

Chapter Fifteen: The Agonies of Having Emotions

"This sucks." Cloud Strife

Mirror, mirror hanging on the wall

You don't have to tell me

Who's the biggest fool of all

Mirror, mirror I wish you

Could lie to me

And bring my baby back

Bring my baby back to me

"Mirror, Mirror"

M2M

"Must be nice," Tifa told the chocobo as she held out gloved hands full of greens for him to devour. This particular chocobo was an attractive mountain bird with lovely green feathers that shimmered like gems when wet with dew. Tifa had bred him all by herself, and had named him Stefan after one of her childhood friends from Nibelheim. The chocobo was, of course, very happy to see her and immediately warked, rushing over on the slightly damp ground of his pen and bowing his head to eat the greens from her hands.

Despite her melancholy mood, Tifa smiled as his beak tickled her palms. She was glad that when she and Cloud had built the Final Heaven bar in Kalm, they had had enough room to put in a small pen for eight chocobos in the back. Sure, things tended to get a little cramped, especially when everyone was together like this, but Tifa considered it well worth the effort. She loved chocobos, and she loved having her friends around.

So why wasn't she happy now?

Her smile faded as her thoughts began to spiral downward into darkness. God, why did life have to be so complicated sometimes? Couldn't she be allowed a little smidgen of happiness and serenity after all she had been through? For a while there, she had thought she was happy. She had her bar, she had her friends, she had her health...and she had Cloud. Happiness for all eternity had been right in front of her face sitting on a silver platter, but she missed out on it due to lack of valor, due to tender words that she kept locked inside of her. How many times had she and Cloud been sitting alone, talking peacefully as if the whole world didn't exist, just enjoying the comfort of each other's presence? And how many times had that Silence fallen, the particular breed of Silence that just screams for words to be spoken, but not just any words, oh no, *The Words*, the ones that would change everything, the ones that would make or break the future of their relationship. One step in the wrong direction, one word neglected, one word too many, and her world could have come crashing down around her ears.

She hadn't had the courage to speak the words then, and now she regretted that more than anything. Her shyness seemed so petty now that things were getting turbulent. Would it really have taken much out of her to just look Cloud in those eternally beautiful Mako blue eyes of his and tell him everything, all her thoughts, all her feelings for him? Would it have killed her to do so?

No, it wouldn't have, not then. But now, oh, now it might be a death sentence to go treading onto such thin ice when the lake beneath their feet was so angry and churning. And the fact that their great lake of unspoken thoughts and desires now had another person balancing on its precarious surface was going to make the tangled web into a prodigious labyrinth with a menacing Minotaur lurking around every corner.

Reno...

What had gotten into her then, what had she seen in those eyes that had made her heart and soul respond in such a fashion? It had been like looking in a mirror and seeing her own shadows and pains reflected with equal intensity. And her emotions, rejoicing at having found someone to know their grief, had lurched out desperately to touch that aching soul, to seal that wound. But surely it had been a one-time thing...

No, something in Tifa's mind sneered. *It most definitely wasn't a one-time thing. It'll happen again, rest assured. Every time the name of "Mika" is spoken, that wound in that cold, callous man will begin to bleed again, and you, being the over-sensitive, do-gooder that you are, will stumble over your own two feet trying to help ease his suffering. And in doing so, you will dig your own grave by pushing away the one you've been in love with your entire life. Every time you touch Reno's face with gentleness, you widen the rift between you and Cloud. Every time you pull him into your arms, you flood the rift*

with water. And every time you stroke that fiery hair with such tender hands, you fill the rift with venomous snakes. Soon that rift will turn into a pit, and that pit into a canyon, and that canyon into an ocean; it will become larger and larger until the one with the Mako blue eyes will be as unreachable as the stars themselves. Pity...

"No," Tifa murmured softly, the hands holding the greens for Stefan shaking a bit. "It can't be that way."

But she knew in the darkest region of her heart that things were rapidly plummeting down in that direction. And she was scared, god, was she ever scared. Scared of what could happen if she said or did the wrong things to the wrong people. Scared of hurting either Cloud or Reno. And most of all, the fear that formed the basis of all her other fears was the terrifying prospect of losing Cloud.

She had never thought of it as a possibility before, especially after all they had been through together. She recalled the silly things he had done for her, or had said to her. Dressing up as a girl to get her out of Don Corneo's greasy paws. Braving those precarious cliffs in the Da Chao mountains to pick a flower that had caught her eye. Allowing himself to be dragged on stage at the Gold Saucer during Enchantment Night. Fumbling for his words as he tried to tell her all the "things" he had planned to say to her.

She had taken for granted that he would always be there, that she would always wake up every morning and come downstairs to see him sweeping the floor or building pyramids with the shot glasses, his bottom lip caught gently between his teeth as he concentrated, knowing that he would catch holy hell if he so much as cracked one of the glasses. Golden hair shimmering in the overhead lights. Blue eyes lighting up as he saw her standing in the doorway. The grim, hard line of his mouth turning up in a smile as he looked at her sheepishly.

God, what would she do without him? Wither up and die, surely. Tifa had failed to realize just how much her world revolved around Cloud until she stood face to face with the hideous possibility that she might actually lose him. And she would be the one to blame. It would be all her fault.

But what do I do? she wondered futilely. *I want nothing more than to be with Cloud forever, but Reno...I can't just leave him like that, with that horrible wound festering inside him like a sickness. It'll kill him one day; I know it will. He has to get help before he's gone to the point of no return... But Cloud...*

Everywhere she turned in this endless labyrinth of emotions, she ran into that godforsaken Minotaur. She needed to help Reno; she *wanted* to help him. Something inside told her that this mysterious "Mika" was the key to every unseen pain, every unseen grievance that plagued the fiery-haired Turk. But in helping Reno save his own life, she knew that she ran of the risk of driving Cloud out of her life. She was torn. What should she do? The consequences on either side of the coin were heavy, but she knew that this could very well be a lose/lose situation. There was no in-between; she couldn't choose by not choosing. She had done enough of that in her life...

So many decisions. Against Reno's pain and suffering, against his unspoken need to release his demons, she weighed the frigid landscape of Cloud's eyes as he stared at her. Again she saw the water dripping down his face like tears, his eyes cold and heartless, his voice flat and toneless. She never wanted to experience that again. But then Reno's face and eyes loomed in front of her. The scars - from what? And that horrendous internal scar, that gangrenous wound deep in his soul that began to gush again as she spoke that forbidden name. And again she heard Reno whimpering deep in his throat as he tossed and turned in the dark of the night. Again she saw Cloud's cold, dead eyes.

She couldn't take this anymore.

A wark suddenly jolted her from her dark reverie. Tifa's eyes came back from their journey to the Twilight Zone, the place where they tried to make sense of the labyrinth and dodge the Minotaur. It was then that she realized that Stefan had long since finished devouring the greens in her palms and was now nibbling at her hair in a comforting fashion, cooing softly, as if he sensed her pain. His green feathers tickled her cheek.

"Must be nice," she whispered to him, patting his head gently as she felt a lone tear roll down her cheek. "I wish I were you, so simple, living life without all the agonies of having emotions. Must be nice..."

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*Why did I let you walk away
When all I had to do was
Say I'm sorry
I let my pride get in the way*

*And in the heat of the moment
I was to blame
I must be stupid, must be crazy
Must be out of my mind
Now in the cold light of the day I realize*

*"Mirror, Mirror"
M2M*

The blades of the fan spun slowly on the ceiling, stirring the dead air of the room and sending small breezes down to the man lying on the bed. The reluctant wisps of cool air brushed across his pale, inanimate face, trying again and again to ease the tension written in every feature, every muscle. They swept over the grim, hard line of his mouth, trying to get the jaw to unclench and the lips to soften. When they failed there, the breezes whispered over the muscles around the eyes, which were narrowed in some warped form of inward concentration. Again they gently touched the dark blond eyelashes, whispered through the thin eyebrows, trying to get the muscles to relax and make the man's expression less forbidding.

But Cloud was in no mood to relax, and the breezes soon gave up and dissipated into nothing, leaving the burden of their job to their descendants that were already being birthed from the fan's spinning blades.

Outside, thunder still rumbled with contentment at its own strength, beside itself with narcissism as it gave forth its mighty roars. Cloud snorted in annoyance and rolled onto his side, making sure he was facing away from the window and the rain was that was pounding against it in such an aggravating fashion. But now that he couldn't occupy himself by watching the fan blades spin around and around, he had nothing else to do but study the swirling grain of the door that was clear to his Mako-enhanced vision even though the door itself was a considerable distance away. Cloud traced the spiraling swirls of the door's wood for as long as he could, but then his emotions caught up with him again, and he flipped back onto his back, giving up his effort at distracting himself.

He was very ashamed, not to mention embarrassed, for the way he had acted in front of his friends. Cloud knew that he had many, many faults, but losing complete control of his temper like that had never been a very serious one of them. The only time he could recall that he had let his emotions wield total power over his actions was when he had desperately rushed into the Nibelheim Mako Reactor and impaled the maniacal Sephiroth with Zax's sword. Back then it had worked to his advantage - sort of - but now it was making him look childish and out-of-control, the last thing anyone needed at the moment.

And all because I saw Reno and Tifa together like that, he thought sourly, the vivid image of them in each other's arms once again rising up before his unfocused eyes like the ghastly visage of Lucifer in the pits of hell.

Shaking his head violently and barely containing the urge to yank at his hair, Cloud shoved the picture from his mind and strove to concentrate all his thoughts on planning, something he had failed to do when he had had everyone together.

Okay, he told himself. *Vincent and Yuffie are back and safe and are not missing any body parts. Good. I pissed Yuffie off, but she'll get over it. Memo to self: don't call her a brat again. Now...Reeve. Still missing. Where could he be? No earthly clue.*

I shouldn't have left her alone with Reno...

No, Cloud! Focus! Reeve! Okay, find the Running Man. Where's the Running Man? Hell if I know.

I should have known Reno would take advantage of her...

Damn me! Running Man! Now, Rude saw him in the remains of Hojo's lab. Would he go back there? It would be pretty stupid of him to do so, but it's all we have to go on. We're not going to go on another ghost ship chase...

What will I do without her?

Cloud let out a cry of frustration that was happily mimicked by the rumbling thunder. He couldn't concentrate on anything! One of his closest friends was missing, probably in the hands of a madman or maybe even dead by now, and all he could think about was one woman! What did that tell him? Gee, well, maybe he was in love...

And he was, he knew he was. Would there have ever been anyone else for him? Aeris had been a possibility for a while, but now she was dead. Sure, he missed her a great deal and sometimes it hurt even to think about her and all she had done for them, but all along, something inside him had told him that Tifa Lockheart was the only woman for him. Maybe it was the memory at the well so long ago that kept this thought pounding through his head, or maybe it was the knowledge that he had gone off to join SOLDIER just to get her to notice him. Then again, it very well could have been the fact that she

had remained faithfully at his side when he had had Mako poisoning, basking him in the warm comfort of her presence even though he had no recollection of her being there. She had braved the voices and fury of the Lifestream for him, all to help him rediscover himself, the Cloud Jeremy Strife that he had thought was lost forever, lost into the horrible servitude of being a mere Sephiroth-clone, the puppet Jenova had believed him to be. Tifa had taught him to believe in himself, in the memories they had together. She had taught him how to feel, to smile, to cry, to...love.

And now she was fading out of his life, it seemed, being sucked into the abyss by a fiery-haired demon to which lies and treachery and deceit meant nothing. Love meant nothing to Reno. Devotion meant nothing to Reno. Tifa as a person meant nothing to Reno. All the redheaded Turk was interested in was her body, with its generous curves and creamy skin. That's all Reno was ever interested in. A man like that didn't know the meaning of the word love; to him, love was synonymous with lust, with carnal desire. Such a man would defile Tifa, taint her with his poison. Cloud couldn't let that happen.

God, what am I thinking? he wondered. *Maybe I'm overreacting completely. Maybe what I saw didn't mean anything to either of them. But is there any other logical explanation for it? Who does Reno think he is, moving in on my...*

And who do you think you are, Strife? a voice in the back of his mind suddenly sneered. *You're treating the one you love most as if she's some sort of possession, a cherished item your macho defense mechanism refuses to let go of because you think it belongs to you and you alone. What kind of person does that make you? A coward, that's what! You had your chance to make her your companion for the rest of your life. For a year you danced around your emotions, filled with uncertainty and ambivalence, wimping out when you had just gotten the courage to ask her what you've probably been planning to ask her your entire life. You were on top of the world, and you refused to see the beauty that was all around you, refused to submit to its majesty because you thought it was too good to be true. And now look what happened. You missed the boat, buddy, and now you're drowning in the cruel sea, all alone. Don't you think all the other fish were just waiting for you to do something like that so they could have an opportunity to hoist themselves up onto the boat with the sea goddess? Man, you really screwed up this time...*

It was times like this that Cloud wished that Sephiroth had been right, that Cloud was only a puppet who had no emotions, who only pretended to be sad or angry. A puppet, a clone to whom tears came easily but without meaning. Cloud wished he felt nothing. He wished he were cold inside, his soul a frozen landscape of hollow thoughts and no feelings whatever. He wished he was heartless and aloof, his eyes empty and icy. Sort of like Vincent.

But no such luck.

Shifting his weight slightly on the soft mattress, Cloud rolled onto his side and growled into the pillow, "This sucks."

And the thunder rumbled in agreement.