

Hell or High Wind

Chapter 6

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The room was so quiet that Tifa could hear every single droplet of rain strike the roof. Occasionally there would be a resounding crack of thunder that rattled through the tower or a flash of lightning, illuminating ghostly shadows at the window. She lay there in bed, snuggled with the comforter up over her slim body. Lightning flashed again in fury, followed by a low rumble that she felt in the pit of her stomach.

Despite the weariness that had settled into the hollow of her bones and the pressing tiredness in her dry eyes, she could not sleep. Her mind was alive with the events of the past two years, wandering from things best left forgotten, things important to remember, and things she could only regret, to the passing of the day still fresh in her mind. A troubled soul such as hers was not content to sleep with unanswered questions, unaddressed thoughts, and unresolved concerns racing about inside her head. Concern for the Planet fluttered through her, accompanied by a sense of total frustration. Just when her life was starting to settle and become whole and secure, this had to happen again. Hadn't they paid their dues by saving this world once before? Hadn't they done their parts already? Yes, she supposed they had. She couldn't help but consider the whole situation just the tiniest bit unfair. To do that made her feel utterly guilty and ashamed. Part of her knew that it was their duty, her duty, as a citizen of this Planet to fight and protect it, even though they had nearly sacrificed everything to do so in the year before. That didn't make quenching the other part of her burning with irritation, frustration, and anger feel any better though.

But that all seemed very insignificant compared to what was really troubling her.

And that, she thought with chagrin and a tired sigh, was what it usually was: Cloud.

He was lying beside her, in her arms, sound asleep. His head was upon her shoulder, beneath her jaw, cuddled against her. She could feel every breath he took, his chest rhythmically rising and falling against her. One of his strong arms stretched over her stomach under the blanket, the other on the pillow above his head. His closeness consoled her weary muscles, comforted her tired senses, and warmed her far more than the blanket ever could. Her mouth twitched in the smallest of smiles as he gave a gentle little sigh against her, deep in some fantasy, some obscure dream known only to him. His face that was so often twisted with anger and determination seemed so young and innocent.

Tifa looked up as thunder cracked, wincing as the boom echoed through the room, shaking it to its supports. Absently, she twirled a lock of Cloud's hair about between her thumb and forefinger. She was so very tired. The world was so heavy upon her eyes, weighing the lids down with the burden of weariness, yet she could not will herself to sleep. Too much to think about. Too much to worry about. She had to be truthful with herself, though. The fate of the world, however laden with danger, or the difficult times they faced ahead was just a distraction. Something was horribly wrong. She could feel it deep within herself, buried somewhere. Like an obscure puzzle, something was missing. And the more she thought about it, the more it worried her.

To make that feeling of foreboding all that much worse, she felt inexplicably cut off from Cloud. During their fight against Sephiroth, she had understood that he had to face a lot of what had been done to him alone, that she couldn't help him fight his mind or memories. After, though, after their struggle in the Lifestream and that night beside the Highwind and the battle at the Northern Crater... after all that, she felt they had drawn closer. Close enough for her to understand him. Now she felt as though something again was happening to him, was troubling and hurting him, and she was too distant to help. She couldn't assist him as she once had. His hurt was once again sealed from her. After they had left the infirmary, Cloud had not spoken a word as to what had troubled him so. They ate a silent, uncomfortable dinner together. Tifa would stare into Cloud's eyes, but she wouldn't be able to find him there. He was lost, distant in whatever worries or thoughts controlled his mind. And after that they had gone to bed without so much as one "goodnight". It hurt Tifa that he was so distant to her, as though she didn't even exist. He had fallen asleep immediately. Now, almost an hour later, she still laid awake, burdened by his cold and aloof actions.

Tifa closed her eyes against the ache burning within them. They felt so dry and tired as she rubbed them. Tiredly, she leaned her head back against the pillow. She wracked her mind for some of the melodies with which her mother had sang her to sleep. It was so long ago that her gentle hands had caressed her daughter's hair, safely and securely tucking her into the warmth of her blankets, her soft, melodic voice chasing away the nightmares. Those soft, sweet songs Tifa had

promised herself she would never forget were now elusive, buried in a memory so cluttered with pain. Finally, she took a deep breath, calming herself and clearing her mind. One of her mother's songs came to her then from the deep recesses of her mind. She began to drift away, silently humming it to herself.

Crack.

Her eyes slowly opened. They focused, with a blurry lethargy, on the door on the opposite of the room. Tifa slowly climbed from sleep, trying to awaken senses dulled from unconsciousness. When a loud thud hit her ears, she opened her eyes wide, her blood running cold. Was there.... Thunder cracked, causing her heart to leap. She remained absolutely still, trying hard not to make any noise, barely breathing, straining her ears. Another thud was enough to break her paralyzed trance. "Cloud," she whispered. He still lay soundly asleep against her, snoring softly. When that failed to rouse him, she sat up quickly, shaking his shoulders. "Cloud! Wake up!" Her soft order was hissed in panic.

He groaned once, snorted, and tried to resettle himself back into the comfort of her arms. "What?" he moaned.

Tifa demanded again, "Wake up! There's something outside!"

When another thud resounded through the room, Cloud finally opened his eyes. In the silence that followed the noise, he swiftly untangled himself from Tifa and slid out of bed. All traces of sleep were gone from him; he moved with deadly swiftness, his eyes narrowed with the sense of danger. "Stay back," he whispered to her quickly.

"Be careful," she said softly. She, suddenly fearful of what monster was outside their door, nodded, and drew the covers up about her. She stared into the darkness as she heard a soft swoosh, metal ringing on metal. Lightning stabbed through the blackness surrounding her, bringing to life the glowing edge of the Ultima Weapon with a flash, the blade coming to life with a silent and frightening promise of danger. Cloud hefted the giant sword with such ease and grace, as though it weighed nothing.

With light footfalls, he approached the door, stopping only once as another thud rocked the metal hinges. Once he was there, he stood still, holding the sword ready. Tifa watched with terrified eyes as he gripped the knob of the door tightly with his left hand, getting right side of it so once it was opened, it could act as a barrier between whatever demon might lay outside and himself. Taking a deep breath and glancing back at Tifa once, he wrenched the door open.

"Cid?"

Cloud, taken aback with surprise, caught the body of his friend as he fell forward, dropping the Ultima Weapon. He had been leaning on the frame of the door, and those thuds had obviously been his knocking upon it. Tifa immediately scrambled from the bed, throwing the blankets and sheets back as she got to her feet, all fear gone from her face to be replaced by surprise.

"Cid, what happened?" Cloud asked as he lowered Cid to the floor. "Tifa, get the lights!" Shocked, the young woman reached to the switch beside the door and pressed it. Bright illumination flooded their room, rivaling the intensity of the flashing lightning outside. Once there was once again light enough to see, Cloud gasped. "Shit, Cid, what the hell happened to you?!"

The body in his arms was covered in wet rain and blood. Cid's face was bruised and bloodied, his eyes squeezed shut, his face pale. A gash in his side oozed sticky blood, the red liquid running down his jacket and staining his white undershirt. "Jesus," Cloud breathed.

Tifa rose from where she had been kneeling beside the two. Her face was ashen. "I'm calling the doctor!" she declared, rising quickly and frantically running back to the stand beside the bed where the phone was.

Cid gasped in pain as Cloud gently placed him on the floor. "Easy, buddy," Cloud said, yanking his blue pajama top off quickly. "This is gonna hurt a bit." Wincing at Cid's groan, Cloud pressed the cloth directly over the gaping wound in Cid's side, hoping to slow if not stop the bleeding. Cloud shook his head as he looked his friend over. The laceration was the least of his problems. Bruises and cuts marred his flesh. From his rasping breath, it was obvious Cid was suffering from bruised if not broken ribs. Somebody had beaten him up pretty badly. "Who did this to you?" Cloud asked his delirious friend, anger

burning him.

Cid didn't respond, only groaned, as Cloud readjusted the blood-soaked cloth on the wound to an area that was not saturated. Tifa returned, carrying the white blanket from their bed. "They're on their way," she said, breathing heavily, her face open with worry. "Just hold on, Cid." She grasped his hand tightly as she drew the blanket up over his shivering body.

"Damn it," Cloud groaned in fury as Cid passed out. What had happened? His rage boiled his blood at who had done this to his friend. Come to think of it, there was no question as to who it was that had attacked Cid. Although he had never known him before yesterday, Cloud already fostered enough hate for the man to start a war. His eyes narrowed. "Damn you, Malachai."

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"Damn it, Cid, just hold still!" Shera barked.

All of the team looked at her, surprised at her sudden outburst of anger and show of temper. Shera glared at her husband with love and irritation in her brown eyes. She was far from temperamental, often quiet, meek, and taciturn, speaking only when addressed. It was amazing to all of them that she had lived around Cid's horrid mouth, temper, and stubbornness for so many years and still managed to retain some patience and compassion. However, she, most of all, had a right to be angry right then.

Cid grumped after looking to his wife and proceeded to keep his face still as she instructed. Shera's gentle, slender fingers grabbed his chin. A white washcloth damp with water wiped gently at his split lower lip, clearing the blood from his face. Cid drew a hissing breath as the warm liquid ran into the sore cut.

All of the team quieted, abandoning their yells, shouts, and arguments of before. It had been a hectic flight back down to the infirmary. The medics had quickly rushed Cid into the doctor's office. Cloud's two passes with the Restore Materia prior to the medics arrival had done much to heal the ailing pilot, and by the time the Berkins, quite irritated at being roused from his sleep, examined him, he was back to his normal, cursing, gruff, and at that moment, fidgeting self.

Thankfully, he was all right. The cure spell had healed the gash in his side, leaving healthy skin as though the wound had never existed. It also did wonders to the broken ribs, mending them in moments when it would have taken nature weeks to repair the damage. All and all, he walked away from the attack with nothing more than a few bruises and cuts, to which Shera was attending now. Despite the fact Cid was going to be fine, the assault did little to elevate the team's already decimated spirits. And the news the pilot brought with him from their enemy only served to further ruin the night.

"So Malachai knows, then," Vincent said from where he stood in the right corner of the doctor's office, leaning back against the wall. Where as the rest of group looked bed wrangled, torn from their sleep because of this, he looked as stoically unfazed as ever. His hair was not mussed, his eyes not misty from sleep, his speech as even and calm as ever, his clothes not rumpled. It left the others to wonder if the man slept at all.

Cid nodded, wincing as Shera wiped the blood from his brow. God, what a headache. "He knows all right," he grumbled darkly. "Sure as hell don't know how, but he found out."

AVALANCHE looked about the room at each other, wondering if the same conclusions had been reached by all. Barret, with Marlene asleep in his lap, looked to Reeve sternly. "Just how many people did ya tell about this, Reeve?"

The President of Shinra's face was clearly broken with indignant anger and hurt an immediately being labeled the traitor. "Now wait just a damn minute here--"

Cloud raised a hand to stop them. "Don't," he said tiredly, eyeing the both of them warily. He turned to Reeve once he was sure Barret would keep his accusations to himself. "How many factions did Shinra split into after Rufus died, Reeve?" Reeve opened his mouth to comment, quite insulted by the remark, that Shinra hadn't split into anything yet, but Cloud stopped him. "How many could it split into?"

Reeve's anger melted more into weariness and frustration as he considered how many little companies could form if

Shinra, Inc. were to crumble apart. He closed his eyes and rubbed his forehead tiredly as he formed an answer. "Five or six," he said with a heavy sigh. He looked to Cloud again. "Major groups. No counting how many smaller factions could splinter away from those."

Nanaki scratched his ear with his hind leg, wincing with the itch. "Could any of them have found out?" He licked his lips. "Tifa... could you scratch... for me? I can't reach it." She smiled warmly as set her fingers to work on the spot Red had designated. He gave a tired, happy sigh. "Oh, that's much better."

"Anytime, Red," she said, patting his head affectionately.

Reeve sighed again as his small repose ended, all turning away from that small distraction for face him again. "I..." he faltered, feeling guilty that this could very well be his fault. He had spent a good couple of months after Meteor simply debugging his office, finding hidden microphones and cameras all over the towers and having them removed. Then the mole hunt began. He, along with his most trusted advisers, set to finding spies in the company and having them removed as well. It was a long and tedious process of elimination and background checks, his staff slowing plowing through the hordes of employees, investigating everyone from the janitors to the top executives. No telling how many spies and bribed men paid to find out secrets the men left over from the old corporation still had running around the building. President Shinra's intelligence network, both legal and illegal, had been quite extensive. The dismantling of it had cost hundreds of hours and millions of gil. Reeve thought it had been a thorough job. Now, he was more than doubtful. He sighed again. "I thought I hunted down the spies and had them removed. But this company is huge. It is probably inconceivable that we eliminated them all."

Cid shook his head darkly. "Great," he muttered.

"So it's possible each of these factions might already know about it," Yuffie surmised, flicking a piece of lint from her pajamas.

Reeve could do nothing but shrug. "I don't know," he answered weakly, his guilt filling him.

"Does Malachai lead one of these factions?" Cloud asked, folding his arms across his chest.

Reeve's face broke in confusion. He rubbed his goatee thoughtfully. "Who's Malachai?"

"You don't know?" Barret said, incredulous that somehow, during all of this, Reeve could have possibly not heard the name or the story. Then again, Reeve had left the party before that fateful attack and nobody had had a chance to explain the incident to him.

Reeve shook his head. "The name sounds familiar," he declared, his black eyes narrowed in thought.

Cid's eyes narrowed dangerously. He turned to look at Reeve, hate pulling his face taut, the blue irises alive with fury. "He's the *&^%\$#^ bastard that ruined our wedding reception and attacked me."

"Shit, man, where have you been?" Yuffie asked, shaking her head. "Malachai's the one that's causin' all this. He nearly killed Cloud." Tifa stiffened, but nobody noticed. "He's been pissin' Cid off since they were in high school."

Reeve's clouded eyes suddenly gained a hard glint. He smoothed his hands down the chest of his blue, satin nightclothes. "That wouldn't be Hariel Malachai, would it? Son of Lucifer Malachai?"

"One and the same," Cid grunted in confirmation. "Why? Do you know him?"

Reeve shook his head. "Not personally, no. But I did know his father was one of President Shinra's most avid supporters. He would always vote for any reform that the President wanted, no matter what it was, at council meetings. Malachai always got the prizes from the President, reaping the Air Development Industry, sucking funds from everything. When he died, a little before the Nibelheim incident, his position went to Heidegger. However, before he went, he made sure his son was well taken care of. Hariel became Heidegger's right hand man. All of his father's fortunes went to him. I hear he was supposedly responsible for canceling the space program."

Cid turned away, unspeakable anger and resentment on his face. Reeve went on his with his tail. "When Heidegger died, he got the position. That was right after Rufus was killed. There was a lot of confusion. A lot of the snakes that had been lying in wait for positions in the upper council to open just took over. There was too much going on with Meteor to stop it." Reeve blew a sharp breath and shook a tight fist. "If I had pulled the strings tighter then, we wouldn't be in this position now. It was too late when I finally realized my precarious position. I don't have to power to replace them now."

Reeve turned away, dead weary of it all. Silence filled the room then as they all considered what was said. Shera finished bandaging Cid's face, covering the cuts with dressings. The swelling had gone down considerably on his cheek. He looked like boy in a school yard fight. The emptiness continued for what seemed like endless minutes. Then Cid, shaking his head ruefully, declared, "He's challenging me."

Yuffie cocked an eyebrow. "Malachai?"

He turned to look at her and nodded. "He knows he has the world's only airship. With the Highwind, he's sure to find the Ancient girl first," he said. "He knows he's gonna win. And he's flaunting it."

"He's not going to get away so easily," Cloud said, looking around the group. He turned to Reeve. "Any word from the Turks?"

The President shook his head. "They never checked in at Kalm."

Barret shook his head, muttering a soft stream of curses. "Maybe they's the ones who ratted out on us."

Nobody answered that. Deep down inside, they had all been suspecting it. After all, the Turks had never checked in. No word had been heard from them. And if anybody could be bribed, it was the Turks. No telling what side they were on.

Feeling betrayed, Cloud let out a slow breath, obviously considering their options. "Alright. We'll give the Turks tonight to make a report."

"Why are we wasting the time?" Barret demanded, shaking his head. "They ain't on our side, Spike."

Cloud turned to look at him, giving a tight glare of irritation. "We don't know that for sure. We don't have any reason to believe they're feeding information to Malachai or any of the other factions. And don't call me 'Spike'."

"Cloud's right," Red said, looking up at their leader. "Until we know for sure the Turks are enemies, we have to treat them as potential allies."

Barret crossed his arms gruffly, trying hard not to disturb Marlene, and sat back in his chair, clearly irritated that he had been shot down so quickly and without mercy.

Vincent suddenly spoke, standing erect and stepping closer. "I doubt the Turks are responsible for this," he said slowly, his red eyes scanning the room.

"Huh?" Yuffie said. She yawned, covering her mouth, and then asked, "How do you know?"

He didn't answer. He didn't need to. They all knew about his past, what he had been before Hojo had done this to him. Vincent had been a Turk, fighting alongside Tseng, Reno, and Rude. At one point in time, he had been their comrade, their friend, their commander. And now... If anyone could understand what it meant to be a Turk, their ideals and philosophies, he could. He wasn't defending them out of nostalgia or friendship. He was defending them because he understood.

"Oh," Yuffie said sheepishly as it dawned on her, and color burned bright in her cheeks as she became silent with embarrassment.

Cloud glanced around the muddled, tired group, feeling his own exhaustion suck his body to weakness. "Let's all go back to bed. Tomorrow morning, if the Turks are back, we'll deal with it. If not, we'll head towards Kalm and see for ourselves."

We'll have to go by chopper, Reeve. Can you arrange it?"

The President of Shinra was staring blankly at the floor, his eyes distant, giving no indication he had even heard the question. Then, without looking up at Cloud, he nodded solemnly. Cloud gave small smile. "All right, then. Let's go back to sleep."

With that, the team began towards the door. Yuffie stood, stretched, and winced as she heard stiff tendons pop. Rubbing her neck, she walked out saying, "First last night and now tonight... Dammit, I'm never gonna get to sleep now..."

The rest of the team followed, Barret carrying his daughter's sleeping form. Tifa tiredly looped her arm around Cloud's waist, laying her head upon his shoulder. Blood covered both their hands and nightclothes. Red and Vincent followed, silent with their own thoughts. And then Reeve, too, left, heading back up to his presidential suite.

Once the doctor's office was empty aside from Berkins, who had remained in the back room, distant from the communication, Shera collapsed tiredly into Cid's embrace. He felt the wetness of her tears upon his shoulder, her weeping like vice crushing his heart. He just held her as she cried, saying nothing, stroking her back. What could he say, anyway? What words could make this better, to make the pain go away and the troubles disappear? What could he whisper to her that would relieve her fears, quell her worries, and quiet her concerns? Cid kissed her temple. She lifted her face to his, streaked with tears, her eyes red with sorrow and terror. He cupped her jaw gently, wiping away her tears with the pad of his thumb. He smiled at her and kissed her lips passionately. Her soft scent rejuvenated him, the feel of her delicate body in his arms bringing happiness to his aching limbs. He broke the kiss and pulled her into a tight embrace. "I love you," he said softly in her ear.

Her arms tightened about him. "I love you, too," was her quiet answer, spoken as though on the breath of an angel.

They held each other for a few moments longer, content to be only in the other's presence. Then Cid slid off the examination bed and grabbed his jacket. Hand in hand, they exited the doctor's office.

Berkins looked up as he heard the door open and close, and breathed an audible sigh of relief as he saw his now empty office, the last couple having left. He muttered as he finished putting away his tools, "At least they managed to keep their clothes on."

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The pub was hot with closeness of people and the fires of the grill in the back. It was dark, the lights above in desperate need of cleaning. Had the grime been wiped away from the bulbs, they probably could have shed twice as much light as they did. For now, though, they were content to render the room into a comfortable dimness. A heavy plume of smoke hung over the heads of the patrons, and every puff leaving the mouths of the smokers only added to the suffocating stench. The aromas of fried foods saturated with grease clung to the air, accompanied by the sting of sour ale and pungent beers. Low music played from a brightly colored jukebox in the corner, but nobody was paying any attention to it. A waitress scooted around the old, stained wooden tables, ferrying heaping plates of mouth-watering food and frothy mugs of beer. Quite a few drunken men were leering at her, making half-assed attempts to grab her rear or pull her into their laps. She just ignored them; after being a waitress in a place like this long enough, one tends to develop a very thick skin. She just continued on with her job as though they weren't there, carrying orders to customers, taking complaints and gripes, piling dirty plates high before returning them to the sink.

A few lonely men sat at the bar, nursing their drinks as they did their problems. None said a word to any of the others, not even glancing up from their nearly empty glasses of liquor before them. Most were drunk and those that were not were well on their way to getting there. The bartender just continued to refill their glasses as they emptied them without question, knowing the only way most could deal with their troubles was to numb them with booze. That was fine with him, as long as they paid their bill.

Reno was one such man as he sat hunched over an empty glass of beer in the far corner of the bar. He twirled the cooling vessel in his hands, only the leftover froth clinging to the sides. His shades were down over his eyes even in the darkness of the tavern. He found it helped to ward away unwanted attention. Others would say he was either dead drunk or blind, either of which was not very unusual for this place. He paid no heed as the waitress walked by him, or as the men in the

back raised their voices to a shouting argument. Behind his shades, his eyes were distant and unfocused. His mind was light years away.

What the hell was wrong with him? He thought the beer and the smoke and familiar surroundings of a good, dirty pub would help him to determine that. But he had sat drinking this beer, smelling this smoke, in this dirty pub so long his butt felt glued to the stool. And he still had no answers. He closed his eyes tiredly.

She smiled at him. Whenever his mind wandered, it wandered to her. Whenever he thought, he thought of her. Whenever he closed his eyes, he saw her, smiling at him, her hair billowing in the breeze behind her. Those bright purple gems he saw in her eyes twinkling at him. His whole body still tingled when he remembered how she felt in his arms. He could not get her mind away from her beauty, her majestic elegance. She was all he could think about, as if his mind had been possessed, controlled into wistful daydreams. Nothing could deter his thoughts from her. It was as if he had fallen in love.

Yeah, love, he thought spitefully. What's that got to do with it? Elena's right; you only like her because she was female and buck naked before you. No matter how many times he told himself that, though, he couldn't convince himself it was the truth. If that had been the case, no way would he be so hung-over her now. No way would his mind still be occupied with scenes of her face, of her smile. No. This was different.

Haven't you learned by now? Hadn't he? He prided himself on being one of those guys that saw women as having one purpose only: to please the men. He had walked away from countless relationships, leaving one bed for another, abandoning one lady for another when she no longer pleased him. He hadn't always been like that. There had times when he had been in relationships, completely infatuated with a woman. He would have run to the ends of the earth for her if she had asked it. But that hadn't been good enough. His heart had been broken enough times for him to know not to trust a female. They were only out for one thing and that was to make men's lives miserable. He wasn't about to let that happen again.

But she's different. He shook his head against his thoughts. She's not like the others. It was true. She knew nothing of their culture, of the women on this Planet that time and time again broke the hearts of their male companions. She was naïve to it all, ignorant of how the members of her gender exploited, manipulated, and twisted the will of men into their bidding. She didn't know of that, so she could not hurt him. She was different, untouched by female foolishness. She was pure.

And he was most assuredly in love with her.

Reno shook his head. What the hell's wrong with me?

He looked up at the sound of approaching footsteps. The sunglasses were ripped from his face. Reno squinted in the sudden brightness increase. Elena stood over him, holding the glasses between her thumb and forefinger. "It's not exactly bright in here, you know."

Reno snatched them back. Gently, he wiped them on his jacket, and then placed them in the inside pocket. "So?" he said as she took a seat beside him. Rude stood between the two, arms folded across his chest.

Elena gave a weary sigh. "Nothing. We talked to every one we came across. Nobody's seen this girl."

Reno bowed his head and muttered a curse. Red locks of hair tumbled over his brow. "Great. Nothing at Kalm, nothing here. Now what?" After they had searched Kalm, the Turks had decided as long as they were looking they might as well investigate Junon. It had obviously been about as futile.

"I dunno," Elena answered with a small shrug.

Rude shook his head. "We go back to Midgar."

"And face AVALANCHE?" Elena asked incredulously. "Screw those pinheads; I ain't going back there. Assholes."

Reno ignored her, bracing his elbows on the counter tiredly. He had so hoped that they would find her, that here they might have located some sort of clue as to where she had gone. A hunger to see her again was growing inside him every

minute they were apart. Frustration swelled inside him. "Damn," he muttered.

They all sat in silence, brooding for their own reasons. On all their minds was failure. They hadn't been able to find the slightest clue as to where to look for the Ancient. Nothing. They had tried. "Failure" was not a word in the vocabulary of a Turk. The thought that they had screwed up was not appealing to their pride as a group and as individuals. And what to do now? Where to go? How could they find her when they had not the slightest idea where she might have gone?

It became so silent between them that the other conversations in the room began to fill their ears. In particular were two men at the table behind them. They were talking quite loudly with excited voices heavy with liquor. Reno winced as their booming words filled his ears, adding on to an already building headache from too much thinking, not enough sleep, this damned smoke, and beer.

"You should have seen it, man," one of them said, his voice thick and deep. "Never seen anything quite like it. No sirree."

Another answered, his voice higher, "You're saying she just walked on water?"

"Yep."

"That's bullshit, man!"

Reno turned to look at Elena, perking up immediately. His heart began to flutter in excitement as he turned around on his stool. The two men, obviously sailors by their attire, sat at a table behind them, drinking and smoking. He hopped off his seat and walked over to them. Leaning down to the first speaker, he said, his eyes hard, "What did you just say?"

The man jerked away, surprised. He regarded Reno warily. "Who the hell are you?"

Elena stood above them, her arms crossed about her chest. "Never mind who we are," she said, dangerously. "What the hell did you just say?"

Rude joined them. The man could purposefully see the shotgun on his belt glinting in the light. He swallowed nervously. "My ship was sailing in from Costa Del Sol. We, um, saw this woman walk across the water. Damnedest thing."

Reno narrowed his eyes. "What she look like?" he snapped, growing impatient with the man.

The guy drew a shaking breath. "It was storming. It wasn't too clear," he stammered.

"What the hell did she look like?!"

The man cringed at Reno's sudden shout, cowering away, raising his hands protectively. "She had green hair, man! All she was wearing was suit jacket!"

Reno leaned back up, shocked. Rude shook his head. "I'll be goddamned," Elena muttered.

He looked to her. A slow smile spread across his face. "Call Reeve."