

Chapter Nine: The Devil's Love Triangle

"Reno, you wouldn't know sensitive or chivalrous if they came up and kicked you in the teeth." Tifa Lockheart

*I'm sorry about the attitude
I need to give when I'm with you
But no one else will take this
Shit from me
And I'm so terrified of
No one else but me...
Reach down your hand
In your pocket and pull out some hope for me*

*"Long Day"
Matchbox 20*

The beach was deserted when the rising sun finally dethroned the night that had presided over Junon Harbor. But the forces of darkness were running rampant and unstoppable for the next few days, and even the mighty brilliance of Dawn with her fingers of rose could not penetrate the stormy thunderclouds that prevented her from touching her kingdom and its inhabitants. The dark interveners of the light still belched forth their endless supply of rain, thunder, and lightening, trying to forcefully take over the realm that was ruled by the sun and moon. And for now, it seemed almost as if it was going to succeed.

The nighttime raindrops had left the dark sands of the beach pockmarked and wet as if the compact grainy substance had contracted a horrible alien disease. The tracks that Vincent and Yuffie had made while fleeing to the shelter of Junon had long ago been washed away, along with their faithful jet ski the Black Stinger, all reclaimed by the insatiable ocean mother who had once owned the world and now wanted to devour the fruits that had abandoned her womb for that of the earth. Her furious tides, swollen by the rain, pounded hungrily and viciously on the sands of Junon, trying to take back what mankind had stolen from them.

But their efforts on behalf of their mother were in vain. They had been trying such tactics for an eternity now. Reclaiming the land was fruitless; human and Ancient alike had long ago ceased to worry about how dangerous the ocean was. They had forgotten her majesty, her fury, and her hungry children of the deep.

So she decided to teach them a lesson.

From her dark depths, she smugly belched forth five war-torn figures.

The first of these figures washed up on shore like an unwanted child who was nothing nature had ever intended to create—an accident, an abomination. Its man-like figure was clothed in the remnants of black rags, and it was missing one entire arm and half of the other. Yet it was with these stumps that it dragged itself relentlessly on shore with some indomitable will that resided within its soulless, heartless, mindless shell of pink flesh. Its legs, whole and complete, but useless for the time being, dragged meekly behind it, waiting for their moment.

As soon as the creature had escaped the grips of the ocean that had decided she was done playing with it, the creature shuffled onto the wet sand, dragging itself along with the stumps that had once been its arms. Lightening flashed across the slightly lighter sky, reflecting off of the creature's glistening head. With the same relentless patience that had propelled it through the worst of the ocean's fury, the monstrosity that may have once been a man sprung to its feet in one swift movement and stood alone on the once deserted beach.

Four others soon followed, each the identical twin of the first refugee. The new arrivals also came from the hungry tides of the ocean, all missing limbs from various places on their bodies. But these absent appendages didn't deter the fleshly monstrosities at all. Their wounds no longer bled; they felt no pain. They felt nothing.

One by one, each of the four new arrivals came to stand beside the first one, looking like outdated and mutilated action figures.

Together again, the five war-torn but fully operational Faceless Men moved towards the awakening city of Junon.

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Cautiously, Reno opened one eye. The effort it cost him to accomplish such a feat, however, was so painful and unrewarding that he ditched the effort and shut it again. He felt as if an entire legion of oddball life forms had invaded his skull and were digging at his brain with tachyon lasers and super-heated pickaxes or whatever oddball life forms used to perform their autopsies on humans. His mouth felt drier than the desert around Dio's prison (not that he'd ever been down there), and it tasted as if something had died in there. His limbs ached from top to bottom, and his nightstick was poking him in...an extremely sensitive place.

In short, he felt like crap. Week old crap. Crap that had been flushed so many...

"Reno?" a voice suddenly cut through his consciousness and assaulted his delicate nerve endings, intensifying the pain tenfold. He groaned.

"Oh, I see you're awake," the voice said dryly. Hey that sounded an awful lot like that lady from AVALANCHE, the one with the boobs, the one that Rude was still obsessing over even after Reno had told him a dozen times to...

"Reno!" Tifa cried, shaking him roughly by the shoulder. "Get up and quit drooling all over my table!"

With a great effort, Reno forced both of his eyes open. Light exploded across his vision, drilling into his brain like an ice pick. Gritting his teeth, he forced both of them to focus at the same time. Ignoring the throbbing pain in his skull and the major annoyance he felt at being so rudely awakened at such an early hour, he squinted into the light above him. Eventually, Tifa's lovely face swam into view, a sight for sore eyes. Only now, as she stood at his side glaring down at him, that beautiful face now sported a severely irritated look.

"Ugh?" Reno grunted intelligibly, trying to work up the strength to move his limbs.

Tifa scowled. "What was that? I don't understand cavemen talk."

"Ugh," Reno said again, but this time followed up with, "Tifa...good morning."

She looked surprised. "Well, um, hello, Reno, good morning to you, too."

He squinted his bloodshot aquamarine eyes, trying to get the two Tifas to merge into one. "Can you turn off my nightlight?" he suddenly asked.

Now she looked amused as well as surprised. "I think you're a bit old for a nightlight, Reno."

Reno didn't hear her comment, noticing for the first time that he was not lying on his bed or his couch. "Where am I?" he slurred, clutching his lead-heavy hands to his aching head.

"My bar," she replied, looking down at him sternly.

"Bar?" Reno echoed weakly. Then, amazingly, he grinned up at Tifa's figure, which was still blurry at the edges. "Did we just get through a night of hot sex?"

Tifa's face darkened with rage almost instantly. Her jaw clenched, and her dark, graceful eyebrows drew together in a furious scowl. "Reno," she seethed. "If I wasn't happily imagining all the pain you're in right now and reveling in your suffering, I would punch you between the legs so hard you wouldn't be able to walk straight for a week. But since I'm a decent, moral human being UNLIKE SOMEONE I KNOW, I just can't bring myself to hit a drunkard with a hangover, even a mangy lowlife like you."

"Mangy lowlife?" Reno echoed with a frown. "Geez, I was just making a joke, Tifa. Are you always such a bitch in the morning?"

This time Tifa did hit him, and Reno, with his normally sharp reflexes dulled by alcohol, could only cry out and clutch his stomach in pain as she drove an expertly trained fist into his gut.

I'm lucky she didn't hit me a few inches lower, he thought with a painful giddiness.

"Get up, you pathetic slob!" she snarled angrily, putting her hands on her shapely hips.

"I will, I will," Reno wheezed, hands covering his abdomen to repel any more blows. "Just wait until the room stops spinning and I can tell which way is up and which way is down."

"Get off my table, now," she seethed, burgundy eyes burning with angry fire.

"Hey!" Reno snapped, starting to come out of the ozone. "I don't even know where the floor is so quit bitchin' at me!"

Tifa raised her fist menacingly, her face as dark as a thundercloud.

"Ah!" Reno yelped. "Okay, okay, I'm up, I'm up!"

He rolled over and off the table, the room spinning wildly around him as he did so. He tried to make a valiant attempt to land right side up, but at the last moment, however, his feet got tangled in the blanket, and he ended up falling flat on his butt on the wooden floor with a loud thud. The force of his posterior's collision with the ground made his teeth click together and sent a whole, new jarring pain up the length of his back.

Damn. Today's just not going to be my day.

"Ow," he moaned, rubbing his backside.

Tifa rolled her eyes in half pity/half anger as she glared down at the red-haired man in the rumpled blue suit spread-eagled on her floor. "Oh please, Reno, it couldn't have hurt that bad. Get your lazy, drunken butt up so I can give you that hangover remedy."

Reno lurched to his feet with a grunt, using a nearby chair as a crutch. His aching body and throbbing head screamed in protest at all his movement, but the Turk refused to give in to his ailments. Besides, he was used to be hung over. He practically went through this every morning of his life.

He waited patiently for the room to stop spinning before focusing on Tifa's retreating figure and asking, "You have a hangover remedy?"

"Yes," she answered, gracefully maneuvering her way behind the bar, where she promptly began gathering the materials she needed for her hangover cure that she thought Reno should invest a lifetime supply in. "When you run a bar, it's always good to develop some kind of remedy for the disease that ails so many of your customers."

Reno snorted at her sympathy for drunkards like him and began to shuffle his way unsteadily over to the bar. "You know, sister," he said. "People drink because they want to. I say let the bastards suffer from their own 'disease,' as you so nicely put it. It's a self-inflicted disease, after all."

Tifa glanced up at him before busying herself again. "Not everyone drinks because they want to, Reno," she said softly. "Alcoholism is a disease with no cure. Some drunkards can't help themselves. It's like they're possessed or something."

The redheaded Turk gingerly eased himself onto a bar stool in front of Tifa, careful not to miss the stool and land flat on his keister again. "You have a cheery outlook on life," he commented with a sneer. "Have you done an extensive study on the psychology of drunkards, Dr. Lockheart?"

She shook her head, brown hair shimmering underneath the lights and brushing her creamy shoulders. "No," she said quietly. "Just one."

Reno raised an eyebrow curiously. "Oh really? And who would that be? Does Red have a drinking problem?"

"No," she said calmly. "It's you, Reno."

He jerked in surprise. "Me?"

She nodded, carefully pouring a generous amount of a nasty brown concoction into a glass. "Yes, you. I don't know why you drink, Reno, but I can tell that it's not because you want to."

Reno laughed loudly, ignoring the burst of pain it caused him. "That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard!" he exclaimed, leaning his weight on the bar, aquamarine eyes flashing with a mixture of harshness and mirth. "Let me tell you something, honey, I drink because I *want* to. I manipulate people and sleep with any woman who crosses my path because I *want* to. I run my own life. I don't do anything I don't want to do. So don't give me any of that, 'You have a disease, Reno' crap, because I don't want to hear it."

Tifa met his iridescent blue-green gaze squarely with her burgundy one, unfazed by his harshly amused words or his blazing stare. "Whatever you say, Reno," she replied calmly after he had finished his spiel. She placed the glass in front of him with an emphatic thud. "Here, drink up."

The Turk eyed the overflowing glass dubiously. "Congratulations, Tifa baby, I think you've created a new color. What the hell is in this crap, anyways?"

One corner of Tifa's full mouth turned up in a smile. "Don't ask, Reno. Just drink."

She watched calmly as the Turk carefully lifted the glass to his mouth, wise enough not to sniff it before taking a petite sip. She watched just as calmly as he gagged on the concoction, his face scrunching up in disgust as he almost spit all of the liquid on the bar top. Her respect for him climbed a tenth of a notch as she saw him succeed in keeping the remedy in his mouth. Not just anyone could do that.

"What the hell?!" he exclaimed when he had stopped hacking and choking. "What, are you trying to kill me or something?"

"The remedy is worse than the disease," Tifa quoted wisely. "Just pretend it's vodka, Reno. Drink it all."

Ignoring the glare he was giving her, Tifa diverted her attention to wiping up the mess she had made while mixing her "remedy." Watching him slurp and gag down the rest of the concoction out of the corner of her eyes, she silently wondered at the paradox of the fiery-haired Turk who had drunken himself into a coma a dozen times over, then claimed he did it because he wanted to. Who knew, maybe he did, but she didn't think so. At first she had thought that Reno was just as shallow as he made himself out to be, but hanging around him as more of a friend than an enemy had led her to witness the more complex layers of his "charming" personality. She now believed that there was more going behind those liquid blue eyes than others tended to assume.

Finished with his remedy, Reno took the glass away from his mouth in obvious relief and set it down on the counter top with a loud thud, looking proud of himself that he had finished the entire thing without throwing it back up. He had some of the dark liquid dribbling down his chin, and another thin stream had stained his shirt.

Tifa sighed. "Reno, you are probably the sloppiest person I have ever met."

He smiled, Mako-enhanced eyes twinkling fiendishly. *Those eyes would rival Cloud's in ethereal beauty*, Tifa suddenly thought, *if they didn't seem to be always mocking people*. She immediately shook away the thought; now was not the time to be romanticizing every unseen aspect of Reno. She had to admit, the Turk was...stunningly attractive and had a unique personality that she hadn't seen in any other individual in her lifetime. Actually, "unique" was too nice of word; "obnoxious" would probably suit him better.

"I may be the sloppiest person you'll ever meet," Reno said amicably in response to her insult. "But since I'm also the most sensitive and chivalrous person you'll ever meet, I thank you for your little 'potion' and that lovely compliment you just gave me, Tifa. I always knew you loved me."

Tifa rolled her eyes. "Reno, you wouldn't know sensitive or chivalrous if they came up and kicked you in the teeth."

He grinned widely, showing her all of the objects that "sensitive" and "chivalrous" would have kicked had they come across him. Tifa just shook her head, smiling slightly at his antics. Satisfied with himself, Reno clumsily wiped his chin off with his jacket sleeve as Tifa cleared away his glass and rinsed it in the sink.

Flicking a wayward lock of red hair away from his face, Reno glanced towards the window to see that though the sky was a lighter shade of gray than he remembered from the night before, rain was still pounding incessantly against the panes of glass with ghastly motivation.

"It's still raining," he commented, resting his scarred cheek on one hand, happy to find that his head was already starting to clear. Tifa's loony mad scientist/mud pie brew had actually worked.

She glanced at the window as she shut off the faucet, a distant and troubled look entering her eyes. "Yeah," she said softly. "The streets are already flooding. It let up for a little while right before dawn...when Cloud and the others left. But then it--"

"Wait just a damn minute!" Reno suddenly burst out, gripping the counter top tightly with his hands as he leapt to feet that still weren't quite steady. "You mean they already left for that cavern?!"

"Yes," Tifa replied wearily, knowing that the others' abandoning Reno would incite such a reaction.

"They went to go look for the Running Man, who kidnapped *my* President, and they had the nerve to leave me, *his chief bodyguard*, unconscious on a hard, uncomfortable table in a bar?!"

"Yes," Tifa sighed, suddenly feeling like crying at her own loneliness.

"THOSE ASSHOLES!" he exploded, blue eyes flashing with unchecked fury as he pounded the bar with both fists, shaking the shot glasses and making Tifa jump instinctively. "I'm going after them!"

"Reno, calm down," she said flatly, starting to wipe the counter again, as if to cleanse the Formica of all his rage. "You and your little hissy fits are so unnecessary and predictable. And you're not going after them so just sit back down. It wasn't

their fault they had to leave without you because you had drunken yourself into a coma and they didn't want to hear you gripe and complain the entire way over there."

Reno sneered, aquamarine eyes glinting frostily. "It's not my fault either," he mocked. "I have a 'disease' and I don't drink because I want to."

Tifa sighed and rubbed her face with her hands. "Reno," she said patiently. "For what it's worth, you're not the only one they left behind."

His eyes widened in surprise. "They left without telling you, either?"

She shook her head. "No, Cloud told me, but...Look, Reno, I don't really want to talk about it. Are you hungry?"

His stomach suddenly rumbled loud enough for everyone in Midgar to hear. "Um, yeah," he muttered reluctantly, wishing his stomach had just kept quiet.

She nodded, relieved that she would be able to take her mind off of things by cooking. "Sit down and I'll fix you something."

Reno hesitated, for a moment contemplating rushing out the door, but his stomach rumbled insistently, demanding to be fed, and a sudden crash of thunder discouraged any more thoughts of sloshing around in rain outside. He trudged over to his stool again and plopped down on it with an internal sigh, still simmering with the residue of his rage.

Oh well, he thought glumly as he watched Tifa remove eggs from the refrigerator, at least I don't have to parade around the mountains, slipping in the mud and getting soaked from the rain. Ha! Looks like Mr. and Mrs. We're-So-Independent-And-Can-Leave-Our-Leader-Behind-With-A-Hangover Rude and Elena came up on the short end of the stick. Who cares anyways? They can go to hell.

But deep down, Reno knew that he wasn't angry with his friends. He couldn't afford to be angry at the only two real friends he had at the moment; unless, of course, he counted Cloud, Tifa, and all the other members of AVALANCHE as friends, but he wasn't ready to consider them as anything more than acquaintances at the moment. No, Reno wasn't angry that Rude and Elena had left him behind; he was hurt. Turks were supposed to stick together, no matter what. *Friends* were supposed to stick together. For almost a year, Rude and Elena were all he had had to rely on, and they on him as the three remaining Turks rose from the ashes of the tyrannical Shinra Inc. to become the new bodyguards/second-in-commands under President Reeve of Neo-Shinra. They had fought together, hurt together, laughed together, got drunk together, and now they run off and leave him here with Tifa...

Hey...Tifa...

Reno snapped out of his morbid thoughts and watched the young brunette as she fried bacon in a pan with her nimble hands. Already the smells of cooking food were making his stomach growl eagerly. He allowed a small smile to come to his lips as his eyes lingered on her curvaceous, slender figure with its tiny waist and large breasts. Yes, Tifa Lockheart was a fine piece of meat, Reno had to admit. Rude certainly knew how to pick them. Her wine-colored eyes were intent on what she was doing, and her long brown hair spilled across her shoulders as she pushed at it impatiently with her free hand, lost in thought.

It then became obvious to Reno that there was something bothering her. Her full, pink lips, usually having cautious smiles even for him, were turned down in the corners, ready to frown instead of smile. There was a nagging worry evident in her eyes, a worry that darted fleetingly across her beautiful face in wispy glimmers, only allowing Reno brief glimpses of what was going on inside her pretty head as she tended to his needs.

"Why did they leave you behind?" he asked suddenly, folding his arms on the counter top and resting his chin on the blue fabric of his rumbled suit jacket, the epitome of casualness.

Tifa glanced up in surprise, as if she had forgotten he was there. "Hm? Oh. I said I didn't want to talk about it, Reno."

The distress in her voice that she tried so hard to hide made him use a softer tone when he said, "Hey, I'm just trying to make conversation."

"Let's talk about something else, then," she said tiredly, setting her finished bacon aside and turning her attention to the eggs.

"Tifa..." Reno said.

She looked up in surprise to meet a pair of curious but seemingly sincere aquamarine eyes that had lost all their mocking demeanor. For a moment there, Reno had sounded just like Cloud.

Tifa quickly averted her gaze and muttered, "Cloud told me I needed to take care of you."

Reno jerked in surprise. "Me? Since when does the leader of AVALANCHE care about the well-being of any Turk, especially a worthless drunk like me?"

She shrugged. "I don't know. I mean, no offense meant to you about the whole Turk/drunkard thing. Turks and drunkards are people, too, right?"

Reno ran his fingers absently over the scar that adorned his right cheek. "Pretty much, yeah," he muttered.

"But I still don't know why Cloud would leave me behind," she fretted as she flipped an egg with her skillet and an amazingly steady hand despite her obvious agitation. "I mean, I know he's not being sexist or anything; he is well aware that I can handle hiking and walking around in the rain better than Cid or Barret, who hate being wet. It makes them grumpy."

"God forbid," Reno laughed.

Tifa went on, oblivious to his attempt to ease her mood. "And Red can't smell anything in the rain, and since he walks on all four feet, he'll have a harder time maneuvering through flooded areas. And Rude and Elena are Turks, and Clouds not even sure he trusts the Turks yet."

Reno made no comment, realizing that she was talking more to herself than to him, and if she was talking to him, she wanted him to listen and not make any snide remarks.

"I mean," Tifa rambled on, "if Vincent and Yuffie and Reeve were with us, then he probably would have taken Vincent or Reeve with him since they don't complain too much and Vincent's really agile and Reeve's really smart even if he can't fight that well. *Then* I could understand if he left me behind since only three people can fit in the Tiny Bronco comfortably."

"Tifa-" Reno started to say, sensing that she was reaching the zenith of her agitation and frustration. He was afraid she was going to have a breakdown or something.

"But what I can't understand for the life in me," she went on feverishly, almost completely unaware of his presence now. "Is why he took everyone else and left me behind! I mean, he knows that Reno can take care himself here alone, and if Cloud had wanted someone to keep an eye on him so he didn't break anything in a temper tantrum, Red could have stayed. He's much better with all that 'Let's all calm down' stuff than I am-"

"Tifa-" Reno said again, leaning forward and peering into her worried face, which was still focused on the cooking eggs as she went on with her frustrated tirade.

"Maybe he didn't mean anything by it," she continued, mumbling now. "Or maybe he was just looking for an excuse to leave me behind. Maybe he thinks I'll have a breakdown or something, or maybe my presence just aggravates him so much that he can't-"

"Tifa!" Reno bellowed, making her jump so violently that she nearly dropped the spatula.

She stared blankly at him for a few moments that seemed to last forever, lost for the time being in the aquamarine lakes that were his eyes and wondering why he had yelled so loud. Oh yeah, she had been...

"God, Reno, I'm sorry," she immediately apologized, ashamed of herself. "I just got all caught up in my own problems. I didn't mean to dump all that on you. I'll be quiet now."

Blushing profusely, she returned her attention to the patiently waiting eggs, trying to not notice how hard her hand was trembling as she handled the spatula.

Reno waved his hand in dismissal, wanting to comfort her and wanting to laugh at her at the same time. "You don't need to apologize, sister. I put a crack in the dam and it all came flooding out over me. That's all."

Tifa shook her head wildly, not meeting his gaze. "No, Reno, those were my problems, my petty worries. I had no right talk your ear off about them."

And why did I have to tell Reno, of all people? He's just going to get drunk and blab out everything to an entire bar. Damn! I've really gotten myself into a predicament this time, and all because I was lonely and wanted someone to talk to. If Yuffie were here, I might have talked to her about this, but since she's not...

Reno rolled his eyes and ran a hand absently through his untamed red hair. "Please, enough with the apologies. You're making me sick to my stomach. Besides, don't worry about anything concerning Spike. I'm sure he had some obscure reason for leaving you here that only he understands."

Tifa raised an eyebrow curiously, still not looking into his eyes. Was Reno actually trying to comfort her? Wow, that would be a first.

"But what was it?" she whispered, poking at the eggs. "I don't understand him."

Reno smiled, flashing rows of white teeth. "He's a guy, baby, you're not meant to understand him."

"Then what am I meant to do, Reno?" she asked with some apprehension, expecting a perverted or degrading answer.

"Beats me," was all he said, spreading his hands in a gesture of ignorance. "I don't understand women."

She sighed. "That's quite an amazing thing, Reno, considering that you've been with so many."

He scowled, graceful auburn eyebrows drawing together. "That's a pretty harsh thing to say when I'm being perfectly *chivalrous* to you. Besides, there isn't really much to understand about my bitches."

Tifa started to snap at him in anger, but held her tongue because he was being "chivalrous" to her for a change.

"Anyways," Reno continued, stretching his arms over his head and arching his back until a section of his pale, well-muscled belly could be seen. "I'm sure your precious Cloud only left you here because he had your best interests in heart."

She glanced at him briefly before returning her attention to the stove. "And what would those be, Reno?"

"Who the hell do I look like, the *%ing Answer Man? I'm not Cloud, thank God, but I *am* a guy, and if I were a guy like Cloud who was involved with an astoundingly attractive, kind, generous woman like you, then that's what I would be thinking."

"Rude and Elena left with your best interests in heart," she said quietly, surprisingly the both of them.

Reno made a peculiar hissing noise through his teeth and narrowed his eyes resentfully. "Going for low blows today now, are we?"

Tifa shook her head. "I'm not trying to cause you any pain; I'm just telling you the truth. They both didn't really want to leave you behind. I could tell when they were about to leave this morning. Elena kept glancing at you, and Rude was uncomfortable, too."

He snorted disdainfully. "They were probably afraid I was going to wake up and bitch them out."

"No, they were just worried about your well-being. Everyone knows that you blame yourself for Reeve's disappearance."

Reno lifted his upper lip in a sneer, but didn't say anything, wondering if almost a year of no espionage or manipulating enemies had made him and his emotions transparent to the people around him. Usually, Reno was most talented at fooling people into thinking that he was someone that he really wasn't. A Turk was required to know many techniques, after all, not just battle tactics. It was Reno's charm and ability to make spur-of-the-moment decisions that had made him talented in this area of his job, at least during the reign of the Shinras.

The truth of the matter was that he *did* blame himself for Reeve's disappearance. Who else was there to blame? One of the Turks' chief jobs was to protect the President at all costs, and he had failed miserably. Reno didn't feel as if he owed Reeve for anything, certainly not giving them a job again, but he was relatively upset that he had failed at one of the objectives he had been hired for - protecting the President. The kidnapping had taken place right around the corner, not ten feet from where he had been walking casually down the hall, and he had been too late to stop it.

Failure.

Pathetic failure.

He laid his head on his folded arms dismally, a scowl on his handsome face as he berated and bashed himself silently, hating himself more than ever at the moment. Couldn't he do anything right? It seemed as if his whole life was a mass of failures and mistakes, one right after the other. His entire existence on this Planet was one big mistake. What world needs yet another born failure in a world of born failures?

Tifa finished with her eggs and glanced up, noticing with some alarm that Reno's expression had taken on a morbid look that she had never seen on his face before. His chin was resting on the arms of his blue suit jacket, and his fine eyebrows

were drawn low to his eyes in a perpetual frown. He drummed his fingers idly over one of his scars, so close to the tender flesh around his fathomless eyes, which were misted in deep contemplation.

"Reno, it's not your fault," she said soothingly as she heaped his breakfast onto one of her plates, trying to ease the pain that she had unintentionally stirred up in his mind.

The redheaded Turk snapped out of his dark reverie and glared at her. "Hey, baby, if I want your opinion, I'll ask for it. You don't know anything about the way I am or the way I feel so just...leave me alone." Those last words made his harsh comment sound more like a whine, and they both knew it.

Tifa didn't respond to his remark, not even to scold him for calling her "baby," a bad habit that he had developed. She knew he was hurting, and he was hurting because she had mentioned the source of his pain. So instead of snapping at him, she just smiled patiently and set his breakfast in front of him, handing him a fork to eat with.

Reno stared at her for one more moment before turning his attention to his food, eating with such vigor that one would have thought it had been years since his last meal. One of the first things she had noticed about Reno, next to his obnoxious personality and womanizing ways, was that he always ate his food quickly without even knowing that he was doing so. Living in the slums of Sector 7, Tifa had noticed that several of the children there ate in similar fashions, practically inhaling their food in fear that the nourishment they so desperately needed would be taken away from them, or, more accurately, stolen from them before they could finish. Reno was just an older version of those children, living proof that lifelong habits die hard. Even years after Tseng had taken him off the streets and polished him up, the Turk apparently couldn't shake the nagging feeling that simple things such as food would be taken away if he weren't careful. This unconscious habit of his made Tifa's heart soften as she imagined how hard a life he might have had before Tseng rescued him.

"Hey, Reno?" she said awkwardly, wringing her hands together.

"Yeah?" he responded around a mouthful of eggs.

"Thanks for, you know, listening to me and all. It helped to get some things off of my chest."

Reno shrugged casually, seemingly embarrassed by the simple words of gratitude and unable to speak around all the food in his mouth.

I'd better give him something to drink before he chokes, she thought with a hint of amusement as she watched him manage to swallow his mouthful in one big audible gulp.

Taking a glass out of the cabinet, she filled it with fresh orange juice from the refrigerator and set it before him, careful not to slosh any on the counter.

Reno glanced at it briefly before turning to her. "Orange juice? I haven't drunk any of that crap since I got pneumonia and Elena insisted on playing Florence Nightingale. Don't you have anything better...like some beer?"

Tifa shook her head and gave a short laugh. "No, Reno, no beer for breakfast. It's bad for you."

He batted his eyes, apparently over his bad humor of a few seconds before. "Please?" he begged, trying his best to look pitiful.

"No," Tifa said firmly, attempting vainly to stifle a smile.

"Pretty please?"

"No."

"Pretty please with a cherry on top?"

She burst out laughing at the sheer absurdity of tough old Reno asking begging her for alcohol in such a childish way, but shook her head again. "No, young man," she scolded good-naturedly, wagging a finger in his face. "Eat your breakfast."

Reno gave a melodramatic sigh. "Aw, you're no fun, honey."

Tifa gave another short laugh and walked out from behind the bar, leaving Reno to devour his breakfast. With her boots thudding loudly on the wooden floor, she walked reluctantly over to the window and looked out. Darkness everywhere. The angrily churning gray clouds continued to belch forth the rain that had upset the balance of nature within their wombs, becoming so heavy and burdening that it had to be released. The streets of Kalm were, for the most part, deserted as the citizens fled indoors to escape the torrents of rain that poured down on them incessantly. Only here and there, Tifa

could see a die-hard workaholic trudging to their place of business, be it the Materia Shop or the Weapons shop or one of the other stores in the quaint country town, clad in slickers and boots. Tifa's eyebrows drew together in distress as she once again thought of Vincent and Yuffie having to stay the night in a flooded cave. Her agitation only increased as she thought of Cloud and her other friends going to investigate the very same cave at this moment.

Pushing the thoughts away with a great force of will, Tifa turned away from the window and what dismal scenery it had to offer, undoing the drawstring on the curtains and letting them fall to cover the dark portal as she did so. A glance to the bar told her that Reno was still happily crunching his bacon, and she allowed herself a small smile when she noticed he was swinging his booted feet like any little kid, in sync with a musical tune that was only in his head. When Reno wasn't being a disgusting, obnoxious, drunken, womanizing pervert, he was almost...attractive.

Oh, god, I'm so worried and lonely that even Reno's beginning to look good. This is pathetic.

Tifa strode over to the table that had served as Reno's bed the night before and picked up the mischievous blanket that had tripped him up and caused him to fall on his backside. She folded it carefully with her gloved hands just like she had watched her mother do so long ago and gently laid the quilt on the tabletop, smoothing it with her fingers as if giving it her seal of approval. That done, she rearranged the chairs Reno had upset in his collision with the floor, pushing them under their proper tables.

It wasn't until she had finished all her odds and ends that she realized that she and Reno had nothing to do but wait for Cloud and the others to come back. God, she hated feeling useless. And with all this time on her hands, all she had to occupy herself with was her own petty worries about...everything. Usually she had Cloud around to keep her company, and if he wasn't there, Marie, Tifa's assistant, was always bustling around and making cheerful conversation about anything and everything. Her bar was always filled with light and laughter, and one of her AVALANCHE friends had usually been there on a visit or just passing through. Now, with just her and Reno to occupy the empty space and fill the silence, her Final Heaven bar seemed just as lonely and desolate as the town outside its wooden walls. There was nothing for her to do, nothing to keep her mind off of her worries and fears, unless, of course, fighting with Reno counted. She didn't want to even *think* about asking him what he wanted to do to pass the time.

A loud belch brought Tifa out of her idle thoughts. She looked to her left to see that Reno was finishing the last bits of his breakfast. With his back to her, he looked to be a lonely, dark figure in a blue suit slumped at the bar in some ghost town on the Road to Nowhere. His long red ponytail hung down to the space in between his shoulder blades, a single rope of liquid fire showing up vividly against the dark color of his signature blue suit. The rest of his hair stuck up wildly from the top of his head, a screaming part of his untamed, rebellious nature trying to break free from the cage of society. Other strands around the sides of his face drooped downwards to fall across his sunglasses and against his scarred cheekbones.

Tifa suddenly remembered brushing away one of those strands of fiery hair the night before when Reno had been in the grips of some horrible nightmare. She recalled the way his shadowy form had thrashed on the table, how he had whimpered deep in his throat, and how he had muttered endlessly about someone called Mika...

"Hey, Reno?" she said cautiously as she moved to stand next to him, staring at his scarred profile.

He was more interested in chugging his orange juice down. "Yeah?" he mumbled absently.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Ask away, baby," he responded as he lifted the glass to his lips.

She took a deep breath, suddenly incredibly nervous. "Who's Mika?"

Reno gagged on his orange juice, spitting it all on the counter in front of him in a great shower. The glass fell from his hand, hitting the counter with a thud and rolling over to the bar area before crashing into the sink with the tinkling of glass, spilling the remains of the juice like blood from an open wound as it went.

Tifa, shocked and alarmed, backed up a step in trepidation as Reno whirled on her, wiping his mouth viciously with one of his coat sleeves. His face was as dark as the thunderclouds outside, and just as angry-looking, with his scars accenting the rage and suffering burning in his slightly luminescent eyes like a demon's unchecked fury. His mouth was twisted into what might have been a grimace, or a sneer, or maybe even a primitive, bestial expression of anger. His hands were curled into tight fists. At that moment, Reno was the scariest thing Tifa had ever seen.

But when he spoke, his voice was surprisingly low, but it was a dangerous sort of low, a deadly breed of low.

"Where did you hear that name?" he asked slowly, putting careful emphasis on every word, daring her to lie to him. His eyes were burning her.

"Reno-" Tifa started to say, shocked at the sudden change that had overtaken him, every bit as horrifying as when Vincent shifted into his Chaos form.

"WHERE THE F*%* DID YOU HEAR THAT NAME?" he suddenly raged, a dozen horrible emotions making his voice so agonized that the sheer force of it caused her to back up another step even though he had made no threatening gestures... yet. He hadn't even risen from his seat.

"Where, Tifa?!" he hollered again, voice shaking the very foundation of the building. "Where?! Where did you hear that name?!"

"F-From you," she managed to force out, clutching at the counter top with her right hand while keeping her left curled up in a cautious fist, knowing that if he attacked her, then she would have to defend herself the best way she could.

"From me?" he snarled angrily. "Liar! Lying bitch! Tell me where you heard that name!"

Tifa felt a spark of anger cut through her fear as that harsh name left his mouth and penetrated her consciousness. "I'm telling you the truth," she snapped, refusing to flinch as she met his burning gaze squarely. "You were talking in your sleep last night, for your information!"

"And what the hell were you doing listening to me in my sleep?!" he demanded, apparently not satisfied with the answer.

"You think I came down here last night just to listen to you?!" she growled. "Of all the pompous, egotistical bastards! Why should I give a care about the stuff you say in your sleep?! I was only up waiting for Vincent and Yuffie to come back, and you just happened to have fallen asleep on the table because you were so drunk you didn't know your left foot from your right! That's what happened, Reno, and if you don't believe me, well then tough shit! That's your goddamn problem, not mine! And don't you ever call me a bitch again, or I swear to God, you'll regret the day you were born!"

Tifa stopped her tirade, her chest heaving for breath and angry tears burning her eyes. She was caught between wanting to strangle Reno and wanting to run up to her room and never come out again. She couldn't remember the last time she was this angry.

Reno, in the meantime, was staring blankly at her, no emotion on his face at all. The silence between them was heavy and thick, broken only by the rain and thunder outside the bar and by the ragged breaths that Tifa drew into her chest as she watched Reno carefully through the haze of her anger. He looked like he was staring right through her, seeing things that weren't there; his aquamarine eyes were misted like they had been when she had mentioned Reeve's disappearance. All of his former anger had been washed away by a tide of melancholy emotions that only flitted briefly across his face in wisps.

Suddenly, the redheaded Turk snapped out of his trance-like state, blinking his eyes slowly as if the eyelids had the world's weight attached to them. His gaze fell on Tifa's flushed, furious face, and he hung his head in shame, fiery ponytail swooping from behind him to lie on his shoulder like a faithful companion.

"Sorry," he muttered, voice barely audible. "Sorry...so sorry...Tifa."

She didn't respond, unable to get her thoughts in order enough so that she could formulate an answer. For some peculiar reason, she thought that he wasn't apologizing just to her. The silence reclaimed the room until Reno broke it again.

"God," he whispered, not looking at her. "I'm so sorry...so sorry."

As Tifa stood there looking at him, looking at how he hung his head in shame, how he murmured the same words over and over again, how he nervously rubbed one of his wrists as if some unseen pain ailed him, she felt her anger begin to ebb. The blood stopped thundering in her ears, and the violent tide that had made her breaths fast and ragged suddenly dissipated as she realized that Reno was actually feeling remorse over the things he said.

"It's okay, Reno," she said soothingly, taking a cautious step closer to him. "You don't have to apologize. Maybe I just shouldn't have asked."

He shook his head miserably, strands of red hair flopping into his eyes. "No...I'm sorry. It's just...Mika..."

Suddenly unable to look upon even this ruthless Turk in such suffering, Tifa averted her eyes from his forlorn figure and knelt down to pick up the stool she had apparently knocked over in her haste to get away from him. Her hands were shaking, but she managed to put the stool back in its rightful spot without another mishap. Reno didn't even glance at her the entire time, his head solemnly bowed, lost in heart-wrenching memories that were his and his alone.

Rising shakily to her feet, Tifa rubbed her hands briskly over her miniskirt as if to purify them after committing some sort of blasphemy. She stepped over to stand in front of Reno, who still refused to raise his head. She fidgeted, not knowing what to do or say. It would have been easy just to go up to her room and leave Reno to his own suffering, but something kept her firmly rooted to the floor in front of him. Maybe she was remembering how he had listened as she vented her pain and frustration, or maybe she remained there because he had managed to make her laugh on a dark, gloomy morning when she, abandoned by the one she loved most and worried sick over her missing friends, had vowed that she would never be able to laugh again.

"Reno?" she said cautiously, talking to the top of his bowed head. "I wouldn't have said the name if I knew it would cause you so much...pain. If you don't want to talk about it, that's fine, but if you ever do...I'll listen."

He was silent for a moment, but then stirred slightly, spinning in his stool so that he was facing the bar again. He lifted his arms and rested his elbows on the counter top, burying his face in his hands. Tifa's face revealed nothing but pain and sympathy for a man she never thought she would ever feel anything for.

"What did I say?" he suddenly asked, voice muffled by his hands.

"Pardon me?" Tifa asked politely, unsure of what he meant.

"Last night," he clarified, voice thick with pain. "What did I say...while I was sleeping?"

Tifa shifted her weight from foot to foot, choosing her words carefully. "Well, not much. You were...in distress, I think, thrashing from side to side and getting tangled in the blanket. You were whimpering, deep in your throat, so low that I could barely hear it. You said Mika, but that's all you said. The rest was just incoherent mumbles that I couldn't understand. I think you were having a nightmare."

Reno laughed mirthlessly, rubbing his face with his hands. "Tifa," he said softly. "I don't remember anything from last night, but the words 'Mika' and 'nightmare' don't belong in the same sentence. Mika didn't belong to the nightmare world. She was...something else, something beautiful."

Tifa put a comforting hand on his shoulder, feeling him trembling slightly. She had never seen Reno like this before; it frightened her.

"Who was she, Reno?" Tifa asked as gently as she could, not wanting to cause him any more pain but feeling that he needed to get this off of his chest.

The redheaded Turk stirred, removing his hands from his face and turning to look at her. The pain in his Mako eyes was almost a physical thing that gripped her heart and squeezed, begging for something to ease its suffering, a painkiller for its aching plight or a razor blade to put it out of its misery.

"Mika was..." Reno started, staring at Tifa intently with those new agonized eyes of his. "Mika was someone from the past, someone I failed to protect when I should have been there for her. She...actually loved me...and I let her die. I failed her, just like I failed Reeve."

"Reno..." Tifa whispered tearfully, touching the side of his face gently.

"It's all my fault, Tifa," he suddenly said, voice rapidly gaining volume as his eyes bore into hers.

"No, Reno," she insisted. "It's not your fault."

"Yes it is!" he burst out, leaping to his feet and staring down at her, their faces just inches apart. "My whole life has been just one big catastrophe after another! I'm a born failure, and you know it as well as me! First Mika, then Tseng, now Reeve! Where does it end, Tifa?!"

The young woman didn't reply, only reached up and placed her hands on either side of Reno's face, trying to calm him down with her touch, something that her mother had done when Tifa was younger, one of the only memories she had of her mother; the others were cloudy and blurred at the edges. Whenever little Tifa had gotten herself worked up over something, her mother would place one of her frightfully delicate hands on either side of her daughter's distressed face, the gentle touch of those loving hands with their soft palms easing the turbulent emotions that had accompanied Tifa's childhood years.

Now Tifa did the same thing to Reno, gently cradling his agonized face with her gloved, calloused hands, tender fingers touching both of his scars carefully, the smooth scar tissue feeling alien underneath her fingertips. Reno just stared back at her blankly, not pulling away, his arms limp at his sides as if too stunned to react. A dozen unnamable emotions flew across

his face simultaneously, all peeking out at Tifa from the emerald blue portals that were his eyes. She met their ferocious gazes bravely and patiently, trying to chase them away with the serenity and solace in her aura.

Reno suddenly exhaled sharply, his eyelids slowly coming down to cover his eyes, depriving the painful emotions from their view of Tifa or of the world. She watched calmly as his dark brown eyelashes fluttered indecisively, wandering whether or not to pull back the gates and expose maelstrom of Reno's soul, letting his darkness seep into the world or perish in the light of the goddess holding his face so gently.

His eyes slowly opened, revealing his aquamarine Mako eyes once more. What Tifa saw there shocked her. A wound. A deep, festering wound that had been etched so deeply that it was a great rift in his soul that would never close. A wound that had been reopened and scarred so many times that it was tough, cold, and unfeeling to the world around it, oblivious to the light and love that others tried to offer. This wound thought itself to be impervious to all types of damage that the universe could dish out. Suffering had hardened it; time had deepened it. This wound was raw, big, and tough as nails.

This wound was bleeding, and its blood was thick and viscous. The liquid pain filled the crevasse, becoming a never-ending river of fire that flowed through the core of Reno's being, avenging its endless agony by inflicting harm on others, using harsh words and murderous hands as its outlet. Tifa saw all this through a pair of aquamarine eyes the color of Lifestream itself, a pair of eyes that belonged to a man, a man with a disease, a man who nature had forgotten and had left out in the cold to fend for himself.

Forever alone.

Just like her.

It was then that she realized her wound was bleeding, too.

Before she knew what she was doing, Tifa found herself slipping her arms around Reno's neck and holding him gently against her, trying to ease his suffering that was kith and kin to her own. For a second, Reno stiffened in surprise, all of his muscles going taut and rigid like a cord ready to snap. He was still trembling with the ailments of his spiritual injury that had reared its head again. Tifa laid her cheek against Reno's flaming hair and rubbed his back comfortingly.

"You'll be okay, Reno," she whispered. "Everything will be alright in the end."

He didn't respond, but instead heaved a shuddering sigh and melted into her embrace, his muscles going slack as he yielded to the comfort she was offering him. Wrapping his strong arms gently around her tiny waist and burying his face in her shoulder, he pulled her to him, hugging her as tightly as he could. Tifa gently tugged on his ponytail, surprised at how soft the fiery strands were. As far as she could recall, she had never hugged Reno before. Well, he had hugged her once when he had been completely drunk off his ass and had been just looking for an excuse to grab hers.

She recalled with sudden amusement how she had stood there, shocked by his atrocious act until Cloud had reacted for her and tossed Reno out the door and into the muddy street, Rude and Elena apologizing profusely before leaving the bar. Tifa had hated that side of the redheaded Turk, but she now realized that there were totally different sides to him, sides that he had unintentionally bared for her to see, sides that maybe his closest friends had never seen before. Reno was a walking mass of paradoxes and clashing emotions, but she had somehow connected and empathized with just one of those torturous emotions. She had suspected from the first time she had talked to him on a relatively friendly basis that there was something in Reno that mirrored a similar something in herself, but she hadn't known what it was until she had embraced him in a motherly fashion, and he had hugged her back, needing the comfort as much as she did.

Tifa sighed with a mixture of sadness and contentment, still rubbing Reno's back soothingly and rocking him gently back and forth, his body warm against hers. She hadn't known how much she had needed to be held until now. Silence reigned once more in the bar, but it was an anxiously peaceful sort of silence, a patient silence waiting for something to happen.

Then the door to the bar suddenly flew open, and Cloud Strife walked in.

Shocked at the sudden flurry of motion that neither of them had been able to hear or detect, Tifa and Reno both leapt back from each other and stared at the sopping wet figure standing in the doorway.

Silence hung in the air, gloating.

It had to be him, Tifa thought guiltily. Cloud had to be the first one to walk in and see me and Reno like that. He doesn't know that it was completely harmless. He's doesn't know about Reno's wound; he doesn't know about Mika...

But for all her rational thoughts, Tifa still felt an ashamed flush come to her cheeks as she stared back at the unnaturally still figure of her one true love, not even wanting to think about what was going through his head. Cloud's spiky blond hair

had been plastered to his head by the rain, but a few rebellious strands still managed to poke out of his scalp in defiance to the elements. Most of the sun kissed locks had fallen into his face and into his Mako blue eyes, but even through that wall of hair, she could see that those beautiful eyes she loved gazing into had become as heartless and cold as the ocean upon seeing her and Reno. His mouth was set in a hard, grim line, and he didn't move.

"Hey, Strife," Reno said casually, his usual cocky grin in place as he reseated himself in his bar stool. "You're back early."

"Apparently," Cloud responded dryly, eyes darting apathetically between Tifa and Reno.

"Yo, Cloud!" Barret's voice thundered as the man's lumbering bulk appeared behind Cloud in the doorway. "Move your spiky ass or I'll move it for ya!"

Eyes still locked on the duo by the bar, Cloud stepped aside as the others came charging in to get out of the rain. They were all thoroughly soaked and no one was at all happy. Elena's mascara was running down her pale face in rivulets, making it appear as if she had been crying black-tinted tears. Cid had pulled his flight goggles over his eyes, apparently trying to offer them some protection from the rain. Red was shaking the rain from his short, fiery coat, something he never usually did since he didn't like to splatter people or the floor with water, but since all of his friends and the floor were both wet, he figured, hey, why bother? Barret and Rude both didn't have much hair to get wet, but their clothes were still waterlogged, and whereas Barret was cursing at the top of his lungs, Rude remained stonily silent, never one to complain much about anything.

"Ew!" Elena exclaimed, wringing water out of her short blond hair. "It's so gross out there! My makeup's running and my suit is ruined! Why couldn't we have taken the Highwind?"

"Goddammit!" Cid bellowed, looking like an out-of-water scuba diver with his rain-splattered goggles and soaking wet flight suit. "I've explained that to you a dozen times over, woman! The Highwind doesn't fit in the cave! And we didn't want to have to swim in there and listen to you bitch the entire time so we took the Tiny Bronco!"

"Yeah!" Elena snapped, putting her hands on her hips. "'Tiny' is the right word for your stupid, broken little plane!"

Cid's blue eyes grew wide behind his goggles. "The %\$#@ you'd just say?! I know you didn't just call my-"

"Glad you're back guys," Reno interrupted smugly, looking comfortable and dry leaning against the bar, all traces of the agonized man with the bleeding wound gone now. Tifa couldn't even believe she had ever seen that tortured soul through such leering aquamarine eyes.

"I see you didn't die yer sleep. Damn," Barret growled as he stared enviously at the haughty Turk sitting next to a very contrite-looking Tifa across the room. The young brunette still couldn't bring herself to meet Cloud's eyes.

"So," Reno said congenially as he stared at the waterlogged members of AVALANCHE and his fellow Turks standing close to the doorway and dripping water on the floor. "How was the cave? Did you find anything?"

Silence. Everyone glanced uncomfortably at each other before finally turning their attention to Cloud, their unspoken leader. The young man, however, didn't return their glances; he was still staring emptily at Tifa, his face absolutely emotionless. Water dripped from his blond hair and ran into his eyes, but he didn't seem to notice. All he saw was the beautiful woman fidgeting next to the red-haired demon across the room.

I knew I shouldn't have left them alone. I should have let her come with us and left Reno here. Who cares about the damn bar? He's...taking her away from me. I shouldn't have left them alone.

Everyone except Tifa stared at Cloud for a few more seconds, perplexed by his silence. They immediately perceived that something was wrong with him, but they were at a loss to guess what and were too wet and spiritually depleted to give it much thought.

Finally Rude said quietly, "The ship is gone."

Reno jolted in surprise, all arrogance leaving his form as he leapt off the bar stool. "What do you mean, 'the ship is gone'?" he demanded incredulously.

"He means the ship is gone," Cid grumbled, removing his wet goggles and wiping them on his equally wet jacket. "It ain't there anymore."

"I thought it was a *ghost* ship," Reno commented sarcastically.

"Ghost ship my ass," Barret growled, plopping heavily into one of the chairs, his prodigious weight making the wooden apparatus squeak in protest. "Someone sailed that sucker out of there, and you can bet your ass that Vincent and Yuffie were probably on it."

"Nice call, Strife," Reno said acidly, his upper lip pulled back in the patented "Reno sneer." "Some ghost ship of yours."

"%\$&@ you, Reno," Cloud deadpanned, stunning everyone. Cloud rarely swore so vividly.

Reno's aquamarine eyes narrowed dangerously. "Don't take out your frustration on me, Strife. I'm just the drunkard you guys left behind."

Big blue Mako eyes glittered with unchecked anger. "You're hardly an innocent, Reno."

Reno glared back unflinchingly. "And what the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Red suddenly cleared his throat, sensing the impending violence that hung in the air. "I believe we need to focus on the situation at hand, my friends. Save these petty disputes for another time. The stakes are higher now."

"W-What do you mean?" Tifa stammered, speaking for the first time.

Red glanced at her before continuing. "We found no ship in the cave. Though it could have been washed out to sea by the rain, such a thing is very unlikely considering how deep in the cave it was. It is the general assumption that someone steered it out of there, presumably the Running Man."

Reno folded his arms across his chest. "The hell would the cowardly bastard want with an old, crappy ship?"

"Plenty of thangs, Turk," Barret grumbled. "To get across the ocean for one; he wouldn't have had to go through Junon or Costa del Sol that way. Or maybe to take Reeve somewhere for safe-keeping, ya might say."

"Where would he take him?" Reno asked impatiently, more frustrated with the situation than with Barret's obscure phrases.

"The hell would I know?" the big man snapped. "All I know was that Vincent and Yuffie were on that ship, either as stowaways or as prisoners."

"But *how* do you know?" Tifa asked desperately. She had been hoping that Cloud and the others would bring Vincent and Yuffie back with them, but now that it was obvious their two friends were in greater danger than they had originally assumed, she felt a yawning pit of despair opening beneath her. And the fact that Cloud was acting standoffish wasn't helping to ease her state of mind.

"Their chocobos were outside the cave," Red explained, the flaming end of his tail twitching in distress. "Both of the birds still had their packs attached to them, but no Vincent or Yuffie. The chocobos looked as if they had been out there for a while. They were starving."

"Well," Reno announced. "I don't think they're on the ship, wherever the hell it is now. You couldn't *pay* Yuffie to get on a ship, even one that's supposed to be abandoned. Unless, of course, you tempted her with materia."

"Maybe she wasn't given much of a choice," Rude muttered darkly.

Tifa, thankfully, didn't hear the tall Turk's morbid comment, and said with a spark of hope, "Maybe they were hiding somewhere else in the cave? Who knows how many tunnels there are under there?"

Red shook his head miserably, padding silently across the wooden floor to get out of the puddle of water he had shaken from his coat. "We searched that cave to the best of our abilities and we found nothing. The majority of it was already flooded from the rains. If we really wanted to do a thorough search, we'd have to assemble everyone and search when the water level goes down. The Tiny Bronco can only take us so far into the cave, and climbing is quite a difficult, if not impossible, feat to accomplish with all the mud and darkness."

"What if they didn't even go into the cave?" Reno suddenly asked. "You know what a pansy Yuffie can be sometimes."

"They were in the cave," Cloud said coldly, glaring at Reno. "But they didn't come out."

Reno still looked dubious. "How the hell do you know, Strife? Them Jenova cells in you send your whacked-out brain some psychic message?"

Cloud was unfazed. "Cid, show them what you found."

Cid hesitated, glancing at the distressed and anxious Tifa back to his solemnly silent teammates and back to his cold-voiced leader. "Sure, kid," he finally answered with obvious reluctance. He began fishing through his waterlogged pockets.

"What did Cid find?" Tifa fretted, wringing her hands together nervously.

"Cid took a dip in a big pool of water," Elena said with a spark of amusement in her high-pitched voice. "He finally put those goofy goggles of his to a practical use."

The pilot glared at her. "Goddammit, woman! I've been listening to your griping all mornin'! Next time your ass stays here! I'd rather have goddamn Reno with us than you!"

"No complaints here," Cloud deadpanned, face still devoid of all emotions.

Only Tifa and Reno understood the statement that dropped from his lips so coldly, issuing from a heart that had frozen up in his chest at the sight of them in each other's arms. The others, however, didn't have time to ponder his strange statement because Cid suddenly pulled an object from the pocket of his jacket and held it up for Tifa and Reno to see.

Tifa gasped, her heart plummeting to the bottoms of her feet. Reno cursed under his breath and plopped down on his stool again, expression closed and morbid emotions locked away tight. The object held from Cid's gloved hands was a long piece of cloth, dark green in color, with a Wutainese symbol in the middle of it. A slender thing, the forest green cloth had seen bloody battle after bloody battle, and had been splattered in the process. It was well worn from traveling, having been stitched together again and again when it was sliced and diced by swords of its owner's opponents. The ends of the cloth, however, were what really caught people's attention. They were shaped like a pair of spades or hearts, a peculiar addition that Tifa had always wondered about.

It was Yuffie's headband.