

On the Way to a Smile: The Story of Tifa

Tifa walked the last customer out of her store Seventh Heaven before returning inside to clean up in the galley. The room was dimly lit with minimal but adequate lighting. No one else was there besides Tifa. Just days ago work didn't seem that long. She enjoyed working along side her family, forgetting all her worries but now, the water had gotten cold and she wasn't getting anywhere with all the dirty tableware. Tifa tried turning on all the lights that illuminated the store in an effort to change the atmosphere. For a brief moment, the store lit up but the unstable electricity supply didn't keep it that way for long. The store was dimly lit again. A surge of uneasiness came over her. She wondered if she was all alone in the house. She couldn't stand it as the thought crossed her mind, and called out a girl's name.

"Marlene!"

Before long, soft footsteps could be heard coming from the children's room, deep inside the store and Marlene appeared.

"Ssssh," she frowned, putting a finger to her lips. Tifa apologized but was relieved.

"Denzel finally fell asleep."

"Was he in pain?"

"Yeah."

"You could have gave me a shout."

"Denzel didn't let me."

"I see..."

Tifa blamed herself for letting the children worry about her.

"What's wrong?"

"Hmmm... What do you mean?" Tifa answered meaninglessly, trying to hide her feelings. Marlene looked around the store where only Tifa stood.

"Did you feel lonely?" The little girl saw through everything. "I'm not going anywhere."

"Thanks. You should sleep soon too."

"I was just about to sleep!"

"Sorry."

She's my daughter. That's how I introduced her to people. Her parents died not too long ago and she was brought up by her father's closest friend, Barret.

Tifa learned a lot about Marlene ever since she met Barret and travelled around with him. It was only natural that Barret entrusted Marlene to Tifa when he decided to go on a journey to settle his past.

Tifa stopped washing and followed Marlene inside. In the children's room were two beds lined up next to one another. There, Denzel laid sound asleep. The Geostigma scar on the eight year old's forehead was a painful sight. Nothing could be done to ease the symptoms as the boy suffered and his conditions wasn't improving at all either. Denzel grimaced a little as Tifa wiped away the pus from the scar on his soaked forehead, but he continued to sleep. Marlene who had watched over Denzel, called out Tifa's name after she tucked herself up in her own bed.

"You still feel lonely even with us here, don't you?"

"...I'm sorry," Tifa answered honestly.

"It's OK. We're the same."

"I see."

"I wonder where Cloud is."

Tifa hung her head, unable to answer. Cloud was in Midgar somewhere. At first, she imagined how the worse could have happened. Maybe he had an accident when he went out on one of his jobs or he was attacked by some monster.

She soon found out that he was still out there doing jobs. There were people who had seen him. He just left the house that's all. Tifa had tried to convince the children that there were no problems but she lost her composure. Before long, the children realized something had happened.

"Why did he leave?"

I didn't know. Maybe all kinds of problems had cropped up between us.

But Tifa remembered that smile on Cloud's face when she last saw him. It had that kindness that made her think everything was all right.

I wonder if I was mistaken.

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One fated day, Meteor came shooting down from outer space. Flowing out from the seams of the Planet, the Lifestream merged together and destroyed it. Tifa had watched the scene together with her companions from the sky.

I wished everything was just washed away. Wash away my past. Our past. Maybe I too felt the inevitable terror that was going to come with the relief brought by the end of the battle.

I wondered if I could continue living the way I was.

When someone was faced with the same question, then she would tell them that they should live on no matter what happened. But now that it was about her, she was unsure.

Thanks to Shinra Inc's development of Mako energy, the world was prospering. Light overflowed the ground's surface but at the same time, something much darker was happening. The anti-Shinra group, "Avalanche" took action to let the world know what that darkness was.

Mako energy was leading Planet to its destruction. Despite Avalanche's underground activity, little was achieved and the world remained unchanged. Once you understood the benefits of Mako, it was hard to turn your back against it. In an effort to change the situation, Avalanche chose to take more extreme action. In the Mako city of Midgar where large amounts of Mako energy was consumed and lots of people lived, they blew up one of the reactors.

Due to a miscalculation in the bomb they made, the area that got destroyed was greater than they had planned. The surrounding areas of the Mako reactor was also destroyed. In response to the incident, Shinra Inc was on the move to eliminate Avalanche. An entire sector of Midgar where Avalanche's hideout resided and many residents were was completely destroyed. It was a brutal act by Shinra in order to destroy the small rebel group Avalanche. In the end after the incident, Avalanche became the reason why countless innocent lives were lost.

That Avalanche was the group Tifa joined.

She had thought that sacrifices were more or less inevitable for their great goal. They were always ready to throw their lives away too. But after the catastrophe, Tifa and the others lost their stance on their original purpose. Amidst their struggle with Shinra Inc, they soon found themselves fighting the powerful Sephiroth. Tifa along with her childhood friend Cloud, the other remaining survivor of Avalanche Barret, Aeris who they met during all the chaos and Red XIII, they set out on their journey. After going through some more events, Cid, Cait Sith, Yuffie and Vincent also became her companions.

It seemed a new friendship was blooming but as if there was a price to pay, Aerith's life was taken away.

Even so, the journey was not over. Looking back at the course of their journey, Tifa could feel that their fight, whether it was a win or loss, was coming to a close.

It all started when I was still a young girl. There was some trouble in the Mako reactor that was built near my hometown of Nibelheim that threatened our safety.

Sephiroth was dispatched by Shinra to resolve the problem but he killed my father. I couldn't bear the hatred I had for Shinra and Sephiroth. Then I joined Avalanche. Yes. That was the start of the resentment I had for them inside me. The slogans Avalanche used about how they were anti-Shinra and anti-Mako was just what I needed to hide my true motive. But too many lives were sacrificed while we tried to save the Planet. If all that was just for my personal revenge then...

The sin held a role deep in Tifa's heart.

She wondered if she could live on with those feelings. Tifa was afraid of her future. She looked down from the sky towards the ground.

Meanwhile, Cloud was sitting next to her gazing at the same scenery but was smiling peacefully. It was a smile that she hadn't seen before during their journey. Cloud noticed her gaze and asked, "What's wrong?"

"Cloud, you're smiling."

"I am?"

"Yeah."

"Everything starts now. A new..." Cloud looked for the right words, "A new life."

"I'm going to live. I think that's the only way I can be forgiven. We've been through... all sorts of things."

"I guess you're right..."

"But when I think about how many times I've thought about starting a new life, it's funny."

"Why?"

"I've always failed to do it."

"That's not funny."

"...I think it will be all right this time."

Cloud became very quiet for a moment. Then he said, "Because you're always with me."

"I haven't always been with you."

"That's how it will be starting from tomorrow," Cloud replied smiling again.

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Tifa went to see Aerith together with her companions. Aerith who was now at the bottom of the Forgotten City's spring. The world she wanted to save in exchange for her life would surely be all right now. That's what they were told. Tifa heard a voice asking if she was all right. She didn't know if it was Aerith's voice or her own. She couldn't help it but started crying. Right after Sephiroth took Aerith's life, Tifa felt no grief towards her death. There was sadness but that sadness was made into more anger and hatred she had towards the enemy. At least now she understood the sadness and pain she felt, tearing her heart apart as she visited the place. Being a member of Avalanche and being with a large group of people gave her these feelings. The tears wouldn't stop.

"I'm sorry, I'm really sorry."

She felt Cloud's hand on her shoulder. He held onto her firmly so that she wouldn't go anywhere. For now, she was just going to let herself cry as much as she felt like. Then she was going to leave the rest to him.

Alone, she just didn't know what she could do.

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Tifa and the companions that she was with for the whole trial of the journey separated just as easily as they joined. Vincent left just like one of those passengers that would sit next to you on a train. Yuffie protested. It just wasn't right for them to split up this way after all they've been through as friends. Barret was the one who said to her that they could see each other whenever they wanted if they all lived. Or maybe it was Cid. After promising to reunite one day, Tifa, Cloud and Barret separated from the others leaving for Corel Town. It was Barret's hometown. The

tragedies that occurred there because of Mako was what started everything for him. Standing silently for a moment, he told the others not to follow him. He too had to go on living bearing sins.

They also went to Nilbeim, Tifa and Cloud's hometown. They didn't feel any nostalgia. They were reminded clearly of the incident that took place in the town.

"I shouldn't have come, " said Cloud. "It draws me back to the past."

Cloud's words spoke out for the way Tifa felt too.

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They then went to Kalm. There waiting for them was Aerith's foster mother Elmyra and the girl that was left in her care, Marlene. Two of Elmyra's relatives had a house in Kalm and that was where they stayed. Barret and Marlene were happy to see each other again. Cloud told Elmyra what had happened to Aerith.

There were no signs how they accepted what had happened but Tifa, Cloud and Barret apologized for not being able to save Aerith.

"You all done what you could. There's no need for you to apologize," said Elmyra.

Tifa and the others couldn't say anything in reply.

Did we really do all we could?

There were many people who arrived in Kalm to take refuge. The normal houses became emergency shelters. The residents of Kalm didn't charge them even though they could. Even the inn provided rooms for the people in need for free. It was like everyone was cooperating to rebuild the world.

"Come on, let's go home," said Cloud.

"Where to?" Barret asked.

"Our suspended reality."

"What the hell do you mean by that?"

"Our normal lives."

"And where do we have something like that?"

"We'll find one." Cloud looked at Tifa and said, "Right?"

"Yeah!" cried the cheerful Marlene. Tifa too nodded but just like Barret, she wondered where they had a normal life.

The four of them arrived back at Midgar. The city had recovered from all the shock and chaos that took place right after Meteor was destroyed. People were on the move again looking towards their future... No, their present lives for the time being. Seeing this made Tifa blame herself again.

When she looked at Midgar from the sky she wished everything was just got washed away. She didn't know there were still so many lives here. Tifa couldn't forgive herself for being so selfish. She told Cloud and Barret what she was thinking when they were on the airship. Barret and Cloud understood how she felt and agreed. But they reminded her that no matter where they were or what they were doing, they wouldn't be able to get away from the sins in their consciousness.

"Since that's the case, we'll live on. We'll live on until we pay back for our sins. It's the only way," said Barret.

When Tifa and Cloud were alone, Cloud said to her, "It's not like you to be troubled by your thoughts."

"It's... Just the way I am."

"No. You're much more cheerful and strong. If you've forgotten the way you were then, I'll be there to remind you."

"You really will?"

"Probably," Cloud said blushing.

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The first thing they done was gather information in and around Midgar. There was a lack of materials but importantly, there wasn't any information being passed around about where to get things. The three of them split up and went around sharing the information they gathered with those who were in need, about where they could get the things they wanted. They helped the people that couldn't move on their own. At night, they slept under a plate in Midgar where rumours had it that it could fall anytime.

One day, Barret came back with a wine jar, a heater and various fruits. They were given to him as thanks for helping someone dismantle a house.

"Just watch," Barret told them as he skillfully started working on some cooking that they've never seen before. The wine had been left to stand for two weeks since then. They found out that it was some special wine made in the town of Corel. Tifa and Cloud sipped their wine slowly. Barret literally drowned himself in wine. He looked like he was enjoying it as he talked about his memories of the peaceful times. He told them how he once drank too much and fell into a well. He also mentioned how he had forgotten why he had proposed to his now deceased wife, to marry him while he was drunk. It's been a long time since Tifa and Cloud burst out laughing.

The next day, Barret said in a serious tone, "How about we started a business and sold this wine?"

"We?" Cloud asked, surprised.

"Of course, you idiot! We can't draw customers! Tifa will have to do it."

"Me?"

"You're good at it."

Not long ago, Avalanche's hideout was at a bar named Seventh Heaven. It was what funded the members lives and activities. Tifa was the barmaid there or more accurately, the bar's manager. Barret continued.

"From my point of view, the people of Midgar can be split into two types. Those dilly dallying around who still can't accept what's happened to the city and those who are working to live on. I understand how both types of people are feeling. Everyone is facing their problems but they're just coping with it in different ways right? The solution to everyone's problem is wine."

"Why is that?"

"I dunno. But when we were half drunk yesterday, we laughed. We forgot all sorts of things right? That's the moment we're after."

"Yeah, I guess you're right."

"Times like that are important ain't they? Hey Tifa, what do you think?"

Tifa couldn't answer right away. She understood what Barret was saying but, opening up a bar felt like going back to the times of Avalanche again. Cloud spoke up.

"Tifa, lets give it a go. If it gets too tough, we can just stop."

"It won't be tough. If Tifa doesn't work she'll end up thinkin' about all sorts of things. Then she'll end up not being able to do anything."

That might have been true.

The three of them made preparations. They decided to build their new business in the new city of Edge that was north of Midgar.

All the people that Barret and Cloud had helped before gathered together. They all transported all the materials that would be used to build parts of the store such as the walls and pillars.

Barret shouted out his orders while Cloud went around correcting them in a low voice. Tifa on the other hand learned how to make Corel's wine and improved it so that it was better to drink. She also thought of the food she could put on their menu using the steady supply of ingredients they could use. Marlene was like a mascot to the people who helped build their bar. It was as if she was emphasizing at how she was going to be the new barmaid. It was hardwork solving problems that arised everyday but it was some fulfilment for them. Sometimes Tifa would find herself feeling guilty for her sins when she smiled but, she would always get interrupted as someone calls her over to ask about something.

A few days more and they might be able to open the new bar, Cloud said. Barret asked what they were going to do about the name. There were a few suggestions but Cloud's ones were all meaningless and boring while Barret's ones made them think of monsters. In the end, it was Tifa who had to decide. The two men promised her that they wouldn't complain no matter what the name was. But it was nearing opening day and Tifa didn't have the time to think about it with all the work she had to do. One day, Marlene came and asked them what they were going to do about the bar's name.

"We're still thinking about it."

"I wish it was Seventh Heaven," said Marlene. It was a name Tifa wanted to avoid.

Just having the past in me was enough. There was no need to go to the trouble of making a name that would remind me of it.

"Why?"

"Because it was fun. If we make it Seventh Heaven we'll have fun again."

We had forgotten how adults had ambitions but, Marlene had nothing to do with them. To her, Seventh Heaven was a happy home where Barret, Tifa and her friends were.

"Hmmm, Seventh Heaven..."

I couldn't erase my past. I could only compromise and live on.

Tifa decided she was ready.

The first day of Seventh Heaven's opening was a great success. The Corel wine was something that you could make yourself when you felt like it so the price was nothing special. Because of the limited ingredients they had, they couldn't make any special dishes. Even so, people sought places like this. A place where they could be with friends while drinking. A place where you could get over the sadness of reality or maybe forget about reality and think about the future. People who didn't have money were allowed to trade items to get a drink. A variety of juice were prepared too so that children could also go inside. They only served the ones that Marlene tried and liked. She was someone who couldn't be missing out on anything. Marlene was the waitress who served until not too late into the night. Those who drank too much were ordered to go home without any hesitation.

Barret was sipping his wine in a corner. Maybe he was planning to be the bouncer. Cloud's job was to obtain the ingredients they needed for their food and wine. He didn't know most of the names of the fruit and vegetables. At first, Tifa was surprised but when she thought about the life that Cloud had, it couldn't be helped. It was funny when she thought about how Cloud's new life was going to start by remembering the names of vegetables. No, I mustn't laugh, Tifa thought to herself.

Cloud wasn't good at socializing. He wasn't good at communicating but yet, he would go negotiate somewhere to obtain the ingredients they needed. The ingredients had a value greater than what they were worth. Cloud was moving on too.

After the first week of opening, Barret told the others that he was going to leave on a journey seeing how well the business was going now. He was going to leave Marlene behind.

"I wanna go on a journey to settle my past."

Cloud nodded as if he understood.

"Settle your past...? But I want to do that too."

"You guys can do that here. Don't just take. Try proving that you can give too."

Marlene who had always slept with Tifa, slept with her foster father Barret the night before he left. Their conversations could be heard late into the night.

Early next morning, Barret set off.

Behind him Marlene shouted, "Send me some letters! Phone too!"

Barret raised his artificial right arm up that had a machine gun attached to it. He kept walking without looking back. It was the back of a figure who had no other way to live than to fight.

I wonder just what kind of life he will find. I prayed that he would be able to stay far away from war. Not just take. I prayed he would be able to prove that he could give too.

"Make sure you be a "nice" kid!"

Cloud and Tifa glanced at each other, as they heard Barret's words. Be a "nice" kid?

"I'll take care of Cloud and Tifa!"

Barret turned round and shouted, "Take care!" His voice was a little shaky.

"Keep the family together and keep at it!"

* * *

Friends were a necessity to me so that I could live on without being suppressed by the sins in my consciousness. Even if they were fellow companions that had the same wounds. Even if they were fellow companions who were burdened with the same sins. We couldn't live without comforting each other and encouraging each other.

Maybe you could call that family. We just had to keep the family together and do our best.

Tifa thought she could get over anything being with friends that she could call family.

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It's been several months since they opened the bar. There was a call from Cloud who went to collect their supply of ingredients. He wanted to discuss the privilege of how much one person could eat and drink for free during their lifetime at Seventh Heaven. Tifa knew what he wanted to say without listening to his story. She was sure there was something Cloud wanted to exchange that odd privilege for no matter what.

It was night and Cloud came back on a bike. It was a model that they had never seen before. Since then, he had been adjusting it whenever he could spare the time in between his job. He brought an engineer that he knew from somewhere to discuss about modifying his bike. It seemed a few other people came to help Cloud complete the modifications. Marlene and her young neighbourhood friends also watched. The scene reassured Tifa that they were really becoming a family in the world.

There were many times when Cloud had to leave Midgar for their supplies. The destination was mainly Kalm. He had to rent a bike or a truck or sometimes a chocobo but now, he had his own bike. Occasionally it seemed he would travel very far and manage to get some rare goods.

One night, there was a call for Cloud. After talking on the phone for a while, Cloud said he had to go out for a while.

"Where are you going?"

"How should I tell you this..."

Cloud told Tifa how there had many times when he was asked to deliver something while returning with supplies. The caller was one of the store owners who shared some of his vegetables with them. It seemed there was something that he wanted Cloud to deliver before the night was over by all means. Cloud gazed at Tifa like a kid who just had his secrets revealed.

"Why are you looking at me like that?"

"Well... I'm sorry I kept quiet about it."

"About what?"

"Doing what I wanted."

Tifa burst out laughing. Cloud went on about how he got paid a little for delivering items. He felt guilty spending it all on the modifications for his bike. Tifa thought he was just like a kid. It may have been a little sad that Cloud had found another world that she didn't know about but, the fact that his world was expanding was a welcoming thought. Yes, it was similar to the feelings a mother would have. Tifa walked Cloud outside and was enjoying the new feeling that was blooming in her.

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Tifa was able to live along with the sins in her consciousness now but, she hadn't forgotten about them. Someday, the day may come when she will be punished. Until that day comes, Tifa was going to look ahead and live on. She was going to live not just taking but, proving that she herself can give too.

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Tifa seriously encouraged Cloud to run a delivery service. They could just take requests at the bar. As for dealing with calls, Marlene or herself could do it. Cloud hesitated but, after thinking about it for one night, he accepted the suggestion. He was just being hesitant again after all.

And so, that was the beginning of the Strife Delivery Service. Midgar was the centre of their business but they also delivered all over the world. Only to the areas that Cloud could reach by bike, though. Cloud smiled at how he was like a big advertisement. His job was also a big success. It was a time when sending things weren't so easy for people who wanted to. Monsters were still lurking around and there were roads that were built in areas that could breakup due to the Lifestream bursting out. This job of travelling around the world wasn't something that anyone could do. It was a job he had been wanting. Tifa thought it was wonderful how Cloud, who wasn't very sociable, was doing a job that connected people through his delivery service.

After Cloud started his delivery service, their "family" life was affected greatly. It wasn't too good. Cloud was usually not at home apart from mornings and late night. And of course, that meant there were less chances for the three of them to have conversations together. Tifa tried closing the bar for a day every week but it didn't stop Cloud from doing his job. Cloud couldn't turn down requests. Although Tifa wanted everyone to be able to take some time off together now and then, she decided that it was too selfish of her. During that time, it was Marlene who noticed a change in Cloud. She told Tifa how Cloud would sometimes look up at the sky and not pay attention to her.

Cloud never really approached Marlene to talk in the first place but, I'm sure he never ignored her before when she talked to him. I knew that Cloud had his own ways of getting along with Marlene. I thought about how there were people everywhere that weren't good with children but had their own ways of coping with them.

I told her that Cloud was probably just tired but it bothered me. Marlene was a child who was sensitive about the changes in adults.

During their holiday, Tifa and Marlene were cleaning the room that was now Cloud's office. There were many papers that laid scattered about unsorted. One of them caught Tifa's eye.

Client Name - Elmyra Gainsborough
Delivery Item - Bouquet
Destination - The Forgotten City

Tifa put the paper away with the others as if nothing happened. But she was trembling severely. Transporting mail around the world meant Cloud was travelling around his past too. She knew that Cloud was in great pain because he couldn't protect Aerith. Cloud was on the verge of overcoming it but now, going back to the place where he and Aerith got separated meant that his sorrow and regret was going to tear his heart apart once again.

It was night and they had closed the bar. Cloud was drinking wine even though he rarely does. He drained his glass. Tifa hesitated before going over and filling his glass.

"Shall I join you?" There was something she wanted to talk to him about.

"I want to drink alone."

Hearing that, Tifa lost control and said, "Then drink in your room."

Barret had called a few times. Most of the time, he wouldn't talk about himself but instead, asked more about how Marlene was doing. Then everytime he would end the call by having a little chat with Marlene. Marlene wondered if Tifa was listening or not before she told Barret in a sad voice, "Cloud and Tifa aren't getting along very well."

No matter what feelings Cloud and Tifa had between them, they couldn't drag Marlene into it Tifa thought to herself.

Tifa forced herself to talk to Cloud. When Marlene was near, she would pick something positive, something that wouldn't turn the conversation into a serious matter. Cloud was bewildered at the

way Tifa changed but guessing at what she was trying to do, he went along with the mood and talked to her. Even Marlene joined in with their conversations.

I thought it went pretty well. But I couldn't talk about what I really wanted to talk about. I didn't know what to say.

One morning, Tifa shared a story she heard from a customer that seemed funny.

"That's really something that can't be done," Cloud thought aloud.

"It can't be done!" Marlene cried out.

All the adults were surprised and looked at Marlene.

"You've told us that story before! Cloud just gives the same answer everytime!"

It didn't go well but we were together. We were family. We lived in the same house and we were lived by keeping the family together. Maybe there wasn't much conversation or smiles. But we were family, Tifa thought to herself. No, it was what she made herself think.

After making certain that Cloud was asleep, she said to him.

"We'll be all right, won't we?"

Of course, there was no answer. Only the sound of Cloud sleeping could be heard. Tifa wondered if the fact that he was sleeping here meant that he was part of the family.

"Do you love me?"

Cloud woke up, a dubious look on his face.

"Hey, Cloud. Do you love Marlene?"

"Yeah. But sometimes I don't know how to approach her."

"Even though we've been together for sometime?"

"Maybe that just isn't enough."

"Even we aren't enough for you?"

Cloud didn't answer.

"Sorry for asking some strange things."

"Don't apologize. It's my problem."

Cloud closed his eyes.

"Lets work hard together."

Cloud didn't answer.

Not long after that, Cloud brought Denzel home with him. Denzel was already unconscious when he was brought into the bar. It was Geostigma. Cloud said the syndromes looked like they just started not long ago. As Tifa nursed Denzel, she thought of how there many children who were also infected with the same disease. There were many facilities setup for children who had lost their parents. Yet, why did Cloud bring Denzel here? Just when Tifa was going to ask him, Cloud muttered something.

"This kid came to my place."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean..."

* * *

After Denzel recovered, she listened to Denzel's story about everything that happened to him before he arrived here. Then she thought to herself that he was meant to come here. He was one of the victims when Sector Seven was destroyed.

Sector Seven was destroyed was because of us. That's why I had to take responsibility and raise him. He didn't go to Cloud's place. He met Cloud so that he could come to my place.

Tifa discussed with Cloud and Marlene about how she wanted to welcome Denzel into their family. Cloud nodded silently but Marlene was full of joy.

At first, Denzel was persistent in helping them as thanks for taking care of him but, his heart began opening to them as he helped Cloud with his job and around the bar.

It was night and the bar was closed. While cleaning up in the galley, Tifa looked up towards the centre table. There sat the manager of Strife Delivery Service, Cloud and his two assistants, Marlene and Denzel. Denzel often suffered because of Geostigma but on the days when he didn't have a fever or any pain, he would hang around with Cloud. Everyday, Cloud would spend half his day out. So once he was home, it was Denzel's precious time to spend with his hero. Yes, Cloud was a hero to Denzel. Riding on his bike, saving Denzel as he fought with terrors of death when the symptoms of Geostigma erupted... It was everything that Denzel had been yearning for. Denzel wanted to know ask Cloud about everything. He would keep asking Tifa questions that she could answer until Cloud returned home. Once, Tifa half jokingly said to Denzel that she was the one cooking their meals everyday. Denzel also said in an grown up manner that he cleaned the house and the bar everyday too.

It was true and he done a very thorough job of cleaning. When he was asked if it was his passed away mother who taught him how to clean, he answered no. The following day, Tifa asked Cloud who Denzel's cleaning teacher was. He had told Cloud about it. Tifa was a little hurt.

I was troubled at why Denzel told Cloud and didn't tell me. One day I tried asking a customer that was about the same age as Denzel about it. His answer was that boys were just like that. So there really weren't any problems. We were just a normal family.

The answer didn't make her understand them more but, the words "normal family" relieved Tifa.

After the bar was closed, the usual three people sat around the table. It wouldn't be a surprise if someone said it was a young father with his two children. If Tifa felt like it, she could go over to that table and be welcomed with smiles.

Cloud laid out a map on the table. He was making sure of the routes that he was going to take to do deliveries the next day. Denzel and Marlene was sorting out the papers. When there were any words that Marlene couldn't read, she asked Denzel. Denzel would then teach Marlene like an older brother. When there were words that even Denzel couldn't read, he would ask Cloud. Cloud had the habit of handing them a pen after telling them how to read them. He told them that if they couldn't write the words then they wouldn't be able to remember them either. The various names of places on the papers made the children curious and they asked Cloud what they were like. Cloud's descriptions were simple. There are lots of people. There are very little people. There's lots of monsters so it's dangerous. Taking the north route is safer... They were descriptions that would make you ask, "is that all?" but the children seemed content. Soon, Tifa wanted to talk a little about the places too. When she added in more detail, Denzel would ask Cloud if it was true. It annoyed Tifa a little. But she also thought it was all right. That's probably what normal families were like.

Maybe they became a real family after Denzel arrived. Cloud was clearly taking less jobs. At night, he would always make sure he had time to spend with the children. The silly little conversations he had with Tifa were also back.

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"So the problem was resolved?"

"What problem?"

"Your problem."

"Yeah..."

Cloud thought about it.

"It's OK if you don't want to tell me."

"I can't really explain it well..." Cloud warned before starting to talk.

"The problem isn't resolved. Well, I don't think it will be resolved for a long time to come. You can't retrieve lives that have been lost."

Tifa nodded silently.

"But maybe we can still save those lives that are endangered just now. Maybe even I can do it."

"You mean Denzel?"

"Yeah."

"Hey, do you remember what you said when you brought Denzel here?"

"What did I say?"

"You said Denzel came to your place."

"Well..." Cloud looked like a kid that about to be scolded as usual.

"Tell me. I'll decide whether I'm angry or not after I listen."

Cloud nodded and continued.

"Denzel had collapsed in front of the church where Aerith used to be. That's why I thought Aerith lead him to "my place"".

Saying all that in one breathe, Cloud looked away.

"You went to the church."

"I wasn't planning to hide there."

"You were hiding."

"I'm sorry."

"I didn't say you couldn't go. But next time, I'll go together with you."

"I understand."

"And you're wrong, Cloud."

Cloud looked dubiously at Tifa.

"Aerith didn't bring Denzel to you."

"Yeah, that's what I thought too."

"Aerith brought that child to us, didn't she?"

Cloud gazed at Tifa and finally smiled. It had that kindness that made her think everything was all right.

* * *

Days after having that conversation, Cloud left. Tifa wondered if the smile she saw was just an illusion. After kissing the sleeping children on the face, she went into Cloud's office. Brushing away the dust on the family photo they took, she tried calling him. After several rings, the messaging service took over.

* * *

Case of Tifa
Fin