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## **Hell or High Wind**

### **Prologue**

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Visit Junj's Midi Dwelling at <http://www.dtech-net.com/oddweb/junj/index.htm>.

The night sky was clear, no clouds marring its crystalline surface. There was no breeze, no quiet song of crickets hiding out in the tall grasses. Stars twinkled brightly within its black like thousands of little jewels hanging from a dress of ebony silk. The moon shown down sadly, reflecting on the swampy lands and lighting the world with an eerily beautiful glow. At any other time, it would have been quite a sight for one to behold. Right now, it was boring.

Joseph MacNare, jokingly called "Mac" by his friends, blew a breath of smoke out into the air, flicking the ash of the end of the cigarette with a deft movement of his wrist. He was bored. Guarding an unknown post at the outskirts of Midgar was hardly what he would call exciting. There were no riots and no crime out in the empty grasslands. Every now and then there was a swamp. No fugitives, no monsters, nothing more than a silly ground squirrel scurrying around or a frog jumping into the water. He was almost bored to tears.

His partner and friend, Miranda Jay, dealt out a couple of cards to him and to some rookie seated across from him. She grinned as she set the deck down. "Seven card stud, black bottom," she declared, picking the edge of her two cards and glancing at their value. Two faces, both spades. What luck.

"Don't ya ever have anything else to play?" Mac asked, leaning back in his chair. The table was set out under the stars on the small platform that served as a guard tower. It was sparse, located in the middle of some swamp with the lights of Midgar the only landmark within sight. The chairs were hard and cold and uncomfortable, the table folded down into an easily carried square, and the platform had little more than an old radio system with a metal roof covering it to protect it from the elements. Nothing else except the three chocobos cooing to themselves miserably below them within the mud and slime.

"Nah," she said. "You're just jealous 'cause I can take away your wages for a month in one game."

Mac picked up his cards, glancing at them. "Why don't you play solitaire?"

"Yeah," the rookie grumbled, staring intently at his two cards. He had already lost enough tonight. Because of it, he'd be pulling so many extra shifts that he was booked for the next year just to regain his money.

Jay shrugged and deftly flipped a card to the rookie. "A queen for you... a three for poor ole Mac... and an eight for me. Rookie's got the bet."

He glanced sharply at her. "I have a name, you know."

She squinted at his name tag. "Okay. Basley over here has the bet."

"Whatever," he mumbled, tossing a one gil mark into the center of the table. His cards weren't anything grand so far. A sufficient word for it might have been "dookie".

Mac followed suit, dropping a coin into the pot. Jay grinned mischievously. "Your one and my one," she declared, sliding two coins into the pot from her mound of loose change.

Basley groaned. "What does she have now?" he muttered, tossing another coin into the middle. Mac frowned but said nothing, forking over another gil piece.

She smiled, flipping over the next round of cards. "Jack... ooh, a two for Mac, he's getting some high cards here... and an ace for me." She grinned. "Looks like I have the high, fellas. One." She matched her words by tossing a coin into the center.

Basley did the same.

Her eyes landed on Mack who was watching the sky. "You in or out, Mac?" she asked. He didn't respond, his eyes locked on something distant in the heavens, the cigarette burning to ash in his hand. "Come back, Mac! Are you in there?"

He glanced sharply at her. "What the hell is that?" he asked, pointing up into the dark. A streak of blue burned brightly in the atmosphere.

Jay looked up, following his hand. She snorted and looked back down. "A stupid falling star. Make a wish to be rich 'cause you're gonna need all the money you can get."

"Maybe it's a piece of the Meteor coming to rain havoc on the land," Basley suggested, staring tenaciously at his hand of cards. "Should we investigate?"

Mac tossed one of his gil into the pot. "Screw it. It'll probably land somewhere near Kalm."

"Yeah," Jay agreed. "A four for Basley..."

"Don't you think we oughtta call it in?" he interrupted, watching as the blue streak disappeared into the dark of a forest.

"You think too much," Jay said, tossing a card in front of Mac and continuing the game. "Another two for Mac. That's a pair..."

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It landed.

Branches scraped against the metal in a shrill screech, tearing away pieces of its outer casing, smashing into it. It picked up rocks and dirt, digging a long trench in the earth, sending small animals scurrying to get out of its way for fear of being crushed, throwing its lone occupant around as though she was a sack of potatoes. It didn't matter. She did not feel pain.

It slid to a stop, slowed by the brush and undergrowth as well as the dirt. Smoke rose from its ruptured lines and from cracks in its outer casing, snaking into the calm air. The forest turned quiet.

The door hissed open, and a woman stepped out, nude and alone. Her eyes looked to the long trail of debris behind her blankly and without comprehension. Her face flickered with dismay as her gaze caught hold of the Midgar lights through the trees. A soft wind began to pick up, blowing the long, tousled mane of sea green hair behind her like waves of grass in a field. The cool breeze did not raise her gooseflesh; she did not rub her bare arms, chatter her teeth, or show any sign of discomfort. The pale light of the moon and stars reflected with a glow from her milky skin, cupping the curves of her small, supple body. The bright glow of Midgar lit up the sky like a constant flare, beckoning the weary traveler. With nothing more than silent footfalls, she began to walk.

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"How can you see anything?" Elena asked, ducking under a low hanging branch and holding it up for her chocobo to get under. The three Turks had been walking through the forest for hours, searching for the location of the mysterious meteor that had fallen near here. They were no closer to their destination than they had been when they started.

Rude shrugged, yawning. He tripped over a root, nearly falling into the back of Reno's chocobo. The startled bird warked and danced at the end of its tether. Reno stopped and shot Rude an angry look.

"He doesn't, Elena," Reno declared, petting the black feathers of the chocobo to soothe it before he began walking. "Which is to say that he probably led us on a wild goose chase out here."

Rude frowned. "I did not," he muttered. "You saw it, too."

Reno shrugged, leading his chocobo through the dense foliage. "If this is after some dumb rock, I'm going to assign you to toilet duty for a month."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Rude commented dryly.

"No prob."

They walked in silence for a few moments. Elena dragged her feet, tired and hungry from a long day of boredom and melancholy behind a desk at Shinra, Inc. Since Meteor, the Turks had gradually lost their prestige and their covert status. They had been reduced to nothing more than simple police and office employees. It had been President Reeve's call to officially disband the Turks, seeing that there was no longer a need for their swift, albeit illegal, workings. She thought privately and darkly that it was out of spite more than anything. The Turks represented a time at Shinra when things were different, when it was more of a dictatorship than a democracy, when power was obtained illegally and abused on a whim, when corruption ran wild and rampant in the dull drab of the Shinra politician's and higher-up's offices. The old empire that was once Shinra, Inc. was no more, replaced by a weak mockery with no drive, initiative, strength, or form. That was for whom she was now gainfully employed. Disgusted was an understatement. Silently enraged was more precise. But what say did she have in the runnings of this "democracy" under which she labored? Nothing.

"Ah, quite scowling, Elena," Reno ordered wearily, tearing her attention from her thoughts. "It could be worse."

She resisted the urge to stick her tongue out at him. "Oh?" she asked, the sarcasm thick on her tongue. "I'm tired, I'm bored out of my mind, my feet hurt, I'm hungry, and I don't know what the hell we're doing out here-" she waved an arm at the dark, shadowy forest enclosing them, "in the middle of freaking nowhere. How could this possibly get worse?"

"It could be raining," Reno replied innocently, a small, smug smile plastered on his etched face. He ran a hand through his blood red hair and continued on through the brush.

She fumed silently at his back. "I hate you, Reno," she muttered, grabbing the reigns of her chocobo and continuing after him, smoldering in silence.

"What was that, Elena? You're stunned by my intelligence, charms, and beauty?"

"Blow it out your rear," she snapped.

Rude suddenly stopped up a head, raising his hand to halt his comrades. All the mirth and arrogance was gone from Reno in an instance. In a flash that glinted from the soft rays of the moon, he drew his gun from the carefully concealed holster on his belt. Elena was taken aback for a moment but quickly regained her composure. She pulled her own weapon and stood still, falling into a relaxed, well-trained fighting stance. She knew that Rude meant business. This wasn't some drill. Turks were trained to see shadows as well as be them. Finely honed senses locked onto to anything out of the ordinary, sensing slight movement, zeroing in on their prey and analyzing the situation and circumstances at amazing speeds. She knew Rude had seen something even in this pitch-black environment.

His next words confirmed her suspicions. "There's something out there," he growled menacingly. His own shotgun was clenched lightly in his right hand; Elena had not even seen him draw it.

Silence fell over them. The forest about was alarmingly still; there were no birds chirping, crickets singing, animals scurrying, nothing. It was starkly quiet. The only sound was the soft rustle as the wind caressed the leaves of the canopy above them. Elena glanced up at the shadows of the massive limbs stretching over them, spreading across the deep blue of

the dark night sky like fingers. The stars twinkled delicately. She couldn't help but smile at them.

"There!" Reno hissed.

Her eyes tore back down to him, following his pointing finger in an instant to the area to which he was referring. Nothing. No matter how hard she tried to stare into the darkness, all she could see were shadows masking tree trunks, creating shifting specters and haunting images in her eyes. "What are you talking about?" she hissed back, tightening the grip on her gun. Her gooseflesh rippled, the tiny hairs on the back of her neck rising. Her heart began to pound and she held her breath unconsciously. Something was wrong. She could feel it. It was too quiet, too peaceful... too still. The forest seemed suspended, held by some invisible force into silent submission. The emptiness was more than slightly unnerving. The chocobos warbled in fear.

She wanted to get out of there.

"Look!" She whipped around as Rude snapped to a different spot, his eyes narrowed. The moonlight gleamed off his head, giving him a sort of halo. Elena would have laughed had she been in the mood. Frustrated, she snapped quietly but not without malice, "What the hell are you guys talkin' about?"

Then she saw it, too.

A flash of bright green danced before her eyes, weaving at amazing speeds in and out of the dense trees. A pair of glowing purple eyes stared at her briefly, meeting her own blue. All she could do was gaze back, shocked, in amazement that a creature could move so gracefully, like a deer. The flash of green disappeared as majestically as it had come, once again melding in with in which the shadows it seemed to thrive.

Elena released a short breath and shook a dazed head. She looked to Rude and Reno, the latter's mouth hanging open. "What was that?" she asked, her voice surprisingly weak.

"I dunno," Rude answered in his usual low rumble. He raised his gun a little, obviously none too comfortable with the situation.

Reno didn't answer, just staring blankly at the spot. It had been breath-taking. Elena watched him intently gaze into the shadows, as if craving another glance at the majestic creature his eyes had just been pleased by.

Suddenly, a loud roar ruptured the eerie silence with a bellow that shook the trees.

They all looked up.

"Holy shit!" Reno shouted as he dived to the right, grabbing Elena in his arms and hitting the forest floor hard. A giant claw sliced through the forest canopy at speeds immeasurable by the eye, ramming with incredible force into the spot where Reno had been moments before. The giant talons speared his chocobo with a spray of blood. The animal gave a piercing wail before ceasing its meager struggles and lying limp under the massive claw.

"Damn," Elena moaned as Reno let her up, rubbing the back of her head where it had snapped back and struck the forest floor. Immediately, Reno whipped around to face the hulking beast that had crashed through the trees. His long red mane whapped Elena in the face as he stood, grabbing her arm and yanking her with him. "H – hey!" But he didn't listen as he pushed her violently away. She nearly collided with a tree before skidding to her knees, twisting around, her gun raised. It was then she got a look at their opponent and tried to mouth a violent curse but found she had no voice.

The creature that had attacked them was huge, a titan of an animal, rising above them a good two stories. It was too dark to see much of it, its fur as black as night. Red eyes shown like two jewels staring down at them. Massive yellow teeth glinted violently in the night light, promising a painful death to whatever unfortunate soul was trapped in its mouth. It was huge, violent, and angry. That was all she needed to know. How a creature of this size snuck up on anything was beyond

her.

"Take that, you bastard!" came a loud, furious yell from the other side of the beast shrouded in darkness. There was the sound of an explosion and brilliant light from between the animal's legs. It gave an unearthly howl, shaking the very land, rearing its ugly head.

"Rude!" she shouted, pointing her own gun at it and firing repeatedly. The bullets must have hit their mark; she had shot at much smaller things with much less light before. However, if they hurt the monster anything more than a pinprick, it did not show it. She heard more gunfire close by. Reno's cursing filled her ears. "Reno!" A loud clicking answered as she pulled the trigger of her gun. She had fired her last round. She fumbled for another cartridge on her belt, her heart pounding in her ears. When she heard a low rumble, she stopped and looked up.

The bright red eyes were staring at her.

She froze in sheer terror, paralyzed with fear. The monster gave a snort; hot breath caressed her skin sickeningly. With a flash and a rustle, she saw the massive outline of its paw being raised. She cried out as she dove to the ground and rolled as hard as she could. The razor-sharp claws that could have ripped her shreds only grazed her as they screamed over. The tree she had been standing near was not as fortunate. A loud crack of wood filled her ears as the trunk split and fell to the side. She screamed as she saw the flash of green leaves racing down upon her. Her eyes squeezed shut; this was the end.

A hand grabbed her arm with a painful iron grip and yanked her bodily to the right. The smell of fresh leaves filled her nostrils as she was dragged along the ground. Her body scraped against rocks, twigs, and anything else sharp on the forest floor, bruising her all over. The tree hit the ground with an explosion of dirt, wood, and leaves.

Elena opened her eyes, shaking with her close call, and saw Reno's face above hers. Under the circumstances, she had never been so glad to see him. "What are you trying to do? Get yourself killed?"

Her only answer was to lie there for a few moments, trying hard to control her pounding heart, slow her breathing, and regain her composure.

"Incoming!" Rude shouted from beside Reno; she hadn't even noticed him before. He raised his shotgun and fired at the pad of the paw of the creature as it raised it in an attempt to crush him. Reno's own gun was out in a flash of cold steel. He fired repeatedly at it. Elena cringed with each and every shot. She raised her right arm and pointed it at the creature only to find a collection of twigs, leaves, and dirt in her hand. She must have dropped her gun in her fall.

"I lost my gun!" she shouted in shock.

"That ain't all you gonna lose if we don't get out of here right now!" exclaimed Reno as he latched his hands under her arms and hauled her unceremoniously to her feet.

Rude unloaded another shot into the animal's exposed and vulnerable paw. It seemed to be enough to cause it some discomfort for it reared and screamed an earth-shattering cry in pain. "I think a strategic retreat is in order."

"Damn straight," Reno answered. "Let's haul ass!" With that, he turned tail and ran into the dark woods behind them. Rude shot at the beast once more before he, too, sprinted away.

"Wait!" Elena whispered harshly. She also tried to run after but took one step and fell. Burning pain wracked her foot, shooting up and down her calf and spreading to her toes. "Damn it! Reno! Rude!!" She had obviously sprained her ankle; there was no way she could run after them.

The creature howled.

"Oh my God," she whimpered as she turned around to face it. It loomed over her like black death, staring her down as if it

were sizing her up as a potential snack. There was nothing she could have done even with her gun. She doubted all three of them with unlimited ammo could even scratch this monster. She was quivering in fear, scrambling along the ground, knowing she was going to die but unwilling to accept it.

The monster grinned if monsters could do such things. Its jaws came tearing down at her. Goodbye, world. I'll see you soon, Tseng. She closed her eyes and waited for her death.

When it didn't come, she cracked open her left eye slowly and fearfully. Then her right. Then she screamed.

Harsh green light consumed the entire area, expanding in a wave of fierce heat and fury. It shook the trees to their roots, booming with a thousand cracks of thunder. The blast expanded further, neon green like the Lifestream filling her eyes with blinding light. Elena shut them tightly but felt them tear nonetheless. Her thin eyelids provided little shielding. A noise rose above the deafening crack of the explosion. The creature was howling, its voice full of pain and panic. It continued to rage for a few moments, the screaming becoming fainter and fainter, the green light swirling brighter. Then it all faded as if it had never come.

Elena sat there, her eyes squeezed shut, breathing heavily. Was she still alive? What had happened?

"Hol-ee shit," Reno's voice murmured.

She recognized his voice, felt the solidity of his hand on her shoulder, and opened her eyes. Everything was white for a moment, the afterimage of that flash burned into her vision. Then, she blinked the tears from her eyes and began to focus again. And she gasped. Where the beast had been now was nothing. It was gone as though it had never existed, most likely incinerated by that violent force. The moonlight shone clearly upon that spot in the forest, now filled with fallen trees and a blanket of leaves. And in the center of it all stood a woman. Elena gasped in utter shock. She stood nude before them on one of the fallen trunks, gazing blankly at the Turks with starkly purple eyes that seemed to glow of their own accord. Long, shimmering green hair billowed out behind her with the fury of a storm on a sea. What was truly disturbing was that she was completely naked before them, vulnerable, and she showed no signs of panic, fear, discomfort, or embarrassment. It was as if she was looking at them but not seeing them. Elena shook her head.

Rude suddenly appeared behind Reno. He glanced at their surroundings and then at the woman. "Whoa."

Elena staggered to her feet. Her ankle wracked with pain, making her dizzy, but she refused to appear weak before the Turks.

"What the hell just happened? And who is that?" Reno demanded, hopping down to where Elena stood.

She dusted herself off, disgusted at every speck of dirt marring her once crisp blue suit. "I don't know what happened. Everything was green, bright green. And that thing is dead. I think she killed it." She ran a hand through her hair and winced when she felt the pine needles mixed in with the thin blond strands.

"Well, I guess that means she's an ally," Reno said as he hopped over a fallen log, walking to the girl. "God, she's beautiful." Rude stepped forward, a hand extended. "Reno, wait!"

Elena crossed her arms over her chest indignantly. "You only think she's beautiful because she's bare naked and this is the easiest time you have had getting a girl undressed."

"Not so," Reno said as he approached her. He stood about ten feet away, staring intently at her. He glanced back to the Turks and gave them a coy smirk. "Never an impure thought entered my head."

He continued to gently get closer to her. Rude sighed extravagantly and hopped down. He followed his comrade out to the woman. She was still staring blankly and strangely upon them, as if she hadn't realized their presence as yet. Elena groaned and muttered something beneath her breath before following, trying hard not to limp.

Reno stood transfixed, staring at the woman with his jaw on the ground, as Rude and then finally Elena walked up beside him. He took in every graceful curve of her body, memorizing them quickly and with relish. He watched her long hair whip in the breeze, shimmering in the moonlight. Her eyes were like purple stars, blinking and twinkling though unfocused. She was gorgeous. "Miss?" he finally ventured tentatively. God, his voice was so thick, he croaked more than spoke. He cleared his throat and tried again. "Miss!"

She abruptly looked right at him. Her face broke in terror. Gasping, she backpedaled and nearly fell off the tree trunk upon which she stood. Reno immediately backed away, raising his hands innocently. She was clearly terrified by her shaking body and her recoiling from him. "It's okay," he said softly, soothingly. Elena shook her head; she had no idea Reno could sound so comforting and compassionate. "We won't hurt you."

The purple eyes that were squeezed shut in panic and terror slowly opened again. She met his gaze hesitantly. Her eyes were so entrancing... he felt he could watch them for hours and never grow tired of the view. The purple hues meshed together like a maelstrom of lush color, a mirror to the heavens and to her soul.

He smiled. "It's alright." He stretched out his hand slowly to her. She looked at it, then at him, and then back at it again. "Come on," he coaxed, beckoning gently. "I would never hurt you." Then, finally, after the longest, tensest moment in his life, she smiled back smally, reached out slowly and with trembling fingers, took his hand.

He stepped forward and gently took her other hand. "Let's get you down from here, huh?" he declared, an unthreatening note in his voice. Slowly, she made her way with bare feet down off the massive trunk. Reno helped her begin to step down. Suddenly, her foot slipped. She fell into his embrace, meeting her body with his. She gave a little gasp and tensed in his arms for a moment, but then fearfully, like a fawn, looked up at his face. He only smiled, one not borne from lust or pleasure, but a genuine sign of compassion and trust. "You're okay."

Elena stepped forward a bit. "What's your name?" she asked.

The woman looked around frantically for a moment, and then she gazed fearfully at Elena. Elena couldn't help but glare. And suddenly she knew why. She was jealous. Forcing her spite down, she asked again, "What do you call yourself?"

"I don't think she understands us," Rude rumbled, holstering his shiny shotgun.

Reno looked at the head buried against his chest, feeling the thick, silky locks of hair falling over his hands. "Do you have a name?" he asked her softly. She was obviously at peace near him. Big purple eyes looked up at him quizzically. Reno gently pried her from him. "I'm Reno." She still continued to look at him blankly, a question poised on her full lips. "Re-no." He pointed to himself, enunciating every syllable very carefully.

She nodded. "Re-no," she said slowly.

He smiled. "That's right. Reno. What about you?" He lifted a hand to her. "You?"

The woman didn't answer for a moment, her eyes once again distant. Then she said, obviously struggling to get the word right, "Ce-tra."

Elena made a face. "Cetra? What the hell kinda name is that?"

Reno's face broke in sudden confusion and anxiety. " \*&%\$," he murmured softly. "Cetra isn't a name. It means 'Ancient'." He turned to look at his companions, his face fractured in shock, astonishment and joy. "Cetra."

The woman nodded. "Ce-tra."

Rude shook his head. "Shit."

"You have got to be kidding me," Elena said, astounded and clearly unapproving. "She's an Ancient? No. That can't be. That Aeris girl was the last one and she's dead. She can't be an Ancient."

Reno began to remove his suit jacket. "Well, one thing's for sure," he said as he slipped it off his arms. Gingerly and moving very slowly, he draped it over the girl's shoulders. "She can't stay here." He slowly took one of her hands and tried to put it through the sleeve. She pulled away. "Here, put your – put..." He trailed off when it was clear she didn't understand a word he was saying. "Damn it, will somebody demonstrate?"

Elena sighed indignantly as she shrugged one arm out of her jacket. Looking at the woman and trying to seem pleasant, she slowly put her arm back in the sleeve. Reno smiled at her. "See?" The woman, somewhat uncoordinated, slipped her arms through the sleeves to Reno's blue jacket. "That's good," Reno remarked. The jacket was way too big for her, hanging down to her knees. It would do for now though. Reno got onto his knees and began to button it up.

Elena huffed. "What kinda person doesn't know how to put on a jacket?"

"Maybe they don't wear clothes where she's from," Rude offered. Elena looked at him strangely. It was rare for Rude to actually participate in a conversation without being called upon first. Reno looked up at him, baffled. "Well, isn't it obvious? She probably came in that thing we saw."

Elena said incredulously, "You're saying she came down in a spaceship? Oh, God, this is rich." Reno grabbed her hand. Gently, he began to walk, coaxing her along. He passed Rude and Elena, pushing through the darkness, looking carefully at the ground for anything she might trip upon. Elena said angrily, "Where are you going?"

Reno didn't even look back. "We can't leave her here. We have to get her some place safe."

Elena limped up to him. "Do you realize what you're doing?" She pointed accusingly at the woman. "We don't know who she is. For all we know, that thing might have been after her. There might be more of them."

"Oh, grow up, Elen-"

The girl's eyes suddenly widened. She backpedaled and began to pull away. From her mouth streamed a language none had ever heard before. The words were fast and ran together, sharp to the ears. Reno held onto her hand as she tried to run. He didn't know why; by no means was she his. He just felt obligated to hang onto her. "Where are you going?!" She just continued to jabber, her face frantic, pulling away from him with all her strength. Reno shook his head in desperation. "Please, I can't understand you!" The look on her face said enough. She was terrified. And by keeping her here, he was only worsening her fear. He frowned and released her.

She smiled once at him. "Reno," she murmured. And then she was gone, melding into the shadows, disappearing as oddly as she had appeared.

Reno stared after her for a moment, longing to feel her hand within his once more, longing to see those purple eyes and feel her body so intimately close to his as it had been. But she was gone. "Damn," he muttered. He bowed his head and rubbed his eyes, a lock of fiery hair falling over his brow. "Anybody got a phone?"

Rude reached to his inside coat pocket and produced his cell phone. He handed it obligingly to Reno's outstretched palm. Elena looked on, dumbfounded, as Reno dialed a number and held the phone up to his ear. "Who are you calling?"

"Reeve," he responded. "He should know there's an Ancient running around loose."

Elena huffed again.

Reno's conversation with the president of Shinra was brief and to the point. Basically, he told Reeve where they were and

that he had important information. He wouldn't breathe a word about the girl until Reeve sent some men out there to pick him up. All he had mentioned was "another Ancient". The president had been none too happy about it, but that was Reno, always in it for himself.

Reno hung up and gave the phone back to Rude. "He's on his way."

"Good," Elena remarked as she walked over to the massive tree trunk the girl had stood upon. She leaned against it. "I'm even more tired, my ankle's killing me, I'm starved, and now, I'm all freaking dirty," she whined with complete disdain, looking at her blemished clothing.

Reno sat down, running a hand through his hair. Rude stood beside him, arms crossed about his chest. "Well," Reno said, pulling his gun from his holster and reloading it, "it could be worse."

Just then, the sky burst open with a crack of thunder. Elena looked up at the darkened ceiling as lightning raced across it. Apparently, it had grown malignantly overcast in the last few minutes. The hot, teeming rain hit them like a heavy sheet, drenching everything in a violent downpour. Water ran down her face, through her eyelashes and down her cheeks, running off her chin in a great waterfall. She was soaked to bone in only a few seconds. Elena clenched her fists as she looked back to Reno. She could see his innocent and arrogant smirk painted across his lips, despite the fact he was also sodden. "Damn you, Reno," she muttered, peering through the rain and her own hair which was plastered to her forehead now. "Damn you."