

Chapter Twenty-Seven: The Ones Left Behind

"Well, there goes the neighborhood." Reno Akuma Mitsuru

Montana had never liked riding in trains. He always thought they were mindless, soulless hunks of metal, boring as hell because they could never go where they wanted to, never could veer off of their tracks, off their courses. He saw no point in such an existence, not even when he was a child. When all the other little tikes in the countryside flocked to see a train pass through on a routine trade route, Montana never went with them. He never had a toy train or played "choo-choo" like the others did. They all thought he was weird so they isolated him, never knowing that the little boy who didn't like trains would grow up into quite the bounty hunter. Never knowing that one day that little boy would come back all big and strong. Montana had put a bullet in every last one of their surprised faces and only regretted not having the guts to do it when he was five years old.

And now here he was, riding the only operational train in the city of Midgar, the one that traveled through Sector Five. He was not a happy camper, but he knew that it would do him no good to complain to his companion.

Jezebel sat calmly in the seat across from him, hands folded in her lap with her legs crossed in a most feminine fashion. Montana almost laughed at that. Jezebel was many things, but lady-like wasn't one of them. The positioning of her limbs was, of course, meant to deceive any of the train operators who might have peeked into the car that only held one tall, lanky man and a slender, relatively pretty woman. Nobody trusted anyone else these days. Smart people.

"You know," Montana said conversationally, slouching down in his seat so that his long legs were nearly stretched across half the floor. "It's going to be one wet walk on the way to Kalm."

"A little rain never hurt anyone," Jezebel told him flatly, studying the tips of her boots. "Besides, you're going to be the only one going to Kalm."

Montana wasn't surprised, but he raised an eyebrow anyways, just because he wanted to. "You don't say? Me alone against two AVALANCHE members? Aren't you worried that I might die?"

"One AVALANCHE member," Jezebel corrected. "The other is a Turk named Reno Akuma Mitsuru. Get it straight, or you will make yourself look even stupider than you already are."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence," Montana said dryly as he lifted one of his bare feet and studied the dirt and other nameless grime that had collected on the sole of it. "It's good to know that you think so highly of me."

Jezebel ignored his sarcasm. "Do you have your back-up on standby?"

Montana was already used to Jezebel's condescending attitude, but he was still offended that she would think him so idiotic that he would forget to summon his "back-up". "Of *course* I have it," he snapped, a flicker of anger showing in his dead green eyes. "You really do think I'm stupid, don't you?"

"Stupider than I am."

"What's that supposed to mean? *You* think you're stupid?"

Empty brown eyes stared at him. "I had my moments of youthful idiocy, but that was a long time ago."

Montana frowned. It wasn't like Jezebel to reveal so much about her past. In all the years he had worked alongside her, she had never breathed a word to him about whatever dark secrets lie buried within her. The one thing he could assume was that she had lived in the slums for a long period of time, long enough to acquire a fairly heavy accent that she either couldn't or didn't want to get rid of.

"Well, someone's talkative today," Montana said with a grin.

"I am unstable," Jezebel corrected. "Just like our underground lair, which is in the process of collapsing as we speak."

"Sucks to be them."

Jezebel just stared at him, as if she couldn't decide whether to be angry or apathetic. "The Master believes the Hungry One is enraged because he smells a traitor amongst his worshipers."

"You mean Titus?" Montana asked immediately. The scar on his left cheek began to itch, like there were ants crawling up and down the red, angry tissue.

"And many others," Jezebel added, folding her arms across her ample chest. "The Master was wrong to bring Titus back into the faction, even for so brief a period. The worshipers never forget their High Priest, no matter where he goes. Ajax is a poor substitute for Titus, no matter how powerful the little bugger may be."

Montana's jaw clenched. "You're going to kill Titus, aren't you?" he asked in a tight, angry voice.

"Those are my orders," Jezebel said coldly, her accent sharpening along with her voice. "And I'm to kill the woman as well, and all others that may have thrown in with Titus. The Master has predicted that all survivors will use the Junon exit to escape from underground. I am to intercept and kill both Titus and the woman called Fa-Li."

Montana leaned forward, his scar burning something awful. "Kill the woman, but leave Titus for me!"

Jezebel's full, sensuous lips curled into a dark smile. "Trying to take my kill from me, Montana? Go for it. See if you can. But first you need to take care of your business in Kalm, then you can follow me to Junon."

Montana gritted his teeth, but he nodded. "I understand."

* * * * *

"'ey, Wed? Ou aunt wum bif herky?"

"No, Reno," Red replied calmly, trying to focus his attention on the flickering television screen. "I don't want any beef jerky, but thank you for asking."

"Oor elcum. Shuit oorhelf." With that said, Reno ripped off another piece of jerky with his teeth, chomping noisily and happily on it.

It took a second for Red's normally sharp mind to translate from Reno-babble into normal, everyday English: You're welcome. Suit yourself.

With an internal sigh that didn't disturb his calm exterior, Red tried his best to drown out the sounds of Reno slobbering and tearing gleefully on his third or fourth piece of beef jerky as the Turk's right hand sank into the bag of chips with a crinkling noise that seemed needlessly loud. Everything about Reno, Red decided, was needlessly loud. From the bright red hair that virtually blazed with the very essence of the color to the sloppy style of dress that screamed rebellion and nonconformity.

Loud. Needlessly so.

But, Red admitted to himself, Reno just wouldn't be Reno without that screeching loudness. Red knew that he was going to meet people from all walks of life during his long, long, long lifetime on the Planet, if Fate didn't sever him from his path unexpectedly. He knew that he would just have to accept Reno and all of Reno's flaws, or he would never be able to deal when people ten times as bad as Reno came along.

From his seat on the couch, Reno let out an earth-shaking burp, and Red decided there would never be a person ten times as bad as Reno. This was as bad as it could possibly get.

Thoughts put aside, Red tried in vain to return his attention to flickering television screen and was just starting to come to a conclusion that there was NO plotline in the program they were watching when Reno suddenly flipped the channel. A large purple dinosaur with a green belly was dancing and singing on the television screen. Rather frightening thing, actually.

"What are you doing?" Red grumbled. "I was watching the previous show."

"That one was boring," Reno said cheerfully. "Don't you think this one is much more entertaining?"

Red wrinkled his nose. "I don't like large purple dinosaurs serenading me and telling me they love me."

"Barney has lots of love to give," Reno said, and Red couldn't tell whether he was joking or not. "If Barney don't love you, then no one will."

"Turn the channel back."

"No."

"Turn it back."

"Make me."

Red started to get to his feet, stretching his muscles like a cat that had just awakened. "Well," he said calmly. "I suppose I'll just go take a nap upstairs."

"Fine!" Reno exclaimed in frustration, begrudgingly switching the channel back. "There ya go, dumb mutt."

"Many thanks," Red replied as he resettled himself on the hardwood floor, eyes once again flicking to the television screen, where a posse of young girls in sailor outfits were running around aimlessly on the screen. No plot in sight so far, but it was the lesser of two evils. [1]

Five seconds into the program, Reno suddenly announced, "I'm bored."

"Go eat something," Red suggested. Normally, he wouldn't encourage Reno to devour someone else's food, but he had a feeling that a bored Reno was not going to be good thing.

"I'm not hungry anymore," Reno snapped. "I just finished cleaning out the pantry anyways. Goddamn it! It's almost ten o'clock. Where the HELL are those guys?"

The abrupt change of subject left Red's mind reeling, but he managed to reply, "Don't worry about them, Reno. They'll make it back okay."

//I hope so//

"So you say, but I know you're worried sick, too."

"So what if I am? Someone has to pretend to be the calm one here."

Reno snorted. "For your information, I'm perfectly calm right now."

The lights suddenly flickered, then went out completely, plunging the room into darkness and silence.

"Okay, maybe not so calm," Reno amended, his voice drifting out of the blackness.

Red lifted himself easily to his feet, ears flicking back and forth as he tried to detect any usual sounds. He had nearly perfect night vision, but ever since he lost one of his eyes, he learned to use his other senses more often. However, he could detect nothing out of the ordinary in the house. The only sound was the rain pattering against the sides of the bar and thunder rumbling in the distance. He could smell junk food, rain, and a deep musk that had to be Reno's personal scent, but other than that, nothing.

"What is it?" Reno asked, rising from his seat on the couch and stumbling over to Red.

"Probably just a power outage," Red replied calmly. "It's to be expected in a thunderstorm like this one. I am just surprised it didn't happen sooner."

"No power?" Reno demanded. "Well, there goes the neighborhood."

Red shook his head. "All we need to do is go and activate the back-up generator. The switch is on the main circuit breaker."

"Great," Reno grumbled.

Red looked up at the Turk. Aquamarine eyes glowed faintly in the darkness with a radiance that could only be attributed with exposure to Mako. Rude and Elena's eyes didn't glow like that, and Red made a note to ask Reno about it later. But more interesting was the fact that the Turk seemed to actually be focusing on Red, even in the unbroken darkness.

"How good is your night vision?" he asked Reno.

The redhead shrugged his narrow shoulders. "If it's warm or it moves, then I'll know it's there."

//He senses things rather than sees them. Good in some cases, bad in others, but I guess it'll do//

"Can I trust you to follow me without stepping on me or running into things?" Red asked.

One corner of Reno's mouth curled into a smile. "Aye, aye, Captain. Lead the way."

Not bothering to point out that "Captain" was Cid's title, Red turned and padded out of the living room. Reno followed him without any mishaps. In the main room of the bar, the two of them slunk out from behind the bar counter. Red cast an apprehensive glance into the main bar area, but there was nothing to be suspicious about. No faces peering in from the windows. The front door was closed. None of the chairs had been messed with. He would have liked to sniff around the place, but he thought that if he stopped suddenly, Reno would end up stepping all over him.

Bypassing the stairs quietly, Red led the way into the hallway running alongside the stairwell. The storage rooms and the garage were in this back area of the bar. Though Red had only visited Cloud and Tifa a couple of times during the past year, he had pretty much committed the layout of the bar to memory, and within a few moments, he and Reno were heading through a door and into a dark, windowless room that smelled strongly of electricity and rainwater. Dangerous mixture.

Red glanced around the room in search of the breaker box until he realized that Reno was still hovering in the doorway, aquamarine eyes darting around nervously.

"What is it?" Reno asked.

Reno wrinkled his nose distastefully. "It smells like snakes in here."

That piqued Red's interest. "Really? I don't smell snakes, but..." He sniffed the air "...there is an odd scent in the room. I think your fear is making you smell things."

Reno suddenly wrapped his arms around himself, as if he was cold. He didn't even snap at Red for saying that he was afraid. "I'm not talking about *snakes*. I mean *the* snake. That giant motherf***er we fought in Midgar."

The minute Reno's words hit home, Red knew that he was telling the truth. The room *did* smell like that snake, but it was a slightly different scent, and that was why he had failed to recognize it immediately. Red's golden eye narrowed, and he turned his head around quickly, scanning the room.

Then he saw the breaker box. Or what was left of the breaker box. The entire thing had been ripped out of the wall, exposing tons of wires that had been sliced through and through. Well, no backup power for them. Red's hackles rose, and he was just about to turn and report his findings to Reno when he noticed something else.

Cloud and Tifa had a trapdoor built in this room so that the bar's occupants could escape in case there was some sort of emergency. They would end up under the bar, and from there it was a small thing to simply walk amongst the stilts and end up beside the building. What Red saw was the trapdoor gaping open, a swollen tide of rainwater lapping hungrily at the edges, seeking entrance into the room. That was why the smell of water had been so strong.

All his senses were on high alert as he padded his way back to Reno, sending out a brief thanks that the Turk couldn't see what was in the room. "What is it?" Reno asked sharply. Apparently, he had sensed that something was wrong.

"I think there's an intruder in the house," Red answered matter-of-factly. "They cut the power and probably the phone lines as well."

Reno's eyes widened. "But how the HELL did they get into the bar in the first place?"

"Through the trapdoor leading into this room. I didn't think anyone was crazy enough to swim underneath the bar just to get to the door."

Reno scowled, glancing nervously over his shoulders. "Great. So we're dealing with a psycho here? I don't even have any weapons on me!"

Red stared up at him incredulously. "You're kidding me."

The look on Reno's face darkened even more. "I'm not kidding! My nightstick's in the sewers, and my gun is upstairs in my room!"

"You know," Red snarled as he brushed past the Turk's legs. "I know you've been under a lot of stress lately, Reno, but I would think that the leader of the Turks would be a lot more responsible. Let's go up and get your gun."

Amazingly enough, Reno didn't say a word, but Red could feel the Turk's anger in a simmering wave behind him as the two walked carefully into the main room of the bar once again. Red was aware of the fact that the intruder might have just come through the trapdoor, severed the power, and then exited back through the trapdoor. He certainly wasn't seeing or smelling anything out of the ordinary, but he knew better than rush to conclusions. After all, he had failed to detect the scent of the Running Man when he had gone to investigate Midgar. If all these strangers were coming from the same group, it was logical to assume that one of their distinguishing characteristics may be lack of scent.

He didn't strive to find consolation in his assumptions, though, and Red made sure the main room of the bar was clear of intruders before turning to lead the way up the stairs. Reno followed him, the scent of his anger, fear, and frustration a unique blend that hung in the air like a jungle musk, thick and heavy. Though Reno might not be able to admit that he was afraid, his body was doing the job for him. If Red had been hunting a prey with that scent surrounding it, he would have

known instantly it was going to be an easy kill. He just hoped the intruders wouldn't look at Reno in the same predatory fashion.

The two climbed the dark stairs in silence, Red maneuvering effortlessly through the inky black, Reno gripping the handrail with sweaty palms as he tried not to stumble. When they finally reached the top of the stairs and strode into the long, upstairs hallway, Red barely took two steps before he froze dead in his tracks, fur standing on end. His lip curled in a snarl as adrenaline coursed through his body.

Standing in the middle of the hallway, about ten feet away from them, was a figure shrouded in shadows. It was dressed in what appeared to be a black jumpsuit, baggy and seamless. It was holding a submachine gun in one of its fleshly pink hands. And it had no face.

"Faceless Man," Red growled, his gravelly voice loud in the stillness of the hallway.

Behind him, Reno froze. "Faceless Man? Where?" he hissed.

//He can't see it// Red realized. //It's not moving, and it's not warm//

"It's ten feet down the hallway from us," Red rapped out, keeping his eye on their motionless opponent. "It's not moving, but it's standing between us and your room."

"In other words, me and my weapons," Reno uttered harshly, the scent of his rage starting to fill the hallway. "Well, what the hell do we do now?"

Red glared at the unmoving figure of the Faceless Man. It looked like a mannequin that had crash-landed in the middle of the hallway, but judging from Vincent and Yuffie's horrific tales, the fleshly creature brandished a danger factor more akin to a sleeping lion. There was enough room on either side of the thing to slink past it by hugging the wall, but Red knew that they ran the risk of being grabbed if the creature were to suddenly animate itself. And according to Vincent and Yuffie, these things possessed unreal strength and incredible endurance. But they were at a standstill until one side decided to act. It didn't look like the Faceless Man was planning on moving anytime soon. Of course, it could just be playing dead and waiting for them to come into grabbing reach. But for some reason, Red didn't think so. He sensed a horrible *stillness* within the creature, the absence of life and awareness, like a machine that had been shut down. Or something that had been dead for a long, long time.

"I don't think it'll grab us if we try and walk by it," Red ventured, "but I don't think creature possesses the sort of wits needed to cut electrical wires..."

"What the hell are you trying to say?" Reno demanded, sounding suitably annoyed.

"I think its master must be close by," Red said in a low voice.

"And just waiting to send this thing after us," Reno finished with a bitter flourish. "Just f***ing great, but I NEED my gun."

Red was about to reply when he suddenly felt a strange energy surge through the air, blazing past him and making his fur stand on end. A strange scent suddenly assaulted his nostrils, unlike anything he had ever smelled before. It seared his nasal cavity, and for an instant, he could taste it in the back of his throat. He dimly heard Reno coughing behind him and knew that the human Turk had picked up on the strange energy as well.

A figure in white suddenly emerged from the room at the end of the hall, hands shoved deep in the pockets of his baggy white pants. His buttonless jacket was open in the front, flaring at his sides as he moved. He was bare-footed and made almost no sound at all as he walked. A pair of dark green eyes was set deep in his face, glittering as lightening illuminated the thick blackness of the hallway. He moved easily - like a predator - until he was standing about five feet behind the Faceless Man.

Silence hung thickly in the air for a moment until Red demanded, "Are you the one that took Reeve and Yuffie?" Behind him, Reno inhaled sharply.

The man smiled, looking amused. He had a scar on his left cheek. "Nope, you got the wrong guy. I'm more of an assassin than a bounty hunter, I suppose. When I get sent out, it's usually to kill someone."

Silence, except for the soundless singing of the tension between the two groups.

"I think you know what happens next," the green-eyed man said in a good-natured tone as he leaned casually against the wall.

"Go to hell," Reno suddenly hissed.

The man lifted an eyebrow. "You know, pal, you gotta big mouth. I can taste your fear in the back of my throat. It stinks up the air."

"Shut up!" Reno yelled at him.

"This is boring," the stranger lamented with a sigh. "It's going to be too easy to kill you guys." He pushed away from the wall, absently running a hand through his spiky brown hair. "That's why I'm leaving my little friend to do it. I have more pressing matters to take care of."

With one last smile, the man turned and started to saunter back down the dark hallway, like he hadn't a care in the world. His indifference infuriated Red, and for a second, the lion-like beast nearly gave into impulse and went springing after the tall man. In fact, the only thing that stopped him was a sudden birth of motion as the Faceless Man started to stir. Red sensed a dark awareness burst into its mind, dead and alive at the same time, and he forgot all about watching the retreating back of the green-eyed man.

Limbs now fully animated, the Faceless Man started to raise its machine gun, cradling in it both hands. That was all Red needed to see. He had no intention of exchanging bullets and blows in such a narrow, cramped space. His limbs tensed as he started to pivot around.

"Shit!" Reno suddenly cried. Even though he was nearly blind in the darkness, the Turk had apparently sensed the Faceless Man's movement as well.

Then the two of them were running full speed towards the stairwell, Red doing his best not to get tangled up in Reno's legs. They barely made it to safety in time; a stream of bullets ripped through the wall just as they were turning the corner. The air screamed as a couple of ricochets whizzed past Red's ears.

Though luck had blessed them with a narrow escape, the fickle creature decided that it did not wish to support them any longer. In front of him, Red saw Reno suddenly lose his balance, boots fighting for purchase on the shadowy stairs before he began to tumble artlessly down the staircase, curling instinctively into a ball with his arms up trying to shield his head. Red couldn't help but feel sympathy for Reno as he heard that human body with its tender skin and fragile bones slamming up against the wall and the edges of each stair. But not once did Reno cry out, and Red's respect for the Turk climbed slightly. The AVALANCHE member ran down the stairs without any major mishaps, as he had four legs and therefore more leverage than the unfortunate Reno.

"Shit, that hurt like a bitch," Reno groaned from where he was lying in a crumpled heap at the bottom of the stairs. His face contorted in pain as he tried to get his bruised and battered limbs to move him into a sitting position. Red bounded up next to him and was about to suggest that they move to a safer location when he suddenly sensed movement on the top of the stairs and heard the sound of a trigger being squeezed.

"Move, Reno!" he cried, darting off the side and into the main room of the bar, weaving into the maze of tables and chairs.

Reno didn't ask questions. Though he still wasn't sure he had all of his wits about him (his head was hurting something awful), he rolled blindly to the right - left? - just as he heard the sound of bullets being fired from a machine gun. Slivers of torn wood erupted from the floor and hit his legs before he managed to roll out of their reach. He only stopped rolling across the floor when he felt his bruised back collide with cold metal. The refrigerator. He had rolled behind the bar.

Instinct kicked in, and Reno tried to wrestle to feet, only to fall flat on his ass twice in a row due to the fact that the bar was dancing in circles around his head. Finally, he gritted his teeth and took a hold of the refrigerator's handle, using that as a crutch while he hauled himself to his feet. Nausea washed over him in a short, powerful wave, but the sounds of gunfire surprisingly close by brought his attention back to the situation at hand.

Ignoring his bruised legs, he looked towards the main bar area and saw that the Faceless Man was firing on Red with its machine gun. Chairs and tables were obliterated into a thousand wooden shards by the steady stream of bullets, but Red appeared unharmed so far. He kept using tables for cover as he came closer and closer to the Faceless Man. When the lion-like beast arrived within a certain range, the Faceless Man gave up firing and simply lifted the gun above its head, bringing it smashing down on the table Red was hiding under. The piece of furniture split in two, but Red managed to get out in time, narrowly avoiding being impaled by a jagged edge of wood.

Clenching his fists in rage, Reno stumbled out from behind the bar. He didn't have any weapons, but he had learned long ago that anger, when used correctly, could be the most deadly weapon of all. And he was plenty pissed off at the moment.

In its pursuit of Red, the Faceless Man had knocked down a couple of chairs. Reno grabbed the closest one off the floor and flung it at the back of the creature with all his might.

Without even turning around, the Faceless Man sidestepped the flying chair and brought the butt of the machine gun down on the next table, forcing Red out of his new hiding place. Letting out a scream of frustration, Reno grabbed another fallen chair and ran up behind the Faceless Man, raising the chair above his head and bringing it down as hard as he could.

It was a powerful blow that would have knocked a regular human unconscious, if not killed them. But the Faceless Man was far too fast to fall for such tricks. Reno only saw a shadowy pink and black blur as the creature whirled and knocked the chair out of his hands, leaving his fingers tingling painfully afterwards. Then the thing slammed its shoulder into Reno's chest.

It felt like he'd been hit with a battering ram. The breath left his lungs in a great whoosh, and the force of the creature's blow sent him flying backwards, where he slammed into the stools surrounding the bar area, like the pieces of furniture were bowling pins and he was Reno the Human Bowling Ball.

"Reno!" he dimly heard Red cry. "Are you alright, Reno?!"

The Turk managed to peel himself off of the floor in time to groan, "Yeah, I think so." At least, that was what he thought he said. His ears were ringing too loudly for him to be completely sure.

"You can't fight it like you are now!" Red called to him, changing tactics and leaping from tabletop to tabletop with the Faceless Man in hot pursuit. The thing smashed its gun through the wooden furniture as it went along. There wasn't going to be shit left over when it was done.

Reno lurched to his feet, feeling helpless as he watched Red facing down the creature all by himself. "Well, what the hell do you want me to do?!" he demanded in frustration. "I can't go after my gun! That guy's probably still up there, despite what he said!"

In an act of amazing dexterity, Red suddenly pivoted and lunged straight at the Faceless Man, claws raking across its nonexistent face and leaving streams of dark blood flowing down its flesh. He leapt off before the creature could bring its gun to bear on him, calling out to Reno.

"Go to Vincent's room! It's right across from the stairwell!"

//Less chances of getting caught// Reno realized.

His eyes only lingered for a moment longer on the warring figures of Red and the Faceless Man before he took off towards the stairs in a mad dash, plunging into the pitch-black stairwell. He didn't know if adrenaline had sharpened his senses or if he had committed the stairs to memory, but he managed to make it to the top without stumbling even once. But Reno didn't take time to pat himself on the back. One running stride saw him right in front of Vincent's bedroom door, which he barreled through so quickly that the doorknob knocked a huge chunk out of the wall.

Reno hesitated in the doorway, his heart pounding in his chest and his breath whooshing painfully in and out of his lungs. Vincent's room was arranged just like the other guest rooms, but for a moment, Reno imagined that it was colder, darker than any other room in the bar, as if the gunslinger had left a residue of his presence behind him like the lingering musk of cologne.

Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, Reno searched feverishly for a weapon of some kind and was rewarded when a sudden flash of lightening illuminated the ominous form of the Death Penalty leaning against the wall. Vincent had wisely chosen to take the small but powerful Outsider with him into battle instead of the large but more powerful Death Penalty, though Reno knew how much it had probably cost Valentine to leave his most powerful weapon behind like a piece of unwanted garbage. Good, trusty guns were hard to come by.

Racing over to the rifle, Reno wrapped his hands around the smooth metal and tried to lift it from the floor, a surprised grunt issuing from his mouth when the gun tried to drag him back down to the floor with it. The thing was freaking *heavy*!!

//How the HELL does Valentine manage to fire this son of a bitch one-handed?! Guess it pays to be a freak...//

But as freaky as Vincent may have been, Reno had to tip his hat to the guy. This gun wasn't made to be used by just anyone. Even if he could manage to lift and fire the gun, he would be lucky if he managed to hit *anything*. He would be even luckier if he didn't shoot his own foot off.

"F*** it," he swore, letting the Death Penalty fall to the floor again.

Fighting to ignore the sounds of battle raging downstairs in the bar, Reno ran around the room yanking open drawers and spilling their contents onto the floor. Not that there was much of anything in the first place, being that Vincent had lost most of his clothes to Mother Nature when he and Yuffie's chocobos had been trapped out in the rain with their packs still on the birds' backs.

"Come ON!!" he screamed in frustration, shoving his hair out of his eyes. "There has to be a goddamn gun around here somewhere!"

Reno dropped onto his stomach next to the bed and yanked the end of the trailing bedspread up off the floor. Then he grinned. Pay dirt, baby. There were at least six guns - all different shapes and sizes - hidden underneath the bed, glittering with fiendish anticipation whenever lightening flashed outside the window. The gun closest to him was some kind of shotgun with a sawed-off barrel. Reno didn't want to take it. Shotguns were great when you didn't care what mess you made, but he didn't want to risk being too messy when Red was down there as well. As a general rule, it wasn't good when you went around blowing away allies as well as enemies.

"What a dignified position that is," an amused voice suddenly commented.

Reno jerked in surprise and tried to pull out from under the bed, slamming the back of his head against the framework in the process. He let out a choice phrase and, without looking, grabbed the closest and smallest gun within reach, raising and pointing it towards the door at the same time his head cleared the top of the bed.

The green-eyed man was leaning in the doorway of Vincent's room, just as casual as you please, an amused smile on his face as he gazed at Reno's choice of weapons. The Turk resisted the urge to scream in frustration. Not only had the bad guy caught him with his head under the bed and his ass up in the air, but Reno had also managed to pick the wimpiest, puniest gun of the bunch. The thing was white-blue, barely bigger than the palm of his hand. It looked like a goddamn water gun. It didn't even have any slots for materia.

//What a piece of crap! Elena's nephew has a Super Soaker bigger than this thing!//

"Silver Rifle," the man suddenly stated, cocking his head to the side as he stared at the gun. "From the Temple of the Ancients, right?"

"You bet your ass it is," Reno snapped with as much confidence as he could muster. He had no idea where the hell the gun was from. He didn't even know if it was loaded.

"You have no idea where the hell that gun is from, do you?" the man asked with a smile, flashing white teeth in the shadows.

Reno rose slowly to his feet, puny-ass gun in his hand (using two hands for such a wimpy gun was just stupid) as he approached the man, his aim never wavering.

"Get out of the way or I blow your head off," Reno threatened coldly, stopping just out of arms reach.

Humor shone in the man's deep green eyes, and Reno suddenly realized that the eyes had a glow to them that he hadn't noticed before. It wasn't Mako luminescence, but it was something similar. Maybe it was due to the eyes being such a dark green that didn't make them bright like his, Cloud's, or Vincent's...

A crash erupted from downstairs, followed by a massive surge of elemental energy and a cold, icy wind.

"Looks like your furry friend is summoning Shiva," the man commented. "She won't be able to help, though. Nothing less than Knights of the Round can kill one of those creatures."

"We'll just have to see about that," Reno deadpanned. "Move or I shoot. I'm not gonna tell you again."

The green-eyed man flashed another one of those maddeningly casual smiles. "I know you're the kind of guy that doesn't bluff, Reno."

The Turk frowned. "Hey, if you know my name, you might as well tell me yours."

The man had the grace to look confused for a moment before he shrugged and said, "Name's Montana."

Reno smiled. "Nice to meet ya, Montana."

He fired the gun, leaping forward at the same time. As he had expected, Montana dodged the bullet, but he was still quick enough to grab Reno around the waist when the Turk was still airborne. However, Reno had been expecting that as well. Grabbing the arm that was flung across his waist, he used it as leverage to fling his body weight forward. Surprised and off-balance, Montana's grip fell away as Reno tumbled over the restraining arm and hit the floor headfirst, with barely enough time to shield his face. Reno turned the fall into a roll, and for the second time in five minutes, he was tumbling down the stairs.

Reno had always known he was a magnet for pain, but this was getting ridiculous.

This time around he was fortunate enough to end up on his butt instead of in a crumpled pile at the bottom of the stairs. He had somehow managed to hold onto the Silver Rifle during his fall. In that one moment that he sat there waiting for the room to stop spinning, he felt an approaching heat from behind him and instinctively rolled to the side, further into the bar area. A stream of white-hot fire came bursting out of the stairwell, consuming the wooden stairs with hungry flames and lighting up the bar area as bright as day.

//Whoa// Red thought as he wrestled to his feet. //Guess that Montana guy wasn't happy I got away// Squinting against the brightness of the flames, he could see nothing of his attacker. Well, it didn't look like Reno was going to be parading upstairs for the rest of the night. It also didn't seem like Montana was going to be coming downstairs, either. Double-edged sword. Yippy.

Considering the Montana threat neutralized, Reno whirled to see that the bar had been converted into a war zone. Bullet holes riddled the walls and even the ceiling of bar. A section of one wall had been blown away, icicles clinging to the sides of the jagged hole and already withering away under the steady onslaught of rain pouring into the bar proper. Red XIII was standing amongst shattered tables and melting patches of ice, panting heavily with one of his forelegs drawn up tight against his body. There was a shallow cut running along his right flank, clotting the fur around it with blood. About five feet away from him, the Faceless Man (sans machine gun) was struggling to get its feet free of the ice that had frozen them to the floor. Its pink skin and dark clothes glistened in the firelight.

If Reno had been more honorable, he would have had qualms about shooting a semi-helpless opponent in cold blood, but the Turk believed firmly that you should kick people why they were down if it would prevent them from getting back up. He coldly raised the Silver Rifle and sighted along the barrel, making sure his aim was perfect before he pulled the trigger. The bullet was on a collision course with the Faceless Man's head, but just as Reno was about to cry victory, the creature jerked its body to the side, its feet coming free of the ice. The bullet whizzed past its head harmlessly.

"Close range!" Red suddenly gasped. "Fight it...at...close range!"

"You've got to be kidding me!" Reno exclaimed as the Faceless Man began to advance towards him, completely oblivious to the wounded Red practically lying at its feet. Reno realized that Vincent and Yuffie had been right; these things were smart and stupid at the same time. If its orders were to kill them, it should have taken out the helpless Red before turning its attention to the armed Reno. Its intelligence seemed to be minimal; it attacked what it perceived to be the greatest threat at the moment. And at the moment, Reno was the lucky guy.

He fired off two more shots at the thing as it approached, but it managed to evade them both with lightening-fast movements. Reno gritted his teeth in frustration. He knew the Silver Rifle probably didn't have an infinite supply of ammo; he couldn't keep wasting bullets like this.

//Damn...looks like I'm gonna have to come up with a plan//

However, the Faceless Man put Reno's scheming on hold when it seized the opportunity and raced forward faster than Reno thought possible for a creature that had no eyes. Before he could pull the trigger, the thing had wrapped both hands around his throat and lifted him off the floor, feet dangling. The creature began to squeeze ruthlessly, aiming to strangle the life out of him. Reno clawed at the thing's rubbery hands, making choking noises as he fought vainly to draw air into his lungs. Already his head was starting to feel light, the room darker and warmer. He dimly heard Red yelling something about claws, but the words made no sense to him. All he could see was darkness eating away at the corners of his vision. All he knew was that pink fleshy head with only indentations for eyes, nose, and mouth staring up at him as its hands choked the life out of the puny little human.

//He's gonna kill me// Reno thought dumbly. //What a bastard he is. Someone should kick him or something//

Reno's foot suddenly shot up on its own accord, slamming into the Faceless Man's chin with more strength than Reno thought he had left in his body. The creature's head snapped backwards like the head of rag doll, and when it came flopping back, the Silver Rifle sent a metal slug right through the middle of its forehead.

The next thing Reno knew, he was lying on the floor of bar, staring up at the bullet-ridden ceiling with the Silver Rifle still clutched tightly in his nerveless fingers. His head was hurting something awful, and every breath he drew into his lungs was pure, beautiful torture. There was something warm, wet, and thick pooling around his arm, and it took him a moment to realize that it was the Faceless Man's blood.

Wrinkling his nose in disgust, Reno forced himself to sit upright and scoot away from the widening pool of blood. His hand had been lying right in the puddle and was now covered with dripping redness, which he promptly wiped on his shirt, leaving a bloody hand print on the white material.

Red limped up to him, fur dyed an even more vibrant red in the hellish light given off by the fires. He sat down next to Reno but didn't say anything. The two sat in silence for what seemed like a long time with the dead body of the Faceless Man inches from them and the Final Heaven bar burning around their ears. Melting ice on the floor mingled with the Faceless Man's blood, making the substance thin and watery. A crashing noise suddenly rang out to their left, but neither of them bothered to look.

"There go the stairs," Red commented quietly.

Reno just nodded, and the silence continued for a few moments before he suddenly announced hoarsely, "You know, I think I owe Vincent and Yuffie an apology."

Red looked at him. "Why is that?"

The Turk gestured to the dead body of the Faceless Man with the hand that was still clutching the Silver Rifle. "I didn't believe that those things even existed, and one nearly killed me."

"Nearly," Red emphasized. "We're not dead yet."

"Right," Reno said in his new raspy voice. He knew what was coming next.

"We need to get out of here," Red announced sadly as he looked around the bar. "This place is finished. Poor Tifa."

Reno rolled his aquamarine eyes. "Poor Tifa? Poor us. We've got to find a way to get to Midgar with all these floodwaters. We also need to find a way to get back upstairs to get everyone's crap out of the bedrooms."

"Any ideas?" Red asked.

Reno shrugged his narrow shoulders. "Well, we still have the Tiny Bronco, the helicopter, and the Highwind parked out back. The ground's higher there so the flood hasn't reached them yet. I think we should use the Highwind."

Red stared at him, golden eye positively glowing in the firelight. "Reno, you can't fly the Highwind in a thunderstorm."

"Bet your furry ass I can," Reno snapped. "I've flown helicopters before. How difficult can it be? Besides, the Highwind is safer than both the Tiny Bronco and the chopper."

//It's also a bigger target for lightening// he added silently.

Red sighed. "Very well. You go ready the Highwind. I'll go around the back of the bar and climb through one of the bedroom windows so I can get everyone's things."

Reno looked at him skeptically. "With that leg?"

Red slowly lowered his foreleg to the floor, testing it before drawing it back against his body. "I used a Cure 3 on it; it should be fine in a little while."

"Fine. I guess we'd better hop to it then."

Red nodded and limped off, heading towards the massive hole in the side of the bar. Reno sat on his bum for a little while longer, staring at the war zone that he used to call the Final Heaven bar.

//There goes the neighborhood indeed// he thought grimly.

~owari chapter 27

[1] Just a note: I love Sailor Moon. ^_^ Can't say the same for Barney, though. Sorry to all you Barney fans out there.