you want."

"If you'll excuse me."

Vincent raised his voice and laughed. At first, Nanaki stayed quiet but before long he too laughed.

The last time laughter filled the Forgotten City was during the Cetra Age but now, it rang throughout the air once again.

Case of Nanaki, End.