

Chapter Thirty-Seven: Parched Eyes

"No need to gut-punch me so early in the goddamn conversation." Reno

Too much time has passed
to lament that we were once in love.
The wind keeps blowing
as I still can't heal the rift in my heart.
Looking with one eye on the future
while keeping the other on the past...
If only I could sleep peacefully once more
in the cradle of your love...
Someone, cry for me with parched eyes.
"Real Folk Blues"
Ending theme of Cowboy Bebop

Reno stood outside in the cool, damp night, drizzle lightly pelting the shoulders of his dark blue suit as he contemplated the roughly carved wooden letters hanging from a post outside the door. The Barnyard was supposedly one of the best bars in town, despite its simplistic appearance. Reno thought that all bars were the same. They all served alcohol, and they all had drunk, depressed people passed out in various shady corners. No difference at all.

Shifting his weight from foot to foot, Reno sighed and drew his jacket closer around him, hunkering into its waterlogged layers and wishing he could light up a cigarette. After a day of being cooped up in Cid and Shera's house with nothing to do but mill about aimlessly and take trips to the garage and bathroom just to avoid getting shanghaied into manual labor, Reno had gone stir-crazy and, in desperate need for a change of scenery, had decided to poke around the sleepy town.

And, of course, Reno found a bar. He always managed to locate them no matter what shadowy corner they were tucked away in, like a dirty secret meant to be hidden from prying eyes.

Reno's eyes once again traced the letters proclaiming the name "Barnyard." For some reason, it felt wrong for him to drown his sorrows in alcohol when somewhere out there, his President was maybe dead or dying. Then, he realized that Reeve wouldn't want him to be miserable...because Reeve was just an annoyingly good, noble person like that. He didn't care only about himself. He cared about Midgar and the well-being of its people. He was the President that greedy Alexander Shinra could never be and that diseased Midgar had desperately needed since the beginning of its social decay.

And now Reeve was gone, and Reno was starting to think they would never find him. What would happen to Neo-Shinra? They had left its operations temporarily in the hands of Reeve's few but very able-minded assistants, but they didn't have Reeve's do-gooder heart. Eventually, even they would be overwhelmed by the stress of a resurrecting a city that was already firmly ensconced in a grave with cemetery dirt scattered over it.

But who else would be competent enough to take Reeve's place? Reno knew he couldn't, and neither could Rude or Elena. Turks were meant to hunker in the shadows, not stand boldly in the spotlight, where bloodstains were easier to see.

As if Reno's mood already wasn't foul enough, the dark skies above suddenly let out a horrendous belch, and the misty drizzle evolved into a steady downpour. Cursing under his breath, the redhead strode the last few steps up to the Barnyard's door, pushing his way through the old-style saloon doors, letting them swing shut behind him with an ear-grinding squeak.

A fine mist of second-hand smoke immediately flitted over to greet him, and Reno almost smiled. Bars. So dependable. He loved them. A few patrons glanced over at him, saw he wasn't female, and lost interest. Being the youngest, handsomest male customer at the moment merited him long, lingering looks from the few women in the bar, but for once, Reno was in no mood for their attentions.

He made his way purposely over to the bar, seating himself between two bulky, glum-looking men. The bartender was a faceless creature with a gruff voice and stained apron as Reno asked for a beer. Truthfully, he wanted something stronger,

but beer was cheap and lasted longer than the potent shots of hardcore liquor that he normally ordered when he intended to get smashed.

But he didn't want to drink to the point where he was puking his guts out in an alley somewhere. He just wanted to forget.

The beer seemed to materialize in front of him, and Reno wrapped his chapped hands around the bottle, the cold glass numbing his damp flesh. His knuckles shifted underneath his skin like the hideous shadow of the Midgar Zolom slithering below the surface of its marshy swamp.

//Damn// he mused. //Looks like the hand of an effing skeleton. Don't think skeletons get hangnails, though//

A deep swing of his beer yielded a bitter taste but no burn. Damn. He wanted a burn, coursing down his throat like a stream of acid, scalding his insides, fogging his brain. Sure, the beer would make him forget, but it would take a while.

He wished he'd ordered something stronger.

But shit, it was so hard to think. He could barely *function*, for Shiva's sake, much less *think*. That was what goddamn Strife was for. Let the leader make all the decisions. At this point, Reno was only good for two things: fighting, and nursing his old wounds. He was dead tired of the first, and he was starting to think his heart could not handle any more of the second.

He'd been unable to avoid seeing Alette during the past couple of days. Cid's house was only so big. Reduced the number of places one could hide from an ex-wife who had murdered one's only daughter.

Reno brought the dark glass of the beer bottle to his lips and tilted his head backwards, swallowing steadily until he had completely drained the bottle. And oh, it burned. At last. His head lolled forward, and he settled his empty bottle on the bar counter with a resolute clink. The grain of the wooden bar in front of him danced and swirled like a kaleidoscope of browns and yellows. That was nice. Dance for me, baby.

A pressure trembled loudly between his ears, and Reno realized the bar wasn't swimming for him. No, it was his eyes that were swimming with... He hurriedly pressed his arm to his eyes, the cold, wet material of his suit jacket meeting the drops of hot, salty liquid that fought to liberate themselves from the cage of his trembling eyelashes.

Too many times had Reno sent prayers to the heavens, to the Planet, only to have them ignored and flung back at him to lie barren and unfulfilled at his feet. But now, he wanted to pray. But to whom? To a Planet the human race had defiled with their greed? To heavens that didn't give a flying shit about a no-good-for-nothing like him? To gods or goddesses who had long ago fallen from their thrones?

No one cared. No one would listen. He could find a random woman, go home with her, release his bodily passions in her bed, but he knew his eyes would be closed during the entire encounter, and the woman beneath him would be wearing someone else's face.

His heart seemed to quake his chest just like the fucking shameful tears dancing their pitiful waltz in his parched eyes, and he hunched his shoulders in a vain attempt to contain the horrible, burning ache that wanted to devour him alive.
//Somebody, anybody, help me...//

The sound of metal chinking against metal reached his ears, but it never occurred to him that the sound was a Crystal Bangle striking the end of a metal gauntlet until he sensed the bartender shuffle over to attend to someone who was evidently seated right next to him. A familiar voice ordered a Blood Rain on the rocks, and Reno slowly lowered his arm from his eyes, glaring at the motionless bar in front of him. No more swimming. Good. He could at least maintain some of his dignity.

His hand once again curled itself around his now-empty beer bottle, more for the comfort of the gesture than anything else. "I think you took someone's seat, Strife," he told his new bar companion.

Cloud Strife shrugged, rain dripping from his saturated blonde hair onto the armor fastened on his left shoulder. "The man who was sitting here left just as I was coming in."

"Hn," Reno contributed as the bartender arrived with Cloud's drink. Red salt specially imported from Bone Village marched around the rim of the short, squat glass, the crimson granules complimenting the bright, virulent red-orange of the liquid itself. It looked too cheerful a drink to be called "Blood Rain," but Reno knew from experience that it was as potent as Hell's Fire. Gave a nice burn, too.

Cloud lifted the index finger of his left hand, bringing the bartender to a halt. "Another for him as well," he said levelly. The bartender didn't ask who 'him' was, only moved off to mix another of the drink.

"Those things are expensive," Reno told his beer bottle. "You're gonna run yourself up a high bill."

Another shrug that Reno barely detected out of the corner of his eye. "I've got money," Cloud replied.

Reno was not one to refuse free drinks, even if the source of the charity was the leader of AVALANCHE. Oh hell. This was a bar. People weren't supposed to care about names, or pasts, or sins unresolved. You were just here to drink, and that was all. Have fun if it suited the mood, but you never worried about names or titles unless you wanted a fight to break out sooner or later.

The second Blood Rain arrived next to Reno's forsaken beer, and the redhead was just about to transfer his affections to the glass when a hand clad in a thick leather glove held a napkin in front of him.

Reno lifted his eyes to meet Cloud's Mako blue ones. "The hell? I got something on my face?"

"Yeah," the blonde replied, voice careful.

Reno grabbed the napkin and briskly wiped his mouth.

"No," Cloud said quietly. "Your eyes."

Reno froze, hand still clutching the napkin to his face. He waited, expecting anger, or shame, or sadness that Cloud Strife had seen him with tears lingering in his eyes. But nothing came to him, nothing but the thought that he really wanted to drink that Blood Rain. A swift swipe across his eyes, and Reno did not check to see if there was any dampness on the napkin. He merely let the paper square flutter to the bar and picked up his glass. A bitterly seductive brush over his tongue, and then the alcohol hit his throat...

Yeah, that was a burn.

Cloud didn't say anything else to him, and together they sat in their identical barstools, hunched over their twin Blood Rains. Reno didn't know what Cloud was thinking about, but the Turk was running. Running from a little girl in a pink dress, playing with her blocks on a sunny morning. And running from his wife, from the woman that had single-handedly ruined his life, and was in the process of tearing apart his new one.

But emotions with nowhere to run had to find some outlet, and they happened upon his voice, spilling from his lips in a voice devoid of the slur of inebriation. "I never knew how much I still hated her until I saw her again that cellar. I can't stand the sight of her."

Cloud stirred slightly, voice just as clear and considerably more frank. "You still love her."

Reno snorted. "Shit, Strife, be a little more considerate, will ya? No need to gut-punch me so early in the goddamn conversation."

"But it's true, isn't it? The fact that you still have feelings for her is half the reason you're so infuriated with the situation. I think...that you hate yourself as much as you hate her. Maybe more."

Burning again, but not from the alcohol. "You'd best stop while you're ahead, Cloud."

Cloud stopped, but after a few seconds, Reno found that *he* couldn't. "We had a family together, you know."

"I know."

"We had baby girl named Mika. I loved that little girl."

No response, just wide open silence, ready to receive his words.

"Alette killed her. She killed my reason for living. From then on, I was just an empty husk tottering through my miserable excuse for a life. So I hate her, and what I hate even more is the fact that I still love her after everything she did."

Cloud didn't say anything.

Reno took another sip from his glass. "You were right, Strife. Aren't you happy about that?"

"No."

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How long must I live on before I'm healed?

The real folk blues I only want
to know true happiness.

All that glitters
isn't gold.

The real folk blues I only want
to know true sadness.

A life drenched in a river of mud
isn't so bad

As long as it ends after the first time.

"Real Folk Blues"

Ending theme of Cowboy Bebop

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Vincent's sisters were crying in the darkness, and he could not find them.

Towering trees rose up on all sides, reminiscent of the forests of his homeland, but no, these trees were terribly wrong. Too tall, too menacing. They blotted out the moonlight, robbed him of any sense of direction. All Vincent could hear was the plaintive weeping and the roar of his own blood in his ears. He wanted to cry with frustration, but boys did not cry. He had to be strong and take care of his sisters, just like Mother said.

But where was Mother? He could not find her, either!

"Mother!" he cried into the forest, his voice like it was many years ago. High, shrill, that of a five year old boy who could not find his family.

A path opened before him, the trees arcing away, their great trunks bending at nearly impossibly angles. Light. He saw light! Vincent forced his bare, tired feet to move faster, treading across the ruthless ground with the ease of a grubby child who had spent many a day outdoors.

Vincent reached the end of his path, arms flung forward to embrace the light. He stumbled, and fell into a small clearing. The dark soil beneath him rolled and bubbled as if something ghastly lived underneath it, and the ground rose and fell with its monstrous breaths. The gigantic trees stopped short of the clearing, not wanting to take root in such foul soil. Overhead the red sky churned and thrashed angrily, clouds rolling and battling one another for domination of the realm below them. Some wanted to rule the world. Others wanted to eat it.

A woman sat on a desolate tree stump in the middle of the clearing, her dark hair unbound and tangled down her slender back, her threadbare dress barely clinging to her long, elegant frame.

"Vermillion!" Vincent cried, rushing across the evil soil to meet his sister. She rose, limbs moving with the same unconscious grace she had always possessed.

Vincent wanted to hug her, but he didn't. Vermillion didn't like her little brother very much. Sometimes Vincent thought she hated him. But he didn't want to think about that now. It would make him cry, and he didn't want to cry in front of Vermillion.

He stopped in front of his sister, breathing hard. The air stunk of something foul. "Vermillion! Where is Mother?"

She stared down at him, face blank. Her eyes were the exact color of the crimson skies above.

Vincent shifted anxiously. The soil was burning his feet, like he was standing on hot metal, or acid. "Where did Vanessa and Valkyrie go? Venicia?"

"They have long since passed," Vermillion said, her low, husky voice just as Vincent remembered.

The little boy frowned. He did not understand many things that Vermillion said, but he didn't want to seem stupid. It would just make her dislike him more. While he mulled over what to say to her next, the pain in his feet spiked upwards sharply, to the point where he could not longer ignore it.

"Vermillion," he whimpered, tugging on the sleeve of her dress. "Please pick me up! The ground is burning my feet!"

His sister ignored him, craning her neck backwards. "Look, Vincent, the sky is bleeding."

Now that she mentioned it, Vincent *could* smell blood in the air, but he didn't want to see the bleeding sky! He wanted to see his Mother!

He fisted his small hands in the folds of Vermillion's raggedy dress. "Vermillion! My feet burn!!"

The ground began to shake and roll beneath them in a startling accurate mimicry of the sky. Vincent felt a shameful scream building in his throat, but Vermillion wrapped her arms around him, tucking his face into the fabric of her dress, right underneath her small breasts. "We're going to run, Vincent."

He shook his head wildly as he clung to his sister. "I can't run! My feet hurt! Vermillion, I can't run! Please don't hate me!"

"Silly, I could never hate you," a voice chided, and Vincent froze, recognizing the high-pitched, musical cadence of it, nothing at all like his sister's.

The scent of Yuffie surrounded him, soothing his exhausted nerves and terrified heartbeat. The world quieted, and even his feet stopped burning. Yuffie was quite a bit smaller than his willowy sister, and Vincent's head fit perfectly underneath her

chin as she patted his short, dark hair with one hand. He hugged her as tightly as the meager strength in his small arms would permit, pressing his face against the weave of her dark green tank top.

"Don't leave me, please," he begged, unable to keep the tears out of his voice.

She laughed. "Of course not. We will go to Wutai together!"

Wutai?

Vincent awoke to find himself clutching not Yuffie, but the ratty, stained white shirt he'd been wearing for the past couple of days. He blinked into the darkness as his mind swam up from the tides of sleep, shaking off the white foam of dream. Shadowy forms of hastily-packed bags and suitcases bloomed from the blurry darkness. Oh yes, he remembered now. He'd passed out.

Red XIII lay on the bed amongst the array of half-unzipped duffel bags and wayward garments that had wormed their way out of the nylon cages. He made no menacing movements as Vincent struggled into a sitting position, but something flickering in the depths of the beast's one good eye immediately put the gunslinger on guard.

"Did you need something?" Vincent asked calmly, leaning his back against the wall behind him. His limbs ached terribly.

"This situation seems familiar," Red commented.

"How so?"

"You inexplicably passed out on the floor, practically dead. I was napping in the living room when a surge of strange energy roused me from my slumber. Following the origin of the power led me to you. I tried to wake you, Vincent, but I couldn't. Only the sound of your breath and the beating of your heart let me know that you were still alive."

Vincent didn't reply.

"For how long have you been passing out like this, Vincent?" Red demanded.

"Since Kalm, the night after Yuffie was kidnapped."

The lion-like beast's tail swished in growing agitation, the glowing tip the brightest object in the dark room. "I know Cloud asked you once, but I will ask you again: are you losing control of Chaos?"

"My disputes with my internal demons are none of your concern," Vincent said flatly.

Red sighed, the air whistling through his sharp teeth as he rose to all fours and dropped onto the floor with a soft rustling of furred limbs and the muted jingle of the rings in his pierced ears. He sat down inches away from Vincent's outstretched legs.

"This is serious," he stated. "I know you are a secretive man, Vincent, and under normal circumstances, I would respect your privacy, but the last thing AVALANCHE needs right now is for its members to be hoarding information that would be better off shared with the rest of us."

"If I believe my fainting episodes will cause harm to AVALANCHE, rest assured I will take necessary action to protect my comrades."

"Which will involve what? Leaving us?" Red retorted.

His words were a little too close to the truth for comfort. But what bothered him more was that Red knew him well enough that he could predict almost precisely how Vincent would react to a situation.

"Red, I cannot explain to you something I scarcely understand myself. These fainting episodes are merely Chaos' way of trying to tell me something, I believe. Nothing that you or the others should be worried about."

Red looked at him narrowly before shrugging. "I trust you, Vincent, but I do not trust that demon, and when I walked into this room, I smelled almost nothing but Chaos' scent. It was most unnerving."

"Chaos is an unnerving creature," Vincent replied, noticing for the first time that there was a black shirt and a pair of pants folding neatly on a floor a little ways away from him. He looked at Red questioningly, but the beast shook his head.

"I did not lay them out. Judging from the scents clinging to the garments, they are Cloud's clothes, and Yuffie laid them out for you."

"Yuffie," Vincent mused, before realizing that the girl must have happened upon him while he was...incapacitated. "Where is she?"

"Asleep in Tifa's room. Cloud and Reno are out somewhere in the town. I believe Rude and a couple of the others will be going out shortly as well, and you, of course, are invited to go with them." He rose to his feet and padded towards the door. "I leave you to get dressed."

Vincent watched as Red slunk out of the door, listening to the sounds of his claws hitting the floor as he made his way presumably back to the living area. He understood his friend's suspicion, but Vincent had spoken the absolute truth when he said that he hardly understood Chaos' strange actions. The demon wished to show him something, he knew that much. Vincent had a feeling that no matter how hard he fought, he would eventually succumb to the creature's advances and be forced to accept the knowledge he was being offered. Chaos would have it no other way, and even Vincent's unshakable stubbornness could not compare to the patience of an ages-old demon.

Sighing, he discarded the white shirt that had served him fairly well for the past few days and gingerly picked up the garments Yuffie had laid out for him. A black cotton shirt. Durable slacks complete with suspenders. Vincent doubted he would find any need for the latter aspect of the pants, as he didn't have Cloud's small waist and relatively narrow shoulders, but he knew from years of experience that even something as petty as suspenders could prove an indispensable resource in a desperate situation.

Considerate of Yuffie to think of him. If only she knew how sorely misplaced her affections were.

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Dr. Campbell hurried down the streets of Mideel as fast as the darkness and his still-asleep legs would permit, his emergency bag held tight in his elderly hands and his pristine coat already settled on his shoulders. The close, muggy air of Mideel made for an extremely warm night, and Campbell had to stop for a second to readjust his glasses as they started to slide down the sweat on his nose. But a second was all he took before moving again, panting slightly as the newly rebuilt hospital came into view, bathed in the light that the Lifestream sitting in the center of the town radiated. It was never truly night, here in Mideel.

He was hurrying to the front of the hospital when the door suddenly flew open, spilling artificial light into the not-quite-dark night.

Campbell blinked to clear his vision, and the stout figure of his head nurse, Elise, came rushing towards him, her dark hair unbound and hanging into her face.

"Doctor!" she exalted, clapping her hands together and interlacing her fingers, as if in some semblance of adulation. "Thank GOODNESS you've finally arrived!"

Campbell smiled congenially, sensing that the woman was extremely anxious. "Yes, and thank goodness I got here in one piece. The climb from the center of the town gets longer and longer every day, it seems."

Her nerves not eased in the slightest, Elise took him by the arm and started tugging him towards the door, nearly dragging him. "I know I shouldn't have disturbed you at such an ungodly hour, Doctor," she said breathlessly as she ushered him into the brightly lit interior of the hospital. "But you see, Jed brought this man in here, and...and...I just don't know what to do for him! I don't even know if..."

Her voice trailed off as they entered the mysterious patient's room. Living and growing up in a small town like Mideel where the economy was self-sufficient and no contact with the outside world was really needed, even though it was welcome, Campbell didn't see the kinds of things that big city doctors saw. No gunshot wounds. No axes lodged in various parts of patients' anatomies. He was lucky (or rather, unlucky) if he saw a cut that needed stitches.

That's why when he saw the figure lying on the only bed in the room, he didn't pick up the nurse's reason for alarm right away. The figure on the bed was moving, its head lolling from side to side and its legs twitching, but it didn't seem to be in any pain. It was a man, dark-haired and barefooted, wearing a shirt that was a very familiar color of fluorescent blue-green and a pair of dark blue slacks that sported tears in a couple of places. The funny thing was, he could have sworn that he had seen this man somewhere before.

Then a figure sitting in a chair beside the bed suddenly leapt up, startling the doctor. He had been so engrossed by the patient's outlandish appearance that he had completely missed the rail-thin figure of Jed, one of the local citizens, perched beside the hospital bed.

"I don't know what's wrong with him, doc," Jed said immediately, sounding apologetic for some odd reason. His blue eyes and weathered face were sad, as if he had done something wrong.

"You're the one that brought him in, then?" Campbell asked gently, trying to put the jittery man at ease.

Jed nodded so hard that Campbell half-expected to hear his teeth clack together. "Yessir! I was just down there, you know, by the Lifestream Lake an' all. I like to go down there at night an' all cause it so pretty and everything. And there he was, doc, just floating there like he was dead or something! Had to reach in to get 'em."

Jed suddenly held out his left arm, and Campbell saw that the sleeve of the man's cream-colored flannel shirt was stained the same color as the patient's. Fluorescent green. Lifestream green.

"Hm," Campbell made a soft, considering sound as he approached the patient on the bed, dropping his bag gently to the floor as he went. "You found this man in the Lifestream?"

Jed gave one of those jerky nods again, looking at the doctor nervously as the elderly man bent over to examine the figure on the bed.

//Gods...where have I SEEN this man before?// he thought as his eyes took in the unnaturally pale pallor of the man's skin, the way his limbs would twitch at random intervals. His mouth was open, his lips moving but no sound coming out.

The patient's face suddenly lolled in Campbell's direction.

"Gods," the doctor commented softly, adjusting his glasses. "Some bright eyes he has there..."

The patient's unseeing eyes still bore flecks of what might have been brown at one point, but were now a shimmering golden color, their luminescence exploding under the lights of the room. Most of the people in Mideel now had rather bright eyes as a result of high exposure to the Lifestream, but none of them were like THIS.

Then Campbell suddenly realized. The twitching of the limbs. The dilated and unfocused eyes. The ceaseless moving of the lips. The shirt stained with the liquid of the Lifestream. And the glowing eyes. The glowing Mako eyes. The only time he had seen eyes as bright as this was on another man about a year ago. That blond swordsman who had washed up on their shores...

Heart thumping painfully in his chest, Campbell looked at the dark hair and beard of the patient, and he suddenly realized just where he had seen this man before. On television. With the rest of AVALANCHE.

It was Reeve of Neo-Shinra.

"Doctor?" Elise asked cautiously from the doorway. "I'm not sure, but this looks somewhat similar to that case a year ago. You know, with that young pokey-haired man carrying that huge sword?"

The doctor straightened, folding his arms across his chest. "This case isn't just similar, Elise," he said quietly. "It IS the same case. Mako poisoning. Only this case is MUCH more advanced." He looked sadly at the mute, twitching figure on the bed.

"This man doesn't have very long. Please, Elise, find me some way to contact Cloud Strife."

~TBC 23 March 2003

Well, here is the next chapter. It's a short one, but the next chapter is looking to be a doozy so things will probably even out.