

Chapter 11: To Each His Own: Part 1

"Figures. Wherever Reno goes, you find trouble."-Rude Texihera

Faye hesitated for a long second as she saw Rude come out of the bar and into the bright Costa del Sol morning, then fell into step beside him.

"What'd you find out?" she asked, not quite meeting his eyes. She shed her jacket in the Costa del Sol heat and throwing it over one shoulder in a motion that might have appeared nonchalant if it weren't for the pallor to her face and the dark circles under her eyes.

The awkwardness between them was strange and not right. "Reno was here. Got thrown out of the bar around ten on Saturday night for nearly breaking a guy's skull."

Faye smiled a bit at that, though again, the smile wasn't directed at Rude. "Typical. What else?"

"Last person to see him was the bouncer who threw him out."

"No one else saw him?" she asked incredulously.

"No one in there, anyway," Rude replied, jerking a thumb behind him to point to the bar. "Wish Reeve was here. He's more...diplomatic than me. Nearly got thrown out myself."

This was something to talk about; something to cover the gaping silences that now gashed their conversations. "I wish he could have come too. But he's the president of Shinra. He can't just leave it on a whim, like we can." Then she frowned. "But to get back to the original topic, I asked around in the different shops. No one there had seen Reno either."

A cry came from behind them. "Wait up!" They halted and turned as Elena came dashing up. She pushed her chin-length blonde hair out of her brown eyes with one hand. She was dressed casually, as were her companions, in well-fitting jeans, sneakers, and a plain blue T-shirt. She was a smart woman; she saw the tension, the silences, Rude awkwardly trying to communicate and meeting a pale, avoidant wall in his wife. She said nothing about it, though, and seemed to be doing her best to ignore it.

"Did you find anything?" Faye asked, patiently waiting for her to gain her composure.

Elena saw that they were looking at her expectantly. "Damn. You guys didn't?"

Rude shook his head as Faye answered, "All we found out was that Reno got kicked out of the bar around ten on Saturday night. You?"

Elena nodded. "Well, yeah, I did, but I don't know where to go with it."

"You were at the hotel, right?" Faye asked quietly.

"Yeah. The manager had Reno in the records, and he told a story about being woken up in the middle of the night with gunshots coming from the room next to Reno's, belonging to a guy named Dan Selby.

"Apparently," Elena went on, "the manager called the police, hid in his rooms, and just about pissed himself." She grinned suddenly. "I'm paraphrasing, of course. About ten minutes after he first heard the shots, a motorcycle roared to life outside. When the manager went to the window, he saw Reno and Dan Selby riding off together. Then several big men, in all black clothes ran out and tried to start the remaining motorcycles."

"They started, but wouldn't go anywhere; apparently, somebody slit the tires. The thugs came back in and asked for a room, the terrified manager gave it to them, and they left in a large, nondescript truck the next day."

"When did this happen?" Faye asked, leaning back against the stucco wall of the local bar in an attempt to duck out of the murderous sun and into the weak shade.

"Saturday night," Elena replied. "But there's more. When I asked if anything else odd had happened, he said yes. He heard gunshots again on Sunday, around midnight, and they sounded like they were coming from the dock."

"Junon," Faye murmured, seeming far away.

"Exactly my thought," Elena responded, looking slightly smug.

"Can't be sure it was Reno," Rude cautioned from where he stood behind Faye.

"Maybe someone was out and could tell us?" Faye suggested.

Elena shook her head. "Not likely at midnight in a small town like this. The ferry's at Junon right now, so we can't ask the crew." She sighed. "But we might as well ask around."

Faye pushed herself off of the wall and back out into the street. "Let's do it." She didn't sound too emphatic. Rude simply nodded.

Two hours later, the threesome met up at the dock.

Faye was already sitting on the boards, with her feet dangling over the edge, watching the sun fade from a bright light to a series of molten reds and electric yellows as it set.

"Anything?" Elena asked as she approached, stepping around a filthy beggar, curled against a wooden piling at the other end of the dock, with distaste.

"Not a thing," Faye replied. As Elena sat down beside her, Rude's figure appeared at the end of the dock.

The two women turned to him-well, Elena turned; Faye just glanced quickly-, the question evident on both faces.

Rude shook his head as he strode up, his boots making the dock echo with a thudding noise. The sun was suddenly gone, casting dark shadows over everything.

"You'd think that Reno with his flaming red hair would be easy to spot," Elena mused.

"And by all accounts, this guy Dan Selby that he was traveling with would be pretty tough to forget as well."

A cackle rang out from behind them. "Hee hee hee! I saw a man with bright red hair, oh yes I did!" called out a high-pitched, cracked voice, giving the impression of an old man. The three spun, Elena and Faye sitting while Rude still stood, to find the dirty beggar grinning at them. The trio shared a quick glance at each other-Elena and Faye climbing to their feet-before turning back to look at the man.

"And when was this?" Elena asked cautiously.

The man laughed again, his face hidden by his blue windbreaker and the dark help of the night. "Everything has its price,

young lady, including this."

Rude studied him carefully. Something about him sounded and looked very familiar...

In the meantime, Elena was asking, "How much do you want?"

The man thought about it for a moment, then replied, "Five hundred."

Elena shook her head immediately, as Rude steadfastly said, "No."

"Three-fifty?" the man suggested.

Rude was silent as he was struck again by the familiarity of the voice. The hood of the windbreaker had a strange shape to it...

"No," Elena said firmly.

The man began to sound desperate. "One hundred?"

Rude shook his head. "Fifty gil."

The man hesitated, then nodded. "Oh, all right." He reached out a hand for the money, but no one moved.

"Info first, money later," Elena said coldly.

The man sighed, exasperated. "Fine. Around midnight on Saturday night, I was sitting here, as usual. Right in the dark corners that are caused by the shadows of this ship." He reached up a hand and patted the boat that was moored behind him. "That's why I figure they didn't see me."

"Who didn't see you?" Elena asked impatiently.

The man fixed her with a glare that she couldn't see through the hood, but that she could almost feel.

"Sorry," Elena said, wondering to herself why she was standing on a dock in Costa del Sol apologizing to a dirty old man.

Standing off to one side and only listening to the entire transaction with one ear, Faye was definitely beginning to doubt the wisdom of coming along on this venture. Rude and Elena were both so much more capable than she was, and maybe the separation would have helped her and Rude. Being together sure as hell wasn't doing anything.

"As I was saying, suddenly, these two come into view. One had flaming red hair pulled back in a ponytail. The other was a woman with long blonde hair. They--"

Elena stopped him for a moment. "Hang on a minute. Where'd the woman come from? What happened to Dan Selby?" Then the proverbial light bulb went on over her head. "The manager told me that Dan Selby had long blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail." She directed her questions to the beggar. "Was she tall and thin, with long legs and pale skin?"

The beggar nodded in response.

"...Dan Selby's the woman," Rude mused quietly.

"Exactly," Elena replied.

"A-HEM!" their informant broke in huffily.

Elena made an elegant, obviously sarcastic hand motion for him to continue.

"So they came dashing down the dock together, and it was obvious they were headed for the ferry, which was beginning to leave. They kinda stopped for a minute when they saw the boat moving, then your friend grabbed the woman's hand and dragged her along with him. She jerked her hand out of his, and really started pumping. Just from the way she pulled her hand away from his, I could tell that she probably doesn't think much of your buddy. Suddenly, this big guy appeared behind them--"

"What kind of big guy?" Elena interrupted.

The man fixed her with another silent, annoyed pause before answering. "Just that, a big guy that was full of muscles. He looked like a hired thug, or one of those old fashioned gangsters. His clothes were all black, and I never saw his face. It looked like they were running from the big guy. He whipped out a gun, and fired off several shots at them. The boat was already detached from the dock, and was moving away. The woman pulled ahead and leaped onto the boat, slamming into the side and pulling herself up. R-the redheaded man--"

Rude frowned at the slip of the tongue, but allowed the man to continue.

"--Followed her a half a second later and after a minute of talking, she yanked him up and over the rail onto the boat. And they were outta there! Their huge pal threw down his gun angrily, then whipped out a nifty little cell phone and held a quick conversation. Then he left. Can I have my money now?" A grimy hand positioned itself in front of Rude's knee.

Rude looked him over for a moment, then asked, "Who the hell are you?"

"Huh?" the beggar said, sounding as if he was trying to feign surprise.

"You know Reno well enough to refer to him by his first name. Don't deny it," Rude said, as the man opened his mouth to speak. "You started to say Reno, then you corrected yourself and called him the redheaded man."

"So what if I do know him?" The man climbed to his full height--which wasn't too imposing--and planted his feet defiantly. Suddenly, with amazing speed, he made a dash for the town.

Later, Faye wished that she could have said that she tripped him on purpose, but she didn't; she was standing there, minding her own business, when he stumbled over her foot. The "beggar" crashed to the dock with a thud. Elena was immediately there, grabbing him by the collar of his windbreaker and hauling him to his feet.

A faintly bemused Rude was left with nothing more to do than to stride forward and pull the hood off of the beggar's head. Cloud Strife's blue eyes glared balefully at him; he was caught tightly in Elena's firm grasp.

Elena gasped, "Strife!" as Faye stared at the Mako eyes.

Rude nodded. "Thought it was you. Why would you give us false information?"

Cloud bristled. "So you think just because we're former enemies, that that information I gave you was fake? Dream on. It was 100 true; all of it."

"Then why are you here, dressed like that?" Elena questioned skeptically.

Cloud shook his golden head stubbornly. "I don't have to answer any of your questions." He twisted his neck to glare at Elena.

Cloud was fairly short, with what had once been a warrior's trim and muscular build. Now he was extremely thin, probably as a result of time spent on the streets. He would have been completely unremarkable except for two features. One was his platinum blonde hair that was tufted into long spikes and shot off into all directions. The other? The Mako blue eyes that glowed in the dark with an unholy light. And there was something else about the eyes, something that had changed in the two years since Rude had seen their owner. Cloud's eyes had lost the determined and naïve look they used to hold. Now they were flat and dead, although anger held sway at the moment.

"What happened to you?" Faye murmured, speaking for the first time in a while, obviously recognizing the man who had been hailed as the savior of the Planet three years before.

Maybe it was the lack of hostility in her voice, or the blatant honesty, or perhaps even the fact that she wasn't a former mortal enemy that made Cloud look over to her. There was silence for a moment, then his head cocked slightly to one side in obvious confusion and he asked, "Who the hell are you?"

Faye ignored the fact that Rude had moved closer to her and placed a large hand at her back as an obvious warning to stop talking. She very nearly instinctively twitched away from him, but knew that such a move would hurt him, and she willed herself to stay in place. "Just the average citizen, curious about why Cloud Strife has been reduced to begging in the streets of Costa del Sol."

Elena openly gaped at her, while the hand at her back tightened slightly.

Cloud, his arms still caught in Elena's firm grip, stared at her for a moment, then chuckled, the amused expression doing much for his angular features. "You're honest. I like that, so I'll make a deal with you."

Behind him, Elena was watching the goings on quietly with a spark of interest in her face.

A small fire of defiance burned in Cloud's eyes for a moment. "I'll explain what's been going on with me if we go to the inn for me to talk, if you tell me why you're so frantic over Reno, if you tell me who you really are, and if you put me up at the inn for the night."

Faye looked to Elena, who was obviously just as curious as Faye as to what had brought the blond swordsman so low, and who nodded. Then she glanced over one shoulder at Rude, who was motionless for a moment, obviously thinking, then shrugged, the flat expression on his face clearly stating, 'Whatever,' and that the two of them would be discussing this later, in private. He stepped away from her.

Faye turned back to Cloud. "Okay," the small woman said.

Cloud nodded briefly, then looked over his shoulder to Elena. "I can't walk if you're still pinning me."

Elena's eyes went to Rude, who nodded, so she released him and migrated over to the bald man.

Cloud walked the three steps to where Faye was standing and just stood in front of her for a moment; looming over her short frame menacingly and looking down on her, searching her face for signs of intimidation.

Rude started forward, but Elena put a hand on his arm. "Don't," she muttered. "I think it's his form of a test." Rude stopped and watched, implacable face showing none of his tenseness. The second that Cloud made a move to so much as breathe on Faye, he would be in a world of hurt.

Faye met the cold and vacant gaze unflinchingly. After a moment of brown eyes clashing on blue, Cloud spoke. "Who are

you?" he asked.

"Faye Texihera," Faye replied, stepping back so their arms wouldn't entangle and offering him her hand.

After a split second, Cloud grasped her tiny hand in his gloved one and shook it gently, completely encompassing it.

"Cloud Strife," he said as way of introduction. He glanced back at Rude and Elena for a moment. "How'd you get mixed up with them?"

"That's Elena Sader--"

The blonde woman waved her hand once in a slightly sarcastic greeting.

"And that's Rude Texihera."

Cloud blinked once. "You-- Oh." He looked from the diminutive woman to the large man, and one golden eyebrow quirked faintly, but he said nothing further, instead, after a moment, simply asking, "Do you mind if we start on that agreement now? I'm getting hungry." The statement wasn't given in the politest of tones, but it wasn't hostile, either.

Faye looked uncertainly to Rude and Elena behind her, who shrugged in unison, if such a thing can be done. "Okay," she agreed. The pair started off together in the direction of the inn, with Faye cautiously attempting to begin a conversation.

"..." Rude said nothing, his gaze following the retreating figures of Cloud and Faye.

Elena studied him for a moment, then a slow grin crept its way across her features as the wind ruffled her blonde hair. "You're jealous!"

Rude just looked at her as they followed the other two, his face expressionless, before shaking his head in what was the Rude-version of rolling his eyes.

Elena's smile grew wider as they came to the end of the dock and ducked through the darkening town. "Yes, you are. I can tell."

"...Jealous of what?" Rude spoke again to quickly cut her off as she opened up for a salvo. "Remind me why we're helping him."

Elena pondered that for a moment. "Because he's not our mortal enemy any more, and he needs help. We just happened to be the ones who were here to give it to him."

"You approve?"

"I don't see any harm in it. Besides, you know you want to know why the hell Cloud Strife is begging for a living in Costa del Sol."

Rude shrugged and muttered, "To each his own."

Elena punched him playfully as they came to the door of the hotel. "You mean to each her own," she corrected in an obvious allusion to the fact that he was outnumbered in their little party, laughing, and she walked past him into the inn.

Rude stopped for a moment as he rubbed absentmindedly at his shoulder where Elena had hit him. "...I am not jealous." No, of course not. It wasn't like his wife was talking more to Cloud Strife than she would to him.