

Chapter Thirty-One: The Point of No Return

"Are you in love with her?" Elena

*Put me in the hospital for nerves and then
They had to commit me
You told them all I was crazy
They cut off my legs
Now I'm an amputee, God damn you*

*"Flagpole Sitta"
Harvey Danger*

"Reeeno!" Tifa yelled, cupping her gloved hands around her mouth to help project the desperate sound of her voice into the rainy night. There was no reply to her cry, just like there had been none to all the dozens before it. Nothing but the cold, unforgiving skies and the thundering rain all around her, pounding ruthlessly down on the pavement, on her.

"Anything?" Elena asked, rushing up to her side, blond hair and navy blue suit a sopping mass clinging to her petite frame.

Tifa shook her head. "Nothing, but I want to look further down the street."

Elena nodded, and the two women fell in side by side, their mostly night-blind eyes searching through the darkness for a hint of red hair, the flash of a white shirt, the glow of a pair of aquamarine eyes. Anything. But all that deigned to appear before them was seemingly endless amounts of pavement glistening with rain and dark alleyways gaping like open mouths. Upper Junon was a big, complex area, and Reno had run off somewhere into the thick of it after the horrible revelation back in the cellar of Kyras's restaurant.

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Then Reno spoke in a horrified, strangled voice. "Alette?!"

The woman didn't respond, but recognition flashed in her dark, terrified eyes, just as tangible as if she had answered him out loud.

//Alette?// Tifa wondered in horror. //No...his ex-wife...the one who killed Mika...//

Reno's next moves were so fast that only Vincent and Red, with their unnatural reflexes, were quick enough to intervene.

As Reno leapt forward with murder in his flashing eyes, Vincent lunged and grabbed the man's shoulders, trying to wrestle him to the ground. Red XIII shot across the room, purposefully tangling himself in Reno's legs so that all three of them – Reno, Red, and Vincent – hit the ground with painful thuds, turning into one massive, struggling heap.

Reno was screaming, the most horrible sound Tifa had ever heard in her entire life. She hadn't even known human beings were capable of making such a heart-wrenching noise – part wail, part shriek, part yell. So many emotions wound up into that scream that she felt something in her heart wanted to collapse under the sheer force of it. The Turk was fighting with all his might to be free of Vincent and Red's grasps, his arms and legs flailing violently. There was a flash of blood red that might have been Reno's hair, Red's fur, or Vincent's eyes, but other than that, her three friends were just a writhing mass of human and inhuman limbs.

The gravity of the situation just wasn't quite clicking in Tifa's mind. Her limbs were frozen where she stood, and from the looks on everyone else's faces, they were stunned as well. For a moment, she looked wildly around the room, mind taking brief stillshots of her friends. Barret and Cid were still plastered against the far wall, their weapons drawn even though they clearly had no idea what to do with them. Elena's eyes were wide with shock as she stared down at Reno's thrashing figure. Cloud looked dumbfounded. The Running Man's eyes were open, so very green and familiar. Rude was absolutely still, mouth hanging open slightly. The woman known as Alette was struggling wildly against her ropes, screaming in pure terror.

Not that she didn't have a right to be afraid. Tifa knew that if Reno somehow got loose, blood would be shed, and it wouldn't be his. Reno would kill her with his bare hands if he had to, and bound to her chair, Alette was a helpless victim...

//...but she killed her own daughter! Doesn't such a monster deserve to die? Doesn't Reno deserve his vengeance?//

//...are you going to watch your friend slaughter someone in cold blood right in front of you? Spilling her blood will not heal him.//

//...she killed two-year-old baby girl!//

//...two years old...twenty years old...human life is human life. All is precious.//

Alette deserved to die, but Tifa couldn't let Reno kill her.

But...she still couldn't move. She tried – oh god, did she ever try. But her feet just wouldn't obey. All she could do was stare helplessly at the thrashing figures of Vincent, Reno, and Red on the hard, pitiless floor of the cellar. It was taking both of them to restrain the Turk. Two fighters with unnatural strength to hold down one human man. It was only then that Tifa realized that much of Reno's strength was rooted in his neverending well of bitterness and rage.

Reno managed to extricate one arm, and Tifa saw that seemingly disembodied limb lash upwards and catch Vincent underneath the chin. The gunman's head jerked backwards, and Tifa imagined she could hear his teeth clacking together. Naturally, it wasn't enough to force Vincent to relax his hold, but Reno suddenly angled his long fingers into a pseudo-blade and slammed them into Vincent's neck with enough rage-driven power to make the man fall away from him, struggling for breath. A blow such as that would have crushed a normal human's windpipe, Tifa knew, but Vincent was only gasping for breath – preternatural abilities at their advantageous best.

With Vincent's gone, Reno's thrashing became more vigorous, and he let out a loud cry as he managed to free one of his feet. Another guttural scream ripped from his throat as he delivered a hard kick into Red's side, sending the lion-like beast skidding away with an angry snarl.

Reno struggled to his feet, face a mask of pure fury. Tifa kept telling her feet to move, to get between Reno and Alette somehow, but her body was something out of her control now. She was frozen.

And so she braced herself, ready to witness the sight of Reno attacking a defenseless victim. But Reno didn't move a step closer towards his ex-wife. He tottered around drunkenly for a second, flashing eyes flitting blindly around the room. His face was a ghastly shade of white, as if some demon had leeches the blood from his body, and he was hovering on the brink of death, blind in his rage. The darkness of the twin scars on his cheekbones and the bloody redness of his hair stood out in bright contrast to the ghostly pallor of his skin.

By chance, Reno's eyes flicked in Tifa's direction, and for a few breathless seconds, their gazes locked and held. A vise closed around her heart when she saw that wound torn and bleeding, gushing. She saw the well of bitterness deep within him, spewing forth dark memories like a geyser, as mindless and out of control as a runaway train, never coming back from the point of no return.

Then his eyes were gone, and he was pounding up the stairs and out of the cellar, leaving only silence and the pitiful weeping of Alette. Tifa slowly became aware of herself again, as if for that horrible time period, she had been estranged from her body, living only for that gloriously unstable man that had just torn out of the cellar as if the devil himself were close on his heels.

A glass shattered upstairs in the restaurant area, and with it the last remnants of the frozen spell Reno's pulsing, bleeding soul cast over the room.

"Reno! Come back!" Tifa cried, racing up the stairs, Rude and Elena close at her heels.

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"Reeenooo!" Elena called, her voice satisfyingly loud. One positive thing Tifa could say about Elena was that the small woman had one mighty bellow.

But even the loudness of the Turk's voice wasn't enough to overcome the endless roar of the rain. Tifa, for one, was so sick of rain and being wet that she didn't think she would mind if she never took another shower again in her entire life.

"God, where could he be?!" Elena said worriedly, panic starting to creep into her voice. "It feels like we've searched the entire goddamn city!"

Tifa shared the Turk's sentiment, but still she said, "We can't just give up. Cloud and Rude are out there looking as well. Between the four of us, we should be able to find him."

//Please be okay, Reno. Don't do anything stupid.//

As she and Elena continued down the street, eyes desperately searching the darkness for any sign of their missing friend, Tifa couldn't help but worry if the appearance of Alette had finally driven Reno off the deep end. She had looked into those crazed, pained eyes and saw the man she had come to know as Reno of the Turks slowly deteriorating, being devoured by

bitterness and a rage so deep that it was a pit without a bottom. Tifa was afraid Reno would take out the sudden surge of violence in his soul on the first thing that crossed his path, and if there was no one, he would turn on himself. She heard the waters flooding Lower Junon were deep. Several people had drowned already, their bodies lost somewhere in that massive watery grave.

//No!// she told herself harshly. //Reno would never take his own life! What kind of friend are you – thinking like that? Think positive, Tifa! Reno is going to be fine. Reno is going to be fine...//

And Tifa realized for the first time that she would miss Reno dearly if he died. He was her friend now, and she had to help him.

However, after ten more minutes of fruitless searching, she and Elena were still no closer to finding Reno than they were when they left the restaurant. All they knew was that he was somewhere out in the complex labyrinth of Upper Junon, and naturally, such meager knowledge amounted to nothing.

Tifa and Elena had already checked all the bars and shops. No Reno. Cloud and Rude were to check the alleyways and get as far as they could to Lower Junon to make sure Reno wasn't thinking of taking a fateful plunge into the floodwaters. Tifa didn't know if they had found anything. Her PHS and Elena's cell phone didn't work in the rain; they had left both communication devices back at the restaurant.

A feeling of isolation washed over Tifa as she sloshed through another puddle, water splashing her already drenched legs. The lighted restaurant filled with her friends (and two of her enemies) seemed so far away. Kalm and the scorched remains of her bar seemed even farther. All she knew was this dark, rain-soaked backstreet, as if it were her entire world and everything else had been just a dream.

"Tifa?" Elena suddenly asked, and something in her voice made all of the other woman's attention come to focus on her.

"Hm?"

The Turk's eyes were wide and dark. "Do you know who that woman back at the restaurant is?"

Tifa blinked in surprise. She had been so caught up in her search for Reno that she had completely forgotten that Alette was back at the bar, a living relic from Reno's dark past. A murderer who had killed her daughter, but...

'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!'

"I know who she is," Tifa said quietly, voice barely audible over the rain. "But it's not my story to tell."

Elena looked her dubiously, mistrust clearly evident in her dark eyes.

"I'm telling the truth," Tifa insisted, unable to keep a defensive tone out of her voice. She had always hated it when people looked at her like that. "Please believe me, Elena. We can't let Reno near to that woman, or he'll kill her."

The woman blinked. "You're serious, aren't you?" she asked softly.

Tifa nodded.

Elena sighed sadly as they continued to walk through the rain. "He didn't have any weapons, I don't think. His nightstick was lost in the sewers, and I don't know if he managed to retrieve his gun before the bar went down in flames."

"I saw Vincent's Silver Rifle tucked in the waistband of his pants," Tifa countered quietly.

Elena's worried expression intensified so much that Tifa wished she could retract her words. "Oh no! I was really hoping he wouldn't have a gun with him."

Tifa didn't say anything in reply, but she agreed wholeheartedly. A mentally unstable, possibly rage-stricken Reno with a loaded gun was not a thing they wanted running rampant without anything to rein it in.

//All the more reason why we have to find him quickly// she urged herself, finding that if she was stern, it would give her time to worry too much.

It seemed as if they had been searching for hours when they finally came to a dead end, though 'dead' could hardly describe the scene that lay before the two women. Upper Junon abruptly fell away, and the ocean stretched out in all directions, dark and terrible in her beauty, but not dead. No, the ocean was constantly teeming with life; Tifa was certain there were dozens of unknown monsters living in her depths. Normally, she loved looking upon the crystalline blue waters

of the ocean, the gentle waves sparkling with reflected sunlight. It was one of the reasons she had wanted to set up her bar in Kalm.

But never in her life had she seen an ocean like this, so dark and forbidding, with tall, hungry waves that leapt and contorted in the air, like they wanted to eat the world. Falling raindrops punctured their watery kindred, making the waves look like they had some horrid disease as they lashed upward, scrabbling for the chance to drown Upper Junon just as they had devoured Lower Junon.

The sight took Tifa's breath away, but in a wild, terrified sort of way.

"Ugly," Elena muttered, wrapping her arms around herself as if cold.

Tifa looked down at the dark waters still a distance below her. Had Reno...?

"Tifa! Elena!" a deep voice suddenly called.

Both women turned in surprise to find Rude walking towards them down the deserted street, strides long and unhurried. His deep-set green eyes glittered as he got closer, their gleam undimmed by the raindrops rolling down his face.

"Rude!" Elena exclaimed, rushing up to him, Tifa close at her heels.

"We found him," Rude announced calmly.

"You did?!" Tifa exclaimed breathlessly. Her heart was beating in her throat. "Where is he?"

"Follow me," he said in an unwavering tone, but Tifa spotted a mixture of relief and worry that flitted across his green eyes before he turned around and began to walk down the street, back the way he came.

Elena moved up beside Rude, but Tifa lagged a couple of steps behind. She hadn't liked the look in Rude's eyes. The relief was something nice to see, but the worry...if they had found Reno, and he was alright, then why worry any longer?

//Duh// a voice mocked. //Because he's NOT alright, and probably never will be again//

//No...don't let it be that way. Reno's going to be just fine!//

Or so she told herself, but there just wasn't enough conviction behind the words. She knew Reno wasn't alright because he had never really been alright to begin with. Not with that terrible wound festering inside him like a slow poison, eating away at his life. She could only pray that it hadn't devoured him already.

Rude strode to the end of the street and up to the very edge of the street until it looked like he was going to walk right off and plummet into the dark waters below. Elena and Tifa hesitantly came up on either side of him, silently willing their shoes not to slide on the wet pavement. One slip here meant an almost certain death in the churning waters fifty feet below them.

"Down there," Rude said, pointing straight down with one gloved hand.

Tifa steeled her and leaned slightly over the edge, hoping her well-honed balance wouldn't betray her now. Right below them, where she had expected to see nothing but roaring, world-devouring ocean water, she instead saw a large metal platform that hung out over the waters, like a balcony without a railing. A wet and glistening ladder at her feet lead down to the platform.

"I don't see him," Elena announced tensely.

"I know," Rude replied, pulling back from the edge. "There a large opening in the wall directly beneath us that leads into an old tunnel that used to provide quick passage for sea-faring crafts."

"Sea-faring crafts?" Elena asked curiously.

"Back when Junon was first built, they were focused on testing different kinds of aquatic military craft. From a testing facility directly underneath Junon, the crafts would be jettisoned out of the tunnel and onto the ocean's surface. The tunnel has been out of use for a long time, and all passageways to the abandoned testing facility have been sealed off so it's now the equivalent of a very large, very long hole in the wall." He paused. "Cloud said Reno was down in the back of the tunnel."

That got Tifa's attention. "Cloud's down there with him?"

Rude glanced at her for a moment, then looked away. "No. Cloud has gone back to the restaurant to inform the others that Reno is alright."

Tifa frowned. She had wanted Cloud to be here, even if it was just for moral support. Reno didn't appear to like Cloud very much, but Tifa knew that somewhere in the back of his mind, Reno respected the leader of AVALANCHE maybe more than anyone else, save for Reeve. Though given the Turk's current state of mind, she was uncertain as to how he would react to an authority figure. Maybe that was the reason Cloud had gone back...

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Elena asked impatiently, moving towards the ladder. "Let's go get him."

Rude laid a large hand on her shoulder, stopping her in her tracks. The blonde woman stared up at him, perplexed. "What is it, Rude? We need to go get him."

Rude looked off across the tormented ocean. "I think Tifa should go down there alone," he said flatly.

"What?" Elena and Tifa asked simultaneously.

//Why me alone?//

Tifa suddenly found herself the focus of a pair of bright green eyes, their brilliance natural, not Mako-derived. "You have to help him, Tifa," Rude said quietly.

"But..." Tifa began in a troubled voice.

"Why just her?" Elena demanded, echoing Tifa's thoughts exactly. "We can help him, too, Rude!"

But it was as if Elena hadn't even spoken. Rude's eyes burned into her burgundy ones. "Please, Tifa."

Tifa's hands clenched into fists at her sides, but not in anger. She felt a heavy burden descend on her shoulders, just as it had the day she had gone out to listen to Reno's story on the beach at Kalm. It was funny how she believed in herself until other people started to do the same thing. She was good at taking responsibility until others began to rely on her as well. It was simple when it was just her life at stake, but when other human beings put their lives in her hands...sometimes it was all too much.

She hated that part of herself. So indecisive. And it wasn't just Reno who was depending on her, she decided, as she looked into Rude's eyes, the calm green shade resembling placid emeralds with a core of chaos within their crystalline cages. And then there was Elena's wide, worried eyes peering around Rude's shoulder at her, slightly angry, slightly desperate. They were relying on her, too. Relying on her help Reno. Too succeed where they had failed...

Tifa nodded, ignoring her waterlogged bangs as they snaked into her eyes. "Alright, I'll go."

She turned towards the ladder, prepared to begin her precarious descent, when Rude suddenly grabbed her hand. She looked at him in surprise.

"Take care of him, Tifa," he said softly.

She smiled wanly. "I will, Rude. Don't worry."

He squeezed her hand, and a strange light entered his eyes. "Take care of yourself as well."

An uncertain pucker formed between her graceful eyebrows, but before she could become further confused, Rude released her hand and stepped back next to Elena, hands clasped in front of him, all business once more.

Tifa nodded at them once more, then turned and started to descend the ladder alone.

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Rude watched emotionlessly as the top of Tifa's head sank out of view. He resisted the urge to step up to the edge and watch her climb down to the platform safely. Such a thing would have been unnecessary, he knew; Tifa was more than capable of taking care of herself. She didn't need anyone to follow her around like an aimless shadow, doting on her every move as if she were some divine being to be cherished and protected lest she break. No, Tifa Lockheart would not appreciate that in the slightest.

Hazy green eyes stared at the top of the ladder until the visage began dancing in and out of focus tauntingly. Then Rude turned away.

"Let's go," he said firmly, beginning the lonely walk back down the wide street that had once provided a resting place for the Junon canon, the former party ground for President Rufus' Shinra welcoming parade. A street full of memories, that's what it was. That was what all of Junon was for him – a cauldron filled to the brim with a terrible concoction of memories better left forgotten.

"Wait up, Rude!" Elena cried, hurrying to his side. "You're walking too fast!"

Rude didn't reply, but he slowed his pace enough for the shorter Turk to catch up. He had to remember that not every one of his friends was six feet or higher. It took two of Elena's strides to match one of his.

Lightening silently knifed through the sky overhead, throwing Rude and Elena's shadows on the pavement before them. Rain pounded his broad shoulders, but Rude paid it no heed. The ill-fated droplets would soon lose themselves in the fabric of his suit or the puddles underfoot, vanishing into the maw of a being greater than themselves. That was just how the world worked, how it always had been.

"I hope you know where we're going," Elena said irritably as she trudged alongside him.

"We're going back to Kyra's restaurant," Rude answered calmly, unperturbed by her bad mood.

Elena gave a very unfeminine snort and crossed her arms across her chest. "I'm so sick of all this goddamn rain!" she declared. "I'm sick of being wet and exhausted and worried and frustrated and...what the hell am I talking to YOU about this for? It's not like you CARE or anything..."

Rude frowned almost imperceptibly. "If that's what you want to believe..."

There was a brief hesitation, and then Elena replied in a voice so quiet that her words were nearly drowned out by the rain. "Sorry, Rude. I didn't mean to snap at you. I just want this all to be over."

"As we all do," Rude deadpanned.

Silence once again became their companion as the two Turks walked along the deserted street, the ocean stretching endlessly to their right and the dark, gloomy apartment buildings of downtown Junon rising to their left. Urban jungle and abysmal ocean. In other words, the proverbial rock and hard place, and this long, wide street was the place that existed in limbo between the two wastelands. This street where the rain seemed to pound harder, the droplets cry even more sadly than normal.

Or maybe Rude's melancholy state of mind was because of Reno's condition? He knew his best friend was being tormented by something, and there was nothing under the stars Rude could do to help. For some reason, what was going on in Reno's soul was far beyond Rude's healing capacity – what little he had possessed in the first place. He had never been adept at comforting others, but back in the cellar of the restaurant, he had wished for nothing more than to be someone else, someone who could heal, someone who had the ability to help others. What he had seen flashing in Reno's eyes was... something that was beyond him, a pain he couldn't ease.

Reno was dying inside, and there was nothing he could do.

//Helpless again. In Junon, too. Seems like this city always strips me of all my strength//

"Are you in love with her?" Elena suddenly asked, out of nowhere.

Rude's steps faltered, and it was all he could do not to jump in surprise. "What do you mean?" he asked, incredulous that such calm words were falling from his lips.

He didn't look at Elena, but he could practically feel her scowling. "You KNOW who I mean. Tifa Lockheart!"

Rude didn't answer her, only kept his gaze straight forward, staring at the end of the street. He didn't trust himself to look anywhere else.

Elena flung her hands up in frustration, voice rising shrilly into the rain night. "I CAN'T believe this! What IS it about that woman?! What does every single man see in her?! I swear if hear one more person—"

Turning away abruptly, Rude strode to the edge of the street, back ramrod straight as he stared off at the churning ocean. His hands were clenched tightly into fists at his sides, fingers straining with the effort to contain his emotions. He felt his own instability, rising in his soul like a demon from the pits of hell.

He was tired, worried, wartorn, and maybe even a little scared. Reeve was still missing, and the Running Man – the one who might or might not hold all the answers they'd been looking for – was locked in the cellar of Kyra's restaurant, waiting

to be interrogated. Only they couldn't interrogate him until they found Reno, who had gone off the deep end because of some mysterious woman whose name Rude didn't know, whose face Rude didn't recognize. He felt like he hadn't slept in years; his body was aching, weary to the bone, and his heart, which he usually commended for its fortitude, was on the verge of shattering along with his body. The last thing he needed right now was for Elena to confront him about his mixed-up feelings for Tifa.

And why did it have to be Elena, of all people? Rude was sure he would have fared better if Tifa herself had come up to him demanding answers to questions better left unasked. For some reason, he didn't want to talk with Elena about his feelings for another woman. It bothered him.

Elena came up beside him meekly, hands wrung together in front of her. Rude didn't look at her.

"R-Rude?" she began so quietly that the ocean's roar nearly swallowed her voice. "I'm so sorry, Rude. I didn't mean to hurt your feelings. Please...don't think badly of me." She sounded like she was about to cry, and that alarmed Rude more than anything. He hated when people cried.

He wanted to devise some answer to quell the onslaught of her questions and impending confessions, but Rude had never been good with words. None came to him, and he just stood in the rain, gazing off over the tumultuous ocean at a sunless horizon that seemed to have no end.

"Rude?" Elena whispered softly, pleadingly. He could feel her eyes on the side of his face.

"Don't worry about it, Elena," he said levelly. "I'm not angry with you."

Still, her discomfort did not cease; in fact, Rude perceived a rising tension in her like a tidal wave, ready to crash onto the formerly immovable shore. He suddenly knew that she wanted desperately to tell him something, and he wasn't sure he was ready to hear it, whatever it was.

"Rude," she began, voice strong yet trembling. "You know, there's other...people out there besides Tifa. People who... people who care a lot about you..."

His eyes widened slightly. //No...she can't be...//

She tentatively touched his arm, and he imagined he could feel the warmth of her small hand even through his thick, soaking wet sleeve. "Rude, I—" she started to say.

Rude turned and gently pressed his fingers against her lips, praying that his fingers weren't as weak and shaking as he felt inside. "Elena, don't—" he said softly.

She stared up at him with hurt blazing in her chocolate brown eyes. The darkness of his fingers and gloves looked like a parasite latched onto her soft, pale skin. One of her hands came up to lightly grip his wrist, fingers shuddering with both cold and emotion.

"I'm trying to tell you something important, Rude," she whispered beseechingly, lips moving against his fingers. The wounded look in her eyes was making a tightness blossom in his chest.

The tall Turk suddenly reached out and wrapped his arms around her, drawing her against him in a firm embrace. He felt her muscles lock in surprise, then relax until she rested within the circle of his arms, head against his chest. Rude held her close, finding that he actually wanted to touch her, touch another person. It had been a long time since he either held or been held by anyone. And to think that in the beginning, if not for Tseng's presence... he and Elena might have been...

He forced his emotions back, burying them deep within the calculating coldness that had kept him alive and safe for years, shielding him from the guilt, the horror, the hell that came with being a Turk, an assassin, a being without morals. For far too long, he had lived a life devoid of deeper feeling, and the recent occurrences were happening too quickly for him to keep up with what people were now expecting of him. To love, to care, to fear...when had these things become so alien to him?

//But, maybe, just maybe, in...//

"Time," Rude said, resting his chin on the top of Elena's head. "Just give me time, Elena. I can't...deal with anything right now. Can you just give me a little time?"

//Please...//

He felt her nod, face moving against his chest. "Yes," she whispered. "I can."

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Dark and echoing was the tunnel. Every breath, every footfall seemed unnaturally loud, screaming and resounding off the circular walls before the darkness gobbled it up. And what a hungry thing was the inky black that Tifa had plunged straight into, leaving the slippery platform and the lacerating rain behind in a world that she felt she was no longer a part of.

For in this tunnel was an entirely different time period, an era ridden with wars of the soul. The only thing that existed in this frightening realm of limbo was the past, and Tifa knew that it was up to her to hang onto the present and to see into the future. Because Reno couldn't do that, not in the condition he was in now, and ironically, it was only the past and future that could offer to him any hope of salvation.

Tifa swallowed hard, concentrating only on pulling air in and out of her lungs. A stale, metallic odor hung in the tunnel, like the stench of old blood. The tunnel was wide and seemed to loom around her on all sides. There was very little light, but streetlamps from the outside world managed to extend their artificial rays of illumination into the mouth of the tunnel; thus, Tifa's path was clear enough before her so she wasn't running blind into the depths of Junon.

Her hands were damp with rain and sweat, and she absently rubbed her palms against the fabric of her skirt before remembering that her gloves were in the way. She had worn her Premium Heart so often in the past few days that it felt as if she had been born with it on her hand. It had been a year since she had lived a life of constant battle, and she was disappointed at how poorly her heart and body were adjusting to the abrupt change.

//Don't think about that// she told herself sternly. //Focus. If you start thinking about how tired you are, you'll never make it to the end//

Yet, somewhere in the back of her mind, she wondered if there ever WAS going to be an end to all this.

She cut her thoughts short, though, for she was suddenly able to discern a shape at the end of the tunnel. White shirt in the blackness, maybe a brief glint of red hair darkened by the dampness of rain. As she drew closer, heart thundering, a pair of bitter aquamarine eyes snapped open, pinning her with their glare. Yes, this truly was limbo, and those horrible, haunted eyes were a pure testament of that. She saw no sense of reality in those pale orbs; they were merely two drowning pools of the darkest emotions ever conceived by man.

"Reno..." she whispered, walking to where he was lying against the wall, his pale, scarred cheek pressed against the cold metal. Everything about him seemed dead, drained of all semblance of vivacity, something that was incredibly unnerving to see in Reno, one who was always moving. The only thing that seemed even remotely alive were his eyes, pale Mako eyes that followed her every movement as she folded her legs beneath her and knelt in front of him, long brown hair pooling on the floor beside her.

Reno's gaze locked onto her face, painfully direct, and Tifa found that she had to look away to avoid being impaled by the figurative daggers that lurked in those glowing depths. She clasped her hands nervously in her lap and looked at Reno's pale hand resting limply on his own thigh, fingers curled slightly. His long legs extended bonelessly towards the center of the tunnel, one of them trapped beneath its counterpart in a position that must have been uncomfortable to be in for any given amount of time.

//How long as he been down here?// Tifa wondered silently. //Reno...what's going through your head? What are you thinking? Do I even WANT to know what you're thinking?//

But instead of asking one of the many questions she had for Reno, she instead said nothing at all – merely sat there in the cold silence, the metal of the tunnel cold beneath her bare knees and the limp form of her friend inches away from her. Inches, of course, that may as well have been miles. Suddenly, Tifa felt very alone.

"My mother," she whispered, "was very important to me."

There was no reply so she continued hesitantly, "She died when I was a young girl, but I still hold her very dear to me, just like all my other memories from back when I lived in Kalm." She paused. "All my experiences have made me who I am today, made me stronger...even the bad ones..."

"Your mother," Reno said in a low, raspy voice that Tifa barely recognized as his. "Didn't kill your only reason for living, I'm sure. You can never understand what I feel. Go away."

Tifa shook her head and met his bitter eyes. "No, Reno, I'm not leaving unless you come with me."

There was silence as he seemed to consider this, only Tifa had a suspicion that he wasn't thinking about anything except murder. Never before had she been in the presence of another person yet felt so *severed* from them. It was disconcerting, as if Reno weren't really there.

"How long did you train with your martial arts master?" he suddenly asked in that quiet, slow voice.

Tifa blinked in surprise. "I trained with Zangan for seven years, why?"

A wicked glint entered his eyes. "I'll bet you know how to kill a man with your bare hands, right? Snap his neck? Crush his windpipe? A thousand painful ways to die – I'll bet that was the pinnacle of your training."

Tifa didn't reply, her fists tightening in her lap. The final technique she learned was the Final Heaven, and against weaker opponents, it DID mean instant death. But that wasn't why she started to learn martial arts in the first place. Just where was Reno going with this?

"Kill me," he suddenly said sharply.

Tifa nearly choked on her own breath.

His eyes bore into her, hidden daggers lacerating her mental armor. "Either you kill me, or I'll go back to there and kill that bitch with my bare hands."

Tifa's jaw clenched as she braced herself. "I can't let you kill her, Reno."

The rage came a second later. Reno's eyes flashed, and those intangible daggers lashed out at her. "Are you siding with her?" Reno seethed, voice twisted with fury. "You ARE siding with her, aren't you?! How DARE you?!"

"Just listen to me, Reno," Tifa insisted, trying to keep the panic out of her voice. She felt him slipping.

"No!" he snapped. "I'm through listening to you! I'm through listening to everyone!"

"Reno!"

"Kill me," he hissed.

"No."

"Kill me now!"

"No!"

His irises suddenly faded to a shade so pale that they almost looked like iridescent pearls. "I'll make you kill me," he threatened, but he didn't move.

Tifa wanted to shut her eyes against the sudden moisture that was stinging them, but the trained fighter in her wouldn't let her look away from a man who had just approached her with violence. "Please let me help you, Reno," she whispered.

"And what the hell can you do for me?" he asked harshly. "You lost your chance to take my life in exchange for hers. I have to kill her now."

"No," Tifa insisted, shaking her head furiously. "You don't have to kill anyone. Bloodshed isn't the answer."

"This isn't about bloodshed," Reno said flatly. "This is about letting my daughter's soul rest in peace."

Tifa steeled herself and said, "Reno, I'm sure Mika wouldn't want you to kill her mother. No child...would want her mother to die."

~"I wanna see Mama..."~

~"Is Mama there...beyond the mountain?"~

Reno laughed, a sharp, bitter sound that resounded off the walls of the tunnel until it seemed as if they were drowning in that dark laughter. "I was GLAD when my mother died, the worthless bitch. I was free after that, free to do whatever the hell I wanted with my rotten life."

Tifa winced at his harsh words. "Reno, please. You can't kill Alette. Could you really do it? Could you kill your wife?"

"You bet I could," Reno spat angrily, eyes glittering in the darkness with primitive, animal-like intelligence.

Frustration rose in Tifa. She wasn't getting through to him! All her words were slamming against the indestructible idea that he HAD to kill Alette no matter what. For now, Tifa could only pray that Reno wasn't so far gone that her words wouldn't be able to reach him at all.

"Reno," she tried again. "You've lived your entire life remembering the promise to destroy her if you ever saw her again. I think that's all you've really been living for, isn't it? All the drinking, all the women – they didn't matter in the end, did they? You were just trying to forget your daughter and your wife. But now, if all you've existed for is those two people, then if you kill Alette, you'll have nothing left. You'd die with her."

An auburn eyebrow lifted derisively. "And? You say that like it's a bad thing."

His words wounded her deeply for some reason. She looked to his eyes and saw no respect for anything; the Planet, human life...it all didn't matter to him. And she remembered his words on the beach: "...and my life is nothing but a scratch in the Planet's timeline. Petty and insignificant, just as it was meant to be."

How...how could Reno even begin to appreciate the lives of others when he didn't even value his own?

And suddenly, Tifa was infuriated beyond all reason. "You're such a coward," she told Reno, voice unforgiving. "You're a selfish bastard who only thinks of his own peace of mind."

"Shut up," Reno growled, eyes starting to bleed back to the pearly color.

"It's true!" Tifa snapped, hands fisted her lap, trembling with the effort not to send them lashing through the air. "All you can think about is killing Alette so that you can finally rest in peace, isn't it? Selfish to the end! Don't you ever stop to think about the people that would be sad if you died?! The people who would cry for you? Rude and Elena are SUFFERING right now because YOU won't let them help you! Sending me down here alone was the hardest thing they'd ever done! They care for you so much, Reno! Your death would tear them apart! Don't you understand?!" Angry tears were running down her cheeks.

Reno's eyes blazed, and he started to look away, but Tifa grabbed him by the front of the shirt and hauled him closer. Her sudden motion upset his balance, and he nearly fell against her, one cold, clammy hand braced against her bare thigh. His ponytail spilled over his shoulder like a sudden outflow of dark blood, and through the portals of his tormented eyes, she could see that the wound inside him was bleeding again, pumping acidic blood through the network of his soul.

"Would you do it to them?" Tifa demanded, her angry eyes never leaving his. "Would you make your friends cry all because of some silly notion of vengeance? They NEED you, Reno! Reeve needs you go look for him! Are you just going to abandon him as well?! You're such a selfish coward, Reno!"

"LEAVE ME ALONE!!" Reno yelled, weakly trying to pull away from her grasp, but it was as if his limbs were no longer at his disposal. "You can't even begin to imagine how I feel! You don't know what it's like to live your every waking moment thinking about...seeing the same face...I can't just forget my daughter like that! I can't let her death go unpunished, and I don't give a fuck what happens to me!"

"Goddammit, Reno!" Tifa shook him hard, her vision becoming increasingly blurry the more agitated she became. "Your daughter doesn't want you to kill the woman who gave birth to her! Do you think I wanted my mother to die?!" Her voice cracked. "NO, I didn't want her to die!!"

"Why are you protecting her?!" Reno shouted. "Alette's not worth protecting! You don't understand ANYTHING!! I can't fail my daughter! I just...can't..."

He stopped and swallowed hard, muscles of his throat working in the darkness. He was trembling within her grasp, and Tifa was caught between wanting to hold him until he stopped quivering and shaking him until he regained his wits.

Reno lowered his head, eyes falling into shadow. When he spoke next, his voice was flat, dead. "Tseng died because his faithful Turks weren't there to back him up. Mika was killed because I wasn't there to protect her. Reeve is dead because I was too late to help him."

Tifa's hold on his shirt tightened. "Stop that, Reno," she ordered. "Reeve's not dead!"

Reno let out a bitter laugh and pinned her with a cruel glare. "Do you HONESTLY think that he's alive? If he was anywhere, then he was down there in wherever the hell you guys were, and that place collapsed into nothing, didn't it?"

"But it's possible that he's still alive," Tifa insisted, striving to be sensible. "And the one man that can tell us where Reeve might be is the Running Man, and we have him in that cellar—"

"—with that bitch," Reno tacked on viciously.

Tifa ignored his words. "We need you right now, Reno," she told him urgently. "Cloud is strong, but he can't do this alone. And your Turks need you as well."

Reno's eyes darkened, and she felt his cold fingers digging into the flesh of her thigh. "Shut up!" he snapped. "Don't even TRY using Rude and Elena against me! Nothing is going to change the fact that Alette has to die! Why do you insist on taking away my one chance to redeem myself, to make up for letting my daughter die?!"

Tifa fully expected her own temper to flare up at his redundant words, but instead all she found in her heart was an aching gentleness. "Because, Reno, if you kill Alette, then you'll die as well, and I don't want that for you. I don't want you to die, Reno."

He looked away sharply. "Shut up," he hissed. "You lie."

She put one gloved hand against his scarred cheek and tried to turn his face back towards her. "Look at me, and you'll know I'm not lying," she said softly.

Reno fought for a moment, trying not to allow her to turn his face towards her. In the end, though, those pained aquamarine eyes locked onto her burgundy ones, and Tifa saw the true extent of his pain. The bitterness was deep, just as every bit unfathomable as his love for his deceased daughter. Mika was at the core of his pain; haunting memories of her face drove him to drink, to darkness. But on the other hand, without her, Reno never would have known what love was...

...unless...unless maybe...

There was something else flickering deep in the depths of those eyes, something that was beyond the rage, beyond the suffering, beyond the bitterness. Something buried so deeply that she was sure Reno didn't even know it was there. Only someone with unclouded eyes could even catch a glimpse of it, and Tifa was desperately striving to make sense of what she was seeing.

But then Reno's eyes slid slowly closed, eyelashes looking far too dark for man of such pale, ghostly skin. A shudder ran through his entire body, and suddenly Tifa found herself cradling his head in the crook of her elbow, the redness of his hair bright against the flesh of her arm. He was trembling something awful, and she instinctively wrapped her arms around him the best she could. One of her hands rested on his back while she absently traced the line of one dark scar with her opposite thumb.

"Reno?" she whispered questioningly. "Are you alright?"

"No," he said quietly.

Tifa rubbed his back gently, trying to soothe him in a motherly fashion. She stared off into the darkness of the tunnel and listened to the cruel rain that seemed so far away. It really did feel like she was in another world, but it was, for better or worse, a world in which her presence was now only a mere handicap.

Her vision danced before her, and she realized more tears were threatening to roll down her cheeks. "Reno," she said softly. "I...don't think I can help you anymore."

Silence. He didn't even stir from within the circle of her arms, but she knew he had heard her.

Her grip on him tightened, a slight desperation written in her movements. "I'm sorry," she mouthed to the darkness. "I'm so sorry."

//This is the right thing to do// she told herself fiercely. //I can't fight this battle for him//

Swallowing hard, she forced words past her constricting throat, "I'm still...here...though. If you ever need me...I'll be right here." She closed her eyes against her tears. "Please don't die, Reno. I'll be sad if you do."

He shifted slightly. "Everything dies, Tifa."

She didn't know what to say to that. Death was a certitude, something guaranteed to every human upon birth. His words were undeniably true, and there was nothing she could do about it but pray that her caring for him would be enough to keep him living, even if it was only for a short time.

So there she remained with him until the first traces of light began to burn away the darkness in the tunnel. Gray, dim light that only touched them because the gloomy storm clouds permitted it to do so, but it was light nonetheless. Tifa had been

staring in the darkness for a long time, it seemed, holding Reno. His cheek was pillowed against her arm, his body still and silent, like calm water before a hurricane.

She absently played with his hair, noting that the blood red strands had begun to dry. "Let's go back to the others, Reno," she said softly.

There was a brief hesitation, but then he nodded. "Yes."

* * * * *

"You guys will be okay?" Cloud asked, trying to keep the bone-crushing weariness from showing in his voice. The figures standing before him blurred, and he had to narrow his blue eyes to get them back into their rightful places.

"Sure thang," Barret assured him, leaning his broad back against the wall next to the cellar door. "Our little friends down there ain't goin' nowhere."

Cloud nodded and glanced at the man positioned other side of the door. "You okay, Cid?"

The man took a long, slow drag of his cigarette, avoiding Cloud's eyes as he said, "Fine. You go rest up, kid."

If Cloud hadn't been so exhausted, he would have been more skeptical of Cid's mental and emotional condition, but with things as they were now – and his body as worn out as it was – he didn't have any strength left for arguing. However, he did exchange a meaningful look with Barret that silently said, Take care of Cid.

The big man nodded. "We gonna be fine, Spike. Now go on and get outta here."

Cloud turned away and muttered something about Vincent coming to relieve them later on, but his words sounded jumbled and incoherent even to him. His boots scraped weakly across the floor as he practically dragged himself down the hall. He couldn't remember the last time he had been THIS tired. Searching for Yuffie, braving the earthquakes in the subterranean complex, fighting their way back to the surface, going after the Running Man, and then chasing after Reno – all these physically taxing events had taken their final toll on his normally resilient body. Proof than even ex-SOLDIERS shot up with Mako and Jenova cells had their limits, and Cloud was at his wits' end.

//Wonder how long I have before my legs give out// he wondered dimly. //Gotta make it up the stairs...up the stairs...//

To get to the stairs, however, he first had to trudge through the main area of the restaurant, where a very irate Kyra was sweeping up shards from the glasses Reno had knocked over in his haste to flee the restaurant. Cloud lifted a hand to her in both greeting and parting, not sticking around to engage in conversation. His feet were working fairly well on autopilot, and he didn't want to disrupt their rhythm for fear he would never get them moving again.

Cloud actually managed to make it up the stairs and halfway down one of the second floor hallways before he realized that he had completely forgotten which room Kyra had told him to stay in. Was it the one next to the living room? Or the one off of the hallway that led to the bathroom? Was it the one off the hallway that led to the stairs that led to the kitchen that led to the bathtub...?

//Oh well...here seems like a good place//

The wall caught him as he fell against it, splintery fingertips accidentally lacerating his skin as he slid to the floor, legs finally betraying him as he had known they eventually would. But Cloud didn't care. It felt so good not to be moving for once. No more worries. Just...sleep.

He closed his eyes and let himself sink into warm darkness without shape or form, just a beautifully empty void in which there existed no world filled with strife or suffering. Just darkness, and Cloud loved it.

Soon, he found himself immersed in a startlingly realistic dream. Tifa Lockheart crouched before him, dark brown hair dyed jet black by rain. Or was in from a shower? No, her clothes were wet, and Cloud was pretty sure she hadn't hopped in the shower with all her armor on.

She gazed at him with a look of heartbreaking concern on her lovely face, dark eyebrows creased with worry. Cloud thought he saw a white, blue, and red figure moving somewhere down the hall, but he ignored it when Tifa's lips suddenly began to move gracefully, forming soundless words.

Cloud smiled sleepily, amused at the whole situation. He really loved having Tifa around, even if she did silly things like flap her lips pointlessly at empty air. Muttering something about turning up the volume on the TV, he once again slipped into darkness, only to go pinwheeling into yet another dream of the woman he loved.

This time Tifa had one of his arms flung around her shoulders and was half-carrying/half-dragging him to a bed with a comforter made of all colors of the rainbow. Cloud thought that that was funny, too, and he grinned again as she lowered him to the mattress, brushing some of his hair away from his face. The surface of the Rainbow Bed dipped as she sat next to him, and he could see her soft, loving smile in the darkness, feel the warmth of her body close to his.

Man, he wished he could sleep forever.

* * * * *

Reno leaned bonelessly against his closed door, waiting for his eyes to become accustomed to the darkness of his room. He could hear Tifa talking to the unconscious Cloud out in the hallway, trying to rouse the AVALANCHE leader from his exhausted state. Reno knew she probably wouldn't have much success. When a person was as burnt out as he guessed Cloud was, the body would refuse to awaken until its neglected energy stores were replenished.

Speaking of depleted energy stores, though, Reno thought he had probably self-destructed long ago because as he glanced around his bedroom, he honestly didn't think he was capable of moving a single muscle. All the better, he supposed, because what he wanted to do was lie down, and it appeared that all the suitable resting places in his room had been the victims of a hostile takeover.

Elena was curled into a fetal position on his bed, snoring softly in the darkness, the unladylike noises issuing from behind the wall of flaxen locks that had fallen over her face like a golden curtain. Something shifted near the window, and Reno's eyes drifted lethargically away from Elena's sleeping form to see a lanky figure unfurling itself from a chair.

"Rude," he muttered. "Didn't see ya."

Rude stared at him. "If I were an assassin..."

"I would have been dead," Reno finished artlessly. "Yeah, yeah, I know the drill."

Silence fell between them as the red-haired Turk pushed himself away from the door, trudging past Rude and over to the window, where he pulled back the drawn curtains to permit gray, morbid light to seep into the unbroken darkness of the room. Though Kyra had erected her restaurant in a decent area of Upper Junon that was usually bustling with activity, no one wanted to brave the stinging raindrops in order to visit their favorite stores or eating places. The glistening streets were as dark and deserted as the skies overhead.

Reno placed one of his pale hands against the glass and watched condensation form around his fingers, misty droplets gathering on the icy glass like miniature tears. //How long as it been?// he wondered. //This search for Reeve? Can't have been more than five days even though it feels like a fucking eternity. And now there's...there's...//

Reno's soul felt raw, like some sadistic bastard had tied it to the back of a truck with a rope and drug it around the wartorn streets of Midgar a few hundred times before shoving it back into his body. Nothing seemed real anymore. Not the rain. Not Elena's snoring. Not even the Running Man seemed to matter any longer. The only things Reno knew were the faint, hazy recollection of his daughter's face, smiling as she waved to him one last time...and that bitch down there in the cellar, dressed in that slutty bodysuit.

//Once a whore, always a whore// Reno thought bitterly, a small bit of sourness breaking through the cold that had settled over his soul. But he knew that frigid shield of primal ice was better than the fire, the burning rage. At least the cold was manageable; it was bearable whereas the fire poisoned him, seared away his sanity and shoved in his place a being who thirsted only for death and blood.

"Reno?" Rude suddenly asked, causing the other Turk to jump slightly. He had almost forgotten his friend was still standing there at his side.

Reno stared at him, aquamarine eyes unnaturally pale in the gray light. "Yeah?"

Rude's voice was carefully neutral. "Are you alright?"

A sarcastic, scathing reply came to Reno's lips, but he forced it back down when he beheld the deep-rooted worry in Rude's green eyes. Though the taller Turk gave no outward appearance of discomfort, the dark circles around his eyes and the tattered state of his usually immaculate blue suit belied the calmness he attempted to exude. It seemed Rude was burning out as well.

Instead of replying to his friend's question, Reno turned back to the window. "How long have you and Laney been up here?" he asked as casually as possible, trying to force his voice to slip back into some semblance of normality.

"For about an hour," Rude answered, eyes on the side of his friend's face. "We were both going to wait up for you, but Elena was so exhausted that I discreetly cast a Sleep spell on her."

Reno made a "hmpf" sound in the back of his throat, a sorry substitute for a laugh. "She'll be pissed when she wakes up."

Rude just shrugged, still watching Reno intently, as if expecting the other man to explode in violence or tears at any minute. Reno was bitterly surprised at just how accurate that expectation actually was.

Sighing deeply, Reno leaned forward and pressed his forehead against the cold glass so that it rested next to his hand. The water droplets chasing one another down the glass on the outside blurred slightly as he watched them follow their aimless course.

"Tifa can't help me anymore," Reno suddenly said, the words tumbling from his lips in a soft rush, craftily evading his already weakened restraints on his actions.

Rude didn't answer, only re-seated himself in his chair with a soft rustling of clothes.

Licking his suddenly dry lips, Reno continued, "Cloud collapsed in the hallway outside. She went to help him to his room."

Silence and then, "Cloud pushes himself too hard."

Pale aquamarine eyes flicked to the shadowy figure seated in the chair. "So does Tifa. It took a lot out of her to admit that she could no longer help me."

//Now all she can do is watch me burn out. Watch from the sidelines, just like everyone else.//

"I know what you're wondering, Reno," Rude said quietly.

The red-haired man closed his eyes and sighed, breath forming a misty cloud on the window's glass. "Then," he said wearily. "Tell me the answer, if you can."

There was only a brief hesitation before Rude said in his low, level voice, "You say she's with Cloud right now, helping him and caring for him. In everyone's eyes, you were his only competition for her attention and possibly her heart. And now since she cannot help you any longer, she's with Cloud. If I really do love her the way she needs to be loved, I should be more upset. Since I'm not..." His voice trailed off.

"Then you don't love her in that way," Reno finished.

"I guess not," Rude said, but Reno caught the small fluctuation in his friend's voice. Whether it was a sudden realization or an unspoken doubt, Reno didn't know and was too tired to give it a second thought. He really wanted his mind to be free of all thoughts, of all worries, of all semblances of pain, but just as he was too tired to ponder some things, by the same hand he was too tired to fend off thoughts of other things.

Visages of Mika came and went as they pleased, elusive as ghosts in the dark, and since thoughts of Alette brought a sweeping firestorm of rage, Reno decided it was safer to reflect on Tifa Lockheart. She had done a lot for him, actually, more than he had ever expected her to do for a wastrel like him. Though some part of him wished he could claim her as his own and have her take care of him for the rest of his life, Reno knew that a delusion like that was hardly even a fantasy. True, it would have been nice to have her there to hold him whenever he needed it, but her heart obviously lay elsewhere, and it wasn't with him.

Still, Reno had bared his soul to her, something he had never done before with anyone else. He cared about her, maybe even loved her a little.

He was going to miss her.

//Crap...I forgot to thank her for everything she's done//

Reno thumped his forehead against the glass. "Dammit," he cursed softly. What he was damning, he didn't know. He figured it was a toss-up between himself and life in general.

Pulling back from the cold glass that was filled with visages of gray skies and plummeting raindrops, he rubbed his face fiercely with his icy fingers, but even those sensations seemed so far away. He splayed his fingers across his eyes and turned to the side so he could stare at Rude, who was watching him with an outer appearance of calm. However, Reno could feel his friend's worry even though the emotion didn't readily show itself in his weary green eyes.

"You look bad, Rude," he said jokingly.

"You look worse," the tall Turk replied quietly.

A wan smile came to Reno's thin lips. "I'll just bet I do."

"You should get some rest," Rude suggested.

Reno was too tired to argue. Besides, he suddenly became very aware of the fatigue he felt in his body and mind. "Yeah," he muttered, turning towards the bed where Elena still slumbered peacefully, curled into a ball on one end of the comforter. He looked back at his friend. "And you, Rude? Don't you need to sleep?"

"I'm fine where I am," Rude replied, settling himself in his chair, long legs extended on the carpet beneath him.

"You don't look comfortable to me," Reno commented, slowly easing himself onto the edge of the mattress so as not to wake Elena with the sudden shift in weight.

Rude closed his eyes and smiled slightly. "Don't worry about me, Reno."

"Yeah, yeah," Reno muttered as he removed his boots, feeling like a child being scolded. He laid his head on the pillow, drawing his aching legs onto the bed with him. After a brief hesitation, he scooted backwards until he felt his back come into contact with Elena, his cool skin becoming warm with her body's heat. Reno wasn't really all that cold; he just wanted to know that she was there behind him.

He listened to the rain pelting the walls of the restaurant before whispering, "Hey, Rude?"

"Hm?" came the faint answer.

Reno gripped a fistful of the comforter in one of his hands, fascinated with how his knuckles bulged beneath his pale, nearly translucent skin.

//Like I'm disappearing or something//

"Nothing," he said, voice barely audible. "Just...thanks for waiting up for me."

Quiet laughter issued from Rude's shadowy form. "Just go to sleep, Reno."

As soon as the word "sleep" found its way to Reno's ears, his body began an automatic shutdown while his mind was still aware. It was an odd sensation, actually, to feel his muscles slowly relax one by one, to feel Somnus begin to embrace him, making his eyelids flutter shut as his companion Morpheus, god of dreams, thankfully robbed Reno of all lingering thoughts of the past. For once, the Turk was given the mercy of mythological guardians keeping faces from both the present and beyond the grave from haunting his dreams.

The last things Reno saw before his eyes slid shut were his own hand lying pale and drained on the brightly colored comforter and the rain falling like tears outside the window.