

Chapter Twenty-Three: The Pain of Love: Reno's Story

"I'm not going to abandon you, Reno." Tifa Lockheart

*She clings to me like cellophane
Fake plastic submarine
Slowly driving me insane
But now that's over
So what if the sex was great
Just a temporary escape
Another think I grew to hate
But now that's over
Why, why do you always kick me when I'm high?
Knock me down till we see eye to eye
Figured her out I know she
May not be Miss Right but she'll do right now
I used to hang on every word
Each lie was more absurd
Kept me so insecure
But now that's over
She taught me how to trust
And to believe in us
And then she taught me how to cuss...that bitch!
It's over
You know, I used to be such a nice boy
"Right Now"
S.R. 71*

Elena blinked blearily and tried to focus on not tumbling down the stairs in front of her. One hand, the formerly manicured nails now snagged and chipped from one too many battles with giant sewer-dwelling snakes, groped for the handrail and gripped it tightly, using it as a brace for her weary body as she carefully placed one foot in front of the other, the wood creaking underneath her stockinged feet.

Elena was not what one would consider a morning person. The female Turk had a generally sweet personality once she had at least two cups of coffee in her system and a head of hair that didn't make her look like she had stuck a wet finger in an electrical socket. Oh, and make-up wasn't bad either, and neither was a set of decent clothes, but considering what had happened to her last two suits, Elena had decided that her coming down in her pajamas and bathrobe would be a statement that she needed a break. No more running around sewers for her, at least for a day or two.

As she continued to descend the stairs with great care, she heard voices in the main room of the bar. Sounded like Cloud and Barret were up, and she had glanced in Reno's room on her way down and saw that his bed was empty. Unless he was in the shower or something, he was probably down there as well. Normally, Elena would be embarrassed that anyone other than Reno or Rude would be seeing her in her nightclothes, but lately, she found herself getting more and more uncomfortable around the members of AVALANCHE. The only one that still creeped her out a bit was Vincent Valentine. And Cait Sith.

"Ew, look what the cat dragged in," a gruff voice commented as Elena entered the bar with a yawn, not bothering to cover her mouth.

Elena's yawn turned into a growl as she put her hands on her hips, realizing that Cid was apparently up as well. "I should have figured you'd be down here," she huffed, her voice still hoarse from sleep. "I didn't any earthquake-caliber snoring coming from down the hall."

Cid, who was completely dressed except for his flight jacket, blew a cloud of smoke in her direction. "Nice to see you're Ms. Sunshine today," he commented with a grin.

"Whatever," Elena commented distractedly, eyes roving around mechanically for the coffee maker that she knew had to be hiding somewhere.

Barret, who was seated at the table with Cid and Cloud, glared at her. "Be quiet," he hissed. "I'm talkin' to my daughter!"

For a moment, Elena had no idea what he was talking about until he turned his attention away from her and she realized that the big man had the phone pressed to his other ear, talking loudly to be heard over what had to be a bad connection. The blonde contemplated annoying him some more, but another yawn erupted from her mouth, and her search for the coffee took top priority once again.

Cloud noticed what she was doing and pointed to the end of the counter with a bare hand, absently sipping from his coffee cup as he did so. Elena noticed in passing that he had finally changed out of his ratty, torn uniform and was instead dressed in a simple white button-down shirt and a pair of blue jeans. His wrists were completely devoid of any type of armor or gloves, and his spiky blond hair looked slightly damp, probably from a shower unless he had taken a dip in the floodwaters outside.

Hope all this casual dress is a good thing, Elena thought warily as she poured herself some coffee, the scent of the dark liquid filling the pristine cup enough to make her perk up a bit.

Turning away from the coffee maker and gingerly sipping the steaming liquid, Elena surveyed the bar in front of her. Cloud, Cid, and Barret were seated at a table, sipping coffee (in Cloud's case), smoking cigarettes (in Cid's case), and talking on the phone (in Barret's case). For the first time, she noticed the lean form of Red XIII resting on the floor near Cloud's chair, one golden eye staring up at Elena calmly.

"You're welcome to come and sit at the table," the lion-like beast said politely, raising his head.

"Yeah, woman," Cid echoed absently, loudly yanking out the chair next to him. "We don't bite. C'mere and sit down."

"Thank you," Elena said, happily surprised that they were being so nice to her. Probably because she wasn't wearing her Turks suit.

Whatever the case, she was pleased that they had at least invited her to join them. If there was one thing she hated, it was feeling like an outcast. Padding over to the table, she paused to pat Red XIII on the head briefly before seating herself between Cloud and Cid. She sipped her coffee contentedly, realizing for the first time that the Final Heaven bar was starting to feel more home to her than her apartment in Midgar. Fancy that. Before she knew it, she might actually be calling AVALANCHE her friends!

Not that they would be bad friends to have, Elena thought as she poked Red with her toe and stuck her tongue out at him when he turned to glare at her. *They're actually kind of nice to be around...sometimes.*

"I'm hungry," Cid announced suddenly.

"So eat," Cloud replied smartly, amusement flickering in his eyes.

Cid made a face at him, fiddling with his pack of his cigarettes absent-mindedly. "There isn't any food. Where's Tifa?"

"Shower," Cloud replied shortly, eyes focused on the window across the room and the rain rolling down the glass.

"Why don't you make your own breakfast?" Elena demanded of the pilot. "Why do you always have to have Tifa make it for you?"

Cid glared at her, blue eyes sharp underneath the thick blond eyebrows. "Why don't you make us some breakfast?" he shot back.

Elena's scowl melted into a grin. "Cid, you don't want to see what happens when I decide to make use of the kitchen. I couldn't cook to save my own life."

"Same here," Cid echoed grimly.

"Same here," Cloud said.

Barret suddenly whirled to glare at them. "You guys shut yer holes!" he roared. "I'm trying to talk here!"

"So go outside or something!" Cid bellowed back, matching Barret glare for glare. "We havin' a nice conversation here and you keep interrupting us!"

Barret's face darkened with anger. "Goddamn asshole," he started to curse, but Elena suddenly heard a child-like voice exclaim on the phone, "Papa!"

All the anger immediately evaporated from Barret's face, and his tone became apologetic. "Sorry 'bout that, Marlene. I jes' yelling at your Uncle Cid."

"He's mistreatin' me, Marlene!!!" Cid called loudly, a grin spreading across his weathered face.

"No, honey, Uncle Cid's just fine," Barret said into the phone, giving Cid a dark glare, which caused the pilot to break out into hysterics. Elena laughed into her coffee cup and saw Cloud doing the same thing.

"You people so goddamn noisy!" the big man declared, leaping up from his seat and storming out of the room with the phone still held to his ear. Cid laughter turned to a wheezing half-cough/half-laugh, and Elena reached over to whack him on the back until he stopped.

Tifa suddenly came down the stairs, her hair damp and dressed in a plain sleeveless black shirt and a pair of denim shorts that showed off her muscled legs, but with more tact than her miniskirt.

More casualness, Elena thought, trying not to be jealous of that fact that Tifa at her worst probably looked better than Elena at her best. *Things are looking up. She doesn't even have her gloves on.*

"Was that Barret I heard yelling?" Tifa asked, glancing around the bar.

"Who else can yell that loud or storm off so eloquently?" Cloud responded with a smile.

Tifa returned his smile, but then her brow suddenly creased as she continued looking around the bar. "Where's Reno?" she asked worriedly. "He wasn't in his room, and I haven't seen him anywhere."

"That guy's been acting funny," Cid responded, sounding a little concerned in spite of himself. "He just came down and sat there for a while, then left when Barret got on the phone. Maybe he didn't want to hear that old geezer's babbling?"

"He left out into the rain?" Tifa asked, anxiety written across her features. "But Kalm is almost completely flooded..."

"He probably went down to the beach," Cloud said quietly, staring into his coffee cup as if it were the most interesting thing in the world. "Maybe you should go after him, Tifa?"

Tifa's burgundy eyes were overbright as she shifted her gaze to the blond swordsman seated next to Elena. "Cloud..." she said softly, and everyone else in the room could sense some entirely private communication passing between the two of them, something that Elena, Cid and Red - as outsiders - dare not disturb.

Cloud looked at her, all gentle smiles and sad blue eyes. "Go," was all he said, the word spoken so tenderly and with such tragic meaning that the others felt ashamed for bearing witness to such private emotion.

Tifa, for all her awareness of the pain of others and her compassion for those with bleeding hearts, only nodded her thanks to Cloud and strode from the bar and into the rain. But everyone knew that she didn't need to speak for Cloud to understand and hear the words residing in her heart. He had seen all he needed to see in her eyes - saw things that everyone else was blind to, and they knew it as well as he.

That's why after Tifa had temporarily forsaken the warmth and company in the bar for the endless fall of raindrops and the bleeding soul of Reno calling to her in the distance, no one dared to speak to Cloud about it, ask him what had just passed between him and Tifa. The knowledge was not theirs to have.

So silence hung in the bar until Cid finally whimpered, "She just *left*. Who's going to make me breakfast now?!"

"Oh good God!!" Elena exclaimed in exasperation, rolling her eyes. "Eat cereal or something!"

"Can it, woman," Cid snapped at her before suddenly leaning down so that he could peer under the table.

"Hey! What are you-" Elena started to protest.

"Hey Red!" Cid called, maintaining his hold on his cigarette with a sheer force of will. "You wouldn't know how to whip me up some breakfast now, would you?"

On the floor, Red rolled his eye and answered flatly, "Certainly. Let me just put on my apron and mosey into the kitchen."

Cid's blue eyes widened. "Really?"

"No, not really."

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Tifa stood on the edge of the deck outside the bar, looking miserably out at the town that she had come to call home. The water had risen so high that the steps leading down from the decking were completely submerged, and the water was

already lapping at the upper level with hungry intent. And still the cruel raindrops plummeted from the dark heavens above, continuing to flood Kalm as if to fulfill some ravenous grudge that they had against the small town. Most of the townspeople had already left, but Tifa could still see some families literally paddling out of town in rafts, clad in rain slickers, with their belongings wrapped up in plastic bags. Tifa wondered how long it would be until she would have to join them. The only reason the bar had remained unscathed so far was because it had been built on stilts (making for a longer fall when she tossed troublemakers out of her bar). But the water trying to get onto the upper deck was swollen and possessed by some insatiable hunger - the same hunger that had made its brethren swallow Kalm whole. What the small village done to merit such unfair treatment from the heavens? And why now, of all times?

Sighing, Tifa tried to push the thoughts from her head. Standing there moping and lamenting the inevitable wasn't going to get her to Reno any faster. Bracing herself, she raised one booted foot and stepped down onto the first step, and consequently, out from under the cover of the porch roof. Rain eagerly soaked into her clothes and hair, and she felt the floodwater seep into her boot with astounding quickness.

Well, there's no use prolonging this experience, she thought grumpily before walking down the steps, her legs entirely underwater in a mere matter of seconds. Wincing whenever hidden debris would brush teasingly past her bare legs, she stopped at the bottom of the steps and realized that she was standing at the very same place that the walkway leading from the bar would have been, had the flood not swallowed it up. She was waist deep in the murky rainwater, and was not looking forward to wading through the rest of it to get out of town and to beach.

But wade she did, one step at a time, fighting the currents the entire way and trying to ignore whenever random items would float near to brush against her sides. Refugees from flooded houses, everything from children's toys to actual doors were floating on the surface of the water, all alone until they sank to the bottom with the dozens of other household items that had preceded them. For some reason, seeing the floodwaters swallow things such as baby rattles and stuffed animals that a child had probably adored at one time or another only increased Tifa's resolve to beat out Mother Nature. Gritting her teeth, she forced strength into her legs and determination into her heart. Strands of dark brown hair flopped into her eyes to join the raindrops in their attempt to obscure her vision. The currents tried their hardest to knock her legs out from under her and send her floating back to the bar.

Yet, still she pressed on. She could feel in her heart that Reno needed her. The magnitude of emotion was so strong, in fact, that it was as if she heard his voice calling to her from afar, pleading, begging. And when she heard that soundless voice and scented the blood from that horrible internal wound, rank and vicious on the winds, her own heart began to ache.

Finally, after what seemed to be an eternity, fifteen minutes found her striding wearily to the beach, boots sloshing through puddles and into grass that was already laced through with the sand that foretold of the inevitable destination of her path. Tifa hugged herself with her arms in attempt to preserve what little warmth she had left in her body. In front of her, the sight of the ocean spreading out in all directions with the storm clouds churning angrily overhead incited such a deep terror - an abysmal feeling of utter *helplessness* - that she nearly whirled on heel and strode back to Kalm.

The only thing that kept her advancing was the lonely figure with fiery red hair seated in the sand, staring out to sea. Reno had taken off his navy blue suit jacket, and the article of clothing was lying next to him on the sand, rain pooling in the saturated cloth. His back was to her, and his waterlogged white shirt, made transparent by the rain, clung to his skin like Shiva's icy embrace. The rain had also dyed his hair an even darker shade of red, so that his ponytail looked like a river of blood frozen in its course down the middle of his back. Amazingly enough, the wild spikes that stuck up from the top of his head - physical evidence of his belligerent nature - hadn't been forced into submission by the rain, and were still sticking up in all their rebellious glory.

He looks so lonely, Tifa thought sadly as she came up behind him cautiously, boots sinking into the wet sand. He was seated with his one of his long legs drawn up to his chest, his elbow resting on his knee. The other leg was spread lazily across the sand in front of him, rain pooling in the dent that the heel of his boot was making in the sand. Her heart ached for him.

"Hey, Reno," she greeted softly, wondering if he could even hear her over the rain. "Can I sit here?"

"Free country," he said shortly, not even bothering to turn his head. He had probably already known she was there, anyways.

Still hugging herself protectively, Tifa eased her body down and knelt in the sand close to Reno's side, folding her legs beneath her as gracefully as humanly possible. She suddenly felt a fluttering in her stomach and labeled it as "nervous." This was the first time she and Reno had been alone - first time they had really *spoken* to each other since their ill-timed embrace a couple of days ago. Tifa had a sinking feeling inside her that Reno had worsened since then. He wouldn't have been out here otherwise, then, would he?

"What are you doing out here?" Reno suddenly asked quietly, aquamarine eyes riveted on the churning sea ten feet away from where they were seated.

You called me out here, Tifa wanted to say.

But instead she said softly, "I was worried about you."

Reno snorted. "Why?" he demanded harshly.

Tifa immediately grew tired of the little game he was playing. "Don't run from it, Reno," she said as unobtrusively as she could, lest she anger him. "I know it's hurting you, maybe even killing you. I'm...I'm here for you, Reno."

"Are you?" Reno asked flatly, suddenly reaching over and picking up his suit jacket from the sand next to him. Wringing water out of it, he continued, "What if I told you that you had come all the way out here just to hear me say that I'm not going to tell you jack shit about what I'm feeling?"

Tifa turned her head to the side and stared at him, suddenly feeling tears dancing in her eyes where sparks of anger should have been forming. She could hear the pain in his voice, and she knew that he heard it as well. Only, Reno was never one to give in to pain, so he twisted and mutilated it into harsh words laced with bitter poison, meant to drive people away and thus protect the impregnable walls he had erected around his heart.

How lonely, Tifa thought, *if he's been doing this his entire life, shoving people away repeatedly...he must be so lonely...all the time.*

Tifa suddenly smiled, surprising them both. "I don't care," she said lightly. "I'll just stay out here and watch the sea with you. I'm not going to abandon you, Reno."

The redheaded Turk suddenly turned to her, suspicion clouding and disguising the pain in his eyes. "Are you for real?" he asked sharply, clutching his damp jacket to himself as if he were ready to leave at any moment.

Tifa turned to him and smiled gently. "I'm not going anywhere Reno. I'm here for you."

Reno's harsh expression wavered violently, his walls crumbling under the barrage of friendship as her soul searched for his, seeking to ease his pain.

"Tell me about her," Tifa urged softly, eyes locked fearlessly onto his.

His brow suddenly creased in distress - a most disarming expression when seen on Reno - and he abruptly turned his face away from her, staring at the jacket he had clutched in his lap, heedless of the raindrops rolling down his scarred cheeks like tears. For a split second, it almost seemed like the scars themselves were weeping.

"Who was she, Reno?" Tifa whispered, almost bold enough to touch his shoulder. "Who was Mika?"

Reno flinched, something that Tifa had never seen him do before. She knew she was risking a lot, going at him like this - urging his wound to bleed even more - but it was the only thing she knew to do. Her mother used to squeeze the flesh around her cuts when she was little, Tifa recalled.

She had said the wound would be cleansed by its own blood.

"Why does it matter - who she was?" Reno suddenly asked softly, his eyes still averted. "She was just a person in my past..."

"But your past is still part of you, Reno," Tifa said quietly, feeling his pain starting to trickle out, drop by lonely drop. Just like hers.

"She's dead, you know," Reno suddenly said coldly.

"You still grieve for her?" Tifa asked softly, knowing how hard this was for him.

Reno closed his eyes, rain cascading from his fiery hair and down his eyelids. "Maybe," he admitted quietly. "A part of me does. A part of me always will." His voice suddenly hardened. "But Mika belonged to another man."

"Another man?"

"Yeah. Another Reno. The person I was then is drastically different from the person I am now. I was another man, then. And now..." he opened his eyes and looked at Tifa "...that man is *dead*."

Burgundy locked onto aquamarine. "Are you sure, Reno?"

Once again, the harshness in his eyes faltered, long eyelashes fluttering closed over his Mako eyes and then opening again. "I used to be sure," he said quietly. "But lately..." His voice trailed off, but Tifa already knew what he wanted to say.

Ever since you mentioned her name in the bar, her ghost has returned to haunt me.

"Are you sure you want to stay?" Reno asked, eyes boring into hers.

Tifa nodded silently, words escaping her for the moment.

The redheaded Turk looked away and sighed deeply - a heartbreakingly sad sound - and suddenly reached out to drape his jacket around Tifa's shoulders, shielding her from some of the raindrops.

"Thank you," Tifa said softly, touched by the thoughtful action. She drew the jacket closer around herself, not caring that the cloth was just as soaked as her own clothes were.

Reno shrugged and turned his face up the sky, letting the raindrops strike him ruthlessly on the face again and again. His aquamarine eyes glittered dully even though there was no sunlight to ignite their glow.

"I've never told this story to anyone, you know," Reno whispered.

Tifa nodded in understanding, her heart aching for him. "I know this isn't going to be easy for you," she said, slipping her hand into his. "But for what it's worth, I'm here with you."

Reno looked down at her hand held in his. Her slender fingers, though callused from years and years of extensive training, were dwarfed by his hand. Without her gloves, her hand looked pale and naked and lonely, and she wondered if his would look the same if he were to remove the fingerless gloves that were like a second skin for him. Gently, he rubbed his thumb against the back of her hand, as if fascinated by such soft skin on a tough woman like her. The touch sent pleasurable shivers down her spine, and though Tifa was slightly surprised at the intimacy in that simple gesture, she only held onto Reno's hand more tightly.

Fingers intertwined with hers, Reno returned his gaze up to the sky, eyes slipping closed against the sight of the piercing raindrops and the sky-shattering lightening streaking across the horizon. The pale skin of his face shone like the porcelain skin of some marble god, flawless except for the twin lines of those two scars, marring his rugged good looks forever. Raindrops rolled down his face like tears as Tifa watched his eyelashes fluttering slightly.

Then his eyes slowly slid open, and she suddenly received the impression that a different man was now sitting with her. There was no laughter in those eyes, no mockery, no humor. The rain had washed these things away. Beside her now was a man with sad eyes shot through with bitterness that hid a deep well of hatred in their depths.

Reno lowered his face from the churning sky, eyes half-closed as he fell deep into the embrace of memory.

Then he began to speak.

"I guess it must have been seven years ago that this whole shitty mess began. I was eighteen, then, and it was way before Tseng picked me up off the streets and cleaned me up, so to speak. I didn't even know what the Turks were back then, and Shinra was just a mediocre electric company in the process of making its way to the top. As you probably already know, I grew up the slums. My father was a drunkard, and my mom had run off on us a long time ago. I was independent and in the streets by the time I was twelve. I had killed a man when I was ten. Not a very clean killing, mind you. Got my hands and clothes drenched in the guy's blood. For some reason, ever since then, I just didn't have the nerve to make any friends or get close to anyone. I kept getting the stupid idea that everyone I met was going to bleed all over me or something dumb like that.

"Anyways, so I didn't have any real friends. Just a bunch of lowlifes like me who I bought drugs from once in a while. They would cover my back in a fight if they felt like it, and I would do the same, if I was in the mood. You know, not real close or anything. A couple of them had sisters who would give me a lay once in a while for free, but I was mostly on my own in those days.

"I had been living in a neighborhood in Sector 2 for a while when I heard about a new girl who worked the corner near my apartment." He looked at Tifa. "You know what that terminology means, right?"

Tifa nodded. "She was a whore."

"Yeah. Believe me when I say that the Sector 2 I lived in then was a lot worse than any of the Sectors during the rise of Sephiroth a year ago. Much as I hate to admit it, Shinra did manage to cut the petty crimes down just a little bit. But Shinra was virtually nonexistent then, and crimes and prostitution were really bad then. Not that I minded or anything. Anyhow,

to spare all the gory details, I decided to see what was up with this girl. We didn't get many new people back then, and all the other girls in the neighborhood were getting boring. It was just simple curiosity, really. At least, that's what it started off as.

"Well, it was nighttime when I first laid eyes on her, naturally. She was...stunning. The most beautiful woman I had ever seen in my entire life, and I had thought I had seen them all. But there was something different about her, and I think that's what drew me to her in the first place. I watched her from the shadows for a little while from the shadows, just to see how she worked. She didn't seem to be incredibly bright - a rather naïve and maybe even dumb one, that woman, actually. It was obvious that she didn't really know what she was doing. Hell, maybe I was moved to pity by her sheer ignorance. Or was it just her stupidity? I still don't know today, but that night I decided to approach her. Why I did it, I don't know. I didn't have any money or any need to take her to bed even though it was clear that she was attractive. Maybe I just felt sorry for her or something.

"That's probably it because when I got up to her, I told her in so many words that I basically wanted to 'be her friend.' And she, in so many words, told me that if I didn't have any money, I should 'buzz off', to put it nicely.

"So I buzzed off. For a day or so. I was back again the next night.

"Of course, she wasn't very pleased to see me, but I didn't care. I was having a good old time. I liked her, I guess. I wanted to protect her. I didn't want just any sleazy guy touching her. It took while, but eventually we hit it off. At first she didn't like me hanging around because I 'scared off' her clients, even though I didn't - and still don't - think I'm that much of a scary guy. But then she actually started to look happy to see me whenever I walked up to her every night to bug her. I guess that surprised me a bit. No one ever looked happy to see me before. Made my heart feel kind of funny, but that's beside the point. To make a long story short, we started seeing each other during the day as well. I got her off the streets and we started living together.

"Her name was Alette, and she told me that she had come to Midgar from some land very far off, to escape from an oppressive family or something. Actually, the words she used were 'family curse' but I just assumed she had had abusive relatives or something. She didn't seem particularly smart or shrewd or anything, which you had to watch out for since in those days some of the slum girls were more intelligent and cunning than the men that claimed to control them. But I thought Alette was basically harmless so I wasn't at all worried. Looking back, however, I remember that she used to get this dark look in her eyes whenever she was alone - a dark, pensive look that now makes me think that she might have been feigning stupidity the entire time. But I was young then. Young and stupid, and I thought she was even younger and even stupider than I was.

"Of course, when a man like me is living in an apartment alone with an attractive woman like her, it's hard to keep oneself restrained. So soon we started sleeping together, and one day I came home only to have her tell me that she was pregnant.

"She wanted to get rid of it, but I didn't. I was curious as to what it would feel like to have a baby around the house. I was damn excited. Alette wasn't nearly so happy. She was yelling and crying and telling me that we couldn't afford a baby and that we were too young to be raising a family. I was laughed at her for a while and then I asked her to marry me. That sold her. I knew it would. It had always been one of her dreams: to get married.

"So we got married - legally, mind you - in this shitty old church with a priest who had had one tequila too many and one of the local pimps as our witness. It was great. Alette was ecstatic, and I had to admit that I felt kind of warm and fuzzy and all that good shit when I said, 'I do.' It was like nothing else existed but me and her. I think that during those first months, I actually knew some measly shred of happiness.

"But I didn't want to be happy. I knew all too well that when you were happy, there would always be someone to come along and take that happiness away. And what were you left with then? Nothing but the shards of a broken heart and a razor to slit your wrists with, if you were lucky. So I reverted back into my old laid back self, with half-hearted smiles and hollow words. But if Alette noticed, she didn't care. She was nervous about having the baby, but I could tell that she was taking some pride in walking around with that swollen belly and getting the nursery ready. Sometimes, at night, I would wake up and hear her talking to the baby while it was still in her womb, and I would strain to hear what she was saying, but she was speaking a different language - her native tongue. I could only understand a few words of it, so I always went back to sleep.

"Finally, one day when I came home from work to see her lying on the floor in the living room, her body shaking with the contractions that always came before the birth of a baby. She was sweating like a goddamn pig and breathing so hard that I thought she was going to freaking die or something! I'm not ashamed to admit that I freaked out. I mean, we lived in a shitty apartment in the shitty slums with shitty neighbors so there was no one who could have given us advice on what to

do in these kinds of situations! I spent about five minutes running around the apartment like a chocobo with its head cut off, and every time Alette would yell at me, I would just yell back at her. I had no idea what to do! But eventually, after I had decided that she didn't have just gas or cramps or anything like that, it hit me that, hey, this damn woman is having a baby on our living room floor!

"It took a lot of coaxing and yelling at each other, but I finally got Alette down to the car and on our way to the nearest hospital. We had a 'medical center' in Sector 2, but I didn't trust the freakos there as far as I could throw them so I got the bright idea to drive clear over to Sector 5, where there was a place that could actually be called a real hospital. Of course, Alette was in labor in the passenger seat and there I was going berserk in the driver's seat so the trip was far from pleasant. I don't even remember it that well, to tell you the truth. I think I knocked over a couple of mailboxes and ran over a fire hydrant, but...oh well. The point is that I made it to the hospital in time for the doctors to deliver the baby. It was a baby girl.

"That girl was named Mikayela Dayanera Mitsuru.

"But from the very beginning, we just called her 'Mika.'"

Something caught in Reno's voice, and he suddenly fell silent, words trailing into nothing as he squinted against the rain, staring out at the churning ocean. Tifa squeezed his hand, reassuring him of her presence while her mind virtually clanked out loud, trying to process all she had just heard.

His...daughter. I had been expecting a wife on an ex-lover, but never a...little girl. Mika...

Tifa wanted to say something to him, encourage him to get his entire story out and purge his soul of the pain festering within, but words failed her. She didn't feel as if it was her right to speak at a time like this. Her throat was unbearably tight, and she could only gaze at Reno's scarred profile with overbright eyes until he finally pulled in a deep breath...and continued.

"I loved that little girl. Loved her with every fiber of my being. I had never really loved another human being until her. Mainly because I believed that all of mankind was foul and corrupt, and everyone was out to get me. I cared for Alette, and after Mika was born, I *did* love that woman, but it was an obligatory sort of love. She was the mother of my child. I *had* to love her, you know? But with Mika it was totally different. I loved her the very second I held her in my arms. I didn't care that she was screaming her little head off and was covered with all that gross nasty stuff that newborns always have on them. She was just the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. She had red hair, but it was much darker than mine - more like auburn. Her eyes, when she opened them, were brown like Alette's, but they had blue-green flecks around the pupil. I had never seen anything so delicate or innocent as her.

"It was then that I decided that I would protect this baby, my daughter, with my life. The poison that had tainted me would never touch her. Never.

"So I gave up everything for that baby. Everything. Drinking. Smoking. Running around with my gang member friends. I held down two jobs and managed to get us out of that crappy old apartment and into a real house. It was still in the slums, but, hey, beggars can't be choosers. Alette stayed home and took care of Mika during the day while I worked. Alette loved Mika almost as much as I did. She played with her and took her in the park in this old baby stroller that I had 'bought' from our neighbors. I didn't like her taking Mika out by herself since I woman and a baby alone just scream vulnerability, you know? But Alette just laughed and said that she was 'one tough bitch' and could take care of Mika by herself. I laughed with her.

"That first year was hard, but damn it, I was happy. Nothing else existed for me but my wife and my daughter. Shinra had risen to power and was at war with Wutai, but I really didn't give a damn. As long as nothing intruded on my little world, I was fine. I worked my ass into the ground to keep my family fed and to bring home toys for Mika every once in a while, and as long as I could see that little girl when I got home, no work was too hard or strenuous for me. I brought her home baby rattles even though I got bashed in that head with those things I don't know how many times. Mika was also fond of flinging baby food at us, but...what was the loss of a couple of shirts pitted against the laughter of my daughter? So many things were insignificant when compared to my little girl. Drugs and drinking were things of the past, and I felt a strange sort of pride that I was no longer reliant on those sorts of things. I'd like to think that I was a good person, all those years ago.

"I was a nice guy. I really was.

"But...but...I should have learned my fucking lesson years before. Life is a bitch. Life is the biggest bitch anyone will ever have to deal with. Fate will chew you up and spit you out and trample over you if given half a chance. Human life isn't shit

in the Planet's eyes. Anyone who believes that is seriously deluded. Surrendering to total happiness is just flat out stupid, and that was the biggest mistake that I have ever made in my entire miserable life.

"Five years ago, I believe, is when the shit hit the fan. Mika was two by then. I was twenty. I never knew Alette's age so I couldn't tell you how old she was. I came home from work one day and Mika toddled up to me like she usually did. She was always happy to see me, that little girl. But this time, she tugged on my shirt until I picked her up, and then she refused to let go. I didn't know what was wrong with her, and I couldn't find Alette anywhere in the house. I tried to put Mika down so that I could look around, but she just held me tighter. Poor girl was trembling; she was scared to death. Most little girls her age were afraid of dogs and spiders and snakes, but Mika was never one to scare easily. For something to frighten her so bad that she became clingy like that was rare.

"The only thing that I could think of that might have scared her was, obviously, the fact that she was alone in the goddamn house...for who knows how long. Alette was nowhere to be found, and I searched the place high and low to the best of my abilities with Mika clinging to my neck. It was only after half an hour of searching that I thought to ask Mika where her mother was. But when I did ask, she started to cry. Now, I can't stand to see people cry. It bothers me. And when women or babies, especially little girls, start bawling, I just can't take it. It's like I can't breathe or something. And this was my own daughter crying so that made me all the more nervous.

"It took a lot of soothing and rocking but eventually she told me that there had been a 'tall man' in the house. Of course, every person is 'tall' to a two-year-old girl, but the point was that there had been a stranger in the house. I was immediately thinking some cutthroat thief had snuck into the house, taken Alette, but had somehow passed up Mika. She had just gotten a new set of building blocks the week before, and she was real quiet when she was building her 'dollhouses' so she wouldn't wake the 'babies'. It was only logical that an intruder would pass her up.

"But then Mika told me that the 'tall man' had talked with her 'mama' and then the two of them had left the house together, through the front door. That just stunned me. Alette had let a strange man into the house and then gone out with him, leaving a two-year-old in the house by herself? Alette's purse was still in our room, and she had apparently had enough time to lock the door behind her so I really didn't think that she had been forced out of the house. If it was a thief, he would have told her to bring her purse. And Mika said that the 'tall man' didn't even touch Alette and that Alette had just followed him out the door.

"For me, that description only meant one thing: she was messing around with someone behind my back. Nowadays, I really could care less about that sort of thing. Some of the women I sleep with are married. But at that time, it was unforgivable. It was even worse that she had let the bastard into the house where Mika could see him.

"In short, I was pissed. *Royally* pissed.

"By the grace of God, Mika was asleep when I heard the front door open and shut quietly. It was Alette, of course, sneaking into our house like she was some sort of dirty prowler.

"I flew off the handle. What can I say? I'm not known for my patience and tranquility. I was yelling and screaming and ranting. It was 'how could you leave Mika alone in the house, you stupid bitch?!' and 'don't think I don't know what you're doing, you damn whore!'. Some of the most horrible things I've ever said in my entire life were said on that night. And the entire time, Alette just stared at me with this dumb, vacant look on her face. She didn't say anything in her defense, just stood there looking stupid. No remorse. No apologies. No anger. Just...that empty look, like someone had torn her brain out of her head and she could no longer function.

"I made her sleep on the couch that night, and she did without any protest. I stayed in our room with Mika, but I didn't sleep at all that night. I just sat in the chair beside the bed, watching my little girl while she slept, and all my thoughts were filled with rage and vindictiveness. The only thing that I could think about was how to make Alette sorry for how much she had frightened my daughter. Now, as I look back, I wish I had been thinking differently. I wish I could have just reflected on Mika and how much I loved her, and how her two years of existence had been the two happiest years in my life. I wish my thoughts hadn't been so poisonous, and now it seems a blasphemy that I gazed upon her sleeping form and thought those kinds of angry thoughts. Visions of violence were just something that you didn't see when in the presence of Mika. Unforgivable. Just as what Alette did was unforgivable. I suppose that dumb bitch and I really were suited for each other, in the end.

"The next morning dawned like any other. I got ready for work, and Mika went to play with her blocks like she did every single day of her short life. Mika, bless her heart, didn't seem to realize what was happening. She ran up and hugged her mother first thing in the morning, babbling cheerfully like most two-year-olds do, painfully oblivious to everything, a silent repellent for evil. Mika never guessed what a foul creature her mother was.

"But I did. I knew. Yet, it was an epiphany that I hadn't wanted, really. I like delusions as much as the next human, after all.

"I really didn't want to leave Mika home alone with Alette, but...I guess...I really honestly didn't think that Alette would do anything to harm her own daughter.

"Yet, somehow, deep inside of me, I knew that something bad was going to happen. I've always been that way. Tseng once said that it was the Wutainese blood in me that whispered such secrets to me, but of course, I didn't know this at the time. But I remember Mika exactly as she was just as I was getting ready to go out the door. Sitting in the living room, building a castle with those old wooden blocks of hers that she loved so much, despite their simplicity. She was wearing a pink dress that was way too big for her. Have you ever heard the saying that redheads shouldn't wear red or pink since it'll clash with their hair or something? Well, apparently the rule applied to all other redheads but my daughter. She looked beautiful in that dress even though it practically reached down to her feet and hung off of her shoulders a little bit.

"I called goodbye to her, like I always did. She looked up and smiled happily at me, waving goodbye silently since she didn't want to wake up the queen's baby that was living in her castle.

"And that was the last time I ever saw my daughter alive.

"I came home that evening with a heavy heart. An odd feeling had settled in my chest sometime during the day, and it didn't fade no matter how hard I tried to ignore it. And somehow, I knew that it had something to do with Mika.

"So I rushed into my house, only to be greeted by silence. Mika knew by instinct the time that I came home, and she was always there to run up and hug me. But this time I didn't see her or Alette. All I saw were Mika's blocks abandoned on the floor of the living room, still resembling the castle she had been building earlier that morning. But my daughter was nowhere to be seen.

"I knew something was wrong. I ran all over the house, calling Mika's name and looking in all the rooms, but I found nothing. I did, however, find Alette sitting in a chair in our room. She wasn't doing anything, just sitting there staring at something in her hands, completely unaware of anything around her. I yelled at her and demanded where Mika was, but she didn't reply. She didn't even *look* at me, goddamn her.

"I cursed at her and left the room, searching the house again and even running over to the neighbors and asking if they had seen Mika. They hadn't. By then my sanity was tottering on the edge of nothingness. I stormed back into my house and somehow found myself back in our room. Alette was still there, just sitting in that goddamn chair, all close-lipped and shit. I start yelling again. I don't even remember what I said. All I knew was that my daughter was gone, most likely dead. And I knew that Alette had done it. Or had had something to do with it.

"But still, I didn't really truly believe it until I saw what Alette was fiddling with in her hands.

"It was one of Mika's blocks. And was blood on one side of it. I know what blood looks like. I grew up on the streets, after all.

"*That* is when I snapped. I've never hit a woman in my entire life - outside of battle - but once it dawned on me that I was facing the woman who had killed my daughter, I just couldn't take it. I hit her. Hard. Right on the face, too. She nearly fell out of her chair, but then she bounced back like some kind of rag doll and went back to toying with that godforsaken block that had belonged to the daughter she had killed with her own hands. By then I was crazy. I was running around the room and breaking things left and right. Screaming. I think I was crying as well. I couldn't get the image of Mika in her pink dress out of my mind. Then I thought about the bloody wooden block in Alette's hands, and it just drove me closer to the edge.

"I was out of control. There wasn't shit left in the room when I was done with it. I had even overturned the whole goddamn bed, possessed by some demonic strength that came with the knowledge that my baby girl was gone forever. The only things intact were Alette and her goddamn chair. Even though she still wasn't looking at anything but the bloody block in her hands, I stormed over to her, my hands clenched into fists.

"But I didn't touch her. I yelled at her, and I can recall very clearly what I said to her. These words are engraved in my mind to this very day.

"'I'm leaving,' I told her, my voice so twisted in rage that I barely recognized it as my own. 'You'd better run away while I'm gone, because if I get back and you're still here, I'm gonna to fuckin' kill you! Hell, if I ever SEE you again in my entire life, I'll twist your head off your neck! You hear me?! I'll KILL you!'

"And I meant it. Every. Single. Word. I've never truly hated a person in my entire life until Alette, and that day began my rapid descent into darkness.

"I left the house for...I don't even know how long. We had been putting away money for Mika's schooling, but I went and sucked the account dry. Spent all that money on booze and drugs. I don't know where I slept that night or who I slept with, but the next day I tottered home with a gun in my hand and a beer bottle in the other. Alette was gone. I never saw her again, either.

"A week - two weeks? Three weeks? Time meant nothing to me - later, there was a news report saying that the body of a dead child had washed up at the local sewage plant. I was in a bar when I heard the report, and I shattered the TV in a grief-stricken rage. Stupid thing to do, actually. I ended up with a bleeding hand and two days in the slammer.

"Of course, they let me out. They always did. And of course, I went back out to the slums and back to being the street rat that I am. You know, it's terrible now that I try to look back and realize that it's as if an entire year of my life is missing. I really remember nothing in that year after Mika's death and Alette's disappearance. I was a body without a soul or heart. Never once did I stop to ask myself why in the world Alette would have killed her own daughter. There was no motive. I never asked myself just who Mika's 'tall man' was or if he might have had something to do with her death.

"For a year, I was just in a void. A dead man walking. Once and a while, a face will float in my mind, and I know that the person is from that time period, but my story and my life ended the day my daughter died.

"And everything else is just history, and my life is nothing but a scratch in the Planet's timeline. Petty and insignificant, just as it was meant to be. And...there's nothing more to tell, really."

The silence seemed so loud after Reno's voice had trailed off into nothing. Tifa was at an utter loss for words. Nothing she could say would be capable of expressing what she was feeling; nothing she could say could acknowledge to the exquisite pain held in the story that she had just heard with her own ears - a story about the pain of love and a man's descent into darkness. A darkness that had sunk sinister talons into his heart, refusing to give up its victim.

Was it dark - where Reno was? Was there even a slim possibility of light reaching him? Would he even see it if it were there?

All these thoughts ran through Tifa's mind, but her heart would not allow her to give them voice. For a moment, she could do nothing but stare at Reno, her fingers still numbly clutched in his, as if afraid he would drift away if she were to let go. The man's eyes were lowered so that only a slim line of aquamarine was visible, still misted with the pain of his story and very, very distant, seeing a place that no one else could see. Tendrils of blood-red hair hung down into his face, dripping silent tears of rain onto his already saturated clothes, heedless of the other raindrops that had already made their homes in the fibers of his clothing. And his scars seemed to weep along with every other part of him.

"I like the rain," Reno suddenly said, voice low and quiet.

Tifa blinked, and her voice suddenly came back to her. "Really?" she whispered. "Why?"

Dark eyelashes curled by rain lifted slightly, exposing more pained aquamarine. "Because," Reno replied. "No one can tell the difference between rain and tears..."

"Reno," Tifa murmured, his name one single, breathless exclamation before she wrapped her arms around him.

It was not a warm embrace - at least, in the physical sense. Her skin was cold, as was his. Cold from rain and other things. But the heart's whisper that had told her to take him in her arms was warm in the purest sense of the word, as was the blood that coursed through his body in a river of pain. For a moment, Reno's body was as rigid and immovable as a marble statue, but something in him seemed to relax, like a sigh expelled into the rain-clouded air, and he wrapped his arms around her slender waist, burying his face in her shoulder.

Tifa tightened her grip on his shoulders, fingers digging into the skin whose pale pallor was visible through the saturated dress shirt he wore. She was afraid to let him go, and she didn't know why. Or maybe she did. Maybe she knew that this "Reno" that she was holding in her arms didn't have much time left before he returned to being the Reno that had made his domain in the present. She knew that in a few moments, Reno Mitsuru, father of Mika, husband of the treacherous Alette, would buckle and surrender to the man that was only known as Reno of the Turks. No last name. Turks didn't need them.

But to think that this seemingly callous, insensitive creature resting in her embrace had the heart in him to keep ties with the man he used to be. She was certain that Reno knew his past had made him into the man he was today, for what else could have done it? That one face, that one little girl in an oversized pink dress playing with her blocks on the floor, had managed to innocently endear herself to a man that made his living by murdering others until a year ago. That such an

innocent child could exercise such unwitting control over Reno even from the grave was something Tifa had thought unthinkable. Unthinkable and impossible.

Reno was a Turk. He was supposed to be a monster. All Turks were supposed to be monsters. They weren't supposed to love anyone.

But Reno defied all the above assumptions. And with his defiance, all of Tifa's prejudices against the Turks were forced down from their lofty height where they had previously blocked her reasoning and closed her normally open mind.

Unobtrusively, Tifa raised her hand and placed it on Reno's head, fingers sinking into the blood-red strands. Warmth seeped from his scalp into her cold palm. Yes, this was a human in her arms. A human with a heart that bled just like anyone else's. A man whose only real mistake in life had been to fall in love with a little girl and believe that he could lead something resembling a normal life. How sad it was, the fate that had befallen Reno Mitsuru.

Tifa had to shut her eyes against the tears that were threatening to spill from them. "Reno," she whispered to the darkness behind her eyelids. "Is there...anything I can do for you?"

He shifted in her arms. "I don't know," he said seriously. "I don't know many things right now. I don't know why I dream of Mika so often as if late. Even in drunken stupors, I still see her face. I don't know why her ghost has returned to haunt me now. And I don't..." he pulled back from her embrace and suddenly touched her on the face, forcing her to open her eyes "...know why I told this story to you, of all people."

Tifa smiled weakly, seeing only quiet curiosity in his eyes. "Am I really that bad of a person to tell it to?" she joked.

No grin came to Reno's mouth, but a flash of amusement flickered in his eyes, a ghost of his old humor starting to return. But a dark cloud seemed to fall over his face, and he said, "I'm poison, Tifa. You know that, don't you? I really meant what I said to Alette all those years ago. If I ever see that woman again in my life, I WILL kill her. It's the only way I can put my daughter's soul to rest."

"By spilling the blood of her mother," Tifa whispered, and the beat of her heart in her chest was suddenly more painful than before. "But...surely there's another way?"

Reno looked away, eyes turning back to the sea again, back to the churning waves and dark horizon. "It's the only way I know how to deal with it," he said, voice sounding a bit melancholy.

"I see," Tifa replied quietly, voice so soft it could barely be heard over the rain. She looked down at her hands, which she had apparently wrung together in her lap at one point. Each hand was embracing the other, looking cold and frightened, especially without her gloves.

Another hand - clad in a black, fingerless glove - suddenly swooped down to cover her own clasped ones, completely dwarfing them. A faint wave of Reno's warmth suddenly surrounded her, and she felt him press a soft kiss to her forehead, brushing aside the soaked bangs that were obscuring his way.

"Thank you, Tifa," he whispered, lips moving against her skin, his body so close to hers. "Thank you for listening to me."

She had never thought that hands so murderous could be so gentle. But they were. His fingers tenderly brushed aside the tendrils of dark hair clinging to her cheeks, cradling her face with both of her large hands and smiling gently at her until she couldn't resist but smile back, the silent between them speaking louder than any words could have.

But the words were still there. *I'm sorry*, Tifa desperately wanted to say. *I'm sorry for your pain, Reno. I'm sorry that I feel to helpless right now. I want to help you, Reno. I really do.*

Yet, she knew that now was not the time for such words. So all she could do was squeeze his hands gently as they slid away from her face, fingers lingering for a second that maybe shouldn't have been there, but for once, she didn't care.

As his aquamarine gaze slipped sadly back to the sea, she asked, "Are you coming back to the bar now?"

She knew his answer before the words left his mouth. "No. You go on back. I'll stay here for a while. I need to return to myself."

Tifa nodded with great reluctance, forcing herself to get to her wobbly feet. "Of course," she told him softly, removing his Turks jacket from her shoulders and slipping it back onto his. "But don't forget to return to us after you're done, alright?"

Reno didn't respond, but she knew that he understood.

The walk back to Kalm seemed so much longer this time around. She kept turning around to glance back at the solitary figure on the beach, lonely against the backdrop of the monstrous ocean whipping and churning in the distance. Her heart ached for him. And she kept hearing his voice, over and over, saying, *"I'd like to think that I was a good person...I was a nice guy...I really was...I really was...was..."*

* * * * *

*Could you sympathize with my needs
I know you think I need a lot
I started out clean but I'm jaded
Just falling in
Well, just breaking the skin
Can you help me I'm bent
I'm so scared that I'll never
Get put back together
Keep breaking me in
And this is how we will live
With you and me...bent*

"Bent"

Matchbox 20