

General warning—There is stuff about attempted rape in this chapter. There's nothing graphic, nothing even really described, and it's really more even implied-attempted-rape. Stuff like this is why this fic is rated R. Just thought I'd give some forewarning.

Chapter 25: A Regular Soap Opera

"I taste like barf!" -Tifa Lockhart

"Hey Rude!" Faye exclaimed, scrambling out the door after Rude.

The tall man halted in the hallway outside the conference room door, a faint smile emerging on his face.

"What're you all smiley about?" she questioned, falling rather flat in her attempt to be friendly as she fell into step at his side, moving through the hall. They made an odd pair as they always had; the tall, sober man and the short, emotion-prone woman who had to take three steps to his one.

"You," he answered simply, meeting her gaze for a moment.

"What?" she asked, a frown pulling at her eyebrows.

"Actually going out of your way to talk to me."

Her mouth opened and she was silent for a moment before dropping her gaze to her moving feet and murmuring, "It's really been that bad?" She glanced back up to him.

He continued to look at her, face expressionless, and the good cheer in her heart abruptly soured.

He obviously saw a change in her countenance, because then he was frowning and questioning her. "Faye?"

She was lost in thought. The last time that she had been so unable to read him, it had been several days before, when he had scared the living shit out of her, killing Silver Dragons. That fear--of herself, after being able to kill a man; of him; that he wasn't who she had married--rose to choke her again, and she found herself suddenly asking, "Would you take your sunglasses off?"

He just looked at her for a moment, and the fear was strangling her and pulling her nerves so taut that she could almost hear them stretching and getting ready to snap--

Then in one fluid motion, he pulled the offending eyewear from the bridge of his nose.

Immediately, she could breathe easier, and she expected him to fold up the sunglasses and tuck them into a pocket.

Instead, he dropped them on the hard floor in front of him, and stepped right on them. There was an ominous crack and crunch, and when Faye stared back over her shoulder, she saw only a small pile of shattered glass and twisted wire.

Rude's low voice drew her attention back to him. "I'm a fucking idiot."

He had been looking straight ahead, but his head turned and the brown eyes fixed on her when she made no response, confused by what the hell he was talking about. The tightness in her throat relaxed and she even felt a little silly; all that fuss over a stupid pair of sunglasses. But she felt a whole helluva lot better, seeing the warm, affectionate--if tired and

guilty--gaze.

"You never should have had to ask," he clarified quietly.

Faye was silent for a moment, touched, hazel eyes finally meeting with his for the first time in what felt like years.

It was silly. It had just been a stupid pair of sunglasses. He had spoken very simple words.

But just the same, she felt like a great weight had been lifted off her chest.

She smiled suddenly in a way that she hadn't in several days; it was unassuming and simple, and lit up her face.

Rude looked immensely relieved for a moment, and she was rewarded with a stunning grin that lasted a few seconds. Then his large hand firmly took hers, and she finally felt like everything was going to be alright again. Yes, he had killed people. But he was still Rude. Yes, she had... Well, no; she was avoiding thinking about that. She wasn't quite sure how she was holding it back. But however she was, it could come later, when she had the luxury of time to completely freak out. And when she did, she had no doubt that Rude would be there.

In silence, they continued to make their way through the quiet halls of the Gainsborough Building. This quiet, though, was peaceful and comfortable, though, unlike the silences of the past several days. They passed no one; this western wing of the hall was reserved for board members' offices, and most of the members had already headed for the function room.

Then they turned the final corner, and Rude saw a familiar red head ducking out of an office ahead of them and go sauntering down the corridor, probably searching for a balcony or utility closet to smoke on/in.

He turned to where Faye had halted and had her hand on the doorknob to his office. "I'll be in; just need to talk to Reno real quick."

She frowned, wondering what he could need to say now that he hadn't needed to say when they had seen him in the boardroom not ten minutes before. But she shrugged. "Okay."

He kissed her gently on the top of her head--eliciting another hard-earned smile--then let go of her hand and jogged down the hallway. "Reno," the tall man called out.

His ex-partner halted, turned, and waited for him to catch up. He raised an eyebrow as Rude came closer. "No sunglasses?"

"Dropped 'em," he deadpanned. "Faye go in the office?"

Reno shot him a look that clearly stated that he was crazy, but glanced over the other man's shoulder anyway. "Yeah."

"The door shut?" he persisted.

"Yeah. Wh--"

He was cut off when a large hand was planted on each skinny shoulder and he was slammed back into the wall.

He just stared at him for a moment, stunned, then the green eyes were snapping with indignance and anger. "Hey, man, what the f--"

"Shut up." The words were delivered quite placidly, but the hands pinning him hard against the wall and the blazing brown eyes glaring at him destroyed any sense of calm. Actually, Reno would venture a guess that this was the most pissed off

he'd ever seen the bigger man. "You should have told us where you were going."

"Aww, hell, man, don't tell me you're gonna bitch me out over that, to--"

"You really think I'd be this pissed if it was just that shit Elena yelled at you over?" he interrupted, voice frigid. His voice was cold, but his eyes still flashed fire and he was leaning in ominously over the shorter man. Reno was beginning to understand why people had all but pissed their pants in their Turk days when Rude had threatened them.

Reno ran through in his head what Elena had said. We scoured Midgar. We took out an entire gang. We flew and sailed across continents. We got shot at. We got caught up in a friggin' war. We almost got killed several times. "It's fucking worse than that?"

A familiar--muffled--voice broke in. "Baby, where did you put my dre--" There was the sound of a door opening, and both men's heads snapped about to find Faye standing in the doorway to Rude's office, staring at the pair of them.

There was silence for a moment as she took in her husband looking murderous--and faintly guilty now that she had caught him in the act--and pinning the smaller man to the wall. "You kicking his ass?" she finally asked.

Rude hesitated for a moment, then nodded. "More or less."

Her mouth set grimly. "Good." The office door closed.

Both men looked at each other blankly for a moment, both clearly surprised by her answer. Then Rude's eyes lost some of their fire and he let go of the other man and stepped back, body language suggesting that he was slightly--just slightly--sheepish.

He was probably expecting some kind of angry response, but he didn't get it. Reno knew his old friend too well for that; there had to be a good reason behind this. So he simply rubbed at his bruised shoulders and waited for it.

Rude sighed. "Faye was so worried about you that she decided to go looking for you at Mona's. Alone."

Though many things could be said about Reno Lynley, one could never call him unintelligent. His face hardened and his jaw set. "She met up with that band of merry rapists that meet up in the back."

A stiff nod was his only response.

His face immediately drained of all color, and he leaned back heavily against the wall. "Oh fuck. Rude. Did they r--"

Rude vehemently shook his head. "No. I found her note telling me where she'd gone and Elena, Reeve, and I got there in time."

"In time. Meaning you killed those motherfuckers."

"Right."

Understanding dawned. "In front of her."

"Yeah. And she killed one, too. To save me." His voice and mannerisms were still calm and fairly expressionless, but there was a reason that he always wore the sunglasses; his eyes betrayed his exhaustion and worry.

Reno shut his eyes for a moment, comprehending Rude's violence more and more. Motherfucker. It's because of me. And

then it turns out I wasn't in any serious trouble the whole time and when he caught up with me, I was makin' out with Kiyara. He resolved inwardly to speak with Faye the first chance that he got to carry out some manner of apology.

The green eyes opened again after a moment, and his remorse was evident. "Fuck, Rude, I'm sorry. Is she okay?"

"She will be. Just call the next time you decide to disappear out of nowhere." He smiled slightly at Reno at that comment--and also probably due to some slight remorse over slamming the smaller man around--then turned and walked back toward his office door.

"Hey," Reno called.

The tall man stopped, turned back, and directed an inquisitive eyebrow at him.

"We're okay?"

Rude shrugged. "We always were." Then he slipped inside his office.

Reno stood in the hallway for another moment, then, completely rattled, muttered, "Fuck," and strode off with renewed vigor in his search for a place to smoke.

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Rahilah padded silently through the halls of the Gainsborough Building, keenly aware of the man who was trying to unobtrusively follow her, as well as the odd glances that she was receiving from passerby.

The man wasn't very good at spying; she kept the same—close—distance from her at all times and followed her every move. She knew this without even turning her head because he smelled distinctively of strong body odor and cigarette smoke, and this particularly repellent scent dogged her sensitive nostrils.

As for the people walking around her, they weren't being very polite. Even as Rahilah thought this, she heard a passing rail-thin woman whisper scream to her companion, "We'd better call security and tell them there's an animal loose in the building." Both females were watching her carefully and slowly edging away in fright.

Rahilah sighed and looked straight at them. "I am no more than animal than either of you, Miss," she said in exasperation.

The women stopped dead in terror, then the more rotund one grabbed her friend by the arm and propelled her down the hall and out of sight.

The great beast shook her head to herself before continuing on her way, following the labeled signs on the walls that read 'function room'. That was when she caught sight of a familiar swaying tail up ahead, and she felt the pace of her heartbeat quicken.

Saion... Oh, love, what've we gotten ourselves into? she asked herself. She stared after him for a long moment, trying to decide whether or not to approach him. He was alone for once, ambling along the hallway slowly, head bowed to the ground that Rahilah knew made people that that he was hunting; searching for a scent. In reality, she knew that this was his thinking pose; the position that he always unconsciously took when deeply disturbed about something, in the way that a human might gnaw heavily on a lip or fingernails. Rahilah shook her head to herself again; humans were so violent and uncivilized.

Her dilemma was solved when Nanaki halted and turned his head back to look at her, a faintly amused glint to his eye. "Well? Are you coming or are you just going to skulk back there?"

A low rumble of laughter escaped her throat, and the smoky gray female trotted up to join him. As dry of a sense of humor as ever, I see, Saion.

"Rahilah..." He sighed and stared at the floor for a moment, watching the pair of fiery red-orange paws take prowling step after step. "Stick to just Nanaki and the spoken language, if you please."

She bowed her head in deference, swiftly bundling up and flinging aside the feelings of rejection and disappointment. Unfortunately, she flung it to her left.

Nanaki staggered under the driving force of misery, then righted himself. "What in the name of Leviathan happened to those mental blocks that we used to have?"

She laughed quietly. "Eroded with time."

He let out another whoosh of breath and halted in the middle of the hallway, sitting back on his haunches directly in front of the female. "I'm sorry, Rahilah."

She cocked her head to one side quizzically. "For what?"

"For what?! For screaming at you in the conference room, for not welcoming you and being glad you're alive, for no--"

Rahilah gently touched his nose to his. "Shhh. Enough. I know." They stared at each other for a long moment, completely unaware of the passing humans giving them a wide berth. "All you need to do to find the truth is to look for it. You know that my mind is always open to you."

He shook his head. "No."

"Oh." The tone was stark, bleak.

He shook his head with the faintest hint of a smile. "Ever the pessimist, hmm, Rahilah?"

"If I remember correctly, Nanaki, you were the one who predicted that the Wutai-Shinra War would bring about an anarchy that would kill off all civilization."

He looked faintly abashed. "I did, didn't I?"

She chuckled before asking wryly, "Does this mean you're not going to play the tortured, wronged kereishi any longer?"

Nanaki smiled, baring sharp white teeth. "All right. I deserved that. And yes, I'd like to... I can't say it without sounding foolish."

"Gods, Nanaki, you know that I of all people am not one to judge on counts of foolishness."

He laughed, the sound a low rumble. "All right, all right." He glanced down to the floor for a moment before back to her face. "Rahilah, I know I can't keep mistrusting you, but I'm not ready to pull a full-blown mind connection yet. That would be irreversible. No turning back. We would truly be bonded."

"Which would be terrible if I am not telling the truth. If I were aligned with Hojo," finished Rahilah softly, a touch of sadness escaping her guard. "My ever logical Nanaki."

"Rahilah... You spoke of foolishness. It would be the epitome of such if I took you at your word-" No matter how much I'd

like to, he finished mentally to her, thought-voice down and sad.

"So, what do you want, Nanaki?" she asked quietly.

"I think I need to learn to trust you again, Rah, before we join minds."

If she were a human, this is where she would have raised an eyebrow. "So you basically want to get to know each other all over again."

He bobbed his head. "Essentially, yes."

Rahilah was silent for an eternity of several seconds, then she smiled and nodded. "Slow, steady, and cautious it is."

His mouth quirked in an unconscious imitation of a relieved human grin. "Abahi daan, Rahilah."

"No thanks necessary," she replied, amused, beginning to move down the hall again with Nanaki now at her side.

The pair padded along noiselessly, simply enjoying each other's company once again.

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Ten minutes into the banquet, Reno was bored as hell. And frustrated to go along with it, as he witnessed Kiyara shunting his efforts to speak to her off to the side for the fourth time in the past ten minutes.

"Kiyara, I wanna friggin' talk to you," he murmured into her ear, the sounds of laughter, talking, light music played by the orchestral band set up in a corner, and glasses clinking echoing around them.

"In just a minute, Reno; I'd like to hear the end of Senator Darwin's anecdote," she replied happily before turning back to the tight knot of conniving, money-hungry people hanging on the ancient blowhard's every word.

Reno swore to himself, realizing that he couldn't drag her off to one side without seeming like an overbearing asshole to some of the most important people on the face of the Planet. He stormed off to the mini-bar set up in one corner of the room, resolving to get another strong drink before making his fifth attempt.

Rude--still lacking in sunglasses--managed to catch his eye from within another cluster of rich brats and, even more impressive, somehow extracted himself from it (and most impressive, somehow extracted himself [and chose to extract himself] from a clingy Faye, dressed in a black strapless dress with a poofy skirt), making his way over to where Reno was now leaning on the wooden counter top and signaling to the bartender.

"Vodka on the rocks," Reno informed the dark-haired young man behind the bar who he thought he vaguely remembered from some or other staff party. Of course, he was always drunk at staff parties, so that wasn't saying much. The bartender nodded and set to mixing the drink.

Rude leaned on the ornate counter beside him, one lightly lifted eyebrow asking the question.

"No, she won't talk to me." The man, wiping one hand on the white apron, set the beverage next to Reno's elbow and watched in awe for a moment as the redheaded man downed half of the glass in one gulp without batting an eyelash. "An' I still don't know why."

Rude looked faintly amused, a small smile playing at the corners of his lips. "I was actually asking why the drink."

Reno slammed the glass down on the bar, not noticing the hairline crack that spread its way through the innards of the expensive crystal. "Fuck it, man, you've got to fucking vocalize if you wanna say something!"

Rude looked over him with an expert eye. Seen him pass as sober way drunker than this before. "...Letting yourself act smashed."

Reno swallowed the last of his drink. "No, I'm not."

The bald man just looked at him.

As always, Reno caved. "All right. So what if I am? What else are these banquets good for besides getting plastered?"

Rude sighed. "If conventional methods fail, use unconventional."

Reno stared blankly at him before carefully formulating his words. "Okay, Rude, I know you were pushin' me around earlier, but I didn't realize you were so screwed up. I shouldn't have yelled at you about not talking; I hadn't figured out it'd push you over the edge. Why don't y--"

"You're a fucking Turk. You want to talk to her this bad? Use trickery."

A slow grin spread across the handsome, scarred face. "Rude, that's one of the most intelligent and elaborate things you've ever said. You're a fuckin' genius."

The taller man took a mock bow.

Reno left his empty glass, his best friend, and his drunken air behind as he pushed off through the crowd toward Kiyara, planning his next course of action. As he grew closer, he saw Kai Anisah, the company's vice president that had been so snide to the blonde woman in the conference room, sidle up to her.

"Miss Maiden, I could not help but notice you from across the room. You look absolutely ravishing this fine evening," he purred smoothly.

She smiled prettily at him, still playing the part of an oblivious bimbo to help stay out of Reno's path. "Thank you very much, Mr. Anisah."

The all-male band dressed in tuxedos in the corner struck up a new tune; an old-fashioned waltz, by the sound of it. Anisah gave her a rakish smile--quite an accomplishment for a man of his age--and nodded toward the dance floor. "I hope you would forgive me if I was so forward as to ask you if I may have the honor of this dance."

She opened her mouth to politely decline--then changed her mind as her eyes met the approaching Reno's. Kiyara smiled dazzlingly at Anisah. "The honor is mine, Mr. Anisah. I would love to."

He extended a hand to her, and she fought back feelings of the utmost revulsion and wrongness to take it, stepping out onto the polished wooden ballroom floor with him, ducking past a large number of increasingly drunken pairs dressed in swishing skirts and black suits. As they settled into a dancing position, she noticed Reno shooting her a disgusted look, which she pointedly ignored.

"You are a fine dancer, Miss Maiden," Anisah complimented as she carefully duplicated the motions that he was making.

Kiyara struggled to keep from decking him and leaping away. Everything inside of her was screaming; clamoring to get away from this man before it was too late, but she couldn't bring herself to face Reno, to hear the unwelcome answer to her unspoken question, and she stubbornly held out, bringing a hollow smile to her face. "Why, thank you, Mr. Anisah, but I

must admit that your skill far surpasses my own."

"Nonsense," he responded graciously. After a moment's pause, he spoke again. "I must admit, Miss Maiden, that my reason for wishing to dance with you is not entirely that of your extraordinary beauty."

"Oh?" she asked, heart beating faster as she thought that whatever strange connection she had with him was about to come out.

"I could not help but notice that you have been staring at me whenever I come into view, and you start when my name is mentioned. Is this something you would like to discuss with me, or..."

"Well, actually, I get the feeling that you're so familiar and I should recognize you, but I don't." At his surprised expression, she added, "I don't remember much of anything before--or during, for that matter--my time with Hojo because of that bastard's tinkering. So I apologize if I should remember you and don't." She frowned silently to herself. What possessed you to give this guy all that information?

He nodded as though this explained the phenomena and leaned yet close to whisper into her ear, "I know who you are, Miss Shinra."

Kiyara drew back from him in alarm, eyes wide, but he reached out to take her hand as she instinctively began to back away. "Not to worry, Kiyara. Your secret is safe with me."

Interesting to notice how the Miss stuff suddenly dropped, she thought to herself wryly. Now watching him carefully, the golden-haired woman replaced her hand in his and began the rhythm of following his footsteps once again. "How do you know?" she murmured softly, looking around to be sure that no one around them was taking an untoward interest in their conversation.

"I recognized you. I was the head of the diplomatic department at the time; I handled all envoys and ambassadors sent and received. If I remember correctly, yourself and your brother had a mad run around the building every so once in a while; got yourself yelled at a bit, especially by me the one time that I found you in my office." He gave a slight grin. "You were making a fort out of the stacked piles of paperwork from my desk. I don't think you liked me very much after that."

Her common sense berated the part of her still terrified of Anisah. Look, you little idiot, he's perfectly nice and reasonable. You're only scared of him 'cause he scared the shit out've you as a kid. But she was worried, nonetheless. "If you've recognized me, what's to stop others from doing the same?"

"Don't worry; I have a photographic memory. That's the only reason that I recognized you. And I won't say a word to anyone."

Kiyara smiled gratefully. "Thank you."

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The air in the basement of the old Shinra mansion was damp and frigid, the walls cut out of the solid, blue-purple rock. The long set of spiraling stairs that lead downward had many a missing step, silent testimony to those teenagers on dares and treasure-seekers who had tried to unlock the secrets of this building. If walls could talk, these cold stones would scream. Freezing air flowed in through numerous chinks in the upstairs walls, making its way down the stairs to raise the neck-hair of any person foolish enough to make their way here. But no one was that much of a fool; all had heard tales of the dark man that lived behind that large pair of locked doors at the end of the corridor. "They say he's a vampire," they whispered, watching the mansion for strange comings and goings. All activity halted on the day once a month that he left the mansion to buy the next month's supplies at the general store. And all in Nibelheim locked and bolted their doors at night.

They feared him. And that was the way that Vincent Valentine liked it.

The air in the basement of the old Shinra mansion was damp and frigid, the walls cut out of the solid, blue-purple rock. But inside the library, it was warm and dry, the scent of dusty old books pervading everything. The dark man, the vampire, the ex-Turk known as Vincent to friends and Vince or Vinnie to those brazen enough to try it, sat cross-legged in a chair, flipping through an ancient manuscript. A desk in front of him held stacks and piles of books, and a solitary green candle provided all the illumination that he needed.

He gave an annoyed sigh as the large mass of long raven hair cascaded into his face again, obscuring his vision. He pulled the unruly tresses back into a black headband with an ease born of long practice, then returned his attention to the tome before him, eerie crimson eyes scanning the pages at an incredible rate.

Vincent Valentine was tall, well over six feet and deceptively thin, pale--nearly dead white--skin and clothing hiding whipcord-tight muscles. He wore a pair of blue jeans and a black T-shirt, having ditched the ludicrous crimson get up of three years ago some time before. One arm and hand was completely normal, but the other tapered into a long, golden claw, a remnant of his days spent with Daei Hojo. His face was a lovely one; so lovely, in fact, that combined with his hair, he was often mistaken for a woman. Yet another result of Hojo's tinkering; the man had known that the Turk was arrogant and proud of his--masculine, thank you very much--appearance.

He hummed a wordless tune as he flipped page after page, halting once in a while to scribble something furiously in a notebook beside him. He was searching for a means to return his beloved Lucrecia to him and undo the ghastly havoc that Hojo had wreaked on his body; had been searching for years. And where better to search than a genius evil scientist's personal library? Mountains of books now stacked in one corner had been perused and discarded, but there were still far more left on the mahogany, slightly rotting bookshelves lining the room. It didn't phase Vincent; he knew that he would never die of natural causes and would have several human life-spans to attain his two goals.

Both the humming and the sound of the rapid page-turning halted within the same second, Vincent frowning. Inside the manuscript lay an out of place page, looking as though it had been torn from another, yet older, book.

He picked it up gingerly, pieces of the yellowed, brittle page crumbling at his mere touch. He moved it closer to the candle for better light. The entire piece of paper was filled with a language that Vincent didn't recognize.

" 'Orrep loric nanami, Amaan'?" he read aloud to himself. What the hell? A sudden idea struck him, and he moved the candle and set it down on the table, picking up the book that the dripping wax candle had been sitting on. 'Tongues of the Ancient World'. Perfect. He recognized the mystery language as the very first one that he came to in the book, to his surprise. He read the first sentence, eyebrows shooting up. " 'Cetran, the language spoken by the guardians of the Planet: the Cetra and the Tanduri.' ...Tanduri?"

He skimmed the paragraph, mostly full of pretentious prattle, and turned the page. To his surprise, it and the following pages were filled with translations of the tongue. Taking a pencil, new sheet of paper, and the ancient page, he set to work.

Within several moments, aided by his inhuman qualities, the sheet of paper was filled with an English poem, translated from the Cetra.

He read it out loud, wanting to hear it spoken. " 'Herein follows an account of the final prophecy given by Amaan of the Cetra in the year of the [untranslatable], 59213.

The silver destroyer shall fall,
The blood rock from black sky shall fail.
But em'rald shan't heed Lifestream's call,
And all may not weather the gale.

From the ashes a fire shall be woken,
Planet's scar thought dead now alive.
Renewed shall be bonds that were broken,
But they both must know how to arrive.

When asked later of this prophecy, the Great Amaan spoke cryptic words of ruby and gold, grass and the sea. He seemed to equate ruby and grass together, as well as gold and the sea. He spoke of the two forces joining together to help the Planet in its time of need, far in the future, and he told of the great evil emerald that did not pass into the Lifestream; instead, threatens the Planet's very existence. The Prophet died seconds after finishing this prophecy, so it shall never all be explained fully.' "

Vincent frowned. "The silver destroyer is obviously Sephiroth. The blood rock is a reference to Meteor. Planet's scar is the Crater. But who are 'they'? Are they 'ruby and grass' and 'gold and the sea'? And what is 'emerald'? Emerald Weapon? Could Amaan be speaking of green Mako?" A horrible thought suddenly struck him, a thought that resonated with truth deep in his very bones. "Hojo." His eyes. His Jenova-induced form.

Those eyes appeared before him, twinkling with evil merriment. The familiar cackle filled the air. Vincent's own orbs searched the room dangerously for a moment, face intent, watching for the source. But the laugh halted and eyes faded as quickly as they'd appeared, and the dark man was left staring at an empty library, the candlelight flickering and causing eerie shadows.

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Reno appeared out of nowhere, grinning at Kiyara behind Anisah's back, face mere inches from hers. She glared at him meaningfully.

He just smirked even more infuriatingly and tapped Anisah none-too-gently on the shoulder. The older man turned to face him.

"May I cut in?" asked Reno, schooling his face into a more serious expression.

Kiyara laughed gaily--and falsely, Reno suspected--twirling back into Anisah's arms. "Not just yet, Reno. Give the vice president and I more time!"

Anisah gave him a smug, gloating look as the pair spun away, and Reno growled under his breath.

Kiyara watched in relief as the red-headed man sauntered off toward the bar again.

"Are you having issues with him, Miss Maiden?" asked Anisah with almost fatherly concern. "Because I'm sure I c--"

"No," she cut him off. "Reno's no problem. I just don't feel like dealing with him right now, that's all."

"Ahh, still, if you are ever in need of assistance..."

She chuckled lightly. "Thank you, but I know how to deal with Reno if need be." She gathered her left hand, resting on his shoulder, into a tight fist, and Anisah looked amused.

That's when Reno appeared again. He gave her a devilish smirk, green eyes glinting mischievously.

She mouthed 'no' at him while the graying man she was dancing with was looking the other way.

His grin grew wider as he nodded 'yes' and stepped to one side to accommodate the uniformed waiter carrying a silver circular tray laden with drinks by one hand. The waiter stepped past Reno and blundered into Anisah, knocking the man to the ground in a shower of alcohol and glass. The hapless server began apologizing profusely and trying to dust a snarling Anisah off while Reno stepped in, taking Anisah's place with Kiyara and surreptitiously slipping the waiter a fifty-gil note in the same smooth, unnoticeable movement.

Kiyara seethed as Reno swept her away, the latter laughing merrily. "You...you..."

"You are damn good at politics and deception for someone who spent the last fifteen years of her life living in the plastic tube," he murmured in her ear.

She wordlessly attempted to walk away from him, but he kept his grip tight on her arms. "Lucy, you got some 'splainin' to do," he crowed quietly.

"What do I have to explain to you?" she hissed frigidly.

"Maybe the fact of why you were dancing with Kai Anisah, a man who called you a whore and you seem to hate even more than you dislike me."

"I couldn't just say no to him, Reno. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm not your personal property." Again, she tried to pull away, and again he held her fast.

"Admit it; you latched onto him because you were trying to avoid me," he whispered to her, resting his forehead against hers.

"Let me go," she demanded haughtily, jerking her head back from his, fighting him.

"Not until you tell me what the hell I did wrong this time," he countered, breath tickling her ear.

She drew herself up as angrily as was possible with him holding her so tightly. "What you did wrong? Oh, I'll tell you what you did wrong!"

"I knew I could count on you for that," came the mildly sarcastic response.

"You have a girlfriend and you didn't tell me!" At this precise moment, she realized that the music had slowed and all other couples besides she and Reno were dancing closer to each other, and several people were beginning to look oddly at the two of them. Not wishing to call unwanted attention to herself, Kiyara wrapped her arms around his neck and leaned into him, snapping furious eyes shielded slightly by his head.

"What?!" he exclaimed loud enough for the nearby wealthy socialites to frown with curiosity and displeasure.

"You know. Your girlfriend? Elena?" she prompted.

He stared at her forehead for another moment before beginning to laugh. "Elena is most certainly not my girlfriend."

"Oh really?" she questioned skeptically.

"Yeah, really. First of all, we'd drive each other friggin' nuts. Second, she's involved with Reeve."

"Then why is Reeve talking to those people over by the food while Elena's over there making out with that guy?"

"What?" He spun, forcibly taking Kiyara with him, to face the direction that she was pointing. Sure enough, Elena was in a dark corner near the restroom with a young male that Reno didn't recognize, kissing up a storm. And even as he watched, he saw her eyes flicker to Reeve across the room, then back again.

"They must be in a fight; she's trying to make him jealous," he mused.

She gave a silent nod and continued rocking back and forth to the music with him.

"D'you believe me now? There's nobody. I don't go in much for the whole 'going steady' thing anyway," he finished with a slight smirk.

He knew immediately that it was the wrong thing to say as the blonde head came back and she gently pushed herself away from him. Kiyara just looked at him for a moment, staring into his green eyes without a sound.

He grinned crookedly and broke the silence with, "Reminds me of the way you looked at me on my roof. Care to try that again here?"

She didn't scoff or roll her eyes as he'd expected; instead, she refused to meet his eyes. Bad sign. "No, Reno. Not again. That was a mistake. Whatever it was that we had is over." She turned to go, but he grasped her arm, face a mask of puzzlement.

"Why?"

"There doesn't have to be a reason."

He shook his head stubbornly, the frown swiftly taking over all other facial expressions. "Why?"

"Hindsight. Bad idea."

"Somehow, I don't think that's it." He snapped his fingers, the mocking smirk growing again. "I know; you've got the hots for Rude and you were using me to get close to him!"

She gave an exasperated sigh. "Reno--"

"I hate to tell you, Kiy, but he's a married man," he barreled onward.

"Reno, let go of me," she gritted.

He was continuing through her protests, eyes high in the air, as though she wasn't standing before him. "And I don't think Faye would be too fond of your attraction."

"I mean it."

"Well, I guess I could introduce the two of y--"

"Reno!" she yelped angrily, then lowered her voice again as she noticed all of the faces turned their way. Relenting, she replied softly with a heavy accent stressed on both words, "I'm married." Kiyara wrested out of his suddenly limp grasp and moved quickly away, weaving through dancing couples.

Reno was left with his mouth agape. "What...the...fuck."

* * * * *

"You're so lovely, my dear," said the fifth consecutive graying, older woman. "The newspaper shots from three years ago do you no justice."

Tifa smiled warmly for the fifth time, only a tad of that initial bashfulness remaining. "Thank you, Mrs. Westinghouse; you're too kind."

Several moments—and lots of small talk—later, Mrs. Westinghouse moved off, smiling broadly and saying to her husband, "What a nice young lady."

With the departure of the two publishing magnates, Tifa finally found herself alone, the crowd of curious well-wishers having dissipated. Grateful for the momentary respite, she moved to the bar, blue heels clicking quietly on the marbled green floor under the general hum of voices and laughter. She squeezed past two conspicuous tall men in black suits, and made a mental note to tell Reeve that his security people didn't blend in well at all.

With a sigh of relief as the weight was taken from her aching feet, she sank onto a deep red leather stool.

"May I help you, Miss?" asked the bartender, who Tifa recognized as Reeve's dark-haired assistant Emmanuel that she had met earlier.

"Surprise me," she replied, crossing her legs and placing her feet on the metal bar running across the bottom of the seat, resting her lower back and arms along the wooden bar itself.

While the young man clattered and poured things behind her, Tifa took in her surroundings. The room was massive, with incredibly high ceilings from which crystalline chandeliers hung. The walls were a plain white, though one entire wall was taken up by a massive picture window, and another covered by a mural of the city at night. A small classical-style band had set up in one corner and was currently regaling the groups of guests scattered throughout the space with a slow tune. In the center was the dance floor, where couples—and one or two odd loners—were swaying back and forth to the music. The bar was set up along one wall, food tables on the same as the mural, and the main doors to enter were on the one remaining partition.

"So? What do you think?" came a quiet voice from her left elbow.

"It's lovely. Quite the improvement on the old Shinra company headquarters," she responded, slowly turning to face Reeve.

"I should hope so." He was cut off for a moment as Emmanuel leaned between them to hand Tifa her drink.

"Emmanuel, you bartend too?" asked Reeve, looking faintly amused.

The lackey shrugged. "Tips and free drinks." He seemed to remember who he was speaking to. "Sir."

The brunette woman took a sip from the large, expensive looking glass after eyeing the creamy brown beverage dubiously as Reeve and Emmanuel spoke. Her eyes widened as she gave a cough, and Reeve laughed while Emmanuel looked to be hiding a grin. "A Crazy Carnival is what you make when somebody asks you to surprise them?" she asked the dark-haired boy incredulously.

Emmanuel raised an eyebrow. "How'd you know what it was?"

"Bartender," Tifa said with a slight smile.

"I hate to interrupt, but scotch on the rocks, if you please, Emmanuel," said the Wutaian man to his assistant.

The younger man nodded. "Coming right up, sir!"

"What's in your drink?" asked Reeve as Emmanuel puttered around in the background.

"Chocolate liquor, vodka, and a couple of other ingredients. Emmanuel went pretty heavy on the vodka and light on the chocolate liquor," Tifa replied, still warily watching the beverage.

Reeve chuckled at her intensity. "I don't think it's going to bite you."

"No, but it'll get me very drunk. I'm trying to decide if I want to or not."

He laughed outright at her comment, accepting the small glass filled with transparent amber liquid from Emmanuel with a wordless nod of thanks. He took a gulp, then said with a crooked smile, "I hear through the grapevine that you're a very nice young lady."

She shook her head. "All of these people are being so nice to me... I just don't understand it!"

"So you're having a good time of it, then?"

"Yes; I don't see what you were talking about when you described how awful these were, Reeve." Tifa stared at the beverage for another moment before deciding, Aww, to hell with it. Go ahead; get drunk. You've earned it. She knocked back a good deal of the drink in one gulp.

"Well, I'm sure I'd enjoy myself too if people just came up to me constantly and told me how beautiful I was," Reeve said wryly with a grin. "No complainers, no discussion of golf, no responsibilities." The smile on his face took all possible sting out of his good-natured words. "Besides, everyone is behaving unusually well tonight. I've only had to politely head off one distinguished angry drunk so far, and I haven't yanked Reno out of a closet or office with someone's wife or daughter yet."

Tifa giggled, before making a faint bubbling sound as more of her drink disappeared. "The presence of Kiyara probably has something to do with that."

Reeve paused with his newly gained glass halfway to his lips. "Come again?"

"Well, you've got to have seen the way they're looking at each other," she informed him, feeling the champagne begin to loosen her tongue. "I mean, just look at them!" She gestured expansively toward the dance floor. Reeve followed the swoop of her hand to see the pair in question wrapped in each others' arms, deep in conversation.

The dark-haired man only took a quick glance before turning back to the bar and downing the remainder of his scotch in one large gulp before responding, "No, actually. I hadn't noticed before."

Tifa frowned. "Are you alright, Reeve? You look a little pale?"

He nodded. "Yeah, I'm fine." He smiled kindly, all traces vanished of that odd, indescribable emotion that Tifa had seen for a split second. He extended a hand to her. "Would you care to dance?"

He was instantly glad that he had asked as her face lit up like a Christmas tree. It looked as though she had been just waiting for somebody to ask her this. "I would love to." She swallowed the last of the Crazy Carnival and walked with him to the center of the dance floor.

She took his left hand with her right, and snaked her left arm around the back of his neck. Tifa felt his right appendage

circle her waist and she happily leaned her head upon his shoulder,—which she had to lean down a considerable amount to do; she was just about his height in heels—disentangling her hand from his and resting it on his chest to play with his tie contentedly.

He chuckled slightly at her. “Miss Lockhart— ”

“Jeez, Reeve, how many times do I have to tell you? It’s Tifa. Please.”

“Tifa, I do believe you’re drunk.”

“No, I’m not. It takes more than that to get a bartender drunk,” she mumbled to his tie. “I’m just a bit tipsy; a little alcohol loosens me up so it seems like I’m drunk but I’m really just...”

“Tipsy?” he suggested.

She blinked, long lashes obscuring burgundy eyes for a moment as her face frowned in an exaggerated expression of confusion before replying, “I don’t remember what I was going to say.”

He laughed again before quieting and resting his cheek gently against her temple and closing his own eyes tiredly, a move that he would never have made if he hadn’t been so exhausted and Tifa hadn’t seemed so drunk. I need sleep so badly...

However, all coherent thought was driven from his brain—especially thought about sleep— when, a moment later, he felt warm lips brush lightly along his jawbone. He started, brown eyes flying open to find Tifa looking at him with a faint smile quirking her mouth. She gave him a questioning look, as if to ask ‘is this alright?’ In response, he leaned toward her, letting his body do the thinking that his mind wasn’t eager to do.

The kiss was tender and quiet and lingering, and Reeve’s right hand slid further up her back to pull her tighter to his chest. She smiled under his mouth, moving her own arm that had been toying with his tie to wrap around his neck, while the other hand cradled the back of his head, fingers intertwining in his black hair. Their eyes met for a long second. His brown orbs were a little uncertain but calm as always, and hers were clear—making Reeve even more certain that the drunkenness was an act—and shyly flicked away but always returned to him, as if drawn.

They were so involved in each other that they didn’t notice the photographer until it was too late. The telltale flash went off and click sounded, and they pushed away from each other instinctively, embarrassedly, a split second after the photo had been taken. The young blonde woman in the flaming red gown grinned saucily at Reeve before moving swiftly toward the exit, expensive-looking camera clutched tightly in one hand.

Reeve felt his throbbing migraine return as he and Tifa stared at each other for a moment, expressions mortified. He finally broke the silence. “Oh shit.”

“Who was that?” asked Tifa quietly.

“Avery St. Clair. Vicious photojournalist for the tabloids,” he responded automatically, mind miles away. What...the fuck did you just do, Kazuma? He ran a slightly shaking hand through his hair, unknowingly raising a messy hell.

Tifa smiled faintly, a little surprised by her own boldness. “Let me get that.” She reached up and carefully patted down his hair.

The innocent, endearing gesture was more than he could bear. I’ve got to get out of here. “I’m sorry; I’ve got to go deal with St. Clair. And then I’ve got some papers I’ve forgotten to look at in my office.”

She looked hurt, rejected, upset, for a brief second, then hid it very well with an expression of benign resignation. “Okay.”

Even before she had finished speaking, Reeve had turned on his heel and slipped through the crowd, leaving Tifa alone, watching him walk away.

* * * * *

“Yuffie!” called out the deep voice, like a subliminal message or something, the young woman in question mused to herself.

“Yuffie,” said Nanaki again, walking up beside her.

The ex-ninja smiled broadly. “Heya Reddie; how are ya?”

“I have nothing to complain of. You’re looking well these days.”

And she was. Over the past three years, Yuffie Kisaragi had matured in leaps and bounds—both mentally and physically. She was now grown to a height of 5’6”—a considerable leap from her former 5’2”—and had finally grown into her long limbs. No longer an awkward teenager, she was a graceful young lady who left men staring. Her shoulder-length black hair was pulled into an elegant French braid with white flowers interspersed, and she wore a form-fitting stunningly white gown with elaborate ebony scrollery up one side. The collar of the dress was high and nearly rose to her chin, much like old-styled Wutaian kimonos. Her golden bracelets, rings, and multiple earrings tinkled merrily as she walked, and her green eyes twinkled intelligently in a face that had thinned out and lost its chubby look over the years.

“I guess being a leader agrees with me,” she responded amiably with a grin. To the Wutaian man and woman glancing her—both dressed to kill...or to fit in at the gathering—she added, “Move off, Kensho, Megumi. Enjoy yourselves.”

“Sumi, Lady Kisaragi— ” protested the woman.

The man cut her off, saying something in rapid-fire Wutaian that Nanaki couldn’t follow.

Yuffie put out an imperious manicured hand and they both immediately silenced. She also spoke Wutaian, though more slowly, which Nanaki suspected was for his benefit. He quickly translated as she spoke. “I’m perfectly capable of taking care of myself and you know it. You may stay in the room, but do not dog my footsteps. Enjoy yourselves.” Then she added in pure Yuffie fashion, “You’re cramping my style, guys!”

The pair walked off, glowering in their zeal to protect the lady of Wutai.

“So Godo has been passing more and more power to you, then?” asked Nanaki, trotting beside her as she moved in the direction of the food table.

“Yeah; guess the old bastard’s finally starting to trust me, huh?” she questioned, good humor apparent.

Red chuckled lightly. “So where is Jun tonight?”

Yuffie rolled her eyes expressively. “Don’t even mention that dumbass.”

The fiery beast managed to hide his smile quickly. “You two have split up again?”

She glowered. “Yes. That idiot took m—” The Wutaian woman froze in her tracks halfway through the sentence, reaching down to place a shocked hand on his broad back in much the way that she would grab the arm of a human. “Do you see that, Reddie?!”

Her companion followed her gaze to where Rahilah was seated uneasily back on her haunches, watching Cid Highwind, who was in turn uncomfortably standing with his hands in his pockets as though he'd run out of anything to say. "Ahh, yes. Come. I'll introduce you."

The dark-haired girl stared. "What?"

Nanaki just continued to calmly walk forward, and Yuffie clattered up to join him after a moment. "Red, who is he? Where'd you find him?!"

"She is Rahilah. All will be explained later, after most of the guests have left. Possibly in the morning, if it gets to be too late."

"So she has something to do with why you guys called me here?" questioned the ever-curious young lady.

"Everything will be explained in due time," Nanaki muttered to her, then they were upon Rahilah and Cid.

A grin threatened to split Yuffie's face in half as she nodded to Cid. "Old man."

He tipped his head in return. "Brat."

Rahilah watched the quick exchange with some confusion before Yuffie turned to her. "Hi, I'm Yuffie Kisaragi." She extended a hand.

The tall beast hesitated for a moment, then balanced on three legs to give Yuffie her right forepaw, which the human shook with a smile. "Rahilah."

"It's so great to meet you; we've all wondered if Red was the last of his species."

Rahilah swiftly recovered from her surprise at the warmth of her welcome, but then her eyes widened slightly as she realized where she had heard the name before. "You're the leader of Wutai."

"Well, not technically. My dad is really the lord of Wutai, but I handle public appearances and stuff 'cause he's getting old," Yuffie amended.

Tifa walked up just then, cheeks pink and manner faintly downcast, and the topic of Wutaian politics was lost.

Yuffie flung herself happily on the older woman. "Tifa!"

Tifa's expression brightened. "Yuffie!" She returned the dark-haired girl's hug, then stepped back to cast a critical eye over her old friend. "Ooh, I love your dress! Where did you get it?"

"Tomayuki's in Wutai made it specially for me," she beamed, spinning on her black high heels to model the back of the gown as well.

"Is that silk?" Tifa asked, reaching down and rubbing a finger along the hem.

"Yep! Daddy insisted on velvet, so I chose silk. I think he said he supported velvet, though, because he knew I'd go for the opposite."

"Can you imagine what this would look like in velvet?"

"I know! It would look so gross! So I said to the designer, 'you've got to make this in your best silk' and then I went and talked to the jewelry designer and she said..."

As the two women continued their cheerful prattle, Cid shook his head and said to Nanaki, "They killed how many monsters in their day and got all kinds've shit all over them, and they still turn into a pair of babbling idiots over clothes."

"I don't understand it," Nanaki agreed.

Cid scoffed. "You wouldn't anyway."

Nanaki pondered for a moment, then grinned in amusement.

* * * * *

The wooden office door flung open and shut as if propelled by the winds of nature's worst gale, and Reeve didn't even bother to look up from the computer. "Hello Elena," he said wryly.

The blonde woman was standing before his desk, fair hair and skin giving off a faint luminosity in the dark caused by the lack of lights. Her hands were at her sides and balled into two fists, and she was glaring.

As usual.

"Ooh, don't you dare 'hello Elena' me!" she retorted angrily. "And look at me when I talk, for Leviathan's sake!"

Reeve's head shot up and he slammed his open palms down on the desk with a loud slap as he stood. "What do you want this time, Elena? What have I done now that's so awful that you have just got to come storming in here and bitch me out about it?" he snapped, bristling with rage. "I am tired of it! I'm not just going to sit here and take it anymore. Get. Out. Get the fuck out of my office!"

She looked taken aback, then her hands slowly came together in applause, killing the silence following his outburst. "Congratulations, Reeve, you've grown a backbone," she said dryly.

The Wutaian man stood there for a long moment, then dropped back into his chair, looking faintly sheepish, and propped his feet up on his desk, pulling his laptop into his lap. "I'm sorry. What is it, Elena?"

The peeved expression dropped from her face as she walked around his desk, trailing her fingers across its smooth, varnished surface as she moved. Her head was down, but she looked to him again after a minute or two, perching herself on the piece of furniture right beside his feet. "What went wrong between us, Reeve? Really?"

He stared at her in disbelief. "One, I can't believe you're asking me that when you were so specific on this same subject last week."

She didn't bat an eyelash in the face of his sarcasm. "And two?"

He shook his head wearily. "Your timing sucks."

Elena gave him 'The Look', drawing her eyebrows together and pursing her mouth in annoyance.

"You want to know what went wrong? Can't remember? Well. I'd be glad to refresh your memory." He paused, relenting from his caustic tirade and continuing in a softer tone. "I was honest. And you didn't like my response."

“ ‘Didn’t like your response’? Reeve, you told me that we were together because I and my name resembled some old girlfriend and her name!”

“No, Elena. I said that that was what originally attracted me to you. Did I ever say that it was why I stayed with you? Did I say I didn’t love you?”

She shook her head reluctantly, sadly. “No. But you might as well have. If we’d stayed together, I would have been paranoid. Every time you looked at me or kissed me or said my name, I would have wondered, ‘is he thinking about her’? And I can’t live with that. I refuse to complete with some long-gone woman that you were involved with 25 years ago.” Her eyes flashed proudly and she sat up straighter.

“I know, Elena. You told me all of this in a distinctly less than polite manner last week,” Reeve answered, hitting several keys on the computer before looking to the woman, then leaning his neck against his chair, letting his head flop over the back.

She colored faintly. “Right.”

“Why now, Elena? Why do you feel the need to bring this up right now?”

“What’s the matter, Reeve? This coming at a bad time, what with Tifa and all?” asked Elena, voice filled with a sticky, false sweetness.

The dark haired man slapped a hand over the upper portion of his face. “Oh gods, don’t do this now.”

“Do what?” she asked innocently.

He groaned. “Stop it. I hate it even more when you pretend to be nicey nice than when you’re pissed.”

Her manner immediately became more sober and uptight, expression becoming so annoyed that it was almost comical. “All right. Fine.”

Reeve’s head was still drooped over the back of his chair. “Thanks much.”

There was a long silence as the president of one of the richest global corporations continued in his half-asleep state while Elena shifted uneasily, twisting her fingers into knots.

He finally opened his eyes, snapping his head up to look at her. “What is it, Elena? I can hear you biting your nails.”

“Shh,” she said in response. At his outraged stare, she added, “I’m weighing my killer curiosity against the fact that it’s not my business, especially with me being the ex-girlfriend. And I can’t weigh while you’re talking.”

He gave her a righteous glare. “I think I know what you’re going to ask, and you’re absolutely right when you say it’s none of your business.”

She continued to gnaw on her fingernails, watching as Reeve grew visibly more agitated by the crunching, squishing sounds emanating from where her fingers met her mouth. He began to drum his fingers on his desk.

Taptaptaptaptap. Clack, slurp, click. Taptaptaptaptap. Snap, squish, gl—

The Wutaian man sat up and pulled his feet from the desk to thud onto the floor in one smooth movement. “I can’t take it

anymore. It's none of your business, but what do you want to know?"

Elena hid a triumphant, devious grin. "Well, gee, I— "

"Oh, stop acting coy and just ask," interrupted Reeve irritably.

"What's going on with Lockhart?" Her pert face was scrunched up in that little frown that Reeve remembered so well, that frown that always seemed to show up whenever her curiosity did.

He ran a hand through his hair. "The question of the hour."

"Aha!"

"... 'Aha'?"

A blush appeared on her cheeks. "I noticed what happened when you were dancing, and you just proved my theory about what happened."

"Glad to please, Dr. Sader," Reeve replied, hitting one key repeatedly on his laptop in annoyance.

"You're being stupid."

"Sarcasm isn't stupid."

"I mean with Lockhart."

He gave her an incredulous look. "Even I don't know what's going on with Tifa. How do you?"

She stared him down, crossing her legs comfortably and swinging her feet, repeatedly hitting the side of the desk with a thunk. "Reeve. I shared an apartment, a bed, and a life with you for seven months. I think I can tell what you're thinking by now."

He sat back in his chair and crossed his arms over his chest, nodding to her. "Please, enlighten me, Doctor."

Elena began to airily inspect her chewed-up fingernails. "You're feeling overwhelmed. There's the break-up with me, the guilt for the 1200 dead soldiers at the Crater, the death of..."—here she pulled a distasteful face but continued anyway—"Ellie—"

"How'd you know?" he interrupted, brown eyes wide.

"Maiden, in the conference room. He's obviously her son, from the way you spoke to him and reacted," she responded gravely.

He nodded faintly in both confirmation and invitation to continue.

"And on top of all this, you've got poor little defenseless, whimpering, cowed, unhap—"

"Elena." His tone held a warning.

"Tifa Lockhart looking to you for help and flinging herself at you. You're interested in her, but I think I've managed to slightly jade you on women—go me—and you feel like it's not proper or respectful to go after her so soon after we broke

up and finding out about Ellie's death."

His annoyed, faintly bemused air had disappeared, and he was now looking at her in surprise. "How'd you know all that?"

"See above comment about apartment, bed, and life."

Reeve leaned back and clapped his hand over his face again. "I can't believe I'm asking you this—I know you were just waiting for it—but what's your take on it?"

"You really want to know what I think?" she asked, stepping down onto the floor slowly and looming over him.

He watched her warily for a moment, then threw up his hands. "Sure. Yes."

Elena slammed the computer shut, pulling it off of his lap and dropping it onto his desk unceremoniously.

"Hey!" he protested.

"I think you need you stop hiding," she told him, completely brisk and business-like, leaning down to look him in the eye. "You're hiding physically in your office and mentally behind that list that I just gave you. I know you, Reeve. And I know that you're relationship-shy. I had to be aggressive as hell to get you. But Lockhart's not going to make the first move here."

"So you think that I need to?" he asked quietly.

The blonde woman nodded. "Bingo."

Reeve closed his eyes in deep thought before glancing to her again.

Elena took the look as a plea to continue convincing. "You need to let go of Elisa.....and me. I think—even if Lockhart is young enough to be your daught—"

"Elenaaa," he groaned, resting his head on the desk.

"I think that she..." She sighed. "I think that she could be good for you and you're going to lose her if you just sit here." The words came out in a rapid jumble that took Reeve a moment or two to decipher.

But when he did, he recognized the wisdom to what she had said, and he climbed to his feet. "You're right. You're absolutely right." As he scrambled around the desk toward the door, he turned for a split second to flash her a smile and a quick, "Thanks, 'Lena" before disappearing down the hall.

Elena listened to his footsteps fade and sat down heavily on the edge of the desk, head bowed to her chest. "You're welcome," she murmured quietly, using her fingernail to repeatedly trace the swirling pattern of the wood on his desk.

* * * * *

With the main group of AVALANCHE members, Yuffie and Tifa were still happily discussing fashion, while Nanaki and Cid were carrying on a good-natured argument about why women enjoyed clothes so much. Rahilah listened to both conversations quietly, feeling like an outsider.

"You're right; still, I supposed not wearing clothes has its advantages," said Nanaki. "Oh, and Barret has arrived."

The pilot frowned. "How the hell d'you—" A massive hand slapped him on the back, nearly knocking him to the ground.

"Know," he finished weakly.

" 'Ey Cid!" noisily greeted the giant of a man standing beside him.

Cid waved wordlessly, still recovering from the heavy blow, while Red piped in with, "Hello Barret."

"Barret! How's Marlene?" Tifa called to the towering black man, breaking her indistinguishable conversation with Yuffie.

"She's doin' just fine, Teef, wants to know when her Aunty Tifa's comin' to visit her again," replied Barret. He was tall and muscled, with short black hair and warm brown eyes set back in a deceptively fearsome face. He wore a tuxedo and looked fairly comfortable in it, besides the way that the bow-tie was wrapped tightly around his thick neck. His right hand was missing; instead, there was a round, steel gun grafted to it.

"You just want me to come and cook for you again," Tifa retorted, eyes sparkling with mirth.

"Maybe," he conceded with a grin.

"Ahem!" coughed Yuffie, and Barret looked to her and did a double-take.

"Are you even taller, Yuffie? How high're those damn shoes of yours?"

"One inch," she told him proudly.

Nanaki broke in again. "Barret."

"Oh hey, dawg, didn't see you there."

Barret received a cold glare for his troubles. "How many times do I have to tell you? I. Am. Not. A. Dog."

"I don' mean it like an actual dog, I m—" Barret's eyes finally came to rest on Rahilah, who had been standing shyly beside Red throughout. "Who's this?"

She gave a smile and offered her paw timidly. "Rahilah."

He shook it with surprising gentleness. "Barret Wallace." He looked from Nanaki to Rahilah and back again. "Wh—"

Dead silence fell as a tuxedo-clad Cloud Strife walked up to the group. He nodded to Yuffie and Barret uneasily, and they both stared at him with icy, speechless anger. "Hey Yuffie. Barret."

"That's Lady Kisaragi and Mayor Wallace to you, asshole," Yuffie snapped frostily.

Cloud looked pained and turned away from her. "Barret, how's Marlene?" he asked, referring to the man's daughter and unknowingly echoing Tifa's earlier question.

"I got no words for you, bastard, an' you know it," Barret replied, face stony.

"I do, though," Cid put in, his own expression set angrily. "They're two words, universally understood." He leaned in close to the blond man's face. "Fuck. Off."

Yuffie gave a small round of applause, while Barret's mouth moved into a grim smile. There was no reaction from Tifa or Nanaki, while Rahilah just watched, as confused as ever.

“Red?” Cloud asked, a pleading note entering his voice.

Even the gentle, non-judgmental Nanaki was glaring at him and said nothing.

The ex-SOLDIER finally halted in front of Tifa, who had been staring at him the whole time as if she’d forgotten that he existed—which, in fact, she had during the last 45 minutes, the past ten in particular. “Tifa? I need to talk to you. Will you listen?”

Yuffie opened her mouth as if to declare that Tifa would most certainly not listen and Cid clapped a hand over her mouth, knowing that Tifa would have to make that decision herself.

The brunette’s eyes bored into Cloud for a long moment, then she shook her head jerkily. “Not right now, Cloud. Sometime in the near future, yes, but not right now.” She spun and walked off quickly, away from his searching face.

Cloud scrambled after her before anyone could stop him. “Why not?”

Tifa didn’t halt and turned her head to one side, resolutely ignoring the man at her right.

“Dammit, Tifa, why not?” His voice took on a harder edge.

“B...because!” she burst out, continuing to stride toward that elusive door.

“That childish excuse just doesn’t cut it, Tifa,” he hissed, voice beginning to sound like that icy monster that it had been that night three years ago. His cold fingers clamped around her upper arm and began to squeeze painfully, and she froze in place.

“Please let go, Cloud,” she said, ashamed to find her voice shaking.

Hit him, dammit! Don’t let him hurt you again!

And that voice made its reappearance again. You can’t, can you? My, my, my, this is delightful! He could hurt you all he wants and you wouldn’t lift a finger against him. Ha ha, where’s the comfortable chair and popcorn when you need it?

Noticing one or two people around them beginning to watch oddly, Cloud swiftly pulled Tifa into the midst of the dance floor, ducking in and around people until they were hidden from sight. The woman followed numbly, mesmerized by the man whose hand was pinching her wrist and by the voice inside of her head.

“So, Tifa, ready to listen to me yet?” he asked, that creepy lilt still in his voice as her moved her limp, unresponsive arms to rest on his shoulders and he wrapped his own arms around her waist to hold her tightly to his body in a grip that made her feel like her ribs were caving in. His short fingernails dug into her skin through the thick fabric of the dress. It was like that night...

Hmm, yes, that night. Let’s see if we can draw some interesting parallels, shall we?

* * * * *

The room was dark, different items casting odd shadows as the rain smattered against the windows. The brunette woman wearing a white tank top and tiny black miniskirt was seated on a stool, her head cradled in her arms on the bar. She wasn’t moving.

The girl with short black hair—Yuffie—crept past, orange sneakers making next to no noise on the floor as she weaved through the boxes in various stages of unpacking.

Tifa, at the bar, gave a start and raised her head hopefully. “Cloud?”

Yuffie winced. “No, Tifa, it’s Yuffie.”

Tifa sighed. “Oh. I heard the noise, and...”

The younger girl let out a whoosh of breath as well and plopped onto a stool beside Tifa. “I know, Teef, I know. He’ll be back soon.”

“ ‘Be back soon’? Yuffie, that’s what he said to me when he went out to pick up some groceries four days ago!”

The younger girl opened her mouth to speak, then shrugged, speechless for once.

Tifa stood, gracefully stretching and moving around to the other side of the bar. “If you don’t mind, Yuffie, I’d rather be alone for a little while.”

The ninja stared at her feet, then nodded and quietly vanished up the stairs, where the rest of Tifa’s friends were sleeping.

Pouring herself some cold coffee, Tifa was in the middle of dumping in an exorbitant amount of sugar when the door opened to reveal Cloud Strife standing there, shoving back the windbreaker hood from his head and shaking away raindrops.

She set the mug down heavily and flew to him, going to fling her arms around his neck. “Cloud!”

The slap of hand striking flesh rang out, and Tifa was flung to the ground, lying on her side and staring up at Cloud in stupefied shock. A booted foot drove into her stomach, driving her backward to ram into a packing crate. “Hi Tifa. Nice to see you again, honey,” he jeered, throwing off his jacket and crouching beside her. A small rivulet of blood escaped from her mouth as her wide, trusting burgundy eyes watched him, a look of horror beginning to grow on her beautiful face.

He leaned down with a smirk and kissed her roughly, driving the back of her head into the floor and his tongue halfway down her throat. This was the moment that Tifa had been waiting for since that night so many years ago at the well in Nibelheim, but something about it didn’t feel right. It felt very wrong, in fact. A thought that was vindicated even further a moment later when he knelt with one knee on either side of her waist, leaning an arm on either shoulder to pin her to the ground. At the same time, Cloud detached himself from her mouth and ripped her white shirt off over her head, exposing her breasts.

Sometime deep inside of the woman realized what was going to happen, and enabled her to give one desperate, full-throated scream before he struck her in the face again, leaving her ears ringing from the force of the blow.

“Shut up, you stupid bitch!” Cloud growled, breath hot in her face.

One of his hands reached for the zipper on the back of her skirt, and Tifa found herself galvanized into action, battling him wildly with the arm that he wasn’t holding down. His fist connected, harder than before, with the side of her head again, and she slumped back, dazed. His face loomed in her vision again, now enraged as his mouth moved in words that she couldn’t seem to hear, and she felt his hand slide down her backside with the zipper.

A sudden, loud shout rang out and his weight was lifted off of her in a blur. Instinctively, Tifa sat up and skittered backward frantically on her hands and posterior until she hit a corner, where she wedged herself in and crossed her arms over her exposed chest protectively before glancing up to see what was happening.

Yuffie had apparently taken a running dive and tackled Cloud off to one side, because she was now kneeling over him with the wooden haft of a mop pressed tightly to the ex-SOLDIER's throat, holding him to the ground. With a roar of effort, he surged up and flung the girl off, sending her into the air to slam into a chair as he leapt to his feet. His eerie blue eyes looked to Tifa again, but before he could take a step, there were several bodies between the two childhood friends. A sharp, golden thing shoved a curtain of crimson in her face, and Tifa's reflexes caused her to quickly cower and duck.

When she looked again, Vincent—seeing the distress on her face—had switched his cape from the claw to his real hand and still offered it to her. With a murmur of thanks, she took it and threw it over her shoulders, holding it tightly shut with one hand before shaking her head lightly at his proffered hand and curling up further into the corner, thinking that she was going to vomit if she stood. Vincent took up a position directly beside her, aiming his gun at Cloud over Barret's shoulder.

To her right, Yuffie was shaking her head and slowly getting standing, while Nanaki, Barret, and Cid were standing between Tifa and Cloud. Nanaki's claws and teeth were bared, while Barret—looking groggy but angry in just a white short-sleeve shirt and large baggy black pants—had his gun arm aimed directly at the former hero. Cid was easily the most comical, hair ruffled beyond belief and winking sleep out of his eyes as he clutched the Venus Gospel with the wrong end pointing outward, and Yuffie, despite the seriousness of the situation, made a faint noise at his chocobo-print boxer shorts.

"Stuff it, Yuffie," Cid grumbled under his breath, poking at her with what he thought was the blunt end of the Venus Gospel. The girl barely dodged in time to avoid being a Yuffie-kabob.

"What the hell're you doin', Cloud?" asked Barret, looking unsure of what to make of what was going on.

"That's not Cloud," Yuffie said before the man in question could answer, moving to stand beside Cid while glaring at him and pointing at his lance to show that he was holding it the wrong way. "It can't be!"

"Aww, c'mon, guys. Just having a bit of fun," said Cloud with a devilish, evil smile. In the background, the pilot quickly turned his spear to face the other way.

Nanaki shook his head swiftly. "No, Yuffie, it is Cloud. He sounds and smells right."

"Hmm...the animal is right!" shouted Cloud with that awful grin as he saw the object of his derision stiffen. "Oh, I'm sorry, that's what you hate the most, isn't it? People thinking that you're an animal, with no thoughts or feelings. Hell, screw 'people thinking', you're terrified that you are just an animal with the capability of speech. And let me tell you something, Red XIII...you're right!" The last two words were whisper-screamed, but Nanaki looked as though he had been struck.

"Stop it, Cloud!" Yuffie yelled in response, hand on one hip.

"SHUT UP, YUFFIE!" he suddenly shrieked in a voice that was louder than should have been physically possible. "NOBODY CARES WHAT YOU THINK BECAUSE YOU'RE JUST A WHINY LITTLE BITCH WHO DOES NOTHING BUT GET IN EVERYONE'S WAY! WE ONLY GET YOU STAY BECAUSE YOUR FATHER WAS LORD OF WUTAI!"

That also apparently struck home, because the knuckles on the hand clutching the shuriken grew white. But her eyes flashed in rage, and she stubbornly retorted, "At least I didn't make up a story about myself being in SOLDIER just to look good, coma boy!"

Cloud gave a wordless growl and began to walk toward them slowly.

"What the fuck is that crazy bastard doing?" asked Cid to no one in particular.

Cloud halted and looked at him. "Cid, ever heard of the word 'failure'? Failed rocket, failed career, failed life, failed relationship with Shera—"

"Hey, don't you fucking bring Shera into this," Cid hissed, voice low.

"Ooh, struck a nerve," the other blond man said with a smirk. "I'm a little surprised that she's your weakness, I must say. That nasty act of yours was good. I never even realized that you didn't hate her more than anything in the world. I wonder if she realized it. Y'think? I don't. She thinks you hate her. She thinks you really think of her as an animal; no life, no thoughts of her own, just 'yes, Captain' and 'no, Captain'. No surprise, really. What with the tongue-lashings, name-calling, barrages of insults, cursing, beatings..."

Cid was still as a statue; dangerously squinted, glittering eyes the only clue as to how close he was to ramming his lance right through the man's chest. "I would never lay a finger on Shera, you fucking asshole."

"What is spiky-ass here smokin'?" muttered Barret in the silence that ensued.

Cloud spun on his heel and began pacing toward the former rebel leader with carefully measured footsteps. "Aah, Barret, Barret, Barret, Barret. What to say about Barret? How about 'you're a stupid son of a bitch who nearly killed us all several times over with your impetuosity'? I mean, come on!" He laughed. "Walking right into the lobby of the Shinra Building and just blazing away? Stupid." He noticed the deepening scowl on the dark-skinned man's face, and snickered again. "What're you gonna do now, spray me full of bullets wildly and/or hit your gun arm repeatedly on my head while screaming either, 'MARLEEEEEEEEEENE!' or a meaningless jumble of Ebonics?"

"What do you hope to accomplish by this endless stream of insults, Cloud?" spoke up Vincent quietly from his corner, arms folded over his chest.

"Not insults, Turk-boy, truth," Cloud retorted easily, turning now to the other man. "As for you, Vincent, there's really absolutely nothing to say. You stand around, look pretty, spout odd riddles that mean nothing, and moon over that woman, what's-her-name."

"Lucrecia," Vincent corrected impassively.

"Right. You have no personality." He looked him from head to toe with a smirk. "Or fashion sense."

Tifa struggled to her feet at this point from where she had been curled silently in the corner, listening. "Cloud, are you drunk?"

The Mako eyes sparkled with glee as he looked to her over his shoulder while executing a crazy spin that any ballerina would have been proud of. "Tifa." He took a deep breath, as though readying himself for a long speech.

"No, he's not," Nanaki replied quietly. "I would smell any alcohol or narcotics on him from a mile away."

Cloud actually giggled. "They should employ you as one of those sniffer dogs for airport security, Red. And he's right; I'm not drunk or high. I just went out one day and realized the hypocrisy of my life. I had fought for freedom, but here I was shackling myself to a woman that I didn't even like that much in the first place. And I was only doing this because I felt that it was my duty or something silly like that. With that realization, I figured out the truth about everything—and everyone else." He stared directly at Tifa, eyes grimly satisfied. "I loved Aeris Gainsborough, not you. 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."

His lip curled in a sneer, and the others looked to Tifa in concern about what the words had done to her. But she was standing there, proud even with a cape draped around her shoulders as a shirt, eyes flashing. And she was mad as hell, fists clenching and unclenching, voice clear and forceful. "Do you expect me to break down into tears and beg for forgiveness when I've done nothing wrong?! 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!"

Tifa marched to the door and held it open, eyes burning with both held-back tears and an incredible rage. "Get. Out."

"Ooh, maybe not as spineless as I thought," he mocked.

"Get the hell out!" she shouted, stomping her foot against the floor.

"Feisty." He gave a growl and laugh but moved toward the exit. As he meandered over the threshold, hands casually in his pockets, he remarked to Tifa, "Anybody ever tell you how hot you are when you're pissed off, baby?" He clicked his tongue and winked.

"Don't let the door hit your ass on the way out!" she replied, voice full of loathing, slamming the door with all of her considerable strength.

She didn't collapse until he had climbed into a cab and disappeared down the street.

* * * * *

Tifa's eyes were empty and vague, as though she'd escaped to another place.

Cloud shook her gently at first, but as he grew angrier and angrier, she flopped like a rag doll.

The voice was humming in sing-song. Nobody's gonna help you, nobody's gonna help you...

The room was whirling in a swirling kaleidoscope of bright colors, her head feeling as though it would break off from her neck as a result of the violent whiplash.

The voice still chanted. You can't do anything, you can't do anything...

"Tifa, are you gonna listen?"

You can't do a thing...

"Dammit, Tifa!"

Both voices began to blur together, with a low mechanical whine humming its discordant sound and swiftly growing in volume and speed.

Nobody's gonna help you...

"...listen yet?!"

...anything...

"...gonna..."

...can't...

"...you gonna listen?!"

Nobody...

"...Tifa..."

Something snapped. Enough! Without warning, she spun once while forcing her arms outward, breaking Cloud's grip even as she moved away from him. This was all accomplished in the space of a moment, and Tifa and Cloud stared at each other after she came to a halt, Tifa breathing hard. Her neck hurt like hell and she felt the beginnings of the fearsome migraine throb behind her temples. Disoriented, she staggered back several steps as she winced and brought a hand to her head.

Someone steadied her, leaving a hand on her shoulder, and she gratefully leaned on the male arm as a wave of nausea passed over her.

"Strife, that was assault and battery," came the quietly enraged voice from her right, and Tifa wasn't sure whether she was pleased or not to recognize the distinctive tone of Reeve Kazuma. After the encounter on the dance floor—and his reaction afterward—she didn't know quite how to feel about him. But Reeve or not, she was relieved to see that someone was there to support her, because she was currently afraid that she was going to sink to the ground and vomit.

"I'm going to call security," the Wutaian president went on, dark eyes hard and unflinching. "And if Tifa takes my suggestion, the police are also going to be called and charges pressed."

"B—" Cloud looked bewildered and confused, and Tifa felt a twinge as she recognized the expression. It was one that had popped up so often in those hectic forty-five minutes in the Lifestream flow in Mideel, one that she remembered from their childhood in Nibelheim.

Reeve made a quick hand movement, beckoning to someone across the room. Tifa, face rapidly paling as the sickened feeling in the pit of her stomach refused to quit, saw the two men in black suits that she had noticed earlier come striding through the crowd toward them.

"Reeve," she hissed as the pair approached, "I don't want to press charges."

He frowned and responded, "I think you should."

She shook her head, then regretted the swift motion as the clanging and pounding going on in her brain intensified. "No."

He looked doubtful. "If that's really what you want."

She gave the tiniest hint of a nod, trying not to move too much. "Yeah. Yeah, it is."

Reeve turned to the two security officers, who had halted in front of him, awaiting orders. "Please escort Mr. Strife from the building."

"Yes sir," said the slightly smaller man, his partner nodding. "If you please, Mr. Strife." He gestured toward the door.

Cloud was gaping at Tifa. "I...Gods, Tifa, I didn't mean to!" he burst out suddenly, voice low and meant for her ears only. "Tifa, Tifa, I'm so sorry!"

"Mr. Strife, please," the other security man said, more insistently this time.

"Cloud, please go with them," said Tifa quietly, refusing to make eye contact as he tried to lock orbs with her.

Cloud opened his mouth to protest, then closed it again, expression still desperate but more resigned and less wild-eyed. He nodded once, then looked to the security officers, who immediately flanked him.

He glanced back over his shoulder as he walked docilely between the two dark-clad men, and his eyes met for a long moment with Tifa's as she dumbly watched his back recede. Both looked stricken and shocked, while Cloud's brows were furrowed in guilt and Tifa's distressed gaze held a tinge of rightful anger. Then he was gone, vanished in the crowd.

"Tifa, are you alright?" Reeve asked, face creased in concern.

"I think I'm going to throw up," she answered calmly.

"Bathroom's over here." Completely unruffled by her serene announcement, he laid a light hand on her arm and guided her off of the dance floor, past the bar and mural and people who hadn't even noticed that anything different was occurring.

He led her to a door—then halted as the notice pinned to the heavy oak door swayed slightly. " 'Out of order'? Oh damn." Reeve glanced around swiftly, as if searching for an answer, then—with a quick look at Tifa's rapidly whitening countenance—he murmured, "Okay, c'mon, this way."

Tifa walked beside him silently, paying no attention to her surroundings as she fought to control the churning in her gut and heat in her throat. Needless to say, neither would just fade away.

She barely found herself kneeling over a toilet before the contents of her stomach emptied themselves in a violent surge. A hand rubbed her back in a move that reminded her of one of her fractured, few memories of her mother. Momentarily free of vomit, she looked blearily at Reeve, who was crouching beside her. "Where am I now?"

An eyebrow lifted. "The bathroom in my apartment. Don't you remember walking up here?"

She shook her head slowly, leaning heavily on the porcelain for support.

"How exactly does that happen?" He idly patted her shoulder as she retched again, then frowned as she recoiled with a faint gasp. "Tifa, wh—" He halted as he noticed the five flaming red dots—fingerprints—on her upper arm, and his jaw set angrily. "That son of a bitch."

She pointed a weak, shaking finger at him. "Hey. You lost the right to be righteously angry when you left me on the dance floor." While her voice held a tone of jocular, there was also some seriousness behind it.

He looked abashed, glancing down at the black tiles. "I was coming back to apologize and explain when I saw him shaking you."

Tifa, lips quirking, said, "Well?"

He cocked his head to one side. " 'Well' what?"

"Explanation?"

"Right?" He began to speak, then waited as she vomited.

After a minute or two, she sat back on her heels, and Reeve handed her a tissue. She smiled wanly as she spat in a most un-lady-like fashion and wiped her mouth with the flimsy piece of material, reaching up to flush the toilet. "And I always thought these things were useless."

"Feeling better?" he questioned, extending a hand to help her wobble unsteadily to her feet.

"Not really. I get the feeling I'm going to be in here again later," she replied, grimacing. "Ugh, do you have mouthwash or anything?"

"Sure." He pried open the mirror to reveal the rows of tubes and boxes, plucking out a large bottle full of green liquid and handing it to her, along with a little paper cup.

"Thanks." She unscrewed the cap and poured a small amount into the cup, then paused as she noticed the brightly colored sea animals dancing around the rim and gave a slight giggle despite the repulsive taste dogging her tongue. "Children's Fixie cups?"

He gave a grin. "What can I say; they make me laugh."

She shrugged with a faint smile and poured the contents of the container in question into her mouth, gargling for a moment before spitting it out into the sink.

"So you don't feel up to going back down there?" he asked, watching her walk out of the bathroom and sink down happily on the black leather sofa.

She groaned and let her aching head drop back onto the cushion. "I don't mean to be a burden, but I feel pretty bad."

"I'm guessing that the drive home would just about kill you." He leaned in the doorway, silhouetted by the bathroom light.

Tifa's eyes widened slightly at the prospect of a lengthy car ride, but she shook her head. "No, I think I could make it."

Reeve looked amused. "You're lying to my face. If it's fine with you, you're welcome to spend the night on my couch. I would offer you the bed and me the couch, but there's a clearer path to the toilet in here."

She gave a weak smile, leaning down to wrestle with one blue high heel. "If it wouldn't be too much trouble..."

"Not at all. Not at all." He walked closer and, getting down on one knee, assisted her with the evil strap of the shoe. "Now that that's worked out, I've got to ask, are you all right?"

"Really, Reeve, I'm fine." She kicked off the offending shoe, then the other.

"Why don't I believe you?" He stood and moved into his bedroom, and Tifa heard the opening and closing for drawers for the second time that day.

"Stop trying to change the subject; I want my explanation!" she called after him.

His voice floated to her through the open door. "Now who's trying to change the subject?"

"You," she responded bluntly.

Reeve laughed and reemerged with a cloth bundle. "All right, all right, I give up." He tossed the bundle at her.

It landed in her lap, and she frowned. "What's this?"

"Well, you can't exactly sleep in that dress, can you?" he asked practically.

She shook it out to reveal a pair of long black shorts with a drawstring, made up of a net-like material with closely drawn-together loops, and a thick gray T-shirt extolling the virtues of Midgar's losing baseball team. "Classy," she remarked.

He shrugged. "Workout clothes." His footsteps were muffled by the rug as he walked toward the door. "I've gotta get back down there, but the apartment's yours. Feel free to grab anything you need; I'll be back within an hour or so."

Tifa stood carefully and moved toward the bathroom. "Thanks, Reeve." She glanced back for a moment with the faintest hint of a smile lighting up her lovely face. "Thanks a lot."

His mouth quirked and he waved her off. "It's no problem at all; no need to thank me." He slipped out, the door clicking shut behind him.

* * * * *

Varicolored lights danced across the furniture, walls, and figure curled on the couch as Reeve crept in again two hours later, tossing off his shoes and setting them down quietly next to the entryway. Tifa was sprawled fast asleep on the couch, legs drawn up to her chest and hand clutching a fistful of the leather material making up the sofa. The light from the muted television bathed her peaceful, pale face with greens, violets, and reds.

The dark-haired man smiled, shaking his head to himself as he leaned down and turned off the television set. Almost expect her to start sucking her thumb. Padding into the bedroom in his stocking feet, he didn't bother to flick on the light switch, knowing that he could feel his way through the room in the dark; he never moved anything from its proper place.

Unfortunately, he failed to account for the mess that the angry Elena had left. A crash rang out, followed by noisy—if indistinguishable—cursing.

The brunette woman bolted upright; though her eyes were red and sleep-filled, she was immediately on the alert. "Reeve?" she called out cautiously, hands unconsciously falling into the familiar combat-ready pose that they took when she felt threatened.

The steady stream of obscenities halted, and the executive appeared in the door, limping slightly while favoring his right foot.

"What happened to you?" she asked, a faint light of mirth buried in her eyes and the way that her mouth kept tugging at its corners.

"Stepped on a dresser drawer that was lying on my floor," he replied with a scowl at his foot. "Sorry if I woke you."

Tifa was wearing the clothes that he had tossed to her earlier; the drawstring on the shorts pulled as tightly as possible, though the garment was still falling from her slim waist. The legs ended below her knees, and the shirt—while not exactly large—was not nearly as tight as some of her own clothes. Her hair had been let loose and cascaded to her calves, and her bare feet were comfortably tucked beneath her.

Reeve gave a smile; she looked like she belonged here, sleeping on his couch in his clothes with the television droning in the background. Honestly, it was a nice change from coming home to an empty apartment or a silently smoldering, angry girlfriend.

She shrugged, rubbing at her eyes tiredly. "It's fine. What'd I miss downstairs?"

"Your friends were wild with worry about you; I said I'd hooked you up with a hotel room because you were afraid to go home after Cloud assaulted you, and you wanted to be alone and undisturbed." He gave a small grin, dropping into the

over-stuffed chair as he loosened his tie. "I said this because I was afraid I'd get my ass kicked if I told the truth. Plus they'd all be up here talking at you and yelling about Cloud and all, and I figured you didn't want that."

She gave a sigh of relief. "Thanks."

"Welcome. And then I put them all up at the hotel, as well as the leaders of the city-states, for the big pow-wow in the morning." Reeve leaned back into the cushioned leather embrace and closed his eyes in contentment to be seated in his favorite chair in his own home, away from the pressure and people. "It's just been one of those days," he chuckled, a hint of bitterness to his good humor.

Tifa sighed, resting her elbow on the fat, padded armrest of the sofa and leaning the side of her face on her hand. "You can say that again."

He gave a faint smile. "Hasn't exactly been the best for you either, has it?"

She laughed quietly. "You can say that again." Her head suddenly came upright. "Excuse me." She fled to the bathroom, slamming the door, and he heard her dry-heave once again.

The diplomat yanked his tie off from over his head and tossed it to the expensive black carpet. Then, sitting forward for a moment, he pulled off his jacket and flung it to the floor as well, untucking the white dress shirt underneath, all the while feeling ready to fall asleep at any given time.

After a moment or two, the toilet flushed and water ran, then Tifa returned to drop gratefully onto the far end of the sofa.

"How're you feeling?" he asked sympathetically.

"A bit better; a little weak. And if you ask me that again, I am going to scream." Her manner was so dead-serious that she had to be joking, and he chuckled. She raised her right hand to tuck hair behind her ear—and Reeve mentally kicked himself.

"Let me get you some ice for that."

He stood and ducked into another room. Tifa's face was a study in confusion, then she asked after a hesitation, "For what?"

"What?" he responded, the sound of ice thudding into a container eclipsing his voice.

"What?" she called out, unable to hear him.

As he clattered around in the kitchen, he finally understood what it was that she had said, and shouted something back. Unfortunately, the moment that he answered was also the moment that he dropped what sounded to be a plastic pitcher on the tiles—and his foot— and yelped in pain. Cursing could be heard again; this time in a strange, rapid-fire language with some vehemence. Whatever he was saying sounded quite colorful and elaborate, and Tifa stifled a giggle.

He hobbled out of the other room after another minute, once again resting very little weight on his right foot, and carrying a green dish towel wound around lumps of ice.

"I still don't see what that's fo—" Tifa silenced as he crouched in front of her and his cool fingers wrapped gently 'round her forearm, turning it to expose the large, vaguely hand-shaped bruise on the underside of her wrist. He pressed the makeshift ice pack to the purple and black mark, then he took her other hand to place it over the ice before releasing the towel.

She smiled shyly, holding the cold mass to her arm. "Thank you."

"You're quite welcome."

"No, really, Reeve, thank you so much for everything." She gave a small laugh. "You've been my hero for the day."

He laughed a trifle bitterly. "Good to know I've done something right today."

Neither said anything, just quietly, contentedly watching each other, and Tifa noticed that he was still bent at her knees. Then he rose and slowly leaned in toward her, weight resting on the hand sinking into the back of the sofa next to her shoulder. He was looking at her in the same way that he had on the dance floor, brown eyes filled with that same indescribable emotion that she was fairly certain she was doing a bad job of hiding on her own face.

The beautiful brunette felt a strange twinge of fear leap over the excitement in her heart; who knew what this could lead to? You're an emotional wreck, dumbass. "I'm an emotional wreck, you know," she informed him, fighting to keep her voice from shaking.

A slight smile flashed, and he continued to lean in toward her. "I am too."

Tifa inched backward minutely. "I...uhh..." You're using him as a substitute for Cloud "I could just be using you because I'm upset over Cloud!"

"And I could just be using you because I'm upset over Elena," Reeve reasoned calmly.

He was very close now. "I..." She made an odd expression as she scrunched her countenance up and shied away from him. "I taste like barf!" ...That one was NOT my idea.

There was a silence, and she cautiously cracked an eyelid. His face was barely two inches from hers, and he was holding himself up over her sitting form by one hand as his knees bumped against hers. If he was trying not to laugh at her comment, he was hiding it very well. His expression was completely serious, handsome face devoid of emotion but brown eyes twinkling with something irresistible. And Tifa was reminded once again of how much he resembled the dark, handsome stranger ideal (well, he wasn't exactly tall, but she could let that pass) of her childhood.

Ohh, don't do it, don't be fucking retarded like you always are. Don't kiss him; you'll end up f--

Don't be disgusting. She idly wondered if everybody talked to the voices in their head.

Oh well; you'll end up alone in the long run. Y--

Maybe in the long run, but not tonight. And at the moment, tonight is all I care about. So go ahead and stuff it up your ass.

The brunette reached up and pulled him off-balance and down.

"Oof!" Reeve's eyebrows barely had time to skyrocket when he found himself lying full-length on the sofa, Tifa on top of him. Her lips were everywhere at once: neck face, ears, mouth, one hand resting possessively on his shoulder, and the other deep in the hair at his left temple.

"Change of heart?" he gasped after a moment as she leaned upward, effectively pinning him with a hand on each shoulder and her weight resting on her arms.

Tifa gave a small, faintly uncertain smile. "Either that or it's the alcohol talking."

"Oh good. I'm hoping it's the alcohol," the Wutaian man responded, looking up at her pinning him to the sofa and unable to think of much besides how incredibly sexy she was.

"For that, I should not kiss you anymore," she retorted.

"I don't need you to kiss me." The tone in his voice suggested that he needed her to do something else.

She burst out laughing. "Reeve! I never would have known you were so dirty."

"Want me to prove how dirty I can be?"

There was a squeal of giggling, then there was no speech for some time.

Author's notes - PHAW! *passes out* FORTY PAGES! Please kill me! To be more serious, quick recap: We find out that Kiyara's married but not to whom, Red and Rahilah are reconciling, Vincent finds a really weird poem (I apologize to J.R.R. Tolkien, by the way; I used a line or two and the rhyming scheme from one of his poems in FotR, because I am lazy and I suck at poetry), Reeve and Elena have broken up because of a mysterious woman named Elisa (if you're smart, you may remember a mention of her. If you caught the mention of Azrael in the Reeve/Elena conversation... ;-)), we find out that Cloud beat up and tried to rape Tifa a long time ago, Cloud in a way attacks her again before showing remorse, and to make a long story short, Tifa and Reeve have sex. Welcome to Kiyara's Soap Opera.

That last bit is meant to be a little bit out of character. They finally both stop over-analyzing things and do something to just enjoy the moment. :)

Much love to Pulsar of FF:WA, who gave me the names of most of the drinks involved in the chapter because I'm alcohol-illiterate. Also many thanks for putting up with me when I was bored shitless after five hours of typing and attacked him from boredom. This happened several times, mind you. XD

Peace out, yo~!