

Chapter 23: More Like Shallow World

"Would you happen to know why Lockhart is staring at Strife like he just cut off her head and stuffed it into a drainpipe?"- Elena Sader

"So let me get this straight. Reno and Kiyara have been off getting food for the past hour?" asked Reeve, frowning and rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

Exchanging conspirator's glances, Tifa and Red nodded. "Yeah, they said they were going out somewhere because Reno was complaining about the food in the cafeteria here," replied Tifa, making it up as she went along.

Reeve eyed her skeptically. "Reno's a slob. He loves the greasy cafeteria food."

Tifa's eyes widened slightly, and Red stepped in smoothly. "He was saying something about 'all the healthy crap' they were serving today."

The Wutaian man gave a small chuckle. "Sounds like Reno all right." He kneaded his forehead for a moment, hands obscuring his vision, and Red and Tifa took the time to exchange triumphant grins. He looked up at them again, resting his hands on his large desk. "You guys are good liars."

"Damn..." muttered Tifa, Red smiling ruefully beside her.

"How did you know we were lying?" the great beast asked, leaping down onto the carpet of Reeve's office and stretching languidly.

Figure outlined by the nighttime Midgarian panorama showcased in the large window behind him, Reeve bent down and began rummaging through a drawer of the desk. "I read it in Ms. Lockhart's--"

Tifa interrupted him. "Tifa."

--Tifa's body language and voice. She might as well have been carrying a huge blinking neon sign that says 'I'm lying'," he replied, voice muffled by the bulk of the desk.

The martial arts expert blushed slightly. "And how did you know how to read me?"

"Tifa, my dear, don't think you can be in the field of politics for 25 years without being able to come up with fairly accurate guesses on what people are thinking." He emerged in triumph with a granola bar in a bright green wrapper clutched in one hand, closing the desk drawer with a foot.

The woman raised a brunette eyebrow. "You're old enough to have been in politics for 25 years?"

Reeve gave a pleasant chuckle. "Please, no flattery." He grappled with the wrapper of the granola bar.

"Who says I'm flattering?" asked Tifa, smiling.

Reeve looked up at her for a moment, brown eyes meeting hers. "Gods, you were serious? Well, change what I said to 'thank you, I'm very flattered', then."

Red spoke up, settled comfortably onto the thick carpet. "How old are you, Reeve? I can usually guess at the age of humans fairly well, but you're an enigma."

Reeve laughed again, pausing from glaring at the offending covering. "And I'd prefer to remain an enigma, thank you very much. I'm old."

"Are you...27?" hazarded Tifa.

The wrapper was now being attacked with a letter opener. "I wish," he replied.

"32?" guessed Red.

A shake of the head was his response.

"35?" asked Tifa.

Reeve pointed skyward.

"Perpetually 39?" suggested Red, grinning slightly.

Reeve smirked in response. "Yeah, you could say that."

That was when the guesses began to grow silly. "62?" Tifa tucked a stray lock of chocolate brown hair behind one ear.

The battle with the wrapper halted for a moment as Reeve looked at her, appalled. "I'm joking," she hastened to assure him.

"87!" called out Red.

"51!"

"No, Tifa, you're getting mixed up with my age," answered Red, baring teeth in a smile.

The estimates came fast and furious. "A hundred and two!"

"Two hundred and twenty eight!"

"Five hundred!"

"1,581 and a third!"

Reeve gave a cry of triumph as he produced the brown granola bar from the wrapper, interrupting his laughter at their antics. "Actually, it's much much worse than that," he told them, taking a big bite out of the bar. A very interesting horrified expression came onto his face as he removed the bar from his mouth and looked at it in utter disgust. "I fink I b'oke muh jaw," he mumbled, hand to his cheek. He picked up the mutilated wrapper once again, and his face crinkled. "The expiration date was three years ago." He tossed wrapper and food into the trash can, the loud clanging noise reverberating.

"How old are you?" Tifa persisted.

He gave her a quick grin that she was certain made her face flame. "Perseverance, aren't you?"

"I'd suggest answering the question and not trying to change the subject; she's very good at eating away at you until you answer," put in Red.

Reeve sighed. "All right, all right." He leaned forward and whispered as if sharing a great secret. "43."

Tifa's brain happily pounced on the number. There, you see? Much too old for you! He was in politics while you were in diapers, kiddo.

Red's sharp canines curved in a smile. "That's not old; I'm older than you are."

"But you're older than anyone who's not yet a senior citizen, am I correct?"

There was a muffled snort from the floor.

Reeve leaned back in the chair and rested his feet on his desk. "So, now that you two have successfully diverted me from the subject, I'll venture to ask. Where exactly are Reno and Kiyara?"

Tifa looked down at the floor, where Red was resting at her feet and giving a small shrug.

"You mean you don't know?" Reeve asked, looking slightly incredulous.

There was a guilty silence, and the chief executive officer groaned quietly. "Ai yai yai... Hojo is alive, he's got agents on the loose searching for them, and you let them go alone without asking where they were going and when they were coming back?"

Tifa sighed, trying to think of why she had been induced to let them go off. "They're adults, Reeve, not children. I'm sure they can handle themselves."

Reeve frowned, but nodded. "I guess you're right..." His face twisted as he worked at something in his mouth, and stopped when he noticed Tifa looking at him strangely. He gave a slight sheepish grin. "There are pieces of granola stuck in my teeth."

"You're the president of the richest company in the world, and all you have to eat is granola bars?" she questioned.

He laughed. "It's too much work t--" Reeve was cut off by a sudden electronic beeping sound. Holding up a hand and signaling for her to wait a moment while smiling apologetically, he pressed a small button on the desk. "Yes, Oli?"

"The front desk just radioed up that there's a large group of people here to see you, Mr. Kazuma," came the placid voice of his secretary.

"Do you have any particulars about this large group? Say, who's in it?" Reeve replied.

"Well, they say that Mr. Texihera and General Sader are there, sir. There are six people and a..." Her voice turned puzzled. "Lion or something."

Red sat up straight on the floor, face intense and tail twitching nervously.

"They got here quicker than I expected..." Reeve murmured.

"Sir?"

"Send them up to the board room, please, Oli."

"Yes, Mr. Kazuma."

The link closed, and Reeve looked to Red and Tifa. "It'd be quite crowded in here if we tried to squeeze everybody in. Come with me?"

Tifa stood, giving Red a small, reassuring pat on the head. "I'm sure she'll be the same as you remember her, Red."

"I wish I had your confidence," he replied quietly, unusually subdued.

With a sympathetic look in Red's direction, Reeve opened a door and stepped through, the woman and lion-like beast following. The door lead straight into the large conference room that had been inhabited earlier by the executives, who had long since left. Red gave a slight, fond smile as he observed the old man slumbering in a chair. Even with all of the excitement, Bugah still managed to fall asleep.

Closing the door behind them, Reeve glanced at Tifa, looking uncomfortable. "There's something you guys should probably know..."

"What's that, Reeve?" Red asked calmly, disliking the tone of the man's voice.

"Well, along the way, they picked up...well, that is to say, he's with them...They picked up..."

Bugah opened one eye. "Just come out with it, my boy."

The other door to the room opened, and a group of people stepped through. Tifa stared at one man in particular, taking a step back as though she had been physically struck. "Cloud Strife," she finished Reeve's sentence quietly.

A soft growl emanated from beside her, and she looked down to find Red glaring at Cloud, hackles raised.

He looked the same as he always had, blonde hair tufted in gravity defying spikes, Mako eyes glowing weirdly, wearing jeans and a T-shirt that clearly didn't belong to him. His head turned, and those once sparkling, now roiling, pain-filled, sapphire eyes that she had adored for so long met hers, heaping wave after wave of memories over her head.

"I want to join SOLDIER. I'm going to be the best there is, just like Sephiroth."

"Once I get that money, I'm outta here."

"As long as I'm with you... As long as you're by my side... I won't give up even if I'm scared."

"I loved that woman more than life itself, and you can't take her place, no matter how pitifully hard you try. You're nothing to me, Tifa. Absolutely nothing. You've never been anything, and you never will be. I want nothing to do with you."

"Do you expect me to break down into tears and beg for forgiveness?! I won't lower myself to do that! If that's the way that you feel about me, about all of us, get the hell out of my bar and my life, Cloud Strife! Get out!"

Unaware that her face had gone deathly pale and her eyes were shining oddly, Tifa called upon the same reserves of strength that had bolstered her that night and stood tall and proud, staring the man down until he looked away.

There was a strained silence for a moment as all were audience members to the tension between the once best of friends, then Rahilah padded out from behind Rude.

"Nanaki," she murmured, making her way toward him.

"Rahilah," he acknowledged, furiously lashing tail giving away what his stony face didn't.

"Amin maciek roshni dinic?" she asked hesitantly, seating herself barely a foot from him.

"Doria tam nwamaka vareesh seray," he replied, watching her closely and looking slightly sickened by something. "Rashaad mader qan Gi mai?"

"Manto don nabeel, conavec Qureshi."

A different voice broke in on the conversation, this one far reedier and weaker than the two low, gravelly voices. "Orrep Rahilah, ara rion qan Gi shikha Qureshi ardiente," Bugah said, also intently watching the female.

Leaving the three to their conversation, Elena moved to Reeve's side. "Do you have any idea whatsoever what the hell they're saying?" she asked quietly.

"Not the slightest clue," he replied. "It's a language I've never heard before."

"Would you happen to know why Lockhart is staring at Strife like he just cut off her head and stuffed it into a drainpipe?"

He winced. "Lovely imagery, Elena."

She frowned. "On second thought, that is a bit of an ew."

"I realized that Avalanche and Cloud had a falling-out three years ago after beating Sephiroth, but I hadn't realized that it was this bad," he answered.

"So why'd you need us back here so rush rush, anyway?" the blonde asked.

"Ho-ho-ho-jo's resurfaced and killed 1200 of our best soldiers with the help of some Rahilah clones," said Reeve, using what had been Hojo's most popular nickname in the scientist's days with Shinra.

Elena stared. "Say what?"

"Yeah, I figured it might be nice to have my two closest advisers here," he responded with a trace of sarcasm in his voice.

Elena shook her head at his caustic tone. "Y'know, Reeve, you cou-"

Tifa stepped backward into a chair directly between them just then, interrupting their conversation. She sat with her head pillowed in her arms, unmoving, almost looking to be asleep. Get up, Lockhart! Be strong! Don't give that bastard the pleasure of seeing you like this! came a bold inner voice. "Go to hell," she murmured distinctly, causing both Reeve and Elena to look down at her in bewilderment.

Taking his attention away from the motionless woman, Reeve eyed the group clustered just inside the ornate doorway of the conference room. Rude and Faye were standing apart from each other with a fair amount of distance separating them (Reeve frowned; what was that about?); Cid Highwind, standing off to one side of them, looked like he desperately wanted a cigarette. Behind him was Cloud Strife, scuffing his boots on the floor repeatedly, glancing everywhere but the distraught Tifa. Beside Cid stood an unfamiliar man with brown hair and right arm in a sling.

"Who's that?" Reeve asked, nodding to the stranger.

"That? That's Azrael Maiden, your helicopter pilot. We weren't quite sure where to send him to, and he wasn't either, so he came along."

Reeve's tanned face paled almost imperceptibly. "Azrael what?"

"Maiden," she answered, puzzled by his reaction. "Everything all right, Reeve?"

He nodded, still looking shaken. "Yes."

"No, it's not."

"Yes, it is, Elena."

"Your face says something is really wrong, Reeve."

"My private life is no longer any concern of yours," he growled, voice cold.

He berated himself as she took a step back, blue eyes filled with pain. Dammit, now you've gone and done it. "Elena, I'm sorry. I didn't mean-"

"It's okay. I deserved it. You were right. I was being nosy; it's none of my business."

Sitting between the two standing people, Tifa listened to their conversation with a puzzled look on her hidden face, subconsciously thanking the argument for momentarily removing her from her own troubles. What happened between these two?

The blonde woman frowned exaggeratedly to hide the pain she still felt, eyes roving the room. "Where the hell's Reno?"

Reeve looked stricken, almost as if his cutting words had been directed at him instead of at the ex-Turk. "Elena-"

"Where is he?"

Why won't she let me apologize? "Don't know; he seems to have disappeared."

Elena scowled. "Again?"

"I think he's planning on coming back this time, though," he offered.

"Great!" she replied, tone heavily laden with sarcasm. "Just spiffy!"

"H-" he began.

"Don't tell me this woman who's so fond of our pal Ho-ho went with him."

"Fine; Kiyara didn't go with him."

She watched him suspiciously. "Why do I get the feeling you're patronizing me?"

"Maybe because I am?" he offered, rubbing his tired face and considering sending Emmanuel out to find the most caffeine-laden, blackest coffee in the city. He moved his hands to find Elena looking at him in the way that a group of 6th century

monks might look at Dennis Rodman.

"You let Reno go off alone with a woman who is being hunted by one of the vilest, most twisted madmen in the history of the Planet and who is the only one holding supremely important information about his activities?!"

"I was asleep!" he defended himself, taking a step back from the fuming woman. "Besides, they probably just went off to get food or something."

"Reno. Beautiful woman. Alone together."

Another voice suddenly joined the conversation. "I don't mean to butt in, but Reno and Kiyara can't stand each other," Tifa said quietly, raising her face to look up at them.

There was a snort, and Reeve looked over to find that Rude had silently made his way over to stand beside him. "Reno dislike a beautiful woman?" Rude pointed out skeptically in that deep baritone.

Reeve gave a groan, dropping into a chair beside Tifa and resting his head on the table with a small thunk. "Well, where the hell are they, then?" he asked, voice muffled by the wood.

"I'll bet you anything they're at his apartment," Elena replied, beginning to pull her arms into the sleeves of the coat that she had been holding. She stopped what she was doing in surprise to watch Reeve for a moment. His shoulders and back had suddenly stiffened, jaw set as well. Her Turk training, combined with her instincts, told her that this news seriously pissed him off, and not at just anyone in general, but at Reno. She exchanged a look with Rude, who shrugged, signaling that he had seen it and didn't understand it either.

But then Reeve's body sagged, going back to that familiar air of exhausted calm, leaving Elena wondering if she had seen what she thought she had. Beside her, Rude was also watching their boss carefully, and Lockheart was frowning as she stared at Reeve as well. "Will you two-" the dark-haired man began.

The woman pulled her coat the rest of the way on. "Already on it," she replied, heading for the door. "C'mon, Rude, let's go collect the man-whore." She grabbed her tall former partner's arm and towed him along behind her. Rude looked fast to Faye, but her eyes were directed squarely at the floor. Rude allowed Elena to drag him out, gaze not erring from his unusually somber wife.

Reeve raised his head to look at the others in the room, all of whom besides Bugah, Rahilah, and Red were watching him. "The best idea would be to wait for the four of them to come back before starting to combine theories," he said. "Until then, free run of the Gainsborough building and the hospitality of Shinra Electric Company are yours." He put his head back down, resolving to definitely get Emmanuel to find that coffee.

"Sir?" came an unfamiliar voice, and Reeve angled his head to one side slightly to find that the helicopter pilot was standing at his side. Their eyes met, and for a moment Reeve felt a chill race up and down his spine as he was certain he saw a flash of recognition in that tanned face. He knows.

"Sir?" Azrael asked again, watching Reeve cautiously.

"Yes?" Reeve replied, feeling his heart thud painfully against his chest with the familiarity of those chestnut eyes.

"Where'd you like me to go?"

The Wutaian man spotted the familiar insignia on the man's jacket. "You're in the air force?" Leviathan, Azrael, what happened to your face? A wicked, fresh-looking scar from one eyebrow across his nose to the jawbone on the other side of his face glared a livid crimson color.

Azrael began to snap his right arm into a salute, then gave a groan of pain and lowered the arm back into his sling. "Yes sir."

"Are you fit to fly?" Say no, Reeve pleaded silently.

"Yes sir!"

"He's a liar," Cid called out.

Reeve gave a wry grin. I could have told you that. He looked back to Maiden. "You're certain you can fly?"

The pilot nodded.

Dammit... You can't protect him, Kazuma. He's not a little kid anymore. "Then get yourself down to your base. We may yet have another use for you."

"We goin' to war, sir?" he drawled.

"Possibly," Reeve answered guardedly.

A ferocious grin appeared on the sun-browed face. "Aye, sir!" He saluted slightly clumsily with his left hand and turned on his heel to walk out the door after a quick exchange of words with Cid.

"Maiden!" Reeve called after him, standing swiftly.

The other man halted, slowly turning around to face him again. "Sir?"

"We'll have to talk sometime. You can tell me about your experiences, your life..... your mother."

Eyes hard, Azrael replied, "My mother's dead, sir." He slammed the door, leaving Reeve to drop back into his chair and let his head collide with the table again while the others in the room stared. Fuck the coffee; Emmanuel needs to bring me a bottle of sleeping pills. Or some rat poison. Or arsenic. Yeah, that'd be nice. Arsenic.

He raised his head after a moment, expression bleak. "Everything and everyone in this building is at your disposal; I'll call you back here when they get back. Now, if you'll excuse me." Standing, he brushed past Cid and Cloud, toward the door.

"Sorry to bother you, but where's the—" Cloud began.

"Third floor," Reeve replied brusquely, ducking out the door.

"...Cafeteria. Thanks," the blond man finished lamely. Looking uncomfortably from Tifa's shoes--seemingly unable to face her--to the door, he blurted something about getting food and bolted out.

As soon as Cloud's form disappeared, Tifa rushed past Faye quickly, head down. "Excuse me." The door closed behind her and the sound of running feet died away down the corridor. Cid wasn't too far behind her, muttering that he didn't give a damn about having given up; he was going to go smoke a cigarette.

Faye silently ducked out the door behind him without a word, still trapped in whatever thoughts were preoccupying her.

"Nalor Rahilah?" Bugah asked.

"Ugando. Bolesimo ainwo."

Bugah looked around the room. "Ho ho, we've managed to clear the area. I didn't think we were that boring."

"We're definitely that boring," Red replied, sounding faintly amused.

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Tifa flew through the hallways, nearly bowling over a startled secretary burdened with stacks of papers. She blindly followed the pathways and stairs that she found until finally reaching a final door. With nowhere else to go, the hallway seeming to end here, she opened it and ducked through. She found herself to be on a small balcony overlooking the busy street, a heavy white railing separating the cement floor from empty air. She walked to the edge carefully and sagged gratefully against the rail.

Alone, with only the faint sounds of traffic and people far below to interrupt her solitude, Tifa stared woodenly down on all those happy, laughing people below with jealousy. I still love him. After all this time. After what he said to me. After what he did to me. I still love him. "Dammit!" she called out suddenly, slamming a hand down on the railing.

The brief violent moment past, her head sank back into her arms on the rail again. You're so pathetic, a terrible, vicious voice told her. So weak. You're like an eager puppy that will run back to its master no matter how many times it's kicked. You just wait and see; you'll be apologizing for throwing him out and misunderstanding him by the time this thing is through.

"No, I won't," she protested softly with no real vehemence.

Deny it all you want, but that's all it is, sister. Denial. You want him to suddenly sweep you off your feet and take care of you. You won't even mention three years ago, won't expect an apology or explanation from him. You'll pretend it ever happened, you'll fly to him and weep in his arms.

She shoved the voice away, but it continued relentlessly. But you know what, Tifa? He knows all this too. Why else do you think he called you pathetic; why else would he not have deigned to look you in the eye today? He knows you're an inferior being and that you'll be there no matter what. So he'll continue to treat you like this forever, because he knows that you'll still always be there when he wants you. Men never like doormats, Tifa. You're a pushover. He hates you; they all hate you. Even your so-called friends are only your friends because you'll do whatever they ask of you. No one cares for you; you're weak and y—

"Tifa?" The male voice echoed suddenly in the blackness that she saw.

The voice re-doubled its efforts. You don't deserve to live, you creature, you thing! Why—

A hand gently but insistently shook her shoulder. "Tifa?"

Her head shot up, eyes wide, to find Reeve Kazuma looking down at her in concern.

A shameful flush came to her cheeks. "Reeve! I didn't know you were there!"

"Well, you seemed preoccupied, and I was going to leave you alone, but then something looked so...wrong that I..." He shifted uncomfortably. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have intruded."

"No, no, it's all right," etiquette forced her to respond. There was an awkward silence between the two for a few seconds, both looking at each other and quickly glancing away when meeting the other's eyes.

Tifa spoke to break the unnatural quiet. "What's going to happen now?"

"Hmm?"

"With the whole Crater situation," she clarified.

"I'm not fully sure yet. The leaders of Junon, Wutai, Costa del Sol, Fort Condor, Icicle Inn, Midgar, New Mideel, Gongaga, and Corel are already on their ways here, and of course Rocket Town and Cosmo Canyon are already represented." He flashed a quick grin, more grim than mirthful. "This is the whole damn world's problem, not just ours."

"So it's going to be a large conference?" Tifa asked, mentally pushing her own personal troubles to the back of her mind and locking them up securely.

"Pretty much. We'll go over everything that's happened, especially the current situation in Rocket Town. I'm going to try to get them all to donate troops and resources, which is definitely going to be tricky. Leaders of city-states are renowned tightwads."

"Well, at least Corel, Wutai, Cosmo Canyon, and Rocket Town are behind you," the brunette offered.

He smiled. "I know. I'm hoping that others will follow their lead."

"So there's the conference. What's next after that?"

"My thought is that we send in a smaller scouting party to the Crater first to try to get more information on what's going on, and to figure out the best tactics and where the best places for troop deployment are."

She ran a thoughtful hand through long strands of brown hair. "I'll bet Red, Cid, and the rest of us would be willing to be that small party."

He looked surprised at the idea. "No, I couldn't ask you guys to do that. Not after what you went through three years ago to save us all."

"Why not? It's the perfect plan. We've been inside the Crater before, we've had dealings with Hojo before—hell, we've killed Hojo before—and we're all experienced fighters," she reasoned.

Reeve gave a quiet sigh. "I'll think about it and ask the others what they think."

A smile lit up her face. "Thank you."

His face held a puzzled expression. "You're thanking me for offering to send you to a place where you'll all be in grave danger?"

"It's just that... I can't just sit by and watch all this happen, and I'm sure everyone else feels the same. It just doesn't feel right not being in the middle of everything. I don't know how much good we're doing just sitting around this building, no matter how lovely and nice it is."

He opened his mouth to make reply, but at that precise instant, a phone's shrill ringing could be heard. Reeve produced a tiny cell phone from a pocket, mouthing 'sorry' to Tifa. She nodded and smiled in what she thought to be an understanding way and went back to staring down at the bright headlights below.

"Hello?" Reeve asked cautiously.

"Mr. President, this is Oli," came his secretary's nasal tone. "You said for me to call you if there was any contact from Mr. Lynley, and I was going to, but then you had those visitors in your office and then the boardroom and it didn't really seem prudent to interrupt."

He sighed inwardly, letting the talkative woman's tongue run its course. "And?"

"Well, Mr. Lynley called a little while ago, sir. He asked if the banquet was still on for tonight, an—"

He cut her off. "The banquet? As in the formal banquet for the stockholders of the company?"

"Yes, sir."

"Is it on for tonight?"

"Yes, Mr. Kazuma."

"I thought I told you to reschedule that!"

"You did, sir, but it was too late! Most of the dignitaries are already here!"

He leaned backward on the railing, feeling the onset of a massive headache. "All right. Thank you, Oli."

"But don't you want to hear what he sa—"

"Goodbye, Oli." He turned off the phone with a vicious click, staring at it for a moment before calmly tossing it over the rail and to its doom.

Tifa stared at him. "Bad news?"

"I lose more phones that way..." he muttered to himself, then answered Tifa with, "The worst. There's a ball for our stockholders tonight that my secretary was supposed to reschedule yet didn't." He rested his forehead on the cool railing, wishing for some aspirin. "Gods, this day just keeps getting better and better."

She smiled quietly. "I don't see what's so bad about this; it's just a bunch of people dressing up and talking nice, right?"

He gave a wry snort. "It's supposed to work out that way."

"Doesn't?"

"Take a walk with me?" he invited. "I think I'm going to see if I find someone with access to the intercom to call everyone back to the boardroom soon. I'll answer your question along the way."

"Sure," she replied, falling into step beside him through the balcony door and back into the hallways, feeling much more in control of herself than she had been fifteen minutes before.

He began to speak, attention seemingly completely on her. "In response to your question, never. Invariably, some ancient high Junon official gets completely drunk off his ass and starts spouting important government secrets and we have to send Elena off with him to find black coffee. Then some bored young hotheads will get into a loud, intoxicated argument which I have to regulate if they're the sons of someone important. After that, either a pretty secretary and an old rich man or a handsome Shinra employee and someone's wife will end up in a closet together—Reno's a frequent offender on that one. I

always end up having to run all over creation, keep track of my more volatile employees and guests, be a peacemaker, and listen to wonderfully interesting small talk about a New Mideelian senator's golf game."

She was laughing by the end, the sound rich and full and happy. A male intern passing with folders stacked in his arms looked after her with interest.

Brown eyes twinkling in amusement, Reeve smiled at her. "Sounds silly, doesn't it? Unfortunately, it's not quite so funny when you're actually there."

Waves rippled through the thick curtains of hair as she shook her head. "It still doesn't seem too terrible."

"You'd have to see it to believe it." The quiet stretched for a moment, then he said, "Which you're cordially invited to do."

A warm feeling began to grow and spread to her cheeks, but she shook her head at herself. Tifa Lockhart, you're here to help save the world, not dance around. "I'd love to, but I can't really accept."

"Why not?"

"I don't think I can exactly show up like this," she replied, trying to laugh it off.

He halted and eyed her critically from head to toe, and she blushed furiously standing beside him. "I think I have something that should fit you." At her stunned look, he added, "Don't worry, it's not mine. I'm no Cloud."

A slow smile began to grow across her face. After appearing to struggle against it for a moment, she burst into laughter. "Cloud in drag..." she chuckled. "That was one of the damn funniest things I ever saw in my life!"

Reeve began to grin. "I'm very sorry I missed it, from the way that you and Aeris portrayed it."

"That horrible purple dress...and blond braided wig...and the Don picked him!"

He frowned. "Wait a minute. Was he wearing a purple dress that looked like a sack and an off-center tiara in his hair?"

She nodded, tears of laughter forming in her eyes.

He threw back his head and laughed heartily. "I saw him! I was controlling Cait in Wall Market at that time and I saw him pass! I didn't realize...Damn, was he an ugly woman!"

Tifa leaned on him for support, weak with giggles. "I had to fight so hard to keep a straight face when he came in like that and told me he was there to rescue me!" She suddenly froze, the merriment ceasing instantly, the smile cracking into tiny pieces.

"Tifa?" Reeve asked cautiously.

"I was just thinking...He told me he was there to rescue me... He was there to rescue me like he'd always promised he would..." she tried to explain brokenly.

And that voice, that honest seductive voice, was suddenly back in full force. Ha, you can't even laugh at him without missing him! Trust me, Lockhart, you're going to go to him and then become heartbroken when he leaves you again because he doesn't love you. He's in love with a ghost, an idea, with a memory that he can never have.

"No," she murmured, shaking her head, realizing she sounded like a petulant child and honestly not caring.

Cloud Strife loves Aeris Gainsborough, you idiot. He hates you. Just like everyone else. Oh, suure, they pretend to listen to you, but the minute you turn your back they're mocking you. They're talking about how annoying you are. How much of a goody-goody you are.

"Stop it," she whispered quietly, dismayed to find that the words were striking home. But she couldn't keep her dark thoughts silent.

You little bitch. Stop denying it. You know this is the truth; you just won't face it. Be strong, like you think you are. Face the truth right in the eyes and stare it down. They. Hate. You. Cloud, Barret, Cid, Red, Yuffie, Vincent, even Reevey-boy there, all of them. They despise you.

She was horrified to feel a telltale wetness trickling down her cheeks. Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words will never hurt me.

Oh, don't give me that. Words may not hurt you physically, but they'll easily kill your spirit.

Tifa shook her head violently, and the thoughts were suddenly gone from their place at her total attention, gone to rest somewhere in the back of her mind. The fiercely private woman hung her head in embarrassment, ashamed at having such a break down in front of someone else. But no matter what she did, she couldn't seem to stop the flow of salty tears from falling. She kept her head down, using her long hair to shield her face.

She stood there for a long moment before slowly, quiveringly lifting her face. Upon meeting the concerned, calm, well-wishing bronze gaze, she took a minute step forward, own eyes silently asking permission. He held up an old-fashioned red handkerchief in response, and she gave a watery smile and folded into him, taking the handkerchief from the offering hand and holding it over her face. Reeve hesitated, but feeling the body clinging to his neck shake with a noiseless plaintive sob, he wrapped his arms around her upper back and held her tightly. His hand strayed--seemingly of its own accord--and tenderly stroked the glossy head while she buried her face in his shoulder and finally let go and cried. She let him rock her back and forth on her feet gently.

Cloud Strife chose just that moment to turn the corner, a half-eaten hotdog clutched in one hand testament to his success in the cafeteria. Somehow, at first, he managed to completely miss Tifa, only noticing Reeve, and he continued walking toward the pair. "Hey Reeve, I'm kinda lost an—" He halted dead in his tracks. Tifa had moved and her brimming eyes were staring at him over Reeve's shoulder.

Here's your chance, little Tifa. Run to him. Do it quickly. Apologize for this and for throwing him out. You know you want to do it. You know you want to be your normal, pushover self. Go on, little girl. Make my day.

Filled with a sudden enraged converse determination, Tifa proudly raised her head and wiped away the last vestiges of tears. Then she spoke, her voice glacially composed and smooth. "I think I'll accept that invitation now, Reeve."

Notes-Hehehe, I like these kind of endings. And I'm so sorry for how long this took. This chapter is actually a lot longer than these 17 pages; I finally made the decision to cut it in half and post the first half now. Second half is forthcoming sooner than the really horrible wait you've had to endure. Thanks for waiting and making me post; you guys are the greatest. :D

P.S.-Happy birthday, darkeOne. ;)