

THE clock chimed ten. Tifa caught Barret's eye.

"We should've headed on by now," he said. "Are you gonna go up and get him?"

"He needs his sleep," she protested.

Barret snorted. "He's been sleeping twelve hours. If you're not going up there, I will."

She stood reluctantly, and made her way to the stairs.

Cloud was motionless in his bed, the blanket drawn up so that only a little of his hair protruded. "Cloud," Tifa murmured. "Cloud." She had every suspicion that he was already awake, despite his lack of response. Carefully, she began to peel the blanket back from over his head. His eyes opened and fixed on her; bright blue had never seemed so dull. "We need to get going," she told him gently.

Cloud didn't react. "You have to get dressed, OK?" she persisted.

"Just give me a few minutes," he eventually answered, his voice a hoarse monotone.

"Five minutes," she said. "Then I'm coming up again." She turned to leave quickly, not wishing to be drawn into further bargaining, and resumed her seat at the table downstairs.

"Well?" said Barret impatiently.

"He's getting up."

"Good."

Five minutes passed. Tifa began to draw back from the table. "I'll just go and check on him," she muttered.

“Nah, fuck it,” said Barret. “You don’t need to be dropping in on him every couple of minutes like some nurse. He knows he’s gotta get his ass down here so he can lead us into battle.” He let out a brief, dry laugh. “Some leader he is. First time I heard of a group of freedom fighters being led by one of the walking dead ...”

“Barret.” They’d had this conversation before. “Fighting is the only time he acts like himself. We can’t take that away from him. We’re trying to help him.”

“It’s not helping *us*,” Barret pointed out.

“We wouldn’t get through some of those battles without him.”

“So we train up.”

She shook her head. “It’d waste too much time.”

Barret frowned, and went on. “Tifa, when are you gonna admit that he’s a burden? Look at you. He’s fucking you up. You need to let go of him. Let him get some rest somewhere and you can call in on him when he’s got his head sorted out.”

“I’m not abandoning him,” she said firmly.

He shook his head in exasperation and stood up from the table, just as Cloud began to enter, shuffling towards them and collapsing into the seat Barret had been sitting in. He stared down at his placemat.

“Have some breakfast,” Tifa ventured gently.

“I’m not hungry.”

She had grown used to that reply. “You need to keep your strength up for fighting,” she reminded him.

He failed to protest, so she headed over to the desk and cleared her throat to get the attention of the receptionist.

“Yes?”

“Can we get another breakfast?”

“Kitchen’s closed, miss. Breakfast is seven til nine.” He gestured vaguely towards a grimy sign on the counter.

“Oh – I’m sorry, but our friend’s sick, he’s been resting – would you mind just checking if there’s anything left in the kitchen?”

He grimaced and walked off into the private quarters. Before too long he returned with a meagre bowl of porridge. “That’s all we’ve got.”

She took it gratefully.

“Not contagious, I hope,” he added.

“Sorry?”

“Your friend.”

“Oh. No.” Sometimes she felt like it was, if she and Barret were anything to go by.

“Good. Bad for business otherwise.” He showed no hint of humour. She hurried back to the table and set the bowl in front of Cloud.

“Here,” she said, trying to smile at him, “we can head on once you’re done.” Behind Cloud, Barret rolled his eyes.

Tifa watched as Cloud began to eat. This ritual had become one of the worst parts of her day. Cloud slowly raised the spoon to his mouth like an old man and chewed each mouthful for what seemed an age, looking as if he was going to gag. She watched his Adam's apple jerk up as he swallowed each tiny portion; the sight of it nauseated her. Barret kept his eyes fixed on her as Cloud ate. You brought this on yourself, he seemed to be saying.

Cloud made it through just over half of the porridge – it had taken minutes – before she bailed. They still had to pay the bill; she was grateful for the excuse.

“Let's see ... bed and breakfast times three ... that'll be six hundred and sixty gil, miss,” the receptionist told her.

Tifa counted out seven hundred-gil coins, laying them on the counter as she signed the receipt. Placing the pen back in its pot, she became aware of a commotion in the next room: the scrape of a sword being drawn, the click of a gun being loaded. Shit, she thought, and hurried back to Cloud and Barret without a thought for her change.

They were locked in a battle stance, their respective weapons pointed at each other's faces, both of which radiated dark, unrelenting ire. Tifa took a deep breath and began yelling.

“What the hell are you doing – both of you! Barret, get away from him.” She placed a hand on Barret's arm and gave it a gentle tug, hoping to snap him out of it; fortunately, he

stepped back. She continued reproaching him nonetheless, having decided that focusing on Barret would be preferable to facing Cloud. “Damn it, Barret, you’re supposed to be responsible! Can I not leave you alone with him for two seconds without you provoking him?! You’re the one who talks about how messed up he is and then you go attacking him the moment my back’s turned! We’re supposed to be helping him get better, not turning him against us!”

She glanced back at Cloud, embarrassed to have said such things about him within his earshot. He didn’t meet her eye. Turning back to Barret, she forced herself to speak more calmly. “Wait outside. We’ll be there soon.”

He looked like he would argue, but headed out, pausing only to scowl at Cloud. She waited until the door had closed behind him before speaking again.

“Tell me what we can do to help you,” she pleaded.

“I’m fine,” was the reply.

Cloud had lied to her before, but this one was monumental, and it wounded her. She tried again. “Cloud, you’re –” she remembered what she had said to the receptionist earlier – “you’re sick. We care about you, we want to get you through this. I just need to know how to help.”

He stood there in silence, a pitiful, broken man. She could feel tears gathering at the rims of her eyes. How could she help him, if he didn’t want help? What could she possibly do for him? She needed to get out of there before she broke down

completely – she knew that certainly wouldn't improve the situation.

“Sure,” she said carefully, managing to keep the emotion out of her voice. “Save the fighting for monsters. I'll see you outside.”

She almost ran out, and of course, Barret was right by the door, perfectly positioned to notice every single one of her tears. “If he lays a finger on you, I'll fucking kill him,” he growled.

Tifa shook her head. “He wouldn't hurt me. And I can protect myself.” She wiped her face on the back of her glove, trying to ignore the wet streaks it left on the leather.

“He's a little shit.”

“It's not his fault.”

“Right. Fucking Shin-Ra.”

“Yeah.”

Cloud emerged from the inn, already looking a little less pathetic for being outdoors. “Where next, Strife?” Barret asked begrudgingly. Tifa flashed him a look of gratitude.

“West,” said Cloud, and began to move without waiting for the others to follow. They fell into step behind him, and Tifa forced her worries away from the forefront of her mind. They would resurge in full force that evening, but it would be a blessed few hours of respite.