

Chapter Eleven: Idle Hands

"I'm tired of jes sittin' here doin' nothing!" Barret Wallace

Just when everything was making sense

You took away my self-confidence

Now all I've been hearing must be true

Guess I'm not the only boy for you

That's what I get

How could you turn me into this?

After you just taught me how to kiss you

I told you I'd never say goodbye

Now I'm slipping in the tears you made me cry

"That's What I Get"

NIN

Silence reigned unchallenged for half an hour in the bar as Cloud and the others sat gathered around one of the tables, shifting in their soggy clothes and chancing cautious glances at the band of green material that Tifa had wrung in her hands like a handkerchief made for weeping. The young woman idly wrapped the headband of Yuffie Kisaragi around her gloved fingers again and again, perhaps weaving some pattern that only she could understand, then unraveling it again so that it pooled up on the wooden tabletop in a lonely pile. Then she would begin the whole process again as Cloud watched her blankly.

He sat back in his chair, the wood creaking as he did so, the only sounds made before the hungry, oppressive silence swallowed them up. On his right side, Barret and Rude glanced at him, as if expecting him to speak, to shatter the screaming silence so that plans could begin. But Cloud did no such thing. His Mako blue eyes were impassive as they kept themselves trained on the green material clutched in Tifa's hands.

What fate had befallen Yuffie and Vincent so that his young friend had somehow lost the headband that she refused to part with no matter how much Cid bitched at her when it slapped him in the face while riding in the Tiny Bronco? And where had that ship gone off to? And what about Reeve? The Running Man? It was all his fault that Vincent and Yuffie had ended up lost or captured or...dead. He was the leader; the burden was on his shoulders. He had sent them off with the unspoken expectation that they wouldn't really find anything. He hadn't even given them a Restore materia - he had been so certain that they wouldn't run into trouble. Now it was his responsibility to take the blame for their plight and find a way to get them and Reeve back.

Cloud wasn't ashamed to admit that he needed both Vincent and Yuffie to help them locate their missing friend and get to the bottom of the whole Running Man/Reeve/Neo-Shinra mess. Though Vincent sometimes scared the crap out of him and Yuffie could only be accurately described as a brat, they both had certain abilities and traits that were exclusive to them and only to them. They were part of AVALANCHE, and they were his friends. At the moment, Cloud would have given anything just to see his two allies again, hear their voices.

But no matter how much he told himself that he needed to snap out of his melancholy state and get crackin' again, the horrific image of Tifa and Reno in each other's arms kept rising up before him like bile in his throat. He couldn't escape from it by closing his eyes; it was burned onto the backs of his eyelids. He couldn't escape from it by fading back into the depths of his rational mind; all his thoughts were occupied with that one image of Tifa stroking Reno's hair and rubbing his back while he lay his head on her shoulder and held her against him...

It wasn't until Cloud had seen them together that he realized that the very thought of another man so much as looking at Tifa, much less touching her, in such a fashion made him angry beyond all reasoning. And that fact that it had been Reno he had seen her with made it even worse. He hadn't liked Reno very much to begin with. Let's face it, trying to kill Aeris and dropping the plate on Sector Seven had just rubbed him the wrong way. Now Cloud, as leader of AVALANCHE, and Reno, as the unofficial leader of the Turks, would probably be working together more than any other two individuals in the search for Reeve. How was he supposed to work with a man that...that...

God, this got more unbearable by the minute.

Raising his dimly focused eyes from the headband in Tifa's hands, Cloud felt them settle on the woman who meant more to him than anything in the entire world. Her amazing burgundy eyes were trained on the headband in her fingers, and he could only see the perfect curve of her delicate eyebrows and how her long eyelashes shimmered in the light. Her

chocolate brown hair had spilled over her bare shoulders, and he barely resisted the urge to reach across the table and run his fingers through it.

In the chair beside her, Red suddenly stirred, butting her shoulder lightly with his head, trying to ease her anxiety. As Cloud's empty gaze shifted to the fiery lion-like creature, Red turned to stare straight at him from across the table. Of all the people gathered, Tifa and Reno excluded, Red was probably the only one that had guessed at what was bothering Cloud. He knew that only something involving Tifa could unsettle the spiky-haired leader of AVALANCHE so much.

Now the gaze he sent as his one good eye locked onto Cloud's Mako blue ones was quite clear: *She wants comfort from you, not me, not Reno, not anyone else. You need to be there for her no matter what.*

If only it was so simple, Cloud thought dismally as he lowered his gaze to the table, slouching in his chair. He didn't look up again.

The heavy silence dragged on for another two minutes before Barret's fuse expired and he pounded the table with his gun arm. If Spike was going to mope there by himself and not act like the leader everyone knew he was, then, by golly, he was going to have to get everyone in gear until Cloud could get his spiky head screwed on straight.

"I'm tired of jes sittin' here doin' nothing!" he bellowed as everyone looked at him. "We need to get to work on somethin'! We need some sort of plan!"

"Yeah, well since you so full of ideas, do enlighten us," Cid grumbled, a cigarette dangling from his lips and his arms crossed over his chest. "I know I ain't got nothing that even comes close to resembling a plan."

"We need to get our priorities straight," Rude suddenly said.

"What do you mean by that?" Red asked calmly, but his golden eye glinted with suspicion.

"What Rude means," Elena picked up cautiously with a glance at her fellow Turk. "Is that we need to see what's more important: rescuing Reeve or finding Vincent and Yuffie."

Cid's eyes narrowed. "Does it matter? Chances are the same bastard that took Reeve captured Vincent and Yuffie, too. Don't go tryin' to make us pick favorites amongst our friends. They all mean the same to us."

"But think logically," Reno interrupted, defending the position taken by his friends. "If the same person that captured Reeve *did not* capture Vincent and Yuffie, too, then we need to see who's the one that needs the most help faster. Vincent and Yuffie are members of AVALANCHE, but that's all they are. Sure, Yuffie's pop may be some big shot Lord of Wutai, but she's just a little brat. Besides, much as I hate to admit it, Vincent and Yuffie are perfectly capable of taking care of themselves. Reeve, on the other hand is the President of Neo-Shinra and..."

Rude picked up where his friend had left off. "Alone and without Cait Sith, Reeve is virtually helpless."

Reno sat up straighter in his stool and placed his hands on his knees, staring hard at everyone gathered around the table. "You all know what Rude, Elena, and I are saying is true. Reeve's more important here."

"Says who?" Barret demanded, brown eyes glittering dangerously. "You and your Shinra buddies? Now, I ain't sayin' that Cat ain't as important as Vincent and Yuffie, but he ain't more important either, ya get my drift?"

"We understand," Rude deadpanned, expression hidden behind his dark sunglasses. "I just have this bad feeling that Reeve's in serious danger."

Cid snorted. "And Vincent and Yuffie aren't?"

Cloud abruptly grew tired of all the arguing. "Look, everyone," he said flatly, gazing at his teammates and ex-enemies through the strands of his blond hair. "Face it, there isn't much we can do right now. That cave is the only lead we have on Vincent, Yuffie, or Reeve. That cave is also basically off limits until we get the proper equipment and manpower to investigate it. When the rain dies down somewhat, we'll go take another look at the cave." His eyes darted coldly back and forth between Tifa and Reno. "And this time *everyone's* going."

Tifa shuddered slightly at the hidden meaning in his words as she wrung Yuffie's headband tighter around her fingers and lowered her head, too depressed to get angry at how unfair Cloud was being. Reno, however, had enough anger for the both of them. If she wasn't going to yell at Cloud for being an asshole, then he would gladly take up the job.

"You know, Strife," he snapped, narrowing his aquamarine eyes. "You got serious problems with pride."

Cloud glared at him. "And those would be what?"

"You've got too much of it, and you don't know how to swallow it."

Cloud didn't reply as everyone except Tifa and Red wondered what the hell was going on.

Reno's hard gaze never wavered from Cloud's angry face. "You're taking out your anger and frustration on Tifa there because you know you're a failure...in more than one area."

"Since when did you become her personal defender?" Cloud snapped, tensing in his seat.

"Ever since you became her attacker," Reno counterattacked viciously.

The precarious damper Cloud had put on his anger suddenly snapped, and he leapt to his feet, knocking the chair down behind him. His Mako blue eyes blazed with anger. "Reno, I'm so goddamn sick of your @#%\$ing attitude!" he swore, hands clenched into fists.

Reno leapt to his feet, eyes on fire. "You gotta problem with me?!" he demanded furiously.

"You know I do," Cloud seethed.

Reno dropped one hand so that it hovered over his nightstick. "You want to take this outside, then?"

"Reno, stop it!" Elena exclaimed, not because she favored Cloud over Reno but because she knew that this wasn't going to help their situation.

Tifa suddenly leapt to her feet, eyes moist with tears and Yuffie's headband clutched tightly in one hand. It was clear she was tottering on the edge of a breakdown and was horrified with the way Cloud and Reno were behaving towards each other...all because of her. She felt it was all her fault.

"Stop it, you two! Stop it!" she cried, her gloved hands flying to her hair as if in intense pain. "All this fighting is pointless! We need to look for--"

Just then, the door flew open, and Vincent and Yuffie strode in, covered with mud and looking like a pair of drowned rats.

Everyone in the entire bar felt their jaws hit the tops of their shoes (or in Red's case, paws) as they beheld their two friends, who, a day before, had been in tip-top condition as they set out for a cave to investigate the strange presence of a ghost ship. Now they looked as if they had been through hell and back a dozen times.

Vincent's hair was unbound and drenched with mud and rain, some of the larger mud clumps falling the floor with thuds as rain dripped off of his ravaged clothes to make a puddle on the floor beneath his muddy boots. His black shirt and pants were ripped in several places, the cloth hanging open like gaping doorways to reveal bruises and cuts gracing his pale flesh. His shirt had become untucked during the trip, and his entire right sleeve up to the shoulder had been torn off, exposing a nasty black and blue bruise. His red eyes revealed nothing, but his split lip and disheveled state told the story for him.

Yuffie was the more battered and ridiculous looking of the pair, wrapped in Vincent's cloak, which was so long that it dragged on the floor behind her. Her tanned legs were covered with mud and bruises; her yellow sneakers were in no better condition. Rips and tears dotted her modest covering of tank top and tan shorts, and rain had plastered her hair, unbound by her headband, to the sides of her face, a few wayward strands dangling into her stormy gray eyes. A huge, yellow and black bruise was swollen under her left eye; similar ones graced her slender belly and her right rib cage.

They were a truly horrific sight, but Tifa had never seen them look better.

That is, until Yuffie stamped her foot on the floor and yelled, "Don't just standing there gawping like a bunch of retards! It's freezing balls over here! Do something, you idiots!"