

CHAPTER V: WINTER WONDERLAND

Tifa turned sharply and slid to a halt. She stepped off her snowboard and looked back up the slope. The others were far behind. She could make out one small figure up on the slope above her, but of the other there was no sign.

She studied the figure, but he was too far away to identify. Still, she knew it had to be Red. He was going in much too straight a line to be Barret.

She picked up her snowboard and looked around. It had snowed during the night, laying down another six inches of powder over the ground that had already been covered, and blanketing the trees in the forest in front of her with a layer of white.

She glanced up. The sky was clear now, and the sun shone brightly, but it gave off little warmth. Although she was flushed with heat from the effort of snowboarding down the slope, she knew it would soon pass. She pulled the zipper on her ski suit up another inch, thankful that they had had the foresight to come properly prepared this time.

She looked back up the slope. She could see Red plainly now. He had a rather unique snowboarding method. She had never seen anyone sitting on one before. However, though not very fast it did seem to be effective enough.

She looked back up the slope as Red came to a stop beside her. She could see Barret now. He seemed to favor the slide wildly out of control, then fall and roll method of snowboarding. Even as she looked she saw him take a tumble.

She shook her head. Cloud would have given her a run for the money. But he was...

Oh no, she wasn't going to get started with that again, she thought firmly. This wasn't the time or the place.

They waited patiently until Barret stumbled to a halt not far away. He stepped off the snowboard, picked it up, and heaved it into a nearby snowbank.

"Goddamn stupidest form of transportation I've ever seen!" he said angrily as he walked over to them. Tifa smiled. With his clothing covered with snow from his numerous falls, he looked like nothing so much as a huge polar bear.

"What the hell is so funny?" he said, looking at her accusingly.

"Nothing," she replied, trying to look innocent. She pointed to the left. "I think the trail leads off this way."

"Ungh," he grumbled, and started off. Tifa and Red fell in behind. A narrow trail led into the trees. Tifa looked around, trying to remember if they had come this way when they were here the previous time, but she couldn't be sure. She remembered a lot of walking on trails through the forest, but they all looked pretty much the same to her.

The trail led east, and for a long time it ran level through the forest. After a while they came to a rocky area, and they investigated a small cave, but it was empty, and showed no sign of having been visited recently. The path from there led northward, and the ground started to climb up slowly.

Eventually they reached a large clearing with a single pine tree near the center. Tifa seemed to remember seeing that before. To the left the forest dropped down into a shallow valley. She could see the gleam of sunlight off of a small lake at the bottom. A trail led down that way, but the one they followed led northward, up steeply into the hills. She was sure they had been this way before, and the climb had not been easy. It was no easier this time, and they were all huffing and puffing when they finally reached a clearing high up on the hillside.

"Let's rest here a minute," Barret said. He brushed the snow off a fallen trunk of a tree and sat down.

Tifa quickly sat down beside him, grateful for the rest. They were high up in the hills now, and could see miles of wilderness below them. Tifa stared out at the land below. She could see no sign of them, but she knew that somewhere below them the others were making their way through that very same forest.

"What a view," Barret commented.

"Uh huh," she replied. She continued to stare, hoping to see...what? She really didn't know. Maybe a small movement somewhere in the trees below, or perhaps the flash of sunlight glinting off a sword.

"Almost makes it worth the trip up here," Barret continued. He looked around. "You know, I'm surprised we haven't run into any wild beasts. They were pretty numerous the last time we came through here. But we haven't seen one."

He turned to look at her.

"Or am I talking too much again?"

She smiled.

"No, you can talk. I'm sorry about last night. I didn't mean to snap at you."

"It's okay, I'm a big boy," he replied. "I can take it. I just didn't realize how upset you were about the situation."

Tifa was silent for a moment.

"It's not even that really," she said finally. "It's not the Turks, although I don't like working with them. It's just that..."

"What the hell is he up to?" he interrupted.

She looked at Barret, who was looking behind them. She turned to see Red slowly working his way up through the rocks, head down and moving back and forth methodically.

"Red?" she called.

He did not answer. He continued moving up the rocks. Then he suddenly leapt up onto a large boulder and disappeared behind it.

They both got up.

"Red!" Tifa called. "What are you doing?"

There was no response. They walked over the the rocks that Red had climbed. They saw nothing out of the ordinary. They both looked at each other.

"Where does he think he's going?" Barret asked.

Tifa shrugged.

"Don't know, but I guess we better follow."

They started up the rocks. They went slowly, for the footing was treacherous. Some of the rocks came free when stepped on, so they had to walk carefully. Eventually, however, they climbed up on the large boulder Red had disappeared beyond.

Red was in a narrow cleft that formed a small level clearing among the crumpled rocks of the mountainside. He seemed to be walking around randomly, nose to the ground as if sniffing the rocks. Every once in a while he would lift his head and sniff the air as well.

"Red, are you okay?" Tifa questioned.

Still he did not answer, though he was barely ten feet away and she knew he must have heard her. He had his head down once more, and now seemed to be concentrating on one small area just under the cliff face. He pawed a few of the rocks out of the way, his nose to the ground.

"What the hell had gotten into him?" Barret exclaimed.

They stepped down off the boulder and walked over to stand right beside him, but he still acted as if they did not exist. Suddenly he sat down on his haunches, lifted his head to the sky, and gave off a mournful howl.

"Red, what the hell is the matter?" Barret shouted.

Red howled again. Barret went to grab hold of him but Tifa stopped him. He looked at her, but she just shook her head and pulled his arm back slowly.

Barret shrugged and they both just stood there. Red howled once more, then his head sank down to the ground. He sniffed once more, then turned towards them.

"Sorry, did you say something?"

"What the hell was that?" Barret exclaimed.

"I'm not quite sure," Red replied. "There's something here, or there was something here. I smell something in the air, and on the rocks, all around. I've never smelled anything quite like it. It made me feel so strange. I don't know how to explain it, but I've never experienced anything like it before."

"Something dangerous?" Barret asked.

"No, at least, I don't think so. But it isn't like that at all. It makes me feel...good, I think. I can't explain it."

Barret gave Red a puzzled look.

"Now you're beginning to sound like Aeris. You're not making any sense at all."

Red shrugged.

"Sorry."

"Are you all right now?" Tifa asked.

"Yes, of course" Red replied.

Barret looked around.

"Well, if you're done doing...whatever it was you were doing, we better get going. There's only an hour or two of light left. We better get a move on if we are going to cover our area before dark."

They climbed back over the rocks and continued north. The trail now wound back downhill. It was much easier going and they soon reached the bottom of the slope. The sun was low in the sky now and hidden behind the mountain. The wind started to pick up, blowing in from the east. It felt much colder, and Tifa pulled her hood up.

"Look, there's another cave," Red said, looking over at a dark crevice at the base of the mountain to their left.

"Let's check it out," Barret said, starting over.

"A good excuse to get out of the cold," Tifa observed, following quickly.

The entrance was narrow, but it widened out immediately, and was quite spacious inside. Though the light inside was dim, it appeared empty. Tifa walked toward the back where she thought it might be warmer.

Red walked in last and looked around.

"Someone has been here," he said.

"Huh?" Barret exclaimed. "How can you tell?"

"There are faint tracks on the floor," he replied. "Not that recent, but not too old either."

He indicated a spot on the floor, and when Barret looked carefully he saw faint footprints. He stood up and looked at Tifa.

"There may have been somebody here," he said. "See anything back there?"

Tifa looked around, surprised. Somehow she had not expected them to find anything.

"No, I don't...oh my God."

"What?" Barret exclaimed. They rushed over to Tifa. She was standing with her hands covering her mouth, looking down at a body lying in the rear of the cavern.

"It's not Yuffie, is it?" Barret asked.

But it was obvious from a glance that it was not. It was a much larger person than Yuffie, and it was a man. He was laying on his stomach, with his face turned partially towards them. Barret looked at his face and at first thought it was a stranger, but then he realized it was familiar.

"It's Staniv," he said slowly.

"Oh no," Tifa said and turned away.

Red came up beside Barret and looked at the body.

"Did he freeze to death?" Barret asked.

Red did not answer for a moment.

"I'm not sure," he said slowly. "There aren't any cuts, but a lot of bruises. I don't know if that would have killed him. It looks like he was in some kind of fight though."

"Could he have gotten the bruises in a fall?" Barret asked.

Tifa steeled herself and turned to look at the body over Red's shoulder.

"Good question," Red replied. "Hard to say, though." He turned away and examined the floor for a while.

"There are a lot of tracks here," he said after a short silence. "At least five people. I don't think any of them were Yuffie, there's no tracks small enough to be hers. I think he was the victim of foul play. If the others had not been enemies, why would they leave him here?"

Tifa had been examining the body slowly, now she turned toward them.

"His neck was broken."

"What?" Barret said. He walked over to her. She pointed to a bruise on the back of Staniv's neck.

"Someone hit him at the base of the skull."

"Hit him with what?" Barret asked.

"Their fist," she replied. She stood up, still looking at the body. "And these other bruises, I think there's no doubt about it. He was killed by someone trained in martial arts. Someone who was very good."

They all stood in silence for a long time. Neither Barret nor Red doubted what Tifa said.

Finally Barret turned to look toward the entrance.

"We better get moving," he said. "It's almost dark. I think it's time to head to Mr. Holzoff's cabin. We've got a lot to tell the others."

No one else spoke, but Red followed Barret toward the exit. Tifa glanced once more at Staniv's body, shivered, and slowly followed them out.

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"Let's get moving," Cloud said.

Aeris slung her snowboard over her back and followed Cloud as he led them down the trail. She had been uncomfortable on the board, but she thought she had done quite well for a beginner. Cait had barely been able to stand on the board, and though she had tried to stay with him for moral support, he went so slowly that after about the tenth time he waved for her to go on she did just that. Cloud had stayed with her, though she knew he could have easily outdistanced her if he had chosen to.

Though she hadn't done badly she was still glad to be off the board and on her own two feet.

They trudged through the forest for quite some time in silence. Aeris wasn't exactly sure what she should be looking for. Some sign of Yuffie, she knew, but she hardly expected to run into her walking down the trail in the other direction. With last night's snowfall, it didn't seem likely they would find any tracks either. She kept her eyes open, but all she saw was the empty trail ahead and the snow clad trees all around.

Eventually they came to a large clearing with a frozen lake in the center. Cloud walked to the edge of the ice and looked out across the lake. He turned to the others.

"There's an island out there with a small cave. I remember it from the last time we were here. We should go check it out, but the ice on the lake is treacherous. Aeris, you better wait here while Cait and I go take a look."

"What, it's too dangerous for a girl?" she said, somewhat indigently.

"That's not what I meant," he replied. He had been hoping she wouldn't object, but to tell the truth, he hadn't been that hopeful. "It'll be better if we have someone back here safe. Then if we get in trouble, you can give us a hand or get us some help."

Aeris looked at him for a moment.

"Nice try," she said finally, "but I'm coming along."

Cloud turned away and shook his head. Women!

He started off across the ice, realizing that arguing was pointless. Aeris and Cait followed. Cloud remembered that the ice had been breaking up in the middle of the lake the last time, but now it was a solid sheet. It must be colder than it had

been then, he thought. It made the going a little easier, but the wind and water had churned up the ice as it had frozen and there were jagged humps and narrow crevices they had to negotiate, so it was still treacherous, but they made it across without mishap.

The entrance to the cave was narrow and little over three feet high. They had to get down on hands and knees to enter. Aeris wasn't comfortable squeezing into such a small space, but she did not protest, and inside the cave was roomy enough.

They could see as soon as they entered that the cave had been inhabited some time in the past. There were some ragged sacks, or perhaps clothing, and the broken handle of what might have been a shovel in one corner, and there was a ring of ashes and some charred wood in the center of the room.

"Do you think this could have been left by Yuffie?" Cait asked, looking around.

Cloud pushed the pile of rags around with his foot.

"These could have been left by anybody," he replied. "I seem to remember at least some of this stuff being here the last time we came though. That fire, however, was not there. Someone has been here not too long ago, but unless we find some better clues, there's no way to tell who it was."

They looked around for a short while, but found nothing more. Although he had no proof, Cloud had a hunch this was somehow connected with Yuffie. This was a remote region, almost uninhabited. Any sign that they found at all was more than likely to be connected to her in some way.

"Looks like we've seen all we can see here," he commented. "Let's get going."

Even if they had found positive proof that Yuffie had been here it still wouldn't tell them much more than that they were on the right track.

They squeezed out the entrance and headed back across the ice. This time across Aeris slipped once and banged her knee painfully, but she glanced at Cloud and went on without a word. When they reached land once more they headed north along the eastern shoreline. A mountain rose up steeply on their right as they walked, but they stayed along the lake. Aeris shaded her eyes and looked up the slope. A trail led up that way, and she was glad they weren't going in that direction. She was tired enough trudging through the deep snow, going up the mountain would have made it even more difficult.

The lake curved slowly to the left until they found themselves heading west. Aeris noticed that this portion of the lake was ice free, and she could see steam curling off the water.

"Is this a hot spring?" she asked.

Cloud looked at the lake.

"Yeah," he replied.

"Let's stop for a minute," she said, walking toward the water without waiting for a reply.

As she approached the water she could feel the heat coming off it. She sat down on the edge and inhaled deeply. She had been cold and her knee ached where she had banged it, but the warmth made her feel much better.

She turned to the others to call them over.

A mound of white was moving toward them out of the trees at the foot of the mountain.

"Look out!" she cried.

Cloud turned to see a huge circular mouth bristling with dagger like teeth bearing down on him. With a cry of surprise both he and Cait dodged out of the way. The mouth missed, but the huge bulk of the giant ice worm bowled them both over and sent them sprawling into the snow.

Cloud sprang to his feet, struggling to try to unsheathe his sword. They had not met any dangerous creatures, and the sad fact was he had let down his guard. Now he flung himself to the side again as the jaws snapped at him one more time.

Cait found himself pinned under the creature in the snow, and thought for a moment he might be crushed by the huge weight. He would have been an easy target, but for the fact that the creature was focused on Cloud as it's main course. Cait struggled to pull himself out from under it, but to no avail. He pounded on the creature with his fists, but it felt like he was punching a huge rubber ball, and he doubted if the monster felt anything at all. He glanced over at Aeris, who had not moved from the lake. She was just standing there with her head bowed, not even looking at them. He didn't think there

was much she could do, but she could at least lend a hand!

Cloud continued to dance wildly around in the snow trying to avoid the worms fearsome jaws, but the snow hindered his movements. As he dodged he looked for some kind of cover, but the treeline was a good thirty yards away, and he would never make it in this deep snow. If it would just give him a moment to draw his sword he would at least have a fighting chance.

Suddenly Cait found himself free. The worm had twisted round, swinging it's huge bulk into Cloud and sending him sprawling into deep snow. He scrambled to get up, but the snow made it nearly impossible to move. The worm towered above him.

Cait stood up and started to rush over, but the snow hindered him as well, and he knew he could not reach Cloud in time to be of any help. He looked over at Aeris, who suddenly looked up and raised her rod over her head.

An aura of yellow light suddenly blazed around her. It swirled and flashed in the air, and then it flashed out and inundated both Cait and Cloud.

Instantly Cloud felt himself filled with power. He drew his sword in an instant. He raised it over his head, and it flashed with light. The ice worm struck, and was met by cold steel. Cloud swung with inhuman speed, slashing like lightening, over and over again. Now the worm was stumbling backward, trying to escape from this floundering human that had suddenly turned into a ferocious beast. Cloud pressed in, showing no sign of fatigue or slowing, swinging the sword as if possessed by a demon. The worm reared up once again, but this time in it's death throes. Then it collapsed to the ground and lay still.

Cloud looked around, almost as if in a daze. It seemed to take him a long time to realize that there were no more enemies to fight.

Cait stood looking at Cloud. Even though he had felt the power inside himself, he had barely had a chance to move before Cloud had dispatched the beast.

Cloud looked at Aeris, who was walking back over to them slowly.

"I take it that was your doing," he said.

Aeris nodded.

"You looked like you needed a hand," she said modestly.

A smile formed on his lips.

"Thanks," he said.

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"About time," Elena said as Reno slid to a stop beside her.

Reno gave her a dark look.

"You're pushing your luck," he said. He stepped off the snowboard and slipped it over his back. Then he took out his nightstick and pointed it at her. "If we weren't on an important mission I'd be tempted to teach you a little lesson."

"Ohh, I'm so scared," she replied sarcastically.

Rude walked between them and started down the trail.

"Let's go kids," he said.

Reno stared at Elena for a moment more, then turned and followed Rude. There had been a definite lack of discipline lately, and it was starting to annoy him. The fall of Shinra had a lot to do with it, he thought, but the death of Tseng even more so. Tseng had been the leader, the one that had held them together. Things had changed since he was gone, and all for the worse. Reno had tried to carry on in Tseng's footsteps, had tried to hold together what Tseng had built, but he realized he didn't have the leadership qualities that Tseng had possessed. Elena especially had looked up to Tseng, and now that he was gone she seemed almost uncontrollable. He was unhappy that the once proud Turks appeared to have fallen so far, yet he was at a loss as to what he could do.

Sometimes he wondered why he even bothered about it. Even with the death of Tseng and the fall of Shinra they were still

doing pretty well. There hadn't been any shortage of jobs for them, and they were actually doing quite well financially. When it came down to it, wasn't that all that really mattered?

Reno caught up with Rude and they walked together down the trail, Elena following a little behind. It was slow going in the deep snow, and Reno thought they would have been better off with skis than those blasted snowboards. At least they could have used those cross country. He also might have been able to keep up a little better. It didn't help his leadership qualities to have been left in the dust by both of the others.

Much as he hated to admit it, the money was not all there was to it. He had wanted to be a Turk since childhood. He still remembered the pride he had felt the first time he had slipped on the blue suit. How he had finally felt like he was part of something, that he belonged. After a childhood spent drifting from one foster family to another, he finally had found a home.

No, the Turks meant much more to him than just a name. They had been the only thing of importance in his life for almost as long as he could remember, and he was scared to death that the fall of Shinra would mean the end of the organization.

He glanced at Rude, who trudged on stoically. Good old dependable Rude. They had been friends since they had joined the Turks, but even Rude seemed changed since Tseng had died. Though he had never been much of a talker, Reno knew that Rude had shared his feelings about being a Turk. But now Rude just seemed to be going through the motions sometimes, and Reno suspected that Rude might just be staying with them because of their friendship, and not for any pride in the organization they represented.

He couldn't really blame either one of them, he thought ruefully. Just what did any of them have left to be proud of? Maybe Elena was right, and they had been reduced to stooges taking orders from a group of people they despised. Was this what the Turks were all about? What would Tseng think if he saw them now?

Reno looked up and suddenly saw that he had fallen behind both Rude and Elena, and now was last in line.

He shook his head. Tseng was dead, and there was no bringing him back, and no replacing him. He couldn't be Tseng, he thought, and it would just make things worse if he tried to be. He just had to be Reno, and go on as best he could.

They slowly made their way northward. For a long time they saw nothing but the trail and the forest surrounding them. Occasionally the trail would open up into a clearing, but they saw no sign that anyone had been in the area recently. The ground gradually grew rockier around them, and the land slowly rose up on their left. The trees became less numerous, but the land was broken up and full of jagged and jumbled rocks, so the going actually became more difficult. They discovered a small cave a little further down the path, but it was deserted.

The mountain rose up steeply on the left now. Reno glanced up and the glint of sunlight reflecting off something high up on the slope caught his eye, but in an instant it was gone. He kept glancing up as they continued walking, but saw nothing further.

Reno wondered if what he had seen was important. He couldn't think of anything out in the wilderness that would reflect the sunlight like that. They probably should check it out, but he wouldn't have been anxious to climb up that steep slope on the best of days, much less through deep snow when they were already exhausted.

He was tempted to walk on without even mentioning it to the others, but finally decided he was just being lazy. Typical Reno mentality, he thought.

He called the others to a halt and told them what he had seen. They looked up the slope, obviously no more anxious than he to climb up.

"Are you sure you saw something?" Elena asked dubiously.

"Yes," he replied. Did she think he was making it up? "The sun glinted off something, right up there. I'm sure of it."

"Okay," she replied. "I just wouldn't want to walk all the way up there for no reason."

"Where was it again?" Rude asked.

Reno pointed.

"Right around there."

"Don't see anything now," Rude stated.

"But there was something," Reno reiterated. Were they both doubting him now?

"I suppose someone should go check it out," Elena ventured. "But I don't see why we should all have to go up there."

Reno looked at her.

"So who's going to go?"

Elena shrugged.

"You're the one who saw it."

He resisted the urge to snap at her. He was the leader, he should either volunteer to do it himself or designate one of the others. He looked up the slope again. He did not want to go up there.

"We're all tired," he said finally. "Let's just rest for a little while. Then we can decide."

Elena shrugged but didn't object. They brushed the snow off some flat rocks on the side of the trail and sat down. The rock was uncomfortable and cold. Reno folded his arms across his chest to conserve body heat. This wasn't turning out to be one of their most comfortable assignments.

They were sitting there for only a few minutes when there was a sharp retort from somewhere up on the mountain above them. They all looked up at the sudden noise, which had sounded like nothing so much as a blast of gunfire, or cannon fire. It echoed through the valley around them.

"What the hell was that?" Rude said.

Reno stood up, puzzled. He looked up the slope and suddenly it looked as if the entire mountainside was moving.

"Avalanche!" he yelled. "Run."

They all scrambled up and ran as fast as they could through the snow back the way they had come. Reno kept glancing up at the slope, and each time he saw the wall of white closing on them with frightening speed. Now the ground around them trembled, making footing even more difficult. If they stayed on the trail they would be overwhelmed.

"This way," he shouted, running off the trail and into a tangled group of boulders to the right. He threw himself down behind the largest one and turned to the others.

Rude was just coming around the side of the boulder when the wall of snow struck. Reno saw Rude for an instant being thrown through the air, then everything turned white.

For a moment there was a thunderous roar, and then all went silent. Reno lay unmoving until he was sure it was over. When he tried to move he found he was pinned by the snow. He felt panic rise up inside him. God knew how deeply he was buried!

With all his strength he pushed upward. He felt the snow give a little, and then it fell away as he burst up into the sunlight. He stood for a moment looking around, blinking. He had not been deeply buried at all. The boulder had shielded him from the worst of it.

The others were nowhere to be seen. He stumbled away from the boulder in the direction he had last seen Rude, calling wildly. But just as he did so he saw Rude scramble out of the snow not ten feet away.

Rude looked at him.

"Where's Elena?"

"I don't know," Reno replied. She had not reached the shelter of the boulder before the avalanche hit. Thinking back on it now, he wasn't even sure if she had followed them. He couldn't remember looking back as they had run.

He looked around helplessly.

"How close to you was she when it hit us?" he asked.

Rude shook his head.

"I'm not sure."

"Did you see her at all?" Reno questioned sharply.

"She was behind us when we were on the trail," Rude replied. "I don't know if she followed us into the rocks."

"Damn," Reno muttered. He started working his way back to the trail. In some places the snow was over chest deep. Even if

she had been following them the snow could have knocked her yards away. Unless she was right nearby it would take a miracle to find her.

Rude followed, a little further to the right.

As the minutes dragged by Reno began to despair. He didn't know how long she could survive under the snow and it was beginning to look like it might be impossible to find her. She could be a pain in the ass sometimes, but she was still a Turk, she was still one of them. He did not want to lose her.

He paused for a minute to catch his breath and looked around helplessly. The snow had buried the entire trail in front of them. She could be anywhere.

He was about to continue when he stopped suddenly and looked around. He thought he heard a muffled sound.

Rude was scraping through the snow nearby.

"Rude, hold on a second," he said.

Rude stopped, and Reno stood there for a minute, listening carefully. He could faintly make out muffled cries.

"I hear her," he said forcefully. "She's over this way. Give me a hand."

He started shoving the snow away with renewed vigor. Rude came over to search beside him. He stopped again and now he hear her plainly, calling their names. She had to be close.

"Elena, we can hear you," he shouted. "Keep calling."

He pushed the snow aside to his right, and suddenly a hand appeared in the whiteness. He grabbed it and hauled her out of snow.

She gasped and shivered.

"Oh, thank God," she said. "I thought I was a goner."

They helped her over to the boulder, where she sat down to catch her breath. Reno and Rude sat down on either side of her.

"Are you okay?" Rude asked.

She nodded.

"I was so scared. I thought I was dead for sure. Thanks for pulling me out."

Rude just shrugged, and Reno didn't say anything, but just looked at her. She was actually a pleasant person when she dropped her arrogant air, and it kind of reminded him of why she had been chosen to join them in the first place. He just hoped it didn't always take a near death experience to bring out this side of her.

"Do you think you are strong enough to go on?" he asked.

She stood up slowly and looked at herself as if to check and see if all her parts were still there. Then she nodded.

"Do you think we can continue now that the trail is obliterated?" she asked.

Reno looked northward. The avalanche had dumped an enormous amount of snow on the trail in front of them. It would be difficult to get through.

"Yes," he said without hesitation. "It might be more difficult to go on, but we're much closer to Holzoff's cabin than if we turned back. Besides, someone deliberately set off that avalanche. Whoever did it was either trying to kill us outright or at least discourage us from continuing. Nothing would please me more than to show them that their little scheme had failed. It looks like we might be on the right track"

Elena nodded and the all stood up.

"Let's get going then," Rude said.

They headed northward once again, trying to make their way as best they could through the deep snow. It was difficult at first, but after about half a mile they passed the area where the avalanche had affected, and the snow subsided to only a foot or two.

Reno kept his eyes open for any hint that they were being watched, but saw nothing. He especially kept his eyes on the

slope of the mountain to their left. Perhaps when they saw they had failed, whoever had caused the avalanche would try again, but he saw nothing out of place up there either.

The ground started to slope upward, and the mountain started to level out on their left, until finally it was a mere hill that posed no avalanche danger at all. Reno breathed a sigh of relief.

But it was a bit premature. As they reached the top of the slope they saw half a dozen people standing on the trail ahead of them.

"Looks like we're being met by the welcoming committee," Rude observed.

Reno slipped his nightstick out again and walked forward. The strangers stood in a line across the trail, looking as if they had been waiting for them, which was no doubt true. They were all dressed the same, in black outfits with a red insignia on the shirt. As he got closer he saw the insignia was of a red fist.

He stopped about ten feet in front of them.

One of the men in the middle of the group spoke.

"Apparently we didn't make it clear enough that we don't want any visitors here," he said. "I was hoping our little hint would convince you to turn around."

Reno shrugged.

"We are kind of thick headed that way," he replied.

"Who are you?" Elena demanded.

The man glanced over at her.

"That's not important," he answered. "It must have been difficult to get through that avalanche. I admire your determination. Too bad it was all for nothing."

"I wouldn't say that," Reno replied. "After all, we got to meet all you pleasant people."

"Very funny," the man said, "But I'm afraid your journey ends here."

"You expect us to turn around now?" Elena said. "After all we went through to get here? That's not very hospitable of you."

The man gave her a look of contempt.

"We don't expect you to turn back," he stated. "We expect you to die."

Elena and Rude stepped up on either side of Reno.

"Sorry," Reno said. "But I'm afraid we're going to have to disappoint you again."

Their opponents charged forward. Reno aimed his nightstick at the one who had spoken and let loose with a blast of electricity. The man cried out and fell to the ground, stunned. The others hesitated for just a moment, and then came forward again. Reno had no time for another blast before they were upon him.

He jabbed with his nightstick, forcing one attacker back. The other one kicked swiftly at his leg, landing a glancing blow and knocking him off balance for a moment. His own leg shot out even while off balance and managed to knock the other one back.

As a Turk he had been trained in all forms of combat, as had Rude and Elena. Though competent at hand to hand he was no expert, working as often with weapons or materia as with bare hands, not specializing in any particular area. There was no materia available at the moment, and his nightstick was not all that useful at close quarters. They were outnumbered by a group of people he soon realized were much more skilled than they in weaponless combat, and soon found themselves on the defensive.

Still, for a while they held their own in spite of the odds. Perhaps their enemy underestimated them, or perhaps the realization that they were fighting for their lives inspired them. Whatever the case they battled to a standstill for quite a while.

But eventually the tide inevitably began to turn in their opponents favor. With their superior numbers their enemy was constantly trying to slip someone behind them, and their constant maneuvering to avoid this eventually found them with their backs to a pile of jumbled boulders which, though preventing them from becoming surrounded, also left them no

place to retreat.

To his right an opponent suddenly got under Rude's guard and struck him solidly on the left cheek. Rude stumbled back and fell. A second man sprung forward to deliver another blow. Reno turned swiftly and let loose with another blast from his nightstick. The man went down as if hit by a truck.

Reno felt a solid blow to his side and he went down as well, the nightstick flying from his hand. To his left he saw Elena, backed up against a large rock, desperately trying to ward off two attackers.

The man who had spoken to them suddenly stood looking down at him.

"You have fought well," he said. "It may be of comfort to know that I take no pleasure in killing you."

"It's no thrill for us either," Elena piped in just before a blow to the forehead sent her to the ground as well.

Their opponents moved in to finish them, but suddenly they paused, looking around. A sound filled the air. Reno had not noticed it in the heat of battle, but now it was too loud for even that to mask it. It was the unmistakable roar of a jet engine.

The sound grew until it was nearly earsplitting. Then the Slipstream flew over them, so low that the nearby trees bent in the wind as it went by. Reno thought he could almost feel the heat from the exhaust of those great engines as it roared by.

Their opponents just stood looking at it. Obviously this was something they had not anticipated.

The Slipstream roared up into the air and swung around. Then it dropped down again and headed straight for them.

Their enemies hesitated, still looking at the jet. Then the one who had spoken turned to look at Reno.

"This isn't the end of it," he said.

In an instant he was off and running, the others following close behind. There was a narrow trail that led into a mass of rocks off to their left, and they sprinted down it as the Slipstream bore down on them.

Reno lay unmoving, looking up at the aircraft and watching the smoke trails as the Slipstream let loose with a barrage of rockets. The last of their opponents had just disappeared into the rocks when the entire area erupted in a ball of flame.

Reno shaded his eyes for a moment at the blast, and felt a shower of pebbles from the pulverized rock wash over him. He hastily covered his head.

When he looked up again there was a sizable crater where the missiles had hit. He couldn't see how anyone could have survived such a blast.

Slowly he stood up. He walked over to Elena and helped her up as Rude came up next to them.

The Slipstream made another turn and came around again, this time much more slowly. Rude and Elena waved.

The black jet waggled its wings as it went by, then streaked off to the north.

They stood there in silence for a few minutes.

"Everyone okay?" Reno asked finally.

Rude nodded.

"Yes," Elena said.

Reno walked over and inspected the area around the crater. He came back to them in a few minutes.

"I don't know if any of them survived, but there's no one around now," he said. "There is a narrow path beyond the rocks. If any of them escaped, that must be the way they went. We're obviously close to something they don't want us to find, but even if all those we saw were killed, we don't know how many others there may be. I think the best thing to do now is to head for Holzoff's cabin and tell the others. I think for this job we're going to need all the help we can get."

Rude and Elena said nothing but followed him as he slowly led them down the right hand trail. No one suggested exploring any further. They had all had more than enough excitement for one day.

Cid and Vincent were the last to arrive at Mr. Holzoff's cabin that evening. They brought the Slipstream down on a rocky outcrop just after dark. Soon they were all gathered around the fire inside swapping stories of the days events.

"Sounds like we had a boring day compared to everyone else," Barret commented.

"I wouldn't call finding the dead body of someone we knew a boring day," Tifa commented humorlessly.

Barret looked at her but said nothing.

"Did you see any sign of the people who attacked us?" Elena asked Vincent.

"No, but we did find something strange," Cid cut in. "A little to the west of you was a narrow valley filled with fog. Couldn't see a thing in it. It was a clear day and there was no sign of fog anywhere else in the region."

"So you think the fog was artificially created?" Cloud asked.

Cid nodded.

"That's my guess. It corresponds to the direction those people took off in after they attacked you," he said, looking at Elena. "I think the fog is being generated by someone to conceal something. Something they obviously don't want anyone else to find out about."

Cloud sat back in his chair.

"You could be right," he said. "At any rate it looks like this bears further investigation. Whoever these people are, they're going through a lot of trouble to prevent us from finding them. There's no doubt in my mind they are connected with the death of Staniv and the disappearance of Yuffie."

"Do you think you killed any of them when you attacked them?" Cait asked.

Cid shrugged.

"Who can say? Reno, you said you didn't find any bodies. Unless we got a direct hit, the broken terrain could have protected them. I'm sure at least some of them got away."

"And who knows how many others there are?" Barret mused. "For all we know the hills could be crawling with them."

"I don't think there could be that many," Red observed. "If there were a lot of them someone would be bound to have seen some sign of them. Out in this wilderness they would have to be getting supplies from somewhere."

"However many there are, it's going to be tough to fight them without our materia," Cloud said. "How good were they?"

"Very good," Elena said.

Reno nodded slowly.

"Difficult to say because we were outnumbered. We might have had a chance one on one."

"Oh, stop it," Elena replied. "They would have kicked our asses and you know it."

Reno rolled his eyes.

Cloud looked at Tifa.

"What do you think?"

Tifa shrugged.

"All I saw was some bruises on Staniv's body. I wouldn't be able to say until I actually saw them fight."

"You may soon get the chance," Cloud replied. "I think our first order of business tomorrow will be to check out this mysterious fog. And I think it would be best if we all went together."

He looked around, but no one else seemed to have anything to add, and they fell silent. Cait and Barret went upstairs. Reno got up and went into the kitchen. He came back in a minute with two drinks and sat back down next to Rude, handing him one.

"She's been hanging out with that freak an awful lot lately," he said quietly, nodding toward Elena and Vincent, who were talking together on the other side of the room. "What's the matter, we're not good enough for her anymore?"

Rude glanced over toward Elena and then looked at Reno.

"You jealous?"

Reno chuckled softly.

"Yeah, right."

He took a long drink from his glass.

"It's not that," he continued. "She's a Turk, we should stick together. Being friendly like that might give them the wrong impression."

Rude did not respond.

Tifa got up and walked toward the hallway. Reno saw Rude's gaze following her. He nudged him.

"And you're no better," he said. "You better forget about that one, though, she's way out of your league."

Rude shook his head slightly, his face remaining expressionless. He took a drink and then looked at Reno.

"So who's your favorite?" he asked.

Reno raised an eyebrow.

"Out of this bunch? Not much to choose from," he replied.

Rude looked at him skeptically.

"All right," he said. He paused and looked around carefully, as if making sure they weren't overheard. Then he turned to Rude and said in a low voice.

"To tell you the truth, anyone that'll say yes."

Rude looked at him, but he just smiled in return. Rude shook his head and drained his drink. He got up.

"You are one screwed up dude," he said. "See ya later."

"What," Reno called after him. "As if you wouldn't."

He was about to turn back to his drink when Aeris walked by. He got up and followed her into the kitchen.

Aeris glanced at him as he came in.

"Wouldn't what?" she questioned.

"Huh?"

"As if you wouldn't what?"

Reno smiled.

"Nothing," he replied. "Just guy talk. What, were you spying on us?"

"Of course not," she answered, taking him seriously. "You said it loud enough."

"So, it sounds like you saved Cloud's ass today," he changed the subject.

"I wouldn't go that far," she said. "It was a battle. We all helped each other, just like always."

"Don't be so modest," he answered. "You know, I really don't understand you."

"What do you mean?"

"You're so much better than they are. You've been running around with a two bit terrorist with a chip on his shoulder and his brainless cronies for how long now? When are you going to ditch them and find some people who are more in your class?"

She looked at him for a moment in surprise.

"You mean like you?" she asked finally.

"Well, it would be an improvement," he replied with a smile.

She looked at him skeptically.

"Are you drunk?" she asked bluntly.

He gave a slight shrug.

"Not yet."

"You're out of your mind," she said. "I better get back to the others."

He stepped out of her way as she walked by.

"That spiky haired jerk is just going to break your heart," he said.

"As if you wouldn't," she answered immediately.

Reno was not about to deny it.

"At least I have some charm," he suggested.

She shook her head and walked out of the room. He stood there for a moment, then drained his drink.

"Oh well," he said softly, and turned to get himself another.

~*~

Tifa sat on a narrow porch in front of the cabin, staring into the dark. She could occasionally catch the sound of someone talking inside if they raised their voice, but that was not often. There was no wind, and the night was silent and clear.

She looked up and the stars blazed above her in cold fury, almost unnaturally bright and beautiful.

The door to the cabin opened and light flared around her briefly. Then it closed again. She looked over to see Rude standing by the door looking out into the dark. She turned back and looked out blankly into the night. For a long time neither one spoke.

"Cold night," Rude said noncommittally.

"Umm," Tifa said, not looking at him. For a long moment he thought she would say nothing more.

She looked up at the sky again.

"But the stars are so pretty. I love looking at them on winter nights. I can't explain it, but they always looked best to me in the winter, almost as if they were closer somehow."

She fell silent again. She didn't even know why she was talking. She had come out here to be alone.

Rude took a hesitant step toward her, then changed his mind and sat down where he was. He looked up at the sky.

"It is pretty," he said.

She nodded but again said nothing. She heard a short bark of laughter from inside. It sounded like Cid.

"There's something..." Rude said and stopped. She glanced over at him but he didn't finish at first, just looked at her for a moment and turned away.

"Umm?" she said.

"There's something I want to tell you," he said slowly, not looking at her. "You probably don't care. I mean, it probably won't make any difference, but I want you to know..."

He stopped again and looked at her. She returned his gaze expectantly, although she was not sure she wanted to hear what he had to say.

"I don't know whether you'll believe me. I don't expect you to believe me. I know how you feel about the Turks, but I didn't know what they were going to do to sector seven until it was too late."

He turned away again, looking down at the ground now. For a long time she just looked at him. Then she shrugged.

"Too many people have died," she said softly.

He looked at her again. He hadn't been sure how she would react to his statement. At least she didn't seem angry.

"It never ends, does it?" she asked, then went on before he could answer. "It seems all my life people have been dying around me. My parents, my friends in Avalanche, Aeris, and now Staniv. When does it all end? When we first started Avalanche I thought we were saving the world, and maybe we have for others, but not for us. I thought after Shinra was destroyed we could live in peace, but I don't think that'll ever happen now."

She looked up at the stars again.

"Maybe it's my own fault," she went on. "I chose a bloody path when I helped destroy the reactors in Midgar. Maybe once you choose that path there's no turning back, or changing direction. Maybe now I'm paying for all the people who died in Midgar."

I She bowed her head and said nothing more. Rude resisted the urge to move closer to her, but just sat there, knowing there was nothing he could do to comfort her, but wishing there was.