

Chapter 24: Smiles, Glares, and Confusion

"Looks like somebody's gonna be scrounging through Faye's closet at the last minute again."-Reno Lynley

There was dead silence on the rooftop.

"Hey guys," greeted Reno. "Nice to see you, please come again soon." There was quiet at this statement, Elena's face showing a pent-up fury, while Rude just looked resigned. "You're kinda interrupting something. Wanna come back later?"

He dipped his head back down to Kiyara, who hissed, "Get. Off."

"Hmm, what was th—"

"Reno." The voice held a warning, and he did as she ordered and rolled off of the chair to one side. The blonde woman immediately sat up, face very pink, and quickly pulled the skirt of her dress back down.

"I cannot believe you!" exploded Elena at Reno, who was crouching on the opposite side of Kiyara.

He stood easily, stretching casually. "What can't you believe?"

"We flew and sailed across continents. We got shot at. We got caught up in a friggin' war. We got nearly killed several times. And you know why?" With every seething word, she was coming one step closer

"No, but I suppose you're going to enlighten me."

She was within striking distance now. "Because you're our friend. Because we care about you, you self-centered asshole." Each word was punctuated with a finger jab to his chest.

"Well, if you love me so damn much, why aren't ya more happy to see me?" the redhead questioned impudently.

"Because what are you doing when we finally catch up to you?" Elena snarled.

"Uhh, is that rhetorical or am I supposed t—"

"You're trying to get a woman into bed without a care in the world!"

"C'mon, 'Lena, would I be Reno if I wasn't tryin' to do that?"

She appeared to be speechless with fury. "You...you...you...bastard!" she exclaimed, suddenly leaping at him and—to his surprise—hugging him tightly.

"Oof!" He hesitated, then gingerly patted her on the back.

Her voice was muffled by his chest. "We were worried about you!" She pounded a fist against his shoulder.

Reno's eyes met Kiyara's over the top of Elena's head. She had a strangely melancholy expression on her face and he frowned at her, Elena's face still hidden in his shirt, as his eyes asked what the hell was the matter now. She shook her head and looked away coolly.

"Reno?" Elena's voice asked after another moment.

"What?" he asked crabbily.

"Why're you all dressed up?"

"Reeve's frickin' stupid ball thing."

She leaned back then hit her head on his breastbone. He yelped in pain. "Dammit, forgot about that..."

He snickered. "Looks like somebody's gonna be scrounging through Faye's closet at the last minute again."

"Ahem," came the soft but authoritative throat-clearing. Reno and Elena turned to find Rude shaking his head at them. "You two lovebirds finished?"

"I'm done with her," Reno returned, releasing the diminutive woman and giving her a slap on the rear-end to boot. She spun, glaring menacingly for a moment, then smiled ruefully.

"You're lucky I don't kick your ass right here and now," she threatened, and he waved her off with a rude noise.

Rude ducked out the door, a laughing Elena following. Reno mock-courteously extended an arm to the waiting Kiyara, but she gave him a dirty look and stormed off.

He stared after her retreating figure. "What? I know I didn't say something wrong this time! Whaaaaat?"

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Cloud stared in genuine shock at the man and woman before him, Tifa's words echoing through his brain. Is there something going on between the two of them?! Reeve looked superhuman-ly calm and benevolent; so calm that Cloud was willing to bet it was an excellent acting job designed to cover up extreme nervousness. But he showed no sign of releasing Tifa. Tifa, on the other hand, was staring straight at Cloud regally, as though he were a bug to be stepped on and ground into that disgusting gooey paste.

"Cloud." She bobbed her head in acknowledgment of him.

He barely managed to force her name out through a suddenly dry mouth. "Tifa."

She gave a cold, frosty smile. "If you'll excuse us..." She stepped back from Reeve and took his arm in the manner of a debutante being escorted to her first public appearance. Reeve caught on immediately, and they walked down the hall together. As Cloud's eyes burned into their backs, Tifa said something and they both laughed. Upon reaching the intersection of that corridor with two more hallways—still in Cloud's view—they parted, Tifa saying something indistinguishable and kissing Reeve on the cheek, and each went down a separate branch to disappear.

Cloud staggered backward into the elevator which was conveniently just behind him and had opened just a moment before. He closed his eyes, but the vision of Tifa engulfed in Reeve's arms played over and over again like a bad, broken movie on the backs of his eyelids. This is what you get for treating her like that, dumb ass.

"Maybe if I told her the truth about what happened, why I did what I did?" he quietly asked his sagging reflection in the shiny metal as the elevator slowly descended.

"No."

He spun to find Cid Highwind standing beside him, arms crossed, face more serious and more angry than Cloud had ever seen it. He held up a hand to forestall comment. "Lemme guess: 'Cid! I didn't see you there!' "

Cloud gave a tiny nod.

"And no, you are not gonna go to Tifa with some lame-assed 'truth' about what you did three years ago. 'Cause whatever you say ain't gonna help. You left." His voice become slowly more menacing and hard. "You walked out on her. On all of us. And maybe that would've been forgivable. It's what you said and did before you left that's not fucking forgivable, Strife. You broke her heart. You scarred her for years. You weren't there to deal with the aftermath of your little tantrum. You don't know how bad you crushed her, how much it slowly ate away at her spirit. You weren't the only one who suffered when Aeris died; you can't forget that! So don't you dare try to 'tell Tifa' any 'truth'. You'll wind up hurtin' her worse than ever." The steel doors slid open again as the elevator came to a slow halt.

Cid paused a moment before stepping out, icy sapphire eyes boring into bright aquamarine. "An' don't think that I'd be the only one comin' for your blood if you so much as breathe wrong around her."

Cloud gave a harsh, grating chuckle. "You caught me in a moment of weakness, old man. I'm not going anywhere near your precious Tifa. I'm here for one reason, and one reason only."

Cid leaned on one of the doors, preventing it from shutting. "And what's that?"

Cloud bent forward, carnivorous grin growing. "Me."

The pilot withdrew from the elevator, shaking his head in disgust as the doors closed. But the thick metal did not shield his final comment, nor the mirthless laugh that accompanied it. "Once a heartless bastard, always a heartless bastard."

Cloud rested his weight on the cool, silver railing. It looks like you've managed to do it again, Strife. Why doesn't what I want to say ever come out of my mouth?

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"Nawara a ti, Nanaki?" asked Rahilah, stretching her lithe body onto the ground comfortably.

She got no answer from Red, who was tensely pacing the floor.

"Nawara a ti, Nanaki?" she tried again.

Still quiet.

"Nawara a ti?" she pressed.

In a rotten mood, Red snapped, "For Ramuh's sake, speak the standard tongue! It's only courtesy!"

Silence swayed in the air between them, then Bugah spoke. "I'm feeling a mite peckish; I think I'm going to find this cafeteria that Mr. Kazuma speaks of. I'll leave you two to catch up!"

Before Red could say a word, beg him to stay, the little old man had slipped out the door. The tawny beast gave a soft, frustrated growl and went back to nervously prowling. She watched him from the floor, golden brown-flecked eyes calmly following his every move.

Unable to take the silent watchfulness any longer, Red whirled on her and exclaimed, "What do you want from me?!"

She breathed a quiet sigh, demeanor full of sorrow. "Nanaki..." The word was part reproach and part pain.

He stopped his movement and sat in place several feet from her, scent reading to Rahilah of confusion, anger, and something else that it was impossible to put one's finger on.

"How could you ever think that I'm here because I want something? I'm here because I've thought you dead since the attack of the Gi. When I heard you were alive, I had to find you!" Those beautiful eyes beamed into his own single orb.

"And why is that?" he asked coldly.

"Nanaki!" she reprimanded again, voice full of distress.

"Why. Is. That," Red gritted, voice low and gravelly.

She climbed to her feet, her turn to pace agitatedly. "Don't you remember?" He was still and silent. "Nanaki. You cannot forget the kereshi."

"I know. Would that I could." At her pained exclamation, he went on. "But I can go one better. I can break it."

Rahilah staggered backward as though a giant hand had given her a powerful shove. "You...You cannot mean it!" she whispered, face staring with shocked agony.

He nearly surrendered to the excruciating heartbreak evident in her expression—and in his heart. But he remembered the roars of his mother as she was killed defending him from the ruthless Gi warriors. He remembered the dying screams of his brothers and sisters. And he could never forget the tears of Seto, turned to stone trying in vain to protect the people and town that he loved. Nanaki's heart hardened against the female before him. " 'Ara non belen.' " He touched his chin and the tip of his tail to the ground in the time-honored way, then stalked across the floor, fiery paws sinking into the plush carpet with every step.

She watched him for only a moment before giving chase, walking beside him out the door and into the corridor. "Nanaki, you have to give me a chance to explain!"

Red shook his head and began to pad along briskly in an attempt to lose her.

"Nanaki...Nanaki...dammit, stop, Nanaki!" Each utterance of his name was punctuated by closing her teeth over his tail or mane, but he shook her off. Finally with this last outburst, she had flung herself into his path and stood there, blocking his way, glaring as if daring him to try to brush past her this time. "If you're such a wise elder and you know all of our ancient sayings, try this one on for size: 'narim ajab pokei anahado.' "

" 'Innocent until proven guilty...' " he murmured softly. But he retorted with, " 'Those caught in the act have not the right to speak of innocence.' "

" 'While those who listen not and were not near the act do not have the right to pass judgment,' " she finished the quote.

" 'Speak not if you know not what you say,' "

" 'Do not build shrines to your own intellect. Inevitably, they will crumble.' "

" 'Love is not always for eternity.' "

" 'Do not presume to know a person unless you have walked for two moons in their moccasins,' " Rahilah replied, voice serene but face intent with thought.

" 'Do not misuse the ancient sayings for the wrong purposes; it will end in sorrow.' "

"I love you."

"That's not a revered saying."

"Yes it is."

"You know that's not what I mean."

She gave a small smile. "I know. But it's the truth."

He stared at her for a long moment, then sighed. "All right. Come back inside. I'll give you five minutes to talk."

The smile grew wider. "Abahi daan."

"Don't thank me; by the laws both partners are due the opportunity to speak when dissolving the kereshi." The look on her face as she slunk back into the boardroom made him almost wish he hadn't said it.

But he sat on the floor again, mind resolute, and motioned for her to begin.

Settling herself into a chair, she curled up and folded into it in the familiar way that she always had, sending a pang through his heart. "I was taken by Hojo that day that I wen--"

The boardroom door suddenly opened and a pale Tifa Lockhart ducked inside, flinging the heavy oaken thing shut behind her. She gave a sigh of relief and sagged against the door, closing her eyes.

"Ahem," Rahilah coughed politely.

One wine-colored eye opened a crack and took in the situation swiftly, whereupon both eyes opened wide and she spoke. "I'm sorry, I'm interrupting something. I'll just go find Cid." As she spoke her hand was already beginning to turn the doorknob.

"Thank you, that's very kind of y--" began Rahilah.

"No, Tifa, you can stay. It's alright," Red broke in. "Isn't it, Rahilah?" He knew that the female would never be discourteous enough to say no.

She hesitated, then answered, "Of course it's all right." But he could feel the heat of her glare burning into the back of his head.

"Thanks," Tifa said, apparently unaware of the discord and dropping into a chair. "Pretend I'm not here."

"Go on, Rahilah," Red said.

Throwing a suspicious glance at Tifa, Rahilah began again. "The day that I disappeared while on the hunt years ago, it was because I had been captured by a very young Daei Hojo, who had never seen anything like me before. He had just been hired, fresh out of school, by Professor Gast, and was eager to impress, taking the initiative, even then, to capture his

precious specimen. After some time with him--which I'm not going to go into--" Here Red noticed the tiniest of shudders run through her, and a small feeling of remorse flashed through him. "--he decided that it was time for me to be tested."

"Tested on what?" Red asked skeptically.

"He wanted to test if all of the sick, twisted things he had done to my head had given him my loyalty the way they were meant to. He wanted to give me a test drive, like a car," replied Rahilah, a slight growling deep in her throat.

Subdued, Red nodded to her to continue. The door opened and closed quietly, but Rahilah went on after seeing that it was only Bugah, returning to sit beside Tifa.

"The test was, of course, to lead the Gi tribe--whose anger with Cosmo Canyon had been stirred up by Shinra--against Cosmo Canyon."

Tifa raised her head and met Rahilah's gaze just over the rim of the tabletop. "I'm sorry, I know I'm not here, but I'm wondering. What would make it worth Shinra's while to go through the effort of pissing off an entire tribe?"

"Power."

"Knowledge."

"Peace."

All three responses came at once, the first from Rahilah, second from Red, and third Bugah.

Red nodded courteously to Bugah, as did Rahilah, and the old man elaborated. "It was really killing two birds with one stone. Think about it, Ms. Lockhart. Think of that conversation about philosophy that you all had on board the Highwind years ago."

At her questioning look, he added, "Nanaki told me about it. What did you decide were Shinra's greatest fears?"

"Knowledge and power for the masses..." she answered, lips curving into a smile as she recalled that heated discussion on the Highwind's bridge.

"And what are the founding premises of Cosmo Canyon?" he prompted further.

Realization struck her. "Oh! Knowledge and peace!"

"The last thing that Shinra wanted was peace. The war cemented their power to 'protect' the people," said Bugah.

"Knowledge is power," put in a quiet, motionless Rahilah.

"And Shinra was greatly threatened by the scholarly power of Cosmo Canyon," added Red.

Tifa hid a smile at the way that the two finish each other's sentences. "Sorry for making you go off on a philosophical digression."

Red and Rahilah spoke at the same time.

"Philosophical digressions are always welcome."

"There's nothing wrong with a good philosophical digression."

They glanced at each other, then quickly looked away.

Bugah quietly broke the awkward silence. "Will you go on, Mokhari?"

A slight smile bared the female's imposing canines. "Mmm...Mokhari. Now that's a name I haven't heard in a long, long time." She paused for a moment, then continued. "You must understand this: I never would have lead the raid if I had known people would die. I was promised that it was merely a task to frighten the people. And..." Her increasingly agitated voice died away.

"And?" Tifa finally asked, giving up any pretense of not listening.

"He promised me that my family would not be harmed if I cooperated. And swore to brutally torture and kill them if I didn't." Her eyes steadily held Red's, seeming to hypnotize him. "I didn't find out until it was much too late that the real purpose was to teach the Cosmii a lesson. Oh, sure, I lead the way through the lower caves, but once we got inside... everything went berserk. No matter what I did, I couldn't stop the Gi. I ordered, howled, cried, pleaded, bit, scratched, even killed. But they wouldn't stop! They wouldn't stop..."

And before Red appeared that hellish image that had haunted his dreams for decades.

Fire.

Fire everywhere.

Roaring, seductive, orange-red-yellow flames dancing merrily and licking at homes, books, household items, people. Screams and agonized cries reverberating from every corner of the small village, angry howls and clashing of weapons ringing across the smoke-filled air. He stands before the ruins of his own home, shocked, stupefied, watching those hungry, aching tongues of fire consume it. And out from behind this towering inferno reminiscent of the underworld, home of the evil one himself, steps a familiar, lone figure.

Rahilah.

She halts and glances his way for just a moment without seeming to see him, looking as though a plume of the roiling smoke has come to the Planet and arranged itself in graceful muscles and sinew. Gray coat glistening with sweat, yellow eyes glinting with a strange inner conflagration, and blue tail-fire shining brightly in the darkness taking up his entire world, she looks just as he remembers her.

He takes a hesitant step forward, then another, uncertain if it is just a phantasm playing tricks on his weary, hurting mind. And he stops after just those two short steps. There is blood coating her muzzle and claws. It isn't the purple blood of the unnatural Gi. It is the deep red of a human.

Suddenly, her head snaps around and she takes off in a flash, running in the way that only the most fit of his people once could. And before his horrified eyes, she leaps and knocks down a fleeing Cosmii woman. A thin, agonized yell drifts over the wind to his ears as the powerful jaws clamp down around her neck and shake.

A large, heavily tattooed and bedecked Gi warrior strides up behind her, and he starts to shout a warning, despite what he has just seen. But Rahilah whirls and shouts a command at the warrior in the guttural harsh language of the Gi, and he salutes while running off. She turns back to the woman at her feet and gives her a disdainful nudge with her nose, as if making certain she is dead.

"Mokhari!" he screams, not wanting to believe that he is seeing this.

But she turns and sprints the opposite way without giving any indication of having heard him, leaving Red to stand alone in the devastation around him.

Rahilah continued after a moment, shaking her head as if to clear it, seeming not to have noticed Red's transgression.

"So I did my best to help. I killed a number of Gi tribe members when they were alone and isolated, and I also pretended to take down several Cosmii and whispered to them to play dead until the Gi had gone."

The horrid image of Rahilah hunting the woman played through his mind with frightening clarity again. Could she be telling the truth?

Intent brown eyes stared into his. "There's only one way to find out."

"Get out of my head," Red whispered, the statement more of a plea than an order.

It's your doing that makes me in your head, Saion. You know that as well as I do.

I know, I know. It's the kereshi, he answered, unconsciously replying in the wordless voice.

"Then, Saion, you know as well that all you must do to discover the truth in m—"

"Stop it, Mokhari!" he snapped, sounding dangerously close to the breaking point. He slumped to the floor, realization striking. Dammit, I called her Mokhari...

There was a loaded silence, then a timid voice spoke. "What'd I miss? Are you guys communicating telepathically or something?" asked a half-joking Tifa.

"Yes, Ms. Lockhart, they are," replied Bugah.

One brunette eyebrow lifted, but she said not a word.

The familiar echoing female presence came into Red's mind again. Sa--

Stop it! came the supernatural roar. The force behind the anguished howl was immense; streams of sound bled out from the main ocean to assail Tifa and Bugah's ears. Tifa clapped her hands to her head while Bugah grimaced fiercely. And the main brunt didn't even strike them.

The wave of hurt, anger, sorrow, and raw power slammed full-throttle into Rahilah, sending her flying from the chair and onto the floor with a thud. She lay there for a moment, still half-stunned. Then she gathered herself to her feet slowly, as if in pain. Her shocked eyes met with Nanaki's solitary orb for a moment and she fled the room.

Bugah let out a low sigh. "You needn't have been so hard on her, Nanaki."

The great beast sat down heavily. "You think I don't know that?" His voice was hoarse, disbelieving. "That cut her deeply. I just crushed the one person I've promised to protect with my life."

"Nanaki--" Bugah began.

"No offense meant, Elder, but I just don't want to hear it." Red stood up again, walking toward the door that Rahilah had disappeared through. "I'll be back in time for the conference. Tifa, you are welcome to join me if you'd like."

The woman rose slowly, uncertainly looking to Bugah. He gave a tired nod of approval. "Go on, children."

The odd pair moved through the hallways of the Gainsborough Building side by side, enjoying the rare time together but each brooding over what they had seen and heard that day.

After a lengthy amount of time, Red finally spoke. "I suppose you're wondering about what took place back there."

"Wondering, yes. Expecting an explanation, no," replied Tifa.

"Expecting or not expecting, you'll get one. Do you ever feel like you need to speak; get something off your chest?"

"Mmm," came the wordless noise of assent.

"Then you'll understand how I feel now. Go on, ask me something. Anything."

"Okay... Why is Rahilah gray while you're red?"

"That's an easy one; different families were different colors. The colors stayed distinct because my people usually found mates in their own families; distant cousins three times removed or something like that. Ask me something else."

Tifa enjoyed the feel of the warmth of the setting sun on her face as she stepped past a large window. "Why did you and Bugah call Rahilah Mokhari?" Tifa asked, thinking it to be a relatively harmless question.

"Each of our tribe has two names; a familiar and a non-familiar. The familiar is...very important. It's taboo to reveal your familiar name to those but the ones that you trust more than anything on the Planet."

"Oh, so Nanaki is your familiar name?"

He hesitated. "...No. It is my non-familiar. You heard Rahilah call me by my familiar back there."

"You don't trust us with your familiar name?" She sounded a little hurt.

"It's not that, Tifa; the familiar is only for use with family and the most extraordinary of friends. Bugah called Rahilah Mokhari because his relationship with her is much like mine was with Grandfather. Their two families have been close than mere friendship for millennia."

"But what about you? Does that mean that your family has been close with Rahilah's as well?"

He shook his head. "No."

"Then why do you have the right to call her Mokhari?"

"Because she was my keresha." The voice was calm but far off, as if reminiscing.

Tifa frowned. "Your what?"

"I believe the human equivalent would be my wife."

She stopped dead. "How could you have had a wife? I thought you were just a kid when the Gi attacked."

"I was. My emotional level was somewhere around that of a 13-year-old human."

She was gaping openly now. "Thirteen and married?!"

He grimaced. "No. The kereshi is not marriage; that was a bad analogy. It's more than marriage. It's...a physical and spiritual link between a male and a female of my people. The kereshi is extremely rare, happening perhaps twice in a thousand years, and cannot be forced. It's a natural occurrence that happens when two are honestly meant for each other. And when you are meant to be together, age—and what families the two are of—is of no consequence."

"So you and Rahilah..." Tifa trailed off, straining to get a grip on this.

"Yes."

"Then why..."

"I saw her attacking Cosmo Canyon. I saw her kill a Cosmii, or so I believed. I couldn't just forget all of that."

"Why did you yell at her?"

"She was challenging me to open myself to her, to use the spiritual bond between us to discover the truth about her part in the Cosmo Canyon raid. I didn't want to do that. I'm not ready to share every inner thought and feeling with another. And I'm certainly not ready to deal with it if she's lying."

Tifa just nodded quietly, listening attentively.

He smiled gratefully at her. "Thanks for listening to that."

"Happy to oblige," she replied, mouth quirking in return.

The building intercom suddenly crackled to life. "Will all of the...bleeding heart tree huggers please report to the conference room immediately?" came the employee's confused voice.

"Sounds like Reno's back," Tifa said wryly, turning back.

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Reeve gave an inner groan as he watched the "bleeding heart tree huggers", to quote Reno's charming announcement, file back into the conference room. They're all pissed at each other.

Red and Rahilah wouldn't look at each other when she crept into the room, head dropping. Kiyara was frostily sliding away from Reno whenever he made the attempt to speak to her or get closer. Faye and Rude were silent and awkward, as they had been for the past several days; she was distant and jittery while he was quiet and pained. Elena was staring angrily at Reeve, which seemed to be her favorite thing to do when bored and she thought he wasn't paying attention. Cid and Cloud glared at each other whenever their eyes met, and the blond swordsman watched Tifa while she did her best to avoid him. And both factions, Shinra and Avalanche, were watching each other warily across the table. Bugah, the sole non-participant, gave him a roll of the eyes, as if to say, "Kids these days."

"Is everybody here?" asked Reeve tiredly.

He received nods and several verbal confirmations.

"Excellent, let's just jump right into this. The first order of business is this: we all take a break, cool off, and return. There's a formal banquet tonight, in 25 minutes." His voice turned hard and annoyed; he got enough of dealing with personality conflicts from board meetings—he most certainly didn't need it from this group as well. "You're all going to come, and you're going to enjoy yourselves. I don't care what you do, what you say, or how you do it, but you're going to kiss and make up, and meet back here afterward to discuss this issue like rational, intelligent adults. Agreed?"

There were quiet, subdued murmurs of assent.

"Good. Be in the function room dressed formally in fifteen minutes. If you personally aren't one of my employees or in the building on a regular basis, you're an honored guest if anyone asks. There's a tux rental shop around the corner if you need it. Bugah, you're fine as you are, as are Red and Rahilah, of course." He gave the faintest hint of a smile. "Dismissed."

Most of the room scrambled for the door, but Faye halted in front of Reeve indignantly with some of her old spirit. "Reeve Kazuma, do you honestly expect me to make it across town, get ready for this, and back in fifteen minutes?"

"No," answered Rude, walking up behind her.

Her manner immediately sobered, grew colder, and Reeve was sympathetic when he caught the extremely brief flicker of pain that flashed across Rude's face.

"...There's a dress for you in my office."

She smiled with no real merriment, looking somewhere around his neck rather than his face. "Thanks."

"We stopped at your place on the way here. How else did you think I ended up wearing one of your dresses?" asked Elena as she walked past them and out the door, resplendent in a long ivory silk strapless ballgown.

Faye frowned. "I thought that looked familiar."

"It's in the office when you want it," Rude told her quietly, and followed Elena.

Faye was still for a long moment, then gave a particularly nasty curse and scrambled after him. "Rude, wait!"

Reeve was troubled for them, but at least Faye seemed to have realized that something was wrong, and she had gone after him.

"Is it still okay for me to borrow that dress of yours?" came a quiet voice from beside him

He turned to find Tifa standing at his elbow.

"Oh right! Forgive me; I nearly forgot. Hold on just a moment..." He pulled out a cell phone identical to the one that he had thrown over the balcony earlier, and hit a quick button before placing it to his ear. "Jose? Yes, this is President Kazuma. I was wondering, could you please keep a tail on Ms. Rahilah without her knowing it? Put your best person on it, and tell them that she'll be very observant.....Yes, the gray one...Call me if there's anything suspicious... Thank you." He hung up and replaced the phone in his pocket.

"You're making sure that Rahilah isn't a danger," said Tifa in a wondering tone.

"It never hurts to be careful. She did spend the last several years with Hojo, after all. My security people have been watching her since she arrived, but now I'm assigning a specific person to her because it'll be harder to follow her as more

people begin to fill the building." He strode quickly to the door, then beckoned to her. "Come along." She followed, sneakers making next-to-no sound on the carpeted hallway.

"Where are we going?" Tifa asked.

"My rooms here in the building," he replied absently, smiling to an employee who nodded her head to him in respect. "The dress is up there, along with my wonderfully comfortable penguin suit." His voice grew more than a trifle sarcastic toward the end, and Tifa smiled.

He stopped in front of a door and slipped a plastic card into an inconspicuous slot in the wall. There was a beeping sound, then the door swung open. He courteously held it for her, and she smiled her thanks while stepping through. A set of stairs was before her, and Reeve's voice carried up to her with the click of the closing door. "Go on up; it's just at the top of the stairs." She followed his instructions, hopping quickly from step to step and rubbing her arms against the air-conditioned chill. Abruptly, she came to another door, which she carefully pushed open and walked through.

Inside was a spacious, well-decorated set of apartments. Large windows afforded an excellent view of Midgar, and it was outfitted in furnishings of classy white and black, with interesting contrast between the two colors.

Reeve came up behind her. "You like it?"

"It's very nice. Very different from what I see at home every day," she replied with a chuckle. "Did you decorate it yourself?"

"No, actually, Elena did," he returned, sounding slightly pained.

"Oh. Oh. Are you two..."

He shook his head. "Not anymore. I was a bastard."

Tifa smiled for a moment. "I somehow doubt you could ever be a bastard."

He gave a pleasant laugh, brushing past her and crossing the floor to disappear inside a room. The sounds of opening and closing drawers heralded his presence. "C'mon in, if you don't mind the mess."

"I'm sure it's no worse than what I deal with at the bar every night," she replied, making her way over to peer inside the room. It was a bedroom, decorated in sparse but rich furnishings that looked to be of Wutaian origin. It was also a huge mess. She raised an amused eyebrow at the piles of clothes, files, hangers, several cell phones, pillows and more strewn across the room.

"I never would picked you out as a messy person," she said.

He glanced back to her from where he was tossing random items onto the bed to clear a path to the dresser. "I'm not; Elena came through one day last week to pick up anything of hers that was here and ended up making quite a catastrophe as she searched. Just haven't had time to pick it up yet."

"Oh." Tifa stared at her feet, feeling slightly embarrassed. "Sorry."

"No need to apologize, Miss Lockhart."

"Tifa," she corrected.

"Right, Tifa." Finally able to get to the bureau, Reeve began opening and closing drawers while muttering to himself. "Where is it, where is it, where is it..."

"Try the closet?" she suggested from her place leaning against the door frame.

He straightened up and looked to her, sheepish grin evident. "Oh. Right." The Wutaian man picked his way through a stack of dirty shirts to the closet and rolled the heavy wooden doors open with a flourish.

As he began to paw through the hanging jackets, pants, shirts, and ties, Tifa spoke. "Reeve?"

"Hmm?" he asked, upper body completely inside the closet.

"I just wanted to apologize for earlier."

He emerged, covered in gray dust. "Apologize for what?"

"For losing it. For crying on you and getting you caught in this thing between me and Cloud."

He shook his head. "No. There's nothing to apologize for. We all need to freak out once in a while; I can understand that. In fact, I do it every month or so. Though I don't usually grab onto a near stranger and use her for a giant teddy bear/tissue." His disarming friendly smile took all sting from the comment.

She smiled herself, then gave a small laugh.

"And I don't mind getting involved in this thing between you and Cloud when it means that it helps you prove your independence, like you did back there." Those clear brown eyes were twinkling at her, and Tifa felt her heart flip-flop.

Reeve held her gaze for a moment longer than was proper, then abruptly disappeared into the closet again, looking faintly embarrassed. But he came into view a moment later, a long garment bag clutched triumphantly in one hand.

"Is that it?" she asked.

"By jove, you've got it!" he replied, eyes dancing with mirth and no longer of that other emotion that she had glimpsed so swiftly before he practically dove into the closet.

"Let's see it," she answered, smiling to hide the faint disappointment that she felt.

Stripping the dirty, dusty plastic covering off, Reeve laid the dress out on the bed for inspection. "I hope it's not too out of style or anything; it's pretty ol--"

A delighted gasp tore from Tifa's throat. "Are you kidding, Reeve? It's gorgeous!"

He smiled, looking relieved. "Why don't y--"

She gathered up the gown in her arms. "Where's your bathroom?"

He gave a bemused chuckle at her intensity. "Third door on the left."

"Thanks!" Tifa was out the door in a flash, azure bundle cradled carefully.

He shut the door behind her, quickly changing into the pants and shirt of one of the ultra-formal tuxedos that he kept in his

closet for the many ultra-formal events that he had to attend.

He ducked into the tiny bathroom attached to his bedroom and turned on the faucet as cold as possible. He splashed the icy water on his face, hoping to wake himself up. The nap this afternoon had helped, but damn was he tired. He glanced up to find his face looking back at him in the mirror overhanging the sink. You're getting old and stupid in that old age, Kazuma, he informed himself. Why the hell did you offer her Ellie's dress? It had better not be because you want her to take Ellie's place; no one can do that. Besides, you saw how crazy she is over Strife. So just do—.

A sudden knock interrupted his thoughts. "Reeve?"

"Coming," he called, quickly stepping out of the bathroom and going to open his bedroom door.

Tifa was standing there. She gave an experimental twirl. Smiling faintly nervously, she asked, "Well? What do you think?"

He remembered well another woman standing there in that dress, asking him a very similar question. "Well, Reeve, my love? How do I look?"

"Like an angel, Ellie. An absolute honest-to-Ramuh angel, come to the planet from the Lifestream."

Light laughter. "You're too good to me, Reeve. Whatever did I do to deserve you?"

He shook himself out of his reverie to glance to the woman standing before him. The hair was brown instead of yellow, eyes a deeper mahogany shade than the sepia tint that he remembered. The differences helped to distance himself from his memories, and when he looked again, he saw Tifa, not Ellie.

The aquamarine gown clung to her body until it reached her hips, where the bright blue expensive heavy fabric flared out to her ankles and moved with her. Thin straps held the dress to her muscled shoulders and the neckline was the slightest V, modestly showing just the smallest amount of creamy throat and lower neck. The rear of the gown was open to mid-back, held together by an intricate system of straps and knots. And here and there down the length of the bodice and skirt were embroidered ivory flowers. It was a lovely picture, even if the dress was a little tight in the chest.

"Hey, you look incredible," he said sincerely, unknowingly echoing Reno's comment of earlier that night to Kiyara while carefully avoiding anything that would sound even remotely like that old conversation that had haunted him a moment before.

Tifa blushed nicely. "Thank you." She looked down at her bare toes. "I suppose it would be too much to hope that you have some shoes I could wear with this?"

"Actually..." he trailed off, leaning over and reaching under the bed to produce an old cardboard box. "I think I do."

She got down on her knees beside him, careful to hike up the skirt of the dress so as not to rip anything. He lifted the lid of the box, and she gave a small gasp. The box was full of expensive-looking jewelry, make-up, and clothes.

At her questioning look, he answered, "Belonged to an old...girlfriend who got dressed for functions at my place a lot. I boxed it all up the night she left and haven't opened it since."

"Was it Elena?" she asked hesitantly. "Because I don't think I could wear this, no matter how beautiful it is, if she's going to be there..."

He smiled sadly. "No, it's not Elena's. The relationship this all comes from actually ended when Elena was somewhere around ten years old, so it's no one who's still around." He wrinkled his nose, lifting out an ancient makeup compact. "Not sure how good some of the makeup is."

She grinned at his understatement. "Just 'not sure'? Look at that stuff; it's completely congealed!"

"Well, hey, it's still usable," he defended himself. "...Right?"

She let out a laugh, taking the small black object and turning it over to show him the date engraved on the opposite side. "Reeve, this makeup's expiration date was seventeen years ago! Gods, it's nearly as old as I am!"

His mouth quirked sheepishly. "Oops."

"Luckily for you, I always carry the necessities in my purse, just in case." She reached into the box to produce a bright blue high heel.

"I think those are the shoes she used to wear with that dress," Reeve said in answer.

"Let's hope we have the same shoe size as well as dress size," Tifa muttered, placing her foot into the shoe and strapping it on. Reeve handed her the other shoe, which she tightened as well. He rose to his feet and helped her stand.

She grimaced, wobbling slightly. "A little tight. But I can deal." She brushed a stray lock of chocolate-brown hair from her face, then froze. "Oh gods, my hair."

"I think everything you need for that should be in the box. And there's a mirror in the bathroom, in case you didn't notice," he offered, casting about on the floor for his own black dress shoes.

She easily tucked the heavy box under one strong arm and glided into the bathroom. "Thanks."

The dark-haired man found one shoe under a red T-shirt and swiftly tied it on lest he lose it again, but its mate was much more elusive. He finally found it under his pillow in the bed after an extensive, lengthy search. He ducked into the other bathroom and completed his own system of getting ready, which was really just running a wet comb through his black hair and applying a dash of cologne. Hurrying out again and snatching up the tuxedo jacket from the back of a chair, he peeked into the bathroom to find Tifa applying the finishing touches to her makeup, her own clothes in a neatly folded pile next to her feet.

"Almost ready?" he asked, tugging the formal jacket on.

"Almost," she replied, slipping the makeup back into her purse and pursing her lips in the mirror, to be doubly sure that she wore the right amount of lipstick.

Then she reached down and gathered her calf-length hair up and into a knot on the back of her head with an ease born of long practice, expertly securing it with two black hair sticks. She turned and smiled at him. "Now I'm ready."

He shook his head. "No, you're not. Not quite." He reached into the box and pulled out a long, black velvet case.

She frowned. "Wha—"

He opened the lid and her hand flew to her mouth as the diamonds nestled inside sparkled in the night.

"Oh, Reeve, they're beautiful! But I—"

"Come on, no buts. It looks incomplete without the jewelry."

"Well...okay!" She gave a small, excited smile. Tifa reached inside the case and carefully withdrew the pair of dangling, multi-faceted diamond earrings and set to work putting them in her ears. He set the box down on the countertop and took out the delicate, fragile bracelet.

"Give me your hand," he instructed. She did so, and he fastened it around her wrist.

He picked up the dainty necklace, designed to just fit around the neck of its wearer with little room to spare, with an alternating pattern of longer carefully sculpted diamonds and shorter gems in every possible natural shape. He gently clasped it around her throat, and she recoiled slightly at the feeling of his cool fingers on her warm neck. He stood back to view his handiwork.

Tifa stared at the shining, elegant, beautiful creature in the mirror. Is that really me?

"You are even lovelier than I'd first realized, Miss Lockhart," Reeve murmured to her, drawing closer for a moment before pulling back again, looking faintly red.

Heart beating rapidly, she quickly responded, "You don't look so bad yourself." But even as she said it, she took a good look at him for the first time and began to grin.

He noticed the expression on her face. "Oh no. What? What'd I do?"

"Forget something?" she asked.

Reeve looked himself head to toe. "Shoes, check. Socks, check. Pants, check—always a good thing. Short, check. Jacket, check. Tie...oh damn."

She smiled broadly at him as he strode out of the bathroom and back into his own bedroom. He glanced at the clock and winced. "Damn damn damn, I'm going to be late for my own deadline." Galvanized by this realization, he found the red tie in record time and scrambled back toward the bathroom's mirror to put it on.

Tifa met him halfway. "Want some help with that?" she asked, surprised by her own boldness.

Knowing that he had been tying ties for the past twenty years, he was still pleasantly surprised by her offer. "If you don't mind."

"Not at all," she replied, taking the crimson strip of fabric, deft fingers slipping it over his head and beginning the knot. "No bow tie?"

He gave a sheepish grin. "I can't find it. It's too small and the mess is too big."

She laughed a real, non-hysterical laugh and he found that he liked the sound. "There." She fussily straightened the knot.

"Thank you very much. Couldn't have done it better myself."

Tifa was suddenly aware of how close her efforts had brought them, and she swiftly took a step backward, face flushed.

Either not noticing or choosing to kindly ignore her discomfort, he smiled at her, motioning to the doorway. They walked to the door to the apartment together, and Reeve opened it.

Tifa stared unhappily from her cumbersome shoes to the steep stairs and back again. "I came through battling Sephiroth without a scratch, but somehow I know I'm going to break my neck on a simple set of stairs."

"I have an idea." And before she knew what was happening, she had been swept up into the man's arms, the backs of her knees resting over one appendage and her upper back supported by the other. She let out a surprised gasp, one arm wrapping instinctively around the back of his neck. He grinned rakishly at her. "Don't worry, I won't drop you."

"You'd better not," she threatened shakily.

He descended the steps carefully, and, upon opening the door at the bottom, set her down on her feet in the corridor. "Maybe I'm not so old after all," Reeve said with a companionable grin.

"Thank you," she said, laughing.

"Would you care to go, Miss Lockhart?" He extended an arm to her in the old-fashioned way.

Tifa placed her arm in his with a shy smile. "If you please, Mr. Kazuma."

They walked down the brightly-lit hallway together, arm-in-arm.