

Chapter Fourteen: The Plight of the Raindrops

"What are you gonna do? Spank us and send us to our rooms?" Elena

*Every moment marked
With apparitions of your soul
However swiftly moving
I'm trying to escape this desire
The yearning to be near you
I do what I have to do
The yearning to be near you
I do what I have to do
And I had the sense to recognize
That I don't know how to let you go*

"Do What You Have to Do"

Sarah McLachlan

Reno's blood was still boiling. The rain that brushed lightly against his pale skin as he stood out on the bar's deck could not cool the rage that coursed through his veins like liquid fire. His auburn eyebrows were drawn together in a fearsome scowl, and his eyes were blazing with fury. God, he couldn't remember the last time he had been this angry! He had to bite down hard on his own tongue to prevent himself from arching his back in rage and cursing Cloud Strife and womb that gave birth to the little prick until his voice was hoarse. Reno folded his arms resolutely across his lean chest and glared at the falling rain, refusing to succumb to the urge to let out the longest string of cuss words he had ever said in his entire life.

Elena and Rude watched their leader and friend from a safe distance, discomfort written in their auras. Rude leaned stiffly against the closed door to the bar, expression hidden by his dark sunglasses. At his side, Elena fidgeted nervously, tugging at the still-damp bottom of her suit jacket and pushing at her tangled hair. She was caught between wanting to bug Reno until he told them what was wrong and just leaving him out here to be alone with his fury. The blonde-haired Turk was not in her best of moods - she was wet, tired, hungry, Rude had just embarrassed her in front of everyone, and now Reno had had a major spat with Cloud that neither of them was likely to get over anytime soon. They were never going to get Reeve back! And what did that mean? Even more disgrace to the Turks' name! She could hear people talking now!

"Those damn Turks! They let another President die under them! What wastrels! Can't even do their jobs right!"

But despite her desire to keep the Turks' name somewhat "honorable," Elena was more weary of Reno's temper than any thoughts of future grandeur she could dream up. She knew that the anger she had seen Reno evince in the bar just now was only a taste of how angry he could really get. And the fact that Reno was still out here brooding only heightened her apprehension. Reno was the sort of person who could blow up in your face one minute and have his arms around you like the best of friends the next. It was rare that he held a grudge, but when he did hold one...

Elena shuddered at the thought.

Reno suddenly turned his head so that Elena and Rude could see the scarred profile of his handsome face against the backdrop of the falling rain. "If you two are just gonna stand there and stare at me," he growled. "Save yourselves the trouble and take a picture. It'll last longer."

The oppressive silence between the trio broken by Reno's harsh words, Elena and Rude left their positions beside the door and went to stand next to their friend and colleague as he turned to stare at the falling rain and weeping skies again. Elena fidgeted anxiously, wishing that Rude would say something to get Reno to come out of his shell. She would have made the effort, but since it seemed that every time she opened her mouth, she said something wrong that only made things worse. She was still a bit sour over Rude having embarrassed her in front of AVALANCHE. Why did he have to go and do that? Elena tried so hard to make herself look and seem professional, but if Rude kept treating her like a rookie, then she was never going to be able to earn the respect of others!

But Rude's scolding had hurt her as much as it had embarrassed her, and she didn't want him to speak to her in such a fashion again...

So Elena kept her mouth shut. Silence hung in the air again except for the rain streaming down from the stormy skies in sheets, just inches away from where she and her friends were standing. Tickling, feather light droplets hit the ground and

jumped back up to playfully touch Elena's face, and if she hadn't had a glowering Reno standing next to her like a time bomb waiting to explode, she would have smiled with sheer serenity.

Then Reno let out sigh that was more like a growl and said, "So, are you guys just going to stand there? Why did you even come out here anyways?"

"Because you were out here," Rude said simply, staring out at the rain with his eyes hidden by his sunglasses. Elena didn't say anything; despite her bitterness over Rude's admonishment, she knew that he could better handle Reno than she would ever be able to.

Reno snorted, his eyes still hard with smoldering anger. "So now you want to be with me, huh? You two sure as hell were quick to leave me behind this morning."

Rude replied, "We left with--"

"-my best interests in heart," Reno finished dryly, flicking a rebellious lock of fiery hair away from his face. "Yeah, I've heard that one before. Right now I'm pondering on whether or not you two should be punished for leaving me behind this morning."

"What are you gonna do?" Elena blurted before she could stop herself. "Spank us and send us to our rooms?"

Reno and Rude both turned to stare at her as the female Turk hurriedly clamped both hands over her full mouth, eyes widening as she realized what she had just said! Great! Why couldn't she think before she talked?! Now Reno was going to go nuclear and stalk away again, and Rude was going to reprimand her for being such a loud mouth...

Then Reno's surprised face melted into a grin. He flirtatiously winked one of those aquamarine eyes at her. "You're just dying to be spanked by me, aren't you, Elena?"

Elena's mouth dropped open at his impudence. "As if!" she declared indignantly. "I swear to god, Reno, you are the most--"

Her displeased retort was suddenly cut off when Reno burst out laughing with glee and gathered her up in his strong arms, crushing her to his chest and lifting her off her feet.

"Reno!" Elena screeched into her friend's shoulder as he spun her around in a circle with her feet flying behind her. "Put me down! This is so humiliating!"

"Aw, you know you like it, honey," he joked, still chuckling as he lowered her to ground again, her heels finding blessed leverage on the wooden decking. For a moment, he hugged her close, her nose filling with the mixture of alcohol and cologne that she had come to identify as Reno's scent.

Then he released her and stepped back, still laughing for some odd reason. Even Rude was looking at him a little strangely, and Elena was beside herself with annoyance.

"What was that all about?" she demanded grumpily, placing her slender hands on her narrow hips. "Next time warn me before you do something like that!"

"You two crack me up," Reno laughed, tossing his ponytail back over his shoulder as he walked away from them and plopped down in one of the wicker chairs that were placed on the wooden decking. He sank casually into the piece of furniture with a grin still on his face, his right elbow inches away from the pouring rain that was still descending like angry tears from the enraged heavens. He was still chuckling, as if he couldn't control his sounds of mirth.

Elena glanced at Rude in bewilderment, and the tall man lifted an eyebrow at her, a gesture that very clearly said, *You cut it close that time. Watch what you say the next time.*

She narrowed her brown eyes and gave her companion a withering glare, sending her own message: *Don't you dare look at me like that. I'm the one who fixed this situation so just leave me alone.*

With that she turned away from Rude's impassive glance with a toss of her hair and strode over to where Reno was beginning to get over his little giggling fit. "What's so funny?" she asked, still a little peeved after the look Rude had given her. She hated it when anyone, especially Rude, looked at her like she was nothing.

Reno turned a half amused but strangely serious gaze to his fellow Turks. "What's so funny?" he echoed. "You two are. You know, I'm glad you two are my friends."

Elena's heart immediately melted, and she felt sudden tears sting her eyes. "Oh, Reno!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands over her heart. "That was such a nice thing to say! That's probably the kindest thing I've ever heard you tell anyone!"

Her flame-haired colleague rolled his eyes and snorted, but not before both Elena and Rude noticed the slight pink flush that came to his pale cheeks. "Don't get all overworked and mushy on me now, Elena. I didn't mean nothin' by it."

Undeterred by Reno's aloof attitude, Elena smiled sincerely. "Aw, Reno, you don't have to be embarrassed. Everybody has to have friends."

Reno shrugged like it didn't matter. "Whatever," was all he said. "Friendship is the most overrated idea on the face of the Planet. You can't define it; there's no way of telling who fits what criteria and why. It's just...pointless."

Elena scowled and put her hands on her hips. "Don't say things like that Reno! Friendship is defined by *personal* criteria, that why not everyone meets everyone's standards and why some people drop friends as fast as they get them. We're all different; we can't all be judged by the same set of criterion."

Reno stared at her for a moment, then rolled his aquamarine eyes again. "Thanks for that lovely moment of enlightenment, Elena. I'm certainly on the road to spiritual salvation now." His face suddenly darkened, and his eyes became cold. "But speaking of friends, you guys certainly aren't very good ones, leaving me behind this morning."

Before Elena could protest, Rude stepped in. "Is it all going to come back to that, Reno?" he asked in a strangely terse tone. "It certainly didn't seem as if you had anything to complain about while we were gone."

Elena blinked in confusion as silence fell heavily in the air. Oddly enough, Reno made no snappy comeback to Rude's statement. Instead he just stared at his friend with a half-amused, half-sympathetic look in his eyes. Sinking deeper into the chair, the wicker creaking as he did so, Reno drew one leg up and rested an elbow on it, the embodiment of contemplation as his aquamarine gaze remained fastened on Rude, never wavering. For a few moments, Rude, or rather, Rude's sunglasses, stayed trained on Reno's eyes, but a sudden crash of thunder seemed to shatter the tall Turk's resolve, for he looked away from his friend and into the pouring rain. Elena was beside herself with confusion, her eyes darting from one friend to the next, completely baffled. What had just happened? Why did everyone get so quiet all of a sudden? Well, if she just waited for a while, someone was bound to say something...

Finally, three loud crashes of thunder later, Elena couldn't take it anymore. "Okay!" she exclaimed. "Did I miss something here?"

Reno didn't even glance at her. "Go away, Elena."

Her mouth dropped open. "W-What?"

Reno flicked his gaze briefly to her before turning back to Rude. "Go somewhere over there," he said, gesturing off-handedly to the other side of the deck, where the rain was senselessly beating a wet wooden rocking chair.

Elena glanced at the pitiful-looking chair, then turned back to Reno with a half-furious, half-hurt look on her face. "You want me to go sit over there in the rain? Why? What did I do?"

"Rude and I need to talk," Reno said shortly, still studying Rude and only paying minimal attention to Elena's protests.

"But why can't I-" she started to say.

"Guy talk," Reno snapped, losing patience. "Now go."

Elena opened her mouth to say something more, something to tell Reno how unfair he was being, but her throat had stopped working, and nothing but silence came forth. She looked to Rude for help, for comfort, for anything, but he was still staring out into the rain as if the conversation didn't interest him in the least bit. Some dark emotion stabbed at her heart. Never before had she felt so alone in her life.

Fine, she thought to herself glumly. *I know where I'm not wanted. I'll just go sit by myself...alone over there in that chair... out in the rain, out in the cold.*

With that, she stalked away, heels making lonely sounds of defeat on the decking as she crossed it and plopped down in the wet chair, her damp clothes and hair now sharing the suffering the piece of furniture had to endure from the ruthless rain. She folded her arms across her chest with grim resolve and tried not to let her loneliness carry her under.

But it wasn't easy.

Reno glanced in passing over to where Elena was sulking at the other end of deck, sitting in the rain. A frown suddenly creased his handsome face. Maybe he had been a little...harsh with her.

Naw...

"Why did you send her away?" Rude suddenly asked, face still impassive as he gazed out at the rain.

Reno looked at him in surprise. "What?"

Rude didn't glance over at him, only kept staring at the waterfall that was pouring out of the gutter lining the roof of bar. The great tides of rainwater spewed forth from the mouth of the gutter and splattered the already-saturated grass below the decking that Rude and Reno now stood on.

"You hurt her feelings," Rude continued in a monotone. "You know she doesn't like to be left out."

One corner of Reno's mouth curled up into a small smile. "I know that. I'll apologize later. I just didn't think she would be very happy to hear what we're going to discuss, though."

"And that would be what?" Rude asked calmly.

Reno stared at him for a moment with some indiscernible emotion flickering in his aquamarine eyes. "Tifa Lockheart," he said softly.

Behind his sunglasses, Rude winced, but he maintained his code of silence and said not a word.

Reno sighed when Rude didn't reply. He hadn't really been expecting one, but still, it would have helped if his friend had at least said something that would have let Reno know what he was feeling. Reno didn't want to say anything that would hurt his friend too much.

"Look, Rude," he began cautiously, staring out into the rain like his silent companion was doing. "We've known each other for a long time, you know. Don't you think that by now I know what bothers you and what doesn't? And things concerning Tifa Lockheart tend to get you all worked up."

Reno glanced at his friend. Rude said nothing.

"Why are you still caught up on her, man?" Reno asked softly.

Rude was silent for a long time, watching the rain fall inches away from where he was standing. His light green eyes, hidden by his dark sunglasses, tracked the movements of choice raindrops as they plummeted from the dark heavens to strike the saturated earth. From the angry, abusive skies they fell, seeking refuge and comfort within the womb of the warm earth, but they were immediately rejected and spit back out by the dirt and grass, both who had had their fair share of rain for the day. *A pity to come such a long way down, Rude thought, only to be rejected again and again, to float away endlessly and become lost in a puddle or a river, losing their shapes and themselves.*

Rude felt sorry for the raindrops. He knew how they felt. He knew what it was like to scale obstacle after obstacle, bumping shoulders with vicious opponents and sometimes being blown off course entirely. He knew what it felt like to see the finish line, the goal, the dream, looming in the distance. And Rude knew what it was like to trip over a little pebble and fall flat on his face, outstretched fingers inches away from the refuge that was so desperately sought.

Yes, Rude knew the plight of the raindrops, who fell such long way only to meet rejection. But he couldn't tell Reno that. He knew that his red-haired friend tried to empathize with Rude's unspoken emotions, but sometimes...he fell short. Reno just lacked the kind of selfless, father-like traits that were needed to open up and listen completely to what others were feeling. The late Tseng had had those traits, but Reno didn't. Rude could understand that, though. People like Tseng were rare and few, and Rude knew that the death of the former Turk Commander had been a crippling blow to the blue-suited organization...possibly even a death blow. Rude, Reno, and Elena were almost entirely lost without their warm-hearted assassin father to watch over them and listen to their deepest thoughts and feelings. Reno tried his best, but he just couldn't fill the hungry gap that Tseng had left behind. But, still, Rude had to give him a chance. Maybe he could understand...

Face impassive, Rude glanced at his friend, who was watching him with a carefully neutral expression, apparently not wanting to do or say anything that would make Rude clam up and become unresponsive, as was the tall Turk's nature to do.

"Why am I still caught up on her?" Rude echoed softly. "Because...I don't know why. I just am. It's like I can't escape from...her."

Reno shook his head slightly, strands of blood-red hair falling across his eyes. "But why her, Rude? She's a forbidden fruit, and you know it, buddy. She's already spoken for."

That sure didn't seem to stop you, Rude thought with uncharacteristic harshness. But then again, it never does, does it?

The poisonous words were there on the tip of his tongue, fiendish imps dancing in the fires of fury, begging to be spoken, but Rude had long ago conquered these demons. He bit back the stinging words that would have angered and even wounded his best friend. Instead he said, "I know that, Reno. I knew that from the moment I laid eyes on her way back when Sector Seven was still...there. Cloud was never far from her, and I could easily perceive that she had feelings for him, but that didn't stop me...I just don't know how to let her go, Reno."

"She doesn't even know how you feel, Rude," Reno said softly, staring at his friend's profile.

Rude shook his head slightly, his voice acquiring a tinge of sadness. "She doesn't need to know. Besides, it would only complicate things even more...than they are now."

Reno sat back in his chair, the wicker creaking in protest to his movement. "I suppose you think it's all my fault, don't you?" he asked quietly, but there was no stinging edge in his voice. He sounded more tired than anything else.

"I never said that, Reno," Rude replied, glad that the conversation had taken a different turn, even if it was the lesser of two evils. He had never liked discussing his feelings with others.

"But you implied it," Reno insisted, eyes faraway and misted as he stared out into the rain. "Don't put too many things past me, Rude. I'm a cold-hearted asshole, but I'm a *smart* cold-hearted asshole, and it's gotten me this far."

Rude didn't know what to say to that.

Silence hung in the air for a few moments before Reno suddenly asked, "Don't you wanna know what happened?"

Rude glanced over at his friend. "Whatever you want, Reno," he said quietly. "If you wish to talk about it, I'm here to listen."

"I know. You always are, but I'd understand if you don't wanna hear this."

"I doesn't matter to me," Rude deadpanned, feeling uncomfortable. He *did* want to hear this, but then again, he didn't.

Reno narrowed his eyes at his friend. "Okay, then, if it doesn't matter to you, then I'm going to start talking. Just remember, buddy, you dug your own grave by saying you had no opinion on the matter."

Turks aren't supposed to have opinions, Rude thought. *Old habits are hard to break, I'm afraid.*

For a moment, Reno floundered for words, something he never did, as Rude waited with suppressed expectation for the explanation that everyone in the bar had been practically begging for. When it didn't come immediately and laced with harsh or perverted overtones, as was the typical Reno style, he braved a glance at his friend and was surprised to see confusion and perplexity creasing his brow. Reno's eyes were misted and strangely troubled as he gazed out at the ill-fated raindrops, and Rude suddenly got the idea that maybe Reno had forgotten he was there.

But then the redheaded Turk suddenly said, "Ya know, I don't know what the hell happened in there, Rude."

"Something must have," Rude said quietly. *Something that upset Cloud so much that he felt his place in Tifa's heart was threatened*, he added silently.

Reno laid his spiky head against the back of the chair, the blood-red strands of his hair dancing like flames against the white backdrop of the painted wicker. "Oh, hell yeah," he said in response to Rude's statement. "*Something* happened, definitely. I just don't know what it was. Something...passed between us, and I don't think that..." His voice trailed off.

"Don't think that what?" Rude prodded him, though his heart was screaming at him to stop while he was ahead. *I can't take this anymore*, it told him. *Certain words drop off of Reno's wagging tongue, and I'll shatter into a million pieces. Then what would you do?*

Reno, oblivious to Rude's plight, shifted his gaze to his tall friend. "Things might be different," he said softly. "And all because of what happened in there. Because of what happened between me and Tifa, and because of what Cloud saw."

"And what did Cloud see?" Rude asked hollowly, staring at the wooden decking beneath his feet. The wood was a little rotten; maybe he should tell Tifa later to be careful when she walks over here...

Reno snorted. "Cloud saw something that very clearly gave him the wrong impression about the whole thing. I'm telling you the truth when I say that Spike is completely misinterpreting the situation. What he saw was...completely innocent."

Nothing is ever innocent with you, Reno. Stop dodging the question and just...tell me. I can handle it...maybe.

"Innocent?" he echoed.

"Innocent," Reno clarified, watching Rude's reaction carefully. "Harmless, benign, not threatening in nature."

"Cloud found it threatening," Rude deadpanned.

"Cloud is an asshole," Reno snapped, as if that statement would justify everything.

"Things are going to get rocky," Rude warned.

"Of course they are," Reno growled. "He's part of AVALANCHE, and I'm a Turk. Things are always going to be rocky between us."

"Yes, but things are going to be worse after what happened in there. We need to find Reeve, and you and Cloud bickering isn't going to help our efforts."

"What are you trying to say, Rude?" Reno snapped, stiffening in his seat. "You blame me, don't you?"

"Blame you for what?"

"You're not helping the conversation, Rude!"

"That's because I'm not quite certain what exactly you're trying to tell me, Reno."

"I'm not trying to *tell* you anything," Reno snapped. He hesitated for a moment, studying Rude carefully, then said, "I guess, I'm just trying to warn you that - this thing with Tifa." He lowered his head, red ponytail flopping over one shoulder. "Something passed between us, and we connected somehow. I can't explain it, Rude, but it was real, whatever it was. I'm just gonna tell you that I intend to...take it further, I guess, though that's not the right way to phrase it."

"What about Cloud?" Rude asked, his own voice suddenly sounding very far away.

Reno suddenly shook his head so emphatically that his ponytail was whipped around to the other shoulder. "Cloud is an insensitive prick," he growled. "He shouldn't feel at all threatened by what he saw. It's not like that, Rude."

"So you're saying you're not interested in Tifa at all?" Rude asked, afraid to hope. *Not like I stand a chance either way...*

Reno shook his head, watching his friend with shrewd eyes. "I don't think so. Not in the way you're saying. I mean, the woman's flat out gorgeous, but you already knew that, right?" He grinned.

One corner of Rude's mouth twitched. "Right," he agreed.

"But I'm not promising you anything," Reno rushed on. "I just don't know how things are going to turn out. Just...be prepared for anything, okay?"

"Sure," Rude deadpanned, his heart beating painfully in his chest. "But just promise me one thing, Reno: that you won't ever hurt her."

Reno nodded gravely. "I promise, Rude. You have my word."

On the other side of the decking, Elena forlornly held out one of her manicured hands, palm upwards, and watched as hundreds of little raindrops gathered there in her palm, all curled up and cozy against each other, sharing their space easily with one another and losing themselves in a single embrace. Millions of such raindrops had also soaked her suit and pants, clinging to her skin and hair as if trying to offer her comfort - comfort for the lonely woman in the lonely rocking chair sitting alone in the rain even though her friends were not even ten feet away from her.

Shoving her saturated hair away from her face with her free hand, she glanced dimly over to where Reno and Rude were deep in conversation. Or rather, Reno was deep in conversation with the stoic Rude, who was gazing at the decking beneath his boots, his fine, strong back facing in Elena's direction. Looking at them, Rude in particular, Elena felt her heart begin to beat with an even more painful emotion than the loneliness she was feeling.

Quickly averting her chocolate brown eyes, Elena turned her gaze back to the falling raindrops that were inundating the city of Kalm, seeking a place to rest their weary, rejected souls in peace. Though the mixture of thunder and pouring rain prevented her from hearing a single word of her friends' conversation, Elena knew that Reno would only send her away if he and Rude were going to talk about one thing. Reno could normally discuss the most lewd, twisted things without giving a damn who was listening, but Elena knew that the mention of a certain woman in front of Rude tended to make things get really uncomfortable, really fast, especially if Elena was present at the time. And Elena knew the name of that woman...

What Rude saw in Tifa Lockheart, she would always fail to see. So the Final Heaven bartender was pretty, fought with her fists, and had big boobs, who cared? Okay, she was a nice, good person, too, but...that was beside the point! Besides, she

belonged with Cloud - yeah, that was it! Rude knew that Tifa was probably in love with Cloud, and Cloud with her, so why did he insist on obsessing over her? He was just going to get his heart broken, and he deserved so much better...

What am I thinking? Elena berated herself. Why am I so bothered by Rude liking Tifa Lockheart all of a sudden? It's been obvious for a while now that he had it big for her. Why is it starting to bug me now? Why?

"Why?" she whispered to the falling raindrops, as if they could plummet to the earth and murmur in her ear the answer they had received from the heavens themselves.

Drawing her knees up to her chest and resting her head on them, Elena allowed her thoughts to drift to the stoic, seemingly emotionless man named Rude. When Tseng had first introduced her to him, there had been something about the tall, levelheaded Turk that caused something strange to stir in Elena. Maybe it was the flat yet soothing tones in his deep voice that were music to her ears even though they tended to frighten others. Or maybe it had been the warmth of his fingers brushing her palm as she shook hands with him. There had been something *right there* beneath the surface that had called to her, something behind those dark sunglasses that were custom made to hide the heart and its thundering emotions...

But whatever it had been, Elena hadn't dwelled on it. All she could think of then was the Turks and Tseng. Everything she did, she did with Tseng in mind. Every test she took, every trial she underwent, she was constantly thinking, "What will Tseng think of this? Will he be impressed? How would he handle this?" Her earth, moon, and stars revolved around Tseng. To her, everything about him was perfect, everything from his long, silken black hair to his deep brown Wutainese eyes. He was a good leader, and he was a good friend. He was flawless, an idol. He was a god.

Then a demon, the god wannabe, a little being with big dreams, that horrible Sephiroth, had tumbled the celestial god from his pedestal in one swift swipe of his sword. Tseng's body had already been cold in death when Reno, Rude, and Elena had rushed into the Temple of the Ancients after having received a call from Reeve saying that Tseng had stopped answering his cell phone. Every detail of the horrific scene was still fresh in her mind, never dying. She remembered Tseng's body lying against the earthen wall, long legs out in front of him, chin on his chest, black hair spread out on either side of his face like the protective plumage of a raven-winged angel. But most of all, she remembered the deathly pale pallor of his skin and the ghastly wound on its chest that had stained his white shirt red with its never-ending flow of bloody tears.

Yes, she remembered it all; she remembered the beastly cry that had suddenly ripped its way out of Reno's throat, echoing forever in the farthest recesses of the Temple. She recalled the way Rude had sagged against one of the pillars in disbelief, his limbs shaking almost uncontrollably before he regained his composure and crouched next to Reno at the fallen Tseng's side. Elena had been the last to join them, running over and burying her face in Tseng's shoulder, trying in vain to muffle her sobs while blubbering to Tseng's dead body about how much she had cared for him, how much had meant to her, and how lost they would be without him. She didn't know how long they had remained there, three Turks mourning the loss of their leader, their friend, their father, the man who had been their world. A man who would never walk, talk, breathe, smile, or laugh again. They were lost.

And when the Temple had started falling down around their ears due to the efforts of AVALANCHE, Reno, fearing for his life and the lives of his friends, had ordered a hasty retreat into the forest. So they had abandoned Tseng's body, left it to be buried with the Temple as its tomb, and they had escaped with their lives, but had all left pieces of their hearts behind at the god's booted feet as sacrifices, silently begging him to forgive them for not being there when he needed them.

And so their world ended, and it never was the same again. The tyrannical, money-hungry Shinra Inc. fell, and the three Turks, finally free of their cage, didn't even bat an eyelash. They were finally released from Shinra's control, fledglings testing their wings, but now it was the memory of Tseng that haunted them and kept them from taking flight. With no one to turn to and nowhere else to go, Elena clung desperately to Reno and Rude, her only two friends in the world. And so she came to love them, despite their faults. And she'd like to think that they loved and respected her, too.

When anyone asked her why she cared so much for the loud, rambunctious Reno and the silent, scary Rude, Elena could immediately make a huge list for them about all the traits in her two friends that she cherished and appreciated. But when someone asked her *how* she loved each of them, that was when she had trouble explaining. She could easily say that she loved Reno like a brother, for she knew that there would never really be anything else between her and Reno than sibling affection and constant bantering back and forth. But when she went to explain in what way she cared for Rude, she started to stumble over her words. She didn't love Rude in the same way that she did Reno. She couldn't say that Rude was like a brother to her because she knew that the thoughts she sometimes had about Rude were not at all sisterly. Elena had no idea why she felt that way; she just did.

Her feelings for Rude, whatever those were, apparently had either been nonexistent or had chosen to lie dormant during her first years with Shinra, when Tseng had been alive. But after his death and the fall of Shinra, Elena had felt her thoughts straying more and more to the tall, baldheaded Turk who hid his amazing liquid green eyes behind a pair of sunglasses. She found herself thinking about what might have been, about what they might have had if she had just...just...

No use thinking about it now, she thought sadly as she watched the raindrops fall from the weeping heavens. It's obvious that he's still caught up over Tifa. I wouldn't be surprised if he's in love with her. Seems like everyone is already. How can I compete with someone like that? I can't, that's how.

Elena was so caught up in her morbid thoughts that she almost fell out of her rocking chair when Reno suddenly came up behind the chair and yanked it back as hard as he could, causing Elena to become almost horizontal with the decking as her feet kicked at nothing but air. All she could see was Reno's smiling face and the ceiling of the porch.

"Reno!" she cried, holding onto the arms of the chair for dear life. "Stop that! Put the chair down!"

Reno grinned down at her as some of his red hair flopped into his eyes. "What are you doing sitting here in the rain, Laney?"

God, she *hated* it when he called her that. Reno came up with the *strangest* names for her.

"You sent me over here, remember?" she growled up at him, trying to remain as still as possible, lest she tip the chair over with her struggles. Reno still had the chair bent back so that it was balancing precariously on the back ends of its two rockers.

Reno smiled again, aquamarine eyes dancing with impish delight. "I did, didn't I? Sorry about that."

"You'd best be sorry," she growled at him good-naturedly, the laughter in his eyes sweetening up her sour mood.

Reno raised an eyebrow. "What was that, Elena dear? You weren't just being impolite to me now, were you? You know, this chair is awful slippery..."

Elena's eyes widened. "No, Reno!" she cried, tightening her death grip on the arms of the chair. "Don't you dare drop me!"

"Leave her alone, Reno," Rude suddenly spoke up from somewhere in front of Elena. She suddenly felt warm hands settle over her rigid ones on the arms of the chair. Her world pitched forward as Reno's face disappeared from view. The chair rocked back to its rightful place, glad playtime was over, and Elena found herself staring right into Rude's sunglasses.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, her cheeks flushing with surprise at finding him so close. "Thank you, Rude."

He nodded politely and released his grip on the chair - and her hands - backing up until he stood a more comfortable distance from her, oblivious to the raindrops pounding on his broad back in search of a companion.

Elena suddenly remembered that she was supposed to be angry with them. "So," she grumbled, folding her arms across her chest as Reno draped his long arms over the back of her rocking chair. "Have you two finished your little male bonding time? Can I be part of the Turks again now?"

Reno smiled at her and patted her on the head, something he did all the time because he knew she hated it. "Of course, Elena. You'll always be part of the Turks."

Elena smiled up at him, thankful for his considerate statement, a rarity for Reno. All three of them settled into a comfortable silence as they sat in the rain, alone together in the cold, not wanting to reenter the bar that they all felt they weren't welcome in. Elena started to gather lonely raindrops in her palms again, giving them a place where they could be together for a short period of time before the water flowed over the edge of her hand and into her lap. Reno stood with his arms draped over the back of Elena's rocking chair, being careful not to upset his friend's puddles of raindrops. Rude looked at Elena and her raindrops with silent affection before turning away from his friends and looking out into the city of Kalm, which was in the process of being drowned by the angry heavens. He stood far away from the others so that he could be alone with his thoughts, but not so far away that they were denied the comfort of his presence, should they need it. All their thoughts were a million miles away.

Reno thought of Tifa and Mika.

Elena thought of Rude and Tseng.

But Rude thought of nothing. He was watching the raindrops.