

Chapter 12: To Each His Own: Part II

"Harry Potter, here I come!"-Elena Sader

Later that night, Cloud had been given a shower, and some of Rude's clothes to replace his dirty and tattered ones. Even though the shirt and pants hung off his emaciated body, making him look like a scarecrow, Cloud still managed to appear dangerous and threatening.

Faye glanced uneasily, quickly at Rude in the light provided by the dim bulb swaying above their heads. The pair of them and Cloud sat around a small round table in the dingy hotel room, watching each other warily.

All three jumped when Elena, carrying several paper shopping bags, walked in the door, slamming it open in the process. "Food's here." She noisily dropped the bags on the table. "I got it from the Wutaian restaurant down the street," she announced, setting out cartons of Wutaian food and pulling paper plates and plastic utensils out of one of the bags.

Cloud snagged a carton and a plastic fork, and began shoveling food into his mouth, blue eyes darting back and forth as if daring someone to challenge him.

No one did. The others scooped food onto their plates from the cartons and began eating, doing their best to ignore the slurping noises coming from Cloud's end of the table.

Rude, Faye, and Elena finished in good time, but Cloud went on eating ravenously for some time.

"Hungry, huh?" Elena remarked idly.

Cloud glanced up from his food for a moment to lock gazes with her. "You tend to be when you haven't eaten in two days."

"Oh," Elena said feebly. The table lapsed into silence again as Cloud went on eating.

After a few moments, he looked up again. "Why the hell are you guys so freaky over finding Reno?" he asked, the words difficult to decipher with his mouth full, as it was.

Rude answered simply, "...Been missing since Friday."

Cloud sat there for a moment, clearly expecting more, then asked, "That it?"

"He's been missing since Friday, like Rude said, and we've managed to track him this far. We don't know where he is, what he's doing, or who the woman he's traveling with is. All we know is that he's gone to Junon, he's in some kind of trouble, and we're going to help him," Elena said determinedly. Almost immediately, unable to contain her curiosity, she said, "All right. We've fulfilled our part of the bargain. Now what about yours?"

The blond man scraped the last bit of Wutaian food out of the carton, then set it down on the table, chewing the last bite slowly. "Why do you want to know about what happened to me?"

Elena shrugged, and her natural tendency toward honesty came out. "Curiosity about what brought the savior of the Planet down this low."

Cloud eyed her for a moment, then shrugged and spoke quickly, voice low. "I didn't really know what to do with myself after we beat Sephiroth. I argued with my friends, left with not-enough money, couldn't go back to them, and then had a hard time finding jobs."

He rose from his seat, the chair scraping the floor. "And now that I'm finished with any obligation that I might have to you guys, I'm going to sleep."

Rude nodded curtly, glad to be rid of him. "Room ten," he said, tossing Cloud a key. Cloud caught it easily, and strode out of the room. Before he left, though, he glanced at the quiet, uninvolved Faye. Busy tracing patterns on the tabletop with her finger, she didn't notice.

"What an asshole," Elena said wonderingly, shaking her head.

Rude shrugged, emptying the remains of the container of lo mein onto his plate.

Elena sighed. "You're right; it doesn't matter. We can just forget about him." There was an awkward silence, and then she continued with her slightly desperate chatter. She yawned noisily. "What time are we leaving tomorrow; did anyone check the ferry schedule?" Before either Faye or Rude could respond, she thought to ask, "When's the next ferry?"

Rude had apparently done the schedule-consulting, as he answered, "Next one's a supply run at 2:30 A.M. After that, 8:30."

Elena stood up, picking up her jacket. "Alright, I'll see you guys at eight."

Faye spoke up for the first time in what seemed like hours. Her voice was thin and tired. "Good night, Elena."

"Night," Rude said.

Elena walked into the hallway and closed her eyes in relief as she heard the door close behind her. "Holy hell," she murmured to herself, exhausted after having carried all conversations all day.

She crossed the small, carpeted corridor, unlocked her room's door with the key that it took her a moment to find, wrenched the door open, walked inside, and closed the door. She padded around the room, kicking off her shoes, pulling her hair down from the ridiculously short ponytail that the heat had necessitated, and in general, getting comfortable. She went to the duffel bag beside her bed and rooted around, emerging with a certain popular children's book clutched in her hand. Maybe some reading before bed.

Elena flopped down on the bed, opened the front cover, and immersed herself in the adventures of Harry, Ron, and Hermoine.

Several hours later...

Elena glanced at her watch and swore, realizing the time. She began to get up to fetch her T-shirt and athletic shorts, then she frowned and listened carefully. No, it wasn't a figment of her imagination, and it was getting closer. She rushed to the window and raised the blinds a fraction of an inch.

Uh oh.

There were a bunch of sleek, black motorcycles parked in front of the inn, and she saw some very big guys getting off of them. Elena had always had excellent far sight, and she muttered another unladylike curse as she hoped she wasn't seeing what she thought she was seeing. She rubbed her eyes, then looked again. All of the men were carrying grenades, enough explosives to blow the town to kingdom come, and some very heavy guns and weaponry. Then she blinked, and looked once more. Just as she had thought. Right in the middle of all of the burly thugs was one slender, fragile looking woman. All Elena could really make out about her was her flowing white hair, long white robes, and the equally long, dangerous-looking sword she carried.

She slowly dropped the blind, then slid on a pair of sandals and quietly crept back out into the hallway, where she crouched on the top step--hidden from view of the lobby below--and listened as the many men and one woman banged on the door until the hotel manager rushed to open it.

"May I help y--" The manager was cut off, and his voice turned into a frightened gurgle.

"You may help us by telling my friends here and I where three of your guests' rooms are," the woman said, her voice dangerously calm and smooth. "Rude Texihera, Faye Texihera, and Elena Sader."

The man let out a choked gurgle. "Th...they're in rooms eight, nine, and ten."

The woman's voice was edgy and sharp. "Why three rooms?"

"Th...there are four of them. The bald guy, his wife, the blonde girl, and some guy with really sp...spi...spiky hair and bright b...b...blue eyes," he stuttered. Elena then heard a thud, then a low moan, as if he had been thrown.

"You heard him; go," the woman snapped. "Walk with care. It will behoove you to catch them unawares; bear in mind, two of them were Turks once."

"My lady," one man said, his voice a deep, bass growl. "What about Mr. Blue Eyed Blonde? We weren't sent after him."

"Liquidate him. We have no need of him," she said dismissively. Her voice took on a warning tone. "You had best not allow them to escape, as you did with the important two."

"You weren't here when she picked up that guy, Amaani; you don't know what the hell you're talking about. They took down Valkie and a bunch of other guys; they were damned dangerous, after you said she wouldn't be. You fucked things all up with them in Junon, and now they're sitting high and dry in Rocket Town, while we sweat it out an--" A sword rang true, and there was a wet slash. The dissenter screamed.

Elena was a smart woman; the 'important two' sounded very much like Reno and Selby, and apparently, they were in Rocket Town.

The woman--Amaani?--growled, and her voice rang out. She was berating the silent men, telling them the error of their mate's ways in arcane language, and Elena hoped that she would talk for some time.

She scooted back away from the stairs and knocked quietly and incessantly on the closest door, which happened to be Cloud's.

An annoyed Cloud came to the door, still fully dressed with the lights on behind him. Elena both had no idea and didn't care why he was still awake at this early hour of the morning. He opened his mouth to speak, and that was when the ex-Turk hurled herself at him, clapping one hand over his mouth and placing a finger of the other hand to her lips.

He nodded his understanding, and Elena pulled her hand back.

"What's going on?" he asked in a barely audible whisper.

"Those guys who were after Reno are coming to get us," Elena hissed back.

Cloud's face became expressionless. "That's none of my concern." The blond began to shut the door, but Elena stuck her foot in it.

"Hope you enjoy being 'liquidated,'" she murmured sweetly.

Cloud stopped. "Shit."

"Exactly."

Cloud sighed. "All right. What're we gonna do?"

"Get Rude and Faye, then get the hell outta here."

He nodded shortly.

Elena crept out and froze in place, listening. Amaani was still in full-blown pissed off rant mode, by the sounds of things. "They're still preoccupied," she whispered over her shoulder.

"Good. What can I do?"

"Go into my room," Elena directed, nodding to her still open doorway. "My duffle bag is on the floor by the bed. Get the two guns in it."

"You don't travel light, huh?" The glowing blue eyes disappeared into her room, their owner not waiting for a response.

Elena crept across the hall and tapped on the door to Rude and Faye's room, watching the stairs cautiously as arguing voices rose to meet her ears. Rude came to the door sans sunglasses, wearing a pair of loose pants and naked from the waist up.

Elena waved her arms frantically as he began to speak, and shushed him with a finger to her lips.

Rude lowered his voice, blinking sleep from his eyes. "...Elena? What the hell?"

"There's a 2:30 ferry to Junon, right?" Elena hissed.

The tall man nodded slowly. Faye appeared behind him, tucking a blanket more securely around her body as she rubbed at her eyes.

"We've gotta be on it. C'mon!"

Rude blinked again, and didn't move. Faye looked from Elena to Rude.

Elena spoke in short, fractured sentences, as if she were speaking to a small child. "Big guys with guns that are after Reno. Want us. Want to 'liquidate' Strife."

Her former partner raised an eyebrow, while his wife just looked tired and confused.

Cloud appeared behind the blonde woman and handed Elena her Beretta. She checked the clip and held the weapon loosely in one hand.

"How many are there?" Rude asked as Faye padded out of sight into the blackness of their room, sounds making it clear that she was looking for something in a bag.

"I didn't take the time to count, but there's about twenty of them, I guess. They're not taking any chances. And there's one

woman, too; she's got a really big sword. I listened to their conversation; her name's Amaani, I think Reno's still with that Selby woman, and they're in Rocket Town."

Rude stood for a moment, and Elena could almost see the wheels turning behind his brown eyes. "Elena, get in your room, close the door, and be ready to ambush them. Strife, I know I can't speak for you, but it would be greatly to your benefit to join forces with us."

Cloud blinked for a moment at the amount of words that had just come from the other man, then nodded and clicked back the safety on his borrowed gun. "Count me in."

Elena took over, all business. "All right. You and I go after them from my room; Rude, you two attack them from here. We'll fight our way to the stairs. From there, we can catch the 2:30 ferry to Junon. There, we head to Rocket Town. Strife, you can either split off from us once we get to Junon or travel on. Your choice."

Rude nodded in agreement with the blonde's plan.

"C'mon!" Elena grabbed Cloud by the arm and pulled him across the hall into her room.

Rude shut the door behind them. As he turned, Faye had already thrown on a pair of flared jeans, brown sandals, and a fitted black tank top.

"Grab the gun in the bottom of the bag," he said, pulling on the blue jeans and gray T-shirt that she threw at him. He piled up pillows and other items to make it look like there were two bodies in the bed, then looked to her. She hadn't moved a muscle. "Faye."

She slowly shook her head, frozen in place and eyes wide. Of course. She didn't want to touch a gun.

Rude crossed the room fast, brushed past her, and pulled the handgun and clip of ammunition out from under the clothes. He loaded the weapon with a loud click, and she started at the noise.

Rude was pained at her fear, and was about to open his mouth when he caught the sounds of someone picking at the lock. Knowing he didn't have time for this, he swiftly turned the light off and stood on one side of the door, waving at Faye to join him. She still stood there paralyzed, and he swore loudly in his head, took two fast steps across the room, and yanked her back to stand behind the door with him.

The door cracked open, and several men stepped through; maybe five or ten. They immediately caught sight of Rude's two dummy figures, and motioned for each other to be quiet. They slowly made their way toward the bed, Faye keeping very still as the final man slipped past her.

Rude held a finger to his lips to her, then darted out the door. Faye followed. So far, none of the men had realized they weren't in the room. Peeking across the hall as they crept toward the stairs, Elena saw the shadowy figures of Cloud and Elena following their lead. So far, no one had noticed a thing.

That was when a shout came up from Rude and Faye's room. "Hey! There's no one here!"

"Same here!" hollered someone from Elena's room.

"And here!" was the yell from Cloud's.

"There they are!" a man shouted, poking his head out of Elena's room.

The four fugitives' only response was to dash down the stairs, no longer caring about silence.

"After them!" came a feminine roar.

Rude, Faye, Elena, and Cloud sprinted down the stairs, in that order. Faye's heartbeat raced as she scrambled down the remaining stairs to the lobby and followed Rude out the door, Elena at her heels. Behind her, Cloud stumbled, nearly fell, and lagged behind.

The ex-SOLDIER poured on the speed, legs pumping to catch up. The slight chill of the night froze the sweat collecting on his body, cooling him. He followed them through the town, across the bridge, and down the dock. First Rude, then Faye, then Elena, and finally Cloud hopped over the gap between the dock and the boat.

Elena dashed up to the bridge of the ship, where there was only an old man who seemed to be the captain of the ship. His feet were up on the instrument panel as he snored loudly.

Elena shook his shoulder violently, and when the man gave a start and sat up fast, told him solemnly, "You have to get going to Junon now."

The man looked bewildered. "But the ferry doesn't leave for another hour or so."

Elena nodded. "True, but...well, see for yourself." She pointed out the window, back at the dock. The twenty dangerous looking men were racing down the dock, lead by Amaani, waving guns. As the old man watched in stupefied amazement, one of the men let off a shot.

The old man ducked instinctively and winced. "All right then. I see your point. Let's get outta here!" He leapt forward to the controls, pulling a lever here and there. Suddenly, he looked back to Elena. "We're still tied--"

Elena had been looking out the window, but she turned back to him on this. "Don't worry. Just go."

Shots cracked, and Elena glanced back to find that Rude was ducked down below the gunwhale of the boat, firing at and quickly scattering the men and woman on the dock.

There was a sudden jolt that nearly threw Elena off her feet, and they began moving away from the dock at a fast clip.

They left the dock behind. Amaani began to stand from where she had thrown herself to the dock to escape being shot. Immediately, hands were extended to her.

"Milady, let me help you up."

"Up you go, milady."

She waved them off imperiously, coldly. "I can stand on my own power." She finished standing and brushed herself off. "Keller!"

Keller appeared in front of her. He was her right hand man, and was short and rail-thin, with a mop of thick black hair, dull brown eyes, and a perpetual stutter. "Y...yes, m...milady?"

"What were our losses?" Amaani began to walk down the dock with long, easy strides, shaking her long, white hair out of her face.

Keller was hard pressed to keep up, and was nearly trotting at her heels, dragging his mangled right leg behind him. "We l...l...lost thr...ee out of the t...twenty, m...m...m...milady." Catching the icy look that she sent in his direction at his slow

speech, he sped up his pauses. "T-they r-ran r-rather th-than f-f-fight."

"Father is not going to be happy about this. Do you believe it was convincing enough?"

Keller smiled, a rare occurrence. "V...very c...convincing, m...milady. T...the 'p...package' was d...d...deli...v...v...vered w...w...without a hitch."

Amaani chuckled, a low, wicked sound that did not often reach the light of day. "I agree, Keller. I agree."

And as her men picked themselves up behind her, the four adventurers sailed on, not knowing what was to occur.