

Chapter Four: Missing Comrades

"You sent Yuffie to check on a boat? She's probably somewhere in that cave blowing chunks all over the floor." Reno

*Put your head on my shoulder, baby
Things can't get any worse
Night is getting colder sometimes...
Life feels like it's a curse
I can't carry these sins on my back
Don't wanna carry any more
I'm gonna carry this train off the track
...Gonna swim to the ocean floor*

*"Swim"
Madonna*

"Hey Tifa, you okay?"

Startled, Tifa Lockheart turned away from the window of her bar to see the muscular form of Cloud Strife leaning against the door frame, his huge Ultima Weapon strapped to his back.

She gave him a weak smile. "I'm alright, Cloud. Did you and Barret find anything in Junon?"

He shook his head and ran a gloved hand through his wild blond spikes, looking just as troubled as she was feeling. "Nothing at all," he said glumly. "I practically interrogated everyone in town and no one has seen anyone matching the description of either Reeve or the Running Man." He sighed and unstrapped the Ultima Weapon, leaving it on a table nearby.

"I really thought I would find some trace of them in Junon," he said dismally, stretching in such a way that Tifa's attention was drawn to the way the muscles of his bare shoulders bunched and flexed. In her opinion, Cloud was the exemplar of male beauty. Big Mako blue eyes. Wild yet soft blond hair. Short, cute nose. A mouth that could smile more easily than frown. A body composed of steel muscles underneath smooth skin. The man of her dreams, but that was the kicker. Of her dreams. If only she could just work up the courage to say the words, then her dream could become a reality...if he was willing to meet her halfway.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts away and found Cloud staring at her strangely. "You okay, Tif?" he asked, concern evident in his blue eyes.

She nodded quickly. "Yes, of course." He didn't look convinced, but she rushed on. "How did you get back so soon? Junon is quite a ways off. I thought you were going to stay the night?"

Cloud shrugged and walked to stand next to her at the window, his brown boots thudding loudly against the wooden floor. "The Turks came by in their chopper and saw me and Barret traveling so they decided to give us a lift."

Tifa allowed herself a small smile. "I know. The chopper landed a few minutes ago. Nearly took down two houses with it, too."

Cloud grinned. "Yeah, Reno was flying it even though I specifically told him to let Rude do it. But he said that if I had a problem with it then my ass could walk all the way home."

Tifa laughed softly. "That's our Reno." She looked out the window, her smile fading. "Storm's coming. Good thing you *didn't* walk home."

Cloud glanced at the beautiful young woman at his side, wondering what could be bothering her. Her wine-colored eyes were worried and distant. She fiddled nervously with a lock of chocolate brown hair, the corners of her mouth turned down slightly. It concerned him to see her like this. Tifa was always full of light and laughter, his one and only hope when all the odds seemed against him and the world was falling down around his ears. She was his stable one, his constant, the one thing that he could always hold onto, no matter what the circumstances. God, how he loved her. If only he could find the words to say it...

"Tifa?" he said softly. "What's wrong?"

She carefully avoided his gaze, knowing that she could easily fall into the depth of those beautiful Mako blue eyes, lakes she could bare her soul to and drown all her sorrow in. "Nothing's wrong, Cloud," she said reassuringly, forcing a smile for his sake. "I'm just worried for Reeve and all..."

Cloud leaned closer to her, trying to get her to look him in the eye. "I know there's something else," he said softly. "I'm not moving from this spot until you tell me what it is." He grinned suddenly. "And you know what a stubborn ass I can be."

Tifa couldn't resist smiling back, as powerless to his smile as she was to his blue eyes. But her smile quickly faded as she lowered her head and said quietly, "I was calling up everyone on the PHS to see how they were doing."

Cloud raised an eyebrow, not comprehending. "And?" he prompted gently.

"I couldn't raise Vincent or Yuffie," she whispered, her throat suddenly thick with emotion. "Not a dial tone or anything. Just utter silence. I have a bad feeling about this, Cloud. What if something happened to them?"

He put an arm around her shoulders, peering into her worried face. "I'm sure they're fine, Tifa. I sent them to investigate that ghost ship off the shore of Midgar. They probably fell into the water and their PHS broke. Knowing Yuffie and those yellow sneakers of hers, she probably slipped and pulled Vincent down with her. That's all. You know that Vincent and Yuffie are harder to kill than that. Don't be so worrisome, woman, or you'll work yourself into an early grave."

Tifa smiled at his poor attempt at humor. "I know, but I just can't shake the feeling that something's wrong. I'm afraid they'll just disappear like Reeve..."

Cloud was about to say something comforting when a loud clap of thunder drowned out his words. He looked at the window just in time to see a torrent of rain slam against the glass, individual raindrops beating incessantly against the opaque surface like demons begging to be let inside to work their ghastly deeds.

"It's really coming down hard," he commented.

Tifa leaned against his chest and said softly, "That's another thing I'm thinking about. Vincent and Yuffie alone in that hidden cave with nothing but a ghost ship to keep them company, watching the ocean outside the entrance, watching the tall waves slam against the rocks as the rain starts to flood the cave..."

She's really worried, Cloud realized. It isn't like her to worry this much. Something has to be wrong. She must sense something that the rest of us don't.

He knew from experience that Tifa had intuitive instincts to rival Vincent's. That's probably why she was able to run bars successfully. She was an excellent judge of character and was able to tell which costumers would cause trouble and which ones wouldn't. Not just anyone could do that. It also took a lot to worry his childhood friend; she usually left the brooding to Cloud, Vincent and Red and focused on keeping the team's spirit up. When Tifa got overly preoccupied about something that he wasn't even considering a problem yet, that was usually Cloud's cue to start worrying too.

He tightened his grip on her shoulders and said soothingly, "Don't worry about Vincent and Yuffie. As soon as the rain lets up, I'll take the Tiny Bronco away from Cid and go investigate the cave myself. Everything's going to be okay, Tifa."

She lifted her face and finally met his eyes, and when Cloud saw the hope fluttering with its fragile wings in those burgundy orbs, he felt a warmth in a section of his heart that he didn't even know existed. He leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss into her hair, breathing in the deep scent of her shampoo as well as her own personal feminine scent.

Tifa sighed contentedly and pressed her face against the warm flesh of Cloud's neck, feeling that sense of hope and inner peace return as she rested in the circle of his arm. God, could he even conceive of how much she loved him? Without him near her, close to her, she would just...die. She inhaled deeply, taking in the scent of him that she loved. For some reason, Cloud always smelled of some sort of candy. Very fresh-smelling. Peppermint, maybe.

Outside, thunder crashed with a horrendous cry that rivaled the screams of the Planet. Both Tifa and Cloud jumped slightly, pulling away from each other like two teenagers caught using the school's broom closet for a make-out room. Lightning flashed erratically outside the window, illuminating the room with its blinding light. They could see the ocean beyond Kalm churning almost angrily, waves rising and falling like gypsy dancers. The whole picture made for very disconcerting scenery, and for some reason almost crushed the fluttering hope where it struggled to remain aloft.

Finally, Cloud tugged gently on Tifa's arm, "C'mon. The others are all here. Maybe they've heard something from Yuffie and Vincent."

Mutely, Tifa nodded and cast one last fearful glance at the raging storm outside before following him out the door and into the main room of the bar. She'd closed down her business temporarily so that it could serve as a sort of base of operations. They usually used Reeve's office for such a purpose, but no one felt comfortable anywhere in the Neo-Shinra building for the time being. Tifa and Cloud had readily volunteered the Final Heaven bar, letting their friends, old and new, eat their food and drink as much as they wanted.

When she and Cloud entered the main room where the others were sitting around idly, Reno, who was in hog heaven with a beer in his hand and more lined up on the bar waiting for him, immediately grinned and slung an arm around Tifa's slender shoulders, making a point to ignore the fierce glare he received from Cloud.

"Hey, babe," he greeted. "Miss me while I was away?"

Tifa was about to open her mouth to snap at him when Rude said, "Leave her alone, Reno. You're making Cloud angry."

"Yeah Reno," Elena echoed from her place at the bar next to Rude where she sat sipping from a Coke can. "Though it would be fun to watch her kick your ass...again."

Reno scowled as Tifa and Cloud walked away from him and sat down at one of the tables across from Barret. "Some friends you guys are," the redheaded Turk grumbled. "Just for that I'm not going to sit next to you."

Elena rolled her brown eyes. "Oh woe is we. Whatever will we do, Rude?"

"I've got dibs on his beer," Rude commented, a rare spark of humor in his deep, level voice.

Reno's amazing aquamarine eyes narrowed, but he kept his mouth smartly shut and plopped down in a nearby chair, taking a sullen swing from his beer.

The door suddenly burst open and Cid ran in, his flight jacket soaked to an even deeper shade of blue and his goggles splattered with raindrops.

"Hot damn!" he exclaimed, shaking his head like a dog and sending water flying everywhere. "It's rainin' cats and dogs out there!"

"Watch where you shake dat water, foo!" Barret exclaimed in annoyance, putting one large hand in front of his face to deflect the shower of flying water droplets. "You gettin' Tifa's floor all wet and soggy!"

Cid cast a guilty glance at Tifa and shoved his hands in his pockets. "It was wet anyways," he grumbled, the "Cid" version of an apology.

Tifa waved her hand dismissively. "That's okay, Cid. Cloud will mop it up later."

Cloud's mouth dropped open in such a comical expression of indignation that she laughed and poked him in his belly as snickers spread across the room.

Cid, secretly relieved that he had been forgiven, strode across the room and flopped into a chair, immediately lighting up a cigarette and sending a long column of smoke spiraling towards the ceiling.

"Good lord," he said with relief. "It's a damn good thing these suckers didn't get wet. Don't know what I would have done without 'em. Let me tell ya, an entire day flying the Highwind by yourself with barely any time to scratch much less take a break to smoke is the worst kind of hell."

"Did you find anything?" Tifa asked hopefully.

Cid shook his head glumly. "Not a damn thing."

"Not even in Costa del Sol?" Red asked from his place on the floor at Reno's feet.

The pilot made a mean face at the soon-to-be Guardian of Cosmo Canyon. "I told ya, I didn't see shit. I even got off and asked everyone there if they had seen the Running Man or Cat, but no one had seen a thing."

"Same thing at Junon," Barret added grumpily, apparently angry that he and Cloud's long and hard search had come up with nothing. "I don't see how the Running Man could have gotten himself and that damn cat across the other continent without bein' seen in either Junon or Costa del Sol. It just don't make no sense."

"Remember, Barret," Red pointed out calmly, his one good eye focused on the large man with a keen intelligence. "We are still not certain whether or not the Running Man took Reeve to the other continent. He could have disappeared somewhere in the ruins of Midgar for all we know."

Tifa glanced at Rude with a flutter of hope in her eyes. "Did you guys find anything in Midgar?"

Rude looked at her, and though no one could see his eyes through his dark sunglasses, they all got the impression that he was reluctant to disappoint Tifa. "No," he said after a brief pause.

Tifa's face fell.

"But there's still a lot more area to search," he said quickly. "There are a dozen places he could hide. We're not giving up."

Reno snorted, the effects of the alcohol already beginning to take its toll. "Rude, we searched that place high and low. Even our resident bloodhound couldn't find anything."

Red stared up at Reno impassively. "It's true that I could detect no scent outside of Reeve's office, but I assure you that I am not entirely infallible."

"Is it possible that the Running Man could have no scent?" Cloud asked.

Red hesitated, his face revealing none of his inner thoughts, but his flame-tipped tail started to twitch faster, a sign indicating that he was nervous. "I suppose it is possible," he said uncertainly. "However unlikely. Almost everything has a scent. And if something doesn't, you can be certain that it is not something that this Planet meant to be in existence."

"Something out of nature," Reno mused, a surprisingly deep thought for one so intoxicated and seemingly shallow.

Cloud rubbed his face with his gloved hands and struggled to gather his thoughts. A feeling of helplessness and worry for his missing comrades kept getting in the way, but he asked Tifa, "Did you find out anything at the Chocobo Ranch? Unless the Running Man swam across the ocean, he had to have taken either a gold chocobo or some kind of boat."

Tifa shook her head, long brown hair shimmering in the lights. "Nothing," she said simply.

"Hey!" Barret suddenly exclaimed. "Cloud, didn't ya send Vincent and Yuffie to see about some kind of boat?"

Cloud glanced at Tifa, and they exchanged a fearful look. "Yes," he said slowly. "There was an abandoned ship in a hidden cavern in the mountains near Midgar. I thought it to be a ghost ship, but I sent Vincent and Yuffie to check just in case they might find something."

"You sent *Yuffie* to check on a *boat*?" Reno asked incredulously. "She's probably somewhere in that cave blowing chunks all over the floor."

"That's disgusting, Reno!" Elena exclaimed, her pretty face twisted in revulsion.

"Reno just says things that suit his nature," Red said flatly.

While Reno pondered dimly over whether or not the red beast was insulting him, Cid glanced around the bar blankly.

"Hey!" he said. "Where the hell are Vince and the brat? They haven't come back yet?"

Tifa wrung her hands together. "No," she said quietly. "They haven't come back. I can't raise them on the PHS either."

"Maybe due to the storm," Rude said.

Cid snorted, blowing smoke out of his nose. He shook his cigarette in Rude's direction, ash drifting onto the tabletop. "Not with the chips I installed, baldy! No little shitstorm like this could mess up the reception on any of our PHS thingies."

"None of you all have heard from them?" Cloud asked, grabbing Tifa's hand and holding it tightly before she could start chewing on her fingernails, a childhood habit that she sometimes, but rarely, regressed to doing when she was nervous or incredibly worried.

Cid and Barret exchanged glances and shook their heads. Red, Rude and Elena also made negative gestures. Reno just burped loudly, and Cloud interpreted that as a "no."

Barret suddenly pounded the table with his gun arm, upsetting a couple of empty bottles. "Goddamn!" he cursed. "Now they're missin'! We gotta go afta them!"

Cloud shook his head adamantly, sending Barret a stern glance. "Vincent and Yuffie are *fine*," he insisted pointedly, not wanting to make Tifa any more worried than she already was. "They're probably just trapped in the cave by the storm."

"And what we gonna do?" Barret demanded, not getting the message. "Jes leave 'em in there?! I don't think so, Spike!"

"I think they'll be fine," Rude suddenly said calmly.

"Yeah," Elena chimed in. "Vincent used to be a Turk."

"And?" Barret snapped. "That somethin' to be proud of?"

Elena scowled at him. "Better a Turk than a terrorist."

"Okay, okay," Cloud interrupted, sensing an impending fight. "You guys quit arguing. We're going to check on them once the storm let's up."

"But they might not be there when the damn storm lets up!" Barret said angrily.

Cid sent a stream of smoke in his friend's direction. "Just calm your ass down," he snapped. "Vince knows what to do in all kinds of situations. Don't know about Yuffie, but I'm sure Vince will be able to take care of her."

"Besides," Elena spoke up, apparently trying to optimistic, a rare trait in a Turk. "Can't Vincent just morph Chaos and fly them out of there?"

Reno laughed. "Yuffie gets airsick, too. I'm sure Vincent doesn't want puke on his lovely purple hide."

"Would you quit it with the stuff about vomit!" Elena snapped. Reno only laughed.

"Hey, Cloud," Cid asked curiously. "Why did you stick Vincent and Yuffie together in the first place? You know that they both work better by themselves. Yuffie's probably buggin' the living crap out of Vince as we speak."

"I think they complement each other nicely," Cloud responded, a bit testy from having one of his decisions, albeit a relatively minor one, called into question. "Vincent keeps Yuffie in line, and Yuffie keeps Vincent from getting a little too... detached and callous towards the situation." He suddenly grinned. "Besides, guys, admit it, Vincent is the only one Yuffie can't steal anything from. He's too watchful to fall for her tricks."

"But shouldn't they be back by now?" Tifa fretted. "The cave wasn't that far away. If Cid said that the storm can't interfere with the PHS, then something must have happened to them."

"Maybe they found what they were looking for...or it found them," Reno suddenly said, looking into his almost empty beer bottle thoughtfully as if he could see all the secrets of the world in the swirling brown liquid.

"The hell you talkin' 'bout, Carrot Top?" Barret demanded in annoyance.

Reno shrugged. "Maybe they found the Running Man...or the Running Man found them."

Silence fell. The only sounds were the raining beating against the building and the thunder rolling angrily across the countryside, the dark forces of nature trying to find a way into the bar. Smoke from Cid's cigarette was gathered around the ceiling, the overhead lights mingling with the misty particles and giving the entire room an eerie, ghostly look. No one dared to speak.

Then Tifa said softly, "I hope they're alright."