



"I'm Ready"
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"Zack. . . Zack! Stop it!"

Lips, hard and impatient and grabbing at hers. A hand creeping up the back of her shirt like a 'possum unleashed from a cage in the woods. The other hand was something like a rogue who'd left her sights. Could be anywhere. Tifa distractedly wondered where that might be, even as she tried to fend off its counterpart and those blasted eager lips.

"Zack! Please, he could be out there! It's only a quarter after, he could be out there--!"

She hissed her words, honestly frightened that Barret hadn't left for the night, that he might still be tallying this week's profits and writing out the orders for next week's liquor. She could imagine him coming through that door; hulking, dark, and scowling at seeing his best friend and some renegade Soldier shoved in a corner of the back room trying to invade each other.

Dammit, there was that other hand. It made its appearance known by tickling over her left thigh and ascending in a flash of warm palm-skin and harder callouses. How could something be so rough but so soft all at once? The lips smothered her reasoning, broken, muffled words behind them attempting less effective persuasiveness. The words couldn't quite compare to the lips' reassurances.

"If you-- want to stop so badly, Tifa, "they muttered, "Why you creeping your leg up mine, huh? Heh."

She giggled as he pushed her harder into the corner, the possum finding its mark and unstrapping her bra with masterful precision. It was late, it was dark, Barret had to be gone. To hell with it if he wasn't, it was too cold outside tonight to deny herself this warmth. Midgar's gritty air was filled with the flutter of new snow, Tifa distractedly saw it winking at her through the window past Zack's shoulder and the sight of that cold made his heat seem almost more enticing. She couldn't suppress a smile as he tackled her mouth again, running a warm tongue around hers and then drawing back his face and taking a bit of her lower lip with him. He grinned at her lopsidedly, his wild hair in his snapping eyes and Tifa ran her fingers through the dark locks, raising her arms so he could slip her shirt off for her.

"I've wanted to do this since I first saw you. . . "he breathed heavily, nestling the side of his face into the space between her neck and shoulder, nibbling her playfully. It hurt and sent thrills through her spine all at once. An exercise in trust; like letting a cat chew your finger.

"Why didn't you then?" she asked as he pushed them both gently to the ground, loosing his shirt on the way. He laughed again, he was always laughing. Was he laughing at her or himself?

"Tifa. . . Tifa, don't spoil this with your god damned questions. . . alright? Don't even start, I'll just kiss every word you attempt right out of your mouth."

He backed up his threat, then fluttered his lips down her neck, sampling her taste as Tifa ran a knee along his side, the both of them on the floor now and helplessly entangled in old tablecloths. Seventh Heaven's back room spread dark and thick and humid all around., leaving trails of tickling, cold sweat down Tifa's face. She lay there with a strange look in her eyes, staring through the air, thoughts running wild. Broken thoughts, a swirl of ideas with a few common themes; blonde and blue and dark umber and black. A face that pleaded, then a face that demanded. Remembrances of favors granted, and promises broken, remembrances of a severed pink bow slithering over cold marble, remembrances of her broken heart after Aeris' death, and a feeling of unworthiness that had driven her nearly mad. But why should she have to feel unworthy?

"God, ya got great skin, "Zack chuckled, pulling Tifa away from those tugging, teasing, cutting thoughts and making her give a gasp as lips brushed over her breasts, his face so close, so nestled to her she felt his eyelashes tickling her flesh. She instinctively put two hands down and grabbed at Zack's face, one at either side, bringing his mouth up to hers again. But she didn't kiss him. She held his head suspended above hers for a moment and they shared each other's breaths. His smelled slightly of beer and she found herself getting steadily dizzy, drunk off the scent.

"Why. . . "she whispered, sounding the depths of his smoky eyes as he watched her with a playful curiosity, "Why do you want me, Zack? You have to tell me before I let you go any further."

"Why?" Zack couldn't help himself. He gave a laughing growl and descended over her; lips on lips again until his tongue broke through and found Tifa's. But she pushed him gently upwards, fighting her desires, common sense and a degree of pain prompting her to find an answer. Zack was kind enough to hold back for a moment. Two hands to either side of her face, thick fingers twisting through the river of brown that profoundly beautiful, slightly befuddled face was

embedded in. He cocked his head to one side, one eyebrow lowered just a bit. "Okay," he relented, "You're going to make me say it. Tifa, I love you. I love you for more reasons than I can count. I love the little girl he told me of, and I love the woman I found. I love the way you hold the damned tap down when you're pouring a beer and I think you've made me into an alcoholic just so I have an excuse to show up here every night. Heh. And I love the way-- "

Tifa silenced him with a finger to his lips and Zack looked surprised for a moment.

"I know all about you, sir," she whispered coquettishly, "That's pillow talk. Be honest with me, Zack. I love you for that."

"For my honesty?" he laughed, right hand sliding up the valley between her breasts like a wary traveler, afraid to stray off the main road. It stopped just below her chin, stroking the soft flesh there but his eyes stayed focused on Tifa's. "My honesty," he repeated, "As opposed to a certain guy's dishonesty. Is that all though? Is that the only reason you let me push you in here? Because I'll screw you and you can know for certain that Tifa Lockhart is the only woman on my mind?"

"No, there's more, you know that," she defended, "It's just. . . I don't know. Will you be here in the morning? Or will the sheets be cold. . . " A tear slid down her face before she could stop it and a smoulder of red fire sizzled behind Zack's eyes. Seeing her hurt. . . there was a certain someone he would have loved to rip apart for that. But no, this situation didn't call for a fist or a threat, this called for a bit of skilled repair work. He'd mend the shattered, trembling heart in this creature. He'd seal the treasure when it was whole again and wrap it in silk. And he'd keep the tainted dirty fingers of the rest of the world from hurting it anymore.

"Tifa. . ." he began, gently pushing the tear off her cheek and brushing the bangs from her eyes, forefinger straying over her left eye and twirling in small circles, as though casually playing in a puddle of new rainwater. "Why don't you let me show you if I'm here in the morning or not? Why don't you try trusting me? Not all of us Soldier boys are unfaithful, ya know. . . and I'm afraid, dearest, that if you keep alluding to him, I'll start to think you think you're with Cloud. And not with me. Nothing's a bigger turn-off."

He meant his words but, like Zack, he laughed as he said them. The smile hovering, wanting a mate, he stayed just above her, waiting for a sign, that wary traveler very much ready to find his desired destination. Tifa felt his anxiousness. He'd suppressed his lust for months and she was more grateful than she could express for his patience. He deserved this now. She deserved it. What they'd seen in each other hadn't been fleeting or an illusion they'd each conjured, it was real and it was honest, natural. No false pretenses, just mutual admiration and longing. She'd wanted him too, that first day in the bar. But Tifa had been so worried her heart was lying, desperate to find someone after Cloud had abandoned her for his delusions. But no, she'd learned Zack was not a substitute, he was too unique to be the simple filler of Cloud's empty boots. Zack demanded attention. Zack demanded respect. Zack demanded Tifa.

She thought it felt god-awful wonderful to be wanted unconditionally.

"I can see what you're thinking," Zack murmured, blinking softly, his gaze unwavering and unrelenting, "Your eyes are like glass, Tifa. And whether there's tears beatin' against the panes or sunlight, I can make out what's inside. I'm tired of seeing the woman inside hiding against the wall. I'm tired of seeing her waiting for a guy with his head up his ass. Think that woman could take me instead?"

She couldn't help it. Tifa started to cry. "No," she whispered, "No 'insteads'. I just want you, Zack. I think. . . I think I just want you. Th-that is, if you wouldn't mind having me."

Zack grinned at the words, and frowned at the tears, a strange expression that drifted to nothing as a warm smile spread over him. He loved this woman so much. So much. A feeling he thought he'd known before but those others had been nothing. Children. He wanted to wrap his arms around her and never let go. He wanted to make her feel as good as she made him feel. A gentle hand moved up to caress the side of his face and he saw Tifa smiling up at him. And then that hand pushed his head down softly to her breast and she wrapped her arms around his neck, the tears gone, the moment all that mattered.

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She let him go as far as he dared that night. For Zack, of course, there were no limits. The both of them clinging to each other like anchors in the supple darkness, for once Zack actually tried to make sure she was just as pleased as he was. He wanted that for her. Tifa needed to be made love to with a certain finesse, he could sense it. He paid attention to her as he had with no other woman before. Because, well, Tifa wasn't just another woman, she was. . . Tifa. He couldn't find a better way to explain it to himself. Tifa should be stroked like fragile velvet, susceptible to being crushed, but she should be roughened up a bit because she roughed back, batting at him like a playful kitten with loving claws. Like velvet, one direction was smooth as satin, but in the other direction, rough as fine sandpaper. Surprisingly, Zack found himself preferring the sandpaper.

A soft, happy chuckle sounded in the dimness of the room. It rolled through the dust motes, then rose to the ceiling, followed by the crackle of an old plastic tablecloth and the rustle of a cotton one; temporary bedding to what Tifa hoped would not be a temporary affair.

"Hmmm. . . and what's this one?"

They held each other in the darkness, morning's mist licking the back room's lone window. Pale light burst through softly, nothing harsh. It was as though the sun didn't want to intrude on something so fragile. It didn't know that the two people clinging in the corner were stronger already than anything either of them had had before.

Zack looked up at the question, hair in his face and a contented glare in his eyes. Tifa ran a fingernail up a scar on his side, tickling him as she wrapped an arm around his broad shoulders, her head laying lightly against his own.

"That's. . . mmm. . . I think that was from a fight from years ago. Knife wound."

"Poor baby. "Tifa grinned and nuzzled his neck, flattening her hand and rubbing his side softly. She picked the hand up, moving away without warning and tiptoeing across his hard stomach, down to his hips and stopping at a protruding pelvis bone. "And this one?" she asked, fingering a line of pale pink there.

"Grazed by a bullet. That one's interesting actually, it was a training accident. The guy that did it, he was drunk off his ass and thought his rifle was a water gun. He didn't make promotion, if I remember correctly. You go any further south, Tifa, and I may have to show some much more interesting things than a few scars."

"I saw. . . "Tifa smiled, wrapping a leg up over him and laying huddled close, the warmth of his side spreading farther than where it actually touched her, consuming her body in gentle fires. She lay her head on his chest, playing with the few strands of dark hair popping out of the expanse of gorgeous brown beneath her hand. "You know, you're a good reason to stay awake."

"Aren't you tired though?" Zack asked, yawning himself. He stretched an arm out until his shoulder popped, then lowered it to rest on Tifa's head, weaving through her hair. She was. Tifa was pleurably exhausted actually but she didn't want it to end. There were things she didn't particularly want to deal with on the other side of the plank door standing so innocently in the wall. The rest of the world, mainly. Laying with Zack was so much easier and so much nicer than anything the rest of the world had to offer. Laying here, blanketed in his warmth, his blunt fingers playing with her ear and running over her breasts and small shoulders, the cruelty of the snow-filled world outside outside could offer her nothing more fulfilling. Still. . . so much she had to do to start another day. She couldn't hide in here forever.

Was that really why she wouldn't let herself drift off right now though? Why she wouldn't get a few hours of sleep before she knew Barret would be barging in with Marlene and a list of chores? Maybe. . . maybe she was afraid she'd go to sleep and wake up and he'd be gone. Maybe he'd leave her like Cloud had left. Her heart was in too many pieces to break any further. If they got any smaller, it would be nothing but dust blowing around inside her chest. You couldn't repair dust. You could only sweep it up and throw it away.

She couldn't trust Zack. Zack had given her a beautiful night, a night she could hold in her soul until she died, but still, she couldn't trust him. She'd been hurt too much and Tifa Lockhart was not a defenseless woman. She'd grown armor against men's lies, against men's promises. She knew so well what a knife in the heart felt like. It didn't leave a scar like that knife wound in her lover's side, it left something infinitely less tangible but infinitely more painful. And it never, never healed.

Nearly frowning, she leaned up on one elbow and stared off at the air for a moment. Warm breath at her throat made her refocus her attention before Zack tackled her and she was on her back, laughing, the darker thoughts pushed from her mind. God, she loved him for that.

He sat on top of her for a moment, balancing on his knees and not daring to put his full weight on such a fragile body. Smiling gently, wanting to push the pain and the questions, the blaring uncertainty out of her eyes, he massaged her with two strong hands, as though to press every thought out of that lovely brown head, leaving only room for pleasure. That was all she needed, he was sure of it.

She was getting excited again and so was he when the knocking came.

"Ignore it, "he muttered easily, eyes flashing and stinging with the sweat rolling into them. Tifa was more than willing to take the advice, her lips swollen and her cheeks flushed, breathing heavily into the humid air. She distractedly heard it come louder but she was too entwined in a haze of love and passion to bother. The sounds swirled as Zack fought to make her his, redoubling his efforts as though something was whispering in his ear, some quiet, mocking voice warning that danger was near, a threat at hand. He drowned the cries in her moans and his, sweat sticking his hair to his forehead, swallowing hard as he locked the both of them together. Nothing could break this because it was real; real and undeluded and he wouldn't let anything come between them. How could he? How could he allow this woman to be toyed with again? No. . . he sought her eyes, luscious orbs of rust-tinted glass that burned with their own fire, and he told her that. Tifa believed the silent promise without question. Even as the knocking redoubled and a voice rose up to accompany the sound; an insistent one that wouldn't be deterred.

Steeling her self-control, actually, fighting to have some self-discipline at all, Tifa gently pushed Zack's mouth from her right nipple, his teeth coming away with some degree of disappointment, and then rolled him off with a groan.

"Dammit. . ." Zack sighed, rolling over and laying casually on the floor, the tablecloths crinkling under his back, "Make it quick, "he laughed, "It's probably some customer, tell 'em there's a liquor store around the corner. And then let 'em know your horny boyfriend's panting for your return in the back."

Tifa grinned and brushed his lips quickly before jumping to her feet as best as she was able, nearly falling back flat on her bottom but Zack caught her and pushed her up, laughing, then sprawling back, casually naked on the floor.

"You going out there like that?" he asked.

"What? Ha, guess I'd better not."

"I wouldn't mind. But I'd make you charge them double for the beer. And then, of course, I'd have to kill them. You're my own personal piece of artwork."

The knocking came again, seemingly rattling the walls. They could hear the doorknob being turned, rattled around irritably, grating in the air and shattering the almost divine peace that had settled over Seventh Heaven's normally bustling backroom. Tifa was sad to hear it go, it'd been a song she'd never be able to get her fill of. Scrabbling on the floor, flipping up the scattered tablecloths, nudging Zack's crumpled clothes away, she searched for her own but gave it up after a moment. He'd thrown them out that window the night before. Stifling another smile, Tifa put her hands on her hips and turned about to face him, trying to look serious, tapping her foot and looking up through slightly lowered lids.

"Seemed like a good idea at the time, "Zack responded to the silent rebuke. He stared at her lithe white figure, creamy brown hair cascading to her feet, hanging over her shoulders in waves of dark sienna swirls, frazzled a bit but-- but--

"Dammit, Tifa, stop standing like that, you're killin' me."

"Hold that thought." She skipped back to the corner and nimbly plucked Zack's over-sized blue turtleneck from the floor, sliding it over her head, wrapping herself in his scent and pausing for a moment to breathe it in; cologne and the bittersweet smell of his body; the hint of cigarettes though he didn't smoke, and then the casual tickle of beer. Tifa smiled, embracing the fabric as she might him, feeling happier in that one instant than she had for the longest time. Zack eyed her and shared the sentiment, satisfaction added to his own expression. He'd put that smile on her face. He'd taken the tears from her eyes. Nothing would put them back. Nothing.

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Opening the door, Tifa was surprised to find the rest of Seventh Heaven quite chilly. She gave the thermostat a glance, then padded on bare feet past the silent tables, the stacked chairs, and the pinball table, blinking and throwing strange neon shadows over the dawn-shrouded room. The knocking sounded in the air and Tifa thought she could make the insistent voice out now. A man muttering things to himself and cursing the cold winds blowing through the eaves. There'd been a time the sound of that voice would have sent shivers through her, would have sparked a current that ran down her back and into her head, would have made her almost physically ill with wanting. But now. . . Cloud's voice frightened her.

A blank expression on her face, her wide eyes bright with a whirling of thoughts, Tifa raised a hand and unclasped the elaborate lock system Barret had devised for the tavern's front door. It swung open slowly, emitting a swirl of cold, a few crackling dead leaves, and then the stare of Cloud's bright blue eyes. Before she could get a word out, he'd swept her up in his arms and was twirling her around, his cold skin making her cringe.

"Tifa!" he shouted, holding her close, pressing her head into his shoulder, "God, Tifa, I've missed you so much! Ha! I thought I'd be able to help myself, but a week is too long! Tifa!"

"Hi Cloud, "she murmured, gently trying to loosen his strong, cold arms, "I didn't think you'd return for a while yet. I thought-- I thought it would still be a while. . ."

"Well, damn, you don't sound very happy to see me, "he joked, finally setting her on the floor. He cupped a hand over each of her small shoulders and pushed her back a bit, so he could a good look. "One of my shirts?" he asked, "Ha, don't worry, I don't mind. But no, I did my soul searching. . . I did it." Cloud sobered a bit, taking his hands from her, sticking them in his pockets and cocking his head to one side, taking in the woman's form with a sort of possessive smile. She was even more beautiful than he remembered, more beautiful than that sacred mental image he kept tucked away in his mind; that one he'd take out to gaze upon when the nights had grown especially cold. Yes, she was more beautiful, more, more something, more radiant, perhaps? He couldn't find the word. All Cloud knew was that he loved her. He loved Tifa LockHeart and now he was convinced he had the guts to admit it. A lifetime of watching from afar, unable to love himself much less anyone else. But now. . . the past few days he'd realized his own worth. He'd traveled the decimated remains of Midgar and found people to convince him of it. People he'd helped, people who respected him. He couldn't garner enough of his own respect, so he'd appropriate theirs. He could do that. He could learn to be confident.

And it was going to start now.

Tifa looked nervous, he noticed. This realization sent a hairline fracture into his courage. She wouldn't look him in the eye, or even come near. Instead she kept those gorgeous eyes of hers pasted to the ground, her bare white left foot, scraping over her right and running over the floor in meandering, circular patterns.

"Heh. . . "Cloud laughed, crossing his arms close around his chest, a look crossing his face suddenly as though he was afraid of being punched, "I'm sorry for running in here like that-- so, so early,"he stammered, "You were probably asleep or, or something. Was rude of me. . . "

"Why are you here?" she asked, finally glancing up, "I was certain you'd never come back. When you left, you were so angry. And so was I. Didn't you find Aeris? Didn't you find what you were looking for?"

"I did find it. . . "he murmured, "I wasn't looking for Aeris, Tifa. No, no, when I said that I was just so mad at myself and I wanted to take it out on you, so I. . . I knew that'd hurt you. That's why I said I was leaving to look for her. But no. This is hard for me, harder than anything I've ever had to do. You-- you know what I want to say and you have to know it's been impossible till now, otherwise there's no way in hell I would have taken so long to come out. . . t'come out and tell you. But I found something out there this week, something in myself that doesn't even belong to me. You know what I found?"

"No. . . "

"It was hidden behind a lot of shit; a lot of insults and barriers but I finally found it. It was you, Tifa. In my soul, there was a long-haired, beautiful woman who told me I could solve my problems, heal my soul. She's my strength, my reason for living, my fight, my courage, anything good about me, anything good at all that makes me do anything good. . . it's you. You are what I've been looking for. And you were there all the time but I had to leave your presence to find you. You're my soul. And if there's anything at all about me that's worth a damn. . . it's any thoughts, memories, whatever. . . related to you."

"Cloud--"

"No!" he interrupted, two fists pressed over his heart as he pleaded, cursing his clumsy words and his desperate thoughts. He was too stupid, too stupid. His words couldn't even begin to describe this flooding of love in his chest, words were stupid, stupid, insipid and meaningless. They were nothing compared to the things he was trying to convey. God, if only he could take his sword and split his chest open, show her the welling of emotion he had for her. If he could paint, or write, or sing, he'd have a better chance, but all Cloud had were his stupid words. "Tifa,"he pleaded, on the verge of frustrated tears, "You have to understand, you have to. There's a-- simpler way to say it, I suppose. Three words. But they get thrown around a lot. They don't really mean anything anymore. Just words. . . " His lips halted, his mouth hanging half-open, and he stared at her averted face, the cold wind from outside freezing his back through his clothes. The warmth here, the warmth inside the bar, that was what he wanted. If he had to leave through that door and back out into the icy breeze, into the elements that would assault him, leave him shivering in the gutter. . . no, it was too terrible to contemplate. His warmth was here, he'd have it. He'd have her. He just didn't know how he could go on without his soul. He'd just found it, found where it had always been, now he needed to become one with it, with Tifa. Didn't she-- ? Didn't she want that too?

"Cloud. Do you. . . do you remember what I said before you left?" Tifa whispered her words, still unable to look him in the eye. She knew she might very well become defenseless if she let herself become trapped in his blue, his blonde, his gorgeousness.

Her words made him hold himself tighter, the winds at his back seeming to blow colder, a harbinger of things to come. He remembered. Swallowing hard, he nodded.

"I said if you walked out the door, I would know for certain who your one and only love was."

"I know you did," he blurted quickly, "But I told you, it's not Aeris! It never had anything to do with Aeris!"

"I believe you,"she said quietly, finally able to look up, realization in her eyes at last. Perhaps this fact now blaring at her was the reason she'd been able to let Zack take her last night. Because she now knew why Cloud had never been able to place her first in his heart. "I believe that it wasn't Aeris, I never seriously thought it was. Cloud, you love yourself too much. You love yourself too much to ever have enough love left for anyone else. I knew it the moment you left. You never, never would have left me alone if you cared more for me than for yourself. If you've come around now from that hidden affair, I'm sorry for it. Because it's just not there anymore. And maybe it never was to begin with. At least, not to a degree strong enough to last through all we've put each other through. Cloud, Cloud, I --"

He cut the rest of her words off by grabbing Tifa up in his arms and lowering his head to hers, prepared halt those horrible rebukes with a savage kiss. He'd kiss away the coldness, the hurt in her voice. He'd melt it with his new love and she'd want to return it. She had to, oh God, she had to see that he couldn't live another minute without someone else. He was so damn lonely. . . he had to fill that hole in his chest with something. Her love would keep the chill from seeping in.

Cologne.

She reeked of it.

The smell tickled his nostril and halted his kiss so that he remained poised above her, eyes snapping open and staring into hers. He licked his lips and swallowed hard, watching Tifa now in a new light. The haze of love and realization receded. The bar's dim illumination stabbed him in the eyes. "Tifa. . ." he whispered, backing away half an inch, his hands trembling, his voice choked as though someone had two cruel hands around his throat, "Tifa, this isn't my shirt."

"You're right." The tears were in her eyes too now. Cloud almost bolted backwards in revulsion and shock. Shaking his head slightly, he gingerly took his hands from her shoulders and stood looking at them as though they were covered in blood. He dropped them to his sides, disbelief, agony, pain, thick in his features. His mouth opened and closed, unsaid words whispered over his tongue. But. . . what. . . how could this be? His reunion was a lie. . . and his love belonged to someone else.

"Welcome back, Cloud."

Blinking tears and hurt away, he looked up and to the back of the bar, a bare-chested figure standing silhouetted black in the dim light. Cloud recognized him immediately and attempted to pull himself together. He ran fingers through his bangs, sweeping them from his vision and impatiently smeared the tears from his eyes. He couldn't look like such a blubbering fool in front of Zack, he'd never hear the end of it. His expression still hurt, still cracked like a fine porcelain mask, he backed up against the wall and leaned there, two hands pressing against it as though he was having a hard time staying on his feet.

"What're you doing here, man?" Cloud asked, trying to sound casual. Zack stepped forward to be by Tifa's side, itching to put an arm around her shoulders and draw her close, but too tactful for such an act. Instead he looked towards his friend and cocked a dark eyebrow up, his arms crossed.

Seeing his naked chest and finally realizing whose shirt Tifa was wrapped in, glimpsing Zack's hastily slipped-on, unzipped pants, noticing they both had bedhead, swollen lips, and red marks on their upper arms and necks, Cloud fell backwards and to the floor, hitting his head on the wall.

"Cloud!" Tifa shot forward and knelt at his side, slipping a hand behind his shoulders and trying to push him up as Zack looked on, feeling out of sorts. "Are you all right?"

"I'm just terrific," he snapped, throwing her hand off and pushing himself away, "Makes me feel like a million dollars to come back and find one of my best friends has fucked my girlfriend. Was she good, Zack? A good fuck, you god damned sonnuvabitch? You wanna fill me in before you spin the story over beers tonight to the bastards in the bar?"

"What the hell're you talking about?" Zack demanded, a frown curling his lip down a hair, "Don't talk about her like that. . . or me."

"Wasn't it enough you got every other bitch you ever saw?" Cloud continued, jumping to his feet, gesturing wildly with his arms, "You had to take Tifa from me?"

"He didn't steal me, Cloud!" Tifa interjected, arms folded under her breasts, rubbing her upper arms with two nervous hands. This was exactly the kind of confrontation she hadn't wanted. This was the sort of thing she'd had nightmares about. She didn't want to see Cloud hurt, she'd never wanted that. But she didn't want Zack hurt either. Why did this have to be so hard. . . ? Maybe if she just spun the truth straight out, sidestepped the silly falsehoods and misunderstandings already beginning to be fabricated, she could halt this before it really started. "Listen to me, Cloud, and please, listen well. I love Zack. I can say that and say it with such honesty and clarity that it almost hurts me. We never had that. You could never tell me you loved me because there were always a million other conflicts in the way. Some of them weren't your fault. A lot of them weren't your fault. But others were. And yes, some of them were mine. Why couldn't I tell you straight out how I felt? I never knew. I still don't know. But I think perhaps it was a sign that the two of us just aren't meant to be."

"How can you know that?" Cloud snapped, "How? After only a week? After one fuckin' night with this, this pig. He doesn't care about you, he doesn't care about anything but your tits and your legs and the challenge of getting you to put out. Zack's like that with everyone, don't think, don't even think for one second that you've made even a dent in his mind because he'll be gone before you know it. He's always been like that."

"Don't speak for me!" Zack roared, stepping forward and grabbing Cloud by the collar. He slammed him fiercely against the wall and the noise of the impact resounded in the tiny bar. "Don't even god damned pass your judgments on me or anything that Tifa and I have because you don't know. You wanna know why don't know?! Because you haven't been here! Ya left her alone to go off and "find yourself". What a load of shit. But that's just your typical brand of Cloud Strife nonsense and everyone knows to expect it from you, but god dammit, ya can't think that Tifa's gonna put her life on hold while you're out "soul searching". Or even expect me to put my life on hold. I wasn't going to wait around to ask your permission and neither was Tifa."

"B-bullshit," Cloud stuttered, flinging Zack's arms from his shirt and shoving him away, "You two don't have anything. . . you can't. Where you been, Zack? You haven't seen what we've seen, or been together like we've been. You don't know what we have."

"But she does," Zack snapped, gesturing to Tifa who looked on, too nervous to breath. She shuffled her feet and averted her eyes, knowing how cowardly she must look. She was cowardly. . . Tifa was convinced of it. But no, she just didn't want to see anyone hurt. She was too damned nice.

"I understand all that's happened, Cloud," she whispered, still afraid to stare at him directly. He was a sun that would blind her if she let him. "All that time though, it was about you. Your feelings, your thoughts and your screwed-up past. But you never asked me anything. No one ever did. I guess. . . I don't mean to sound selfish or jealous because I don't think I am. You were more important than me -- "

"Tifa!"

"No, Zack," she said firmly, cutting him off with an upraised hand as her voice began to gain a little confidence, "You don't know about this. But Cloud, you were more important and that's fine, you couldn't help it and I didn't begrudge the fact that we were on *your* vendetta. However, I won't lie and say it didn't hurt when no one ever asked me why I was crying. How I felt. It hurt a lot. It hurt even more because you were one of the silent ones. . . too cold. Too wrapped up in yourself and revenge and other things. . . Any love for me seemed like an afterthought. But Zack. . . no pretenses. He only cares about me. His eyes are never distant, never full of regret or sad memories. Just love. I could never see that in you, Cloud. And how could I respond to something I couldn't see? How could I ever be expected to return something never given to me. Cloud. . . I dearly wish Aeris was still here for you. I wish it more than almost anything else. But do you know what I wish the most? I wish for my own happiness. I have to put that first. I've been putting yours first and having nothing come of it for too long. Life's too short and opportunities too few for me to let Zack go."

Let Zack go. . ? Cloud snapped his eyes to each of them, at a loss. Weren't these the same two people? What'd happened? Why'd he leave? Tifa just didn't know what was what, she was too innocent to understand what had been done to her. He'd save her yet, he'd save her from this bastard's lies.

"What has he told you?" Cloud demanded, shaking his fist and stepping forward, "A lotta pretty words and some flowers and a night on the town, maybe? Yeah, Zack's methods aren't anything fancy. But it seems they work. Tifa, you gotta listen to me. You gotta see him for what he is!"

"Aren't you a wonderful friend?" Zack muttered bitterly. Cloud dashed up to him and shoved him hard in the shoulder, throwing both arms out at his sides and clenching his fists in a bloody rage.

"Me?! You're the one fucking my girlfriend! Want me to return your knife once I yank it from my back?"

"Heh. Seems you and Tifa's relationship isn't the only one in question today." Zack narrowed his eyes, fighting the urge to throw a punch. In the corner of his vision, he could see Tifa's face; a mask of white, new tears in her eyes. This was hurting her. And that fact was hurting him. "Cloud, I think you need to leave. Your scrabbings to knock my feelings to shit in Tifa's eyes are obviously not gonna work. Whatever I was is whatever I was. I won't deny that I'm not the most committed of guys in the world. But neither are you. I seem t'remember a story about you and Aeris in an amusement park. And that wasn't very long ago. Now you're throwing yourself at Tifa. After just returning from a week spent lusting after Aeris. God damn, Cloud, if you ever managed to *get* any, you'd be more of a stud than me."

Cloud ignored him, turning to Tifa, blue eyes desperate. "Didn't that night mean anything? Under the airship? Anything at all?"

Zack answered for her.

"That isn't a problem I don't think," he said smugly, glancing suggestively down at Cloud. Then he raised a hand and poked him in the forehead with his index finger, "This is. Get it?"

"Don't touch me. . . "

Cloud's low voice was a growl. Zack was taller than him but he ignored the fact. He drew himself up as tall as he could and spit in his former friend's face. "You're the lowest sack of shit I've ever known."

"No, don't say that, it's not true," Tifa protested, coming forward, a bit of heat in her eyes. Zack held up a hand, his gaze focused on Cloud.

"It's alright, Tifa," he reassured, "Guy's just run outta arguments and is resorting to insults. That's Cloud, you know that. You wanna fight me? Ya hotheaded prick? You've already lost. May as well go away lookin' the part."

"Lost. . . " Cloud growled, "This isn't a game, this is my life. Her life! You see, Tifa? This is a game to him! He's using you! You're quarry, nothin' more!"

"Say that again," Zack invited, a dangerous smile playing over his lips, "Say it again, you hotheaded, deluded fuck."

"You don't love her. And she doesn't love you, she's just confused, has every right t'be. I was selfish, not anymore! I'll keep her away from you, you don't deserve her!"

"One more time. . . "

"I'm not scared of you!" Cloud raged, words squeezing from behind grit teeth, "You don't scare me! You won't have her! You won't have her as your little toy until you get sick of her like ya did with Aeris! I won't see that happen to Tifa!"

Zack swore, drew his fist back, and slammed the sharp edge of his knuckles into Cloud's cheek. There was a crack and a grunt and Cloud flew back into the wall, standing there for a moment, then beginning to slide down, eyes half-shut, a line of red oozing from between his lips. But he shook it off and found his feet.

"No!" Tifa cried as he dashed forward with a cry towards Zack, "No! Don't do this! You don't have to do this! I'll go away! I'd leave rather than watch the both of you like this!" The words were meaningless, they were blocking the only way of escape, but Tifa stepped forward anyway as the two men rolled on the floor, exchanging blows.

"I've always hated you!" Cloud roared, hitting Zack again and again with his fists, then slamming a hard, pointed elbow in his stomach, "You heartless bastard, ya shoulda stayed gone, ya shoulda stayed away! Fuck you, man, fuck you!!"

Zack twisted around trying to get Cloud from off the top of him and finally succeeded, features amazingly cool and collected under the barrage of blows. He got a hold of Cloud's head and wrenched it about, slamming his skull into the bar's plank floor, then moving his knee into his sternum, effectively pinning him. "You're wrong. You don't deserve her. You don't deserve her face or her body or her voice or her cooking or her god damned love. You ever looked at her? Really looked at that woman that was always by your side?"

Tifa's fists shot up to her lips at Zack's words, her heart pounding. She watched him as he spoke, breathing hard, love in her eyes. He could do that with so little! Not a lot of bullshit or stolen glances. Forthright passion, forthright understanding. She'd never realized it could be like that. Or that it could feel so good.

"You can't comprehend real love, or her. It's always about you, Cloud. And Tifa knows it and she told me she knows it. What'd she ever tell you? Nothing, because how the hell can ya talk to a guy like you? Ya couldn't talk to me for five minutes without wanting to fight. Fuck me, Cloud? Nah. Fuck you. Can't think of anything more appropriate to say. Heh-- "

His laugh cut off sharp, Cloud lashing out with two furious boots to Zack's face. His head snapped backward in a arch of blood and his body followed, landing crumpled on the floor. Cloud jumped to his feet and proceeded to kick him in the ribs, swearing madly, tears in his eyes. Why'd it have to be this way? Such a long long battle that never ended. Zack didn't fight back, his lip split, his eyes squeezed shut in pain. He lay on his side, trying to block Cloud's kicks with his pulled up knees but he let the kicks come. He knew Cloud needed to let it out. He knew Cloud and despite their harsh words, he didn't want him taking any bottled-up rage out on himself. Let the kicks come. Let that uncanny aggression find an outlet.

"Leave him alone! Cloud!! Stop it!!"

Tifa knew no such thing though. She shot forward and forcibly grabbed Cloud's shoulder, pushing him away then falling to her knees beside Zack, cradling his head in her lap, putting a towel to his lip. She wrapped her arms around his neck and embraced him passionately, staring at Cloud with a hurt expression. "It's over, "she said forcibly, "Let it die. . . "

He shook his blonde head, looking as though he'd break down. He smeared a bit of blood from his nose and muttered, "No, Tifa, don't fall for it. Don't say that. Please, please don't. . . "

"We both have to move on now. Don't drag your feet, farmboy. There's someone for you, someone more patient than me. . . or. . . I don't know. But I love Zack. And Zack loves me. That's enough. So so little, but more than enough. "

"So it meant nothing?" Cloud whispered, his voice low to hide the gruff. He impatiently smeared wet from his eyes, taking a step backwards, the sight of Tifa cradling Zack almost physically painful to him. What was worse was that they looked so right together. If he looked at it without prejudice, they seemed like a fucking couple. . .

"It meant a lot, "Tifa contradicted, holding Zack close. He sought out her hand, fighting to open his eyes and look at Cloud. "But somehow, this now. . . this means more. This is more real. This is more right. But nothing can demean what we had. . . " She would have like to say more but she didn't want Zack to hear it. There were some things she couldn't tell him or that he'd ever understand. Years of longing couldn't disappear overnight. Though she had to admit, one night of fulfillment had gone a long, long way in her mind towards canceling out a few years of deprivation. She unconsciously stroked the side of Zack's face as Cloud stood there, expression blank.

She looked so happy. Happier than he'd ever been able to make her. Cloud turned about slowly and stood in the doorway, letting the freezing air blast his front now. Cold. A lifetime of cold. Always. His hand strayed to the door frame and his fingers brushed the wood, Tifa watching his actions with a lump in her throat, holding Zack tighter and burying her chin in his hair. He returned the embrace, his anger dulled.

"I loved this bar, "Cloud whispered, back to them both. His fingers came away from the warm wood as the winds blew his hair in his eyes. The city stretched before him black and filthy. He plunged himself into it without another word, slamming the door shut in his wake.

Tifa held onto Zack for a long time after he left. After a minute or two, he pushed himself up and held her too, nestling her head in his shoulder and stroking her hair as she cried into him. He'd promised himself he wouldn't let her cry anymore. But he had a feeling these were an okay sort of tears.

"You don't regret it, do you?" he whispered into her ear, tickling her. She didn't look up but Zack could feel her shaking her head no. "That's good. Because you know he'll find someone. But that's his business. You do love me right?"

Tifa looked up at that one, smiling through sparkling wet eyes. "Only if you don't leave," she replied softly, glad to be lost in his strong arms. They encompassed her shoulders and she bathed in the gentle warmth, letting it shove away the cold that had blown in through the opened door.

"Now his nonsense didn't shake your faith in me, did it?"

She didn't answer for a moment, looking instead into his mischievous blue eyes and brushing strands of dark umber from them, letting the back of her hand linger on his cheek. "I love you so much, Zack. I want you to know that from the beginning. No false starts or missed signals. All right?"

He kissed her softly, ignoring his hurt lip, then swept her up in his arms, holding her close and intensifying their kiss on the way up from the floor. He leaned them both against Seventh Heaven's walls, not letting her feet touch the ground, supporting the both of them even as he distracted her deliciously with his lips. She was too amazing to ever have to touch the earth. He'd hold her up from it forever, hold her suspended in the sky, in his arms, in his lips until she didn't want him anymore. Yet that wasn't a concern really. Zack saw love in her eyes; relief; happiness. He held her away from the touch of the cold ground, the touch of anything wrong and locked her in his strength. Tifa was glad to be put there. Glad enough to keep the bar closed all day.

This fic really belongs to my friend Zelda6, I wrote it for her and it wouldn't be in existence (not that that would be a bad thing) if she wasn't such a huge Tifa fan ^_^ It only took me a couple nights to do and I can't believe it's actually coherent. Something about it though, I had to post it...

By GlassShard

Finished: 8/14/99