

Chapter 17: Rough Waves, Rough Politics, Rough People

"You big wussies."-Elena Sader

"There's a storm comin' on," announced the ferry boat captain casually.

Elena peered out at the water, made dark by the night sky. "Are you sure? It doesn't look bad."

The old man nodded. "Aye, I'm sure. After spendin' a lot of time on the sea, you can tell when she's about to squall."

"How bad is it gonna get?" Cloud put in suddenly.

The old man thought for a moment, then answered grimly, "Pretty damn bad."

Elena looked at him with apprehension. "Define 'pretty damn bad.'"

"The waves are gonna be swampin' the decks, the wind's gonna pick up, and it's gonna rain cats and dogs," replied the captain, turning the old, polished wheel as he spoke.

"That's going to make it damned hard for the helicopter that you called for to pick us up," observed Elena.

Rude shrugged. "Can't do anything about it now."

Faye broke in. "I think I can hear it."

They were all quiet for a moment, and sure enough, the telltale dull thudding of rotors hitting the air came through.

Elena broke the silence. "Here comes the rain."

Great gusting sheets of rain spattered against the window, and the old man turned on a pair of what looked like windshield wipers to try and keep his view clean.

Cloud frowned. "Listen. He seems to be getting closer, then farther." As they all went quiet again, they found that he was right.

"Wh--" Elena was interrupted by the crackle of the short-band radio.

A male voice with the hint of a slow drawl came through, heavily intercrossed with static. "This is Alpha 1 calling the Costa del Sol ship Heatwave, over."

The captain picked up the microphone. "Heatwave here, over."

The voice came back, sounding frustrated. "I was sent here to pick up some folks, but where the hell are you? I can't see my own hand in front of my face in this weather, over." As if to prove his point, the rain began pouring down even harder, each individual drop making a loud plunking noise on the roof of the bridge.

Elena looked around the bridge, and her eyes settled on a large metal case in the corner. Bingo. "If not your hand, could you see a flare?" asked Elena, leaning into the microphone. "Over," she added belatedly.

There was no answer, then: "Yeah, I think I could, over."

"Be watching, then, over."

"Roger that, Heatwave. This is Alpha 1, over and out."

"Who wants to volunteer to go out there and guide him in?" asked Faye with a hint of quiet wryness.

There were no takers.

"Well, somebody has to," she said.

There was another uncomfortable silence, then Elena sighed. "You big wussies," she muttered, grabbing a bright yellow slicker, the case of flares, and a small version of the short-band radio that she had caught sight of. The door slammed behind her.

She made her way across the ship, carefully watching each step on the treacherous wet decks and making good use of the cold metal handrails. Before taking three steps, Elena was soaked to the bone. She pulled out the radio. "This is Pissed Off Heatwave 1 calling Alpha 1, over."

There was a crackle, and Elena nearly dropped the radio before she realized that it was laughter, being poorly translated.

"Uh, Pissed Off Heatwave 1, this is Alpha 1," he finally said. Elena could hear traces of laughter still in his voice. "What do you need, over?"

"Just making sure this thing works. I'll call you when I need to, roger that?" Elena felt herself slipping into the radio language with ease.

"Understood, Pissed Off Heatwave 1."

"Right then, this is Really Wet Pissed Off Heatwave 1, over and out."

She could have sworn she heard laughter before she tucked the radio away.

The blonde muttered rebelliously to herself. "Stupid...sitting there high and dry while I'm all wet... Damn them..." So caught up in her ramblings, she walked right into something hard and clung to it to avoid being sent to the soggy deck.

A tinny voice was coming from somewhere, and Elena looked around dumbly. Then she remembered the radio in her pocket, and she pulled it out to find Alpha 1 speaking.

"Hey, PO'd Heatwave 1, are you okay? I heard a crash and some cursing, over."

"I'm fine, over," she replied, replacing the radio in her slicker pocket.

"What the hell did I run int- Oh. Great. The handrail at the end of the boat."

She picked up the case of flares that had fallen at her feet. At least she hadn't dropped it overboard--yet. "There's still time," she muttered grimly, opening the case and producing a flare and flare gun. Breaking the seal on the flare, she loaded it into the gun, listened to see if the helicopter was in range to see it, and fired. A green light blossomed overhead, and the droning of the helicopter grew louder almost immediately.

"Aha!" The radio carried the triumph in Alpha 1's voice. "I see ya. Can you light a flare to guide me in close to the ferry,

over?"

Elena pulled out another flare, broke the seal, and waved it frantically.

"Gotcha. I'm comin' in, over."

Whirring rotors could be heard, and Elena felt her hair whip into a frenzy. Shielding her eyes against the stinging salt-water particles, she waved the hand holding the flare to the helicopter pilot, beckoning him closer. "C'mon, c'mon," she muttered.

Suddenly, a blast of wind carried the craft very close; probably too close, but Elena didn't take the time to think about that. The door to the helicopter was open, and leaning up and grabbing a strut, she pulled herself up and in.

"Alpha 1, I presume?" she asked the back of the head, half covered by a huge set of headphones. She roared to be heard over the sound of the helicopter rotors.

"Typhoon!" He spun, and she caught a glimpse of startled brown eyes and laugh lines around a wide-open mouth before he turned back to his instruments. "Typhoon," he repeated, less vehemently. "You scared me."

"Oops."

"Is there anyone else I need to be waiting for?" he asked.

"Yeah. Two..." Elena wasn't sure of Cloud. "Or maybe three."

The man's hands flew over the control panel. "They'd better hurry up, because I can't hold us here for much longer."

Elena nodded. "I'll get them." She pulled out her radio, feeling the chopper shudder under a fearsome shriek of the wind. "This is Elena to Heatwave. Guys, the chopper's ready and waiting. Get out here fast, over!" She didn't wait for confirmation, and shut the radio down. Then she moved to the open door of the aircraft to wait.

Up in the bridge of the ferry, the old man was staring in open-mouthed astonishment. He gave a cackle. "Y'know, in all mah years pilotin' this ferry, I ain't never had anybody airlifted off."

Rude was still speaking to the man. "You'll be alright in the storm?"

The man gave a toothless grin. "This old dawg has still got some tricks, boy!"

The radio crackled, and Elena's voice came through. "This is Elena to Heatwave. Guys, the chopper's ready and waiting. Get out here fast, over!"

"Time to go," Faye said, staring out at the pelting rain in displeasure.

"Thanks," Cloud said to the captain of the boat, heading out the door.

The old man waved him off. "Forget about it. My pleasure."

The three moved along the slippery decks of the ship quickly, making their way to where the helicopter was hovering at the stern of the boat.

Faye found herself walking between the two men. "So, uh, Cloud, you're coming with us to Rocket Town, then?" she asked

the blond, slightly confused over the fact that he had come with them.

He gave a nod. "Got nowhere else to go."

Rude muttered under his breath.

Elena was leaning out of the open door of the helicopter, waiting for them. "Hurry up!" she shouted to them above the roar of the chopper.

As they scrambled to the back of the ferry, they saw the aircraft get carried away from the boat by a particularly strong gust of wind that nearly threw the three off of their feet. But the helicopter was back again quickly, the pilot now obviously fighting the wind.

They climbed or were boosted or lifted into the helicopter with very little event and fanfare, helping each other. As soon as Rude was in, he slammed the door, and the helicopter took off into the storm.

No one noticed that they were missing something. As he climbed into the helicopter, Rude's small cell phone that established a direct link with Reeve had fallen out of his pocket to be sucked up greedily by the hungry ocean below. And they flew on, now with no means of contact with the outside world, the shortband radio of the helicopter being good for nothing unless it was within three miles of the intended target.

The old captain saw the object fall, and although he didn't see what exactly it was, he bowed his head for a moment. "May the blessing of Leviathan be with all of ye," he whispered. "Somehow, I know that ye'll need it."

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Reeve Kazuma hung up the phone and frowned at it, as if the power of his brown gaze could answer his question.

"S'funny. Why aren't Rude, Elena, and Faye answering their PHS?" he mused, drumming his fingers on his desk absently. Reeve was a handsome man who looked every inch the executive. His thick black hair was immaculately combed, and he had a small goatee and mustache. His earth brown eyes radiated calm and kindness, while his medium height figure filled out a business suit nicely.

Reeve was sitting at his desk in his office in the Gainsborough Building, the equivalent of the old Shinra Building that had been destroyed--along with the Plate--in Meteor's attack on the city three years ago. Reeve had decided to christen the new building after the dead flower girl because he had admired her courage so much, and because he wanted to remind the Planet that this was a new Shinra indeed. There was a spectacular view of the city behind him, but Reeve ignored it and just rubbed his forehead wearily.

He looked up at a gentle cough from one of his visitors. "Sorry," he said.

One of them nodded. "No need to apologize, President Kazuma. Your concern for your people is admirable," Bugah replied. He was an elder from Cosmo Canyon, the peaceful home for generations of scientists and scholars of the Planet. Bugah was an old, frail man who looked like he would blow away in the next strong wind. He wore plain, simple, long white robes and exuded an aura of peace from where he sat in a chair in front of Reeve's desk.

The other delegate from Cosmo Canyon, however, was not nearly so calm. Nanaki, know as Red XIII to his friends, prowled the floor anxiously. He was a large--even larger than Reeve remembered him--dangerous looking beast who would look quite a bit like a lion but for his bright red color and the flame that graced the tip of his long, sinuous tail. He had numerous tattoos, piercings, and other adornments covering his fiery body, and he was missing one yellow eye in an intelligent face. Long, sturdy claws tapering to dangerous points tapped against the floor as he paced, and his muscles rippled. Watching him, Reeve almost expected a feral growl to escape from his throat.

Bugah frowned at him, then turned back to Reeve. "You must excuse Nanaki. He is still but a teenager, you see."

The teenager in question bared his gleaming razor sharp fangs. "My age is of no consequence. It is just that...I can feel the disturbance, Elder. And it is growing worse."

At Reeve's confused look, Bugah chuckled. "Heh heh. Perhaps we had better explain, eh, Nanaki?"

Red jumped up into the empty chair beside Bugah's. "I am not one to waste words, Reeve, so this is what has been going on. For the past year or so, I have been feeling the Planet grow..." The articulate beast seemed to search for the right word. "Apprehensive. As if something was gradually causing its fear to rise." His tail lashed behind him, and for a moment, Reeve was afraid he would catch the chair on fire.

Reeve frowned. "Wait a minute. I'm sorry to interrupt, but I seem to remember Aeris speaking to the Planet, and none of us, not me, not Cloud, not Red, could even hear it besides her. The only time we could all hear it was when the Planet was screaming, and even that was only when we were in Bugenhagen's observatory."

Nanaki nodded solemnly. "That is correct, and in all probability, I should not be hearing this. Yet somehow, I am."

Bugah broke in. "Actually, President Kazuma, the other elders and myself have been researching this. We managed to unearth some ancient documents in the Cosmo Canyon library which seem to shed some light on the situation. It appears that long ago, Nanaki's people may have been protectors of the Planet along with the Cetra. All of Nanaki's people and the Cetra could speak to the Planet back then. We have come to the conclusion that, although it was millennia ago, the Planet still recognizes Nanaki as one of its protectors, and with no one else to...well, speak to in this crisis, it turned to him."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa. Crisis?" asked Reeve nervously.

Bugah smiled. "Perhaps we had better continue with the story. You see, Nanaki was the only one who could hear the Planet speaking, and even that was only faintly and only when he was in Bugenhagen's observatory, as you put it. Nanaki informed myself and the other elders, and we made the decision that we wouldn't do anything about this until someone besides Nanaki could hear the Planet's cries." He chortled. "And boy oh boy, did we hear them!"

Reeve looked to Red, who took up the narrative. "Yesterday, the Planet began to scream," said the highly intelligent beast in his gravelly voice.

Reeve felt chills race up and down his spine as he remembered the eerie, frightening wails that the Planet had emitted three years before.

"Anyone who he brought up to the observatory could hear it," added Bugah, "and he can hear it even now." The jovial old man turned suddenly grim. "Tell him, Nanaki."

"The Planet's disturbances are focused here, here, here, here, and here." Red pointed a sharp claw from his seat to the revolving model of the Planet that sat on Reeve's desk.

Reeve looked up, startled. "But that's Gongaga, Fort Condor, Mount Nibel, underneath the sea, and...and...Midgar. The five places that Mako reactors were set up at years ago." He looked bewildered. "But we shut down all four outlying reactors, and demolished Midgar's completely! How-"

Red interrupted him. "I saved the worst for last." His one yellow eye locked onto Reeve's twin brown orbs steadily. "Those five places are very disturbed, but the main disturbance is coming from the Northern Crater."

Reeve's eyes bulged, and he made a gurgling sound. "The Crater?! Do you think...?"

Red nodded grimly. "It could very well be Sephiroth."

"Typhoon, Ramuh, and Bahamut." Reeve leaned a weary head on a hand and rubbed his temples against the sudden migraine. After a moment of this, he looked up. "All right. First of all, I'm going to send my teams into the four reactors, and I'll assemble a team to search through the pipes that Mako used to run through in Midgar." He turned on his laptop and began pressing keys at a furious rate.

"Your teams?" asked Bugah.

Reeve's attention didn't waver from the computer screen. "After every government on the Planet outlawed the use of Mako, I didn't want someone trying to sneak around this and try to use Mako again. I've had all outlying four reactors under guard for several years now. One team comprised of specialists and soldiers is waiting at each reactor. I'll just send them in to find out what's going on."

Bugah nodded sagely, then turned to Red as Reeve studied his computer screen. He lowered his voice. "You were right to insist that we bring this information to Mr. Kazuma, Nanaki."

The keys clacked furiously, then Reeve's voice could be heard. "As of the last security check in at noon today, everything was nominal. But I'm sending all of the teams in, just to be careful and to make sure there's no Mako being produced." Reeve struck one key, hard, and paused in his typing for a moment before starting afresh. "Now I've got to assemble a team to check out the Mako pipes running under the city. We never bothered to demolish those, figuring that with no power source, it didn't really matter."

Red blinked his one eye. "You are doing all of that just with that computer?"

"Yes," Reeve replied. "As you know, Red, electronics are my specialty." He gave a roguish grin at this last comment. "Cait proved that rather well... I can give orders, check out reports, and do all kinds of things just with the touch of a button. Bow, if we can wait for a few minutes, we'll know the outcome of my people's searches. Are you two thirsty or anything?"

While Bugah shook his head, Red nodded. "If at all possible, Reeve, could I have some water?"

Reeve began to speak, then paused. "Uh, since you can't exactly use a glass..."

Red gave a smile. "Just a bowl of water on the floor is fine, thank you."

Reeve stood up and pressed an intercom button that was built into the wall. "Emmanuel?" he asked into the speaker.

A deep male voice came back immediately. "Yes, Mr. President?"

"Can you please bring a bowl of water up to my office?"

He sounded puzzled. "A bowl, sir?"

Reeve rolled his eyes, but kept his voice calm. "Yes, Emmanuel, a bowl full of water."

"Right away sir."

Reeve let go of the button and the intercom shut off with a ding. He began to say something, but was cut off. A sudden chiming noise came from the computer, and Reeve dove for the desk. Reeve jumped back into his seat and wheeled over to the desk. Red saw the reflection of the green words on the back background reflected in Reeve's eyes as the man scrolled

down through the text. "The reactor at Fort Condor is clear, as is the one at Gongaga. The other two are going to take longer to reach, as will the pipes under the city."

Bugah nodded. Red began, "But what are you going to do about-"

Just then, a gentle knock came on the door. "Come!" Reeve called out.

Emmanuel, a tall gangly youth, came in carrying a large, crystal bowl of water. "Where should I put this, Mr...Presideh-eh-ent..." He slowed and trailed off as his eyes bulged at the sight of Red XIII seated at the desk.

"Right on the floor please, Emmanuel," Reeve directed distractedly from his seat.

Carefully, slowly, his eyes not leaving Red, Emmanuel set the bowl down on the plush jade carpet.

Red leapt off his seat and padded over to the bowl. Emmanuel moaned softly and backed away slowly. Red dipped his head in and lapped up a mouthful, giving Emmanuel an eyeful of sharp canines and strong mouth, then pulled his head out, muzzle and whiskers beaded with moisture. His one eye locked onto Emmanuel's terrified face. "Thank you," he said simply and distinctly. Then he returned to drinking.

Emmanuel managed to hold onto it for a moment, staring, then went running out the door. "Yeeeeeeaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhggg!"

Reeve held back his chuckles, waiting to see what Red's response to the insult would be.

The beast gave a very passable impression of a human style shrug, his heavily muscled limbs rippling, and went back to his water.

Bugah appeared to be hiding a smile.

A beeping noise came from the computer, and Reeve studied it, a grin growing on his face. "The report from Mount Nibel is in. They say a whole bunch of things that aren't fit to repeat about a faulty rope bridge." He chuckled lightly. "They obviously aren't aware that their report is being sent directly to the president... And they also say that there is nothing odd or out of place to report." Another chime sounded, and Reeve quickly scrolled through the new report. "The underwater reactor is also clear." He tapped a few keys, then sat back. "I should be getting the report from the Midgar team any minute, since there really isn't all that much piping to inspect." As if on cue, the familiar noise came, and Reeve's hands flew over the keyboard. "Damn. And Midgar is normal too."

Red bounded across the room lightly to spring back up into his chair. "So what now, Reeve?"

"You two wouldn't mind sitting around for a little while, would you?" Reeve asked, grabbing the cell phone that he had set aside and accessing a different screen on the laptop.

Red blinked his good eye. "What for?"

"I've always been aware that something like this may happen, which is why I revived the old Shinra army. No SOLDIERs, of course, just the same old blues, but I figured they would come in handy one day." He punched in some numbers and held the phone to his ear. "And they most certainly will now." He held up a hand for silence for a moment, then began speaking in a low monotone. After several seconds, a loud beeping sound came and Reeve put his hand down again.

Bugah looked confused. "What are you doing with your army?"

"I'm sending several platoons to the Northern Crater." Reeve's brown eyes grew hard. "We're going to get to the bottom of

this."

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Many miles below the city of Midgar, there came the sound of steady, eerie dripping. Some of it came from the sewers; liquid waste spilling into new pipes. Some of it came from the odd, green-brown growths on the walls. And some of it... some of it was blood. Human blood.

"Juroi!" snapped Amaani, her white hair and robes miraculously clean in this place of filth.

The beast she was yelling to looked up from the man that it was mauling, growling. The man was already dead, rivers and pools of blood collected on his Shinra uniform, his terrified eyes open wide.

"Juroi!" she repeated, and the snarling creature backed off under the force of her command.

All around the large sewage pipe, sleek, dangerous black monsters reluctantly backed off from their dead prey to cluster around Amaani.

She smiled, and crouched down to stroke one under the ears, murmuring to it in a musical language with harsh undertones.

A shout broke in. "M...milady!"

She sighed in annoyance and stood to her full, imposing height. She recognized the voice. "Keller?"

The cripple sounded panicked. "T...t...there's a sig...g...nal coming th...th...through, milad...d...dy! It's asking for a report on the M...M...Mako pipes!"

Amaani was at his side in a flash to peer over his shoulder at the small computer that they had taken from one of the dead men. "It is too early for them to know of our plans. Forge a report, informing them that all is nominal." Her steady white gaze held his terrified brown one for a moment. "You know very well the price of failure, Keller." She glanced significantly at his twisted and gnarled leg.

He gulped. "Y...y...y...yes, Milady."

His attention returned to the computer screen, although Amaani sensed that she was distracting him. The woman moved away, leaving him to his fakery.

She returned to her pets--the Tanduri was her name for them--and patted their heads. They pushed and nipped at each other to get closer to their mistress, and she smiled languidly, half closing her eyes to stroke their hard, rippling muscles. She and her pets had always had a special...connection. Father liked to say the connection was that they were both completely malicious, twisted, and evil, and Amaani tended to agree. But then again, Amaani tended to agree with anything that Father said. In her mind, Father could do no wrong.

We are almost finished here, Father, she transmitted silently.

Good, was his brisk reply. Once you are finished there, I believe there is a small matter in Rocket Town that needs to be taken care of, isn't there?

Yes Father. It shall be done.

Good girl. Oh, and Amaani--

Yes, Father?

You did very nicely with delivering the package.

Amaani basked in the glow of his praise, but all she said was, I am glad it pleases you, Father.

"Milady! M...m...milady!"

Keller, growled Amaani.

There was a sense of annoyance from the other end. Go. They need you. And the link was closed.

Standing, she stormed over to Keller. "What is it?" she barked.

Keller flinched, but told her. "M...milady, they b...b...bought it comp...p...pletely."

Amaani gave him a rare bit of praise. "Well done, Keller."

Reaching up, she rapped on the thin pipes above her head with one fist. A faint blue-green glow could be seen, and moving through the pipes outward, away from the city. "The Mako is ours."