

Chapter 14: A Freight Train Named Tifa

"You talk anymore, Lynley, and I let Tifa snap your neck!"-Cid Highwind

And so it was that several hours later, after a flight on the Highwind in which there had been a near fight between Cid and Reno when the latter called the great airship a "rattletrap," Reno and Kiyara were standing on yet another doorstep with yet another pilot.

This time, however, was different in that the pilot was different, and Reno and Kiyara didn't look the same. The three of them had determined along the way to Midgar that Reno and Kiyara had to be especially careful not to be recognized in the city, and were both wearing enough of a disguise that their faces were hidden. Basically, they had both just taken a hat and pulled it down low over their eyes.

They had trekked through quite a bit of the huge city of Midgar to get to Sector 5, Reno complaining most of the way until Cid finally spun around and threatened to stab him with the Venus Gospel. The redhead had been quieter after that, muttering his comments to himself rebelliously.

"Be nice," Cid cautioned as he gave a hard rap on the door. "She's not gonna be as easy to convince as I was."

Behind him, Reno nodded, realizing it was directed toward him.

Kiyara took a moment to check out the area.

Sector 5 contrasted with the other sectors that they had trudged through in that it seemed a little more seedy and run down. They were on what seemed to be the main street of the Sector, with old, beat-up trucks and run-down cars going past the building that they stood in front of. Turning her attention back to that same building, Kiyara frowned slightly. It basically looked like a dive. It was a nondescript old, tired building, made of tan colored bricks that were stained with various substances and graffiti advertising different gangs. If a building could sag, this one was doing it, and the windows were covered with some sort of dark curtains so that the people inside had privacy. Over the door, a weathered sign proclaimed that this was Tifa's Final Heaven, and advertised its beer and service. But on a closer inspection, the place was nicer than it first appeared. Its doorstep and stairs were clean and looked freshly swept, as did the sidewalk in front of it. No beer cans and old newspapers littered the street in front of it, like they did along the rest of the street.

Suddenly, the door creaked. Kiyara spun to find that it had only opened a crack.

A middle-pitched, fluid, feminine voice was heard. "We're not open yet. Come back in a few hours."

As the door began to close, Cid stuck his foot in it. "Don't shut it! It's me, Cid!"

The door stopped, and the voice came again, full of laughter. "Sorry, Cid! Hang on a second!" The sound of deadbolts being unlocked and chains being taken off were heard, then the stout door was flung open. Kiyara's jaw dropped as the woman came into view.

She was tall, with an unreal-looking hourglass figure, especially wide in the top half. The woman's long, chocolatey brown hair fell past her trim, tiny waist and bumped against the back of her knees. Near the end, it was gathered into a ribbon, and the two tips of the hair were formed like a shark's tail. She had wide brown eyes, sparkling with laughter at the moment, and full red lips in a heart shaped face. She was wearing a tight white tank top that showed off a well-muscled stomach, and her black very, very mini-skirt showcased amazingly long, slim legs. Her hands were callused and scarred, and her legs and arms were also well muscled.

In short, she looked like a fighting prostitute.

Smiling happily, this sexy siren stepped out and hugged Cid tightly, who looked like he was losing breath. "Cid! How've you and the family been?"

Kiyara giggled, and pointed out, "He might be a little better if you loosen your grip on him a little bit."

"Oh!" The woman immediately released Cid, who was gasping for breath. "Sorry, Cid! Sometimes I forget my own strength."

"S'okay, Tifa," Cid managed to say.

Tifa looked curiously at Kiyara, then her intelligent eyes slid to the figure to the left of the blonde. Those same eyes widened, then hardened in anger, and her fists came up.

Reno seemed to realize that he had been spotted and watched Tifa warily. Pure anger was radiating off of the woman, and Reno wisely took several steps backward.

"You bastard!" she screamed, her throat raw. The brunette launched herself at the Turk.

"Tifa, stop!" Cid shouted, and made a quick grab for her, but missed as she blew past him. He was thinking the same thing that Reno and Kiyara were thinking. Reno may have been good in a fight, but Tifa was a martial arts expert. A very angry martial arts expert. Plus, Reno was unarmed.

The only thing that saved him from getting the shit beat out of him right then and there were Tifa's anger and Kiyara's quick reflexes. While Tifa's rage gave her an adrenaline rush, it also left the brunette oblivious to what was going on around her. Tifa only got one wild swing off at Reno before Kiyara stepped in, having dropped her bag to the sidewalk. She grabbed Tifa's slim arms and pinned them to the martial arts expert's back just as she was moving to go after Reno again. Unprepared for the assault, Tifa came to a screeching halt as Kiyara dug her heels in. Before Tifa had a chance to do anything, Kiyara swung one leg around Tifa's legs, keeping the slim appendages pinned against her own.

Tifa fought back and struggled furiously against the strong grip, but Kiyara held firm.

"Let me at him!" Tifa hollered, attempting to kick Kiyara. "He killed thousands of people when he brought the Plate down on Sector 7!"

Her words seemed to have a strange effect on Reno for a second as he winced, and seemed miles away. Then he shook his head violently, and, clutching at an eye in pain, moved to Cid. That one wild swing of Tifa's had been enough to black that same eye. "I suggest you talk to her."

In the background, he and Cid could hear the two women conversing.

"Look, as much as I'd love to see you beat the snot out of Reno, you can't. You might kill him, and then I'd have lost my traveling partner."

Tifa ignored her and continued struggling.

Kiyara sighed. "Look, we got off on the wrong foot. My name is Kiyara Maiden. What's yours?"

"Bite me!" Tifa hissed viciously, spinning her head to spit on Kiyara's shoulder.

Kiyara remained calm, speaking in a low, controlled tone of voice. "I'm happy to meet you, Bite Me. Nice place you've got here." She nodded to the bar in the background.

Tifa growled unintelligibly and slammed her head backward at an amazing speed. It smashed into Kiyara's jaw, sending her teeth together with an audible sound. It sounded like a gunshot. The blonde's eyes rolled back in her head and she dropped to the sidewalk.

Reno started toward her prone form, then thought better of it. Realizing that he would have to defend himself in some way, the redhead shrugged his duffle bag off of his shoulder.

Tifa flew at Reno again, and sent a punch at him. The man twisted out of its way and grabbed her arm, pinning it to her back. Before he could pin back her legs, she whirled out of his grasp and slammed her palms against his breastbone, sending him flying to land on the ground in a pained heap.

He gasped for breath, having had the wind knocked out of him. Through a haze caused by his oxygen-deprived brain, Reno saw--and felt--Tifa straddle him and take his head in her hands. What the...? Oh fuckfuckfuckfuck! She's gonna break my neck!

Struggling weakly with the strength that he had pull together, the ex-Turk saw the maliciously grinning face of Tifa in front of his for a moment as the irate martial arts expert leaned over him, her dark eyes shining. "For Sector 7!" she whispered quietly.

Her hands flexed in preparation for making the twisting motion that would be required to break his neck, when suddenly a voice called out, "Tifa! Stop!"

Tifa looked up, and out of the corner of his eye, Reno saw Cid's hiking boots appear.

"Give me one good reason why I should," she said coldly.

"Because he's not such a bad guy," Cid replied begrudgingly.

Reno managed to smirk slightly. "I'm never lettin' you forget you said that, Highwind," he wheezed.

"You talk anymore, Lynley, and I let Tifa snap your neck!" Cid barked.

Reno shut up.

"Tifa, I'm sayin' this more for my kids than anything. For some weird reason, they really took to him. I really don't wanna have to tell them, when they ask where he is, that Auntie Tifa snapped his neck. Please, Tifa. For Josh and Kat." Reno felt her weight slowly rise off of him. "That's it, Teef," Cid encouraged.

She stood there, shaking. "What did I almost do?" she whispered, sounding in pain. "I nearly made myself into as much of a monster as him!" Reno saw her boots disappear from view as she ran up the stairs and into the bar.

Cid watched her go for a moment, then Reno then saw the pilot's feet moving past him to where Kiyara was crumpled on the sidewalk. Cid threw her bag over one shoulder. "You really owe me for that one, Lynley." He paused from where he was scooping Kiyara's unconscious form up when he realized Reno wasn't making a move to get up. "You comin'?"

Reno gave a pained chuckle. "Gimme a minute; breathing's a little tough."

Tifa suddenly came back out. Reno cringed slightly, but held his ground, sitting up slowly and looking up at her. She held out a slim, scarred hand to him after tossing his bag over one shoulder.

"Need a lift?" Tifa asked, her voice ragged and her face amazingly pale.

Slowly, cautiously, Reno took her hand, and Tifa pulled him to his feet.

Reno, silent as he still struggled to catch his breath, trotted into the car at her heels. Cid, following with Kiyara hanging limply over his shoulder, shut the door behind them.

Reno stared around the inside for a moment. "Wow..." he whispered quietly.

It was a hell of a lot better looking on the inside than on the outside. There, of course, was the actual bar itself with the stools lined up along it, right beside the door, and it took up that entire wall. Then, on the opposite side of the room, there was a small stage, with speakers, microphones, instruments, and amplifiers lying around in a kind of messy order. Right next to the stage was a small set of stairs, and at the top, a hallway was visible. The center of the room and what space was left was full of brown, round tables with four or five chairs at each. Even though the blinds were pulled, the bar was still somehow full of light and was cheery looking. The walls were a white color, and were amazingly spotless and immaculate. There were tasteful, appropriate light fixtures hanging from the ceiling, and the overall impression was that of a restaurant rather than a bar.

Tifa smiled slightly at his reaction. "Glad to see you like it." She deposited Reno in a chair at the closest table and set his bag down on the floor beside his seat. "I've got some old materia in my place above the bar. I'll go get it." She moved across the room and disappeared up the stairs.

Reno, over his surprise, slumped in his chair. "That chick is fuckin' crazy!"

Cid shook his head, still holding Kiyara in his arms like a broken rag doll. "I don't know what got into her. She's usually the most level-headed outta all 've us."

Tifa's footsteps were heard on the stairs again, and the two men went silent guiltily. The brunette came into sight, now wearing a bangle full of brightly colored materia and carrying an ice pack. She walked over to Reno, skirting all of the tables and chairs with an ease born of long practice.

"Feel like any ribs are cracked?" she asked of the redhead.

"Don't think so," he replied.

"You're made of stronger stuff than I thought, then," she responded with the faintest hint of a smile. She tossed him the icepack, which Reno easily caught and held to his rapidly swelling eye.

Next, Tifa walked over to where Cid was cradling Kiyara's unconscious form. She murmured, "Cure!" and there was a brilliant flash of light.

Kiyara began to stir as Cid set her down in a chair. She opened her eyes blearily.

"Why do I feel like I've been run over by a freight train?" she groaned.

Reno snorted. "A freight train named Tifa Lockhart."

Kiyara blinked. "Oh yeah. Hey, why do I always suffer the head injuries?"

Reno shrugged, an expansive gesture that began with his shoulders and ended with his hands. "Fate doesn't like you?" he suggested.

The blonde hit at him weakly across the table. Reno dodged easily.

Tifa coughed gently, returning the attention to her as Cid dropped into a seat between Kiyara and Reno.

Tifa sat down. "Maybe you'd better explain why you brought these two to me, Cid," Tifa said quietly, massaging her temples as if she had a headache.

Cid nodded. "Fair enough. Here's what's goin' on, without goin' into too much detail. An old friend of mine, who turned out to be a friend of Reno's as well--"

"And who also turned out to be the real president of Shinra," Reno leaned across Cid to whisper to Kiyara, sounding like a tour guide. Cid glared, and Reno went quiet. Tifa didn't hear.

"--Showed up with the two of them at my door one day. He vouched for Reno's character, then left after Shera agreed to take them in. Teef, they're on the run from some pretty damn bad guys; I don't want to tell you too much so that you can't get into trouble over this. You certainly don't hafta take 'em in; they could stay at an inn--"

This time it was Kiyara who leaned behind Cid to make a face at Reno. "We'd be spotted immediately if we went to an inn!" she hissed at him.

Cid waved a hand at her, signaling her to be quiet. "--But this is the one place in Midgar that we figure they won't be looked for. Just let them stay here 'til they find out more about the guys that're after them, then we'll figure out where to take them from there."

Cid stood. "I need an immediate answer though. Those same guys that're after them should show up in Rocket Town soon, lookin' for those two, and I wanna be sure that we're ready for 'em."

Tifa sat still for a moment, then nodded tiredly. "They're welcome to stay with me."

"Thank you," the other three chorused simultaneously.

Kiyara wearily held one hand out across the table, the other arm supporting her aching head. "Let's try this again. I'm Kiyara Maiden. Nice to meet you."

Tifa took the hand and shook it. "Likewise. I'm Tifa Lockhart."

The two women appraised each other silently for a moment, then they both gave small, almost imperceptible nods of approval.

Reno decided not to jump on the introduction bandwagon. She already knows who I am, plus I'd rather not fuckin' remind her that I'm here...

Tifa, still looking at Kiyara, said quietly, "I'm really sorry about what happened outside."

Kiyara waved it off, then regretted making the violent motion as her head spun. "It's fine, really. I should have known better than to defend Reno. He deserved a good beating."

"Hey!" Reno protested as Tifa cracked a small smile.

They look like they're gonna be all right, Cid thought to himself in relief. "I'm gonna get goin'," the pilot announced,

reaching a hand up to adjust the flight goggles on his head.

Kiyara held up a hand to him. He brought his own hand down from his head and began to shake hers, then he heard her chuckle lightly. "I meant for you to pull me up."

Cid grinned sheepishly. "Whoops." He yanked her out of her chair and onto her feet. Kiyara staggered for a moment, then righted herself.

"Thanks for everything, Cid." Kiyara hesitated for a moment as if unsure of what to do, then awkwardly hugged him.

Cid looked surprised, then gingerly returned the embrace. "Anytime."

Kiyara smiled at him and sat back down.

It was Tifa's turn next. The brunette also hugged Cid, but as her face came over his shoulder, she whispered, "I'm sorry--" I'm sorry that I attacked Reno. I'm sorry that I didn't listen to you in the first place and stop. I'm sorry that I'm not the same optimistic old Tifa that I used to be. I'm sorry that I let that happy, upbeat shell slip today. I'm sorry that you had to find out that I've changed this way. She gave him a rueful smile that he only caught a glimpse of. "I'm sorry," she said simply.

Cid smiled fondly at her for a moment. "You got nothin' to apologize for." Then the smile grew into a crooked grin. "And it sure as hell ain't me you should be apologizin' to." The pilot paused. "But then again, don't let Turkey there off too easy. I'm enjoyin' the look of terror that goes on his face every time you walk by him."

Tifa laughed. "Okay, I won't let him off easily. Have a safe flight back, and tell Shera and the kids hi for me."

Cid nodded as he backed off. "Will do."

The pilot turned and began to move toward the door, but another voice hailed him.

"Wait."

Cid spun around to find Reno jogging forward to stand in front of him.

Reno stood in front of the pilot, his mouth quirked in a whimsical smile. "Clear skies."

"And fair winds to the both of us," Cid replied automatically, finishing the pilot's farewell. Then he realized that Reno had just said a traditional pilot's good-bye. Cid arched a blond eyebrow at the other man.

Reno grinned. "You're not the only one who's friends with pilots."

Sharp sapphire eyes met languid green, and for a second, that fast fleeting second, a spark of understanding and mutual respect jumped between them.

As you probably could have predicted, the moment passed. As also could have been predicted, Reno was the one to speed it on its way. "And have a nice ride, s'cuse me, rattle back to Rocket Town, old man!" Reno wisely backed off swiftly, the familiar old smirk on his face.

The pilot fumed. "Why you--" he began to roar, then was cut off by Reno's yelp as Kiyara kicked him. Cid cracked a smile, the expression doing much for his craggy features.

Tifa was laughing quietly as well. "We'll be just fine, I think, Cid. You go on. The crew's probably waiting for you."

Cid glanced at his watch, then cursed. "No, you're wrong on that one. They won't wait. They promised they'd leave without me if I'm not back on time. I'll see you all later." Then he was gone.

There was an uncomfortable silence for a moment, then Tifa beckoned to them. "Follow me. You can drop your bags off upstairs."

Kiyara stood up and threw the strap of her duffel bag over one shoulder. Reno, still holding the icepack over his eye with one hand, leaned over and grabbed his bag as well. Tifa went up the small set of stairs at the back, Reno and Kiyara following.

They went down a small hallway, carpeted in forest green and painted a pale yellow, passing several doors. Tifa pointed out what they were. The door closest to the stairs was her bedroom. After that came the living room, kitchen/dining area, bathroom, then she opened the next door. Inside, there was a bed, a dresser, a small futon, and some miscellaneous knickknacks.

"You can stay in here, Miss Maiden," Tifa said.

Reno and Kiyara simultaneously began to laugh.

Tifa frowned, the expression creasing her beautiful face. "What's so funny?"

"I'm sorry, hearing someone call me Miss Maiden sounds ridiculous. Please, just Kiyara."

Tifa smiled, her even, white teeth gleaming. "All right, Kiyara. So, as I said, you can stay in here."

Kiyara, over her laughing fit, nodded. "Thanks, Tifa." Then she noticed that Tifa was looking from her to Reno.

Reno didn't like the look on Tifa's face. "What?" he asked.

Tifa shifted uncomfortable. "Well, the problem is that I just had my old, ratty couch taken away from the living room, and the new one won't be in for a week or two. This is my only guest room, and the only other bed is in my room, which I'm selfishly not giving up. So Reno either sleeps on the floor in the living room--"

"I'm not sleeping on the floor!" Reno interjected.

Kiyara punched him in the shoulder. "Ooh, the big bad floor!"

Reno hit her back. "You'd be singing a different tune if you were the one that had to sleep on the floor!"

Tifa raised the faintest of confused eyebrows at their antics, but went on. "--Or he sleeps on the couch in here."

Kiyara shook her head. "Aww, hell, no! I'm not sharing a room with Reno!"

Reno crossed his arms over his chest obstinately, still holding the icepack in one hand. "And I'm not sleeping on the floor!"

"And why not?" Kiyara asked.

"I've got a bad back!"

Kiyara eyed him skeptically. "Is that so?"

Reno glared right back. "You really wanna see?"

The blonde nodded, mocking him. "Yes, I really wanna see."

Reno began to talk as he set down his ice pack and duffle bag. "I did it when..." Reno began to explain, then trailed off, looking uneasily at Tifa.

The brunette caught his look. "What?" she asked. "I did it at the Plate, when I dropped into the helicopter after you guys beat the shit out of me," Reno finished, looking to Tifa.

Tifa shrugged. "Wish I could say sorry, but I'd be lying."

Reno smiled admiringly. "Cold."

Then, biting his lip against the pain that he knew was about to come, the redheaded Turk placed both hands on the small of his back, and gave a hard shove. There was a sickening, crunching sound as his back arched. Then the same noise was heard again as he relaxed back into his normal slouch.

Kiyara picked up his bag and tossed it onto the bed wordlessly.

Author's notes: Whoo hoo! Historic landmark! Catching Glimpses has passed the 100 page mark! *Blows a little party horn*