

Oil and Water

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And you can't fight the tears that are coming
Or the moment of truth in your lies.
When everything feels like the movies,
Yeah, you bleed just to know you're alive.

—Goo Goo Dolls, Iris

The door slammed behind him.

It rattled in its rotting frame, showering dust and fragments of the decaying wood down onto the floor in a miniature storm of debris. He winced involuntarily as the door threatened to break from its rusted hinges and flatten him with the fury of which it had been slammed. He was almost sorry when it didn't.

Reno straightened his rumpled suit, setting it to its normal position that was by no means formal. It hung loosely from his frame, wrinkled and tousled in the style of an easy-going man who has no care for appearance. He frowned almost imperceptibly as he stuffed his hands into his pockets, warding off the chill of the winter air as he started down the steps out of the building in which they were currently housed. His foot landed on a cockroach.

"Damn filthy place," he growled, the steps creaking with every minuscule amount pressure he applied to it. He hated the slums. He hated what had happened to the once renounced Department of Administrative Research, what had happened to the Turks. He hated the disgusting slime that they had wandered into after Shinra had been taken over by Reeve. He hated the dirt and the dirty looks from the rest of people who crawled through the streets of Midgar. He hated the stink of it all. The stench of piss and blood permeating from the alleys and the garbage, the putrid puddles of sweat and tears forming in the cold winter air.

So this is what roughing it was.

Just a reminder, was all.

He stepped through the open portal that served as doorway for the mess of people crowded together in a few scant rooms of this building, walking out into the crimson sunset. The slushy mud roads glowed red with the blood of everyone who had died to free them from oppression. A lot of good that did. Dying to free nameless others who could never be free from themselves. Dying to save a dead world. What a joke.

It was all the same as it had been years ago. Nothing ever changed in the slums. You grew up quickly, or you died quickly. You grew up quickly, and you grew cold. That was what the slums taught you. If you didn't learn... Hell, you had to learn. When you had nothing, you had nothing to lose.

Reno sighed and blew a breath of steam into the chilly air, randomly picking a direction and walking down the street. There was nothing he could do for their group now. Rude was off in a drunken stupor, lying in a pool of spilt whiskey, mumbling incoherently to himself about better times. Elena... He didn't even want to think about Elena. She was still trying to get them back on the up and up. She had no idea that they were all finished. The Turks had died with Rufus Shinra.

What he wouldn't give to fall into the same drunken stupor that had claimed his best friend.

But he couldn't. Something wouldn't let him take even a sip of liquor now. That same something that had saved him so many years ago, that had taught him to be so indifferent to the world. He frowned, shrugging deeper into his jacket as the cold air bit into him on a wafting breeze. It wasn't this. It wasn't the slums. He despised the slums.

His eyes wandered across the street. He stopped walking, his gaze landing on a group of kids with dirty hair, ripped clothing, and wild eyes. He stared blankly at them. That had been him. He had been the kid with the wild eyes and unruly, dirty hair, standing at the street corner, waiting for an unsuspecting person to pass by and fall victim to his pick-pocketing. He shook his head. Had it really been that long ago?

“Check out the narc.”

The words snapped him back to the present. The laughter pummeled at him like the shards of glass from his broken past. He should have been angry at them; he would have given anything to feel rage at the insolent kids across the slush roads. But he couldn't be angry. There was nothing to be angry about when the words rang true. He walked away, numb from the cold and numb from the remark.

Was that what he was? What that what he had inadvertently turned into? A talking monkey in a suit waiting to be given orders, so it wouldn't feel worthless to the world. His teeth ground together in frustration. He was a monkey in a suit. Goddamn it, why was he always so blind to everything? Why did he have to be the loyal dog that came back begging for scraps only to get kicked in the ribs once more?

He stopped walking to find the sun had disappeared and the moon had yet to rise. The streets were dark, shadows hanging back in the alleys, a menacing presence that threatened to jump from its hiding place in an empty attack against him. Reno reached for his electromagnetic nightstick instinctively as he stared into the dark and then bit back a curse. He didn't have it. Oh, well.

He sighed as he sat down on a dilapidated bench, ignoring the chips of paint that scattered to the ground. He flicked a piece of fuzz off of his knee, before resting his elbow there, rubbing his face with his hands. He was tired. He was tired of fighting over the rest of the scraps of Shinra. He was tired of growling and whining and yelping and snapping over something that really meant nothing.

The story of the slums all over again.

The nightly brawls over pocket change. The angry fistfights over a snatch of a moth-eaten blanket on a cold night. The raging words and careless insults just to feel like you had something. No one had anything anymore.

Pride, maybe they all had that here. Too proud to ask for help, too proud to cry, too proud not to fight over a moth-eaten snatch of blanket. What use had pride? No use. It was just one thing to make you feel bigger when you had nothing. It was empty.

Love, maybe that had died with hate. No one could hate anything anymore. It was a reminder that you had nothing to love. All the hate, and fear, and angry emotions in the world could not fill the empty gaps here.

What did he have left? Nothing, no, he had something. He had his loyalty to his friends. He had his loyalty to his company. He frowned. But loyalty was as useless as the last. It was an excuse to get yourself killed. And what good was loyalty when the people above you would rather have you to take it in the rear instead of appreciating your devotion to their cause? What the hell was their cause anyway? To take the young and the strong and oppress everyone else?

The memories flooded back to him.

A young boy, a mass of filthy rags and dirty hair marred with mud to the point of being almost black... huddled in a dank alleyway... sick, hungry, alone... this is what the slums teaches you...

No parents to hold him... dumped there too long ago by faceless people... he couldn't remember them... couldn't find them... why did they have to do this to him... left him here to wallow with nothing... he didn't learn... he should've died in that alley, sick hungry, alone... should've died...

"Why the hell didn't you let me die?!" he demanded, staring up into whatever fates had looked over him so long ago, his own voice echoing between the desolate and destroyed buildings. Only his words sounded back to him, no reply from the slums. No reply from the fates that had made the Shinra find him, drag him from where he had been lying, save him from his death.

He looked back down to the ground, his gaze landing on a disheveled dog that was staring at him from beneath a brow of ratty black hair. The dog's lips parted in a huge grin, its tongue lolling from its mouth in a long strip of pink. Reno frowned and stood abruptly, oblivious to the dog and to the whisperings of the criminals hidden within the shadows. Just let one of them mug him and leave him for dead in the streets. He wouldn't mind. And that was the truth, one among too many lies; he was cold enough not to mind his death. He was indifferent to everything.

He felt the tears coming on and fought against them. So many questions danced in his mind. Why hadn't he been spared this cruel life on that day? What sad twist had kept him alive to suffer through this world, waiting forever to die and never making it to that final leg of his journey? Someone would tell him he had been lucky. He thought he was damned. Why wouldn't Cloud Strife just come up and run him through once and for all?

Why wasn't he afraid of dying?

Anybody who was in their right mind would be afraid of leaving this world without putting their mark on it somewhere. Anyone who had not grown as cold as he would fear departing from this world without leaving some piece of himself as a sad reminder of his passing. Without a mark to ensure he was never forgotten.

He tripped. His knees skidded into a puddle of the snowy slush, the icy cold water biting into his flesh. It was only then he realized he had been running, it was only then he realized where he had run.

This was his mark.

He felt the tears trickle down his cheeks, running over his scars in a small stream. He closed his eyes against what he saw. This wasn't a mark. It was a sickening blemish, marring the face of mankind for all eternity. Hundreds massacred, loved ones dead, innocents killed, cold-blooded murder... This was his mark on history. Goddamn him for ever thinking of pushing that button...

The loyal monkey all dressed up in a business suit, waiting for orders.

He was going to Hell.

Sector Seven had been destroyed because of him. He had sent the plate tumbling on upon the people sleeping in their homes. This was their burial ground, their monument. He snorted. A lousy playground surrounded by a mass of twisted metal and jagged cement. A set of rusty swings creaking in a breeze that stunk of death and decay. A slide that was impaled by an immense beam, cracked and falling apart. A child's doll left in the mud and slime, brown with dirt, ripped from neglect.

The children once played here.

Now it was the final resting place for the dead. A final resting place for everyone he had killed on that day. What had he done? Turned a place built for happiness into a forgotten memorial...

Reno shook his head, opening his aquamarine gaze to the world once more. Who was he kidding? There was no happiness in life. All there was in life was hurt and suffering and the monotonous work five days a week to take home a meager pay check, squander the money on liquor and bills, and head back to work. That was what life was. No happiness. Whoever could find happiness in this godforsaken city was the luckiest man alive.

He envied that man. But, then again, his blind tactics had probably killed that man. There wasn't anyone left he could envy.

He envied their happy, happy deaths. This was what happened when he finally let the truth of the matter sink into him. He would look at it and hate what he saw. Every time he would look just a little longer and hate just a little stronger. But he was helpless to stop what he had become. Every damn time. Helpless.

This was what he got for being cold. This was what he got for lying to himself, for pretending that nothing hurt, that he didn't care, that the world would go away and leave his sad life alone for only a few moments. This was what he got every time the lies disappear, the hurt surfaced, the care returned, and the world reminded him that he had lived through just one more day. A few moments to mull over his past's demons, to stare at the man he had become, and to hate himself. This was what he got for being heartless. His sunglasses slid off his forehead and over his eyes.

"God. Just strike me down," he muttered, glancing down at the slushy water in which he was kneeling. A tear trickled off his chin, dropping into the puddle silently and rippling through his reflection, sending swirls of rainbow color around him.

No answer came from the heavens, no thundering judgment, no whispered forgiveness. God seemed content to send him to Hell. Reno pushed himself to his feet, ignoring the chilling water running down his shins. Then, so be it. He would go to Hell.

He started to walk away.

He deserved nothing more.