

Rufus's Twin
By Jen

Chapter 6: Our Savior

Barret, Elmyra, Rude, and Elena, herded Marlene, Cera, and Mandie up the stairs of Wonder Square and into the game room. They each had a set amount of GP, and were given an hour to play before lunch.

"I want to ride the Motorcycle. Can I Dad?" Marlene asked.

"Go ahead. Just don't spend yer GP too fast."

"Hey Uncle Rude, can we go to the Chocobo Races after lunch?"

Rude looked down at his tiny charge, Cid's daughter Mandie, and being the softie that he was, agreed.

"And get cotton candy?" Cera asked.

"Cotton candy? I don't know." Elena said doubtfully.

"Can we Uncle Barret? Pleeaaassssseee?!"

Barret scratched his head and turned to Elmyra.

"After lunch. But, only if you eat it all."

Elena and Rude thought it was pretty cute that the girls had started calling them Aunt and Uncle. Rude knew that it was one hell of a privilege too, that Cid trusted him with his daughter. It was strange to look back now, to over eight years ago, and think that they once had been enemies. With the Shinra destroyed, they now had no reason to quarrel. Rude hadn't been sad to see Shinra go, they were nothing more than a job to him. His loyalty went to Reeve now. And to the others that he called his friends. And, most importantly, to his wife.

Elena turned to smile at Rude as he slipped an arm around her waist. Who would have thought that she would be married to Rude now? Even having been a Turk with him, Elena had quickly realized that she didn't know Rude like she thought she did. He kept everything hidden very well. Perhaps, the only one who had ever known his true self, had been Reno. But, there were so many qualities that she admired about him. Among them, his loyalty, his calm nature--which she needed to balance her out, considering she was a little rash at times--and his genuine concern for others. Rude was such, that once he made up his mind, there was little that could change it. He was swayed by nothing but pure logic, paying no attention to malicious slander and ridiculous rumors.

Others found him a little intimidating, considering his height and lack of expression, not to mention that he didn't talk a whole lot. Elena knew the last to be wrong though, he spoke to her quite a bit. To others, Rude only said something when he felt it was important. He wasn't wasteful, and that extended to his gestures and locution as well. So when he did speak, one couldn't help but be impressed.

Rude returned Elena's smile and tightened his hold on her waist. He knew others found it strange that she had married him. He was also well aware of what others thought of him. But, it mattered little. Rude didn't waste time worrying about what others thought of him. As for Elena, he found her to be the most beautiful, loving woman he had ever had the good fortune to meet. She was sometimes impetuous yes, but she was very dedicated to her work and always gave all she had to everything. She understood him as no one else had, with the exception of Reno. She also understood the former demands of their job as Turks, and that they all strived to give Reeve their loyalty and their best efforts.

But most important, she was good for him. She helped him to open up, to live life instead of watching from the sidelines. Together, there was no better team in either work or play. He recognized her soft heart, she recognized his introspection. And they both balanced each other out, making up for each weakness with strengths of their own.

Barret watched the girls having fun, and said, "I'm glad we only got one. Can't believe Cid and Shera are havin' another."

Elmyra smiled, "Yes, Marlene is quite enough. But, I'm not complaining, mind you. After A..."

She trailed off with a sigh; eight years, and it still felt like yesterday.

"Myra," Barret said softly, pulling her into his enormous arms, "it's all right to talk about'er."

"I know. Have I told you how lucky I am, and how happy I've been these last eight years?"

Barret scratched his head, embarrassed, as always, when she complimented him.

"You make me happy, I make you happy, it works," he replied gruffly.

Elmyra laughed, "Typical Barret! That's why I love you."

"Jesus, stop it!"

But he grinned, and said, "I love you too."

She thought back to the time before they were married. Barret had come to Kalm after Meteor had pretty much destroyed Midgar to collect Marlene, but he had nowhere for Marlene to call home. Elmyra had offered to let Barret and Marlene stay with her in the slums until he could find his own place. At first, he had refused. It took Marlene a half an hour of considerable begging before he gave in. After a few months, Barret took over the weapon and items shop in Kalm. Over those two months, he and Elmyra had grown close and Marlene had started calling her mom. When Barret bought a house in Kalm, Elmyra moved with him as his wife.

"Hey Uncle Rude," Mandie asked, "will you pick me up?"

If he thought the request was odd, he didn't show it; he simply hefted her a good six feet off the ground and right next to his face.

Mandie promptly reached out and swiped his glasses. She then found herself staring into a pair of eyes so green, they put emeralds to shame.

"Wow. You have pretty eyes. Why do ya hide'em?"

"To conceal my emotions."

Mandie lost herself in thought, her face scrunched up in an intense look of concentration, "Uncle Vincent does that, and he doesn't need glasses."

Rude grinned and set her down.

"That one is too smart for her own good," Elena observed as Mandie scampered off to the games.

"She gives Cid exactly what he deserves," Rude replied.

"Plenty of headaches and plenty of opportunities to expand his colorful vocabulary," Elena said, laughing.

Tifa deftly dodged the enormous blade of her opponent's sword, and sent a kick to his knee. The warrior stumbled under the strength of the blow, but did not fall. He darted forward and swung his sword in a massive arch toward her middle. She brought her foot up and easily knocked the blade away.

Starting to grow weary from the exercise that had been going on for about a half an hour now, she wiped the heavy sheen of perspiration off her brow and blew her bangs out of her eyes. Given this opportunity, he slid his sword up under her shirt strap and sliced it in half.

Tifa let out a soft cry of fury and darted forward, sending two punches to his gut and then using her swift feet to knock him to the floor.

"Phew!" She exclaimed, dropping herself onto his chest.

"Damn, you're good!"

"You let me win," she accused, leaning down to kiss him.

"Yeah, maybe," he replied, grinning.

"Hmfm!" she said, tugging on one of his spikes.

Cloud took this moment to study her. She had long, silky brown hair that fell to the backs of her knees; compassionate, wine-colored eyes; and soft, fair skin. She was beautiful, as always, but there was more to Tifa than just physical beauty. She was a wonderful wife, mother, and friend. After everything that happened those eight years ago, he still didn't feel as if he deserved her.

"Cloud?"

"Hmmm?"

"What's wrong? You look so somber."

"I was just thinking about how lucky I am to have you."

They had, had this conversation many times before, and it angered her that he put himself down.

"Cloud-" Tifa started.

He put up his hand to silence her, "I know what you're going to say love, but it won't change the way I feel."

She leaned down until her face was right above his, "Cloud Strife, we have a wonderful kid, great jobs, and a good marriage. I didn't do all that by myself."

He grinned. Tifa herself was pretty, Tifa at five o'clock in the morning was pretty, but Tifa angry was something else.

She slapped him upside the head, "This isn't funny!"

"You're beautiful when your angry."

"Don't try to change the subject. Sweet talking me isn't going to work."

Cloud simply watched her, his mako-enhanced eyes changing from a mischievous light blue, to a serious deep blue. His hand slid up her arm and began softly stroking the place where her shirt strap should have been.

Tifa caught her breath and said, "Don't do that. That's playing dirty."

But she didn't offer much in the way of protest when he cupped the back of her head and drew her lips to his. Tifa let out a soft sigh and decided that arguing with Cloud was a losing situation. He only had to look at her with his stunning blue eyes, and she forgot that she was angry with him. It had always been that way. She thought back to

eight years ago, to the time right after Sephiroth and Meteor were destroyed...

Cid landed the Highwind and followed Cloud and Tifa onto the deck and over the side. He made his way into his house, and Tifa, not wanting to intrude on his time with Shera, followed Cloud past Cid's house and into the center of the town.

"Cloud?"

He turned to her, his face a storm of raging emotions and his eyes an intense shade of blue, "What do we do now Tifa?"

She shook her brown head, unsure of what to answer.

"Stopping Sephiroth, avenging Aeris...that gave us all a purpose. Everyone has something to go back too. But, what about us? We have no home. Sector 7 is destroyed, and I won't live in that false Nibelheim."

"Cloud...I don't know. I wish I could give you the answer you need. But, I-I...just don't know."

Cloud headed for the area that once held the rocket and sprawled onto the grass. Tifa sat next to him, looking up at the sky that had been blocked out by Meteor only hours before. She looked at Cloud, who was also staring at the sky, lost in thought. What was he thinking? Was he thinking about *her*?

"Cloud, I'm sorry. About-about *her*."

He looked over at her, "We all are Tifa. Why are you offering so much comfort to me? It's Elmyra that feels the most pain."

"Well-I just-that is-thought..." she trailed off, embarrassed and unsure of herself.

Cloud studied her a moment and then said, "You thought that I loved her?"

She nodded, miserable and failing to hide it.

"I do. But not that way. Aeris was special, but she was meant for no one. I thought-I thought I cared about her enough to want her for life, but...it was nothing more than a silly fancy. I realized that it has to be stronger, steady, if you want it to last."

Tifa looked at him, amazed. Throughout all this, Cloud had seemed too superficial and so false. She knew that the Cloud she had known long ago had much more substance to him, but she wasn't sure what had happened to him those five years that they were apart. It had seemed, though, that whatever it was had been enough to destroy his faith in life. Maybe she had been wrong.

"Cloud," she started, summoning up her courage, "there's something I want to tell you."

"What?"

"I-I love you. I always have, even when we were kids. I just didn't know how to tell you. And then, when I thought you loved me-Aeris, I just..." she trailed off.

She felt his hand close over hers and he said, "I love you too. The way it's meant to be. Steady, strong, and forever. I was just too much of a stupid jerk to realize it."

Joy lit up her face and brought a vibrancy to her eyes that he hadn't seen since they were younger. He got caught up in her loveliness and pulled her into the circle of his arms, kissing her. Tifa was shocked at first, but then she wound her arms around his neck and kissed him back. When they parted, she was embarrassed to find herself in his lap.

He grinned, "Er-sorry. You just looked too beautiful and I couldn't help it."

She gripped his face with her hands and said seriously, "If you love me as much as I do you, then stay here, in Rocket Town and make a life with me. We may not know where we're going, but we have wonderful friends and we have each other."

"Tifa? Are you asking me to marry you?"

She blushed, "I guess I am."

He grinned and squeezed her tightly, "Well then, I accept."

"Tifa, where are you?" Cloud asked, pulling her back to the present.

She smiled down at her husband, "Just remembering the day *I* asked you to marry me."

"You beat me to it, that's all."

"Ha!"

"Don't be so full of yourself."

"Full of myself?!" she yelled, rolling off of him and attacking his ticklish sides with her hands.

"Hey!"

"You deserve it," she replied, throwing herself on him and attacking his armpits with a vengeance.

They began rolling around the living room in a tangle of arms and legs, laughing and bumping into anything in the way.

Suddenly, Cloud sat up and raised his hand for silence, "Did you hear that?"

"What?"

"It sounded like a crash, and it came from the Cid's shop."

"Oh God," Tifa replied, her face pale.

Cloud helped her to her feet, and they ran out the front door.

Shera ran out of the house at full speed, fear clutching at her throat like a noose. When she entered the shop and saw the fighter on the ground, she fell to her knees and pressed her hand to her mouth.

"Cid. Oh God, Cid!"

Tifa and Cloud came in right behind her, and Tifa, seeing Shera's distress, dropped to her knees next to her friend and wrapped her arms around her. Shera clung to Tifa like a life-line, shaking and sobbing.

Cloud walked up to the fighter, his face pale, and cursed softly, "Damn!"

Reno screeched the car to a halt and leapt out, not bothering to kill the engine. Reeve gathered the girl into his arms and they ran into the shop.

"\$@#%! Is Cid under that?" Reno asked.

Tifa glared at him, glancing down at Shera's head and back up for emphasis. Reno grimaced apologetically and walked up to where Cloud stood.

"How can we get it off so you can help him?" Reeve asked the girl.

"I don't know," she replied.

Tifa froze. She knew that voice; but it wasn't possible to hear it now, right next to her. Cloud looked over to Reeve and was stunned to see who he held in his arms.

"Aeris?" Cloud questioned, shocked.

"Yes. It's me."

"How?"

"There's no time to talk now. We have to save Cid."

Tifa felt all her old fears and doubts rush back and overwhelm her, increasing her agitation and fear. Now wasn't the time to be worrying about Cloud's feelings toward Aeris, so she pushed them aside and concentrated on Shera.

"There has to be a way to get this off," Reno stated, touching the cool metal with his hands.

"I think I may be of help," a voice said from the doorway.

Everyone looked up to see Vincent, his hair a wild tangle of black around his face. If it was possible, his eyes looked more menacing and wild than they had ever been. Fear was a new emotion for him, one that he hadn't let himself feel in a long time. But, right now, he knew that if they couldn't get Cid out in time, he would die. He glanced around the sea of faces and took in the form of Aeris in Reeve's arms.

"If I can remove this from him, can you help him?"

Aeris nodded.

"Stand back," he told everyone.

A bright red shell encased his already crimson form, increasing the darkness of it and making him look like a demon from hell. He fell to his knees, and the Vincent that was once there was replaced by a form as sinister as Satan himself. Chaos stretched its enormous wings and glided over to the fighter. With a strength beyond that of any mortal man, he lifted the 20 ton plane and held it in place while Reno and Cloud pulled out the crushed, bloodied form of Cid.

"Tifa, don't let Shera look!" Cloud ordered, shaken by the state of his friend.

"Set me next to him, Reeve." Aeris said, softly.

Reeve placed her next to Cid and moved back. Unmindful of the blood, Aeris stretched herself out over Cid and closed her eyes. Silence descended on the group, and was soon replaced by a low hum. The hum increased in its frequency and a bright light emanated from Aeris and enclosed her and Cid in a shield.

"You'll be all right," she told Cid.

"Aeris? I must-be-dead."

"No. Close your eyes Cid. Imagine yourself flying, soaring high above the planet."

"I-like-flyin'..."

Aeris focused all her energy on Cid's pain, absorbing it and taking it into herself. The feeling of it was excruciating, and she

had to bite her lip to keep from screaming. She sent Cid all the life that was in her, feeling his body repairing itself under her as she did. When it was over, the light faded, and Aeris went limp, drained.

Reeve rushed forward, cradling her in his arms and praying that she wasn't dead. He lifted her up and away from Cid, leaving the shop. Tifa let Shera go, and the other woman took Cid into her arms and sobbed. Vincent had long since dropped the fighter, and was on his knees, also drained from having used all of his energy to become Chaos. Reno helped him to his feet and they followed Cloud and Tifa out of the shop.

Shera rocked Cid back and forth within her arms, still fully aware that if it hadn't been for Aeris, he would be dead.

"Dammit woman," came his weak voice, "quit your blubberin'. I can't stand it."

Shera wiped at the blood staining his face and smoothed his hair back with her shaking hands. Cid reached up and gripped her hand, his blue eyes locked with her brown ones.

"Cid, if Aeris hadn't-I don't know how I'd-I can't live without you."

He reached up slowly and wiped the tears from her face, leaving red, dirty streaks.

"You got that backward babe, it's me that can't live without you."

She laid her head on his chest and wrapped her arms around him. He stroked her hair, fully aware of his mortality. He had many questions right now, among them Aeris' sudden appearance and why the damn plane fell on him in the first place.

"Damn, I need a cigarette."

Shera lifted her head and kissed him, "That'll have to do for now."

He pulled her back down, "That's even better."

Mandie leaned over the rail that kept the crowd off of the Chocobo track and cheered. She had managed to talk Uncle Rude into letting her bet on a black one named Darius. So far, Darius was winning.

"I don't think yer pop's gonna like this," Barret said.

"Oh Barret," Elena replied, "it's not going to do any harm."

Cera, who knew Mandie's luck when it came to such things, had also bet on Darius. She had her ticket clutched tightly in her hand and was jumping around in excitement. Marlene, however, wasn't interested in gambling. But, she did get a little excited as the Chocobos neared the finish line.

"I'll be damned! That black one came in first!" Barret yelled.

"Of course, Uncle Barret. I tried to tell you I've done this before. Daddy taught me how."

Rude's eyebrows rose above his glasses, "Does your Mom know your Dad let's you gamble on a regular basis?"

"Nope. It's one of our secrets."

"Hmmm, should we tell?" Elena asked, mischievously.

Rude grinned down at her, "We'll use it as a bribe the next time we need a favor from him."

"Sounds damn good to me." was Barret's reply.

The group stood in Shera's living room, talking amongst themselves. Cid was lying in his bed and Aeris was resting in Mandie's.

"I got a close look at the plane while holding it up," Vincent told them, "it looks like someone deliberately loosened the supports."

"Why the hell would anyone want to kill Cid?" Reno asked, taking a drink from the beer Shera had provided.

Cloud raised his eyebrows, "*Who* hasn't wanted to kill Cid at one time or another?"

Tifa pressed her fists to her hips and said, "Get serious you morons! Someone tried to kill Cid, and if it wasn't for Aeris, he would be dead!"

She paled and her legs grew weak, forcing her to sit on the couch. An image of Cid as he had appeared when pulled from under the plane entered her mind and she turned to look down the hallway where Aeris rested. Why was she back? How had she returned? What was Cloud thinking about this?

Vincent walked over to Tifa and put his claw on her shoulder. Never before, could he remember being as terrified as when he thought his friend was dead. He would have gladly suffered through all of Hojo's experiments again, rather than view the lifeless body of Cid Highwind being dragged from beneath a 20 ton plane.

Cloud had to control the urge to run down the hall and speak with Aeris. It had been eight years since he had last seen her, and he had so many questions that needed to be answered. Cid's brush with death had made him realize how close they all could come to dying. Why would anyone want to kill him? And, better yet, *who* had attempted it?

Reno dropped his empty beer bottle into the trash and grabbed another one out of the fridge. He was more shaken by the turn of events than he cared to admit. When this was all over, he planned to get rip-roaring drunk. He wanted to know how in the hell Aeris was alive and he wanted to know what bastard tried to kill Cid.

Shera closed the door to Cid's room and walked into the living room, "Please, everyone. Let's keep this away from the children. They don't need to face things like this when they're so young."

Murmurs of agreement went around.

"How is Cid?" Tifa asked.

Shera smiled, "He's fine now. Thanks to Aeris."

"How's Aeris?" Cloud asked.

"She's doing better. Reeve's with her now."

"I'm going to go talk to her," he told the group.

Tifa stepped forward, wanting to follow, but then decided against it. Whatever Cloud needed to know, he needed to find it out for himself.

Reeve raised a glass of cool water to Aeris' lips and then asked, "Are you better now?"

"Yes, thank you, Reeve."

Reeve's face heated under the gaze from her clear, green eyes. She was still as beautiful as he remembered seeing her through Cait Sith. She had long, honey-blonde hair; a delicate, heart-shaped face; and a kind, loving nature. And she had been willing to give up her life again to save Cid.

"Aeris, what you did-"

"It's all right, it was what I was meant to do."

Reeve frowned, "You mean you came back for Cid?"

She shook her head, smiling, "No. I was sent back by the planet for other things."

"What other things?"

"Things that threaten."

Reeve shook his head in frustration, "You're still as exasperating as you were before!"

Aeris smiled.

"Did the planet send you back?"

"I think so."

"Is the planet in danger?"

She shrugged, "I'm not sure yet. When I am needed, I will know."

Reeve sighed. How could so much rest on the delicate shoulders of such a young girl? No, not a girl. Aeris was a woman now.

Aeris took this time to study Reeve. Everything, from his perfectly combed hair to his meticulously kept suit, suggested that he was a man who valued order. She liked his compassionate, brown eyes and his concern for others. She knew she could grow to care for this man, to call him one of her closest friends.

"I've been gone a long time, Reeve. Tell me, what have the others been up to?"

Reeve looked at her for a moment, but then tilted his head to the side and began, "Cid and Shera are married. They have a daughter, Mandie who's seven, and another baby on the way. Shera works as an engineer and Cid as a mechanic. Yuffie and her father have brought Wutai great prosperity and Yuffie gives tours of Da-Chao. Red is living at Cosmo Canyon and gaining wisdom to one day become an Elder. Barret is married to-to..." he trailed off, uncertain how to tell her about her mother.

"Yes?"

"Well, he's married to...your mother."

To Reeve's surprise, Aeris laughed.

"Huh?" he asked, puzzled.

"Don't you see? That's wonderful! I'll bet Mother has had her hands full and has been loving it!"

Reeve shook his head. Aeris always managed to amaze him. Her reactions were never quite what he expected them to be.

"Well? What about the others?"

"Vincent lives alone in the Nibelheim mansion, going through all of Hojo and Gast's files to make sure everyone is safe. Rude and Elena are married, and Reno is his usual smarta-er cheerful, drunken self. The three former Turks work for me. And, Tifa and Cloud are married. They have a 7 and a half year old daughter named Cera. Cloud works for me and Tifa has her own Martial Arts school."

Reeve looked to her face after the last statement. He had always gotten the impression that Aeris had feelings for Cloud.

But, she simply said, "And what of yourself?"

"Me? I'm the lucky sap who gets to run Midgar now. I converted all the Mako reactors to electric generators and now everything runs on electricity. It's more expensive, but at least the Planet doesn't suffer."

Aeris reached out and touched his hand, "I always knew you had a soft heart, Cait. That is why you stayed with Shinra even after you knew of their evil ways. You wanted to make sure that the people were safe. And, that's why you joined in the first place; you thought you might get a chance to help people."

Reeve's face turned as crimson as Vincent's cape, "Cait. No one's called me that in a long time. And you have too high of an opinion of me Aeris. I was a spy, remember?"

"Yes. And I remember all the good you did too."

The door suddenly opened, and Cloud stepped in. He took in Aeris and Reeve sitting so close, holding hands, and stopped.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to interrupt."

"No. No. Sit down." Aeris said, patting the other side of the bed.

Reeve watched Cloud sit, trying to wave off an unreasonable surge of jealousy. What did he have to be jealous about? Aeris wasn't his.

Reeve stood up, "I'll leave you two alone. I'm sure you have much to talk about."

"Don't leave, Reeve," Aeris said, shaking her head.

Reeve reached the door, "No. It's all right. I'll be back to check on you later."

Cloud watched him leave, and then turned back to Aeris. Aeris and Reeve? He smiled a little. Reeve was a good man and he would make Aeris happy if that was what she wanted.

"Aeris, how are you now?"

"I'm fine. Is Cid doing okay?"

"That's our Aeris. Always worrying about someone else," he chastised, smiling.

"Cloud, I heard from Reeve about you and Tifa. I'm so happy. She was always the right one for you. I'd love to meet your little girl."

"Yeah. Tifa's wonderful. I love her very much."

They studied each other for awhile and then Aeris said, "You've changed, for the better."

Cloud shrugged, "Tifa's a good influence on me."

Aeris grinned.

Then, he asked seriously, "Did the Planet send you? How long are you here for?"

She frowned, "I don't know how long I am here. When the time is right, the Planet will let me know what I am to do."

"Vincent says that he thinks someone tried to murder Cid."

Aeris' gaze sharpened, "Then, whoever this is, might try to kill you all."

Cloud thought for a moment, "Yes. He-she-they could."

"I am here to protect you all then. I will not fail."

Reno watched Tifa, taking in her misery at having her husband behind a closed door with Aeris. He wanted to tell her that she had no reason to fear. He'd seen the way Cloud watched her, with a mixture of love and complete faith. He wished to hell he could believe in something that much.

Instead, he walked up to her and said, "Nice shirt Tif. Going for the off the shoulder look?"

"Buzz off, Reno."

He grinned, in typical Reno style, and saluted her with his beer bottle, "I'm just gonna go check up on our savior and your husband."

Tifa lifted her foot to kick him and then dropped it, feeling that it would be too mean to kick a drunk man.

Reno knocked once on Aeris' door and then entered.

"Hope your behaving yourself kids."

"Reno." Aeris smiled.

Cloud rose from the bed and left, and Reno strolled over and took his place.

"What's up dollface?"

"Same old Reno. Always giving people what they expect and hiding the real man underneath self-pity and denial."

"See, that's what I love about you, babe. You give it to a guy straight in the balls."

Aeris shook her head, taking in the bottle clutched in Reno's right hand.

"How many of those have you had?"

"Enough to numb."

When Aeris didn't answer, Reno said, "Your still one hell of a good lookin' gal."

Aeris smiled again, "Reno, I just don't know what to do with you."

Aeris had always amazed and confused Reno. One moment she was serene and wise, the next, carefree and young.

"Mind if I lay here with you awhile, beautiful?"

"No. Feel free."

Reno settled up next to her and took a swig from his beer. He studied the pattern on the ceiling, suddenly thinking of Yuffie. Why couldn't that Brat be like Aeris? Hell, what was he thinking. All women were complicated in their own little ways.

"People would like you for who you are, you know. You don't need to push them away with this act."

"Hey, honey, I don't remember asking for a free analysis. Plus, what you see is what you get. This is as real as real can be."

Aeris shook her head, but didn't reply.

The door opened again, and Reeve stepped through, carrying dinner on a tray. He took in Reno laying so close to Aeris and clenched his jaw, his hands tightening on the tray.

"Reno, you can leave now. Shera has dinner ready," he told the red-haired man, a little too sharply.

Reno looked up, surprised, but he obeyed, "Sure Super-prez. Wouldn't want to miss a chance to fill my gut."

Reeve set the tray down next to Aeris and studied her with anxious eyes.

"Reno meant no harm, Reeve. You know that. It's just the way he needs to be to survive."

Reeve flushed, ashamed. He had never known anyone with the ability to make him feel so small, yet never cut him down.

"I'm sorry. I was just looking out for you. Reno has quite a reputation."

She looked amused, "I can take care of myself you know. I am a grown woman."

Reeve blushed again, wiping his hands nervously on his pants.

"Go ahead and eat, Reeve. I'll be fine. Thank you for bringing me this."

He stood up and walked to the door, "If you need anything, let me know."

She nodded, turning to the tray of delicious smelling foods. It had been a long time since she had needed nourishment of this kind.

Shera closed the door behind her, balancing a tray of food on her hip.

"Sit that damn tray down woman, and get your @\$ over here."

She did as she was told, gratefully sinking into the warmth of Cid's arms.

"You were out there takin' care of everyone again, weren't you?"

"Cid, they're all concerned about you and Aeris. I couldn't send them home."

He studied her face, "You look dog-@\$ tired."

"I had help."

He frowned, "Are the others back yet?"

"Yes. I sent the kids out to play while Barret and the others were filled in. Elmyra is in with Aeris now. Everyone wanted to barge in here and I told them to eat their damn dinner first."

He grinned, "That's my girl. Did Mandie enjoy herself?"

"Yes. I just told her you got sick. I hated lying to her, but-but..."she couldn't finish, the horror of what had happened still too fresh.

"It's all right."

"No! It's not all right!" she yelled, suddenly breaking down into great, rasping sobs that soaked Cid's pajamas and ripped up his insides.

"Baby, please-shhhh...dammit Sher, don't cry. Your gonna have me startin' with the waterworks pretty soon."

She continued on, and he just held her, stroking her hair and whispering words of comfort.

"I'm-I'm sorry," she said, wiping her eyes.

"@#%&! You know I hate that apologizing \$#%@"

Shera just sighed and snuggled closer to him.

"You need a nap. You're worn out. I'm gettin' up to take care of things."

"Cid, no! You need to rest."

"Bull\$%#@! I ain't that bad off."

When he got up, he noticed his legs were a little shaky, but that was about all. Throwing on some clothes, he grabbed a cigarette and lit it.

"Damn that tastes good!"

"Cid-"

"You stay there and sleep woman. If you get up, I'm gonna beat the hell outta ya."

Shera grinned and snuggled deeper into her pillow. Cid covered her up, and then leaned down to kiss her softly on the lips.

"I love you." he told her, gruffly.

"I know," she yawned, "I love you too."

Who is trying to kill our heroes? As if we don't know ^_~ Well, leave it to Vince, he'll figure it out.

Ok, so another Aeris resurrection took place. Well, I wasn't going to do it, but she fit nicely into the plot. You'll see why as time goes on, I'm sure. Hmmm...what's with Reeve and Aeris? Could it be? Or will Cloud give Tifa a good reason to be scared? What?! You thought I was going to tell you? *snort* Keep reading and you'll find out.

And, what's with this Reno? Does he really have a thing for Yuffie, or does he just like *every* pretty gal?

Well, keep reading! I'd love to hear from ya'll ^_~

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