

CHAPTER VII: WORKING STIFFS

"What a dump," Yuffie observed.

Reno didn't reply, but looking around the hotel room he had to agree. Though Rude had booked them in one of the best hotels in Gongaga, it impressed neither of them. Even after the Healer had cleaned it up, Gongaga was still a working town, with neither the money or pedigree of Wutai or Junon, nor the resources of Corel. It wasn't a tourist town. There was nothing here that was particularly scenic. It didn't have a lot of the amenities expected in a large corporate town. It wasn't along a major trade route. There wasn't anything here that would appeal to big business, and Reno had to wonder why Vanguard had picked it as the home of their headquarters. The only reason he could think of was that they just didn't want to draw attention to themselves.

Reno picked up an envelope that was lying on the bed.

"What's that?" Yuffie questioned.

"My cover ID," Reno replied, ripping open the envelope. Half a dozen papers and cards spilled out onto the bed. Rude had used some detective work to find out what kind of people Vanguard was looking to hire. Reno sat down on the bed and sifted through them.

"My name is Marshall Mathers," he told her. "I'm an acquisitions expert from Mideel. I've got an appointment to meet someone named Darren Blume at Vanguard headquarters at 3:30." Reno glanced down at his watch. "Damn, that's only an hour and a half from now. You think Rude could have cut it a little closer?"

"Marshall Mathers," Yuffie mouthed. "What kind of name is that?"

"What's wrong with it?" Reno replied.

"Sounds stupid," Yuffie responded distastefully.

Reno frowned.

"So does Yuffie, but I wasn't making any comments."

"What's wrong with Yuffie?" the young ninja snapped.

"Sounds stuuupid," he replied, mocking her whiny tone.

She looked daggers at him.

"Oh shut up Reno! Unless you'd like to eat shuriken for lunch."

"Yeah, yeah, threats, threats," Reno replied dismissively as he continued to look through the papers. "You know what your problem is? You're too predictable. It's so easy to figure out exactly what it takes to get under your skin. Your precious town, your heritage. Just pick on one of those things and you go off the deep end, you act irrationally, and you end up making mistakes."

The smoldering look in Yuffie's eyes just deepened at these words.

"Hey, I'm not ashamed of that," she snapped. "I'm proud of my town and my heritage."

"I'm sure you are," Reno replied. "But that's not the point. The point is you shouldn't be so obvious about it. You shouldn't wear your heart on your sleeve like that. Because when people know they can say something that bothers you, then they have an advantage. They have a weak point that they can exploit."

"Reno, you don't know anything," Yuffie shot back. "My feelings for my town aren't a weakness, they're a strength. They form a bond between me and all the people of Wutai."

"It's not a strength when it causes you to do stupid things," Reno returned. "And challenging someone when they insult your town is stupid. That's why you'd never make a good Turk."

Yuffie looked at him like she was ready to snap his neck.

"So what am I supposed to do, just ignore it?" she questioned. "Just walk away if someone insults me? Are you trying to tell me that's what the Turks do?"

Reno held up his hand.

"Let's make a distinction here. We were talking about your town, not about you. What's Wutai anyway? It's just a location. Just a spot on the map. It doesn't mean anything."

Yuffie looked at him incredulously.

"You are so wrong!" she blurted out.

"Am I?" he replied. "Wutai is no different from any place else. Yeah, you grew up there, but so what? You could have grown up anywhere, and you'd feel the same ties to where ever that happened to be. So what's the difference? If you left Wutai and went somewhere else, I bet that in a few months you'd feel the same about the new place as you do now about Wutai. Loyalty isn't all it's cracked up to be."

Yuffie opened her mouth, then shut it again. She couldn't believe he didn't see just how wrong he was. How could two people have opinions that were so diametrically opposed. Were they from different planets or something? Then she thought of something.

"You don't know what you're talking about Reno," she said. "The truth is that *you* don't have any loyalty to your hometown. And who could blame you, growing up in the slums of Midgar? If that's where I'd come from, I would probably feel the same way. In fact, I'd probably be ashamed to admit it. Growing up in a warped and perverted environment like that, it's no wonder you have a skewed sense of reality. But it's not like that everywhere. Just because your childhood sucked, doesn't mean everyone's did."

He slowly stood up, his face expressionless.

"Do you really think that growing up in Wutai was so much better?" he questioned. "Midgar was a hellhole. I'm glad it was destroyed. But for all it's faults, when it came down to it, it still managed to kick Wutai's ass, now didn't it?"

Yuffie's face clouded with anger.

"And what was Wutai after that?" he continued. "They were lucky that Midgar was so generous with the surrender terms. Midgar occupation forces controlled Wutai for three years after the war, before they left. Tell me, you were there, how did that feel? You were growing up then, right? How did it feel to have foreigners controlling your precious town, making all the decision while Godo rubber stamped them? That your father, the Lord of Wutai, was a laughing stock?"

He took a step toward her.

"Reno..." she growled.

"And how did it feel after that, after they left, having taken everything of value, and no one being able to lift a finger to stop them. How did it feel to know they had raped the town of all it's resources, that you had nothing left?"

"Shut up Reno," she snarled.

But he didn't.

"How did it feel to open up all your sacred temples to tourists? To unbelievers who knew nothing of your culture, just so you could survive? How did it feel when you had to bow to..."

Before he could finish she lunged at him. He stepped deftly to the side, and her blow caught only empty air. He grabbed hold of her exposed arm, twisting it round so that she tumbled to the ground.

She spun around, on her feet again in seconds. Reno just stood there with his arm folded in front of him.

"Predictable," he stated.

She grabbed hold of his collar and pulled him to her, bringing back her fist. He did not resist. The look on his face made her hesitate.

"I'm not going to fight you," he said. "We're on a mission, remember? I just wanted to make a point. Turks don't let personal feelings get in the way of what needs to be done, and neither should you. You insulted Midgar a moment ago. You did it to get me angry. That was pointless, because you were right, and I really don't give a damn about Midgar. But even if I did, I would have reacted the same way. When you get angry you lose control, and when you lose control you make stupid mistakes, like you did just now. That's a weakness. Never tell anyone your weaknesses, no matter who they are, no matter how long you've known them."

Yuffie stood there for a moment without saying anything. Finally she let go of him.

"You are sooo cynical," she said bitterly.

"I'm a realist," he countered. "Never, *never*, let someone know that they've gotten to you, no matter how much it hurts. Even if it's accidental, even if it's your best friend in the world."

"They wouldn't be my best friend if I couldn't tell them things like that," Yuffie sighed.

"You never know when today's best friend is going to be tomorrow's enemy," Reno replied. "Now I'd love to continue this little discussion, but I've got to get ready to go to that meeting."

He started to unbutton his shirt.

"All right," Yuffie said. "I admit I might be a little hot headed, and that might be a drawback on some occasions, but I still don't think you know what you're talking about."

Reno pulled his shirt off. He walked over to the entrance to the bathroom.

"Whatever," he said. "I'm going to take a shower now. Care to join me?"

Yuffie gave him a sour look.

"I think not," she replied. "I'm going back to my room."

The red haired Turk shrugged.

"Your loss."

Yuffie glanced down at the papers on the bed.

"Hey, is this a map of their headquarters?" she questioned.

Reno stepped over and glanced at it.

"Yup."

"I think I'll take it with me," she said. "This way I'll have some idea of what the place is like when I go check it out later."

Reno hesitated a moment.

"Don't you think that's a bit premature? Why don't you let me get inside and look around before you go snooping around outside."

"Whatssamatter?" she questioned. "Afraid I'm going to get caught?"

He gave her a knowing look.

"Well, with your track record, I have to admit the thought crossed my mind."

Yuffie frowned.

"I know how to take care of myself."

Reno rolled his eyes quickly so she wouldn't notice.

"Now where have I heard that before?" he muttered.

He unbuckled his belt and pulled it off. Yuffie snatched up the map.

"Well, I'm outta here," she said, walking over to the door that led to the adjoining room.

"Fine," he said.

She turned to look back at him.

"So all those things you just said..." she said hesitantly. "You were saying them just to get me mad? You didn't really mean them?"

Reno looked at her for a moment.

"No, not really."

Yuffie nodded slowly.

"Even the part about my name being stupid?" she added.

The Turk hesitated a moment.

"No, that was true," he said finally.

She stood there for a moment.

"I hate you!" she snapped.

Reno grinned.

"Good, then I must be doing something right," he replied.

But it was too late, the door to the other room had already slammed shut.

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"Good afternoon Mr. Mathers. I'm Darren Blume. Welcome to Vanguard."

The man's handshake was firm, but seemed a bit too vigorous to Reno. The kind of handshake that came from a man who thought he had something to prove. He had short brown hair and a thin mustache, both neatly groomed. His grey suit looked like it had been made to order, and fit him like a glove. Typical corporate wonk was the label that came to Reno's mind.

They were in an office on the third floor of the Vanguard building. The structure itself was on the outskirts of town, in a wooded area not far from the old reactor. The entire complex covered over thirty acres, but a lot of it seemed to be virgin woodland at the moment. The Vanguard building itself stood not far from the entrance. Though thoroughly modern, and obviously brand new, its concrete and glass gleaming in the sunlight, Reno had failed to be impressed when he stepped out of the car that had been sent for him. The building was only five stories high, and for all its newness, looked quite ordinary. If it was a good first impression these people were after, Reno thought ruefully, they could have taken a lesson from Shinra.

But once he entered his impression of the building went up a notch. In fact, he was downright impressed. The lobby was huge. It seemed to go on forever in all directions. The floor was white marble tile with gray streaks. The walls were white as well, with recessed lighting between rows of paintings by easily recognizable contemporary artists. Not that the extra lighting was needed, as the large windows in the front of the building seemed to focus the sunlight throughout the room. Black modular furniture completed the look. A wide staircase led up to the next floor in the center of the room. The whole place was immaculate. Reno had to admit it got his stamp of approval.

Not only was the main entrance huge, but he soon found out the entire complex was as well. The structure had been built on the side of a hill, and it appeared the contractors had tried to keep the setting as natural as possible. Trees and the contour of the land concealed just how large the building was. It took him almost twenty minutes walking down halls that seemed to go on forever before he finally found the office he was looking for.

The office itself was decorated in the exact same motif as the main lobby, and in fact every room in the building that Reno had come upon. It seemed that Vanguard had coordinated all the offices to fit in, and that individual tastes were not part of the equation. All part of the corporate mindset, Reno thought. Just like a bunch of worker ants in the hive, and Mr. Blume seemed to fit in perfectly.

"I've looked over your resume," Mr. Blume said, looking down at an open folder on his desk. "I must say, I'm quite impressed. Eight years with the Shinra Electric Company, and three years with Wutai Power and Light. We've been looking for someone with ties to Wutai. We're very interested in expanding in that area. I've heard they've got some of the best people over there. I believe they've recently been working on a new solar cell that stores 50% more power than the cells currently on the market. What can you tell me about that?"

Reno hesitated a moment. They weren't wasting any time testing him. Good thing he had done his homework.

"You mean the EP50," he stated. "I'm afraid it's not all it's cracked up to be. They've increased the storage capacity all right, but the cell has a nasty tendency to burn out without warning. Until they get that little problem out of the way, it's not going to be a viable product."

Mr. Blume paused a moment, then nodded.

"Good," he said. "Management was a bit concerned about that. Anyway, it's good to have you aboard. Let me show you around a bit. It's a big place, it's easy to get lost."

"So I've noticed," Reno commented.

For the next two hours Mr. Blume led Reno around the complex. The entire time the man kept up a running commentary, babbling on and on so incessantly that Reno began to wonder if he had been a tour guide prior to his being hired here. But in spite of that the Turk also had to admit that he was learning a lot.

The Vanguard complex was practically a city unto itself. What couldn't be found in the main building itself was nearby. Apartments, shopping mall, eatery, entertainment, laundry services, and a sports complex were all in the building or a mere stone's throw away. The employees never really had to leave the place at all, if they didn't want to. Hell, after Mr. Blume showed him one of the apartments he was tempted to stay here himself. The employees were encouraged to do so, and with an employee discount, they were much cheaper, not to mention much nicer than the hotel he and Yuffie were staying in. Unfortunately, if he stayed here, he would have no way to stay in contact with Yuffie.

Eventually they made their way down to the first floor again, but in another section of the building from the main lobby. They walked down a long hall, like they had been for what seemed like ages, and came to a pair of double doors.

"And finally, here's where you'll be spending most of your time," Mr. Blume said.

They walked through the doors and Reno saw they were in a large warehouse. Except large really didn't do it justice. Reno had never seen a single room as huge as this one. Three stories high, it looked like it could easily have swallowed three or four football fields. It was so huge he couldn't see from one end to the other. All he could see was dozens of rows of shelves that rose up almost to the ceiling themselves, running into the distance as far as the eye could see.

"This is the main warehouse," Mr. Blume explained. "Pretty impressive, eh? Here we keep over a million individual items. Vanguard isn't just a power company you know. They're involved in over 600 individual businesses worldwide, from things as diverse as earth moving vehicles to children's toys. It's our job to cover the needs of all those businesses. If they need something that's hard to find, this is the place they call, and they expect us to come up with it. Our job is to know where it is, and if it's not in the warehouse, to find it as quickly as possible. That's one way we stay ahead of the competition. You think you're up for that kind of pressure?"

Reno stood there for a moment looking around. Then a smirk grew on his face as he turned to Mr. Blume.

"I thrive on it," he replied.

Mr. Blume nodded in approval.

"That's the kind of attitude we like," he said. "C'mon, I'll show you where your office is."

They walked down the aisles, Mr. Blume explaining the layout of the place, and the general idea of how and where everything was stored. Reno tried to pay attention. He had a pretty good memory, but even so it was going to be hard to remember everything they had gone over. He hoped the man didn't expect him to remember where everything was immediately.

They came to a door that had what Reno recognized as a key code security lock on it. He had noticed a few of them before, but all of them had been up on the fifth floor.

"That's where we keep high security inventory," Mr. Blume told him helpfully. "Once you've been around for a while and have shown you can be an asset to the company, you'll be given clearance."

In other words, once they thought he could be trusted, Reno thought.

"In a way you're lucky. You'll only have to deal with what's out here. There's another hundred thousand pieces of inventory in there."

Reno nodded, looking around to make sure he remembered just where this particular door was. It seemed he already had a target for further investigation.

But there was no rush on that.

They continued on their way, then suddenly turned off to the left. In a recessed alcove in the wall they entered an elevator and went back up to the third floor. The elevator opened up on an elevated walkway that ran along the wall of the

warehouse. Now Reno could look down over a concrete railing and see the warehouse floor below. If anything, from up there it looked even larger. Offices lined the opposite wall. Mr. Blume led him into one.

"Here you go," the man said.

The room was large, but then again, it seemed you could say that about every room in the building. Not surprisingly, the decor matched that of all the other rooms he had seen. White walls and floor, with modular black furniture.

"What do you think?"

Reno attempted to look suitably impressed.

"It's very nice," he replied.

Mr. Blume walked over to the desk.

"As you can see," he said, indicating the papers on it. "We've already got some invoices here for you to go over. I'm afraid our previous acquisitions officer left the place in rather a mess, and we need to get it straightened out as soon as possible. All these have to be entered in the computer. C'mon I'll show you how to do it."

Reno nodded and sat down behind the desk. Mr. Blume went through the procedure. Reno picked it up by the second try. The third one he did by himself.

"Good," Mr. Blume said. "I'll leave you to it then."

"My office is right down the hall," Mr. Blume continued, jerking a finger in it's direction. "If you need anything, feel free to ask. I'm the manager of this section, so I'll have the answers to most anything you might want to know. There's a fifteen minute break in the morning and afternoon. You can take them anytime you want. And an hour for lunch, which is served between eleven and two o'clock down at the cafeteria. I'll come by later to see how you're doing and introduce you to some of the other managers."

"Thanks," Reno replied.

"All right then, I'll leave you to it."

Mr. Blume left the office. As soon as he was gone Reno stopped what he was doing and sat back in his chair. A minute or two later he got up and walked over to the door, opening it up. He looked out. Satisfied that Mr. Blume was gone he stepped over to the railing, looking down and noting with satisfaction that from this position he could clearly see the door to the secure inventory room. His first order of business was to find someone who had a key card to get in there. A little bit of simple observation ought to turn up someone fairly quickly. Then it would just be a matter of 'appropriating' a key of his own. He didn't think he'd have too much trouble.

Which was a good thing, he thought, glancing back at his office. Because he didn't plan on spending too much time here. The sooner he got out the better. He would have to keep up appearances for as long as he was here, which meant he'd have to deal with that stack of papers on the desk. Something he was not anxious to do. No, he wanted to get this done as soon as possible. This job was too much like work.

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Elena took her compact out of her bag and flipped it open. Turning her head from side to side she looked at herself critically. Touching her cheek she wondered if she had put on a little too much make up. Or then again, maybe not enough. She hadn't been sure just how far to go when applying it this morning. It was hard to tell just how much would make a good impression, and how much was too much. She had found that, as a general rule, when it came to the business world, too little was usually better than too much, but one never knew.

She would have laughed at herself, if she wasn't so nervous. She wanted to impress them, even though this wasn't really a job at all, and she was just here to spy on them. Yet still she felt the need to make a good impression. It certainly couldn't hurt to do so, and might just help her get the information she needed that much faster. And it wouldn't do them any good if she went in there looking like a slob and ended up getting fired.

The door to the office she was standing next to opened suddenly, startling her.

"Miss. Morrison? Mr. Holbrook will see you now."

Elena just stood there for a moment, regaining her composure and calming the butterflies that were fluttering in her stomach. Then she ran her hands down her skirt to straighten it, and walked into the room.

Inside another man was sitting behind a desk, a third man standing beside him. They turned toward her as she walked in.

The man who had opened the door closed it, remaining where he was.

The man behind the desk stood up and extended his hand.

"Theo Holbrook," he introduced himself. "Chief of Plant Operations."

Elena took his and gave it what she hoped was a firm shake.

"Marion Morrison," she replied, though she was sure he already knew that.

"Yes," the man replied, returning to his seat. "We've heard a lot about you Miss. Morrison. Vanguard doesn't normally hire people without first having a personal interview, but the person you're replacing left unexpectedly, which kind of left us in a bind. And your resume was so impressive, we thought we had to get you before someone else snatched you up."

"Thank you," Elena said politely.

"This is Zeth Darkmon," Theo continued, indicating the man standing by the desk. Elena nodded and Zeth smiled at her, but for some reason the smile did not communicate any warmth at all. "He's my assistant. If you have any problems that can't be handled in your department, he'll be the one you need to speak to." Theo gave her a penetrating look before continuing. "Let's hope there's not too many of those."

Elena gave the barest nod of her head, but she was getting the message loud and clear. They expected her to handle whatever they threw at her.

"And the gentleman who let you in is Gorby Vanussen. He's been filling in in the public relations department until we found a replacement. I'll leave it up to him to fill you in on the little details of what's going on in the department, but first I'd like to give you an idea of the big picture."

"Sure," Elena said, nodding.

Mr. Holbrook got to his feet once more. He walked over to the window behind him and looked out on the panoramic view of Junon harbor below.

"As I'm sure you're aware, Shinra gave electric companies a bad name," he said. "After the truth about their corruption and misuse of power came out, people lost their trust. Only natural. Unfortunately, even though we are an entirely different company, that lack of trust has carried over. People used to have a lot of faith in the companies that ran the country, figuring they were working in the people's best interest. It was very easy to keep their trust. But since the Shinra incident they've become disillusioned. Now they've swung in the opposite direction. Now they look at everything we do and question it, trying to see if we have an ulterior motive, to see if we're going to follow in Shinra's footsteps. Under these circumstances, good PR is much more difficult to maintain, yet if anything, it's even more vital to do so than it ever was in the past. Before Vanguard bought it out, the Junon Power Company was on the verge of bankruptcy. With the new infusion of funds from Vanguard, that's not going to happen. But Vanguard is still a business, it expects to make gil. Unfortunately this company is still losing gil. Vanguard didn't buy this place out of the goodness of its heart. It saw potential here. It saw that with modern equipment and a streamlined workforce this place could become quite profitable. They don't expect it to happen in a day, but they do expect it to happen. We're getting pressure from Vanguard to produce, and at the same time we're getting pressure from a public that doesn't trust us. Needless to say that doesn't make our job any easier."

Mr. Holbrook sat down on his desk and folded his arms across his chest.

"As our public relations expert, it's up to you to restore the public trust in us," he said, looking straight at her now. "It's not going to be an easy job, as your predecessor found out. We don't get any praise for keeping all the lights on, but we sure as hell hear about it when we don't. We need the help of political figures and the public in general to get the contracts we need and public backing for our projects. We're not going to become a profitable company until we do that, so you could say that the fate of the company is resting on your shoulders."

He gave her a probing look, a look that made her heart race. She hoped they didn't notice how wobbly her legs had become. But before she could say anything Mr. Holbrook smiled.

"Not that I'm putting any pressure on you or anything," he said.

That eased the tension a little bit.

"It might not be quite that bad," he continued, "But it is serious. Do you think you can handle it?"

Elena hesitated a moment, hoping that when she spoke it wouldn't give away her jitters.

"I'll try my best," she finally managed to get out.

Mr. Holbrook didn't reply to that, just sat there looking at her for a moment. Finally he nodded, then went over and sat down in his chair again.

"All right," he said. "I guess that about covers it. Mr. Vanussen, would you escort Marion to her office and fill her in on things?"

"Yes sir," Mr. Vanussen replied.

Elena gave an inward sigh of relief that it was over. She immediately turned away and followed Mr. Vanussen out the door. He started down the hall.

"Um, is there a bathroom nearby?" she questioned.

He turned to look at her.

"Uh, yeah, there's one right down the hall," he replied. "Are you alright?"

She looked at him sharply. Was it that obvious?

"Of course," she replied hastily. "Why do you ask?"

"I don't know. You looked a little nervous in there. Not surprising I guess, being new on the job and all. And Mr. Holbrook can put the fear of god in anyone. But since you work in public relations, I thought you'd be used to it."

Elena hesitated. She had hoped that her nervousness hadn't shown, but it was obvious she hadn't hid it as well as she would have liked. If Mr. Vanussen had seen it, it was likely Mr. Holbrook had too, and that thought made her even more nervous.

"I'm fine. Just a little first day jitters. It takes me a little time to adjust, that's all," she said, thinking that it sounded lame, but she couldn't think of anything else to say. "Can we find that bathroom now?"

"Uh, yeah, sure," he said.

He led her down the hall, and just as he had said there were bathrooms at the end of it. Elena quickly entered one. She leaned against the wall and let out a sigh of relief. Her stomach felt like it was going to erupt. She couldn't remember ever being this nervous in her life, not even when she had applied to join the Turks. She had never worked undercover before. She had never had to go around telling everyone lies. She wasn't sure she was cut out for it. She was deathly afraid that she would slip up, that she already had slipped up. She went over in her mind everything she had said back at Mr. Holbrook's office, wondering if she had said anything that would give away the fact that she wasn't what she seemed. What would they do to her if they found out the truth? She assumed they would just dismiss her, or at the worst call the police. She wasn't worried about that. The Turks would get her out of trouble on that score. But what if there really was something going on here, something they didn't want anyone to find out. If that were the case, her life could be in danger if they found out the truth. Would she get any warning? How did she know that even now some innocent little thing, or even her nervousness had made them suspicious. The Turks had spent a lot of time making sure her cover would stand up to scrutiny, but who could tell. Vanguard was a big company, she was sure it had plenty of resources. If they dug hard enough, it might be possible that they could discover her real identity. And she'd probably never know until it was too late. That smile on Holbrook's assistant's face, she didn't trust it. Did he know something? She might walk into her office and suddenly...

She shook her head, realizing she was letting her imagination get carried away. There was no way she could think like that and function. If she went out there a nervous wreck, it would be sure to make them suspicious. She had to act natural and trust that her false identity would stand up. Otherwise she'd go out of her mind.

Vincent, I wish you were here.

He wasn't far away. Right down the street at a nearby hotel. He could be there in minutes. She had his number on her cell phone. They had prearranged for her to say a particular sentence to him to tell him she was in trouble, just in case there

were other listeners. But that wouldn't help her if they seized her before she could use the phone. If they found out about her, it was unlikely she would know beforehand. Even though Vincent was only a block away, she felt alone.

She turned around, looking in the mirror over the sink, straightening a loose lock of hair. She had to calm down. She couldn't waste anymore time in here. If she stayed in here too long, it would arouse suspicion.

Don't be weak, she thought to herself. You can do this. She'd just have to make sure she didn't slip up. And if she did, Vincent would get her out, somehow.

She took a deep breath and walked back through the door, a smile painted on her face.

"Sorry," she apologized. "All ready now."

Mr. Vanussen looked at her for a moment, then nodded and started down the hallway once again.

"I'm really glad you're here," he said as they walked. "I'm really not a public relations expert. I mean, I can talk to people, but I don't have that flair, you know. They just picked me cause no one else wanted the job. It's good to have you with us Marion. I can call you Marion, can't I?"

"Sure," Elena replied.

"You can call me Gorby," he continued. "We don't have to be formal when we're in the department."

"Okay," Elena agreed.

Gorby stopped in front of a door.

"All right, here we are, our home away from home."

She pulled it open and they entered. It didn't look much different from the office she had already been in. In fact, this one was bigger, but it also held two desks. Elena noticed there was a large pile of paperwork on both of them.

Gorby walked over to the nearest desk and pulled out the chair. He looked at Elena.

"Have a seat," he said.

"Thanks," Elena said, sitting down gratefully. She hadn't liked Mr. Holbrook all that much, but she supposed that was just the boss thing. And she definitely hadn't liked his assistant, but Gorby seemed nice enough. Perhaps things wouldn't be as bad as she thought.

"All right, I'll fill you in on what's going on," Gorby said beside her.

For the rest of the day they went over all the notes, charts and paperwork Gorby had collected. Elena knew pretty much from the start it was going to take her a few days to really get to know exactly what was going on. Still, she felt a bit overwhelmed. Not only did she have to worry about being uncovered, but she also had to make sure she did her job. But she forced that out of her mind. She had already had her crisis for the day, and she was determined not to repeat it, at least, not while she was still here.

And eventually the workday did end. Elena left quickly, and felt visible relief when the doors to the Power Company closed behind her. She almost ran down the street back to the hotel Vincent and she were staying at. When she entered their room, Vincent was sitting in a chair, staring out the window.

"Oh Vincent, I'm so glad that's over!" she exclaimed, walking rapidly over to him and dropping down in his lap, at the same time swinging her arms over his shoulders.

He looked at her with some surprise.

"I think I almost blew it right from the start," she blurted out before he could say anything. "I was so nervous, so scared they would find me out, that something would go wrong. I had a talk with the Chief of Operations, and I was so nervous I thought I'd pee in my pants."

Vincent knew better than to smirk at that thought.

"Something like that does take a little getting used to," he agreed.

"But I did good," she continued. "Or I think I did. I'm working with a guy named Gorby Vanussen, and he seemed pretty nice. I felt a lot better after a while, but I was still so relieved to get out of there. I don't know how secret agents can do this stuff all the time. I think I'd lose my mind."

Vincent nodded. Wrapping his arms around her, he kissed her.

"I don't want to go back," she said, breaking away from his kiss. "But I'll be strong. I can handle it. It really isn't so bad, if you just don't think about it."

"Uh huh," Vincent replied.

"I mean, it's not going to be for very long, right?" she continued. "Just until we find out if anything fishy is going on there. I'm not sure there is. They're under a lot of scrutiny because of what Shinra did. If you ask me they'd have to be nuts to be trying anything funny. With all the distrust and snooping, someone would be bound to find out."

"That's quite possible," Vincent stated.

"I'll just have to look around and see what I can find out," she said. "But I'm not sure how easy that's going to be. I mean, I was nervous enough now and I wasn't doing anything at all. If I have to go snooping around in places I'm not supposed to be, I don't know if I could do it. But I guess I have to, eh? I mean, that's what I'm there for."

"Elena," Vincent said patiently.

"There's no point in me even being there, if I'm not going to find out anything. Right? So I'll have to do that. It was hard today, but I got through it. I'm sure I can get through that too. I can do things. The Turks only hire the best, right? It might take me a little while, a little time to adjust, but I'll do what I have to do."

"Elena," Vincent said again, a little more emphatically.

"After all, I'm a professional. Everyone is depending on me. I don't want to let you all down. But you know, I half hope that nothing really is going on there, cause that would make things a lot simpler, wouldn't it? Then it wouldn't be a big deal even if they did find out who I was. They probably just..."

"Elena!"

She stopped and looked at him.

"You did fine. You'll do fine. You're a very competent person. Now shut up."

The frown that started to form on her face was washed away by a shower of kisses.