

CHAPTER VIII: THE BETRAYAL

"Why do I feel like I'm the only one who's nervous?"

Aeris gave him a reassuring smile.

"You don't look nervous."

Reeve looked around. The train station was crowded, even this early in the morning. He saw two soldiers standing by a long counter not far away. They glanced over at him. He quickly turned away.

"Let's hope so," he said softly.

Reeve looked over at Vincent and Elena, who looked perfectly at ease, which didn't surprise him at all. They stood a few feet away, their backs to the wall, engaged in casual conversation. And though they did not seem to be paying any attention to the others around them, Reeve could tell from their occasional glances that they were watching everyone else in the room.

He glanced around himself once more. He didn't know what Vincent and Elena were looking for, but it seemed to him that everyone who looked in their direction was taking note of them. One man in particular caught his eye. He was standing amid a crowd of people by the ticket counter, but he was not on line. He was an older man, his brown hair flecked with grey. He wore dark casual clothes, not a business suit as so many of the other commuters around them. He seemed to be staring straight at them.

No, not at them, he realized. He was looking at Aeris.

Reeve turned toward her. She was just sitting there not looking at anything in particular.

"I think that man over there is looking at..."

Even as he spoke he glanced back, but the man was nowhere to be seen.

"What?" Aeris said.

Reeve did not reply for a moment, but stared at the ticket counter. He had only looked away for a moment. Where had the man gone?

"I thought someone was looking at you," he said finally. "It was probably nothing."

Reeve looked over at Vincent and Elena once again, but they showed no sign of having seen the man. He was probably just being paranoid again, he thought. Even if the man was looking at her, it could have been perfectly innocent. Was it really so much of a surprise for Aeris to attract a man's attention? But it did seem odd the way he just vanished like that.

There was an announcement on the speaker overhead, and suddenly Vincent stepped toward them.

"That's us," he said.

Reeve and Aeris got up and followed him and Elena over to the train. Two soldiers stood on either side of the doors watching everyone who entered. Occasionally they would stop someone and ask for papers. Reeve's hand involuntarily reached down and touched the pocket that held his. He felt a lump beginning to form in his throat. He reviewed in his mind what he had memorized from the papers. Vincent had told him to say as little as possible if he was stopped. Well, he didn't think he would have a problem there. The way he felt now, he would be lucky if he was able to speak at all.

They walked in front of the guards and for a moment Reeve felt their eyes upon him. But then they were all past. Reeve breathed a sigh of relief as they stepped onto the train. They walked through the cars until they found one that wasn't very crowded and sat down.

It was almost an hour later that the train finally pulled out of the station. By that time the car they were in was quite crowded. He looked around again. Nobody seemed to be paying them any particular attention. They had gotten past the worst part. The best thing he could do now was relax.

He looked at Aeris, who sat beside him with a thoughtful look on her face.

"What are you thinking about?" he asked.

She shrugged

"Just about Cloud," she said slowly. "So far we've just been thinking about getting to Mysteele. What do we do once we are

there? It's a big city, who knows how long it will take us to find him? I hope he's okay."

Reeve looked down at the ground.

"And the others," she continued softly. "Zack, Tifa, Barret. Everyone. We don't even know if they're alive."

There was a sadness in her voice that Reeve had never heard before. He looked at her, knowing that there really wasn't anything he could say, yet he found himself speaking anyway.

"I'm sure they're alright."

She gave him a rueful smile, but she did not speak. The truth was she missed the others much more than she let on. A feeling of loneliness had been growing in her ever since the sub had been sunk. It had come to her, in fact, off and on, ever since she had been a child. A feeling of being cut off from everyone. She felt it at times even when surrounded by her friends, but now it was especially strong. Even when she was with them, she was still separate. She was an Ancient, something she could not share with any of the others, no matter how close they became. In that way, she would always be alone.

Reeve looked at Aeris for some sort of response, but she seemed lost in thought. He looked around again, and suddenly he spotted someone at the other end of the car. It was the same man he had seen at the ticket counter. He was looking right at them.

He grabbed hold of Aeris arm.

"Look," he hissed, nodding. But even as he said it the man turned away and disappeared through the door at the back of the car.

"What?" Aeris said, startled.

"It was the man I saw at the train station," he replied. "I'm sure he was looking at us."

He stood up suddenly.

"I'll be right back."

He walked toward the back of the car. He saw Elena staring at him questioningly, but she didn't say anything.

He reached the next car in time to see the man walking through the back door of that one. He followed, speeding up. For all he knew, this could still all be perfectly innocent. The man had been in the train station, it could just be coincidence that they were on the same train. There were a lot of people going to Mysteele. But just the way the man had looked at them, or more specifically, at Aeris, made him feel it was more than that.

He didn't really have a plan in mind. Even if he caught up with him, he couldn't accuse him of anything. He certainly had no intention of drawing attention to himself by confronting the man. He really just wanted to see where the man was going.

He stepped into the next car. He looked around, but the man was nowhere in sight. He looked toward the back of the car. He could see a window in the door, and through it the long line of the tracks behind them. This was the last car.

Where could he have gone? He looked around slowly, but he did not see the man in any of the seats. He couldn't have just vanished.

He stood there for a few moments longer, until he realized that people were starting to look at him. He was tempted to ask if anyone had seen someone come in the car before him, but he decided that would probably not be a good idea.

He walked slowly back to the others. Aeris looked at him curiously when he sat down beside her again.

He told her what happened.

"He just disappeared?" she said when he had finished.

He nodded.

"Into thin air," he replied.

"Should we tell Vincent?" she asked, looking over at him and Elena, who sat in the seat across the aisle from them.

Reeve shrugged.

"What is he going to do? We don't know who this guy is. If he was working with the government why haven't they already

come and arrested us? He'll probably just think I'm being paranoid, and I can't say that I blame him."

"So what should we do?" she asked.

"I don't know," he replied. "He's gone now, and he doesn't seem to have done any harm. Let's just keep our eyes open and see if we see him again. Maybe it really was just nothing."

She said nothing more, but Reeve could see from the look in her eyes that she didn't believe that any more than he.

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Zack stepped onto the dock and looked around. There was a line of warehouses across the street, the skyline of the city rising up behind them.

A tan colored van pulled up by the dock, and three men stepped out. One of them nodded to the Captain, who stood on the deck of the ship they had just left. His return nod was barely perceptible.

The men walked over to Zack and the others. One of them stepped forward and extended his hand.

"I'm Dr. Lee," he said. "You don't know how happy we are to see you."

He seemed about to say more, but then he stopped suddenly, looking at Zack. For a second Zack saw surprise in the man's eyes, but it disappeared in a moment.

"C'mon," he said, recovering quickly. "I think it would be better if we got you out of sight."

He led them back to the van.

"I thought you guy's weren't supposed to tell us your names," Zack commented as they got in.

Dr. Lee waved his hand in dismissal.

"That's only for operatives out in the field," he replied. "It's for their own protection. If we get caught, they're not going to need to get my name from you. I'm already well known to the government, and in fact have been honored by recently being placed on their most wanted list."

Zack wasn't exactly sure just how much of an honor that would be.

The two other men with Dr. Lee got in the front, while everyone else sat down in the back. In moments they were under way.

Zack introduced himself and his friends.

Dr. Lee nodded.

"Have you seen any of the others?" he asked.

Zack looked at him in surprise.

"How do you know about the others?" he asked.

"The government has files on all of you, though I don't know how complete they are. We don't have access to them, but we've found out enough. Spies on your continent identified everyone on board your ship before you even left."

Zack paused for a moment to digest this information.

"We haven't seen them," he said finally. "For all we know they may never have made it to shore."

"At least some of them did," Dr. Lee replied. "There have been scattered reports from all over the county. Six soldiers were killed in a small fishing village near where your ship went down. At least four of your friends were there. A couple of others caused quite a stir in Dunlan. Three were actually in custody in Unthor, but they escaped and shot down a jet to boot. Your friends seem to be leading the government on quite a chase. They appear to be very resourceful."

Zack nodded.

"Well, they are that, yes," he said. He paused for a moment. "Have you any knowledge of one particular girl, light brown hair, green eyes."

"Or another with brown hair and eyes," Rude said quietly.

Zack looked at Rude for a moment, but said nothing.

Dr. Lee shook his head.

"I don't have any details about individuals," he replied.

Red took a moment to add things up, then he spoke.

"Well, if your numbers are correct, it sounds like everyone survived."

Dr. Lee looked at him in surprise, but it passed in a moment. Zack was impressed with how quickly he recovered.

"I'm sure that is a comfort to you," he said slowly.

"What about Cloud?" Zack asked.

"Ah yes," Dr. Lee replied. "Mr. Strife is safely tucked away at the presidential palace. He is quite under government control at the moment. I'm afraid they have deceived him, but we are working on remedying that."

The van pulled to the side of the road and came to a halt. Dr. Lee looked out the front window.

"We have reached our destination," he announced.

He opened the back doors and they got out. Quickly he led them into a nearby building. They passed through a maze of corridors, until they reached a small room that Dr. Lee motioned for them to enter.

"I have to excuse myself for now," he said. "I need to inform Orlando of our arrival. Please make yourselves comfortable. If you need anything, just ask."

Zack nodded and stepped into the room. Dr. Lee walked quickly down the corridor. He went up two flights of stairs and entered a large room.

One man sat at a long table at the far end of the room. The table was strewn with papers, and he was poring over them as Dr. Lee came in. He looked up.

"Are they here?"

Dr. Lee nodded. He walked forward until he stood by the table. Orlando stood up. He was a large man, well over six feet. He towered over Dr. Lee.

"How complete were the government profiles of everyone on board that submarine?" Dr. Lee asked.

Orlando thought for a moment before speaking.

"Most of them were quite detailed," he replied. "There were only two that did not have much information. Zack and Nipala."

"I suspected as much," Dr. Lee replied thoughtfully, rubbing his chin. "If they had know I'm sure we would have found out."

"If they had know what?"

Dr. Lee paused for just a moment before answering.

"If they had know that the one called Zack was a member of SOLDIER," he replied. "If they had known that he too was infused with mako."

Orlando looked at him in surprise. Neither one spoke for some time

"This changes everything," Orlando said slowly.

Dr. Lee nodded.

"I would think so."

Orlando paced back and forth a few times, pondering this new information. Finally he looked at Dr. Lee once more.

"This could work out very well for us," he said. "Magnus said it would be difficult to get Cloud Strife out of their hands. But now it appears there is no need. In fact, it would appear that he now poses a different problem entirely. It seems to me that it would be in our best interest if Mr. Strife was disposed of as soon as possible."

Dr. Lee nodded slowly.

"Should we inform Magnus?"

Orlando looked down and tapped his fingers on the table.

"I don't think so," he replied, looking up suddenly. "Something went wrong at the warehouse. There's a leak somewhere. I think it would be best if we take care of this little problem ourselves."

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In this run down section of Mysteele, the man in the immaculate blue suit stuck out like a sore thumb. One didn't have to be particularly observant to notice the garish nightstick, or the neatly polished shoes or gold chain hanging from one pocket. It was also clear from the overly loud conversation he was engaged in that he had had just a little too much to drink.

He strolled blithely down the road, apparently unaware of all the heads that turned in his direction as he passed. He had a girl draped on one arm. She wore a black miniskirt and tight t shirt. Probably a hooker, tonight's little dalliance, a chance for the man to share a little of his wealth. Though if anyone had stopped to look in her eyes they would have seen not the vacant stare of most of the girls that walked the street corners in this neighborhood, but instead a smoldering watchfulness that signified a clear and alert mind. As it was, not many people had their eyes on that particular part of her anatomy.

Two men who had been sitting on the stairs in front of one of the many old tenement houses that someone had cloned down the entire length of the block stood up and started walking down the street behind the pair, following at a discreet distance so as not to be noticed. At first they merely followed the two, watching them carefully and weighing the possibilities. One could never be too careful these days. But eventually, when the couple started down a narrow alley, the pair behind them decided it was time to act. They increased their pace, and were within a few feet of the couple when the man glanced back and noticed them. Any reasonable person would likely have become nervous to see the two grim faced men coming rapidly behind them in the confines of the alley, but the man just smiled at them.

The two men stopped a few feet away.

"Hey pal, spare some change for a cup of coffee?"

Reno reached into his pocket and dug out a coin. He flipped it to the man. He turned back to continue on his journey but the man suddenly reached out and grabbed him by the shoulder. Reno turned back and saw the knife in his hand.

"Thanks a lot," the man said. "Now how about giving me the rest of your gil."

The other man produced a knife as well and waved it at Tifa.

"Just relax, honey," he said. "I wouldn't want to have to cut up that pretty face of yours."

Reno slowly shoved one hand into his pocket, looking at the men nervously.

"Sure, just don't hurt us," he said.

Casually he brought his nightstick up and suddenly the man standing in front of him was knocked backwards by an electric jolt. At the same moment Tifa kicked and the knife the man held in front of her went flying through the air. She pivoted and kicked again, driving her leg into the man's abdomen. As he buckled forward she brought her elbow down on the back of his head. He dropped like a stone.

Reno looked over at her.

"Easy," he admonished. "We just want to disarm them, not break their necks."

Tifa shrugged.

"Sorry."

Reno collected the men's knives, then checked them both to see if they had any other concealed weapons. By the time he was done the man he had shocked groaned and opened his eyes.

He looked up at Reno.

"What the hell did you do to me?"

"Never mind that," Reno said. "What do you know about the Brotherhood?"

The man just lay there looking at him for a long time.

"Who the hell are you?"

"That doesn't matter," Reno replied. "We need to find the Brotherhood. Do you know anything about them?"

The man's eyes narrowed.

"You working for the government?" he asked.

"If we were, we'd already have hauled you out of here by now," Reno replied.

"Yeah, I suppose so," the man said. He got slowly to his feet.

"What makes you think I know anything about the Brotherhood?" he asked.

"Let's just call it an educated guess," Reno replied.

The man looked at them carefully. Then he glanced back and forth down the alley.

"I may be able to tell you something, for a price," he said slowly.

"Hey, we let you live, didn't we?" Reno said sharply. "Maybe you'd like another taste of this nightstick. But this time you may wake up behind bars, if you wake up at all."

"You won't learn anything that way," the man replied, eyeing Reno's weapon.

"Not from you," Reno retorted. "But there's plenty of others in this neighborhood willing to try to relieve a drunk of his hard earned gil. You're not the first to have tried."

The man pondered this for a moment. The second man moaned and lifted his head.

"All right," he said. "There's a bar near here, over on 45th street. It's called Lance's Pub. I've been told that the bartender knows the type of people you're interested in. If you drop by there around, say, eight tonight, he may be able to arrange a meeting for you. I'll tell him you're coming."

Now it was Reno's turn to look closely at the man. Finally he nodded.

"Tell him we'll be there," he said. Reno took Tifa by the arm and they walked away. The man turned and stooped by his accomplice, who was now sitting up, holding his head.

"What happened?" he said.

"Nothin'," the first man replied. "We've come up empty for now, but I think that might change soon enough. I have a feeling we might soon be splitting a substantial reward. C'mon, we've got to go make a phone call."

Tifa looked at Reno after they were back on the street.

"Do you really think we can trust them?" she said skeptically.

Reno shrugged.

"Hey, if you can't trust a thief, who can you trust?" he replied. "We had to do something, didn't we? We don't know anyone here. We don't know how to get in touch with the Brotherhood. We had to take a chance. I didn't hear you come up with any better suggestions."

Tifa fell silent. She wasn't happy with the situation, but she knew he was right. They had to get in touch with the Brotherhood somehow. There was not much they could do on their own in a strange city.

They walked rapidly down the road, heading north, and soon they reached a part of town that wasn't quite so run down, thought it still wasn't anything to write home about. They had rented rooms in one of the hotels in the area, the ID papers they used the spoils of an earlier run in with some other would be muggers. It was already dark by the time they got there. When they reached their rooms Reno turned to look at her.

"You hungry?"

"Yeah, a little," she replied.

Reno opened his door.

"C'mon in," he said. "I'll order room service."

She looked at him for a moment. "All right," she replied. "But no...well, you know."

Reno raised his hands and looked at her innocently.

"Hey, I haven't forgotten."

She walked in and sat down on the bed. Reno closed the door and went over to the phone. He called room service and placed their order. Then he put the phone down and looked at her.

"You know, it really isn't necessary for us both to go tonight."

She looked at him and frowned.

"Much as I hate to say it," she replied. "But we're in this together. Besides, I thought you trusted him."

"I learned a long time ago never to put too much trust in anyone," Reno replied. "The more I think about it, the more I realize how foolish it would be for us both to go."

"So what are you saying?" she asked. "That I should go by myself?"

She saw just the faintest hint of a smile at that.

"You know what I'm saying," he responded.

Tifa shook her head.

"You're not leaving me behind," she said adamantly. "This is just another of those macho things again. You men are all alike. You think you have to protect us helpless little girls from the world's dangers. Well, I don't need any man's protection, especially not yours. We share the dangers, and that's the end of it!"

Reno looked as if he wanted to argue, but the look on her face must have made it obvious that it would be useless. Finally he shrugged.

"Suit yourself."

There was a knock at the door. Reno walked over and opened it. A man stood outside with their food. Reno took it and placed it on a counter in a small vestibule by the door, then paid the man. Tifa heard the door close as Reno picked up the food once more.

"Are you sure you won't change your mind?"

She sighed.

"Reno, you don't strike me as being the protective type."

"Well, there's a lot of things you don't know about me," he replied. "Maybe if you took the time to know me better, you'd find out that I'm not such a bad guy after all."

She looked at him skeptically.

"I think I already know you well enough," she responded. She really didn't feel like discussing this with him.

"Can we just eat?"

"Yeah, sure," he said. He brought the food in and placed it on a small table in one corner of the room. They sat down and ate in silence. When they were done Reno sat back with a contented sigh. Then he looked at Tifa.

"You know, the other day with the motorcycle? The things I said? Well, you were right, some of those things might have been said to gain favor with you. But not all of it. Some of it was the truth, I mean, besides the part about you being irresistibly attractive."

She rolled her eyes. "Of course," she said.

He looked at her carefully.

"He really doesn't deserve you."

She looked at him and shook her head slowly.

"Reno, I..."

"Just think about it for a minute, okay?" Reno interrupted. "Let me ask you something. If it was you who had run off, do you think he'd do this for you? Do you think he'd chase you halfway across the world? Do you think he would go through all this to find you?"

Tifa sat in silence for a moment. Then she leaned forward and looked straight at him.

"Yes he would."

Reno sat back in his chair and looked at her skeptically.

"I guess some people never learn," he said.

He shrugged and stood up.

"Looks like you're just one of those people who has to find out things the hard way, but don't say I didn't warn you," he said. "Well, I'd love to stay and chat some more, but I've got a little rendezvous to go to. I'll meet you back here when I'm finished."

She looked at him angrily. "I told you we're going together," she said.

She stood up, but suddenly the room seemed to be moving of its own accord. She brought her hands up to her head.

"Not this time," she heard Reno say.

She looked down at her drink, although she found it hard to focus on it. Then she turned toward Reno.

"You drugged me?!" she said accusingly.

He shrugged. "It's your own fault," he replied. "You wouldn't listen to reason."

"Damn you!" she cried and lunged toward him. But even as she did she felt her legs giving out underneath her.

Reno grabbed hold of her as she slumped to the ground. He lifted her up in his arms, then walked over and laid her down carefully on the bed. He picked up his nightstick, which had been propped up against the wall nearby. He walked over to the door, then turned to look back at her.

He started to turn away but stopped. He could see a glimpse of white beneath her skirt.

He stood there looking at her for a long time. Then he slowly stepped back across the room until he was right beside her. He looked down at her face. She lay there unmoving, completely helpless.

Again he stood there staring at her. Slowly his hand came down and brushed lightly against her cheek. She really was beautiful.

His hand dropped down lower, slowly to the side of the bed, then he picked up the edge of the blanket and folded it over her, covering her legs.

He turned and walked back toward the door, a rueful smile on his face, and all the way wishing that he had been clever enough to somehow weasel out of making that promise.

It didn't take him long to find the tavern. At least the man hadn't lied about that. It was perhaps half full. No one gave him more than a cursory glance when he entered. He slowly made his way over to the bar. It took a while for the bartender to notice him. When he did he walked over and looked him up and down.

"You the guy from the alley?"

Reno nodded.

"You fit the description, but he said there would be a girl too."

"She decided to stay home," Reno replied.

"Too bad," the man replied. "Heard she was quite a looker. They're upstairs, first door on the left."

He jabbed his finger in the direction of a doorway beside the bar.

Reno walked over and found himself in a short corridor with a flight of stairs in front of him. He walked up and entered a

narrow hallway. He opened the first door on the left and stepped in.

There was a table in the center of the room. A man was seated behind it. There were six other men in the room. Three standing on either side of the door. The man who was seated looked at him for a moment.

"Where's Tifa?" he asked.

Reno realized with a sudden sinking feeling that they had never mentioned their names to anyone.

One of the men stepped behind him and closed the door, then stood in front of it.

The man in front of him sat back in his chair, a smile on his face, the kind of smile a cat has when the mouse is cornered in front of it.

"She couldn't make it. She had to wash her hair."

For just a moment Reno saw a flicker of anger in the man's eyes.

"That's very unfortunate," the man said, motioning to a chair by the table.

"Sit down."

Reno slowly eased himself into the chair.

"I really wish you had brought the girl along. It would make things so much simpler. For both of us. You see, we really don't have any interest in you, Reno. Yes, I know your name, and the names of everyone that was with you. I also know about your little organization. The Turks, I believe you are called."

Reno said nothing, just looked at the man, his face expressionless.

"My name is Kendal," the man continued. "I'm the finance minister for the government, among other things. I'm really surprised you made it this far, considering the effort that the government has put into finding you. But I'm afraid that your ignorance of the customs of this country have finally caught up with you. You see, the criminal element in Mysteele is under my personal supervision. Either they report to me, or they do not survive for very long. I'm afraid you put your trust in the wrong people."

Reno glanced around briefly at the others. He still had his nightstick, but there were just too many of them.

"Now it turns out that my government is very keen on capturing this girl you had with you. So you can see it's a problem for me that she didn't come along. I don't suppose you would be kind enough to tell us where she is?"

Reno sat there for a moment as if giving it some thought.

"I don't think so," he said finally.

"Come, come," Kendal replied. "I'm sure we can come to some kind of agreement on this. Like I said, I know all about you, and the Turks. And I must say, I feel a certain kinship. You and I are a lot alike, I think. We both do what needs to be done without getting emotionally involved. Neither one of us are adverse to doing rather unpleasant things if the need arises... and if the price is right."

Reno did not answer for a long time. He sat back in his chair, tapping his nightstick lightly against the ground.

"You're asking me to betray a friend," he said slowly. "That's a costly thing. A very costly thing indeed."

Kendal leaned forward and looked at him carefully, the thin smile reappearing on his face.

"Well, I am not without my resources," he replied. "Every man has his price, now doesn't he?"

Now Reno leaned forward as well, a matching smile on his face.

"Let the negotiations begin."

Tifa opened her eyes and looked groggily around the room. She sat up as her head slowly cleared, and when she remembered what had happened she felt her rage returning.

Damn him! When she caught him, oh was she ever going to let him have it. How could he have done this? This was exactly something that Cloud would have done. Why were all men such assholes?

She got off the bed and looked at the clock. Reno had been gone over two hours. Could it possibly have taken this long? It

would be just like him to run off and get himself in trouble. Damn!

She started for the door, but hadn't taken more than a step or two when the door suddenly burst open and three men rushed in.

The first man went to grab hold of her, but she dodged out of the way and kicked him in the stomach. She ducked under the second man. The third got a hold of her, but a knee to his groin quickly loosened his grip. She ran past them and out into the hall. A quick glance to the left revealed three more men headed rapidly in her direction. She turned and ran to the right. There was an open window at the end of the hallway.

Kendal was surprised when he saw Tifa burst from the room. The two men with him ran after her, but she had enough of a start that he thought they would not catch her before she made it out the window and onto the fire escape. He pulled a materia orb out of his pocket and looked down at it.

Tifa was just a few feet from the window when suddenly it was as if a fist had struck her, only inside her head. She stumbled and crashed to the ground, banging heavily into the wall, and for the second time that day, she felt herself slipping into unconsciousness.

Kendal shoved the stun materia back into his pocket. He walked over to where Tifa lay and looked down at her, a satisfied smile forming on his face. They had led a merry chase, these friends of Cloud, but it looked as if their luck had finally begun to run out.