

Chapter 10: Crystal Snowflakes

"He's my brother. He was flirting with me. I'm going to throw up."-Kiyara Maiden

Dinah walked slowly along the icy path. She had just finished getting the tour of the rocket with Cid, and was on her way back to the house. After two days in the town, she was bored stiff. Especially after the constant action of her life and the past three days or so, this inaction was intolerable.

Reno had stayed behind to check out more of the rocket, so at least she'd have him out of her hair for a little while. Reno had proved to be as bored as she was, and a bored Reno equals not much fun for Dinah. Cid had grumbled about Reno staying, but had displayed a grudging admiration for Reno's intelligence and interest in Cid and Shera's brainchild. Dinah raised the collar of her jacket and hunched her shoulders against the biting wind.

Suddenly, she heard childish giggling, and her face unconsciously creased into a smile. Kat and Josh had been the only bright spot in the last two days; they were sweet kids, and reminded her of... No, she'd promised not to think about that.

Dinah followed the sound to an area right next to the house. When someone had shoveled the path to the rocket, they had piled it all on either side of the trail. Dinah used the resulting snowbank to her advantage, peering over the top of it to find Shera and the twins cavorting and playing in the snow.

An idea struck her, and Dinah grinned wider. She scooped up a handful of snow in her borrowed gloves and molded and packed it into a perfect snowball. She aimed, then threw. The snowball flew straight and true, and exploded in a shower of icy crystals in the middle of Shera's back. Shera and the twins spun to find Dinah smiling and waving at them.

"Snowball fight!" Joshua roared. The three charged up the snowbank, wielding snowballs and yelling fierce war cries. All three threw, but Katania's snowball was the only one that met its target. It struck Dinah in the back of the head as she turned to flee.

She flopped down comically. "Agh! Ya got me!" she moaned. Kat giggled and pounced on her. The two rolled around in the snow, Dinah pretending to fight back while the little girl pushed snow in her face. Then Kat stuffed a handful of snow down the collar of Dinah's jacket.

Dinah yelped and leapt up, dancing around and grabbing at her back. "It's going down my back! I'm gonna get you for that one!"

She made a powdery snowball and tossed it at Kat, who dodged it easily. Kat stuck her tongue out. "Nyah, nyah!"

It became a free-for-all from there. Shera, Josh, Kat, and Dinah picked up handfuls of snow and flung them at each other, laughing. This went on for several minutes, until Shera happened to glance down the path toward the rocket.

She grinned mischievously as she hissed, "Stop! Truce!" Everyone froze where they were. Josh and Kat were in the process of wrestling, and Dinah was holding a snowball with her arm cocked back to throw.

"Everybody, c'mere!" Shera said quietly.

They all huddled in together, and their whispered conversation was punctuated by giggles. They broke apart swiftly, laughing quietly.

Shera and Kat dashed across the path to station themselves behind a snowbank, while Dinah and Josh did the same on the other side. They made snowballs, Dinah taking care to make sure hers was a rock hard ice-ball, and then settled in to wait. Then didn't have to wait for very long.

Reno came into sight, walking slowly down the path with his hands jammed deep into his pockets.

"Ready?" Dinah whispered. Grinning, her little cohort nodded. Reno unwittingly walked closer and closer to the trap set for him.

"Aim," Dinah hissed. She and Josh cocked their arms back. Reno walked the last few critical steps, and he was right in between the two teams.

"FIRE!" Dinah yelled, popping up over the snowbank and firing off her ice-ball; Joshua rising and firing beside her. Shera and Kat appeared on the opposite side, and did the same. The air was suddenly full of flying snowballs.

Reno yelped as Dinah's ice-ball hit him square in the back with a thud, and just as he turned around, Josh's snowball struck him in the chest. Then Shera's snowball hit him in the back of the head. Reno spun again.

"What the f-" he began to say, then Kat's snowball exploded in his face. Reno frantically cleared off his face, and glared around at the laughing conspirators.

Out of the blue, he grinned ruefully. "Man, you guys got me good!" He chuckled with them. Suddenly, he scooped up some snow and made it into a snowball, then let it fly. It struck Dinah hard and fast on the shoulder. She grinned and hopped up on top of the snowbank to get a better shot at him. Then she happened to glance down the path.

Dinah flung herself off of the snowbank. "Hey, temporary truce!" she yelled.

Reno paused in the act of throwing a snowball. "Why?" he asked, the snow chunks caught in his fiery hair glistening in the sunlight.

Dinah smiled roguishly. "Cid's coming."

The twins hopped up and down. "Let's get Daddy!" Joshua said, laughing.

Dinah and Josh ducked back behind their snowbank, while Reno dove behind the opposite one with Shera and Kat.

Just then, Cid strode into sight, moving along fairly quickly. He appeared to be planning something because he was mumbling to himself and was waving his hands around in the frigid air in front of him. He sauntered right between the two snowbanks.

"FIRE!" yelled Dinah for the second time that day. Everyone popped up and let loose snowballs.

Cid tried to duck, but didn't succeed. "What the hell!"

Josh and Katania shrieked with laughter. "Daddy said a naughty word!"

Cid grinned sheepishly. "Whoops."

They all continued to barrage Cid, but he had figured out what was going on, and was laughing and returning some of the snowballs. Josh and Kat ran out from behind their respective snowbanks and jumped on Cid, wrestling him to the ground.

Shera laughed, ducking out from behind her snowbank to join the cloud of snow that was her husband and children. They were all laughing and shouting as Shera tickled them unmercifully.

Dinah watched for a few moments, blue-gray eyes utterly lost. Then an ice-ball struck her in the back of the head. She

turned to glare, and found Reno grinning mischievously at her. She growled something inarticulate, then she and Reno launched into a particularly vicious and fierce snowball fight that lasted for several minutes.

It ended when Reno flopped down in the snow and announced wearily, "I give up."

"That's actually not such a bad idea," Dinah agreed, throwing one last snowball at his still form and sitting down. She smiled and nodded to the still-tussling Highwinds. "Think they'd notice if we went inside?"

Reno shook his head. "Naw."

Dinah cupped her hands to her mouth, and got ready to shout down the path, then dropped her hands. "They stopped." The four Highwinds were indeed all exhaustedly spread out along the trail.

"Fuckin' amazing." He gave a sudden, convulsive shudder. "It's damn cold here; I'm going inside."

"That's actually not a bad idea," she said, rising out of the snow and brushing herself off. She started to walk toward the Highwind home-enduring a cheap snowball shot by Reno that exploded across her back-and heard the crunch of footsteps behind her.

Then smaller, faster footsteps started. "Wait!"

She glanced back to find the two Highwind children racing after her and Reno. Dinah looked to Shera, and the other woman's hand went up in the air, waving them on. "Go ahead, guys."

"C'mon, Dinah!" Joshua said, latching onto her hand.

Reno felt someone grab his hand, and heard Dinah's chuckle. "Don't look now, Lynley, but I think you've got yourself a new friend."

Reno looked down to find Kat's brown eyes looking up at him; her childish, round face turned upward as if to catch the rays of the sun. Suddenly, in his mind, he saw a pair of wider, intelligent green eyes replace the almond shaped brown ones. Her straight black hair became shorter, curly ringlets, red as molten sunlight. His brain changed the shape of the face to a slightly longer, thinner one. Aimee...

Reno shook his head furiously, and the image faded away to be replaced by Katania's puzzled face. He felt a sense of déjà vu as he hesitated, then stuck his tongue out at her. This caused Kat to burst into gales of laughter.

"I like you, Mista Reno!" she giggled.

"I'm flattered," he replied sarcastically. His tone went right over her head, but he was, actually, kind of flattered. He allowed her to lead him by the hand toward the house, the little girl chattering away happily.

Dinah stared after him for a moment. Where did he learn to be so good with kids? She shrugged and followed, with Joshua in tow. She glanced behind herself one more time, and smiled at the sight that met her eyes.

Cid had started to get up and follow, his eyes on the retreating backs of Reno and his daughter, when Shera put a hand on his arm. She said something that sounded like, "They'll be fine, Cid." She began to stand herself, when Cid pulled her back down, laughing. Shera fell on top of him with a squeal and a giggle.

Dinah turned away at that point to give them privacy. But Joshua had no such qualms. He made a disgusted noise. "Eww, Mommy and Daddy are kissing!"

Dinah smiled at his revulsion. You'll understand some day... They walked off toward the house together, Josh talking excitedly.

Later, everyone was back in the house. The twins had both taken a liking to Reno and had dragged him upstairs, saying something about an "invenshun." Cid was at the crude airstrip, supervising the repairs on the Highwind. The good natured baby, Raven, who had been staying at a neighbor's house while the Great Snow War went on, was sitting in a high chair in the kitchen, giggling and eating Cheerios.

Dinah was in the same room as Raven, curled up in a chair and fighting with her tangled golden locks. They cascaded all the way down her back, almost to her waist, and had gotten hopelessly snarled during the snowball fight. She wrenched her borrowed brush through again and again, tears of pain springing to her eyes.

Shera paused on her way to stop Raven from throwing Cheerios to watch the battle. "Do you need some help with that?" she offered shyly.

Dinah looked up gratefully. "Would you?"

The other woman stepped up and took the proffered hairbrush. "Be glad to." She began brushing through Dinah's hair with long, gentle tugs.

A crash and loud laughter from upstairs echoed through the house. "I'll be right back," Shera said, somehow managing to look amused and annoyed at the same time. She put down the brush and walked to the foot of the stairs. "Is everything alright up there?" she called up the stairs.

"Everything's fine, Mommy!" Kat answered, her giggles nearly as loud as her brother's. Reno's voice shouted an affirmation.

Shera returned to Dinah, smiling as she heard another bout of laughter.

"Shera, I'm curious. Why do Joshua and Katania look...nothing like you and Cid?" Dinah asked, putting it as tactfully as possible.

"Cid and the others found them in the ruins of Midgar that Meteor left. We tried, but couldn't find their parents, so we adopted them," the brunette answered.

"And Raven?" Dinah asked as Shera began to brush her hair again.

The rocket scientist smiled quietly. "She's originally ours. Four months old."

Dinah closed her eyes and let her mind wander as Shera's gentle hands pulled the knots out of her hair. Gentle, yes, but she gave a particularly hard yank that rocked Dinah's head back in pain. That pain seemed vaguely familiar; like... like...

The memory struck suddenly, rising from the back of her mind; feeling like it was smashing into the front of her skull.

The room was a large and opulent study with creamy white walls. Thick maroon carpeting covered the floors, and a massive antique green and brown desk took up most of the room. A heavy chair with extensive wood-working sat behind the desk, while stacks of papers covered the escritoire's surface. Bookcases lined the walls, and heavy red curtains shielded the dark world outside from the events inside the room. A pair of ancient swords were crossed in their sheathes over the mantle of the stone fireplace, in which a fire was roaring behind a mesh screen.

Despite the cozy atmosphere, things were not so good in paradise.

One of the room's two occupants was a middle-aged, slightly overweight man, wearing a black suit without the jacket, black dress shoes, and with a green tie loosened about his neck. His light brown hair was thinning on top, and his blue eyes were sparkling malevolently at the other figure. The other was a young girl, perhaps five or six-years-old. She had short, bobbed blonde hair, and slightly almond-shaped inquisitive blue eyes. The girl wore only a large purple T-shirt that reached to her ankles, obviously meant to be a nightgown.

The florid, sweating, piggish face was directly in that of the small girl. Flecks of spit flew from his mouth to dot her terrified face. "You little brat!" he bellowed in rage, grabbing a fistful of hair and yanking upwards.

The girl gave a shrill scream of pain. "Daddy, Daddy, don't!" She began to sob openly as he shoved her backward. "I'm sorry, Daddy, I didn't mean to!"

"You destroyed two months' worth of work!" he exclaimed, gesturing at the messy upheaval of papers spread on the floor.

"I'm so sorry, Daddy, so sorry," she whimpered. "I didn't mean to; I was standing on your desk to look at the picture of the pretty lady and I kicked them on accident!"

With an inarticulate yell of rage, he backhanded her across the mouth to send her slamming into the wall. Her head struck the inanimate object with an audible thud, and the girl fell to the ground in a heap.

It was then that a blur burst into the room, leapt onto the chair beside the fireplace, and pulled one of the swords from its sheath with a ringing of metal. A middle-aged, beautiful woman with classical features and flowing blonde hair, clad in an elegant white nightdress that fell to her knees, jumped off of the chair and held the blade millimeters from the man's throat.

"You keep your hands off of our daughter, you sick son of a bitch," she gritted, brown eyes fairly exploding with rage. Her entire body was shaking with anger, and her face showed that she was barely holding herself back from driving the sword into his throat.

"I--" He opened his mouth to speak, face apoplectic with wrath.

In the background, the small girl crawled inch by inch across the floor to hide underneath the large desk.

The woman let her actions speak louder than words and jabbed him in the throat with the sword. A trickle of blood dribbled down his throat to stain the collar of his starched white shirt crimson. "Get out of here before I do something rash, Rufus." Her voice was low and gravelly, like that of a lifelong smoker, and her eyes flinty.

Her husband made the intelligent decision and fled the room, slamming the heavy oaken door behind him.

The woman's ire was immediately gone, and she flung the blade down with a clang before running to her daughter. She pulled the dust-covered girl out from underneath the desk. "Oh baby, are you alright?"

"Mommy," the child whimpered, clutching a handful of her mother's nightgown and clinging to her.

"Hush, it's okay. Mommy's here now," the woman whispered, gathering her daughter into her arms. "Tell me where it hurts."

"My head," the small figure replied, wiping at her streaming nose with the back of a chubby hand. Her mother's deft, callused fingers parted the hair at the back of her head to reveal a large black and purple bruise.

"Okay. Sweetie, how many fingers am I holding up?"

She squinted for a moment, then responded, "Two."

The older woman breathed a silent sigh of relief, but still asked another question. "And what's your name?"

The girl gave a half-hearted giggle. "Kiyara Maiden Shinra."

"Good girl." Her mother smiled and hugged her.

The door to the study creaked open again, this time accompanied by a small face. A brown-haired boy of eight or nine darted inside and slammed the door shut behind him.

"Azrael, did your father...?"

He shook his head mutely, ducking over to his mother and ensconcing himself under one of her arms. "He tried to kick me, but I got out of his way."

The woman closed her eyes at his response, indecision evident on her face. "Oh, my babies. My babies." They sat on the floor, a child under each arm of the mother's, and she rocked them gently as though they were just babes. Outside the door, there was an angry man, and a cruel world, but inside, for the moment, they were safe.

Dinah awoke to find herself sitting on the kitchen floor, propped up against her chair, with Shera looking down on her anxiously.

"Are you alright?"

The words, spoken softly, echoed around and around in her head.

She managed to smile in satisfaction, while wincing and holding her aching head. "I'm more than alright. That was a memory! I know my name!"

Shera had heard Dinah's whole story over the last two days, so she understood the reference.

"That's wonderful," the shorter woman responded with the quiet calm that Kiyara had come to expect from her. "What is it?"

The blonde woman climbed to her feet shakily and dropped back into her seat. "Kiyara Maiden Shinra," Dinah replied. There's something familiar about that name, and something I know I should remember from my memory... But her normally razor sharp mind was dulled from her blinding headache. She looked up to find Shera staring at her, open-mouthed.

"What?" Dinah asked, massaging her head.

"Shinra!"

Dinah stared blankly for a moment. Then realization struck her. She nearly fell out of her chair. Again. "Holy shit!"

Shera nodded once, features pulled into a frown. "My thoughts exactly."

Dinah's eyes went wide as she realized the full extent of the name. Her mouth opened and closed, but no sound came out.

"You must be one of the kids who they said died twenty years ago."

"What?" Dinah asked, not trusting her voice to remain even.

"It happened when I was about...twelve I'd say," Shera answered, looking toward the ceiling for a moment as she reached into her memory. "We were told that President Shinra's wife and two young children were kidnapped, tortured, and eventually killed by the Wutaiin government. In fact, that's one of the main reasons the Wutai-Shinra War took place seven years later. President Shinra eventually remarried and his new wife had Rufus, who later became the Shinra president." She frowned again. "But if that's not true, what really happened?"

"I don't know! All I remember is that memory, then being in Hojo's lab!"

The brown-haired woman looked bewildered. "They had horrible tapes of the torture and everything."

Dinah shook her head. "It's obviously not true, since I'm alive. You said children. What about the others?"

"A ten-year-old boy, named Azrael. After the whole thing was over, Azrael and Kiyara became two of the most used children's names in the world."

Dinah frowned as she remembered. "Wait."

"What?" The rocket scientist looked a mite apprehensive.

"Azrael was in my memory!"

Shera blinked. "Well, that's ... good?"

"Azrael as in Azrael Maiden!"

"That can't be. Are you sure?"

"It looked just like him! And did you ever see pictures of President Shinra's first wife, the one that 'died'?"

Shera thought back in her mind. "I did. And...oh." Her eyes widened behind the glasses. "Oh my. You're right; she looks just like Azrael, and a little similar to you! I never even thought of it!"

"So this mean...this means..." Dinah trailed off.

"That Azrael is your brother," the other woman finished.

Dinah smiled weakly. "I knew there was something familiar about him from the moment I met him!" Then she stopped dead in her tracks. "He's my brother. He was flirting with me." Her face paled and took on a faint green tinge. "I'm going to throw up."

All that she had learned about her family in a rush, her earlier nausea from her headache, and that last thought all combined to push her over the edge of the precipice of nausea that she had been teetering upon ever since her headache. Dinah dashed for the bathroom, hand clapped over her mouth.