

## **Chapter Seventeen: All Roads Lead to Midgar**

*"I just can't believe this shit!" Cid Highwind*

Cid Highwind's deep blue eyes were as thunderous and stormy as the ocean as he stood underneath the wing of the Tiny Bronco, covered from head to toe in a black rain slicker, complete with dark boots over his already booted feet. A cigarette dangled from his thin lips, the lighted tip of it the only thing that lent illumination to the shadow cast by his plastic hood. The light danced over his cheekbones, set high in his almost haggard face, creating hollows of inky shadows beneath the strong bones. It also lent an orangish-yellow illumination to his deep blue eyes, making them look like they were smoldering with fire in the literal sense as well as the figurative.

"Bastard," he suddenly mumbled, cigarette dancing on his thin lips as he spoke. A bit of ash floated down to sand beneath his feet.

Barret turned to glare at him. "You talkin' to me, foo?"

Cid blinked at his companion. "Naw."

Barret snorted and turned away again, the movement of his head unsettling the stubborn raindrops still clinging to the hood of his slicker. "You talkin' to yerself, then?"

"No," Cid growled, blowing smoke out of his nostrils in annoyance. "I just can't believe this shit!"

"I hear ya," Barret echoed grumpily, shifting his weight from foot to foot. The man was so tall he had to crouch slightly to fit under the wing of the Tiny Bronco.

"I mean," Cid continued to rant. "We busted our asses yesterday, climbing the mountains, riding the waves, to get to that cave to look for that *damn ship*, and the @\$%ing thing ends up on the beach!"

And sure enough, fifty feet away from where Cid and Barret were standing miserably underneath the wing of the Tiny Bronco, the "ghost ship" that had very un-ghostlike qualities was sitting on the beach with a certain smugness that seemed directed at the two men. Everything about the ship from its broken mast to the rotted boards of its hull appeared to gloat at Cid and Barret, teasing them about the hard work they had endured the day before, belittling their actions and making fun of their anger. *Look at me*, it seemed to say. *I'm made of rotting, termite-filled wood held together by rusty nails, and I outsmarted you! Hahahahaha!*

Cid spat at the sand. "Goddamn hunk of crap," he cursed.

"Well, getting your panties in a twist about it ain't gonna make all our hard work worthwhile, ya know," Barret grumbled, striving to be the sensible one now that Cid was all huffy and puffy over a stupid ship.

Cid crossed his arms over his chest and cursed softly when his cigarette was almost extinguished by the water sitting on his sleeve. "Shut up," he told his companion. "I had a feeling something like this was gonna happen."

"Then why the hell did ya drag me out here this morning?" Barret growled, adjusted his way-too-small slicker with his normal arm. "I'm cold, I'm wet, and this damn slicker thang smells like booty!"

"Probably 'cause I gave you the one that was kept outside by the septic tank," Cid said, calmly puffing on his cigarette.

Barret turned an amusing shade of green and whirled on his companion, glaring down at the smaller man. "Foo, you'd best be joking or I'm gonna bust a cap in your ass! I did attach my gun-arm this mornin' ya know!"

Cid grinned. "I can see that. I ain't blind. I was just joking, anyways."

"Best be," Barret grumbled, folding his arms across his chest, a little peeved that his companion had managed to make him loose his cool with one off-the-wall comment. He had promised Marlene that he was going to work on keeping his temper in check, and goddamn it, he was gonna try his hardest!

Then Cid went and ruined it. "I gave you the one I found in my chocobo's pen."

Barret blew his cool again. "What?! The hell you put a coat in the chocobo's pen anyways, foo?!"

Cid scowled and blew smoke out of his nostrils. "He didn't have no hay! Didn't want the poor bird-brain to have nothing to lay on! Are you gonna shoot me for being nice to my chocobo?"

"You ain't nice to your bird, Cid! You didn't even feed him yesterday!"

"Did too! I fed him in the morning!"

"Yeah, well, I fed him again in the evening, seeing that you didn't do it!"

"You ain't supposed to feed chocobos that much food! Now he's gonna get fat!"

Barret's scowl deepened. "You supposed to feed chocobos two times a day! Two, fool!" He held up two fingers of his normal hand.

Cid's mouth fell open, but he managed to keep an expert grip on his cigarette. "You shittin' me?" he demanded of his tall companion. "I didn't know that."

Barret threw his arms up in exasperation. "No wonder the damn bird is always eating my birdie's food!"

"Birdie?" Cid repeated, then burst out laughing.

Barret flushed and made another mean face at his amused friend. "Shu'up, foo! That's what my little girl calls 'em!"

Cid continued laughing, clutching his sides in mirth.

Barret folded his arms across his chest again, offended. "I give up on you, Cid! Ya need serious help or somethin'! Now what was we talkin' 'bout before?"

"Where I got your coat from," Cid managed to say through his snickering.

"Before that, fool!"

Cid gave it some thought after he finished his laughing fit. "Hmmm. Oh yeah! We was talking about how @#%\$ing stupid it was for us to be out here in the rain, all wet and cold, just staring at a stupid ship on the beach!" He pointed to the "ghost" ship sitting on the shore to prove his point. The rotting thing stared back as if to say, "Who me?"

"If it's so stupid," Barret grumbled. "Then why did ya drag me out here? Yeah! That's what I was askin'!"

Cid shrugged. "You were the only one awake and dumb enough to come with me."

Barret gritted his teeth and counted to ten (just like Marlene told him to do) before he trusted himself to answer Cid. "Let's go back to the bar, foo. I'm done standing out here admiring this old hunk of crap. The brat Yuffie was right; it sure is one ugly son of a jackal."

Cid snickered at Barret's euphemism, but made no move to restart the Tiny Bronco. Instead he said, "You think Cloud will have his head screwed on straight and right side up when we get back?"

"He'd better," Barret growled, eyes still on the falling rain. "Or someone else is gonna have to take command." He glanced at Cid. "Be ready, foo. We probably nominate you."

Cid chewed on that for a while, then shook his head. "Naw. You know there ain't nothing that can keep Spike down for long. I think he's gonna be just fine by the time we get back. I believe in the kid!"

Barret scowled down at his friend, offended. "So do I! Don't talk like I ain't got no faith in the spikey-headed idiot! 'Sides, probably ain't his fault, what happened yesterday. It's that goddamn Reno!"

Cid snorted in distaste, smoke exiting his nose in two funnels as he did so. "That @#%\$ing Turk," he snarled. "Trouble follows him wherever he goes."

"I can't believe we has to work wit 'em," Barret mumbled.

"It's only for a little while," Cid said. "He's good in a battle, and them Turks are friends of that damn cat so I guess they can't be that bad once you really, really, really, think about it."

"That's a lot of 'reallys', man. I don't think I can think that hard."

Cid ignored him. "Now, Rude and even that loud-mouthed Elena ain't bad at all. Rude don't say much, and Elena usually don't put up too much of a fight about our decisions because she so insecure about herself. It's just that Reno that I think is gonna give us problems." He looked up at Barret from under the shadow of his hood. "What you think?"

Barret shook his head with sudden weariness. "I ain't in no mood to be thinkin' right now. I just want to find Reeve and get this whole damn thing over with. I have a daughter to raise and take care of. She's gonna be going to school soon, ya know."

Cid nodded silently. He knew that Barret probably loved his little girl more than anything on the face of the Planet. Probably more than the Planet itself. But Barret's love for his daughter was something Cid could understand. He loved his wife, Shera in such a fashion. All that stuff about fighting for the Planet was all just a load of crap, to put it in a not-so-nice way. Cid was fighting for Shera. Everything he did, he did with his wife's well being in mind. Sometimes, he was surprised at how much he had changed in only one year, and he had Shera and AVALANCHE to thank for it. It may have taken him years and years to realize just where his heart belonged, but now that he did know, he couldn't have been happier.

"I can understand, you know," Cid suddenly told Barret. "About Marlene and all."

Barret glanced at him thoughtfully. "I know ya can. You probably the only one that can, once ya really think about it."

Cid grinned up at his large companion again. "I thought you said you wasn't in the mood for thinkin'?"

With a frustrated cry, Barret threw his hands up in the air again. He could tell it was going to be one hell of a long day.

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Tifa sighed as she pulled the shoelaces tight on her fighter's boots, double knotting them like she always did so they wouldn't come loose in the middle of battle. She hadn't gotten much sleep last night, and she knew that her lack of rest was seriously going to be weighing her down today if they got into any skirmishes. She hadn't been in a serious, life-threatening battle in months, and the fact that she had tossed and turned all night worrying about Cloud, Reno, and Reeve wasn't going to help her situation at all. Too much to worry about and so many things to do.

*Might as well just give up on having a normal life,* she thought glumly, pulling on her Premium Heart fighter gloves.

There was suddenly a knock at her door, and Tifa's heart jumped slightly when she considered that it might be Cloud. He hadn't spoken to her all day yesterday, not that she had given him much of a chance, though. From the barn, she had gone straight upstairs and barricaded herself in her room, and she had spent the whole afternoon trying to watch TV and ignore the fact that Cloud was locked up in his room only two doors down. She had thought she had heard him talking to someone in the bar late last night, but the thunder had been too loud and she had given up on listening. Probably just a figment of her imagination, birthed from her wishful thinking and longing for Cloud.

"Tifa?" a voice suddenly called through the door, and the young brunette realized that she had spaced out.

"Yuffie?" Tifa asked, recognizing the voice.

"Yup, it's me. Can I come in?"

Tifa tried her best not to sound gloomy. "Sure! Come in."

The door opened, and a very sleepy-looking Yuffie Kisaragi trudged into the room with her feet dragging and her eyes drooping. The young girl offered her older friend a half-hearted wave with the ghost of her normal spunkiness. Then she practically collapsed on Tifa's bed, rumpling the sheets and almost sending Tifa bouncing to the floor.

"Are you okay, Yuffie?" Tifa asked with concern flickering in her burgundy eyes. "You look absolutely exhausted."

"I am," Yuffie mumbled, opening one eye to glance at her friend. There were red veins around the stormy gray iris. "I didn't get any sleep last night."

"Bad dreams?" Tifa asked sympathetically, smoothing back some of her young friend's chocolate brown hair.

Yuffie nodded miserably, closing her eyes again. "Horrible nightmares. The only sleep I got was when I dozed off taking a shower this morning. It totally sucked. I almost drowned!"

Tifa laughed softly. "Poor Yuffie. Are my clothes still working out for you?"

Yuffie nodded, absently adjusting one of the straps of her sleeveless tank top. "Yeah, but I was sort of hoping that my boobs would miraculously grow to fill out the shirt overnight, but no such luck. Darn."

Tifa laughed again. "And the shorts? Those are practically the only pair I had that were small enough to fit you."

Yuffie nodded sleepily. "They keep slipping, but that's okay. I like them loose." She yawned widely. "So tired..."

"You don't have to come with us today if you don't want to," Tifa suggested, getting off the bed and adjusting her suspenders absent-mindedly.

"No!" Yuffie exclaimed suddenly, rising up to a sitting position. "I'm definitely going with you guys! I've been out of action for too long, and I'm not going to miss out on any more of it!"

Tifa raised her hands in mock surrender, a bit surprised at her friend's vehemence. "Hey, hey, calm down, Yuffie. It was just a suggestion. Besides, you and Vincent have been experiencing most of the action lately, fighting with those Faceless Men or whatever they were called. All we were doing was sitting around worrying about you two."

"Vincent," Yuffie muttered under her breath, eyes spacing out for a second before coming back into focus. "Is Vincent awake yet?" she suddenly asked.

Tifa blinked. "I think so. You never know with that man. I heard Cid and Barret tripping over stuff earlier this morning so I know they're up. As for all the others, I have no earthly idea."

Yuffie made a half-hearted effort to stifle a yawn. "What are we going to do today? Did Cloud say anything important that I might have missed?"

Tifa winced inwardly at the mention of Cloud's name. "No, he didn't say anything else, but I figure we're going to do something today now that we're all together again. Let's just go downstairs and see who's up."

Yuffie nodded dully, her eyes half-shut. That didn't stop Tifa from seeing the spark of humor that suddenly twinkled in their iron gray depths. She lifted her hands towards Tifa. "You might have to carry me down the stairs, Tifa. I'd fall and crack my head open otherwise and Cloud would have to mop it up."

Tifa laughed and tugged Yuffie to her feet. "That makes two of us, you know. This is going to be like the blind leading the blind."

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Cloud drummed his fingers absent-mindedly on the table and stared at his two friends that were sitting across from him. "You guys have got to be kidding me?" he muttered under his breath.

Barret heard him, however, and snorted at the young man's lack of confidence. "You want to go out there in the rain in that damn broke plane and take a look for yerself, Spike? We tellin' you the truth, boy! That ship jes be sittin' there on the beach, all old and rotten like!"

Cloud sighed and rubbed his face with his hands, letting the rough texture of his gloves grind against his skin. He relished that dull pain. "I know, Barret. I wasn't calling you guys liars. I just didn't think we'd ever see that damn thing again, that's all."

Cid blew a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling. "You and me both, kid."

Cloud allowed a silence to descend on the almost deserted bar as he fought to gather his thoughts. After he had left Vincent alone in the darkness the night before, he had returned to his room and had actually managed to get a couple of hours of sleep before waking up at the butt crack of dawn that morning. Cloud had no idea whether the alcohol lingering in his system or talking with Vincent had eased his mind enough to sleep, but whatever had done it, he was eternally grateful for. For some reason, talking with the dark gunslinger had always served as a sort of balm to his nerves. It wasn't that Vincent's presence was comforting or anything like that. No, nothing so simple. It was kind of sad actually. Whenever Cloud looked at or spoke with Vincent, he was always thinking in the back of his mind, "Wow, all my stupid-ass problems are nothing compared to the hell this guy has gone through. I got off lucky with just fractured memories and glowing Mako eyes. Look at his guy! Damn, to think I could have ended up like this! Whew!"

Sad, and mean as hell, but it was heartbreakingly true. Cloud was happy he hadn't ended up like Vincent, so cold and callous, leaving even his friends to wonder if there was a heart behind those ruby-red eyes of his. But he hated thinking like that, especially when Vincent was around. He was always afraid that those piercing garnet eyes would suddenly turn their soul-searching beams on him and dissect his every thought, exposing the darkest corners of his mind to a man that was practically darkness given shape and form.

Hell, maybe Cloud felt better after talking with Vincent because deep down he thought that Vincent was the only one that could understand him. In any case, Cloud had actually gotten some sleep last night before he had roused himself from his bed to once again sheathe himself in the guise of a leader - a mixed up kid ready to lead his friends and enemies alike onto the battlefield. That's all he really was, after all.

Cid and Barret, however, had beaten him in the race to be the earliest riser. Cloud had heard the two older men down in the front room while he was getting ready. From the sound of it, they had been tripping and stumbling over chairs in the darkness, and cursing loud enough to wake the dead. Cid and Barret were definitely not the most graceful or soft-voiced men in the world, and that was for damn sure.

After trying to catch them before they left and failing, Cloud had spent about ten minutes standing in front of Tifa's door, wondering if he should knock and try and smooth things over there and then. In the end, however, his weak, prideful heart had failed him, and he had gone downstairs to stare at the rain and wonder why Cid and Barret would be taking the Tiny Bronco out so early in the morning.

But the news they had brought back with them was definitely worth the trip, in Cloud's opinion.

*So the ghost ship is beached on the shore near Midgar, he thought, brow creasing as he sought to derive something useful from the piece of information. According to Vincent and Yuffie's story, the thing was out on some deep-sea complex the night before last. And we know it wasn't there yesterday morning because we would have seen it when we went to investigate the cave. I know the seas are all turbulent right now, but could it have really drifted all this way in less than a day? My instincts tell me no, unless of course...that's it!*

Barret raised an eyebrow when he saw the look on Cloud's face become dangerously contemplative. "Whatcha thinkin' 'bout, Spike?"

A short, mirthless laugh emerged from Cloud's throat. "Something bad. But let me ask you guys something: do you think the ship just kind of floated over to the beach, or did someone pilot it there?"

Cid's eyes widened when he realized just what Cloud was getting at. "The Running Man! He might have been on the ship - that's what you sayin' right, kid?"

Cloud nodded, some unruly strands of blond hair flopping into his face. "Yeah, and did you notice how close that shore is to Midgar?"

Barret caught on immediately. "You think the Running Man is in Midgar right now, then?"

Cloud's mood was becoming grimmer by the minute. "Yeah, and that is exactly where I was planning on heading today."

"Why do you look so sad?" Cid demanded. "If he's there in Midgar, we'll be able to find that bastard and finally get information out of him! This is a good thing, I'm telling ya!"

"I suppose so," Cloud muttered, still unnerved by the idea that the Running Man had somehow predicted their next course of action. That could only mean one thing: there was a spy. But he didn't know who it could be, so he didn't want to be making any premature accusations. Of course, the Running Man could have been heading to Midgar just by coincidence. Maybe he had left some unfinished business behind. But either way, Cloud wasn't at all comfortable with the fact that the man who had kidnapped his friend was going to be running around the same place as they were. And they were going to all split up, making it easier to target one group at a time. He had to protect Tifa...

Just then the center figure in his thoughts - in his life - came walking down the stairs dragging an exhausted-looking Yuffie by the arm. "Good morning, everyone," Tifa said cheerfully as she guided Yuffie over to the table and dumped her in the seat next to Cloud. The young ninja immediately swayed to the side, her head landing heavily on Cloud's shoulder, chocolate brown strands tickling his bare skin. Though he wasn't too happy about all the extra weight, Cloud hadn't the heart to shove her away. Besides, he was too busy fretting over the fact that Tifa hadn't looked at him once.

Cloud's preoccupied thoughts were interrupted when the door suddenly flew open, and Red XIII bounded in, soaking wet and severely unhappy. Reno, Rude, and Elena came running in right after him, equally displeased and dripping water onto the floor. After Reno and Cloud's big blowout yesterday, the Turks had decided to stay at the hotel instead of at the bar, which was sort of pointless, being that the hotel was right next to the Final Heaven bar. Not trusting himself to go and wake them up in order to assemble for their next operation, Cloud had sent Red to go fetch them from the hotel. That had been an hour ago, and from the looks of it, it appeared as if they had had some...difficulties along the way.

Cid took one look at the waterlogged foursome and grinned wolfishly. "Hey guys, is it still raining outside?"

"Shut up!" Elena snapped, wiping at her mascara, which was running...again.

A look of fatherly disapproval appeared on Barret's dark face when he saw the huge puddle of water on the floor. "The hell did you guys do? Swim all the way over here?"

"Practically," Red replied dryly, shaking raindrops from his coat and splattering the walls - and Reno - with water.

"Goddamn it, Red!" Reno cried, stepping away from the lion-like beast as if Red had suddenly grown another head. "Did you have to do that when you're right next to me?!"

Elena ignored her companion and addressed everyone else in the bar. "Actually, Red *did* have to doggy-paddle over here. The water out there is rising!"

"Serves you guys right for staying at the hotel!" Yuffie interjected cheerfully, apparently ignoring her own exhaustion long enough to taunt their ex-enemies. "What - do you think we have cooties or something?"

"Is it really that bad?" Tifa asked worriedly, rushing up to the Turks with three towels in her slender arms.

"Red had to swim through the deeper parts, like Elena said," Rude answered as he took a towel and wiped his face. "Thank you, Tifa."

"You're welcome," Tifa said politely as she handed a towel to a miserable and pouty-faced Elena, who only grumbled her gratitude. Tifa didn't seem to notice, however, as she focused all her attention on avoiding Reno's gaze as she handed him his towel.

"Thanks, Tifa," Reno said clearly, trying to get her to make eye contact with him.

"You're welcome," she muttered almost inaudibly as she knelt to help Red get his waterlogged mane out of his eyes. Basically, doing anything to give her an excuse to avoid Reno's eyes. She did a very good job of it, but both Reno and Cloud weren't fooled. Reno snorted his annoyance before attacking his wild hair with the towel. Cloud just stared, trying to unravel the physics behind the love triangle he had somehow gotten caught up in.

"So, is everyone here now?" Cid asked, noticing that Cloud was zoning again. He wished the kid would stop doing that...

Yuffie looked around, her loose hair brushing the sides of her face. "Vinnie's not here yet, is he?"

"Right here," a shadow near the stairway suddenly said.

Yuffie whirled with a gasp as the others looked on in surprise, watching Vincent's figure discard its cloak of shadows and walk into the light. He was still wearing his borrowed clothes, but he had gathered his glorious hair in loose ponytail, which was cinched with an elastic band below the nape of his neck. "Are we moving out yet?" he asked flatly.

Reno took the towel away from his face and glared at everyone in the room as if they had done something to wrong him. "Moving out?" he echoed suspiciously. "I didn't hear anything about moving out."

*God, Cloud thought in annoyance. He's already being problematic. Keep cool, Strife, keep cool. Don't get angry.*

"Barret and Cid found the ghost ship," he said clearly, keeping his eyes trained on the three Turks. They didn't say anything so he continued, "It was abandoned on the beach near the city of Midgar."

Elena blinked. "So?"

"We thinkin' that the Running Man is in Midgar," Barret responded impatiently.

"Really?" Yuffie asked, wide-awake now as she recalled the dark figure she and Vincent had just barely glimpsed a couple of nights before. "Then what are we waiting for? Let's go!"

"Not so fast," Cloud warned, before his young friend could get too excited. "The Running Man isn't the main objective of this trip."

"What do ya mean?" Reno demanded, flinging his damp towel onto a nearby chair. "If he's the one that took Reeve, then he sure as hell is the main objective right now!"

Vincent suddenly spoke up, his deep, cold voice silencing any fiery protests that may have been hovering on Reno's tongue. "Just because this Running Man took Reeve doesn't necessarily mean that he knows where he is right now. Remember, the Running Man boarded that ship alone when Yuffie and I were on it. He didn't have Reeve with him when he sailed to the deep-sea complex. It's possible that he turned Reeve over to a different group of people before he boarded the ship."

"You mean he's some kind of bounty hunter?" Tifa asked.

Vincent nodded wordlessly.

Cloud picked up, grateful that Vincent had taken up the task of explaining. Cloud wasn't sure if he could have sounded even half as eloquent or logical. "And that's why he's not the main objective of this mission. But he's still a very dangerous factor so I want everyone to be careful. Watch out for him."

"What exactly will we be doing in Midgar, then?" Red asked from his seat on the floor, tail swishing back and forth placidly.

"We're gonna turn that place inside out," Cloud said in a hard, determined voice. "We're going to split into teams and search every inch of that place until we're sure that Reeve isn't being held right under our noses. That's the objective of this mission."

"Midgar's a big place, man," Barret warned.

Cloud nodded. "That's why we're splitting up."

"And I'll bet anything that you're choosing the teams," Reno sneered, eyes glittering maliciously.

Cloud's glare was icy. "Yes," he said flatly. "I will be." Before Reno could start bitching again, Cloud went on, "I am going to be investigating the remains of Hojo's lab. I'm taking Tifa with me..."

"Figures," Reno muttered.

"And Rude," Cloud finished.

"WHAT?!" Reno exploded, the look in his eyes turning positively dangerous in an instant. "No way! Turks stick together! You ain't separating us! No way!"

"You can't take Rude away from us!" Elena protested. "We work best as a team!"

*And there is no way I'm letting him go anywhere that Tifa Lockheart is going,* she added silently.

"I have no problem with Cloud's decision," Rude suddenly said.

"WHAT?!!!" Reno and Elena both demanded, whirling on their friend and colleague, wondering what had gotten into him.

"I understand if you don't trust us yet," Rude said calmly, directing his words at Cloud. "I'll go with you and help you in any way I can."

Cloud nodded, grateful that Rude hadn't put up a fight. "Thanks."

But Reno still wasn't finished yet. "Wait a minute! You're taking Rude with you as some kind of security blanket so we won't turn on you?! That's dirty, Strife! Using people like that!"

"Don't talk to me about using people, Reno," Cloud counterattacked in a flat, cold voice. "And if you have to know, the primary reason I'm taking Rude with us is because he's the one who saw the Running Man sneaking around Hojo's lab. Remember? He'd be of great help to us."

"Fine!" Reno declared, teeth gritted in anger. "But why are you taking Tifa, then? Tell me that, Strife!"

"Because I want to be with her," Cloud said simply, carefully hiding the longing in his voice.

Tifa lowered her head, feeling tears sting her eyes. *Please, everyone, stop it,* she pleaded silently. *This hurts so much...*

"You mean you don't want me to be with her," Reno sneered.

"Can we please get back to discussing the mission," Red interrupted with a growl, noticing Tifa's state of distress. "I see no need to take this battle to a personal level."

"Red's right," Cid interjected, glaring at the still-smoldering Reno. "The first team is decided. Go on, kid."

Cloud fought to get his emotions under control. "Cid and Barret - you guys are going to go the former Shinra headquarters."

Barret blinked. "That dump? Why?"

*Goddamn,* Cloud thought. *Is everyone going to be interrupting me after every other sentence?*

But instead of snapping at his friend, Cloud said patiently, "You are going to reactivate Cait Sith."

Cid's eyes widened. "That damn cat? Why?"

"We're going to need all the help we can get," Cloud answered. "Wasn't Reeve saying that he had finished with all the adjustments he needed for Cait Sith to work on his own?"

Surprisingly, it was Elena who answered him. "Yeah. He came down to the office one day to tell us about it. He said that he had given Cait the same personality that he had had when he was traveling with you all. Only now Cait can work on his own without too much help from Reeve." She smiled, and her voice became sad all of sudden. "He was really excited about it. Poor Reeve."

Reno put an arm around her shoulders and hugged her gently, surprising everyone.

Cloud nodded at Elena, acknowledging her answer and sympathizing with her pain in one gesture. Then he turned back to Cid and Barret. "Cid, you know how to work Cait, right? Didn't Reeve show you one day?"

Cid puffed thoughtfully on his cigarette. "Yeah, I think I remember. And even if I didn't, it shouldn't be too hard to figure out."

"Leave to us, boy-ee!" Barret said amiably.

Cloud grinned at him, then turned reluctantly to the task of telling Reno what he needed to do. "Reno, you and Elena are going to investigate all the underground tunnels in Midgar, and see if there is any way at all that the Running Man could be using them to get from place to place. And yes, that includes the sewers. It may take a while, but do the best you can, okay? I figure you two know Midgar pretty well."

Reno rolled his eyes. "You mean you figure a worthless slum kid like me should know the sewers well?"

Cloud ignored him. "Take Red with you. He can't smell anything in the rain anyways."

*Please don't give me hard time on this one, he begged silently. I'm not in the mood.*

Everyone in the bar waited.

Reno and Elena blinked. Red blinked. Reno and Elena stared at each other. Then they stared at Red, who stared back at them. Elena and Red stared at each other. Then they both stared at Reno, waiting for him to start bitching.

But all he said was, "Cool."

Everyone in the bar breathed a sigh of relief.

Then Yuffie grumbled, "Something tells me I'm with Vinnie again."

Cloud nodded, turning in his seat so that he could see both of them at the same time. "You two are going to Reeve's office and see if there is anything else that we might have missed the first time. And watch out for the Running Man. I have this feeling that he might be returning there."

"How come I have to be with Vinnie again?" Yuffie whined.

*He's probably tired of me, she thought sadly. I don't want to bother him with my annoying presence anymore.*

Cloud stared at her. "Fine. You want to go with Cid and Barret then?"

Yuffie glanced warily at the two older men sitting across from her on the table. Cid was blowing smoke out of his nostrils. Barret was scratching his armpit. "Um," she floundered. "No thanks. I'll go with Vinnie."

Cloud looked at the dark man standing close to the shadows. "That okay with you, Vincent?"

The man nodded silently.

Cloud nodded, feeling as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. "Okay," he said. "The teams are decided. Now, how are we going to get to Midgar?"

Immediately, he regretted his words. Everyone started talking at once.

Elena: "Let's take the Highwind!"

Cid: "You can't fly the Highwind in a thunderstorm!"

Yuffie: "Let's take the Tiny Bronco!"

Reno: "We don't all fit in the Tiny Bronco!"

Cid: "You can't drive the Bronco on land! Only in the water!"

Elena: "Besides, it's broken..."

Reno: "...and ugly."

Cid: "Don't diss my plane!"

Red: "As long as I don't have to walk..."

Barret: "Let's take the chocobos."

Yuffie: "In the rain???"

Barret: "You got a better idea?"

Reno: "I'm flying the helicopter!"

Cid: "Yeah, and I'll be laughing my ass off when you get struck by lightning and die!"

Barret: "You said it, foo! I be laughin' now! Hehehehehe!"

Cloud soon got fed up. He'd have much rather preferred listening to voices of Jenova and Sephiroth living in his head than all this silly arguing. "Everyone, shut up!" he roared. The talking died off. "We're taking the buggy," Cloud seethed, the look in his eyes leaving no room for arguments. "Two people in the front with the driver. The other six doubled up in the back with Red across their laps."

Silence as everyone chewed on that, then Yuffie asked innocently, "So...who's driving?"

Reno: "Oh! Mememememe!"

Elena: "No, don't let Reno drive!"

Reno: "Why the hell not?!"

Elena: "He doesn't have a license!"

Rude: "I think I should drive..."

Reno: "Sure as hell I have a license!"

Yuffie: "Let Red drive!"

Elena: "That license is fake!"

Tifa: "Red???"

Reno: "Is not!"

Barret: "I'm not sittin' in no guy's lap!"

Elena: "Is too!"

Cid: "Whatever you do don't let Yuffie behind the wheel!"

Reno: "Is not!"

Yuffie: "I'll take that as an indication my expert driving makes you jealous."

Elena: "Is too!"

Cid: "Expert drivin' my--"

That's when Cloud rose from his chair and grabbed the keys from their hook and started walking towards the garage. Everyone followed silently.

When they reached the garage a couple of minutes later, Cloud flipped on the lights to reveal the buggy sitting peacefully in the middle of the floor, red surface gleaming in the electric lights. It was totally oblivious that it was about to become the source of a major battle.

"Shotgun!" Cid and Reno cried at the same time, racing to the car as Cloud rolled his eyes.

“Door seat!” Cid yelled, flinging open the car door and plopping himself down in the passenger seat.

Reno glared at him. “Move, old man!”

“@#% off!” Cid said cheerfully.

“That’s not fair!” Reno whined, scowling down at the pilot. “You got in first so move over!”

“Quit your bitchin’,” Cid growled.

Reno’s eyes suddenly gleamed mischievously. “Fine, but I’m gonna have to climb over you.”

Cid narrowed his eyes suspiciously, making it apparent that he thought Reno had something up his sleeve, but he still wouldn’t relinquish his seat. “Go ahead, Turk, knock yourself out.”

So Reno climbed over Cid, making sure to step on his feet, sit on his hands, hit him in the face, elbow him in the chest, crush his legs, and knee him in the groin as he did so.

“Sorry, my nightstick slipped,” Reno apologized profusely as Cid cursed and clutched himself in pain. Reno was grinning from ear to ear, quite pleased with himself. *Damn, I’m good*, he thought.

“Move over, asswipe,” Cid wheezed. “You’re crowdin’ me!”

“Fine,” Reno grumbled, but when he tried to move over, Cloud chose that moment to sit down in the driver’s seat.

“Ew! Strife, get out of my lap!”

“Hey! I’m the one who is driving! Move over!”

While Cloud, Cid, and Reno were fighting over the front seat, the others were trying to find a way to fit into the backseat without having legs and arms sticking out of the windows.

“Okay,” Barret said, taking control. “Three guys, three girls, and...Red. The guys get in first, and then the girls sit in they laps, and then Red climbs in, awright? Ya’ll got that all down?”

“Wow, Barret, you’re a genius,” Yuffie said sarcastically. “I never could have thought of all that.”

“I know,” Barret said as they opened the car door and started to file in. But they seemed to take forever, and soon Yuffie got tired of waiting around with nothing to do but fidget and stare at everyone’s butts as they went in. So to speed things up, she ran around the car to the other side, and opened the door.

Vincent stared up at her. Yuffie stared back.

*Great*, she thought nervously. *It had to be him. I don’t want to sit in his lap because...I’m afraid I’ll like it. God, I bet I’m blushing!*

“Watch out, Vinnie!” she said as casually as possible, plopping down into Vincent’s lap as he watched without a flicker of emotion. But the scent of clean skin and herbal shampoo drifted to his nose, and he found himself inhaling as deeply as he could without making it obvious.

“Vincent, your legs are bony,” Yuffie commented suddenly, trying to get comfortable. She was so nervous!

“Your butt is bony,” Vincent muttered before he could stop himself.

Yuffie pinched him on his human arm, the only piece of his anatomy that she could cause damage to at the moment. “I can’t believe you just told me that, Vinnie! You don’t tell girls their butts are bony! Apologize immediately!”

“I’m sorry, Yuffie,” he said as sincerely as he could manage, and he really was sorry.

“You’re supposed to argue with me, Vinnie!” Yuffie said in a scolding tone. “It’s more fun that way.”

Vincent didn’t bother to reply. Instead, he wisely moved his human hand out of the way before Rude could sit on it. Wouldn’t help to lose his other hand, now would it?

After Rude had gotten in, Barret crowded in his beefy bulk next to Rude; consequently, Vincent and Yuffie were shoved up against the door. “Hey!” Yuffie cried. “Watch it people! We *are* sitting over here, you know!”

“How could we forget wit all that damn noise you be makin’!” Barret snapped as Tifa, then Elena, climbed into the car, hunched over as they searched for a lap to sit in.

Tifa found herself staring right into Rude's sunglasses. *Oh well*, she thought reluctantly. *I guess I don't mind...* "Hey Rude," she greeted casually. "I guess I'll be—"

She was interrupted by a loud cry. "Woman, you are *not* sitting in my lap!" Barret was telling Elena. "You all wet and smelly!"

"I am not smelly!" Elena screeched, and Tifa had to refrain from covering her ears.

Tifa maneuvered herself around so that she could look at Elena. "Do you want to sit in Rude's lap?" she asked with a sympathetic smile.

Elena flushed and made a face. "N-no!" she stammered. "I mean, um, I don't want to sit in anyone's lap! But I guess anyone is better than Barret over here!"

"Same to you, smelly woman!" Barret retorted as the two girls filed out of the car and came back in, only this time Elena went first and sat down in Rude's lap and Tifa sat in Barret's. Rather than get into another "sensible discussion," Red chose the more impulsive approach and simply leapt into the car, trying his best not to hurt Tifa, Elena, and Yuffie with his claws. Unfortunately, he was only mildly successful.

"Ow! Red, be careful!"

"You scratched me, you dumb mutt!"

"Gawd, Red! That hurt!"

Red ignored all their grumbling with the ease of long practice and settled himself carefully in their laps. He ended up stretched across the entire length of the back seat, with his head in Yuffie's lap, his front paws and upper body in Elena's and his hindquarters in Tifa's lap. Red was not a happy camper.

"I'm not enjoying this any more than you are," he grumbled as Elena accidentally kneed him in the belly. "This is a very uncomfortable position."

"You're telling me!" Yuffie exclaimed, patting Red on the nose just to annoy him. He growled up at her.

"Is everyone okay back there?" Cloud called, twisting around the best he could with Reno squashing him.

"NO!!" was the unanimous response.

"Okay, just checking," Cloud said with a grin. "Let's go." He started to reach for the shift, and realized that they had a problem. Reno's legs were in the way. He had them all bunched up on one side of the shift, making it impossible for Cloud to shift gears without breaking one or both of Reno's legs in the process. Not that that would be a *bad* thing, but...

"Reno," Cloud said. "Spread your legs."

Reno whirled on him with an incredulous expression on his face. "What? I didn't know you swung that way, Strife."

Cloud rolled his eyes. "Straddle the shift. I can't move it with your legs all bunched up like that. You're blocking me."

"Fine," Reno muttered, apparently realizing that it was the logical solution to the problem. So he did as Cloud said and placed one leg on either side of the shift, almost knocking out the windshield, breaking the radio, and cracking the dashboard in the process.

"Okay," Cloud said again. "Now we're ready to go."

"To Midgar, foo!" Barret cried for no apparent reason.

"Whoo-hoo!" Reno exalted sarcastically, trying to ignore how awkward it was to have Cloud reaching between his legs to shift gears.

The going was tough from there on. After Cloud had already started the car, Cid wisely pointed out that the garage door wasn't open. Then after the garage door was open, Tifa noticed that it was still raining and suggested that it might be a good idea if they put the buggy's hood on. So after all that was done and the buggy was out of the garage, Cloud had to run through the rain to close the door because everyone else was "too comfortable." They ran into even more problems when they realized that they couldn't drive the buggy through Kalm because all the roads were flooded. After another minute of arguing and some of Reno's "wise suggestions," Cloud took matters into his own hands and, with a quick apology to Tifa, drove right across the lawn, tearing up the grass as he went. As Tifa lamented the fate of their front lawn and

everyone, even Elena, promised to help her replant it, Cloud half drove/half hydroplaned across the grassy fields beyond Kalm until they reached the highway leading to Midgar.

After scraping the bottom of the buggy getting onto the road itself, they were finally on their way. Cloud breathed a sigh of relief. He just hoped this trip was going to be worth all the trouble they were going through to get there. But he was in for a lot more trouble along the way...

Two minutes after they had gotten onto the highway, Reno decided that he didn't like Cloud reaching between his legs every time he needed to change gears.

"Strife, stop doing that!"

Cloud scowled. "I need to change the gears, Reno. Unless you want to be going 15 miles per hour all the way to Midgar?"

"Well, no!" Reno said. "But why do you need to keep changing the damn gears so much? Just go to a really high speed and stay there!"

Cloud pointed to a big puddle sitting in the middle of the road. "See that there?" he asked impatiently. "If I hit that going 60 miles an hour, we're gonna skid off the road and into the grass and then we'll be walking all the way to Midgar!"

Reno floundered for words. "Well, um, I have an idea! I'll change the goddamn gears from now on!"

Cloud was in no mood to argue. "Fine. I'll tell you when to change them."

Reno made a face and gripped the shift with one hand. "I don't need you to tell me! I can change gears without your help. I have a standard car, too, ya know."

Cloud had to bite his tongue to keep from yelling, but he decided to let Reno have his way if they wanted to get to Midgar within the next year. Unfortunately, their little arrangement didn't work out very well. Reno had no idea when Cloud needed to have a gear shifted because he insisted that he didn't need to watch the speedometer. As a result, he kept shifting gears at the oddest times, making the buggy jerk and stall and make very ugly-sounding noises. More than once, Red ended up falling from the girls' laps and sliding to the floor of the car. Finally, Cid threatened to skewer Reno with the Venus Gospel if he didn't relinquish control of the shift. Noticing that the pilot was serious, Reno reluctantly surrendered control back to Cloud with the complaint that he still felt "violated" every time Cloud changed a gear.

The trip went as smoothly as possible for the next five minutes until Barret broke the tranquility.

"Okay, it smells like arse up in here! Who farted?"

"You smelt it, you dealt it!" Reno declared cheerfully.

"Maybe it's your upper lip," Elena snapped, using her anger to cover up the fact that sitting in Rude's lap made her nervous as hell.

"Well, it sure as hell wasn't me!" Cid exclaimed.

"You denied it, you supplied it!" Reno said immediately, ignoring the fierce glare Cid shot him.

"Actually, it smells more like a wet dog," Barret corrected himself, sniffing at the air.

"That would be me," Red said flatly. "Now hush."

Barret hushed because he couldn't think of a snappy comeback to say. Cloud unconsciously began to drive faster, eager to get to Midgar before they all went stir-crazy and started killing each other or something. He counted the minutes of peace and got up to ten before Tifa, of all people, spoke up.

Hers was the nice kind of interruption, though.

She smiled and said in a hushed tone, "How cute! Look! Yuffie's asleep."

And sure enough, Cloud turned around briefly to see that Yuffie had fallen asleep in Vincent's lap with her head nestled fearlessly underneath the man's chin. Her eyelids fluttered slightly as if she sensed their stares, and she cuddled closer to Vincent as if to hide her sleeping vulnerability from their prying eyes. Vincent was looking out of the rain-splattered window with his arms wrapped absently around Yuffie's waist, watching the clouds churn and dance angrily over the horizon. He paid no attention to the curious looks the others gave him.

"No wonder she was so quiet," Elena muttered after everyone was done wondering how Yuffie could have possibly fallen asleep in Vincent's lap. Most people were so afraid of Vincent that they were scared to *breathe* around him.

"Don't jinx it woman!" Barret whisper-screamed. "Maybe she'll stay asleep for the rest of the trip."

Actually, when Cloud pulled up in front of the entrance to Sector Five on the outskirts of Midgar, Yuffie was still slumbering peacefully in the circle of Vincent's arms, completely trustworthy of her companion. She only awakened when everyone else was piling out of the car in search of breathable air and Red accidentally scratched her on the leg.

She was awake immediately, shrieking, "Eeep! Something bit me! Vinnie, something bit me on the leg!"

"Don't worry, Yuffie," Vincent said calmly, opening the car door with his claw. "It was just Red."

"Red bit me?!"

"No, he accidentally scratched you when he was climbing out of the car."

"Oh," Yuffie said, stretching and rubbing her eyes. "Are we here yet?"

"Yes."

"Okay," Yuffie said, trying not to sound disappointed. She didn't want to climb out of Vincent's lap just yet, but if she stayed any longer, then it would start to look like she actually *liked* sitting in Vincent's lap. So with great reluctance, she hopped out of the buggy and onto the muddy ground, wincing as her borrowed boots sunk into the gooey substance. *Good thing I'm not wearing my sneakers*, she thought as Vincent climbed out and shut the buggy's door.

Trying to work the kinks out of her stiff limbs and ignore the raindrops hitting her head, Yuffie walked around to the front of the buggy where everyone else was already gathered, all staring silently up at the diseased city of Midgar. It was still as ugly as sin. Sure it was on its way to recovery, but it was still a long way away from discarding its gloomy countenance in exchange for one that looked even the least bit inviting. And the rain pouring down and all the dark clouds that *always* seemed to be gathered right on top of Midgar did nothing to change the way she looked at the dilapidated city. Yuffie had never really liked traveling around in Midgar, especially in the slums. It depressed her. Every time she saw a homeless person begging for food or one of the little delinquent pickpockets casting furtive glances at her items pouch, it always made her think that no matter what poor Reeve did, Midgar would always be a worthless cause, something that was already beyond help.

"Midgar," Barret suddenly said. "I hate to be sayin' this and all, but it's gonna feel good to be back home."

"Just remember," Cloud said firmly. "Be careful where you tread, and this place is gonna be searched high and low! Everyone has their PHS?"

All of the AVALANCHE members nodded.

"And cell phones?" Cloud asked.

The Turks nodded.

"Okay, then! Let's move out!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"There they are," Titus said, more to himself than to Fa-Li. The blonde-haired man didn't seem at all bothered by the fact that there was rain pounding down on his back and the top of his head. He adjusted the lens of his binoculars and focused more closely on the miniature army approaching the gates of Sector Five. He and Fa-Li had been hiding on the top of a pile of rubble and keeping a close lookout for the past hour. Titus had figured that even members of AVALANCHE wouldn't be so reckless as to parachute into Midgar again in the middle of a thunderstorm. He had also figured that they would use the entrance closest to the direction from which they would be approaching, and he had been right. Of course, he took no pride in being correct. The hard part was still yet to come.

"Well, it's about time they arrived, baby," Fa-Li snapped from where she was cowering under a small alcove created when the rubble plummeted to the ground. She was soaking wet and being even more of a bitch than usual. "Where's that stupid little ditz we're going after?"

"Hmm...hold on," Titus replied absently, studying each of the members closely. He recognized the three blue-suited Turks immediately. How could one not know them? There were only three left in the world. And he recognized Cloud Strife, the

one with the spiky blond hair and blue eyes, for there wasn't a single person in the farthest corners of the world who hadn't seen a picture of Cloud Strife at least once. It's not everyday a Sephiroth clone saves the world from total eradication.

Then, Titus' slightly luminescent eyes fell on the last pair entering the gate, and he cursed softly. "Dammit."

Fa-Li immediately snapped to attention. "Damn what, sugar? Somethin' wrong?"

"I found the girl," Titus said, tracking the movements of Yuffie Kisaragi with his binoculars. She was a lot younger than he had been expecting...

"Then what are you damning?" Fa-Li grumbled, pushing her damp hair away from her eyes.

"She's working with Valentine," Titus said grimly, putting the binoculars away and pulling a black ski mask from his item pouch. "It's not going to be too hard to capture her, but it's getting the drop on Valentine that I'm worried about."

Fa-Li was starting to look interested. "Valentine's out there? Really?"

Titus rolled his eyes and tossed the binoculars in her direction. "Take a look for yourself if you don't believe me."

Fa-Li started to inch towards the binoculars, but she suddenly stopped short and drew back into her little hiding place. "Are the Turks still down there, Titus?" she asked softly.

Titus flicked his gaze quickly to the small army walking fifty feet below them and immediately saw three blue suits. "Yeah," he muttered, voice muffled by his ski mask as he pulled it over his head.

The Wutainese woman suddenly drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, looking like a little girl. "That's alright, then," she murmured. "I'll take your word that Valentine is down there."

Titus finished adjusting his ski mask and turned to stare at his companion. Against the backdrop of dark cloth, the slight luminescence in his eyes was all the more obvious. "What's wrong with you?" he asked grumpily.

Fa-Li averted her gaze. "Nothing, honey."

"Don't call me that," Titus snapped, rising to his feet, a silent signal that they were about to move out. "Are you afraid of the Turks, Fa-Li?"

"You might say that," she whispered softly. "I've heard...stories. Yes, Titus, I'm deathly afraid of the Turks."

Titus snorted and said coldly, "Well, I think that you had better swallow that fear. You don't want something like that getting in the way of your mission. Or mine." He walked away without a second glance.

"Asshole," Fa-Li muttered under her breath as she rose to her feet and followed her companion down the rubble pile and into Sector Five.