

## **“The Maiden Who Travels the Planet”**

**By Benny Matsuyama**

Aerith was sinking—down, down, into the depths. The water of the spring was clear and cold as she silently slipped through it, her face smoothed as if in slumber. A web of light woven by the ripples on the water’s surface danced upon her motionless body, as if in some vain attempt to trap her unspooling life.

Her placid face no longer moved with the rich emotions it once expressed. It no longer showed joy—no longer lit up with that infectious, encouraging smile. Never again would it flush red with anger—anger at the suffering of the weak and the cruelty of those who oppress them. Nor would it ever again shed tears to ease the sorrow pent up in her heart.

Her body was muted, silenced in perpetuity.

And yet its passing did not mean the end of Aerith. Even now she was watching—not with her beautiful green eyes but through the lens of her soul—a conscious body of lifeforce side-by-side with the flesh it used to inhabit. Above her the glittering surface was slowly receding, and beyond it, in the vague haze of that other world (for already that was what the realm of the living was to her), she saw the shadowy figure of someone staring down at her. It was the face of a man whose heart had shattered to pieces—the face of a man barely holding himself together amid his sorrow at losing her and his anger and hatred for the one who took her away. It was the face of Cloud.

“Don’t blame yourself. You don’t have to worry anymore. Even if Meteor falls, everything will be alright. So don’t get bogged down in all those feelings. Just let yourself be who you really are. That’s all you need to focus on...”

She tried to speak these words, but her lips wouldn’t move. There was no way to convey her thoughts now that she’d taken the form of a soul, and she could only watch as Cloud quickly dwindled into the distance. The light quivering on the water’s surface grew fainter and fainter as she continued to sink. Smoothly she fell, gliding through the trenches of the Forgotten City, that abandoned Ancient metropolis. Aerith, the last surviving Cetra, had completed her mission of protecting the planet. And so she descended, down and beyond, into the boundless depths of her final resting place.

### **1**

Yes... boundless.

Aerith had long ago reached the bottom of the spring, yet she continued to sink further.

Her physical form came to rest on the seafloor, cradled in its bosom, cushioned by the accumulated detritus of incalculable years. There she bid it farewell forever, departing the body

she spent 22 years in—all too short a span. Separated from its soul, the vessel would slowly return to the earth, its tomb a bed of purifying water.

From there, Aerith's consciousness continued its descent.

Now she moved along gently as a ghost, without so much as a breath or a sigh to disturb the dancing motes of dust. Sinking through and beyond the thick floor of sediment, Aerith could see nothing but darkness. Yet she was not alarmed, for this new realm of lightless oblivion was tender and warm.

In time she realized that what she was observing was not mere refuse and mud. Already her senses were adjusting accordingly—shifting to a higher plane where she could perceive the essence behind matter.

And suddenly the world she saw was no longer shrouded in darkness.

She was inside a torrent of pale, greenish light. At the same time she could perceive it on the grandest scale. It was a flow of energy branching off into tens of thousands—no, hundreds of millions of currents, circulating the planet like blood vessels, spreading to every corner of the globe. The flood of light enveloping her was but a small stream trickling off from one of these great tributaries. The total amount of mako energy contained within the planet was too vast to tally by any man-made measure.

Aerith looked on as the planet's life pulsed about it, gazing upon the radiance of the Lifestream as it flowed to and fro. She saw it for what it was: the source of life from which all living things arise and ultimately return.

In a place where countless souls fused and melded, their knowledge, experience, and memories merged as one, Aerith still retained her individuality. She stood fast with an unshakeable sense of self, her living image unchanged even as a torrent of deceased consciousness roiled around her like a storm. Despite her discarnate state, she was able to exist, think, and act within the Lifestream just like the living Aerith Gainsborough.

She had no idea things would be this way.

Then again, as the last surviving member of an Ancient race of settlers who spent their lives enriching the land wherever they went, Aerith had the ability to communicate with the planet. More specifically, she could speak with the numerous consciousnesses that made up part of the Lifestream. Doing so taught Aerith that death was not, in fact, the end of life.

Most people believe that death is synonymous with nothingness—that the consciousness is consumed by darkness, yielding to an unfathomable nihilism from which one can never wake. It's for this reason people fear death. They dread the obliteration of who and what they are. Despite knowing their lifespan is short and death is inevitable, many people shrink from mortality and refuse to accept it—even those who've made it to an old age.

Aerith knew that death didn't mean annihilation. She knew that those Cetra who completed their mission of unlocking the planet were greeted in the end by a tranquil afterlife. Therefore, she felt no trepidation when she met her demise, of which she had a strong premonition. She was able to fulfill her duty free from fear and with a clear head. Though ordinary humans, severed from their ancient ability to converse with the planet, might describe

her death as an untimely tragedy, Aerith was able to face it with a still heart. When the time came, she felt no regret for not running away and living to see another day.

And yet she still felt sadness. There was still pain in her heart.

The fact remained that she could no longer interact with people as a living person. She was cut off from them... from the friends she'd journeyed with to save the planet... from the people she was close to—friends and family like Elmyra, the mother who'd raised her and watched her grow for 15 years. Even acquaintances she'd barely known had passed beyond her reach, not to mention all the people she'd never have a chance to meet. They would be forever strangers now.

Aerith also knew this grief wasn't hers alone. It belonged to the people she left behind as well. None of them knew that she still lived on as a soul. How could they? Though people hope against hope for some sort of afterlife, without confirmation their sorrow can hardly be assuaged. The realization she'd brought such suffering to the others only deepened her pain.

Thinking about Cloud was especially hard to bear. It didn't help that she'd taken a liking to him. At the start she'd thought he resembled the first man she had feelings for. There was nothing about Cloud's face or voice or even his personality that matched that other man's, yet there were gestures and quirks that for some strange reason reminded Aerith of him. Not that it mattered in the end. She'd come to like him far more than her first love. Cloud was both her hero and a man in peril she couldn't ignore. Though he seemed calm and collected, a delicate vulnerability would occasionally peek through his confident veneer, as though he might disappear the moment you took your eyes off him. She would have stayed with him if she could. That was where she wanted to be: by his side.

When she left her companions to head for the Forgotten City, Cloud's psyche was like an egg on the verge of cracking and splitting apart. Instead of hatching, the yolk of his consciousness was poised to pour out, leaving his mind in a state of collapse. Aerith had wanted to support him. Had she been anyone but the last of the Cetra, she would have stayed behind to help him.

But she couldn't.

Because of Sephiroth. He of the jet black and silver, a warrior once hailed as a hero but now gripped by madness—the man who inherited the will of Jenova, the calamity from the skies. In his hands now lay the Black Materia, an object capable of casting the supreme destructive spell: Meteor. With that power in his possession, Aerith was left with no choice but to fulfill the mission given to her by the Cetra. It was only a matter of time before Sephiroth used the spell to summon a giant meteoroid and inflict unthinkable damage upon the planet—a wound capable of utterly destroying it. In order to mend itself, the planet would invariably concentrate a flood of spiritual energy at the site of the injury. The moment that happened, Sephiroth planned to collect the power that gathered and claim it for his own. If he succeeded, he would assimilate with the planet and become equal unto a god. His hatred would consume humanity and devour the world whole, and the future of the planet and the cycle of all life on it would cease forever.

Aerith surmised from the whispers of the planet that there may be a way to prevent the worst from happening. Only she, the surviving descendent of the Cetra, would be capable of doing so. To find out more, she would have to acquire additional knowledge in the Forgotten City, an abandoned Ancient metropolis. However, going there would mean attracting Sephiroth's malice and revealing herself as the single greatest obstacle to his plan.

Aerith felt no hesitation on this point. She was single-mindedly prepared for whatever fate awaited—whether it be the extinction of all mankind or an exchange of her life to prevent it. If any doubt weighed on her, it centered around Cloud. She was reluctant to leave him teetering on the brink of mental collapse. But if she didn't go, neither her companions nor anyone else in the world would ever be saved. It was clear what had to be done. For Cloud's sake, there was no other option.

And so she set off on her own to learn what she must do at the water altar in the Forgotten City. In the end, Aerith herself was the key to it all. As the last remaining Cetra, it was her destiny to come into possession of the White Materia, the only instrument capable of countering Meteor with the ultimate spell Holy. Entrusted with it by her deceased mother Ifalna, Aerith had carried the White Materia with her at all times in the ribbon fastened to her hair, never knowing how it was meant to be used. Equipped with that knowledge at last, Aerith sent out a prayer from the bottom of her heart. Through the White Materia, she spoke to the planet and tried to summon the white magic Holy to negate the power of Meteor.

Had she wavered in the slightest, her prayer may not have reached the planet. Yet she managed to see the task through. By the time Sephiroth descended on Aerith having realized her intentions, the conditions for summoning Holy had already been met. Impaled on his cruel blade, she yielded to the death she'd known awaited her; but the expression she wore was one of calm, at peace having fulfilled her task.

However, the next moment a cry rang out.

It was not the wailing of a voice but the protesting screech of Cloud's spirit. Had it come from his body it would have shredded his throat and brought forth blood, a raging torrent squeezed from the depths of his soul. It was the cry of a wounded heart that couldn't be mended—a heart filled with self-reproach, grieving for Aerith's death and burning with hatred for the man who caused it.

His profound sorrow took her by surprise. It gave her some joy to know he felt so strongly about her, yet that happiness was dwarfed by the ache in his heart. Though she knew there was no way to help him, it still brought her great pain to see the terrible suffering she'd caused him.

That pain endured even now inside the Lifestream. Despite losing her body, Aerith still envisioned herself in a physical form, recognizing the pain she felt as something that came from within. Placing a hand over her aching chest, she let her eyes lower in sorrow for a moment.

That was when she noticed it.

All about her, countless consciousnesses swirled. They were a sea of voices—a mountain of memories. Things she used to sense only back in Midgar, in the church in the slums, now

filled the space around her. Here were souls who, like her, had died and returned to the planet. And yet...

Aerith could find none among them who held a clear shape the way she did. She seemed to be the only one in this swirling vortex of spiritual energy who maintained the appearance she bore when she was still alive.

“Is it... because I’m a Cetra?” Aerith murmured to herself. In this place, thinking and speaking were one and the same. Her disembodied consciousness sent out thoughts and feelings like ripples on water. In turn, the expanse of memories contained within the Lifestream lapped against her like breaking waves. If she didn’t maintain a strong sense of self, she would soon lose track of which will was hers and be swallowed up in the tide of surrounding whispers.

“I wish I could somehow get a message to Cloud...”

Aerith puffed out her cheeks and gave a slight pout of dissatisfaction. She found herself unaffected by the sensory chaos caused by the mako energy, by this sea of wayward knowledge and memories. Growing up listening to the voices of the planet had steeled her against it. It was only natural that she’d grown skilled at maintaining her consciousness, ensuring that her identity as Aerith didn’t wash away.

She understood, however, that in this place the self gradually unraveled and returned to the planet. Like a drop of water falling into a river, it immediately mixed with the flow and lost any distinctness of its own. Aerith wondered how she, a single soul plunged into this vast ocean of spiritual energy, could hold onto her individuality for so long, regardless of how accustomed she’d become to it.

“If it’s because I’m a Cetra, then the Lifestream must be full of other Cetra like me. Mom was a Cetra, too... but it’s been 15 years since she died. Maybe after that time I’ll become one with the planet as well and slowly fade away.”

She cocked her head to the side and dwelled on this for a moment.

“If that’s the case, where can I go to reach out to Cloud? To tell him that I’m doing fine? Well, maybe ‘fine’ isn’t the right word. But I am still ‘solid’ and here in one piece.”

Perhaps it was her lingering attachment to Cloud that kept her in this distinct form. During her life in Midgar, she’d often sensed the souls of those who died in distant lands when they returned to catch a glimpse of their family or partners and tell them they loved them. Both one’s own residual feelings and the feelings of those they left behind could sometimes lead the deceased to maintain a resilient sense of self.

“But would that mean I’d disappear as soon as I saw Cloud? Maybe so... Or maybe there’s something else left for me to do...”

At that moment, a flash of insight surged through Aerith like an electric shock. Without thinking, she slammed her fist into the palm of her hand in a gesture of dawning comprehension. Her physical body was only a phantom conjured by her consciousness, yet she could hear the echo of skin on skin.

“It’s just like before. Everything makes sense. There has to be a reason I haven’t dissolved into the Lifestream. I was the only one in the world with the materia to call forth Holy from the planet. Maybe there’s something more to be done. Something else that only I can do.”

As soon as the thought crossed her mind, she felt the planet stir slightly—not the voice of each melded consciousness but the singular consensus of the planet, abuzz as if to affirm her conclusion.

“I see.... But... what could it be?”

Aerith’s question was met with a noise barely louder than silence. Not even the planet knew the answer yet.

She broke into a smile as sweet as the flowers she used to sell in the slums. In the soft fluorescence of the Lifestream, her beloved smile bloomed with a pitiful sort of beauty.

“Alright, then. It looks like there are people who still need me. I won’t drift asleep just yet. Until the time comes, I’ll wander around here for a while. Little by little, through the planet. Through our Promised Land...”

Hoping to send a message of how she was feeling, Aerith raised her eyes to the sky—or rather, the inner shell of the planet that spanned overhead. Particles of mako floated and fizzled in the air, forming a scene that resembled the night sky—a starry expanse not unlike the one she’d gazed up at with Cloud when they sat around the bonfire in Cosmo Canyon.

## 2

Aerith found that time and distance worked differently in the realm of mako—the so-called Lifestream—than it did in the world above the surface.

The hours seemed to drag on slowly, yet if she wished they could fly by in the blink of an eye. In this sea of mako, the passage of time meant little in and of itself. The history of the planet was an ever-present continuum—a vast swell of intermingling memories. The present was the past and the past was the present. Though Aerith could hardly take it all in, she saw the events engraved in those memories lined up side by side with no gaps in between. Time’s passage in the world of the living was the only indication that the present continued to march into the future. Memories from the surface mingled anew and the planet’s energy was in turn sent back as brand new life. Through this ceaseless cycle she was able to tell that time continued ticking away, second by second.

Connected by the Lifestream, the places of the planet’s interior were similarly contiguous. Currents of spiritual energy could carry one anywhere in the span of a heartbeat, even to the most remote locations above the surface. Conversely, there were some areas seemingly closeby that were actually inaccessible—regions that couldn’t be reached because the flow of mako had been warped and rerouted. This must have been the result of the mako reactors on the surface, thought Aerith. If they kept forcibly pumping up energy and using it in unnatural ways, the equilibrium of the Lifestream would surely be upset. The planet would likely abide the process, if only to make life slightly more comfortable for those dwelling on it. But the Shinra

Electric Power Company was taking things too far. If it continued down this path of greed, it wouldn't be long before the balance of life on the planet collapsed. Aerith recalled the desolate scenery of Midgar, a mako-steeped city where flowers only grew in the church in the slums.

"That's why the people at Shinra wanted to know about the Promised Land. A place overflowing with mako that only a Cetra can guide you to. But... the Promised Land is where I am now. It's the place everyone goes in the end to return to the planet. Shinra had it all wrong. A land where you can take all the energy you want... The place they envisioned never existed."

Aerith continued to think aloud, letting herself be guided by the flow of the Lifestream. She gazed out as the world of mako passed by, the landscape shifting yet staying the same.

"Sephiroth's version of the Promised Land is much different. It's a place he's trying to will into existence. He's planning to wound the planet and gather nearly all of the Lifestream's energy in one place so he can take it for himself. That's the Promised Land Sephiroth is after..."

Aerith trembled at the thought of the future that would follow—at the state of the planet should Sephiroth's ambitions be realized.

"I wonder if the others are all right.... Cloud, Tifa, Barret... I hope they don't push themselves too hard going after Sephiroth."

"...Cloud? Tifa? Barret?"

Somewhere nearby, a ripple of thought spread out in response to Aerith's words. It was the first time she'd encountered a clearly defined consciousness other than her own, and she hastily exited the current that was carrying her. Now as she stood still, a faint shadow detached itself from the surrounding mako. Its form was less distinct than Aerith's, but she could tell its thoughts were those of a woman.

"Those people..." Aerith said. "Do you know them? Who are you?"

"I'm..."

The figure's memories appeared muddled. Perhaps it was a soul that had entirely melted into the mako but for some stubborn core, which drifted along undiffused.

"Oh—I suppose I should introduce myself first. The name's Aerith. Were you by any chance a member of Avalanche?"

"Avalanche... Yeah. That's right."

The woman's individual memories began reconstructing themselves from the sea of mako. Realizing her identity, the transparent shadow rapidly solidified into the form she once bore on the surface, her color returning as if in response to Aerith's presence.

Although still blurry compared to Aerith, her facial features and the clothes she used to wear had already resolved into focus. Her hair was tied back in a practical ponytail and her outfit was functional and vaguely martial. She, too, had come to this place before her time, and looked to be roughly the same age as Aerith.

"Clumsy old me... I can't believe I forgot. I'm Jessie, from Avalanche. And you said you were Ms. Aerith, right?"

"Just Aerith is fine."

“I owe you one, Aerith. So—Cloud, Tifa, Barret... you know them? Are they all alright? Are they still at war with Shinra? Ah...” Jessie shook her head apologetically. “I guess if you’re down here with me then things didn’t turn out well for you, either.”

“It’s okay. And, I’m sure everyone’s fine....” Aerith felt her thoughts turn to Cloud and quickly changed course. There was no hiding from the truth in this place, so instead she tried not to let herself think of him. “I always felt worried about Barret and what he was going through. So, back then, you were one of the Avalanche members who... died... trying to defend the Sector 7 pillar. I only ever met Wedge.”

“Wedge!?” Jessie’s eyes widened. “That’s right. And there was Biggs, too! The three of us came here together, but then we all instantly disappeared.... I could barely even remember who I was until just a few moments ago, when I met you.”

As if guided by Jessie’s memories, two more figures suddenly manifested by her side. The two men rapidly took shape, one sporting a sparse beard, the other a plump, rotund body.

“Wh—whoa,” muttered Biggs, the man with the beard, staring down at his palms. “Looks like I’m still me. I thought I’d have disappeared by now.”

“I’m so happy to see you two again,” Wedge rejoiced. “And... you’re Aerith, right? The one who took care of me that time? Did you pass away, too?”

Aerith smiled at him and nodded in lieu of the obvious answer.

“Long time no see, Wedge. And it’s a pleasure to meet you, Biggs. I ended up becoming a member of Avalanche, too. I guess that makes me your junior.”

“Hmm... Looks like Avalanche has a pretty high mortality rate,” said Jessie.

“Is Barret still as headstrong as ever?” asked Biggs. “Well, at least he’s got the power to pull everyone else along.”

“A junior, huh? Finally!” exclaimed Wedge. “I always wanted to be someone’s mentor.”

Aerith filled the trio in on what Avalanche was fighting for now. They weren’t just trying to stop Shinra anymore but a far more deadly enemy—Sephiroth—whose wicked ambition it was to seize control of the planet. It was a battle that had taken them well beyond the borders of Midgar.

“So, Cloud’s one of us now, too,” said Jessie. “I’m glad to hear it.”

“Heh,” Biggs chuckled. “He was always trying to act too cool for us, but I knew he’d come around.”

“Does that mean Cloud is my junior, too? I’m not sure I’m up for that.”

The ghosts of the Avalanche members laughed and chattered happily. But as the mirth died down, Aerith sensed that there was sadness emanating from them. The three were bound by a profound feeling of remorse.

“What’s wrong?” Aerith asked them. “I can tell you’re all in pain...”

“You’re right...” Jessie said, her face falling. “It’s because of how things ended for us. We never got to make amends.”

Biggs elaborated. “We fought in accordance with Avalanche’s creed. A sacrifice here and there seemed like a reasonable price to pay for stopping Shinra from siphoning away the planet’s



life. But we had it all wrong. We realized that when we got here.... You probably heard about it, Aerith. The Mako Reactor 1 bombing.”

“Yeah... I lived in the slums on the opposite side from Sector 1, so I didn’t get all the details, but I heard a lot of people died....”

“At the time I thought everyone who lived on top of the plate were sheep who either worked for Shinra or benefited from their greed. If some of them got caught up in our bombing mission, well they were just getting what they deserved. But you know, everyone comes to this place in the end, Shinra employee or no. If that’s the case... what the hell is it we were doing? We were like drunks yelling above the rest to make our pointless opinions heard. Talking all high and mighty about protecting the life of the planet... Who were we to say what was right?”

“I never thought about it too deeply, either,” Wedge chimed in. “I was tired of living my life on the sidelines. I wanted to shine. I thought that by joining Avalanche I could become a hero and protect the planet’s future. That’s all it boiled down to for me. I never even bothered to think other people might get involved. I’m no shining star. I’m just a dull pebble.” He crouched down and clutched his head in shame.

“That whole operation was actually drafted by the old Avalanche,” Jessie went on, her voice oozing with regret. “The one that’s no longer around. They had a ton of members and were much more radical. All we did was take on the mantle of their disbanded resistance group. We were Avalanche in name only. But they left behind detailed plans for the bombing on a computer—precise instructions on everything from how to make the explosives to where they should be planted. Since I was skilled at building bombs and gadgets, we decided to give it a go. We were positive the plan’s only goal was to disable the mako reactor. I should have realized it was designed by people who loathed Shinra more than anything else in the world. A horrible operation made to claim as many lives as possible. But that sort of thing was totally off Barret’s radar.”

“That’s why...” Biggs lifted his eyes to the dome overhead, a look of melancholy on his face. “That’s why we wanted to fade into the planet as soon as we got here. To disappear. I remember wishing I would, but I couldn’t. Barret and the others are up there fighting to save more people. But we can’t even do that. There’s no way for us to atone for the crimes we committed. We’re just stuck here suffering, serving out our sentences like prisoners.”

“We just wanted a little relief,” said Jessie. “So we let ourselves fade until we didn’t even know who we were.”

“It’s no good, though,” Wedge lamented. “We turn back at the slightest provocation. But even then we aren’t solid like you are. It’s like some kind of curse.”

They laughed dolefully at their own foolishness and let out a collective sigh.

“But... but,” stammered Aerith, unable to stand their sadness any longer. She tried to console them: “Everybody makes mistakes. There was one time I accidentally shortchanged somebody when I was selling them flowers.”

“Hmm...” replied Jessie. “I don’t think that quite compares to my blunder.”

“But the idea that you all have no choice but to suffer...”

“You’re kind, Aerith,” said Biggs. “I know this all sounds pretty pathetic coming from a senior member of Avalanche. It feels like just desserts for all those pretentious things I used to say.”

“The fact of the matter is I can’t forgive myself,” said Wedge. “That’s why I’ve got to stay here like this.”

“Maybe one day we’ll be able to return to the planet—but not yet,” Jessie mused. “Anyway, you should get going, Aerith. You must have some role to play if you’re still looking like that. If you hang around us, I’m worried the memories of our sins will rub off on you.”

“I’m sure that wouldn’t...” Aerith trailed off.

“And then we’d have even more to feel bad about. So get a move on, will you?”

Aerith knew Jessie’s words were a lie. It was obvious she was trying to keep Aerith away so she wouldn’t have to share the group’s pain.

The trio of phantoms were already beginning to fade. Biting down hard on her lower lip, Aerith spoke through held-back tears.

“I’ll just say this, then. A lot of people in the slums were able to escape because of what you three did defending the Sector 7 pillar that day. More than the number of people who died in the Mako Reactor 1 explosion—I’m sure of it. And I was also able to save Marlene because of you. Maybe that’s not very convincing. After all, human lives aren’t values you can add and subtract. But just remember, your crimes aren’t the only things you accomplished.”

“...Thank you, Aerith...” their voices echoed, no longer recognizable as belonging to any one consciousness. And so they returned to the prison they’d fashioned for themselves, sinking once more into the sea of memories.

Aerith wiped away her tears and began walking again, praying that the souls of the deceased Avalanche members would find rest and forgiveness as soon as possible.

### 3

Aerith couldn’t say how much time had passed up on the surface. How long had it been since she met and parted ways with Jessie and the others? It could just as easily have been days as seconds.

Hoping she’d been able to soothe their suffering at least a little, she continued on with her subterranean journey, riding the Lifestream through the sea of mako that filled the planet.

When she saw the next phantom, Aerith couldn’t help but gasp. The steel muzzle of a gun rose gradually from an eddy of pale light. Catching sight of the prosthetic arm it was attached to, Aerith wondered if Barret, too, had bid farewell to the world of the living. She felt her chest tighten at the thought of Marlene, who was supposed to have evacuated Midgar with her mother Elmyra.

“Marlene!” Aerith’s thought rippled outward. Sensing what she sent out, the figure of a man with a gun on his arm emerged fully from the surrounding mako. The cold, gleaming weapon extended not from his right arm but from his left. Only the gun materialized with a lurid, vicious sort of solidity; the rest of the man’s body was a murky red haze.

“You’re...” Aerith began.

“A woman? Have we met somewhere before? You know Marlene’s name....”

“We have met, Dyne.”

He was the former boss of Corel Prison, a desert penal colony full of sand and scrap metal. At one point Barret’s bosom friend, he despaired after Shinra razed his hometown of Corel and gave himself over to madness and senseless slaughter.

“I remember now. You’re that gal who was with Barret. Looks like you kicked the bucket, too. Sorry ’bout that.” Dyne let out a bitter laugh that belied his apology. “This world really is an absurd place. An innocent gal like you endin’ up in the same afterlife as a bloody murderer like me. What a worthless thing, this planet. We really would be better off tearin’ it all down.”

“So that’s still how you feel?” said Aerith, slightly raising her slender eyebrows. Her figure looked strikingly clear in contrast to Dyne’s. “For all the worrying you do about Marlene, you sure don’t seem to care what happens to her.”

“The hell do you know? Listen here, missy—”

“It’s Aerith.”

“Heh... you’re a brave one. Then again, down here this left arm’s just a phantom of the one I had when I was alive. But fine, have it your way, *Aerith*. You heard me back then, didn’t you? When I was havin’ that little one-on-one with Barret? The plan was to destroy everything and everyone under the sun. Even Marlene would have ended up down here.”

“I don’t buy that. You’re just putting on a front.”

“You can’t tell lies here, remember? It’s what I really thought. At least at the time. Then I challenged Barret to a deathmatch and took a full-time job pushin’ daisies.” He raised his right hand to his forehead and leaned back with a long peal of laughter. “I guess I should thank him for that. After all, I was a part of the world I wanted to destroy. Not that I ever had any intention of takin’ my own life. I wasn’t about to let those yellow bellies at the prison have the pleasure.”

Aerith didn’t respond.

“Do you get it now, Aerith? What you see before you is the ghost of a man so hopelessly broken even the planet won’t take him in. The same planet my wife, Eleanor, supposedly returned to. Besides, I’ve already asked Barret to keep Marlene safe. Whatever happens to the planet from now on ain’t any of my concern. I’ve washed my hands of all that.”

Aerith continued not to say anything. Noticing her silence, Dyne laughed again, reveling in his momentary victory over this impertinent girl. But he soon realized he wasn’t all that amused himself. Surveying her more closely, he noticed the girl looked far from defeated. Her jade-like eyes held a piercing light that seemed to sweep aside the madness enshrouding him.

“...You’re a coward,” she said.

“What was that?”

“I’ll say it again. You’re a coward, Dyne. You’ve never had the courage to step back and start over. You just roll over and take the easy way out.”

Aerith took a step forward and fixed her gaze on Dyne. Overwhelmed by the power in her eyes, he took an involuntary step back and covered his face with his gun.

“Barret replaced his arm with a gun just like you did. He talked about the way he took all the terrible things he felt—all the horror and hatred in his heart—and turned it into ammunition to use against Shinra. That’s why he said his hands were stained red with the blood of countless people, just like yours. But Barret didn’t let that discourage him. He shouldered those burdens and now he’s fighting to save the planet for real. He’s not running away. He’s doing everything he can to protect the world Marlene calls home.”

“...That bonehead’s always been able to change his mind at the drop of a hat. It’s what he’s best at.”

“You think Barret’s special somehow? That he’s different from you?”

Dyne quailed at Aerith’s interrogation. He was coming to his senses like a drunkard waking up. The draft of madness he’d drunk to blind himself to what he hated most—himself—was drying up under Aerith’s sincere gaze, and the armor around his heart finally fell away.

“My soul is rotten through and through. It’s foul with the blood of everyone I’ve killed. Can’t you see it? Those poor bastards... they’ve got their claws in me even now. If I give in even a little, they’ll drag me down with ’em.”

The red haze surrounding Dyne’s figure suddenly became sticky and viscous. Ever since Corel was razed to the ground, Dyne’s left arm had been spraying leaden hatred left and right. Now it was spattered with the blood of its innumerable victims, binding Dyne like a chain of guilt.

“How was I supposed to start over? I had no choice but to drown out the sorrow—to sink into madness and just hate, hate, hate! Am I wrong?”

“You are wrong.” Ever so gently, without aggression or reprobation, Aerith advanced toward Dyne. Her outstretched hands made contact with the thick film of blood that coated him. “This blood that’s tying you down... it’s a product of your own guilty conscience. Those people whose lives you took have long since returned to the Lifestream. You mustn’t ever forget the wrongs you’ve committed, but there’s no reason you can’t start over. I promise you can.”

Now it was Dyne’s turn to be silent. The syrupy blood coating his body congealed and sloughed off around the area Aerith touched, disintegrating into a fine dust. As it did, his left arm gradually became less distinct.

“Will I... be able to join the planet someday, too?”

“You will. I’m sure of it.”

“When Marlene dies of old age and winds up down here, will I be waitin’ to welcome her with open arms? As part of the planet?”

Aerith looked up into Dyne’s face and nodded with a broad smile.

“That’s right. Because you’ve already begun to start over. Everything’s going to be fine.”

Dyne's dim face could now be clearly seen. It was a different face from the one Aerith had encountered in Corel Prison—the face of an earnest man who loved his family and his hometown above all else.

There was no returning to those peaceful days before tragedy struck, back when the hardest challenge Dyne faced was sweating it out in Corel's coal mines. He and Aerith both knew that. But the human heart can recover. It can face down sad, bitter memories and live to see another day. If it couldn't, the world really would be as absurd as Dyne claimed.

"This sea of mako... what is there to do here? Well, I guess the question is what should I do? I suppose I'll stay here thinkin' about all those folks I killed. I'll keep 'em in my thoughts till the day I melt away."

"That sounds like the right thing to do."

"Hey, Aerith. I'm sorry to see you down here, but I'm glad we ran into each other."

"It isn't so bad."

"You really are a brave one."

For the first time Dyne gave a heartfelt smile. As he did so, his figure quietly began to fade away. The gun on his left arm was the first thing to disappear.

"After bitin' the dust and sittin' in timeout, it looks like I finally learned my lesson. Now I can face Marlene and Barret with my head held high. It's all thanks to you...."

Dyne was just about to sink into the Lifestream when Aerith saw it. As if animated by some will, a swirl of Lifestream rose up and nestled itself against Dyne. He called out in surprise to the ghost.

"Eleanor? Is that you?"

With that, Aerith continued on her journey.

## 4

Until now, Aerith had thought scent had no place in the Lifestream.

The soul perceived things with a set of five spiritual senses. Instead of reporting sounds, hearing functioned as a way to read thoughts, while vision worked by capturing differences in the concentration of surrounding energy. Though tactile stimuli were still present, it was more accurate to say that touch functioned mainly as an extension of this world's version of sight.

As Aerith had no requirement to eat, she couldn't attest to taste. But it ought to be obvious if her sense of smell were working. However, she'd caught scent of nothing thus far. Even the blood splattered over Dyne presented as no more than an abstract symbol. Aerith therefore concluded that odors must not exist in this place. She felt a vague sense of loneliness at the thought that not even flowers would smell like anything here.

But then she came across the next soul.

It smelled like something rotting. It was the sort of stench that made you knit your brows in disgust—the intense, foul stink that arises when a bit of entrenched filth finally starts to decay after who knows how long.

The mako around it was stagnant—an inert zone around which the currents of Lifestream twisted, unable to bring renewal. In the center of this cut-off region stood an older-looking man.

“Well, well, well. Now there’s a familiar face,” he said.

He was clad in the same suit he wore before his death, cut from the same lavish cloth he no doubt paid a fortune for. At first glance the man seemed to have retained an image as clear as Aerith’s. But it was only his clothing and expensive shoes and accessories that took solid form; his face itself was utterly indistinct. The old man’s sagging cheeks and neatly trimmed mustache were a grainy blur whenever he spoke.

“What was your name again? Well, it doesn’t matter. The girl descended from the Ancients. That’s you, isn’t it?”

“It does matter, actually,” replied Aerith. All the same, she wasn’t about to tell her name to this man. Not to President Shinra, the iron-fisted despot who once held rule through his multinational megacorporation, the Shinra Electric Power Company.

“So, you ended up down here, too. Dead like me, and in the same place.” The President continued on in a tone of delight. “We lived totally different lives but were sorted into the same heap. I guess that’s how the planet works—like a well-oiled machine. Looks like I got the long end of the stick once again.”

“The long end...?”

He was making the same point Dyne did when he first started speaking—only Dyne’s remarks were mostly cynical and self-satirizing. President Shinra was a different beast altogether. Aerith judged from the thoughts he was emanating that his words reflected what he truly believed.

“You don’t understand, do you?” said the President. “You Ancients are surprisingly dense. Then again, it explains why you so stubbornly refused to cooperate with my company. My, my... what a tragically miserable life you’ve led.”

“How rude! I don’t recall it being miserable at all.”

The President brushed aside Aerith’s anger with a disparaging chuckle.

“Perhaps being oblivious to one’s own profits and loss is its own simple kind of happiness. But try using that little brain of yours for a moment. It’s been 15 years since you and your mother escaped from Hojo’s facility, and all that time you were living in that trash heap of a slum. If you’d been a good girl and returned to us when the Turks found you, you at least could have lived a glamorous life up above the plate. Hojo was engrossed in other research back then, so I told him it would be good enough just to keep you under surveillance. But if you’d shown a little initiative and offered to help us, I would have been more than happy to let bygones be bygones and welcomed you back with open arms. Now then, what do you say? Can you deny your life was a pitiful mess, crawling around like an insect in the gutters of the slums, joining up with Avalanche only to die never having had a taste of the finer things?”

“What a conceited point of view. Measuring another person’s happiness or unhappiness...”

“You think me self-righteous, do you? I disagree. Look at things with a level head. Nobody has attained more than I have.” The President cast Aerith a ridiculing sneer, continuing as if with a lecture. “Shinra was no more than a weapons manufacturer when it started out, but through my own skill and perseverance I built it up into what it is today. The turning point came when I recognized the potential of mako, this magical energy contained within the planet, and developed the mako reactors to pump it out. Supplied as electricity, mako enriched the lives of the public and brought them under my sway. Once they tasted the day-to-day comforts this new energy source could offer, the ignorant masses submitted to its rule like an addict to a drug.

“With a stranglehold on mako, Shinra expanded almost overnight. A little whitewashing here and propaganda there allowed me to recruit all the most talented individuals to my cause. A construction project for the megalopolis of my dreams, an unprecedentedly ambitious space program—there was nothing they wouldn’t do for me. I was a king attended by his servants. The masses will never appreciate the big picture. Even the press that guides the public’s sentiment lives to serve Shinra and its energy monopoly. With the whole country under my company’s control, I ascended the throne as a supreme ruler, answerable to no one. From there I reigned over the world, trampling the dimwitted rabble and amassing an infinite fortune! I should have liked to live a little longer, of course—but I digress.

“So, what do you think, Little Miss Ancient? My life or yours? Do you understand which was more fortunate now? Or, rather, do you see how miserable yours was?”

“Hmm...” said Aerith. “If you say so.”

What Aerith did understand was that the man in front of her was utterly removed from her idea of happiness. What he defined as happiness was nothing more than a relative concept—a measure of how many people were in a worse position than him. The pursuit of this so-called “happiness” informed the corporate philosophy of Shinra, a company that sought to suck dry the very life of the planet. How miserable this man’s soul was, unable to feel joy without knowing there were others less happy than himself.

She had no intention of pointing this out to him, however. If President Shinra was satisfied with where he ended up, then so be it. The phantom riches he’d amassed and couldn’t let go of clung to him like a layer of filth, reeking of decay. This monstrous old man would never recognize the cesspool in which he was stagnating. He would never know the misery of being imprisoned by his own lust, even after death.

Ever looking to others as a basis for comparison, the President grimaced at Aerith with discontent as she stood before him utterly unflustered.

“What an unpleasant business, quibbling with dolts like you. A net loss, no matter how you look at it. There’s a limit to how much aggravation I can bear. If you won’t understand what I’m telling you, then hurry up and move along.”

“I’ll do that,” Aerith returned.

The President’s soul would more than likely never be saved. He would remain here on this throne buried by the weight of his own depraved desires, until, after many years, his sense of self wore away and vanished altogether.

Aerith turned her back on the President. She was about to continue on her journey when something strange happened. An odd wave, separate from the flow of the Lifestream, surged through the sea of mako and rocked it whole, swelling ominously like some massive seismic pulse.

“What is this!?”

Aerith spun around at the sound of the President’s shout. He was already far away by the time she looked. Gradually yet with tremendous momentum he continued to gather speed. It wasn’t a current that carried him. The old man’s soul was being dragged away like a dropped stone accelerating with the force of gravity. It was being pulled toward some distant point in the ocean of mako. At last President Shinra disappeared, leaving a terrified yell trailing behind him.

Aerith felt the pulse once again. She sensed it clearly this time. It bore the same wavelength as the man who’d taken her life in the Forgotten City. There was no mistaking it: somewhere within the Lifestream he was lurking.

“Sephiroth...”

The fallen angel with silver hair gave a contemptuous laugh. He was gorging on energy, drawing souls stagnant with wickedness into his churning inferno.

It was at that moment Aerith realized it. The crisis was still at hand.

Holy, the spell she thought she’d invoked, had been suppressed just before it was cast. It was Sephiroth who was holding it back, biding his time in a scar engraved in the planet long ago. He was inside the Northern Cave—Jenova’s Promised Land—waiting to be resurrected as his original self.

Just then, Meteor began to move. The jet-black magic of utter destruction had been called forth. It began its journey from the reaches beyond the sky, a diabolical hammer summoned to smash the planet.

## 5

Cloud was descending into the Lifestream. Not as a dead man or as a soul but alive and in the flesh. Down he fell into the sea of mako... down into decay.

In the Northern Cave he’d discovered his memories were a lie. He learned that he was a puppet whom the mad scientist Hojo had implanted with Jenova’s cells and fashioned for assimilation with the soon-to-be-revived Sephiroth. But he’d turned out to be a failure, making such a poor copy that he was never even given a number.

A hollow shell, Cloud ended up alone and forsaken in Midgar. Afterward he encountered Tifa Lockhart, the “real” Cloud’s childhood friend. Upon meeting her, he instantly transcribed Tifa’s image of him thanks to the memory duplication ability Jenova had endowed him with. Any missing parts were supplemented by the few memories of SOLDIER he was left with. Thus was born Cloud Strife—a patchwork personality based on the boy who existed in Tifa’s consciousness. Despite being a walking contradiction, this fictitious character was able to take shape only because Cloud himself never doubted it.



But now his mask had been removed.

He had long since begun to lose control. Repeated contact with other Sephiroth Copies and the psychic dissonance those encounters caused had given rise to suspicions Cloud never should have had. With Aerith's death, the dam of his mind finally burst asunder and these doubts began to overflow. He managed to keep them in check thanks to his hatred for Sephiroth and his sense of self-purpose, but when he came face-to-face with Sephiroth's true form, his defenses failed.

At the Northern Cave, Cloud's personality was adroitly peeled away when Sephiroth commandeered Jenova to confront him. What's more, his very consciousness fell under Sephiroth's control, and in a shocking turn of events he ended up entrusting his puppeteer with the key to summoning Meteor: the Black Materia.

Cloud had aided the man who was supposed to be his sworn enemy, sabotaging his own objective of thwarting Meteor. Broken at last, his sense of self collapsed entirely. The mosaic of his false identity was shattered, and in the cavity of his consciousness, all that remained was a deep despair that he was nothing more than a failed Sephiroth Copy.

No longer of any use, the empty husk that used to be Cloud passed through the crater of the Northern Cave and consigned itself to the Lifestream that runs through the bowels of the planet.

What would happen to an egoless man soaked in a sea of highly concentrated mako—a man adrift in the aggregate memories of the planet? To give an analogy, it would be like soaking a dry sponge in liquid. An indiscriminate flood of random memories would pour in and fill the vacuum of his consciousness. It was the worst conceivable case of what people commonly called “mako poisoning.”

His psyche hopelessly corroded, Cloud drifted along through the Lifestream. With no business being there, his living body was eventually ejected into the coastal waters of Mideel, one of the few known sites where mako energy naturally rose to the surface.

His identity lost, Cloud emerged disabled with his mind still a muddle.

\*

Aerith soon learned why the Northern Cave was one of those places that couldn't be accessed from the Lifestream. It was being blocked off by Sephiroth's barrier. When Jenova, the calamity from the skies, had come hurtling to earth, the impact of the meteoroid she was riding left an enormous scar on the planet's surface. Now the place where energy gathered to heal that wound had become the cradle for Sephiroth's rebirth. Currents of life swirled unnaturally around it, barring the approach of any discarnate existence like Aerith.

Aerith drew right up next to Cloud as his body continued to drift away, trying her utmost to speak to him. She stayed by his side all the way as he was swept toward Mideel. But he couldn't hear her voice. His heart was broken by despair, shattered into a million little pieces. No

matter how loud she cried out to him, her words couldn't reach him—just like when they'd parted in the Forgotten City.

Aerith stood dumbstruck in the sea of mako as she watched Cloud's body return to the surface, at a loss for what to do.

✱

"How can I help Cloud? Even if I do, there's still Meteor to take care of. I had no idea Holy was being held back. At this rate the planet will be Sephiroth's to do with as he pleases. What can I do?... Tell me, Cloud...."

Aerith wept for Cloud's shattered heart, beyond the help of even her prayers. The wreckage of who he was seemed to be past the point of repair. If he'd never even been Cloud to begin with, who was he truly? All Aerith had ever known was Cloud the "ex-SOLDIER." What his true identity was, Aerith couldn't even begin to guess. She was overcome with an indescribable sense of powerlessness.

"Cloud... I wish I could be with you. The real you..." It was a murmur, a thought, a ripple, spreading out across the sea of mako.

Into her mind flashed memories of the time she spent with Cloud, before he disappeared. She'd been struck by the cheer and liveliness she sometimes glimpsed, even when he was pretending to be cool and aloof.

"It's true parts of him didn't feel like they matched up. But to think it could all be fake... an entirely fabricated persona. Was there any truth to who he was? ... Yes. There must have been. He said things only Cloud could come up with—did things only Cloud would do. Nobody's hollow from the start!"

But that truth was beyond her reach. And so her thoughts went, round and round. Aerith would return to her memories and recall some detail of Cloud's behavior—the way he walked, the way he carried himself. She'd analyze every little thing.

Through this cyclical process a personality began to awaken within the Lifestream—the identity of a man who'd all but diffused into the sea of mako. At last he opened his eyes, recognizing Aerith's figure as the one who called him forth.

"Aerith?... Is that you?"

The voice came so suddenly that at first she couldn't recall whom it belonged to. She hastily spun around and caught sight of a familiar face she hadn't seen in five years. It was the first person with whom Aerith had shared a fleeting romance—a close friend she'd suddenly lost contact with one day and never seen again. It was Zack, the man she'd seen in the way Cloud acted. He, too, bore the blue-tinged eyes that mark out members of SOLDIER. He stood there before Aerith, his figure no less distinct than her own.

"Zack! Does this mean you died, too?"

The thought was reflexive and Aerith asked it unthinkingly despite the needlessness of the question. Death seemed an unfitting fate for such a lively and talented SOLDIER. She was shocked by the cruelty of it. She realized how blindly she'd clung to the belief he was still

okay—that even after going missing, he’d surely settled down somewhere to live a life of peace and quiet.

“‘Too’? You mean... you’re also dead? Well, at least you held out longer than me. But... I don’t know what to say. ‘Sorry for your loss’? Something like that I guess.”

“You haven’t changed a bit.”

Aerith gave a wry smile, feeling a sense of relief. That was just like Zack. Never losing his cheerfulness no matter the situation. It was this quality that drew her to him back then, despite knowing he was a SOLDIER in Shinra’s employ.

“I’ll have you know a lot’s happened since then. A real hell of a slog. It all started when I got sent on this mission to Nibelheim, a town out in the countryside.”

“Nibelheim?”

“Yeah. You heard of it? I teamed up with this super famous SOLDIER. People called him a hero back then. But one day he totally snapped....”

“That SOLDIER,” Aerith gasped. “Was it Sephiroth?” She was convinced Zack’s appearance there must mean something. She had a feeling he was somehow connected to everything.

“Like I said, real famous, that asshole. Or maybe you read about it in the papers? ‘Massacre at Nibelheim.’ Some big headline like that, right?”

“You were there when that all happened? Then... Cloud—”

“Hey, hey, hold up a minute! You know about Cloud, too? Is he safe?”

“So you know him, too. Cloud... really exists?”

The two quickly brought each other up to speed. Aerith learned that Cloud wasn’t just a duplicate puppet created for Sephiroth’s use. She also learned why she’d constantly seen Zack in him.

For Zack’s part, he learned everything that happened to his dear friend after the two were caught up in the Nibelheim incident and hunted by Shinra. He learned that Sephiroth had returned from the dead and now posed a danger not only to Nibelheim but to everything else on the planet.

“But Zack... How can we make Cloud recognize who he truly is? Can’t we prove to him that he’s a real person?”

“I don’t think we can pull it off. It seems like the only one who can is that Tifa girl. She was in Nibelheim at the same time as me and Cloud. If the memories inside her can make Cloud remember what happened, then just maybe...”

“It’ll be tough to make that happen. But I won’t give up. There has to be a chance.”

With new hope kindled in her heart, Aerith’s face lit up. “If we can make that happen, I just know Cloud and the others will be able to take care of Sephiroth. They’ll get rid of the force that’s blocking Holy.”

It wouldn’t be long before that chance arose.

✱

Meteor's pending impact and the planet's release of colossal sentient Weapons was wreaking havoc with the Lifestream's main current. Energy made to flow backwards erupted from the surface with unprecedented force, engulfing Cloud—who was convalescing in the village of Mideel—and Tifa—who was desperately trying to nurse him back to health. Enveloped in mako, the pair descended into the planet's interior—Cloud for a second time, and Tifa for the first.

Gambling everything, Aerith seized this one-in-a-million chance. As Tifa floundered in confusion amid the highly concentrated mako, Aerith did everything in her power to reach out and guide her consciousness into Cloud's closed-off heart.

Being honest with herself, Aerith wished she could be the one to help Cloud. But this was a role she couldn't fulfill. Therefore, she would entrust the task to Tifa. She would leave everything to the love of Cloud she knew resided within her—to the woman who would go on living beside him.

And Tifa indeed pulled through. Comparing Cloud's memories with her own, she managed to discover things only the true Cloud would know. With these as proof, Cloud's closed door was opened. His true identity was extracted from the depths of his heavily fortified memory. A regular infantryman who was never able to become a SOLDIER, Cloud duplicated his best friend Zack's mannerisms using the abilities of the Jenova cells implanted inside him. Now he was restored to his proper, original self, not some fake personality concocted to preserve his own fragile ego.

"You've done it, Tifa," Aerith rejoiced. "I can't thank you enough.... It makes me a little jealous to ask, but please take care of Cloud. Not just him but the rest of the world up there."

Smiling with a motherly sort of affection, Aerith looked on as Tifa snuggled close to Cloud and returned to the surface with him, his true self regained at last.

Zack narrowed his eyes as if dazzled by the sight.

"Damn it. Of all the girls I ever got close with, you were far and away the best, Aerith. If I'd been able to make it back to Midgar after that mission, maybe we could've gone steady. I'll never stop hating Sephiroth—and Shinra for covering it all up."

"As if I'd ever take a playboy like you for a lover."

"Hey, that's uncalled for. I just happen to get along with everyone."

"That's your problem. I prefer someone pure, and a little tactless. Like Cloud."

"Ah, so that was your type all along."

"Well, maybe not. Five years is a long time. Things might have changed."

"Right..."

Zack pouted as if to sulk, then broke into a carefree smile. Aerith recognized that boyish grin. It was the same smile she'd fallen for when she was 17 years old.

"I know it isn't over yet, but I think I'll catch some shuteye. It doesn't look like there's anything I can do at the moment. Give me a holler if you're feeling lonely, Aerith."

"I'd have to get pretty lonely for that to happen. Sleep tight, Zack."

With a wave farewell, the SOLDIER 1st Class sank into the sea of mako. Confident he still had a role to play, Zack drifted into a temporary slumber in order to bide his strength.

Aerith, on the other hand, did not sleep. Perhaps it was her Cetra heritage, but she never seemed to grow tired. For now, at least, she felt happy—happy to have known the real Cloud and watched over him, if only for a short time....

## 6

“Heh, heh, heh...”

A bone-chilling chuckle filled the air. Aerith came to a sudden halt, wondering if she’d imagined it.

Cloud and the others were up on the surface, fighting to find a way to penetrate the Northern Cave. Meanwhile, Aerith continued to wander the Lifestream, searching for a seam in Sephiroth’s barrier or a chance to release Holy from the force that was binding it. But there was none to be found. With Jenova’s abilities completely at his disposal, Sephiroth was now deeply entrenched within the cavern that had become his cocoon. Access via the Lifestream had been totally barred. In so doing, he had outwitted even the planet, which had long kept vigil over Jenova, and evaded the ire of the Weapons, constructs created by the planet to eliminate foreign threats.

If Holy couldn’t be activated in time... Aerith had hardly begun to imagine the consequences when laughter rang out again.

A new soul had just fallen into the sea of mako—a man in a white lab coat, his thin, agitated features twisted into a deranged grin. It was Hojo, a mad scientist who, under the auspices of Shinra, had conducted scores of barbaric human experiments. There he stood, fixing Aerith with his frenzied gaze.

“Professor... Hojo...”

“Ah, the Ancient girl. So, it would seem the Cetra have the willpower to persist inside the Lifestream without letting their consciousness diffuse. A gift us mere mortals have lost... Heh, heh, heh... Perhaps not so different from what Sephiroth and Jenova can do.”

“We’re nothing alike. And you still can’t remember my name.”

“That’s because it doesn’t matter. ‘The Last Ancient’ is a far more accurate nomer. It speaks to the essence of what you are. Yes, yes... when it comes to specimens, descriptive data and numbers are all you need.”

“So you think humans and animals are nothing more than fodder for your experiments? Even stripped down to your soul, there’s no changing you, is there?”

Hojo broke into raucous laughter, as though he’d just been told a highly amusing joke.

“Oh, but I have changed,” he said, still cackling. “It was just before I fell into the Lifestream. Ah, I see... this lab coat is in the way.”

Hojo gripped the white gown he was draped in and tore it away with tremendous force. The image of the coat burst into shreds and fluttered about like feathers, exposing the bare flesh hidden beneath.

Aerith was speechless with shock. What met her eyes was not the body of a human but a mass formed from Jenova cells—the same kind she'd seen several times before. It seemed Hojo had finally grown tired of experimenting on others and devoted his own flesh to the horrors of his research.

"You see?" he said, letting out another high-pitched laugh. "I'm nothing more than a research sample now. I'll bet you never imagined I could change this much, did you?"

"What on earth have you done?... Professor Hojo, are you even human anymore? Even your soul has been defiled. It will never return to the planet now...."

"The Lifestream... the cycle of souls... the will of the planet. They mean no more to me than the dirt under my nails. What truly matters is science. How far can we take it beyond the natural order—beyond the planet's order? That's the real question. Why should I regret losing my humanity if it means fulfilling this insatiable curiosity—this noble desire of mine? If my hypothesis about Jenova is proven correct, who cares what becomes of the planet!?"

The thoughts Hojo was sending out were pure insanity. It was nothing like the intoxicating madness Dyne had used as a crutch. And unlike what President Shinra lusted after, Hojo's ultimate goal was downright destruction. Hojo was no different in death than he had been in life. He was a slave to "knowledge," consumed by scientific fanaticism and utterly unconcerned about his own life and what might become of it.

"Gast was a coward who ran from science, yet he was always considered my superior. With this, nobody can deny that I've surpassed him. Had Gast remained in charge of the Jenova Project, I never would have been able to reach this point.... Ah, that's right," Hojo said with a chuckle. "Professor Gast was your father, wasn't he?"

"My father... he realized that the planet was more important than science...."

Aerith knew this from the memories that had melted off of Cloud and Tifa when they fell into the Lifestream. She also knew it was Hojo who'd shot her father when he resisted and seized his recently born daughter to use as a new research specimen.

"Hmph. Gast could never move past that. To leave behind his research and give up on everything he'd done... it was an affront to the very soul of science. Well, that's enough idle chit chat." Showing absolutely no sign of remorse, Hojo turned his head in the direction of the Northern Cave. "My son—the man who's master over Jenova—is calling out. He needs more life force." Hojo let out a low laugh. "A sacrifice I'll gladly make. He and I will become one—I, whom he loathed so much and always looked down upon. This shall be my Reunion."

Just as President Shinra before him, Hojo was dragged away along with the Jenova cells with which he was fused. Cackling with insane glee, he was drawn into the depths of a warped well of energy.

"Let me give you one last piece of advice, Ancient. Nothing you do will change anything. It's just the way this planet works. The cycle of life was designed without account for the arrival

of an extraplanetary entity. And yet one has come—Jenova. Where is her soul to go? Even should she be destroyed, she will not disappear. She will melt into the sea of mako, riding the Lifestream until she's infested every corner of the planet. Eventually you'll all have to live as part of Jenova, just like me. Heh, heh, heh... It's only a matter of time."

"We'll never let that happen!"

"Just wait and see. Sooner or later, you'll understand."

With a parting sneer, the thing that used to be Hojo disappeared beyond the reach of what Aerith could sense. And so he became an offering to Sephiroth, his face plastered with madness and delight. His soul remained void of shame or regret, unrepentant until the very moment it was devoured.

Aerith knew that Hojo's death meant the end of Shinra. Their path now clear, Cloud and his friends were drawing near to the final battle.

Aerith began to run. If Hojo could give his life to support Sephiroth, there must be something she and the others could do to save the planet. She just knew it....

## 7

Cloud and his companions had at last defeated Sephiroth. He'd bided his time in the planet's scar, siphoning away mako energy to heal the wounds he once sustained, and eventually succeeded in resurrecting his original body. Yet he'd failed to achieve the ambition he inherited from the ancient calamity Jenova. Cloud and the others had fought with full hearts and broken the limits of their own human capabilities. Sephiroth had been crushed, his body obliterated. Bruised and battered, the victors prepared to head home....

But Cloud sensed there was still something to be done. A part of his spirit resonated within him—the remnants of Sephiroth's psychic control, which he'd once exerted through the Jenova cells inside Cloud. Somewhere within the Lifestream, Cloud could feel the presence of a thoughtform that continued to keep Holy from being unleashed.

He went after it, diving into the sea of mako with only his consciousness for a vessel. He sped along the currents of the Lifestream to find his old nemesis waiting for him—the soul of Sephiroth, an enemy of the planet who refused to perish.

In the world of spiritual energy, the two men crossed swords. Sephiroth, hailed as the strongest SOLDIER ever to live, brandished his long katana in a band of bright light. But Cloud was undaunted. Certain of victory, Sephiroth was about to deliver his next thrust when Cloud unleashed every ounce of power he'd pent up. Seizing the momentary opening, Cloud bore his greatsword into Sephiroth's body. The attack created a new gap in his enemy's defenses, and Cloud pressed on with a rapid assault. Sephiroth was pierced by a storm of ceaseless slashes—15 inescapable swordstrokes, each with the finality of a killing blow.

Even after this onslaught, the mad fallen angel bore a fearless smirk. Yet even as he smiled, his spiritual form began to crumble, having sustained far more damage than it could endure. A flash of light burst from within, devouring his body and scattering the pieces.

Sephiroth had been annihilated. Cloud's nightmare—an endless horror show that began in Nibelheim five years ago—had finally come to a close.

Freed from its bonds, the white magic Holy immediately began to activate.

Cloud was still in a daze, his consciousness divorced from the body it belonged to. And then he saw it—a hand guiding him from the depths of the world of mako. It was fair and delicate and reminded him of a hand that once upon a time had handed him a flower in Midgar. Cloud instinctively reached out for it....

His consciousness returned to his body. The hand he grasped was Tifa's. She'd reached it out to catch him just as the foothold beneath him crumbled away. The timing was too perfect. Had her actions not been guided, Cloud would have tumbled into the depths of the abyss below. He knew as much deep down. He knew that he'd been saved.

No sooner had they escaped aboard the Highwind than Holy ascended in a triumphant column, piercing the leaden skies above the Northern Cave with brilliant light.

But it was too late.

Meteor had already drawn far too close to the earth's surface and was poised to touch down over Midgar. As the planet and the giant Meteor wreaked havoc with one another's gravitational fields, a magnetic storm sprang up and began mercilessly peeling apart the top layer of the city's sturdy plate. Holy was now a ribbon of energy that stretched between Meteor and the earth below. Rather than acting as a buffer, it amplified the destructive power of Meteor, pouring oil onto an already blazing fire.

At this rate, the maelstrom would not only obliterate the citizens of Midgar who'd taken refuge in the slums but inflict irreparable damage to the planet itself. The world and everything on it would perish. Sephiroth's scheme had been foiled, yet it was clear the worst was yet to come.

The planet was approaching its end.

"Everybody!" Aerith cried. "I need your strength!" Her plea became a wave of thought, rippling out across the sea of mako. Born along the currents of the Lifestream, the message wound its way around the planet.

"I can't do it on my own. I need everyone here to help. Help me protect the planet!"

The call of the last Cetra resonated in the countless consciousnesses she'd awakened during her journey. They were one and the same as the planet's consciousness. This aggregate of stronger wills—the thoughts of people who'd lingered in search of atonement—served as shepherds, managing and directing the spiritual energy of the greater planet.

"It's about time!" yelled Jessie. "Let's light this fuse and blast that rock right out of the sky!"

"Avalanche's Lifestream Division reporting in!" called Biggs. "With Barret gone, that makes me leader!"

"Hey, I wanted to try being leader this time!" Wedge shouted. "No fair, Biggs!"



“This Barret’s crew?” came Dyne’s voice. “What a careless bunch. Get serious you ninnies—for Marlene’s sake!”

Following their command, the Lifestream rose from the earth’s surface in countless bands of interweaving light. Cradling the planet in a shining web, they burrowed into Meteor and pushed back the cosmic battering ram. The movement of the lights was like a valkyrie leading her immortal champions on a charge across the heavens.

“Hey, Aerith. Did you see Cloud’s finisher?” Zack guided his energy into a second wave that forced the stalled Meteor further back into the sky. “Looks like he copied my sword skills, too. Pretty impressive, huh? Enough to make you fall in love with me all over again...”

With enough space to operate, Holy now resumed its intended function. Acting as a barrier, it shattered the parts of Meteor it came into contact with, expelling them into outer space like so much dust. No longer a threat to the planet, Meteor was reduced to a harmless tool, with nothing left to do but await obliteration.

The planet had been spared from ruin—Aerith’s final prayer had been unleashed.

From the deck of the Highwind, Cloud saw her, as did Tifa and Barret and all the others. They gazed upon Aerith’s smiling face, suspended in the amber of their memories, a gently fading visage drawn by ribbons of Lifestream returning to the Planet.

The hands of time began to move once again, and sorrows found succor, if only a little. Thus the record of life, etched in the very fabric of the planet, continued to be written. And the world marched on to an age of rebirth.

*fin*