

## **Chapter Eighteen: The Midgar Nightmare**

*"Because I'm the only one who has the patience to deal with your pissy attitude." Red XIII*

"This place smells like shit," Reno grumbled, wrinkling his nose in distaste as he panned his flashlight around one of the "underground tunnels" beneath Midgar. There were heaps of green algae (and other stuff that Reno didn't even want to think about) clinging stubbornly to the stone walls and glaring indignantly at Reno as he sought to violate their putrid sanctuary with his presence. There was the sound of water running nearby, and a quick inspection with his flashlight showed that a small sludgy "river" had decided to make its home in the Midgar sewers. The waters were dark with all sorts of rancid substances so that not even the light from Reno's flashlight could pierce their oily surfaces. Fascinated by anything that he could gross out Elena with, Reno took a tentative step across the concrete and winced as the bottom of his boot slid across another patch of algae, almost sending him to the water.

"I hate this place!" he exclaimed angrily, once he was sure that he had recovered his balance. "I'm gonna to kill Cloud for sending me down here!"

"Quit your complaining, Reno," Elena snapped as she descended the ladder heading down into the sewers, her heels clanging loudly on its rusted surface. "It's not like I'm having a good time, either!"

Reno rolled his eyes. He could already tell that this was going to be a fun trip. He, Elena, and Red were already dripping wet due to how freaking *long* it had taken them to find a manhole that had a ladder that didn't lead straight into pool of solid or liquid waste. Parading around Midgar in the rain with a bitchy Elena and a silent Red had already put Reno in a sour mood, and the rancid stench of the "underground tunnel" was only serving to exacerbate his grumpiness.

*That goddamn Cloud*, Reno thought, pushing at his wild hair with a gloved hand. *He knows that the only underground tunnels in Midgar are the sewers. I don't care if there might be something to find down here, I think he only sent me down here to keep me away from Tifa, which is stupid because I need...I need...*

Reno shook his head violently, the wet strands of his ponytail striking the sides of his face like miniature slaps. What the hell was wrong with him? Now wasn't the time to be thinking such things. Now was the time to be bitching as Reno of the Turks was obligated to do when he was cold, wet, tired, grumpy and running around shit-filled sewers.

"This sucks," he announced, wrinkling his nose as his flashlight beam lit upon a log that probably wasn't a log at all.

Elena stumbled over to his side and saw what his light was trained on. "Ewww!" she moaned, her voice echoing in the dark sewers. "That is revolting! Totally disgusting! I *hate* it down here!"

Red landed on the ground with a clack of claws behind them. "I assure you that none of us are enjoying or will be enjoying this trip, Elena," he said flatly, shaking water from his coat for what seemed like the millionth time that day.

"Oh, be quiet!" Elena snapped at Red for no apparent reason, gesturing with her arms so violently that her flashlight almost flew from her hands. "At least you can get the rain off of you by splattering it all over us! And I can't see a thing! This is going to be a whole lot harder on us than it will on you!"

Red blinked, his one eye faintly luminescent in the darkness. "First of all, Elena," he said calmly. "You probably can't see anything because you don't have your flashlight on. And while we're on the subject of the hardships of this trip - try having your face only three feet off the ground with an enhanced sense of smell *in the sewers*, and then tell me who is going to have a harder time."

Reno rolled his eyes. "Quit your complaining."

Red eyed Reno coolly as he took a couple of experimental steps down the algae-covered concrete. "Certainly," he replied. "As long as you do."

The redheaded Turk growled under his breath as he followed Red's beast-like form with his flashlight. "Why did we get stuck with you?"

"Because I'm the only one who has the patience to deal with your pissy attitude," Red answered without looking back at Reno. His flame-tipped tail swished in the rank darkness, a lonely beacon in an endless pool of eerie black.

"Well, at least we're out of the rain," Elena grumbled, hugging herself with her arms as if cold. "What's the game plan? I want to get the hell out of here as quickly as possible, you know."

Red almost sat down on the concrete, but apparently thought the better of it and remained standing. "The way I figure it," he said. "All our job really entails is following this tunnel and searching for anything that may appear out of the ordinary."

"What's your definition of 'ordinary'?" Reno grumbled, examining the interesting substances on the wall with his flashlight again. "Everything down here looks a little...eccentric."

Red acknowledged the Turk's observation with a nod. "I suppose we should be looking for things that appear to have been disturbed recently. It's unlikely that anyone would ever come journeying down here for normal, everyday matters."

"Except idiots like us," Reno muttered.

Red ignored him and started to walk off into the darkness. "Let's get going."

Elena groaned and followed him, switching on her flashlight as she did so. After debating whether or not to protest on how the mutt had suddenly taken charge, Reno reluctantly followed, keeping his flashlight trained on the floor in front of him so he didn't slip on any more algae. He had only taken two cautious steps before felt a strange feeling run down his spine and spread across the width of his back. Reno hissed under his breath and reached behind himself to pat his back with his free hand, certain that some oddball lifeform had detached itself from the ceiling and slid down the back of his suit. But all his questing fingers found was the damp material of his navy blue suit.

Still not trusting his results, Reno whirled around and shone the beam of his flashlight down the expanse of tunnel they had just left. Nothing. Just the same algae covered walls and rancid water running merrily along its shit-filled way. A little bit of light filtered in from the open manhole cover as raindrops plummeted through the open hole and into the sewers, eagerly exploring this fun, new, dark place. Reno's aquamarine eyes narrowed in outright suspicion, their slight Mako glow accusing the dark of hiding things that he needed to know.

*Something's wrong*, he suddenly thought. *I know this feeling...*

"Reno!" Elena suddenly called, her nasal voice jolting him out of his thoughts.

The redheaded Turk spun around to get a faceful of light blaring in his eyes. "Dammit, Elena!" he cried, throwing up his arms to shield his smarting eyes. "Watch where you point that thing!"

Elena lowered her flashlight. "Well, if you hadn't started lagging behind like a slow-pokey turtle, then we wouldn't have had to come--"

"Spare me the sob story," Reno snapped angrily, blinking in order to make the red spots leave his field of vision.

"What's wrong, Reno?" Red asked calmly, padding up to stand next to Elena.

"Nothing, nothing," Reno grumbled, too embarrassed at being caught in an act of paranoia to tell them about the peculiar feeling he had in his gut. "Let's just get goin' already, okay? I don't want to be down here too long."

"Trust your instincts, Reno," Red suddenly said softly, golden eye glittering in the dark with a natural bestial gleam.

Reno scowled. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"Is there something bothering you?" Red insisted.

"No!" Reno declared immediately. "It's just...should we shut that manhole cover or not? Rain's coming in and all."

Red snorted and turned away again, as if disappointed in Reno somehow. "Close it if you wish," he said calmly. "Because I certainly can't do it."

"No!" Elena cried. "Don't close it! It lets a little light in after all. We'll be able to find our way back if we get lost."

Casting a suspicious glance over his shoulder and panning his light around one more time, Reno nodded reluctantly. "Fine, we'll leave it open."

"Good," Elena said, and turned to follow Red into the darkness.

But Reno lingered for one moment more in the darkness of the tunnel, breathing the rank air and listening as the star-crossed raindrops fell into the filthy sewer and struck the concrete with lonely splashes. Something was wrong; he could feel it in his bones. Three years as a Turk hadn't just earned him an endless supply of blue suits and a pair of hands stained with blood that could never be washed away. Reno had an incredible intuition and senses as sharp as they needed to be for a professional assassin. Red had told him to trust his instincts.

*Yeah, well, instinct tells me to get the hell out of here and go get plastered at a bar, he thought. And that sure as fuckin' hell ain't gonna happen so...I'm leaving now.*

With that, he spun and followed his companions into the darkness, forcing himself not to look back once.

\* \* \* \* \*

Titus stood as still as a statue in the pouring rain, letting the pitiful droplets course down his leather clothes and soak whatever skin they could find. Underneath his ski mask, his platinum blond hair was already soaking wet, and there were raindrops clinging to his long eyelashes. Beside him, Fa-Li was shifting her weight from one heeled boot to the other, the epitome of misery with her dripping hair and soaked skin. The leather bodysuit she was wearing offered defense against the sadistic little raindrops, but the form-fitting outfit was more for show than protection against the elements. In other words, she had enough skin exposed for the rain to soak. It was bugging living hell out of her, and the fact that Titus was standing still in the rain like an idiot *again* wasn't helping to ease her sour mood.

"Well, what the hell are we waiting for?" she finally snapped at him. "If we stay here any longer, we'll lose the trail of the Kisaragi girl."

Titus didn't reply. His incredible eyes remained closed, the pale flesh of his eyelids looking thin and vulnerable against the cloth of his ski mask. Fa-Li was about to repeat her question in a meaner tone when Titus' eyes suddenly snapped open.

"Through with your little nap?" the woman snapped, trying not to let herself think of just how damn beautiful those emerald eyes were. If she got to thinking like that, then she began to actually miss what she and Titus used to have, and that was never a good thing. People weren't meant to be missed or grieved over.

As Fa-Li watched in bafflement, Titus suddenly strode across the wet pavement, his boots splashing through puddles as he went. Rolling her eyes and resisting the urge to scream, Fa-Li chased after him, careful to overstep the puddles that Titus had just plowed through.

"Baka!" she called when she saw her companion suddenly stop his puddle splashing and kneel on the ground. "What the hell are you doing *now*?"

"Just be quiet," Titus deadpanned. "And quit calling me stupid. I don't appreciate it one bit."

"Fine," Fa-Li snapped, shoving at her waterlogged hair away from her face as she splashed up behind Titus to see that he was staring down an open manhole, his gloved hands wrapped around the edge. The cover was discarded a few feet away, apparently having been dragged off, judging by the scrape marks on the pavement that the rain hadn't washed away yet. The sewer gaped open like the hungry mouth of some sea beast...and it smelled just as bad, too.

"Titus!" she immediately exclaimed, wrinkling her nose and backing away from the odoriferous stench. "I am not going down there! I mean it, Titus!"

"I didn't say we were," he answered calmly, rising to his feet and crossing over to where the manhole cover was lying meekly on the pavement. Titus hunched over it, sliding his slender fingers underneath the edge and pulling it over easily. He carefully slid it back over the open manhole, shutting its rank breath off from the world.

"Now, why did you go and do that?" Fa Li asked as he straightened up.

Titus stared at her, the fabric of his ski mask moving along with his mouth. "Didn't you see three of them go down here?"

Fa-Li scowled. "No."

"Well, I did," Titus replied, the look in his eyes reprimanding. "I don't want any outsiders interfering with this mission so I'm eliminating the possibility of them intervening."

"By trapping them in the sewers?"

"Precisely."

Fa-Li suddenly smiled prettily, stroking the wet leather sleeve covering Titus' right arm. "You're so smart, honey."

Titus jerked away as if she had bit him, scowling so hard Fa-Li thought his face would crack. "Whatever," he snapped, turning his back to her. "Now help me look for something to hold the cover down with."

Fa-Li followed her companion with a sigh. *Men...*

\* \* \* \* \*

With a loud grunt of exertion, Cloud slammed one booted foot against the door, putting all his weight into the kick. The twisted metal groaned in protest at the abuse it was receiving, and to his relief, Cloud felt it give a little underneath his foot. Taking a deep breath, he backed away from the door and steeled himself to give it another kick. This time, the battered metal fell away completely, collapsing and giving Cloud, Tifa, and Rude a lovely view into the darkness that used to be a home for Artemis van Hojo and all his sick scientific secrets.

There was a moment of silence in which the trio gazed into the hungry darkness, perhaps remembering all the pain and strife that Hojo had caused when he had been alive and wishing that they didn't have to go venturing into the man's former home and breathe in the evil-tainted air. Then Cloud wiped his hands on his pants and said, "Okay. Is everyone ready?"

Tifa adjusted her gloves, trying to hide her discomfort. "I guess so, but one thing?"

"Hn?" Cloud responded, not looking at her but instead peering into the darkness, trying to discern something with his Mako-enhanced vision.

Tifa glanced at Rude with a questioning look in her burgundy eyes. "Weren't you just in here a couple of days ago, when you saw the Running Man?"

Rude nodded. "Yes."

"Then how come we had to break down the door?"

Rude hesitated for a moment, then said, "Turks know of secret passageways within the building often used when the President decided that he needed one of his employees...silenced."

Tifa's eyes widened. "You've killed members of your own organization?" she asked quietly.

Rude looked away from her beautiful face, absently fiddling with his fingerless gloves. "The Turks are assassins, Tifa. They kill indiscriminately."

"How sad," Tifa commented snappishly, folding her arms across her chest and looking away from Rude sharply. She wasn't trying to mean to a man who had been nothing but polite to her, but she was starting to think that she would never be able to see eye to eye with an assassin. Even ex-assassins.

Cloud noticed that Tifa wasn't going to continue her questioning any further and decided to pick up where she left off. "So, if you know about a secret passageway, then why did I just go through all the trouble of kicking down the door?" Cloud wasn't in a very good mood, either. He was thinking that he pulled muscle in his leg. The damn thing was hurting like a bitch...

"Because," Rude said in response to Cloud's question. "Reeve ordered all the secret passageways to be torn down immediately, and that's what I was doing in there that day. He said that the Turks would not longer have any use for them now or ever again."

"And were you relieved?" Tifa suddenly asked, turning back to Rude again and watching him carefully.

The overhead lights flickered on the lenses of Rude's sunglasses as he looked at her and said sincerely, "Yes, I was."

Tifa didn't reply, but the look in her eyes was one of approval.

Cloud snorted, shifting his weight to his unhurt leg. "So even Turks have hearts, I guess?" He knew he was being shallow and problematic, but he couldn't help it. He had a bad feeling in his gut that would go away.

"Turks have as much of a heart as terrorists do," Rude answered calmly. "And I'm not trying to insult you, Cloud. Just merely stating facts."

Cloud sighed in resignation. "Yeah, I know. Sorry, I just..." He turned away abruptly, not wanting to make everyone else nervous with his paranoia. Something was wrong; he just knew it even though he was at a loss to explain what precisely it was that was making him so nervous.

"What's wrong, Cloud?" Tifa asked his back, speaking directly to him for the first time since she had slammed the door in his face a couple of nights ago. That day seemed so far in the past already...

Cloud shook his spiky head without turning around. "Nothing," he said quietly. "Let's just move out already."

That said, he took a bold step into the darkness of Hojo's lab, his entire figure disappearing into the hungry shadows. The vise of memory immediately closed around his chest along with the darkness, and he had the sudden urge just to turn around and leave. But Cloud knew that he could never allow himself to do such a thing. He had given himself the task of investigating Hojo's lab for one reason: he didn't want anyone else to get hurt. After he and AVALANCHE had rescued the late Aeris from the Shinra tower over year ago, she and Red both had mentioned that there were more specimens than just the two of them and the monster that Cloud, Barret and Red had defeated. And though Hojo was dead and gone (good riddance), Cloud had a bad feeling that some of those specimens might still be lurking around the shadowy corners of the lab, and they were probably not happy. If anyone was going to deal with those living phantoms of the past, it was going to be him.

But as Cloud moved gingerly into the darkness so that Tifa and Rude could enter the lab, he was starting to think that maybe he wasn't the most competent one for this job. He had only been in Hojo's lab once, and that had been over a year ago. Besides, now that he saw just how whole and complete the darkness was, he realized that his Mako-enhanced vision, no matter how good it was compared to a normal human being's, wasn't really much of a help.

*I should have brought Vincent and Red with me, he thought grimly. Vincent can see almost perfectly in the dark, and Red could have used his sense of smell...but I wanted to have Tifa with me so that I could protect her. And Rude was the one that saw the Running Man. What if I made a mistake choosing the teams? Maybe Tifa would have been safer with that goddamn Reno in the sewers than up here with me and Hojo's reject specimens. What if we get lost in here? What if Red and the others get trapped in the sewers? What if Barret and Cid can't reactivate Cait Sith? What if the Running Man decides to take revenge on Vincent and Yuffie for following him? I can't protect them all!*

*Yeah, a voice sneered in the back of his mind. And what if your head explodes because you've been worrying too much? Focus, Strife!*

A shadow suddenly shifted on Cloud's right side, and the leader of AVALANCHE nearly had a heart attack right then and there before he realized that it was only Tifa's shadowy figure standing close to him. The meager light streaming in from the hall outside the door danced briefly in her burgundy eyes before the darkness swallowed that, too.

"That you, Tifa?" Cloud asked, just to make sure.

"Mm-hm," Tifa said, moving again so that Cloud could be sure of her presence. It was then that she realized that he probably couldn't see any better in the dark than she could, and that was going to cause some problems. She had been thinking that Cloud's Mako-enhanced eyes would be able to pierce the blackness easily, but now that she saw that that wasn't true, the fluttering feeling of anxiety was blooming in the pit of her stomach.

*If he can't see anything, then this is going to be the blind leading the blind, she thought gloomily, watching the steady but suddenly weak light from Cloud's Mako eyes gleaming in the darkness. She could see nothing else. It was strangely bewitching, watching those two floating orbs of Mako blue hover in the darkness like earthbound stars, their lights only flickering when Cloud blinked. They were misted and beautiful, focused on nothing until they lit upon her figure in the gloom. The light suddenly narrowed and became more intense as Cloud apparently squinted to see her better.*

Tifa waved in spite of herself, forgetting that she was supposed to be angry at Cloud for being a butt for the past two days. "I'm right here," she said softly, relishing that long lost feeling of his eyes on her.

The two blue eyes bobbed up and down as Cloud nodded slightly. "Where's Rude?" he asked.

"Right here," Rude's calm voice issued from bunch of shadows right behind Tifa's left shoulder. She jumped a bit at finding him so close behind her; she hadn't even heard him moving around in the darkness.

"Where exactly did you see the Running Man?" Cloud asked, disembodied voice floating like a ghost in the darkness.

"In the main lab," Rude answered in his deep voice. "You know, the one where he usually conducted the experiments on the specimens."

Cloud winced. "You mean the one with the specimen elevator?"

"Yes," Rude said.

"Isn't that a little far away?" Tifa asked, remembering the time she and the others had stormed the Shinra Headquarters to find Aeris. It hadn't exactly been a short walk to get over there.

“Yeah,” Cloud said grimly. “And we have no source of light to guide us. I’m assuming there’s a lot of debris around here?”

“There is,” Rude confirmed matter-of-factly. Tifa suddenly heard the rustling of clothes. “But I also have this.”

A beam of light suddenly struck Cloud in the face, setting his Mako blue eyes and golden hair alight with artificial fire and dancing across his strong features.

“Hey!” he exclaimed, flinging his strong arms in front of his face to shut out the light. “Watch out! Did you have that all along?”

“Yes,” Rude said calmly, steering the flashlight away from Cloud’s face.

Now that there was light in the room, Tifa could see Cloud take his hands away from his face and scowl deeply. “And why did you fail to mention that before?” he demanded of the stoic Rude.

“Forgot,” was Rude’s simple answer. Then he shone the flashlight beam into the darkness over Cloud’s shoulder and started to walk away, sufficiently ending the conversation then and there.

Cloud and Tifa had no other choice but to follow him and hope that they weren’t in over their heads.

\* \* \* \* \*

“You put a *what* down there in the sewers?!” Fa-Li demanded of her companion as they paraded through the rain toward the office of President Reeve, where Titus believed they would be able to kidnap the Kisaragi girl.

“An *Evict*,” Titus answered matter-of-factly as he tore through another puddle. “I locked it in one of Hojo’s old tunnels. You know, the ones he used to use to transport human specimens?”

“I know the ones,” Fa-Li snapped, “but where in Leviathan’s name did you ever get your hands on an *Evict*, for crying out loud?!”

“I have connections,” Titus said flatly.

“But those things are monsters!” Fa-Li cried, fighting to keep up with her companion’s taxing pace. “Faceless Men that failed to submit to the treatment that turns them *into* Faceless Men. They’re nothing more than zombies! They’ll eat anything!”

“That’s the idea,” Titus said coldly.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Thissucksthissucksthissucksthissucks*, Reno chanted over and over in his head, anything to distract himself from the disgusting, suspiciously warm water sloshing around in his boots. He decided then and there that he was going to kill Cloud Strife once he got out of here. What the hell did the little turd think he had been doing, sending Reno down into the sewers to look for “abnormal things.” Everything Reno had seen so far had been abnormal! Everything from the greenish brown pool of...whatever...that he, Elena, and Red had literally *swam* across to get back on the concrete path to the green moss-like growths that were suddenly dangling from the walls and ceilings, every once in a while swooping down to tangle themselves in Reno’s spiky hair. He was cold, tired, and filthy, and it didn’t help that he now had no earthly idea where the hell they were. Getting lost in the sewers was something that didn’t appeal to Reno one damn bit. He at least hoped that Red knew where they were. If he didn’t, then they were in deep shit.

Not that they weren’t already, of course. Literally and figuratively.

“I wanna go home,” Elena suddenly whined, sounding ten years younger than she really was.

“Shut up,” Reno snapped, focusing his flashlight on her back instead of the nasty sludge on the floor. He was still in the back of the line. “It’s not like I’m having any more fun than you are.”

“Nor I,” Red added from the front of the line, his fiery coat stained and clotted with all sorts of gross-looking stuff.

“What are we even looking for down here????” Elena whined again, waving her hands in the air and making her flashlight beam dance and swirl along the walls. “Why can’t we go back up the surface and just say that we didn’t find anything?!”

Red stopped and whirled around, fixing the female Turk with a bestial glare that made her stop dead in her tracks, a grumpy Reno almost plowing into her back. “Do you want to find Reeve or not?” Red growled up at Elena, golden eye alight with inhuman intensity and one lip curling slightly over his sharp teeth.

Elena blanched and said weakly, "Yes."

"Then would you kindly shut up?" Red asked calmly, though the annoyed rumble that Reno heard in the back of the beast's throat sang a different tune.

"Hey," Reno snapped, walking up beside Elena and glaring down at Red. "Leave her alone, mutt."

Red's hackles rose, then settled just as quickly. He closed his eye briefly and sighed, his entire form relaxing a little. "Forgive me," he said to Reno and Elena as he reopened his eye. "I'm not in my best of moods right now."

"I think we need a break," Elena suggested hopefully, glad that Red wasn't angry anymore.

Reno rolled his eyes. "Yeah, let's just plop down on the floor and have ourselves a little rest."

"We need to discuss our next course of action," Red deadpanned.

Reno scowled. "Our next course of action is to get the hell out of here. You and I both know that the only reason that Strife sent us down here is to keep me away from Tifa. And if I were you, Red, I would be pissed that I got sent along as a babysitter."

The red lion-like beast stared at him with unshakable calm. "You don't know Cloud. He wouldn't have sent us down here if he didn't believe there was something down here for us to see."

"What's there to see?!" Reno demanded, his grumpy mood making his voice harsh. "All I can see for the next fifty yards are piles of shit and more piles of shit! All three of us are dead tired, and you know it! Let's just go back up! If Strife wants to see all this crap lying around, he can do it himself, on his own time!"

Red's flame-tipped tail continued to swish calmly in the dark, unperturbed by Reno's anger. "Instead of complaining, Reno, why don't you tell us something useful for a change?"

"Like what?" Reno growled, shifting his weight and wincing as he felt the goop that was sheathed happily in his shoes.

Red glanced at both Reno and Elena before continuing. "You two were both members of Shinra, Inc. Just how much contact did you have with Professor Hojo?"

An unwelcome and unexpected shiver suddenly ran down Reno's spine at the mention of that horrid name. "Minimal," he clipped, trying very hard not to remember all the terrible things that Hojo had done in his twisted lifetime. "Turks weren't allowed up into the labs without special permission."

*Not that anyone would have wanted to go anyways,* he added silently.

Elena had no problem expressing her fear and disgust in a violent shudder that nearly shook the flashlight from her hands. "As little as possible," she said quietly, her face looking glaring and ghostly in the light from their flashlights. "That man terrified me. Him and his specimens - he must have done such horrible things to them!"

Red looked off into the darkness, golden eye glinting briefly in the light. "He did," the beast said calmly, but both humans could hear the repressed anger in his gravelly voice. "Trust me, I know from first hand experience what it is like to be a specimen."

"That must have sucked ass," Reno said with his normal eloquence, eyes straying to the tattoo "XIII" on Red's left foreleg.

"It did," Red replied, shifting his gaze back to Reno and Elena. "What else can you tell me about Hojo and his specimens?"

Reno suddenly got the impression that he was being tested, and he didn't like it one bit. He always failed other people's tests. "Why all this sudden interest in Hojo and his specimens?" he demanded of Red. "It's not like we were his goddamn lab assistants or anything."

Red's golden eye stared hard at the two humans while the shadows and artificial light danced over the folds of the stitched one. "When I was imprisoned in Hojo's lab, I noticed that there an unusual batch of specimens that I'm sure even a horrifically immoral man like President Shinra would never have permitted Hojo to experiment on, at least in the multitude I saw them in."

"Just what were these unusual specimens?" Elena asked, making a vain attempt to hide the tremor in her voice.

"Civilians," Red said flatly. "Human beings."

Silence, except for the sounds of dripping water.

"He kept them in cages," Red continued, staring off into the dark again as if in that inky embrace, he once again experienced the terror that he had apparently witnessed during his captivity. "I could hear them scratching and clawing at the metal bars like animals, even from my cell in the specimen lab. And their screams - their screams were so loud I was surprised all of Midgar couldn't hear. But no one ever did hear. No one but me and the other specimens. But, of course, I was the only specimen there with something remotely resembling intelligence. All the others were simple beasts or had had what little emotion they contained in their forms obliterated by Hojo's ghastly experiments. But the humans...they were the worst."

"Oh my god," Elena breathed, bringing her hands to her cheeks, heedless of the filth that covered them. "Did you ever see any of them?"

Red glanced at her. "No, but their screams were real enough."

"B - But," Elena stammered. "How could he have gotten them up there?"

"There was really no up," Reno suddenly cut in. All eyes turned to him, and silence once again descended. The redheaded Turk stood with his arms casually folded across his chest, the epitome of calmness even though his aquamarine eyes dared the others to challenge what he was saying.

*Damn you, Red, he thought silently. Damn you for bringing this up and making me look like an even bigger monster than everyone already thinks I am.*

"They were kept down below," Reno continued in a level voice. "Where Hojo apparently thought no one could hear them." He glanced in passing at Red. "Apparently, however, someone *could* hear them after all."

Elena's mouth was hanging open. "Reno? You knew that these humans were being held captive?"

"Yes," Reno said coldly, aquamarine eyes glittering frostily.

"And you didn't do anything?" Elena squeaked, the look in her eyes straddling the line between horror and outrage.

Reno looked off into the darkness, glad that he couldn't see all of the nasty things that were hiding out there. "Elena, I was second in command of the Turks, but I was also known for my belligerence and my insubordination. Shinra couldn't have such an important, dangerous man misbehaving now, could he?" He paused briefly to recover himself, then said, "Hojo showed me from the very beginning just what would happen if I betrayed Shinra Inc."

"Oh, Reno..." Elena whispered, her eyes filling with tears of pity. She suddenly rushed forward and hugged her friend hard, trying to offer him comfort.

Reno brushed her rudely away, his eyes harsh. "Leave me alone," he hissed.

"But, Reno," Elena began, still trying to grasp what had happened to her friend. Reno had had such a cruel life and had seen such terrible things, and why did Fate still continue to mistreat him? And how strong he was, never giving up. At that moment, Elena had never felt such respect and love and sympathy for her uncouth, redheaded friend.

"You mean President Shinra authorized the experimentation on these humans?" Red asked Reno in a flat voice.

"Of course he did," Reno snapped. "But in a very discreet way, of course. I believe his exact words were, 'Do whatever you think will further the power and development of Shinra Inc.' You should know that everything about that fat bastard was under-handed and sneaky."

"But in such multitudes?" Red asked skeptically.

Reno shrugged. "He probably didn't know that Hojo was going to bring in so many, but it didn't matter in the end. Hojo did what Hojo wanted to do, and there was no one on Earth that could stop him."

"But surely too many humans being held captive would create quite a stir," Red pressed on, watching Reno's reaction to his words carefully. "Rumors would get out, and that is not what the late President Shinra would have wanted now, would he?"

"Why are you asking me?" Reno snapped angrily, thinking that Red was trying to get at something. "I can only assume that Hojo had ways of silencing those that found out about the experiments, and he probably had secret...passageways..."

Reno's voice trailed off, as he realized just why Red had started this conversation in the first place.

"And where would those secret passageways be, Reno?" the lion-like beast asked, suddenly sounding like he was talking to a two-year-old.

A scowl appeared on Reno's handsome face. "In the @\$%ing, shit-filled sewers!" he snarled, glaring down at Red. "You did all that fancy-talking and subtle questions just to make me look stupid, didn't you? You crafty mutt!"

Red snorted a bit at the name-calling. "Actually, Reno, I just wanted to confirm one of my suspicions about the experimentations. You know, make sure I wasn't hearing voices in my head the entire time I was in the lab."

"Just the hell up!" Reno snapped, suddenly feeling the urge to throw a tantrum. "You're not funny!"

"I wasn't trying to be."

"Yeah right!"

"Excuse me," Elena suddenly cut in, waving her hands in the air between the tranquil Red and the fuming Reno. "So are you saying that the secret passageways we're looking for are the ones most likely used by Hojo to transport the human specimens underground?"

Red nodded approvingly. "I think that sums it up rather beautifully, Elena. It's good to see that someone here still has their wits about them." He spun and started down the concrete path again.

Reno's glare followed him. "Okay, you mangy mutt, I'm just gonna pretend like that comment wasn't directed at me."

"Pretend all you want," Red countered, not looking back. "But it was."

Reno let out a cry of frustration and anger, squeezing his flashlight so hard that he almost cracked the plastic. On a wild and crazy impulse, he swooped down and scooped a handful of goop lying on the floor and flung it at Red's retreating back, his aim going wild in the darkness.

Red dodged it easily and kept going as if nothing had happened. Elena took one look at the fuming Reno and his sewage-covered hand and took off after Red, apparently deeming him to be the more stable one at the moment.

Mumbling curses under his breath, Reno stamped after them, wiping his filthy hand on his filthy suit instead of wiping it on the filthy wall or the filthy floor. He never could remember being this miserable in his entire life.

After five more minutes of walking, he just as miserable. He had no freakin' idea what the secret transport tunnels were supposed to look like, so how the hell was he supposed to find one? It was still pitch black in the sewers, and the only things his flashlight was showing to him were the river of sewage to his left, which was still gurgling and bubbly happily, and the nasty looking walls overgrown with green algae. Not very nice things to look at. He was pretty sure that the transport tunnels were dug into the walls somewhere, but if Red wanted to find them, then he was going to have to sweep away all the gross crap that had made its home on the concrete walls himself, because Reno sure as hell wasn't going to do it and Elena was probably too afraid she was going to break a nail.

Reno had been walking for another five miserable minutes when he suddenly heard *something* moving in the water on his left. His nightstick was immediately in his hand and his flashlight trained on the murky waters, but he saw nothing. Nothing at all.

"What the hell," he muttered, glaring at the flowing water as if they were going to give up their secrets if he stared at the murky waters meanly enough. He was *sure* he had heard something...no, probably just his imagination...yeah, that was it.

"Reno?" Elena asked, suddenly noticing that her companion had stopped following them. "What's wrong, Reno? Hurry up, or you'll get left behind."

"Yeah, yeah," Reno muttered, slowly walking away from the water in question and moving back towards his friends.

"Is something wrong, Reno?" Red asked gruffly, his tail swishing back and forth rapidly.

"No," Reno grumbled, lowering his nightstick reluctantly and turning towards the lion-like beast to give him another nasty Leave-Me-Alone-Because-I'm-Still-Mad-At-You glare. Then he noticed that some of Red's fur was standing up on end and his hackles were up.

"What the hell happened to you?" Reno demanded. "You bite into a live wire or something? You got a serious fro going on there, my friend."

Red shook his head like a dog as if doing so would flatten the fur. It just made it puffier. "Do you smell something?" he asked the two humans.

Reno took a big wiff of the air...and immediately regretted it. "I smell shit, shit, and more shit."

"Ew," Elena commented, wrinkling her nose. "Same here, Red."

"But...do you smell anything else?" Red asked with a strange hopefulness in his voice. His fur still had yet to resettle itself.

Reno sniffed again. "Shit," he confirmed. "And sewage. Nothing else."

Red started to pace uncomfortably. "Well...I smell something else. It's an odd smell...almost like Mako, but not quite. It's something different, and I don't like it one bit. It makes me...afraid."

"You think there's something alive down here, then?" Elena asked in a hushed tone, her eyes wide in the meager light given off from their flashlights.

Red suddenly shuddered violently, and Reno took an unconscious step back from him, a little nervous. He had never seen Red do that before...

"Elena," Red said. "I *know* there's something alive down here, but I don't understand what's making me feel all this...fear all of a sudden."

Reno was about to make another witty comment on the way Red's fur was standing up on end when a loud, echoing moan suddenly filled the sewer tunnel like the awakening rumble of some age-old beast. It was pitched low and seemed to vibrate the concrete beneath their feet, and all three of them froze upon hearing it, muscles going rigid in their bodies. On and on it echoed like the eerie moan of a restless ghost, rebounding off the walls and jumping back at them until the sound seemed to become the very air, burning their lungs as they inhaled.

"Okay," Elena whispered fearfully after it was done. "What...the hell...was that?"

The moan came again, louder this time. Reno and Elena shone their lights around wildly, trying to pinpoint the source.

"It's coming from down there," Red snarled, crouched in battle-ready mode as he glared at the section of the sewer tunnel that they had yet to investigate.

Once again, the moan split the air of the tunnel, harsher and almost sounding like a human voice.

"Holy shit!" Reno cried, his heart thundering in his chest. "That sounds like a @\$%ing person!"

"Oh my god!" Elena screeched, her eyes so wide they practically bugged out of her head. "Is someone trapped down here?!"

Red shuddered again, suddenly reminding Reno of a person having spasms. "It don't like this!" he growled, pacing like a caged beast.

"Hello!!" Elena suddenly called before Reno could tell her to shut up. "Is anyone down here?!"

The moan came again, sharper and louder than before. Whatever it was, it now knew that they were there.

"This way!" Reno cried, rushing past the shivering Red and slipping and sliding down the tunnel. "Hey you!" he called. "We're coming!"

"Reno, wait!" Red snapped as Elena ran past him in pursuit of her friend. "Something's not right here! Wait!"

But Reno didn't even hear him. The redheaded Turk ran almost blindly into the darkness, following the source of those ghastly moans that sounded like funeral music from beyond the grave. All he could think about was someone trapped down here, in the sewers, alone for who knows how long. And damn his lying soul to hell if that didn't sound like a godforsaken human being! A human trapped, like those poor specimens in Hojo's lab...

"Hold on!" he cried, his flashlight in one hand and his nightstick in the other as he raced across the concrete, shoes slipping and sliding on the goopy surface, almost sending him flying into a couple of walls.

"Reno, wait!" Red called again, bounding after them. "Wait, I said!"

A wall suddenly loomed up in front of Reno in the darkness as the everlasting sewer tunnel came to end. Reno cursed and backpedaled furiously, narrowly avoiding sliding into the algae-covered wall.

"Damn it!" he swore, his heart thundering in his chest. "Where is that sound coming from? There's no more tunnel!"

Elena skidded to a stop behind him, huffing and puffing. "Reno," she gasped, wiping her forehead with the sleeve of her suit. "Look, right there!"

Reno whirled back around to look at the wall, wondering what Elena was babbling about. Then he realized that a section of the filthy wall wasn't as filthy as the rest. The algae had been unsettled recently, some of it scraped and shoved away to expose a circle of dull, rusted metal embedded in the wall. Before he could stop himself, Reno reached out with his hand and wiped away even more of the clingy algae, which, in its battered state, was forced to submit to his superior strength and relinquish control of the domain upon which it had rested for years.

Squinting in the darkness, Reno shone his flashlight on the tarnished surface, and suddenly the letters "Transport Tunnel E-14" jumped out at him.

"Hey, Red!" he cried, proud of himself for making a discovery. "I think I found one of those tunnels! What if one of the humans is still stuck in here! I'm gonna open it up!"

Red rushed up to him from behind, startling Reno so bad that he nearly unloaded a full charge of electricity into his furry friend. "Reno, you mustn't!" Red cried, his fur still standing up on end. "Don't open it!"

"Dammit, Red!" Reno cursed, turning his attention back to the tunnel door and clearing algae away from the handle. "Get a hold of yourself!"

Red shook himself violently again, baring his teeth. "Reno, I'm warning you, don't open that! We haven't heard that sound again."

The Turk scowled and took hold of the handle, starting to pull. "But that doesn't mean it's not--"

Reno never got a chance to finish his sentence because the tunnel door suddenly burst open from within, a ghastly moan erupting into the rank air and rising to a shrill degree. The door slammed hard into Reno, sending him flying into the wall behind him, his nightstick falling from his grasp as spots danced in front of his vision. He heard Red let out a bestial snarl of alarm, then heard a loud splash, but Reno was unable to see what was going on since the door was blocking his view. And the shrill moaning continued.

Elena, who had been waiting a distance away from the tunnel, suddenly let out a terrified scream, her eyes riveted on the opening to the tunnel and her face as white as a ghost.

Reno was about to ask what was wrong when he saw a human figure run at Elena, shrieking in a ghastly voice and flailing its stick-figure arms in the air, hands flopping on the ends like some sort of rag dolls. It was dressed in the tattered remains of what might have been clothes, and it ran blindly towards Elena, the only thing it could see, screaming the entire way.

"What the @\$% is that?!" Reno cried, hand fumbling through the muck on the floor for his nightstick. That thing was gonna attack Elena!

The monstrosity let out another feral shriek that froze the blood in Reno's veins and suddenly lunged in Elena's direction, its bony hands curled into claws.

Suddenly, Elena's gun was in her hand and trained on the abomination. Reno heard her scream as she fired three bullets right into the creature - two in its chest and one in its head.

But the thing refused to be silent even as it went to its death, crumbling to the floor like a sack of potatoes and giving one last gurgling cry of madness before it at last was quiet, lying on the concrete in a still heap, its face pressed to the floor and its limbs arranged bonelessly around it.

For a moment, no one dared to speak a word, both Elena and Reno staring at the monstrous mold of demon clay fashioned into the figure of what might have once been a human being. It was completely bald, its pink head shiny and glistening, and its ratty clothes barely covered its emaciated figure. Its hands, or what was left of them, were still curled into monstrous claws as it lay there dead on the floor, unmoving, as blood pooled out around it.

"R-Reno," Elena suddenly whimpered, her hold on her gun trembling. Her flashlight, which had been held in a death grip in her other hand, suddenly clattered to the floor. Her knees started to crumple.

Nightstick forgotten, Reno was on his feet in an instant, rushing over to his friend. She all but fell into his arms, her brown eyes still riveted on the motionless figure of the creature she had just killed. Reno tried desperately to still the pounding of his own heart as he wrapped his arms around Elena, holding her small body tightly against him.

"You're okay, 'Lena, you're just fine," he said in the most soothing tone that he could manage, smoothing back her blond hair. His hands were trembling like crazy.

Elena buried her face in Reno's chest, her back heaving with silent sobs as she started to babble, "Oh my god, Reno! It was so hideous! My god, Reno, it nearly killed me! It wanted to! I know it did!"

"It's dead, Elena," Reno said firmly, burying his face in her blond hair and trying to ignore the horror they had just experienced. "You killed it. Nice reflexes, there, Elena. Very good."

"It was human!" Elena suddenly cried, arms locked around Reno's waist in a vise-like grip. "That thing was human, Reno! Oh god, what did they do to it!! It was human!"

Reno cast a dubious glance at the lifeless figure lying facedown on the floor, illuminated in the light from Elena's discarded flashlight. Human? Could it be? Maybe Red would know...

It was then that he noticed Red was missing.

"Hey," he told Elena gently, squeezing her tightly for a second and then releasing her. "Where's Red?"

Elena wiped her eyes with her hands, her gun still held tightly in one of them. "That...that thing came bursting out and knocked him into the water."

Reno's eyes widened, and he shone his flashlight into the murky, sewage-filled river at his side. "He fell...in there?"

Elena nodded mutely, reaching down with a trembling hand and picking up her flashlight, keeping a safe distance from the creature's dead body.

Reno took a step closer to the nasty sewer river, wrinkling his nose in disgust. "Ugh...well, I'm not going in there after him so he'd better--"

Just then sewer water exploded everywhere as *something* jumped clear out of the water, growling and snarling as it did so. Elena let out another scream and raised her pistol, and Reno was just about to dive for his nightstick before he realized that the sewer monster was none other than their furry friend...

"Red!" he cried, pissed that the mutt had startled him to bad. "What the hell do you think you're doing?!"

Red landed gracelessly on the concrete, covered from head to toe in sewer water and dripping more of the nasty stuff onto the concrete. He had a panicked look in his one golden eye.

"Run!" he cried, teeth bared to the gum, fighting to keep his balance. "There's something down there!"

Reno barely had time to say, "What?" before the river rose up again, this time spitting enough water up in the air to splash Elena and Reno with its nastiness, blinding the humans for the time being. A high-pitched bestial roar suddenly split the air, louder than the cries of the insane creature that had attacked Elena. This mighty shriek seemed to shake the very foundation of the sewers, threatening to bring everything toppling down on the three travelers.

*What is it?!* Reno wondered furiously as sewage water stung his eyes and he flung his arms up to cover his face. He heard a loud hissing sound.

"Snake!" Elena suddenly screamed. That word made Reno's blood freeze in his veins.

*Snake? Oh no...holy shit...*

Heart thundering in his chest, he wiped the last of the rank liquid from his eyes and opened them to see the head of a giant snake towering over them in the light from Elena's flashlight, its forked tongue darting in and out of its fanged mouth and its cold, slitted eyes alight with dark hunger. Poison dripped from its sharp fangs and fell into the water, making pained hissing noises as it did so. Water cascaded down its scaly hide, glistening with godly danger, silently telling the weak little mortals that they had no chance against something of this might.

"A giant snake!" Reno confirmed, hand flying to his left hip before he realized belatedly that he had lost his nightstick.

*IhatesnakesIhatesnakesIhatesnakesIhatesnakes*, he thought wildly as he stared dumbly at the monstrous creature that was eyeing him hungrily. He abruptly felt his consciousness slipping...

Teeth sank into his leg, and Reno nearly shrieked like a pansy before he realized that it was Red.

"Run!" he cried, darting away...back towards the tunnel that the monstrosity had emerged from.

"Where?!" Elena shrieked, pushing Reno along in front of her as she followed Red. For some reason, Reno couldn't get his feet to work properly.

"This tunnel!" Red cried, hopping up into the entrance. "It's the only way!"

"But we don't even know where it leads!" Elena cried.

"Doesn't matter," Red retorted. "Anyplace is better than here!"

Reno abruptly returned from his little venture to the Twilight Zone. "My nightstick!" he cried.

"Leave it, Reno!" Elena cried, still shoving him along.

But the snake, infuriated that its prey was escaping, suddenly lunged forward with a bestial roar, intent on devouring whatever it got to first.

Reno sensed the thing coming behind him, but he could do nothing about it. His reflexes were dulled by fear, and besides... all he had was a freaking flashlight! What was he supposed to do?! Blink it to death?

Suddenly, Red's figure appeared in the entrance of the tunnel again, yellow and orange lights blazing around his lean figure like the fury of a thousand suns.

"STARDUST RAY!!!!" he roared, the air around them turning dark and star-filled as he threw back his head and let out a ferocious howl that shook the very bones in Reno's body.

*Please let me make it out of this alive,* Reno prayed as he heard the giant snake let out a pained scream behind him. But as he and Elena ran past Red's blazing figure, Reno sent a silent plea that his friends would make it out alive, too.