

But the Pretzels Are Free

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You always get the excess crap for free. You follow Cloud for ten dollars, but you get the Turks, no extra charge.

A story from the worm's-eye-view of Reno, Rude, and the rest of the Turks. A story with humor, drama, a dash of romance, and plenty of ra

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Chapter 1: Speechmaker

“Thirteen Gil.”

“Huh?”

“That’s how much it was.”

“How much what was?”

“The beer I gave you.”

The redheaded chopper pilot glanced down at the bottle in his hand, baffled. Then he grinned mischievously, looking back at his partner.

“But what’s a beer between friends, huh?”

The man beside him shook his shaven head. “I don’t have a problem with a beer between friends. I just don’t like twenty-nine beers between friends.”

“You’re actually counting?” the redhead yelled, sitting up suddenly.

The bald man looked away, adjusting his black blazer and sunglasses. “You shouldn’t drink and fly the chopper, Reno.”

“Heh...” Reno muttered, shrugging as he took another swig of beer. “This isn’t whisky, Rude. I’m a seasoned drinker—beer won’t get me drunk.”

“Tseng would throw a fit if he knew,” Rude replied, keeping his gaze on the overcast sky roiling about the window. His partner scratched his chest lethargically and undid a few buttons in his untucked undershirt.

“Yeah, yeah... damn protocol... Tseng is such a stiff, it hurts to look at him...”

“Reno...”

“What?”

“Tree.”

“Aw, shoot,” Reno muttered, jerking the joystick on the chopper quickly. The craft veered off to the left,

grazing the branches of a large pine that had loomed up out of the darkness.

“Whew,” Reno laughed, drinking the last of his beer and tossing the empty bottle aside. “Okay. Time to land...”

Silence ensued. Reno scratched his head and sniffed. He glanced at Rude significantly before shifting his weight and sitting up, peering at the land below the chopper, all dotted with trees. Slowly, he looked at Rude again before sighing and flopping back in his seat.

“You know I don’t know where the hell to land,” he grumbled.

Rude’s face remained stoic. His head turned toward his partner.

“The Mako Reactor. Avalanche blew it up, remember?”

“Yeah...yeah,” Reno nodded slowly. “Okay. I’ll have to go back to Midgar then.”

“I was wondering why you headed all the way over to Junon...” Rude sighed as Reno fiddled with his joystick, making the chopper do an abrupt about-face.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” Reno demanded, reaching back to grab another beer out of the cooler. “That was a good two hour flight! If we would have actually gone to the reactor, we could have gotten back in fifteen minutes.”

“Thirty,” Rude muttered, rubbing his temples.

“Huh?” Reno queried.

“You owe me thirty beers now.”

“Stop counting my beers Rude, okay? Okay.”

“That’s three-hundred and ninety Gil.”

“When did you even start counting my beers?” Reno demanded as he picked unconsciously at a hangnail.

“Two weeks ago.”

“Wow...” Reno breathed. “I drink too much don’t I?”

Rude didn’t reply. He gazed lifelessly out of the window, watching as the smog cleared as they began to cross the mountains, which looked like giant black serpents in the blanket of darkness. The weather had been very poor recently. Not even the stars were visible—not that it mattered much—living in the pizza pie of Midgar. There, the sky was constantly blocked from view by the plates raised over the different Sectors. Even the absence of a rainy day was strangely upsetting. Only the bigwigs had the privilege of visiting the upper levels of the city—out of the slums. Perhaps that was why he joined the Turks in the

first place. To see the skies and the trees every once in a while, even if the land was covered in smog.

“Hey...” Reno said suddenly, “you doing okay over there? Cuz, uh... I know you get airsick and stuff, so if you gotta puke, just... don’t do it in the cockpit, okay?”

“I’m fine,” Rude replied in his usual business-like tone. “Just thinking.”

“I see...” Reno replied, nodding and grinning knowingly. “About a girl maybe?”

“No, about the sky.”

“I don’t even know why I hang out with you.”

Rude smiled despite himself as Reno gulped down his beer, letting the chopper veer severely as he did so. He didn’t complain, though. Reno wouldn’t crash the craft after just two beers. Rude settled back in his seat and closed his eyes, getting himself comfortable.

“Yeah, you take a nice long nap, Rude,” Reno said sarcastically. “I’ll just drive all by myself for another two hours... You know, next time we gotta fly somewhere, you get to fly the damn bird, okay?”

“Sure.”

“‘Sure,’ he says. But when our next mission rolls around, you’re suddenly gonna get airsick or something. Anything to get out of flying the helicopter.”

“You’re a better pilot than I am. I was never formally trained.”

“You don’t need formal training to drive the friggin’ chopper, Rude. It’s just grabbing a joystick and wiggling it around a bit.”

“If that’s all it was, they wouldn’t bother with the formal training.”

Reno sighed, scratching the back of his neck, more out of habit than out of actual necessity. He went back to flying, periodically taking swigs from his bottle. Rude settled back again and it didn’t take long before he actually fell asleep. It surprised him to be looking at the back of his eyelids and listening to the rotor blades of the helicopter one minute and then to be getting jarred roughly by the landing. He sat up, adjusting his sunglasses hastily and looking around. What was wrong with him? He never fell asleep during flights. He watched Reno flipping and toggling several switches until the rotor blades slowed and quieted to a dull hum until they finally stopped. His partner then looked over at him begrudgingly, but then started as he realized Rude had awakened.

“Well, I just want you to know...” Reno started haltingly, but then cut off, his pupils dilating and contracting wildly. He swayed before continuing, “I just wanted to let you know that I drank the rest of your beer for falling asleep. So there.”

Rude raised an eyebrow. “And you still landed the chopper?”

“Oh yeah,” Reno sniggered. “I landed it all right. Landed it all over the place.”

Rude looked out of the window to assess his surroundings. But Reno had landed in front of the destroyed reactor, just as he had been instructed. Rude looked back at him incredulously.

“How is it that you’re sense of direction gets better when you’re drunk?” he asked.

“Cuz I know these things, okay? I friggin’ know. I know,” Reno replied, trying to open his door.

“Just a second Reno,” Rude sighed, getting out of the helicopter and walking around to the pilot’s side. He opened the door after a moment of struggle and Reno tumbled out, scrabbling frantically at the air, as if he was trying to grab on to something just out of his reach. Rude caught his arm and helped his wasted partner clamber out of the helicopter. Reno had begun laughing at this point, and Rude rolled his eyes as he led the man to the entrance of the destroyed reactor, where several ShinRa soldiers were laying about, dozing.

Rude left Reno to one side, and the redhead stood there with his eyes closed, wavering. Rude watched him for a few seconds to make sure he wouldn’t fall before he strode over to the ShinRa militia and stood before one of them, who was propped against the gate of the Mako Reactor, snoring. Rude coughed loudly several times before the man stirred and looked up at him through bleary eyes.

“Hello. I am Rude of the Turks,” Rude stated officially. He then wavered, glancing back at Reno. Talking was usually his partner’s task, and being suddenly burdened with the job of speechmaker threw Rude for an unpleasant loop. He continued, nonetheless.

“I have come...to collect your report.”

“Huh?” the man mumbled groggily. “You guys? Weren’t you s’posed to be here, like, three hours ago?”

“We...” Rude trailed off. ‘We made a wrong turn,’ didn’t sound very Turk-like. They were supposed to be the elite forces of ShinRa after all. Well, maybe not the elite. At least second under Soldier, though... And it didn’t sound good for the Turks to be taking three-hour wrong turns.

“What we do is none of your business,” Rude countered after a noticeable pause. “Our orders come directly from President ShinRa himself.”

“You’re still late...” the guard mumbled.

“Just give me your report,” Rude replied, extracting a pen and notepad from the breast pocket in his blazer. The man gazed at him blankly for a moment before Rude stared at him harshly. He then gave a start and began.

“Well, uh, when we came it was sort of already on fire,” he recounted slowly. “We did all we could to put it out, but us militia have really bad equipment and stuff, so nothing we did worked. That’s the reason why you guys gotta tell ShinRa to invest more in its militia, you know, because we pretty much gotta do everything and it’s really—“

“The report,” Rude interrupted calmly.

“Yeah, I was getting to that,” the man yawned. “Anyway, we saw a couple of guys escaping the Sector. One of them we almost caught, but, like I said, ShinRa doesn’t invest enough in its basic military force, so we never get our jobs done right and we—“

“Did anyone catch what this man looked like?” Rude pressed.

“Um... Yeah, I was getting to that. So, after the whole ordeal, I was talking to my buddy Bruce, and he—“

“Does this have anything to do with the report?”

“I was getting to that,” the man snarled. “Jeez. Okay, so I was talking to Bruce and I was like, ‘Hey man, you see those guys run out of the Reactor? They were, like, booking!’ And he goes, ‘Oh yeah, I almost got one of ‘em.’ Then I said, ‘Seriously? Aw, man, you should get fricken promoted for that.’ He was all like, ‘Yeah I know. I almost killed him too with my bare hands. Except his eyes were really weird. Like, I don’t know, glowing sort of.’ And I was really shocked, you know, because that’s obviously someone from Soldier he’s talking about, because I study the different ranks, okay? So I said, ‘That’s gotta be some guy from Soldier, because they all have those weird-looking glowing eyes.’ And he’s like, ‘For real? Whoa. But isn’t Soldier on our side?’ And I’m like, ‘Yeah, they are.’ So we figure there’s some sort of traitor from Soldier leading one of them rebellion whatchamacallits. Which, I’ve always said you couldn’t trust those highly ranked guys, because they get really big heads and they betray us and stuff—“

“Good,” Rude said, as he scribbled down a few notes. “Did you... Did...” Again, he looked back at Reno heatedly before stumbling on, “Did you get more of a description than just that he was in Soldier?”

“Um, yeah, I guess,” the man replied, scratching his head. “He was some young blond with a huge sword and black clothes.”

“Is that it?” Rude asked after scribbling the information down.

“What do you want, a fricken book? I only know what Bruce told me.”

“Can I talk to Bruce, then?”

“Naw, he left about two hours ago.”

“...Did anyone else see this man...?”

“Everyone else that’s still here aren’t going to be any help to you,” the man scoffed. “They would have never gotten off their asses to chase after some Soldier guy.”

“Did you get a description of anyone else who infiltrated the facility?”

“Um...no. But there was this one flower girl who we were talking to before and she was pretty hot, so I

thought I should talk to her too. But she didn't want to go to the bar or nothing—one of those real boring broads, you know? She just kept saying, 'That man paid me too much, and he didn't take his change. Will you please give him this if you see him?' So she, like, gives me two Gil and tells me that the guy is young and blond with a huge sword. Which is kinda the same description Bruce gave me of the Soldier guy—"

"All right," Rude said shortly, pocketing his pen and paper. "That should be good. Thank you very much."

"Oh, no big deal. Just doing my job, you know? And, um, buddy? I think your friend over there is tanked. No offence or nothing, but..."

Rude glanced over his shoulder at Reno, who was leaning against the charred gates of the Mako Reactor, warbling "My Chocobo Died This Morning" with his eyes still closed. Rude sighed and walked over to him, grabbing him by the shoulder.

"Reno. Wake up," he hissed in the redhead's ear.

"Go away Rude," Reno mumbled almost unintelligibly. "I'm singing okay? I haven't gotten to sing since like first grade. That was pretty much what my family did every day. I always had to eat those damned peas..."

"Reno, we have to talk to a witness now," Rude said firmly. "It's our job. Let's go."

"Stop touching me Rude!" Reno yelped, opening his eyes and jerking himself away. He then wandered a few feet away before turning and stumbling back.

"I'm sorry man," he mumbled, his eyes closed again. "I just have the worst headache ever. Do you got any of those pills? Those really good ones? Because I'm really in the mood for that ice cream."

"Reno, how about you stay in the chopper. I'll be back in a few minutes. I'm going to go talk to someone," Rude sighed, rubbing his temples.

"Yeah, go and have fun without me," Reno snapped, opening his aqua eyes. "You're always doing shoot without me Rude. I drove the helicopter all the way here okay? Do you want your money? I only got about...um...fifty Gil on me right now. I'll get some more tomorrow."

Rude gave up. Reno's stupors lasted as long as anyone else's, despite the redhead's claims of being able to sober up in fifteen minutes. Rude decided Reno could fend for himself and turned around, walking quickly back to the guard he had spoken to before, who was beginning to doze off again.

"Hey," Rude said as he came up to him. "Can you tell me the name of that girl you spoke to?"

The man opened his eyes and nodded. "Yeah... I think it was Aeris. She was pretty hot. Boring though, you know?"

"And you said she was a flower girl?" Rude queried.

“Yup.”

“Thank you,” Rude said quickly before jogging off down the alley. It wasn't long before he heard sloppy footsteps behind him. Rude sighed, shaking his head.

“Hey!” Reno shouted. “Hey! Where're you going? Hey! I'm talking to you!”

Rude slowed to a stop and waited as his friend stumbled up to him, gasping.

“What's that all about?” Reno demanded breathlessly as he doubled over, resting his hands on his knees. “You're not leaving me there with the chopper are you?”

“Well...” Rude replied, “I was...”

“We...” Reno paused to breathe for a moment, before standing up so suddenly that Rude had to grab him by the front of his shirt to keep him from falling over backward. Reno seemed not to notice this, for he continued as if it had never happened. “We have a job to do right?”

Rude squinted at him, and was almost tempted to remove his sunglasses. Reno was smiling thickly, but his words didn't seem as strained anymore. But he couldn't be sober now, could he?

“Come on Rude, let's get this show on the road,” Reno said, walking forward down the alleyway.

Rude stared after him. Was he sober?

Reno suddenly wobbled and fell on his face.

Nope. Still good and wasted.

Rude didn't even bother helping him up this time. He just continued walking down the dreary streets of the Sector, the harsh streetlights acting as his guide, for in the slums it was always starless night. He passed the dilapidated apartment complexes and shops, which had filthy neon signs blinking from almost every window. Rude soon saw a main street looming in the distance and made for it. Once on it, the slums seemed to become lighter, but it was only the harsh glare of even more electric lights. Rude glanced around and then began walking down the road, which was made of crumbling and dirty cobblestone.

Reno caught up not long afterward, still stumbling about and still very un-sober. He had started humming a little tune again, and had begun playing with his retractable rod whimsically, and periodically used it to conduct himself as he sang while straggling behind Rude. Rude ignored him as best he could. He instead kept his eyes open for signs of something one would usually never dream of seeing in the slums.

Flowers.

Now he just had to find them.

“Would you like one sir?” a voice from the side of the street asked. “They’re only a Gil.”

“Ooo... cheap,” Reno said suddenly.

“You don’t even know what she’s selling Reno,” Rude said irritably, looking back at his partner. “It could be...any...thing...”

He stopped. There she was. Right under his nose, and for that matter, almost tugged away from it. She was simple looking, yet there was some sort of natural draw to her earthly beauty that made her stand out. Her dress was plain and pink, and she wore a short-sleeved red jacket over it. Her hair was a soft brown, and pulled back in a long, curling ponytail. Ringlets framed her face, and her green eyes sparkled with a youthful and independent effervescence. She smiled at Reno, who had staggered over to her.

“I have lots of different varieties. But I like the day lilies best,” she said, her voice bubbling and soft as she picked a beautiful white flower out of her basket and handed it to Reno. Reno took the flower slowly before digging around in his pockets and extracting a Gil. He handed it to the girl, who thanked him graciously before turning to Rude.

“Would you like one too, sir?” she prodded. “They’re all fresh and nothing is synthetic.”

“I actually have a few questions for you,” Rude interrupted. “Have you seen a blond man with a large sword and strange eyes around this part of town?”

The woman’s smile faltered slightly, but she answered just as calmly, “I think a violet suits you best. I don’t know why. But violets have always seemed like rather sad flowers to me. And you...you seem sad.”

Rude felt as if she had kicked him. He stopped—his composure completely shattered. What was she talking about? He wasn’t sad. Just irritated with Rude for drinking all his beer and getting himself drunk in the middle of a mission. How was that being said? Rude tried to speak—to counter her remark, but he couldn’t. He was no speechmaker.

“Well...here!” the flower girl laughed. “I knew I had one somewhere. A violet! Do you want it?”

Rude looked away. He tried to speak, but he couldn’t.

“They’re only a Gil,” the flower girl said teasingly.

“I... I don’t...” Rude stammered helplessly. He looked back at Reno, but the redhead was definitely not ready to just jump into the fray. He had already begun to fall asleep again, and his eyes were closed as he held his day lily tightly.

“What’s the matter?” the girl laughed. “Are you afraid that a flower won’t be macho enough for you?”

“I...” Rude halted. Damn Reno. Damn Reno and his beer.

Reno was supposed to talk to people! Not him.

"I think it's stupid that men think flowers are only for girls," the flower girl said, her voice still as light and airy as ever. "Flowers are beautiful gifts from the Planet. I guess people just don't appreciate the Planet like they used to."

"I...You...You need to answer my question," Rude finally spat out.

"Hm?" the girl asked calmly. "Oh, I'm sorry. What was your question?"

"If you've talked to..." Rude began, but he felt his voice failing him again. The flower girl's placid emerald stare was beginning to completely unnerve him—assuming he hadn't been completely unnerved already. Nonetheless, Rude forced out, "Have you talked to a blond swordsman with strange eyes?"

"I talk to a lot of people in my business," the girl laughed. "I'm not sure I can remember any one person on a description like that."

"His...his eyes... Have you seen anyone with eyes that...glow?" Rude stuttered.

The girl looked at him for a long time, as if she were reading his soul like an open book, and found the contents at least interesting. She then shifted her gaze from inside him to at him, and answered, "Yes."

Rude sighed with relief. Finally, they were getting somewhere.

"Did he give you a name?"

The girl shook her head. "No. He just bought a flower."

"Did he look like he was in a hurry?"

"I guess. I don't know why that means anything, though," she replied. "Most people are always in a rush to be somewhere."

But Rude wasn't listening. He was just trying to keep his string of questions flowing before they dried up suddenly. He quickly asked,

"What is your name?"

"I'm AERIS. AERIS Gainsborough, the flower girl," she replied.

"My name is Rude," Rude said, pulling out his pen and paper. "Can you...tell me where I can find you if I need to talk to you later?"

"Mr. Rude, are you asking me out?" AERIS laughed.

Rude felt the color rise in his face. "No..."

“It’s all right. Maybe I’ll treat you to a date or two,” Aeris interrupted him. “I usually take care of my flowers in the church in Sector 5 slums. If you want the date, just drop by.”

And with that, the flower girl turned around and walked off down the street. Rude quickly scribbled the information down before shoving his pad in his breast pocket again and looking back at his partner. Reno had seated himself on the oil-stained street, and was propped up against a chain-link fence, snoring. Rude irritably yanked the redhead to his feet and dragged him all the way back to the chopper.