

Rufus's Twin

Chapter 7: A Few Small Truths

He was not disappointed that the attempt on Cid Highwind's life had failed. It had simply been a test to ascertain the strength of his enemies. He wondered if his creator realized the outcome of his actions. Yes, Hojo had been brilliant where science concerned, but when it came to other things, he was a fool. In everything that he had done, he had never once stopped to realize the outcome of his actions. By infusing Cloud Strife with mako and altering Vincent Valentine, he had given them great gifts and made them formidable opponents.

He had not counted on the return of the Ancient. Vincent would still have managed to lift the plane off of Cid, but without Aeris Gainsborough, they would not have been able to give him back his life. Now he was certain that the Planet was aware of his existence; or, perhaps it was aware of the threat to its saviors. Aeris had been unable to stop his mentor though, and he had no fears of her stopping him.

He had something Sephiroth didn't, he **was** something Sephiroth wasn't. They would not find him as easy to defeat.

Cid gazed down at the sleeping form of his wife and felt an unexplainable ache in the pit of his stomach. He'd been with her so many years now, in marriage and out. They hadn't always been good years, especially the ones right after the failed launch of the Shinra 26.

It amazed him that he was content enough with his life to let his dream of going into outerspace pass. When the Shinra had launched the rocket at meteor and he, Cloud, and Vincent had been aboard, it had, strangely enough, seemed to appease him. Staring out the window of the escape pod had been the most exhilarating experience of his life, next to marrying Shera and Mandie's birth. The universe was such a vast space full of stars, planets, and who knew how many different galaxies. He had come to realize how small the Planet really was and how much more there was to things than what people saw with their eyes.

He pulled the covers up to Shera's chin and sat next to her. She was a good woman; she had put up with his \$@#% for a good lot of years and never complained, all because she loved his grouchy @\$\$. Even now, Cid felt such shame at his treatment of her. He had blamed her for the destruction of his dreams and made sure she knew of it every moment that she was with him. He still remembered that day as if it only happened moments ago.

Cid walked through the doors that led to the heart of the rocket and sat down. He looked around at all the controls and felt his chest swell with pride. He had helped make this rocket and now he was being chosen to fly it into outerspace. Shinra was smart enough to see that space exploration was the future of the Planet, and who knew what they could accomplish with this knowledge.

Excitement flowed through his veins and caused his stomach to dip and dive in a fashion reminiscent to the maneuvers he had performed in the Tiny Bronco. After what seemed like an eternity, the rocket was ready and he okayed the launch.

Everything was going fine until an engineer came over the air and said that there was still someone aboard. Cid wasn't sure what in the hell this was about, but whoever was still aboard was going to be fried blacker than a piece of coal if they didn't get off.

It didn't take long to figure out that it was Shera. She had been checking the oxygen tanks earlier and he had told her to hurry up. Uneasy about the results, she had stayed behind to make sure they were working properly. He warned her to get the hell out of there because there was only 15 seconds until launch time. But she refused, saying that she could get the tank fixed in time for the launch.

Cid didn't have much choice after her decision, it was either kill Shera and accomplish his mission, or sacrifice his dreams and let her live. He was no murderer, so he aborted the launch.

The rocket hit the ground with such a force, that it rattled his teeth and caused an ache in his bones. He held on to the control panel and cursed as the rocket began to lean. Luckily, one of the supports caught it and it remained tilted, a reminder of his failure and the part that Shera played in it. After that, the Shinra abandoned space exploration in favor of Mako and Cid's dreams crumbled to dust and flew away with the corporate helicopters carrying Shinra back to Midgar. The rage that he felt at himself and Shera, and the shame at failing, sent him to alcohol.

In a way, although he hadn't appreciated it or understood it at the time, Shera had saved him. She came to live with him, offering her life to serving him for her mistake. Having her there took the focus off of alcohol and on to her. Every chance that he got, he had berated and belittled her for ruining his chance to reach outerspace, when in the farthest corner of his mind--a place he tried not to visit--he really felt the fault was his. Maybe if he hadn't rushed her in his excitement to launch, he wouldn't have needed to make the choice of sacrificing his dreams or her. But, if he thought that way, the urge to get drunk became too strong. Instead, he laid all the blame on Shera's small shoulders and she carried the burden without complaint.

It wasn't until Cloud and the others had recruited him and he stared death down in the form of Sephiroth, that he realized what a fool he had been and how much he had lost over time. He took a long, hard look at the events those few years before and realized that Shera had really saved his life. If she hadn't been re-examining the tanks, he probably would have died. And he knew in his eagerness, he had overlooked little details that held great importance. When it was over, when Sephiroth was defeated and returned to the Planet, he went home to Shera and told her how he felt.

Cid landed the Highwind in the back of his house and heaved the rope ladder over the side. Cloud and Tifa went ahead of him and then headed into town. The first thing he did when his feet touched the ground, was to light a cigarette. He went through three before he got up the nerve to go through the back door.

It closed behind him and he leaned against it for a moment, listening to the comforting sound of rattling dishes. How many nights had he spent in this house with her and taken for granted the sounds of running water and the smell of food cooking on the stove? Never once, had he thanked her and never once had she asked for anything in return.

He knocked his fist against the back of his head a few times and took a long drag of his cigarette. It shouldn't be this hard, he had known the woman for years. No, that wasn't true. He may have lived with her, but he didn't know anything about her wants and needs. He had never taken the time to ask.

He walked down the hall and stopped in the entryway to the kitchen when he saw her. She was so small and yet, so strong.

And look at me, he thought, some big tough guy pushin' around a woman half my size.

"Shera." he said softly.

"Captain?!" she yelled, whirling around and dropping dishes to the floor.

She watched, dismayed, as they broke into tiny pieces and scattered across the kitchen.

She folded her hands in front of her and said, "I'm sorry. That was clumsy of me."

"@#\$%! Don't apologize! I hate it when you do that!"

She flinched at the vehemence she heard in his voice and stepped back. This wasn't the Captain she knew; he would be telling her what a clumsy moron she was right now.

"\$%@#! I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell. I just don't want you apologizing to me no more, I don't deserve it. It's just dishes anyway, I can buy more."

Shera's brown eyes widened under her glasses and darted around nervously, "Captain?"

"Listen Shera, I got some stuff to say to you."

Shera wasn't sure how to respond to his kindness, so she walked to the stove and fumbled around with the kettle to keep her hands busy, "Do you want any tea?"

"@#%! No, I don't want any damned tea!"

"Oh-I'm sorry."

"Dammit Shera, don't apologize!"

"I'm-" she trailed off as she realized what she had been about to say.

"Sit down! How can I talk to you unless your right in front of me?!"

She silently obeyed, taking a seat by the door so that she faced him. Cid was pacing and puffing on a cigarette that hadn't been tapped in an ashtray for awhile. She took one from the table and brought it over to him, shocked when his hand gripped hers and didn't let go. Cid was a little stunned as well, at the attraction that hummed along their skin. In all the years that they had lived together, he had only touched her once, and that had been when he was drunk.

He had made his way home from the hotel bar by a miracle, and had opened his front door to find her standing in his living room with two suitcases. Flying into a drunken rage, he had lifted her off of her feet by her shoulders and shook her until tears had filled her eyes. She had not uttered a word concerning her pain, but had simply watched him with tears falling silently down her face. At that moment, he had been so disgusted with himself he fled to the bathroom to vomit. After that, he had quit getting drunk and had looked for work instead.

Shera's small cry of surprise sent him back to the present, and never taking his eyes off of her face, he set the ashtray and cigarette aside and hauled her into his arms. Shera was so shocked, she didn't respond at first. But after a few moments of realizing it wasn't a dream, she threw her arms around his neck and kissed him back.

Cid held her away from him, "@#%! I meant to tell you I cared about you and tell you I'm sorry for all the years of \$@#% I put you through. I know I can never make up for all-"

"Captain." Shera interrupted.

"Cid! My God damned name is Cid!"

Shera blushed and pushed the name past her lips, "C-Cid. You don't have to explain, I know."

"What the hell do you mean? All those years of blaming you for what I should have never let happen and all those years of your life you wasted on me..."

"They weren't wasted. I wanted to do it for you. I-I love you."

Shera looked down at her hands after that, expecting him to hate her for admitting her true feelings.

"Aw, \$@#%!"

Tears welled up in her eyes and slid down her cheeks. She had been expecting this, but it still hurt.

"Fightin' Sephiroth made me realize I could die. Well, I started thinkin' real hard about my life and the way I lived it. All those years I blamed you because it was so much easier. But the truth is, I blame me. And-and...I-\$@#%-I love you too."

She looked up suddenly, unsure she had heard him right, "Cap-I mean Cid?"

He reached out and wiped the tears from her face with the callused pad of his thumb.

"Are you cryin' 'cause of me? I never want you to again. That's why I'm gonna give you your freedom."

It killed him to offer her the chance to leave and never come back. He couldn't imagine his life without her, but if that was what she wanted, then that was what he'd give her.

Shera shook her head, confused, "Freedom? But I don't want to leave you."

Cid frowned, "Why would you wanna put up with me anymore?"

"I told you. I love you."

"Yeah. I jut can't believe you'd love someone that treated you like \$@#%."

"Please Cid, I understand. If I hadn't destroyed your-"

"Stop right there, woman. If it hadn't been for you, I would have died. Maybe I knew that all along, but when that tank blew up on me when the Shinra launched the rocket at meteor, I really understood what a sacrifice you were makin'."

She didn't argue, but shook her head and frowned.

"There's gonna be a few changes 'round here. For starters, no more doin' everything. I can get offa my lazy @\$ and help out. Don't apologize to me, I don't wanna hear it. And, you're movin' outta that old bedroom."

"But where will I sleep? We don't have another room."

Cid stepped forward and gripped her waist, "You'll be sleepin' in mine."

He had a good chuckle over the expression on Shera's face that day and turned his head to look at her sleeping form. He thought about his dreams and how the fighter had fell on him. He'd double checked those damn supports and was sure they were sturdy. And the dreams, suddenly appearing again. Did this have something to do with that bastard Sephiroth? Was he really alive after all these years?

He clenched his fist and fought off a wave of panic. If it happened, he and the others would deal with it. They had done it before and they could do it again. Only, there was a lot more at stake now. Both he and Cloud had children they didn't want caught in the middle. And Barret had both Marlene and Elmyra to protect. With Aeris alive again, Elmyra was in a new kind of danger if Sephiroth lived. He would want to end Aeris' life again before she stopped him and kill everyone else in revenge.

He lit up a cigarette and stood up after a few puffs. Before he faced the others, he needed to cross the hall and see Aeris.

"You should rest, dear."

Aeris smiled, "I will, mom. It's just so good to see everyone."

Elmyra found it hard to believe that her daughter was here. She looked wonderful; maybe somewhat older and wiser, but she as still the same Aeris they had all known. When she had learned of her daughters death, she had been devastated. It had been like losing her husband all over again. The only one who had really understood, was Barret, who had lost his wife when the Shinra had destroyed his home town of Corel. He and Marlene had been a Godsend. They had kept her too occupied and distracted to let the pain of Aeris' death overwhelm her. She loved Marlene as her own daughter and could not imagine life without the sweet girl.

"I hear from Reeve that you are married to Barret."

"Yes. I'm very happy. If it hadn't been for Barret, I don't know what I would have done to cope with the loss of you. And

now, here you are again...I can hardly believe it."

Aeris covered Elmyra's hand with hers and touched her with concerned filled eyes.

"Do you know why you've been allowed to return?"

Aeris frowned, "I've been doing some thinking and I believe I am here to keep you all safe. Someone feels that everyone's a threat, enough to attempt to kill Cid. The Planet may be in danger, but I'm not sure. Jenova is gone, and through my years in the Lifestream I have felt the planet healing itself. Maybe...a part of me has always held on to this world, and when those I cared for were threatened, it allowed me to return. If that is the case, then I don't know if I will have to return to the Lifestream when the threat passes."

She looked away, but not before Elmyra caught her troubled expression.

"Do you want to return?" Elmyra asked, softly.

"I don't know. The Lifestream was a wonderful place, full of peace; it taught me so much. But here..." she trailed off, unsure.

The door burst open and Marlene, followed by Mandie and Cera, bounced in. Marlene walked up to the bed and Mandie and Cera, who didn't know Aeris, stayed near the door.

"Hello, Flower Lady," Marlene said shyly, shuffling her feet on the carpet.

"Hello, Marlene. You've grown into a pretty young lady."

Marlene blushed and stammered a thank you, while Mandie punched Cera in the shoulder and whispered something in her ear.

"Did the Lifestream bring you back to us?" Marlene asked, her brown eyes wide and unblinking.

"Yes."

"For good?"

"I wish I knew. But, I promise that we will have fun together no matter how long I am here."

Marlene brightened, "Yeah! I want to show you the chocobo mom and dad are letting me raise at the chocobo farm."

"I'd like that. Who are you're friends."

Mandie, ever the bold one, strode forward while Cera hung back.

"Amanda Cid Highwind. But, you can call me Mandie. Marlene says you're a real special lady, so I guess I like you."

Aeris grinned at the girl. She had her Father's gumption, that was for sure. But, she looked a great deal like her Mother.

She turned from Mandie to look at the other girl. Her breath caught when she realized that the little girl favored Cloud. What really startled her, was that looking into Cera's eyes was like looking into Cloud's blue, mako-enhanced ones. Her heart ached some at the thought of what might have been had her life not been taken from her. But, she held the belief that all things worked out as they should, both good and bad, so she pushed the past behind her and let it fade away.

"You must be Cera."

The shy little girl nodded, and then suddenly blurted, "You're awful pretty."

Aeris laughed, "Thank you."

Mandie crossed her arms around her small frame and asked, "Can I call you Aunt Aeris?"

"Sure. I'd like that."

Mandie walked up, sat next to her on the bed, and leaned toward Aeris with the air of a longtime confidant.

"Uncle Reno is drinking too much again. Uncle Rude'll have to keep him outta trouble until he passes out. One time, he grabbed Aunt Tifa and kissed her. Uncle Cloud punched his lights out and then Uncle Rude got to go home early. Daddy said that if Uncle Reno ever touched Mama, he was going to ram his spear up-

"Mandie!" Marlene and Cera yelled simultaneously.

"Well, it's true!" Mandie protested.

Aeris just shook her head, not at all surprised that Cid's daughter defied convention. Unexpectedly, the door opened and the man in question entered the room.

"Daddy!" Mandie yelled, jumping off of her bed and launching herself into his arms.

"Hey munchkin. Did ya have fun?"

"Yeah. I gotta snowboard just like you showed me. And, Uncle Rude let me bet on chocobos. I won 30 GP!"

Cid stared down at the tiny face of his daughter and squeezed her tightly. If Aeris and Vincent hadn't saved his life, he'd never have seen her again.

"Ouch! Your squeezin' me too tight!"

"Sorry," he replied sheepishly, loosening his hold on her.

"Mama said you were sick. Are you better now?"

"Yeah, baby."

Cid glanced over at Aeris and then back to Mandie. Goddammit, his little girl looked just like her Mama. Both of them were so beautiful it took his breath away to think they belonged to him. And now, he had another baby on the way. His legs lost their strength and he sat down hard in the chair next to Mandie's bed.

"Daddy? Are you okay?" Mandie asked, her small face full of worry.

Cid inhaled deeply on his cigarette and expelled a thin stream of smoke from his nose, "Sure, kid. I got you, don't I?"

She laughed and jumped off of his lap.

"Can we go out and play some more?"

"Yeah. Just don't wander too far off."

"Goodbye, Aunt Aeris!" Mandie yelled, and charge out the door before Aeris had a chance to answer.

Cera nodded shyly and followed.

"Will you come and stay with us when you're better?" Marlene asked.

"I'd love to. We're sisters now, you know."

Marlene beamed, "Yeah. Yeah, we are!" she added, racing after her friends.

"That's some girl you have there, Cid."

Cid scratched his head and said, "Yeah. Drive's her Mama to distraction. Real smart, like her Mama too. And loves to fly like her old man," he added, with a proud grin.

"How is Shera? I heard you're expecting again."

"Yeah, gotta another Highwind on the way. As for Shera, I made her take a nap. That damn woman was running herself ragged."

Aeris knew, that it wasn't too long ago when Cid wouldn't have cared if Shera worked herself too hard. He had change a lot since then.

"Listen Aeris," Cid said, seriously, "I wanna thank you for my life. If you hadn't...well, I'd never have seen my girls again."

"It's all right, Cid. You're my friend. I'd do that for any of you."

"Yeah, well, it needed to be said."

Aeris smiled at him. Cid had never been good with words, unless they were curse words.

Cid rose, "I'm gonna give you some more time with your Mom. You rest up."

After he had left, Aeris remarked, "He's changed so much. Who would have thought that, that cantankerous, old pilot I first met would turn into a big softie."

Elmyra laughed, "Barret's the same way when it comes to Marlene."

"Anything is possible, I suppose."

As Cid entered the kitchen, a hush descended on the group at the overly crowded table. He was a little unnerved to have them staring at him, and a little uneasy at the conversation he knew would take place. The sounds of the children playing drifted through the open kitchen window and he cherished their innocence for a moment, thankful that this evil hadn't touched them.

He placed his fists on his hips and barked, "Well \$%#@#! You all are gonna eat me outta house and home!"

Reno raised his beer in silent salute and turned back to his plate. If he just kept drinking, he wouldn't have to think about what the attempt on Cid's life meant. Once before, this group had destroyed an evil that had threatened all of mankind. He had no wish to be right in the damn middle of it this time. And, God forbid, should Sephiroth live, what could they do to stop something with enough power to rise again?

Reeve fingered the handle of his fork and absently pushed the remaining food around his plate. If Aeris was allowed to return, then that meant that something with enough strength to threaten the Planet's balance was preparing to unleash its power. He didn't want to think about what they may have to face and who would lose his or her life this time.

Cid had enough of their blank stares and yelled, "Quit your damn gawkin'! I ain't dead yet!"

That seemed to break the spell that had fell over the group and they made room for him at the table.

"How is Shera, Cid?" Tifa asked.

"Damn tired. I sent her to bed."

Tifa turned to Barret, Rude, and Elena, "I'm so glad you had the kids. If they had been..."

She trailed off, not wanting to visualize the children facing a horror like the one they had witnessed. Cloud's hand reached up and covered hers, squeezing lightly. Grateful for his strength, she looked up at him and managed a small smile.

"Look," Cid said, "I ain't to good at this, but thanks for savin' my worthless @\$\$. "

"Vincent and Aeris deserve most of the credit," Reeve replied.

Vincent leaned back in his chair, seemingly uncomfortable when the groups attention turned to him. He had only done what he knew everyone in this room would have done for him. It was really something for a man to say that he had so many friends.

"I hate to bring this up," Cloud interjected, "but it has to be said, "Cid, Vincent thinks someone tried to murder you."

Cid nodded sharply and replied, "I know. I checked those damn supports twice. That plane shouldn't have fell on me."

"Something is very wrong. Aeris wouldn't be here if there wasn't," Elena added.

"What I wanna know, is who or what in the hell are we dealin' with?" Barret said, knocking his fist on the table top.

"Hey! Some of us are drunk here!" Reno yelled.

"When aren't you drunk?" Barret fired back.

Reno grinned, "Only when I can't help it."

"Smart@\$\$. " Barret mumbled, turning his attention back to the topic at hand.

"I don't wanna say this, kid," Cid began, his eyes on Cloud, " but we hafta consider the possibility of Sephiroth bein' alive."

Somewhere in the back of his mind, Cloud had entertained thoughts of Sephiroth living. Lord knows he had re-lived the horror of Sephiroth's reign of terror so many times and tried in vain to shy away from thoughts that he might have somehow survived.

"But, if Sephiroth somehow survived, wouldn't that mean that I'd-he'd...I might be a danger to you all," Cloud said.

"\$#@&! We put up with ya goin' bonkers before, we can do it again!" Barret interjected.

Cid shot Barret a look and said to Cloud, "What Barret here means is, we'll deal with it if it happens."

"Aren't we jumping the gun? We don't even know if Sephiroth is alive, much less if someone *is* trying to kill us," Reno said.

"I checked those damn supports. There's no way they coulda failed," Cid replied.

"What I think Reno means," Rude added, "is that we have been given no indication that Sephiroth lives."

"We haven't really had anything in the way of trouble. Cloud hasn't been experiencing any headaches or loss of memory and there hasn't been any monsters running around," Tifa said.

Vincent leaned forward, "Something is happening. The Elders at Cosmo Canyon have been uneasy for awhile. The reason that Red has not alerted anyone is because they are unsure of what they are feeling. I, for one, do not think Sephiroth lives. But, with the return of Aeris and the attempt on Cid's life, things may get worse from here."

"I don't like this one damn bit! Ya mean somethin' might happen anytime soon and we just gotta sit back and let it 'cause we don't know nothin' 'bout it?!"

"Calm down, Barret. We may not know what we are dealing with, but at least we can be prepared for it when it comes," Reeve said.

"Reeve's right," Cloud spoke. up, "There are a number of things we can do. We can ask Red to keep an eye on the Planet with his Grandfather's observatory. Vincent can keep looking through the files. I can't shake the feeling that if something bad is going to happen, then Shinra had a hand in it somehow. Rude, Reno, and Elena can ask around and see if they can find anything out from the other towns. And, we can all keep our families safe."

Reno stood and stretched, "There's no sense in sitting around here worrying. If it's gonna happen, then it's gonna happen. And, if things do get ugly, you can count on me to play hero."

Rude nodded, "Anything you need of me, I will give."

"Same here. You guys-well-are my friends. A lot has happened since our days with Shinra, and things are different," Elena added.

Barret stood, "Ya know I'm in. And anyhow, that skinny@\$\$ Reno is right. Ain't no sense worryin' ourselves ta death. I'm gonna go see about Elmyra now, anyway."

Cloud and Tifa collected Cera and headed for home. Rude, Elena, and Vincent left for the buggy and waited for Barret to collect Elmyra. He would drop Vincent off at Nibelheim before heading to the ferry that would take them to the other continent.

"Well, Cid," Reeve said, "it looks like I might have to infringe on your hospitality. Reno is too drunk to drive and he won't let me touch his car. Which simply amazes me, I am a much better driver than him."

"Hey piss off, Supre-prez. We've already been through this. No one touches my car. If it's going to get wrecked, then I'm going to be the one doing the wrecking," Reno called from the kitchen, where he was fishing around for another beer.

Cid swiveled in the direction of Reno's voice and said, "Don't drink all my damn beer! This ain't a bar ya know!"

Reno chuckled, "Yeah. I'd get better service in a bar."

"Listen here, you @\$\$hole, if you don't like it, you can always sleep out in the backyard!" Cid fired back.

"Awww, and miss sleeping on your lumpy couch?"

Cid threw his hands into the air in frustration and belted out a long string of curses.

"Why I even bother with that jack@\$\$ is beyond me! Listen Reeve, feel free to stay here. Just keep an eye on that damned Reno. Now, I don't know about you, but it's late and I've had enough excitement for one day. You know where the spare blankets are, so help yourself."

Having said that, Cid went to get Mandie. Since her room was being used by Aeris for the night, and the living room was pretty much taken up, she was going to have to sleep with him and Shera.

Barret pushed open the door to Mandie's room and stepped in. Elmyra was sitting next to Aeris on the bed, holding her hand and listening intently.

Aeris looked up, "Hello, Barret."

Barret grinned, "Hey daughter."

Aeris looked surprised for a moment and then giggled, "I guess I am! Well, then, it's good to see you Dad."

"You two!" Elmyra said, getting up to stand next to Barret.

"How're ya doin'?" he asked.

"Much better," Aeris replied.

"So, ya gonna come stay with us?"

"Of course."

"Marlene'll love to have ya. Us two old fogies aren't too excitin' for her," he added looking down at Elmyra fondly.

"Well, we should be getting home. Marlene needs to go to bed. She likes to think she should stay up later than 9:00, but..." Elmyra trailed off with a shake of her head.

They said their good-byes, and then Barret and Elmyra went to collect Marlene.

Reno walked into Reeve's office and stood in front of his desk, "Hey, Reeve."

Reno waited patiently for Reeve to turn his chair around and answer, but the other man made no move or sound.

He stepped forward and said, "Super-prez what're you doing, sleeping on the job?"

When there was still no reply, Reno grabbed onto the chair and swung it around. What he saw caused him to jump back and take out his weapon. Reeve sat slumped over, the Masamune sticking out of his chest.

"What the hell?!"

"Tsk, ts, ts. We are quite the failure, aren't we?"

"Wha-who the hell are you?!" Reno demanded.

"Don't you recognize my voice?"

Slowly, a form began to materialize on Reeve's desk. When it finally took shape, Reno was stunned to see Rufus Shinra crouching there, smirking.

"You are dead!" Reno cried, charging his weapon.

Rufus shrugged, leaning forward until he could almost reach out and touch Reno.

"My, my Reno. Let me see, how many people have you let die so far. First the President, then Tseng, Me, and now, Reeve," he added, counting each person off on his fingers.

"Shut the @\$% up!" Reno yelled, his aqua-blue eyes flashing.

"What's the matter, Reno? Can't take facing the fact that you are a failure at whatever you do? You didn't belong in the Turks and you shouldn't be working to protect Reeve. As you can see, that last assignment failed miserably."

Rufus laughed, standing up on the desk and turning to look at the prone body of the President of Reeve Electric Co. Reno charged Rufus and he easily stepped aside, jumping to the floor.

"You are nothing but a miserable drunk, Reno. You aren't good for anything and you are better off dead."

Rufus pulled the Masamune from Reeve's chest and swung it toward Reno.

Reno woke up, looking around frantically. He calmed some when he realized that he sat on Cid Highwind's floor and that Reeve was sleeping soundly on the couch.

"\$@#%, I gotta quit drinking so much," he muttered, massaging his aching head.

He stumbled to his feet and headed for the kitchen. When he got there, he was startled to see Aeris standing at the counter, a pitcher of milk in her hand. She wore an old robe five sized too big and her hair was loose, flowing down her back and around her shoulders in a silken haze.

"Hey, babe. What're you doing up at this hour?"

"I might ask the same of you," Aeris replied, taking a second glass out of the cupboard.

"Nightmare." Reno mumbled, opening the fridge.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Aeris asked.

"No."

"I've already got you something to drink. Come sit at the table with me, I'd like the company."

Reno looked up and saw the glass of milk awaiting him, "Milk? I don't drink that crap."

"It's better than alcohol," Aeris replied, helping herself to the oatmeal-raisin cookies on a plate in the middle of the table.

Reno flashed her a grin, baring his even, white teeth, "Nothing's better than alcohol."

Aeris shook her head, patting the table where his milk sat. Reno shrugged and walked over to it. He figured it wasn't too much to ask if he drank the damn milk to make her happy.

"So, we've established why I'm up, what about you?"

Aeris finished her cookie and said, "You."

"What?!"

"I sensed your distress."

Reno leaned back in his chair and pushed a lock of red hair from his forehead, "Doesn't that strike you as a @\$%ing weird?"

"No. I've learned a lot from the Lifestream since my death, and when those I care about are hurting, I feel it too."

Reno digested this and then reached across the table, snatching a cookie, "You care about me?"

"Sure. Why not?"

Reno shrugged, "Why would you give a damn about someone who made your life miserable when you were alive?"

"You're not a bad man, and neither was Tseng."

"Did you...see Tseng in the Lifestream?" Reno asked, his eyes searching her face.

"Yes."

Reno looked away and said, "I failed Tseng."

"What?" Aeris questioned.

"I should have been there, to stop Sephiroth from killing him. I owed so much to him."

Aeris shook her head with a small smile, "No, Reno. We make our own destiny. Tseng chose his and accepted the consequences."

Reno slammed his fist down on the table, emotion brimming in his eyes like fire, "No! Tseng didn't deserve to die like that! If it hadn't been for him, I'd still be living on the streets."

"Tseng helped you?" Aeris prodded, hoping to help Reno to lose his burden.

"Yeah. When I was ten, my parents died and I was forced to live on the streets. I learned real quick that the only ones that survived learned how to cheat, lie, steal, and fight. See these," he said, pointing to the scars on his cheeks, "I would have had a lot worse if it wasn't for Tseng. I was 15 at the time and part of a gang. There were two gangs dividing Midgar, the Eastside and the Westside. I belonged to the Westside. We were constantly stealing from each other and fighting. I thought I was pretty hot \$%#@ and that I was invincible. Well, I got caught one day and held down by two guys bigger than me. The leader of the Eastside took out his pocket knife and carved these in my face as reminders of which of us was superior. He was about give me a few more souvenirs when Tseng came up behind them and finished them all off in a few seconds. I was so damn speechless that I only stared at him like some idiot. I'll never forget the way he looked to me, like some God. He was tall, with long black hair to his waist and wearing the signature blue of the Turks. He held his hand out to me and helped me up. He trained me how to really fight and then got me into Soldier. After a few years of Soldier, he got me into the Turks and I met Rude. When he died, a part of me died with him. He was like a Father to me and-and I failed him."

Aeris reached out and took Reno's hand, "No, you didn't fail Tseng. As I told you, it was his choice to go to The Temple of the Ancients, not yours. If he saw you now, he'd be proud of you."

Reno snorted, "Proud? Look at me, I'm a worthless drunk."

"Don't do that to yourself!" Aeris said angrily.

Reno shook his head, turning away from the searing gaze of her emerald green eyes.

"You're helping those that you once were enemies with, that's a big step for anyone."

"That's just an excuse to soothe my conscience," Reno replied, biting into the cookie he had been holding.

Aeris sighed, "That's not true Reno, but if you choose to believe it, then who am I to stop you."

Reno ignored her, saying, "Damn these are great. That bastard Cid has it good."

Reeve shuffled into the kitchen, noting Reno and Aeris holding hands. He clenched his teeth and forced himself to remain

silent. Why the hell did Reno have to go after everything female? And why the hell did they always like it?

"Oh, hello Reeve," Aeris greeted him.

He nodded sharply, his gaze turning to Reno.

"Hey Super-prez, wanna join the party? We've got milk, cookies, and a whole lot of reminiscing. It should make for a wild time."

"Yes, why don't you sit with us?" Aeris invited.

Reeve shook his head, "I just wanted a drink of water."

He trudged over to the sink and poured himself a glass of water. Suddenly, they heard footsteps from the hall and found Shera standing there.

"Hey babe," Reno greeted.

"Hello. What are you all doing up?"

"Having a wild party," Reno replied.

"I can see that. Half the plate of cookies are gone."

"That's my fault," Aeris giggled, "they were just so good!"

Shera glowed under the praise, "Thank you. They're Cid's favorite. Well, I just had to use the bathroom and I wondered why the light was still on. Good night."

Reeve went silently back into the living room, saying nothing to Aeris and Reno.

"What's biting him?" Reno wanted to know.

"I don't know," Aeris frowned.

"Maybe you should go talk to him," Reno suggested.

Aeris looked at Reno, "Why Reno, one would almost think you cared."

"Shut up and get going."

Aeris walked into the living room and found Reeve sitting on the couch, about to remove his shirt. He noticed her and hastily lowered it, blushing furiously.

"Uh-sorry. I didn't expect you."

Aeris grinned, "It's all right, Reeve. Mind if I sit next to you?"

"Ah-sure," he stammered.

Aeris sat down next to him and asked, "Is something wrong?"

"Wrong? Why do you ask?"

"You just seemed so upset when you were in the kitchen."

"Oh..."

Reeve scratched his head, and wondered how he was going to tell her that seeing her and Reno together stirred his protective instincts. After all, she had told him earlier that she could take care of herself.

"I'm...just worried about things. I'm not sure what we're up against here. I don't want anyone to get hurt."

Aeris smiled, "We'll be okay. You all defeated Sephiroth before."

"Yeah, at the cost of your life!" Reeve replied a little too vehemently.

Aeris shrugged, "It was necessary."

"Necessary?!"

Reeve had never felt more helpless than when Cait Sith had stood at the steps to the altar and watched as Sephiroth killed an innocent girl. He had also felt so ashamed that he wasn't there to protect her, instead he was safe at headquarters, letting all the others do the real work.

"Aeris..."

"Things will work out, Reeve, you'll see."

"I wish I could share your optimism."

"I'll have enough for the both of us then," Aeris replied, squeezing his hand.

After she had returned to the kitchen, Reeve could still feel her hand in his.

I know, I know. You're probably saying, "It's about damn time!" Well, I agree with you. It's just been half laziness, half writers block.

Before I launch into my usual stuff, I'd like to thank Frank for making me realize that Barret was Aeris' Father and Marlene was Aeris' sister now that he married Elmyra. So, click on OH NO! NOT ANOTHER FINAL FANTASY VII WEB PAGE and go read his FFXII fanfics. They've been dubbed the Internet Books and they are all REALLY good. So, if you haven't read them you've been seriously deprived. Mwa ha ha! I did it anyway Frank :P

Okey dokey. Well, as you read, I went ahead and wrote about Cid's past with Shera. I thought it made for good reading :) And, the group had *the* important conversation. Now, they are alerted that something is wrong, they just don't know what. And they won't for awhile yet. Hwa ha ha!

Ahhhh, the Reno, Reeve, Aeris triangle. Who will triumph, Reeve or Reno? Or, is Reno even competition for Reeve to begin with? Depends on whether or not I feel like being mean :) Poor Yuffie.

Okay, enough rambling. I gotta get cracking on ch 8 before another month goes by.

As usual, you know I love to hear from ya'll :) So, if you haven't wrote me by now, what's the matter with you! This is ch 7 for Heavens sake! ^_^

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