

Chapter 22: A Bit of Harmless Fluff

"The Mako cannon is being brought out to the car."-Kiyara Maiden Shinra

"Shhh!"

"Stop shushing me! You're making more noise telling me to be quiet than I'm making!"

"SHHH!"

"For Leviathan's sake, stop that!"

The noisy whispers echoed as the two figures tip-toed out of the large spacious office, leaving a figure slumped to the desk behind them.

Kiyara pulled the door closed gently behind her and glared at Reno. "You're so loud! You almost woke Reeve up, and then where would we be?"

"We would be back in there trying to brainstorm and coming up with absolutely nothing. But unless you're nicer, I will leave you here," Reno retorted, growling.

She scowled. "You're such an ass. Did it ever occur to y--"

"What are you guys doing?" broke in another voice. The two jumped as if stung and spun around. A bemused Tifa was standing there, one hand on her hip and a white paper bag in the other. Red XIII was standing beside her, tail swaying rhythmically.

Both faces looked incredibly guilty. "I...umm...we...err..." Kiyara fumbled for words.

"We were gonna go take a walk, since Reeve fell asleep," offered Reno.

There was a low rumble of laughter. "Why do I doubt that?" Red asked, teeth bared in a grin.

Tifa pushed past them to the door to Reeve's office. "You guys go ahead and do whatever it is you're going to do. Just be careful. We'll stall Reeve with one story or another about where you went when he wakes up."

"We will?" asked Red.

"Yes," Tifa replied firmly, "We will." She opened the door to Reeve's office quietly, and she and Red slipped inside quickly. The door closed behind them.

Reno and Kiyara exchanged glances. "Go!" they hissed at each other simultaneously.

They jogged down the corridor to the elevator. "Where were we now?" Reno asked.

"Keep your voice down," Kiyara admonished him.

"We're all the way down the hall. It's not like he's gonna hear me," Reno replied practically, pressing the glowing key for the elevator.

Kiyara shook her head, tapping her foot as they waited. "Do you really want to take the chance? You know he'd never let us

go if he knew what we were doing."

Reno rolled his eyes, but lowered his voice. "All right, all right all ready."

The elevator dinged and they stepped inside to find it empty. Reno pressed the button that read 'ground floor,' and the lift rocketed down.

Kiyara turned to glance out the glass side—and stared in awe at the impressive sight of Midgar at night. "Wow..."

"You've never been to Midgar before?" Reno asked with a frown.

"I have, but I've never seen it like this..." she breathed.

He leaned over behind her to peer out. White and gold lights twinkled in the velvety dark of the night behind the reflections of their faces in the glass. "Almost looks beautiful, doesn't it?" he pondered.

"Almost?" she asked incredulously.

"If you'd actually been down there and seen Midgar itself, not the pretty idealized version that you're seeing here, it would never look beautiful to you," he said quietly, long fingers tapping out a slow rhythm on the glass.

Kiyara looked over at him in surprise at the philosophical statement. He was leaning casually on the pane beside her, handsome face lost in thought and green eyes flickering over the vista. And she thought, not for the first time, that there was a lot more to this man than most believed.

She heard the doors open behind her, and she gave Reno a light shove when he made no move. "C'mon."

His head came up, face startled. "Wh—Oh, right." He followed her out of the elevator and into the lobby.

Kiyara went straight for the front door, but he grabbed her arm and pulled her aside, across the tiled floor to the large, polished front desk.

He grinned at the cute little receptionist. "Hey Nari."

A mock expression of dismay went across the woman's face. "Oh no. Not you."

Reno leaned on the desk lazily. "I'm back, babe. Aren't ya glad to see me?"

She smiled at him, batting her eyelashes coquettishly. "Yeah, I'm happy to see you. Where've you been? I got my hair done just for you." She patted the aforesaid frizzy platinum blonde curls with a manicured hand.

He chuckled her under the chin. "It looks great, babe. And so do you."

Kiyara stared at her high-heeled shoes as the flirting went on. Why is this bothering me so much? That idiot's a player. He probably always acts like this around women. But a random thought crossed her mind. Why doesn't he act like this around me? She battered it down with a quick, Not like I'd want him to or anything. That's just sickening. She started paying attention to what was going on again when she heard her name.

"So, anyway, Nare, I think you have an ID card for Kiyara here," Reno was saying.

The receptionist finally seemed to notice Kiyara, giving her the once-over from behind those false eyelashes. She gave

Kiyara quite the dirty look, but the blonde just glared frostily back.

Looking slightly abashed, Nari reached under the desk and came up with a small plastic chit, which she handed to Reno.

"Thanks doll," he drawled, while handing the card to Kiyara. "I'll see you later."

Kiyara pocketed the voucher, and as they walked away, Reno sighed and asked, "All right, what now?"

"What are you talking about?" she retorted, pushing the large double doors aside and shivering against the onslaught of the frigid air.

"Your glare is practically burning holes in my back. What did I do to deserve The Look?" Out on the sidewalk, under a streetlamp, he held up a hand and waved. Almost immediately, a yellow taxi pulled up to the curb in front of them. Opening the door with mock servility for Kiyara, he motioned to the interior of the cab. She stepped inside with dignity, and he got in and pulled the door shut.

"504 Fifth Street," he told the cab-driver. The man nodded and they pulled out into the packed, traffic-laden street.

"Fifth Street? That's not where the shopping center is, is it?" Kiyara asked in confusion.

"No, it's not," Reno replied, leaning on the window and watching the walkers on the side of the road fight the wind.

Kiyara frowned. "Then where the hell are we going?"

"We're making a pit-stop," came the vague answer.

"A pit-stop where?" she demanded.

His eyes shifted uneasily, and winced in anticipation of the blasting he knew he was going to get. "It's a surprise?" he offered.

She just looked at him, saying nothing.

Reno sighed. "Fine. We're stopping at my apartment for a few minutes because I'm getting tired of wearing clothes that don't belong to me, plus I want another gun, since my old one seems to have gotten dropped somewhere along the way."

Kiyara nodded her head, hair sparkling like gold under the illumination of the streetlight that they were passing under. "Okay. I can understand. Just don't take too long."

"Well, c'mon, I need clothes and a new g--" Reno stopped himself, a sheepish grin growing on his face. "You said okay, didn't you?"

She gave an amused smirk. "Yep."

Reno kicked at the seat in front of him. "Dammit, now I look stupid..."

She raised an eyebrow. "You don't always?"

"Shut up..." he growled, more to himself than anything.

"Why don't you?" she countered.

As usual, Reno's mouth worked faster than his mind. "Why don't you get that bug taken out of your a--"

"Hey, buddy," the cabdriver broke in, "are you gonna get out an' pay me or what?"

The redhead looked up in surprise to find the familiar apartment building looming beside the car.

"This it?" Kiyara asked.

"This is it," he confirmed, opening the door and stepping out onto the tar. As he paid the driver through the front window, Kiyara slid out of the taxi and closed the door. She looked around with interest as the first icy snowflakes began to fall, evaporating into nothingness as they hit the pavement. Her first impression of the neighborhood could be described by many words. Rich, affluent, opulent, wealthy, loaded.

The street was lined with large apartment buildings much like the one they stood before now. Each building was at least five stories, and was painted a different, dark color. There was no graffiti anywhere to be seen, and the road was well-lit by streetlights. Cars drove by continuously, but they were all sleek models that looked like they had just come straight from the factory. The street looked like it had just been paved, and the sidewalks, driveways, and walkways had all been immaculately cleared of the snow that covered the rooftops and tiny front lawns.

Reno came up behind her as the cab drove off. "Admirin' the neighborhood, I see," he said, looking amused.

"I--" Kiyara cut herself off, pulling her borrowed black coat tighter around her shoulders. "Uhh, do you realize that the cab just drove off?"

"Yep," he answered, watching the red taillights disappear into the dark. "I figured since I have a car, why bother paying for the taxi." With that, he turned and strode up the walkway to the dark red building. Inserting a key into the lock, he turned and asked, "You coming?"

Kiyara slid up the icy path to join him. He pushed the door open, and she stepped inside. He came in and closed the door behind himself. They were in a moderately spacious room that had been painted an off-white color. Thick, expensive-looking forest green carpeting covered the floor and the set of stairs off to the left of the large, wooden door. Another door was across from the steps.

"Not bad," she said grudgingly.

Grinning, Reno motioned to the stairs. "After you, fair Maiden."

Kiyara jogged up the stairs, groaning in disgust. "Ifrit, Reno, where do you come up with these puns?"

"I got that one from your brother. It's what his old commander in the air force used to call him," Reno's voice floated up to her. "I thought it was appropriate in this situation. And stop at the top floor."

After only a few more steps, there were no more stairs to climb. Kiyara waited on the small landing in front of the one door on this level. After a moment, Reno came bouncing up the stairs. Pulling out the mass of keys again, he flicked through them quickly, whistling to himself, and chose one. Inserting the slim golden tool into the door, he turned it and pulled the doorknob. The thick, oaken door swung open, and Reno ducked inside. After a split second's hesitation, she followed him, pushing the door shut with a foot.

It was pitch-black inside, and Kiyara couldn't make out a thing, though a stream of constant muttering kept her in tune to where Reno was. "Stupid electrician...Why the hell did he have to move the light switch to where I'm not used to it..... Where are the damn lights?!" There was a muffled thudding noise, and Reno's curses lit up the apartment. "Freakin'

cleaning lady! Dammit, that hurt!"

Kiyara didn't grow nervous until he fell silent. It was then that she realized that he had been talking out of courtesy to her, because he moved so quietly that she couldn't figure out where he was. Shiva, where did he go? She looked around nervously, taking care to keep her breathing quiet. That was when two faintly glowing green objects appeared about a foot from her face. She gave a strangled yelp and jumped back a step.

"Whoa, shit!" The green orbs grew larger for a moment, then smaller. "Oh, it's you. Sorry," came the familiar voice as something snaked past her ear to make a clicking noise. The room was flooded with light, and Kiyara was left blinking in the sudden illumination. When she regained her sight, she found that Reno was standing in front of her, hand still on the light-switch behind her head.

She put a hand over her heart and gave a shaky sigh. "You nearly gave me a heart attack!"

He gave a crooked smile, emerald eyes twinkling. "If it makes you feel any better, you scared the shit out of me. I didn't know you were there."

Green eyes...weird green floating things... "Your eyes glow!" she blurted out.

The grin dropped, and he gave a clipped nod. "Yeah..."

Obviously not a subject he cares for much... Kiyara mused to herself.

The smirk came back after a moment, though, as he raised his arms in an expansive gesture to take in the apartment. "So, whaddya think?"

It was Kiyara's turn to smile as she looked at the walls. "Lovely decorating."

And she wasn't being facetious. The walls had been painted black, silvery-white dots covering them, sparkling in the light and obviously meant to embody the stars. A large, picture window showcased a breathtaking view of the city that never sleeps. Gleaming hardwood covered the floors, and the chairs were all expensive-looking black leather. A large fireplace took up a chunk of the room, and the mantle over it had a few photos and other trinkets on it. In short, it was tasteful, appropriate (even if the motif was a bit strange), clean, reeked of money, and was beautiful in a poetic type of way. Not Reno. Not Reno at all.

"Hey, gimme a break," Reno protested. "I just moved in a few weeks ago, and haven't had time to get it re-painted yet."

"I'm not kidding, Reno. It's beautiful," she informed him, walking out of the small front cubby and further into the room. With an even better vantage point, she now saw the large, gray cabinet that looked like it housed an entertainment system and the black leather couch. Several doorways to other rooms in the spacious apartment were visible.

"Did you ever think you'd say the words 'beautiful' and 'Reno' in the same sentence?" he questioned her with a grin. He shrugged off his jacket, tossing it onto the couch, and brushed past her into one of the aforesaid doorways, where she caught what looked to be the edge of a bed.

She ignored his comment, grudgingly admitting, "This is a bit better than I thought. I was expecting some little hole in the wall with beer cans and week-old pizza everywhere."

"Cleaning lady comes every Monday," he called out, the sound of drawers opening and closing accompanying his voice.

"I pity that poor woman," she replied loudly, walking over to a wall to lightly trace her fingertips along it.

"You shouldn't," he answered. "I pay her very well." Turning around to make a response through the bedroom door, Kiyara found that Reno was apparently changing clothes, because he was visible in the room naked from the waist up.

She shook her head slightly. "You just have no modesty, do you?"

He glanced up to find her looking at him and grinned as he pulled on a shirt. "You know ya like it, babe."

The blonde scoffed. "Hardly." She turned away quickly as he began to unbutton his pants, and his soft laughter followed her.

"All right, all right." She heard the door close.

She dropped down onto the couch to wait for several minutes, amusing herself by attempting to count the silver dots on the wall. She lost count around 1200 and began looking around for something else to do.

That was when something caught her eye. Frowning, Kiyara stood and walked over to the fireplace to investigate. She picked up the framed photograph off the mantelpiece.

She looked up for a moment, her perusing interrupted by a slamming sound. But wait, no, that was coming from Reno's bedroom. She'd let him deal with it. She returned her attention to the matter at hand.

Reno, a small girl, and a woman smiled up at her, the child looking like she was two or three. The small girl was sitting on Reno's shoulders, looking like she was shrieking with laughter. Flaming curls cascaded down to frame a narrow, pert face with bright green eyes. Those same emerald orbs held an air of intelligence, cockiness, and impudence in them that Kiyara wouldn't expect from someone at such an incredibly young age. The high, defined cheekbones and wide grin were painfully familiar, as was the 'don't mess with me' aura. And as for the woman... Reno was holding her up in the air by the waist as she laughed. She was tall, slim, and heart-breakingly beautiful, with luscious brown curls cascading down to her shoulders, and brown eyes sparkling with mirth. There was something incredibly familiar about that tanned face...

Realizing suddenly that Reno may grow suspicious that she had been quiet for so long, she called out, "Reno, are you almost ready yet?!" and received no answer.

She returned to gawking at the photograph still in her hand, mouth slightly ajar. Carefully, she turned it around to find 'the family' inscribed on the back in neat, unmistakably feminine handwriting. ...Family?...

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(In case you couldn't tell, this is taking place a few minutes before Kiyara discovers the picture...)

As Reno reached for the doorknob to his room, the red flashing light on the black box sitting on the table grabbed his attention. He reached out and hit 'play'. There were several concerned messages from Reeve, Rude, Faye, and Elena, and he felt slightly guilty as he skipped over them. Then there was one from his landlord—fat little pig—complaining that he was too noisy, skip that; another from a telemarketer for Mideel Resorts, skip that; and then there was only one final message. As he listened, he felt the urge to throw something that would make a satisfying crash. He had totally forgotten!

The woman's businesslike voice informed him: "Hey Mr. Lynley, Moiré from Delante Escort Services here. I was calling to tell you that a last minute familial conflict has come up, and I can't make it to that party on the 22nd with you. I'm sorry, but if you can call the offices before the 20th, they can reschedule someone to go with you." A click.

"Shit! Today's the 22nd!" he hissed to himself, picking up the phone and dialing. On the other end of the line, another woman's voice picked up. "Hello, President Reeve Kazuma's office."

"Hey, Oli. It's Mr. Lynley. Wanna do me a favor?"

The dour secretary sounded doubtful. "That depends on what it is."

"Check Mr. Kazuma's schedule to see if that little bash he's having for the Shinra major stock-holders is still on for tonight."

She sounded relieved that that was all he was asking. "All right; hold on a moment please, sir." The sound of furiously tapping keys reached him, then her voice came back. "It's still on, Mr. Lynley."

"Damn," Reno cursed to himself. Even with everything that's going on, Reeve is still throwing his party?! A part of him knew that was unfair to Reeve, though. The man did have to placate the stock-holders, after all.

"Mr. Lynley?" the woman was asking.

"Yes?" he replied distractedly.

"Do you want me to tell Mr. Kazuma you called?"

"No! Err, I mean, no, don't bother, Oli. Thank you. Bye." He hung up the phone and contemplated throwing it across the room, but settled for slamming it down in its cradle.

He sat down on the edge of the bed for a moment and thought rapidly. There's got to be some way out of this! Without a woman with me, all those rich old broads at Reeve's stupid little parties swarm on me like flies on a rotting carcass! If they weren't so old or so married to rich powerful guys, maybe... But no. Bad idea Reno. Bad bad bad idea.

He settled his chin into his hands. "What to do, what to do..." he muttered to himself. No way in hell Reeve'll let me get outta going, and it's too late now to find someone else from Delante... Where am I gonna find a beautiful, intelligent, charming woman who knows a lot about a bunch of different shi—

"Reno, are you almost ready yet?!" called out an imperious, impatient voice as if in answer to his dilemma.

Fiery eyebrows shot up as the solution struck him. Bingo...

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Kiyara's reverie was interrupted when someone walked around in front of her, rudely plucked the picture from her hand, set it back on the mantle, and asked brusquely, "Are you ready to go or what?"

She jumped in shock. "Reno! I didn't know you were th—"

Reno shook his crimson head, cutting her off. She noticed that he had changed out of the borrowed clothes and into a pair of jeans and a blue T-shirt that read, 'I Do All My Own Nude Scenes.' He moved toward the door, opened it, and motioned to her. "Comin'?"

After a split second's hesitation, she crossed the room and stepped through the door. He threw a coat over his bony shoulders, flicked off the light switch behind her, and closed the door.

Kiyara followed him back down the stairs to the room where they had first come in. She grabbed his arm as he stopped to unlock the other door in the breezeway. "Reno, I—"

"I don't wanna talk about them," he replied gruffly, shaking off her hand and not even turning to look at her.

Attempting to get the normal banter going again, she said, "Nice shirt."

He gave a small smirk and replied, "And it's the truth too."

Reno opened this door and held it open for her as well. She stepped through cautiously, shaking her head at him. Again, it was pitch black, but this time he simply reached over her shoulder right away and turned on a switch. Again, Kiyara was left blinking, but this time, it wasn't because of the unexpected light.

They looked to be in a parking garage; rows of parked cars were in evidence, as well as a large, car-sized sliding door. But she wasn't looking at those. No, she was staring open-mouthed at the nearest vehicle with a growing sense of horror. "Oh mother of all creation no..."

Reno grinned at her as he ducked past her. "Hell yes." He pulled a lone key out of his pocket as he jogged down the steps that she was standing at the top of. His good humor apparently restored, he whistled to himself as he crossed the concrete floor—and passed the expensive-looking motorcycle that Kiyara had been eyeing. She breathed a sigh of relief. He stopped at a sleek, black sports car, and her apprehension returned. Opening the front door, he paused, looking at her across the top of the car. "Are you comin' or not?" he asked.

"I think I'm gonna regret this..." Kiyara muttered to herself, walking down the steps and over to the car.

Reno was waiting, and he nodded to the passenger-side door. She slid inside and slammed the door shut as he did the same on the other side. He turned to smirk at her. "We're gonna have some fun. Like they always say, driving with me is a real experience."

I'm too young to die! Kiyara lamented to herself, fumbling for the seatbelt.

Reno frowned at the look on her face, reaching up to press a button on the sun-shield. The garage doors began to ponderously open. "Hey, you should put a little more faith in me and my driving skills."

"Y'know what, I'm not even gonna bother to answer that," she replied, slamming the belt buckle into its counterpart again and again, trying to produce that elusive click. "C'mon, c'mon," she muttered, throwing an anxious glance at the rapidly rising doors.

He watched for a moment, then sighed. "Oh for Ifrit's sake..." He reached across and pushed down on her hand none too gently. The belt came into place with a satisfying click, but neither of them noticed.

Reno stared at where his hand was placed over hers, the point of contact sending jolts of electricity up his spine. His emerald eyes met her startled stormy ones, and they watched each other for a prolonged moment, as if they had never seen the other before.

But like all moments, this one ended. Kiyara snatched her hand off of the seat buckle and was suddenly fascinated by the oh-so-interesting concrete walls of the garage. Reno turned his newfound energy into a vicious stomp down on the gas pedal. The tiny car rocketed out of the building, and he reached up quickly to press the button to close the doors again.

"What does this thing have, rocket launchers on the back?" the blonde asked in amazement as the black sports car zoomed down the street.

"Naw, just needs real expensive gas," he retorted.

After a moment or two, he spared a second to look aside to her, and he had to smile. Despite her earlier apprehension, unlike any other women that had ever driven with him who always wedged themselves into the corner between the seat

and the car door and wailed, Kiyara was sitting up straight, looking around with interest, not looking perturbed in the slightest.

She caught him looking at her. "Well, from what you said, I expected it to be much worse than this."

Shaking his head in admiration, Reno grinned and said nothing.

In reality, however, Kiyara was fighting to keep herself from lunging at the hand-hold above her head and holding on for dear life. But no! She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of seeing her terrified. "Do you always drive like this?" she finally snapped at him.

The small sports car came to a screeching halt at a stop-sign, and she was horrified to see that they had come to a convoluted area, full of other madly-driving vehicles. She shrank down in her seat minutely. I'm gonna die in a car accident...

"Drive like what?" he asked innocently, zipping out in front of a large truck that poured on the brakes and honked its horn noisily at him. Reno gave a one-fingered salute to its angry driver and whistled a cheery tune.

"Jenova, if you drive like this when you're sober, how the hell do you drive when you're drunk?" she murmured to herself.

Reno had sharp ears. "Why don't we test that? There's this great little bar along the w--"

"No!"

He winced, turning on the windshield wipers to brush away the snow that was beginning to gather. "You don't have to blast out my eardrums. A simple 'no, thanks, Reno' or 'another time, Reno' or 'later, Reno' or 'Reno, you're so hot, I want to f--"

"How 'bout this. Reno, shut your ass up."

He gave an exaggerated frown. "My ass isn't talking."

"You an ass, and you're talking," she retorted.

Grinning and still humming, Reno reached over toward her, hand at chest-level, and she gasped and batted his hand away.

He raised an eyebrow. "What, I can't turn on the radio?" He nodded to the dial in front of her.

Blushing slightly, she allowed him to flick on the radio. Lilting strains of classical music filled the car, and he hurriedly fumbled with the switch, changing it to a loud banging that reverberated and shook the small space.

Kiyara turned toward him, eyes incredulous and face split in a huge grin. "You like classical music?"

"No, that's not my station! Elena had it on the last time she was in the car! It's all Elena's fault!" he protested feebly.

The smile and glee vanished from her face swiftly, becoming one of confused disappointment for a split second before turning into blankness. They drove for some time in silence besides the noisy rap music.

What the hell got into her? Reno asked himself, face creased in thought.

After several minutes, they pulled into a large parking lot, full with row after row of parked cars. He found a space and turned the car off, then opened the door and stepped out. Kiyara did the same on the other side, and Reno locked the

doors with a press of a button.

She looked out across the sea of cars toward the lit-up, large building that was their ultimate destination, face creased in dismay. "You just had to park in the boonies, didn't you?"

Reno shoved his hands into his pockets, and they began the long walk in. "In the what?"

"Okay, let me try to say this another way." She was silent for several moments, thinking, then came out with, "We're gonna have to take a freakin' airplane to get there within the next three hours!"

He burst out laughing, part out of the sheer absurdity of the sentence, and part out of happiness that he was being spoken to again. She was unable to contain her smile at his merriment. "Glad to see I'm such an amusement," she remarked, her breath making white steam rise through the air.

He watched the ivory smoke waft away through the cold night air. There was a silence between them for a time as they walked, but this time it was a comfortable, companionable silence.

As they neared the looming building and bright light spilled out through the glass doors to wash over their faces in its white harshness, Reno finally found the courage to ask, "Why'd you get all pissy at me in the car, anyway?"

Kiyara was suddenly very interested in her shoes stepping over the curb. "Pissy? Who said I was pissy?"

He saw that he wasn't going to get anywhere with that line of questioning, and wisely dropped the subject. "Miss Maiden, welcome to the epitome of Midgarian class, taste, and elegance. I give you--" He opened the door and held it for her courteously. The blonde entered, and he stepped inside behind her. "The Midgar Mall."

All around them loud, garish clothes hung, waiting in vain to be bought. Cheesy Christmas carols played over a crackly loudspeaker and sad, thin, fake evergreens with bright red bows drooped from the ceiling. Shoppers with over-bright eyes scuttled around everywhere, carrying masses of bags.

Kiyara looked around, taking it all in. "Classy joint," she remarked, making her way through the sea of people. "I'm hoping this isn't the standard for the whole place."

Reno got slightly separated from her as the crowd pushed, and he fought to get back to her side. "Don't be so snotty," he called out to her. "And no, it's not. We just happened to come in through one of the worst stores." That earned him some glares from the harried-looking sales associates.

He finally managed to catch up to her again, ducking around a young couple whose arms were filled with packages. "Please tell me I don't hafta come with you and 'ooh' and 'ahh' over your purchases," he complained in her ear.

She shot him an amused look and shook her head. "No, you most certainly do not have to come."

Then they were finally out of the store, and Kiyara found herself agreeing with Reno's statement about the whole place being unlike the first store. Cheesy Christmas carols still played, but the hanging green swags didn't look half-dead, the floor was made of a nice brown tile, and there weren't nearly so many people pushing and shoving. A large, ornate clock with surrounding plants and park benches stood before them.

He turned to her, that irksome 'I told you so' patented Reno smirk on his face. But to her surprise, all he said was, "How long'll it take you?"

She wrote herself a quick mental list of what she needed. "An hour."

He raised an eyebrow. "An hour to replace an entire wardrobe?" He skipped a beat, then finished, "Surely that's giving yourself far too much time."

"Shove it, Reno," she grumbled at him. "It's because of you that that 'whole wardrobe' got left behind in Costa del Sol."

He nodded, conceding. "True, true. So I'll meet you back here, in front of this clock, in one hour?"

Kiyara was already walking off, merging into the crowd. "Sounds good."

And so they went their separate ways—for the time being, anyway.

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Reno stared at the back of the blonde head sitting on the park bench. There is no way that's her. No way did she finish in forty minutes!

The head turned as he approached, and he saw that it was indeed Kiyara. "What took you so long?" she asked nonchalantly.

"You...You're inhuman!" Reno replied, eyeing the bags piled around her. "How did you buy all that so freakin' fast? I thought I had time to grab a beer, dammit!" Dammit dammit dammit!!! I don't have time to stop at Stardust and pick it up now! Bloody hell!

She grinned. "It's a skill that comes with being a--" She stopped in the middle of her sentence, and her face held an expression that clearly said, 'Oh shit! Can't tell him that!' The woman finished lamely, "--an ex-research specimen."

Reno blinked, and studied her quizzically. The hell...?

She recovered nicely, though. "And knowing your driving skills," she retorted airily, "it's a good thing you didn't get to buy that beer." Scooping up her packages, she bobbed her head toward the store that they had come in through, unable to point with an occupied hand. "We goin', then?"

He was about to reply in the affirmative—when the sign of a particular store caught his eye, and his nimble brain worked out a swift Plan B. "Actually," he replied, "I was thinkin' we could leave through a different store, seein' as how being pushed around in Ginger's ain't exactly my idea of fun."

Kiyara shifted the bags so that the handles weren't cutting into her palms. "I don't care where we leave from as long as the walk back's not any longer."

"Where ever are my manners?" he asked facetiously, having acquired a precise accent. "Pray tell, Mistress Kiyara, may I carry some of your purchases for you?"

"Thanks, Jeeves" she drawled. He mused idly that the sarcasm in her voice could probably shear the infamously strong Masamune in half. "You're a doll." She dropped the handles to one hand's worth of bags into his outstretched fingers, and he nearly dropped them.

"Jenova, what do you have in here, bricks?!" he asked, trying to distribute the weight evenly between both hands.

"No, actually, in those bags are the grenades, tear gas, and the AK-51 submachine gun," she answered calmly.

Reno stared at her open-mouthed. "You're shitting me."

She shook her head, face calm and serene, blue eyes glittering. "Nope. And then in my bags, I've got the high-powered rifles, different varieties of smaller handguns, materials to make a bomb, and some bootleg materia."

He gawked at her. "You're shitting me," he repeated woodenly.

"And the Mako cannon is being brought out to the car." Kiyara smirked at the expression on his face. "Of course I'm shitting you. All these bags have in them are clothes. So where are we leaving from?"

He grinned. "You're good," he admitted, casually strolling toward the store that had a large, flashing blue sign marked 'Stardust.'

"Okay, I take it we're heading out through here." She moved beside him through the entrance to the store.

"My, aren't we smart today?" he remarked to the air. Let this work let this work let this work...

"My, aren't we sarcastic today?" She mimicked his tone perfectly, and he had to smile.

She's in a good mood. Gooooood...

There was silence for a moment, and in that brief respite, Reno took in their surroundings. Stardust was very well known for its excellent women's formal wear, and that was blatantly obvious as the pair walked through the rows of expensive, lovely gowns. He watched Kiyara out of the corner of his eye as she looked around as well. I've never known a woman to walk through Stardust without stopping at least once. When she stops, I can bring up the subject all casual-like.

And she continued to stride along, making scowling faces at her armfuls of bags. The two went past dress after dress, Reno's hope fading with every garment that they passed. Is she a woman?! Hell, is she human?!

The glass doors came into sight, and blasts of cold air could be felt emanating from them. He trailed along behind her resignedly. There goes my grand plan. Ugly old women wearing too much make-up, here I come. He reached for the door handle—and realized that Kiyara was no longer beside him. Frowning, he turned. "What are you do--" As he saw what she was doing, he grinned in triumph. Perhaps she was a human female after all. She had stopped and was running the red fabric of a dress through her closed fingers.

He couldn't even see the gown, but leaned over her shoulder as if he was examining it and remarked, "Pretty."

She gave a small smile. "It had damn well better be pretty for how much they're asking for it."

He tossed a panicked look onto his face when he noticed her looking at him. "Aww shit."

"What?" she said, hand still holding the hem of the dress.

"I just remembered... That's tonight?! Ifrit of fucking hell!" he cursed noisily and got some choice glares from a nearby woman who was holding a small child by the hand.

"What?" she demanded again.

"The dress reminded me. Reeve is having a damned formal party tonight that I'm required to go to!" He knew that he looked totally chagrined and pissed. I missed my true calling when I became a Turk. I'd make a damn good actor, he gloated to himself.

"What's so bad about that, besides all the old fogies?" Kiyara asked with a smile.

"The old fogies' wives," he replied, and was rewarded with a slight widening of the eyes and a burst of laughter. "Oh, go on. Laugh laugh laugh. It's just so damn funny," he chastised her. "But it is true. I'm one of the youngest unmarried males there. Prime real estate."

She continued to laugh uproariously.

"Being hit on by women old enough to be my grandma is not a fun time," he told her.

It finally seemed to register to her that he was serious, and the laughter slowly died away. "Well, don't you have a date?"

He shook his head wordlessly.

"You have no women you could call to be your date?" she answered practically, an idea beginning to grow in the back of her mind.

Again, he shook his head.

"Are you sure?"

Nod.

"Can you talk?"

"Nope."

"Okay, that's what I thought. So you're absolutely sure you have no one who could go with you?"

"Yes, Kiyara, I am abso-fucking-lutely sure," he dead-panned in exasperation.

Kiyara pondered what she was going to say for a moment, wondering if it was the right decision. Then she took the plunge. "I'm willing go with you."

"Really?" he cut her off.

"Ahem."

"Right, sorry, interrupted."

"I'm willing to go with you, but when is this thing?"

Reno glanced at his watch then back to her waiting face. "Two hours," he announced casually, as if it were nothing.

It was her turn to stare blankly, her expression a comical study in shock and disbelief.

"What, too much warning?" he asked.

She found her voice. "Try the opposite."

He shrugged it off. "You'll make it."

"Reno, did it ever occur to you that I might need something to wear?"

He nodded to the dress her fingers were still resting on.

Her face paled. "Have you seen the price tag that's attached to this? I..." She looked at her feet, blushing slightly.

Suddenly, he understood. Damn, I'm dense... "Of course, since I'm doin' the invite, I'll pay for it."

Her fiery eyes glared into his, and she gritted out, "No."

"That pride just jumps up and chokes you in the throat sometimes, don't it?" he remarked idly, ignoring her wordless growl. He went on, growing more serious. "Look, if what you're worried about is money, don't sweat it. I have more than I know what to do with."

"Modest, aren't we?" she muttered.

"And saving myself from a night of torture by old women cooing over me like I'm their five-year-old grandson is a good way to use that money."

She cracked a small smile at that.

"You wouldn't owe me a cent, 'cause you're the one doing me a favor," he reasoned. "Plus, it would be worth every gil coin of it to see you in that dress." He still hadn't managed to get a good look at the gown around her, but figured that flattery was always a good idea.

A slight flush came to her cheeks, but she stubbornly persisted in poking holes in his plan. "I don't have any makeup, and my hair..."

"I've got someone that I think'll deal with it," he replied cryptically.

"Well..." Don't do it don't do it don't do it! Kiyara's mind told her furiously. "Okay. I'll do it." Damn you! was her mind's reply. She plucked the dress off of the rack.

As she walked off in the direction of the fitting rooms, Reno reached over and looked at the price tag on one of the remaining dresses. His face paled ever-so-slightly. This is gonna be a helluva expensive night.

* * * * *

Within a half an hour, they were zipping along the freeway in the little speed car. The gown hung in a dress-bag in the back seat, Kiyara watching it closely to be sure it didn't fall onto the filthy floor. Reno seemed to regard the floormats in the backseat of his car as one large ashtray.

The aforesaid ex-Turk was seated next to her, driving with the same reckless abandon that he treated everything in his life with. One hand was casually resting on the wheel, while the other held a cell-phone up to one ear. "Hey man, it's Reno. You still in the biz?...No, dumb ass, not THAT biz...Kiyara Maiden.....Yeah.....C'mon, Vinnie, you gotta do this for me. You owe me one.....Hey, at least I didn't let 'em kill you!...You'll do it?...Great, thanks. See you in five." Click.

He glanced at her questioning face for a moment. "Oh, you know what they say. Hair today, gone tomorrow!"

She shook her head as they pulled into the parking garage once again. He stuffed the phone back into a pocket and turned

the key in the ignition. The throaty rumble of the engine cut out. Stepping out of the door, he looked at the sparkling, immaculate silver car beside him. "Damn, he got here fast."

Kiyara jumped out, grabbing the dress and slamming the door behind her. "I take it he'll be doing my hair?"

Reno nodded, pulling out a collection of keys and thumbing through them. "You got it." He inserted a key into the lock, opened the door, and walked through, reaching behind himself and holding it open for Kiyara with one hand.

"So who is this guy, and why's he doing this for you?" she asked, following him up the steps.

"His name is Vinnie Delmundo, and he's a small-time crook who was a valuable insider on one of the biggest Shinra resistance groups besides Avalanche, called the Wraiths or some crap like that. I was sent in undercover to watch out for him, and saved his ass countless times. He'll still be paying me back for it years from now."

"But why a hair-stylist?"

"Well, it was one of the courses they offered in prison." He caught the look on her face. "Don't worry; he's really good. Changed his name to Xavier St. John and has all kinds of rich and satisfied customers."

Coming up the final flight of steps in front of Kiyara, he found a short, elegant man with slicked back ebony hair waiting in front of his door.

"Vinni--" Reno began.

"Xavier," the man corrected in a purely Midgarian accent, shifting the large, expensive briefcase he held in one hand.

"Alright, alright, Xavier."

"Reno, mind moving so that I can actually get up the stairs?" came a disgruntled voice from behind him.

"Oh, right." So saying, he slid to one side and Kiyara stepped out into the illumination provided by the hallway light.

The ex-con seemed to hold his breath for a moment, then his face burst into a dazzling smile. "Miss Maiden?" he asked.

"Pleased to meet you," she replied, reaching out and shaking his hand.

Reno reached between them to unlock his door and hold it open, motioning to Xavier, who took the hint and stepped through. The blonde woman began to follow, but a hand locked around her arm and her progress came to an abrupt halt. Turning, she frowned, her expression clearly reading, 'What?'

"You're filthy stinkin' rich."

It took her a moment to process and understand this statement, then she asked, "You want me to pretend I'm a millionaire?"

He nodded.

Realization began to grow in the blue-gray eyes. "You told him I'm wealthy, didn't you? That's why he got those gil signs in his eyes."

"Well, he wouldn't have come if he didn't think you were a prospective customer."

A toothy grin appeared. "I can play the rich brat."

"Reno, I'm settin' up in your kitchen!" came a bellow from inside the apartment.

Kiyara spun and sauntered into the room, having acquired a ramrod straight posture and a nose held high in the air.

Reno called after her, "I'll be right back!" She nodded, and he closed the door and headed back down the stairs.

He halted at a landing where a plaque read 'five' and ducked out. He counted doors while walking down the corridor. "One...two...three...four!" Stopping at the fourth door on the right, he knocked. No answer. He knocked louder. Again, no response. He kicked the door several times.

"All right, all right, coming, coming!" came the irritated, feminine retort.

The door was flung open to reveal a young Wutaian woman with startlingly green close-cropped curls. She was holding a purple umbrella by the handle as if it were a deadly weapon, but set it down and leaned on it casually when she recognized him.

"Mr...Lynley, correct? I met you twice in the elevator?" she asked coolly, her voice a smooth, low cadence filled with rich Wutaian overtones.

"Nice to meet you again, Nhi—nice umbrella you got there." He grinned at her.

"Thanks," she replied dryly. "Now, how can I help you?" Her voice took on a faintly mocking tone. "You wish to borrow a cup of sugar? Or perhaps a dash of cinnamon, or a pint of milk?"

"No, not quite. You're a makeup artist, am I right?"

She gave a clipped, cautious nod. "Yes, this is true."

"Well, I've got a job for you. There's a woman in my apartment that needs to be ready for a party that's in an hour and a half. Feeling up to the job?"

She crossed her arms over her chest, almond-shaped liquid brown eyes watching him skeptically. "And what is in this for me, pray tell?"

"If you do a nice job, she'll put in a good word for you at the formal ball she's headed to."

She pondered for a moment, then bobbed her head again. "All right, Mr. Lynley. Wait here." Within a moment she was back, a black messenger bag—the color matching that of her clothes and lipstick—swung casually over one shoulder. Reno ushered her up the stairs in front of him after she closed and locked the door.

Nhi turned to speak over her shoulder as they walked. "So who exactly is this woman?"

"The widow of some mythrill magnate," he lied between his teeth. Seeing Nhi's face turned toward again gave him faint misgivings. The lips were black, the eyelids were a deep ebony shade that made her eyes look sunken back into her head, and her face had been made up to look dead white. I hope she's good...

* * * * *

Some time later, Reno found himself seated in front of the television, idly drumming his fingers on an end table. He was wearing a black suit that was destined to become a mess—much like his old Turks suit had been—before the night was over. Scowling, he tugged uncomfortably on the forest-green tie. Damn thing... Despite the tie, he knew that he was considerably under-dressed. The other men would be wearing tuxedos, which he flat out refused to allow near him.

What the hell's taking so long? he mused to himself. There had been silence in the closed-off kitchen since the noise following Kiyara's sudden shout of "Keep those damn things away from me! You have no idea how long it's taken me to grow my hair out!" had ended some time ago.

As if on cue the door to the kitchen, which had been closed since Nhi had entered almost an hour ago, squeaked. Reno looked up from the screaming fans and players on the television to find Nhi standing beside one of the double, galley-style swinging doors.

"Is she ready?" he asked.

Giving no answer, she pulled open one of the doors and leaned on it to hold it open. The opposite door squeaked, and Xavier grinned from where he held a foot against it. The slow click-clack-click-clack of heels on the tiled floor could be heard in the paralyzing stillness. Looking away for an instant, he turned off the TV, closing down the wild cheers and shouts emanating from it. And when his gaze returned, she had stepped into view.

His mouth ran dry, and his heart began to race, thudding painfully against his chest. Wow...

The red gown was anchored to her tan shoulders by thin straps, and flowed tightly down her body to end at her ankles. She shifted the way she was standing, and the dress shimmered golden as she did so, leaving the impression of molten lava. Slim, fit legs were visible through long slits on either side, tapering down into trim ankles and feet clad in red high heels. Her hair had been pulled into a series of tiny twists, each intricate knot making up a link in the magnificent golden crown adorning her head. Even as he looked on, she reached up with crimson-painted fingernails and tucked a stray lock behind one ear. And her face? Each small imperfection and blemish had been hidden, creamy complexion was flawless, cheeks blushing a pale pink. Her lips were a pink sheen, and her eyelids were covered in an indescribable color that brought out the sapphire in her eyes. Those same orbs were locked onto his, as if awaiting a judgment.

"I...wh...you...Holy shit you look incredible!" This first statement out of Reno's mouth was neither poetical or eloquent, but Kiyara blushed all the same and gave a small smile.

She opened her mouth to speak, then turned to the woman creeping along behind her towards the door.

"Ms. Takishawe, thank you," the blonde said effusively.

"Don't mention it, Miss Maiden," Nhi replied easily, clipping the messenger bag on her shoulder closed.

"Actually, I would like to mention it: to the women at the function I'm attending. Would you happen to have any spare business cards with you?"

Nhi's face lit up; the first real emotion Reno had seen from her. "Do I ever!" Digging through a pocket in her bag, she came up with a small stack of cards, which she placed into Kiyara's outstretched hand. "Thank you, Miss Maiden." And with that, she was gone, the sound of the closing door the only reminder of her presence.

"Reno, Reno, Reno. That hair is so unclassy," Xavier was arguing.

"If you think I'm cutting it, think again," Reno retorted, ducking the outstretched scissors in Xavier's hand. "Besides, it looks fine like this!"

"Oh really?" Xavier asked skeptically. "Reno, it's bad enough that it's long and in a ponytail, but it's not even a neat ponytail! There are pieces of hair sticking up all over your damn head! At least let me put it up neatly."

Reno eyed him warily. "Alright, but if you try to tie a pansy ass ribbon in my hair, within three seconds you'll be so full of electricity that all of Midgar can friggin' use you as a power source."

"Tch, such violence. Alright, alright, no ribbons." Xavier produced a hairbrush.

And for the next several minutes, Kiyara was treated to one of the most amusing spectacles of her life.

Finally, though, Xavier was off, giving one last wink and earning a curse from the newly coiffed Reno as he shut the door. The redhead turned back around, still muttering rebelliously under his breath and tugging uncomfortably at his now-neat ponytail. She was watching him, smiling slightly.

"Hang on just a second," he told her, disappearing into one of the many doors.

Shrugging, Kiyara turned to the large window, resting her fingertips on the frigid panes and wondering again at the beauty of Midgar.

"You really like that, don't you?" came a sudden voice from behind her.

"It's lovely," she replied softly.

A slow smile lit up the reflection of his features in the window. "If you like that, you'll love this." He reached out and took her hand, that same electric jolt running through her veins from where their skin touched again, the chill sending goosebumps through her body. He gave a slight tug on her arm, and she allowed herself to be led through the kitchen.

Kiyara Maiden, you stop that this instant! her mind admonished sternly. I can't help it! a softer, more gentle inner voice protested. "Mental note to self: when out of this whole mess, go see a shrink," Kiyara muttered under her breath. "Schizophrenia is not normal."

Either choosing to ignore or not hearing her comments, Reno halted in front of an ordinary-looking brown door that she had assumed led to a closet. Releasing her hand, he pulled the postern open to reveal a set of steps and gestured to her. Taking the hint, she walked up the stairs to find another door at the top, which she opened. A blast of warm air assailed her, and she stepped out to find that she was on the roof of the building. This particular apartment building had a greenhouse on the roof, as did many other fashionable Midgar homes and edifices. It was entirely closed in by glass windows that were all completely covered in snow, and all kinds of tropical flora covered every nook, cranny, and the floor. A small, winding path made its way through the bright, beautifully sweet-smelling flowers, and there were several lawn chairs spread throughout the greenhouse. The humid air that had blasted her as she walked in was being circulated by a noisy mechanical contraption of some type that was in one corner.

A door clicked shut behind her, and she turned to find Reno standing there.

"It's nice, Reno, but why'd you bring me up here?" she asked in puzzlement.

He opened a glass door that was nearby where she was standing, and she walked through, again, taking the hint. And once again, a blast of air struck her, but this time, it was frigid. She shivered, standing on the newly-shoveled concrete of the roof, crossing her bare arms over her chest. "Okay, the first time we came through a door, I was just curious about why you brought me here. Now I'm curious, cold, and pissed!"

He gave a slight grin. "Look." He pointed outward, and Kiyara turned her attention away from the object of her annoyance--and sucked in a breath of amazement. All of Midgar was spread beneath her feet in its awesome form. Snow

continued to fall gently, slowly collecting on the panoply of vibrant shades of illumination throughout the city that never sleeps. The sound of cars honking the driving far below was muffled by the snow, making the entire experience seem surreal and fairy-like.

She turned to face him after a moment. "Reno, that's incredible!"

"I thought you'd like it," came his satisfied response.

She began picking her way across the frost toward him—and stepped directly in a patch of black ice. Skidding forward, she got the horrible impression that she was going to stumble onto her face on the hard, cold, unforgiving concrete. Suddenly, her fall was arrested, and, looking up in surprise, she found two emerald eyes looking down on her, and slowly became conscious of a pair of arms wrapped around her waist.

The ivory snow was drifting down lazily from the sky, alighting on his shoulders to stand out in sharp contrast against the dark fabric. It fell into his hair and slid down his face in melted, fat droplets, beginning to partially obscure the angry crimson scars on either side of his face. He was watching her with frightening intensity, an unreadable expression on his face, and an undeniable hunger in his eyes.

Reno saw her watching him like a startled chocobo in the headlights of an oncoming car. He knew he should just set her back on her feet and walk away, but he found that he couldn't release her from his grasp, couldn't tear his eyes away from hers. Snowflakes continued to fall, landing upon her upturned face, melting on her bare arms, making a glistening crystalline crown in her hair.

"Jenova...You look like Shiva," he half-whispered in the muffled world that suddenly belonged solely to them.

A small, wry smile quirked into existence on her face. "I should hope not; legend has it the Ice Goddess, protector of the north lands doesn't wear much in the way of clothing."

"What's so bad about that?" he asked. "I should think you'd look nice in next-to-nothing." He touched his lips gently to her neck.

A pair of hands cupped his face and drew his head back away from her slowly. He blinked as it became apparent that the hands belonged to none other than the woman before him, and he readied himself for the stinging slap. A stinging slap that never came, as a thumb gently caressed his waiting cheek instead. Her eyes, overly bright and shining, met his, and that was all the encouragement he needed. He dipped his head swiftly and found her lips.

He drew her in closer and held her as tightly as he dared, continuing the kiss, which, he was gratified to feel, she was returning. Two long, slim fingers ran gently over the scar tissue on either side of his face, the rest of her hands still cupping his chin.

Feeling as if her legs were going to buckle under, both by cause of those damned high heel shoes and the shock of all this, Kiyara began to slowly step backward--thinking of the heat of the greenhouse and how cold she was--bringing Reno with her. Quickly understanding her objective, he swept her up into her arms, and she gave a startled, albeit muffled exclamation, her arms dropping down to tighten around his neck.

He disengaged his mouth for a moment to gasp out, "Kiy...choking..." Walking backward with her, he retreated into the warmth of the greenhouse.

She loosened her death grip on his neck. "That's what you get for surprising me like that!"

"Alright, alright. Remind me to never try to pick you up again." He set her back on her feet none-too-gently, and she found herself grasping at him again to prevent herself from falling.

He smirked down at her for a moment, crimson ponytail hanging over one shoulder. "Just can't let go of me, huh?"

"Shut up," she replied firmly, kissing him again with a fierce suddenness that he gladly returned.

After a moment or two of this, he scooped her up again, and again, she scrabbled at him in a panic. He winced in pain as a sharp fingernail caught him on one ear and tore the skin, drawing a trickle of red blood. But he persisted, and set her onto the lounge chair that he had been eyeing. As he did so, laying her out gently, he watched her face carefully, watching for the telltale "get away from me, pervert!" signs. And to his mild surprise, there were none. She continued to kiss him as he lowered himself over her, her eyes meeting his easily, no emotions visible save an electricity and need that he was sure were mirrored in his own.

Clutching at fistfuls of the fabric of his suit jacket, she continued the jaw-cracking kiss, raising one slim leg in an effort to kick off a painful shoe. Abandoning the effort after discovering that she'd have to lean down to un-strap it, she settled for resting the offending foot, shoe, and leg on his ankle, not noticing that as she did so, the skirt of her dress lifted to a scandalous height. One of Reno's hands began to stray toward the high hemline of the gown.

He was on top of her, kissing passionately. Her skirt was hiked up to the point where very little was left to the imagination, and his hand was inching up from its position resting on her thigh. The tip of Reno's ear was bleeding from where she had accidentally caught it with a fingernail. That was how things looked when the door to the greenhouse from Reno's apartment opened with a loud click. Both heads swung to the side in alarm.

"Reno, you...you...freakin' asshole!" sputtered Elena in indignation, blue eyes flashing angrily.

"..." agreed Rude.

Notes galore: Many apologies for how long it took me to finish this chapter. Many apologies for my bad romance scenes. Many apologies for the total unnecessary-ness of this chapter that was written because I just wanted to write some mushy stuff. And more apologies for the incredibly length of this chapter. I hope to get the next (shorter) chapter out soon. Also, inspiration for the "naked scenes" t-shirt that Reno wears came from my friend Koba, who actually owns a shirt just like that. Oh, and if you want to complain that this chapter incorporates many things that are un-Final Fantasy, such as Christmas? Bugger off.