

## FLASHBACK: Reno

Regan Hage

What can I say, I was born and raised in Midgar. Both my parents worked for Shinra, just low level stuff, but I grew up in the shadow of the company. I knew that I'd be working for them someday. I wasn't sure where, but I knew it would be them I'd be working for. It was one of the few givens in my life.

Positive in the fact that I'd be a company man I became a bit of a free spirit.... Okay, a lot of a free spirit. I didn't bother worrying about my future. It was set, with Shinra, and I turned my youth into one long party. I felt that I knew where I was going so it didn't matter where I had been on the way there. Life was a ride, and I was enjoying it.

It wasn't until I turned twenty when something happened to me that made me stop and think. I *still* didn't have a job. I was trying to find out where in the company I'd fit best. I happened to be in a bar, as usual, when I saw her. She was waiting tables, but immediately I sensed a difference between her and the other barmaids. She was young, fresh, innocent. Untouched by both the crude language of the patrons and their groping hands. Something inside me just wanted to grab her, take her away from all this, make sure she never lost that innocence. It was an odd feeling. I had only just seen the girl, I didn't even know her name, but I wanted to protect her. Keep her safe from the viciousness of the world.

"Can I get you anything?"

Her soft voice shocked me out of my deep thoughts. I hadn't been expecting her to come up to the solitary booth I usually tucked myself into. I had to answer, quick, before she thought I was nuts.

"Umm... yea... a beer."

"Coming right up."

Once again I was shocked by my own actions. I never ordered beer. Not anymore. I always went straight for the hard stuff. But that day I think I wanted to stay sober a little longer, just so I could look at her.

"Here you are."

Her silent approach caused me to start, for some reason I was extremely jumpy that day, and I stared dumbly at the glass in front of me for a moment before glancing up at her.

"Thanks...." I trailed off, prompting her to give me her name, but she said nothing and started to walk away.

"Hey wait!" I called after her.

"Yes, would you like anything else?" she asked softly, turning back.

"Yea, I was wondering what your name was?" I asked smoothly, shooting her an easy smile.

"Oh." She flushed slightly and once again I felt that protective feeling well up inside me. My... name.... I'm Kayla."

"Reno," I replied, indicating myself.

"Well... nice to meet you Reno, but I really should get back to work...."

"Right." I watched her walk away, my mind racing with thoughts of her. Kayla. Kayla the barmaid. The girl too seemingly sweet to be working here of all places. This was a dive, she deserved better. I don't know what made me think that, but I did. I knew that I was going to stay sober today, just so I could talk to her when she got off work.

By the time I saw her starting to leave a few hours later I was still, astoundingly enough, nursing my first beer. I was instantly on my feet and at her side.

"Hi there," I said quietly.

She jumped slightly, obviously not expecting me to be there, and I felt bad for scaring her like that. "O... oh.... H... hello...."

"So...." I looked her over, instantly uncomfortable. I didn't know what to say to a girl like this. So petite, so fragile looking.... "You're leaving now, huh?" I finished lamely.

"Y... yes."

"Is it far to where you're staying?" Her eyes widened in fear slightly and I quickly plunged on. "It's just that this is a pretty dangerous part of town. I wouldn't want to see you get hurt."

"W... why would you be worried about me?" she stuttered.

"I don't know," I answered truthfully. "There's just something about you that makes me worry about you. But if I make you uncomfortable...." I trailed off and started to walk away.

"Wait." That one simple, softly spoken word halted me in my tracks. "I... would... um... would you like to have a drink with me before I go?"

"A drink?" I turned back, sure that my amazement was written clearly on my face.

"Sure, why not?" she rushed on, obviously feeling a little more at-ease. "You seem... nice."

"Looks can be deceiving," I replied flatly.

"Are they?"

"Not this time."

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That was the start of something special for me. An actual relationship with a woman, one not based on sex. Every day that she worked at that hole I was there. After that first day I always walked her home, the two of us sharing a companionable silence, happy with one another's company. When we did speak we talked about our pasts. Our childhoods. She had grown up in Kalm and had moved to Midgar in hopes of making a name for herself. Her stories astounded me. Having grown up in Midgar the peace and quiet of Kalm seemed more like a whole other world than a neighboring town. I was constantly prompting her to tell me more, and she always obliged. Slowly but surely our times together lengthened. We went out for coffee, for dinner, occasionally to see theatrical performances. We were friends, and for once I was happy with just that. Then one day everything changed.

I was walking her home, as usual. We had just had dinner and were enjoying that pleasant silence that we always shared. Finally we reached her flat.

"I'll see you tomorrow then?" I asked, leaning down and brushing a light kiss across her lips. I was allowed that much liberty but it didn't bother me.

"Reno," she began slowly, almost hesitantly, making me wonder what she was going to say.

"Yes?"

"How... er... how would you like to come in for some coffee or something?"

"Kayla," I breathed in shock. I was stunned. We both knew what would happen if I came in, but she was inviting me in. She *wanted* me in. "I'd love to," I finished.

"Great! Come on then."

She led the way and I followed her into the flat. It was small, but appeared more spacious than it actually was. Who would have guessed that someday it would become a second home for me.

"Make yourself at home, I'll go put the coffee on."

I nodded and sat down on the couch as she walked off, thinking about how far we had come. It seemed like not too long ago she had been so timid and hesitant, and now....

"The coffee'll be ready in a few min... mph!"

I didn't let her finish. I just kissed her. I don't know why. Maybe because it had been so long since I had been with a woman like this. Since I had met her I hadn't even *looked* at another girl, much less done anything else. She kissed me back and the coffee was very quickly forgotten.

I won't go into the details of that night, there are some things that a gentleman just won't speak of. But I will admit that after that night, everything changed. I had felt something with her that I had never felt with another woman before in my life. I had been happy just to hold her. It had been, somehow, more than just sex. And as of that night we officially became a couple. We went everywhere together, did everything, and for once in my life I actually *tried* to find a place in Shinra that I'd fit. For her. For our future together.

A few months passed and we settled into an almost blissful routine. Then everything changed again. It started with a simple illness. What we thought was maybe just the flu. But the subtle hints began to add up and a test proved it. She was expecting my child.

I wasn't sure how I felt. But finally I settled on something between ecstatic and terrified. I was going to be a father. And I was going to marry Kayla.

The night I proposed I took her to the most elegant restaurant I could find. I wanted everything to be special, memorable, absolutely perfect. By the end of dessert I was on bended knee and she was crying. Neither of us had been happier. We left the restaurant arm in arm, both of us intent on getting home to celebrate our upcoming nuptials.

I should have been paying more attention to where we were going. I should have seen the pair of thugs behind us. I should have stayed on the main road. But we were both so anxious to get home I took her along a shortcut. **Why** did I take that shortcut!?

We were so wrapped up in each other that I didn't even know what happened until it was too late. I felt a strong hand on my shoulder, and as I turned, points of light exploded in my vision and I found myself thrown to the ground. My head was aching, my vision just a blur, but through the haze I heard Kayla screaming. Screaming my name.

I tried to struggle to my feet, but was immediately knocked back down and I felt something sharp slice painfully across one side of my face.

"Stay where you are, loverboy. We'll give her back when we're through. But if you try anything you might not get her back in one piece...."

I barely heard him. All I could hear was Kayla. She was nearly silent now, just whimpering slightly, and whispering my name every so often. "Kayla..." I started to say, trying to sit up at least.

"Shaddup!" The sharp thing... (a blade... it had to be a blade) raked across the other side of my face, causing me to collapse again. Kayla screamed and I heard one sound that made me feel ill. The sound of a slap. One of those bastards had hit her. Rage rushed through me and my eyes slowly cracked open as I forced them to focus. I needed a weapon of some sort. I groped around blindly for a few moments and finally my hand closed around a short, thin length of pipe that had obviously broken off of something. It was good enough for me though. In one fluid movement, fueled by a hidden store of adrenaline, I got to my feet and swung the pipe. The one who had cut me didn't even know what hit him. My makeshift weapon thudded against his temple and he collapsed to the ground. That done, I lurched towards the other one, but not before he fired the gun. The gun he had pressed up against the side of Kayla's head. The piece of pipe fell from my numb fingers as I watched him shove the limp body of the love of my life away from him and run off into the shadows. Instinctively I ran forward to catch her but I knew it was too late. She was gone. My fiancée and my unborn child, both dead in one senseless act of violence. An act that I could have stopped if I had been paying more attention. If only... if only....

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A lot of what happened after that is a blur. The first coherent thing I remember is waking up in a hospital bed, my head aching. But when I checked out the haze returned. My life didn't have a purpose anymore. Without Kayla I was lost again. And with a fresh row of stitches on either cheek people avoided me even more than they used to.

It was about a month after Kayla's death when some suit approached me in a bar, with an interesting offer.

"Recognize this face?" he asked me, dropping a photograph on the counter in front of me. I glanced at it and immediately felt my blood begin to boil.

"What the hell do you want?" I hissed at him, not trying to hide my anger.

"I take it you do then," he said calmly, as if I hadn't even said anything. "I have a proposition for you...."

"I'm not interested," I grumbled, trying to ignore him.

"Oh I think you will be. See, I know everything about you. I know what happened last month and I must say you have promise...."

"Promise," I echoed cynically, my voice emotionless.

"Yes, the one thug you hit. You basically crushed his skull. We could use a man like you."

"Yea? Well aren't you just a sick pack of sons of...."

"I wouldn't speak of the Shinra Corporation in that way," he cut me off quickly. "It may be hazardous to your health."

I stared at him blankly, sure that my eyes reflected the deadness I felt inside. "Not like I have anything to lose."

"No, but you could stand to gain quite a bit."

"How so?"

"How about revenge for a start?"

I felt a twisted sense of elation at the thought of getting even with the bastard that had murdered Kayla, but I hid it carefully from the suit sitting beside me. "Go on," I prompted.

"It's quite simple, you join our little group and we'll provide you with the resources to find this man." He tapped the photo that was still laying on the bar. "Once you find him you can have free reign with him. Do whatever the hell you want, we don't care."

"This sounds too good to be true," I stated simply. "What do I have to do for you when I join this 'little group' of yours?"

"Oh just this and that," he replied, casually waving my question aside. "Just little things. Any odd jobs the company might need you to do."

"Odd jobs," I echoed. "That's it, just little 'odd jobs.'"

"That's it. So do we have a deal?"

I glanced back at the picture and my eyes narrowed as memories of that horrible night came back to me. The way he had pulled the trigger without flinching. Watching Kayla's sparkling brown eyes go blank as the bullet buried itself in her brain.... I squeezed my eyes shut and tried to calm myself. I had to save my rage, for when I met this monster face to face again.

"It's a deal," I replied, my voice barely audible. "Count me in."

"Glad to have you aboard," he said as he stood. "Come to the Shinra building tomorrow at nine sharp. We'll be expecting you. Any later and the deal's off. This is the beginning of a new life for you, I hope you're ready for it."

"So what's this 'little group' I'm joining anyways?" I asked before he had a chance to walk away.

"Well, if you show up tomorrow, you'll be the newest addition to the ranks of the Shinra Manufacturing Department of Administrative Research," he replied, shooting off the long title with ease.

"The what?"

"If you've ever heard of them, you've probably heard them referred to as the Turks...."

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I had heard of them. I vaguely remember hearing my father complaining about them. They were like enforcers, of a shady type, and they thought I had the right stuff to be one of them.... If only mom could see her little boy now....

I showed up at the Shinra building on time, was led to my quarters and given a uniform, a plain navy blue suit. I glanced in the mirror as I finished doing up my tie and nodded. Whoever I had been before this moment was dead. I was now Reno of the Turks, and I was going to be the best damned Turk possible. After all, they were giving me my chance for revenge.

I picked a pair of sunglasses up off the dresser and slipped them on, a smile crossing my face as I looked at my reflection. I looked every inch the shady enforcer now, my scars making me look even more dangerous.

"You're a natural."

I turned and took in the two men standing in the doorway. Both were probably only a few years older than me, and dressed in the same uniform as I was.

"You're Reno right?" the one on the left asked and I nodded. "Well, I'm Tseng, and this is Rude. Good to have you aboard. I've heard about you."

"Oh... really?" I asked slowly, thinking about how I had ended up here.

"Yea. You basically smashed a guy's skull open right?" I glanced away and said nothing so Tseng continued. "That's a little on the crude side, but the fact that you have no remorse shows something. In this business remorse is a definite liability...."

"This... business?"

Tseng shook his head, obviously seeing the confusion on my face. "Reno, exactly *what* do you think a Turk does?"

"I dunno," I replied with a shrug. "I've always thought it was enforcer work."

"Enforcer work," he echoed flatly.

"Yea, you know. If someone doesn't do as they're told, we make them."

"Well... I suppose you could call it that," Tseng sighed. "But don't mention it to anyone else. Officially we're supposed to find possible new recruits for SOLDIER."

"And unofficially?" I prompted.

"We do what they tell us to," he replied with a shrug. "The farthest we've gone is a full out assassination. *That's* why they want people with no remorse. Enjoy your new career."

He strolled off, Rude following him, and left me alone to contemplate just *what* I had gotten myself into.

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"Of course the Turks are expected to know how to handle all weapons. But we'll let you carry whatever you feel the most comfortable with...."

I glanced warily over the rows of guns and blades in the arsenal. I had never used an actual weapon in my life and they were expecting me to be able to handle all of these different kinds? What had I gotten myself into!?

"So pick one," the man in charge of the arsenal prompted irately. "I haven't got all day."

I tried to ignore him and continued to scan along the rows, finally coming across some of the odder, more exotic weaponry. I stopped as my eyes fell on a stick. It didn't look very deadly but for some reason I picked it up anyway, hefting it to test its weight.

The man standing beside me started talking, probably telling me all about this little stick, but I wasn't listening. I was thinking about that night. About the feeling from smacking that length of pipe across that sleaze's head. And I knew that this was what I wanted.

"I'll take it."

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After that I fell into a routine. It was just as Tseng said, they told me what to do and I did it. First they just gave me the simple stuff but as I got better, and got a reputation, they trusted me with

more. A kidnapping here, a severe beating there, just like I'd been told. This and that, odd jobs, tell me what to do and I'll do it.

In between all that I was looking for Kayla's killer. It was the one thing holding me up. The chance to put him through as much physical pain as possible.

Then one day I got my chance. I found out where the little scum had been living and as soon as I had the free time I decided to pay him a little visit. When I got there the slug opened the door so trustingly it wasn't even a challenge. I had him begging for mercy in no time.

"What's the Shinra want with me!? I swear, I didn't do nothing!"

"The Shinra doesn't want anything with you," I replied evenly.

"W... what? Then what do you want? You work for Shinra, I know that uniform."

"I'm here for my own reasons. Don't you recognize me?" He stared at me blankly and I started to glower. He had destroyed my life and he couldn't even recognize me. "It was a couple of months ago," I began slowly. "And you and what I presume was your friend came across a young couple on their way home from dinner. They wandered off the main road so you two decided to have some fun." There was a panicked flicker of recognition in his eyes and I continued. "Your friend took care of getting the man out of the way and you were going to enjoy yourself with the woman. But you hadn't been expecting the man to fight back. He split your friend's head open like a melon, so you shot the woman and ran." I stopped and watched him grovel at my feet.

"I'm sorry man," he was whimpering. "I didn't know you were a Turk. If I'd known I wouldn't have done it. I swear...."

"But I wasn't a Turk back then," I replied calmly. "You made me into one. Now why don't I tell you a little about that woman. Her name was Kayla, she was from Kalm, she was my fiance, pregnant with my child and when you killed her you killed a piece of me. So in a way you killed three people with one bullet. You're a triple murderer and you're going to pay for it." I pulled out my nightstick and pressed the electrifiable end under his chin. "Any last words?"

"I didn't mean to! I was scared! I...."

"Shut up," I cut him off coldly. Then without any hesitation I turned on the electric current in the stick, closing my ears to his screams and slowly turning up the voltage until I *knew* that he was dead.

As I looked down at the body on the ground I wasn't sure what I felt. I had thought that I would feel lighter, have this great sense of a wrong righted. But I didn't. I felt just as empty as I had before.

"Oh my God!"

I turned at the scream behind me and saw a young woman standing in the doorway, tears filling her big blue eyes.

"What did he do?" she asked hoarsely. "What did he do that the Shinra decided he deserved to die?"

"It wasn't Shinra," I replied, not looking at her. "It was personal."

"Well what did he do to you then!?" she shouted at me. "Tell me you cold bastard! What was it!?"

I said nothing and turned away, shoving past her out the door. I had thought that doing this would fix everything. Set me at ease. But I felt just as dead as I had before.... I quickly closed my ears again, this time to that woman's shouts, and headed back to the headquarters.

I slunk into my room when I got back and pushed my sunglasses up on my forehead, staring at myself in the mirror. Just what had I become? A Turk. A cold blooded killer.... Angrily I pulled off my tie and I was attempting to fight my way out of the rest of my uniform, never wanting to see it again, when there was a knock at my door.

"Buzz off!" I shouted at them.

Whoever was out there didn't listen to me and I found myself glaring at Rude as the door swung open. My glare deepened as I noticed the almost painstaking perfection of his uniform, like he was proud of what he did. Well I sure as hell wasn't proud. And I was definitely not going to look it. Not anymore.

"What do you want?" I growled at him.

"I was wondering if you want to go down to the bar with me?" he asked calmly. "You look like you could use a drink."

"Do I have to talk to you?" I sneered.

"No. In fact I'd prefer it if you didn't."

I considered my options. I could stay in my room, sober, and wallow in self-pity. Or I could go with Rude and get drunk, effectively drowning that self-pity. The answer was obvious. "All right," I sighed. "Let's go."

I don't know how drunk I got down there. It had been the first time I drank since joining the Turks. But I know that for some reason I just started talking.

"So why'd you join the Turks?" I found myself asking Rude.

"I thought you didn't feel like talking," he replied bluntly.

"It's amazing what liquor can do for a guy," I snapped back. "So you gonna tell me?"

"Everyone has their own reasons," he said with a shrug. "I just wanted to prove that I'm the best at what I do." That simple, matter of fact answer sent chills up my spine. "So what was your reason?" he asked.

"Revenge," I sighed. "I was given the means for it and I accepted the price."

"Not a very good reason... for anything really."

I thought about what had happened earlier and shook my head. "No I suppose not. But it was all I had to live for."

"Did you get it?"

"Yea."

"Was it what you expected?"

"No."

"It never is. But you gotta live with what you've done... go on."

I glanced over at him and watched as he casually took a sip of the drink sitting in front of him. He was right, I had to forget what I'd done and move on. Having no remorse was the only way you could survive. What I had been before was finally dead, and now buried. I was Reno of the Turks. I didn't have to be happy with the new me, but I could at least accept it. Accept it and keep going. Because now being a Turk was all I had to live for.

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