

Chapter 28: Last Bastion of Safety

"And by 'some poor jackass' and 'fall' I assume you mean Strife when you push him in." -Kiyara Maiden

Far off in the distance, a bird screeched, the sound echoing for miles across the white expanse of nothingness.

The thoughts were racing through Reno Lynley's head a mile-a-minute. No-wonder-he-looked-like-he-was-going-to-kill-you-when-ever-you-were-with-Kiyara. He's-a-fucking-grandfather;-how-weird-is-that? Doesn't-matter. Fuck. Fuckmefuckmefuckme.

"You're not fuckin' with me, are you?" he questioned sourly of his superior, keeping the rest of his ideas to himself.

Reeve shook his head ever-so-slightly, eyes downcast, and mouthed silently, 'No.' One hand reached up to unconsciously tug at the stained bandage swathed about his neck.

He fucked Rufus 'I kill people who look at me funny' Shinra's wife and he's alive? What the shit, did the old man lose his edge or something?

Somehow realizing that the dark-haired man would not welcome this way of putting things, all the redhead said aloud was, "Doesn't know, does she?"

Again, Reeve faintly shook his head, watching his gray boots crush layers of tiny crystals as the pair walked slowly side-by-side through the snow.

"Yeah, I guess that's right. The only pre-Hojo memory that she has--as far as I know--is of one time when her da..." He paused for a moment; he had been about to say 'dad,' but that wasn't quite accurate now, was it? "Shinra beat her and her mom came to her rescue."

His face tightened in anger. 'I should have killed that--' Here, the words that fell from his lips were indistinguishable; presumably, they were Wutaian. '--when I had the chance.'

"...I'm sorry, what?!" Reno demanded, fiery ponytail swaying from side to side down his back as his head moved with the vehemence of the exclamation. "You had the chance to kill Rufus Shinra and you didn't take it?! What the hell's the matter with you?"

The Wutaian cracked a small smile at that, glancing down for a moment before the brown eyes finally found his employee's face. 'When Kiyara was nine, Shinra finally got suspicious and had a paternity test done. He found out she wasn't his, came home, and started beating Elisa, Azrael, and Kiyara. Their housekeeper knew enough to call me, and I bolted over and knocked Rufus out.'

The Mako-green orbs slitted faintly, the man's skeptical thought almost palpable. "The Prez was a damn big guy. You knocked him out just like that?"

'Young ex-boxing champ versus middle-aged overweight businessman. It wasn't just like that--' He snapped his fingers. 'But it was pretty easy.' He paused for a moment or two, apparently lost in thought, before taking up the thread of his narrative once more. 'I sent the three of them to Lord and Lady Kisaragi in Wutai to seek sanctuary. I'm distantly related to the Kisaragis, and I knew that, despite my exilement after I went to work for Shinra, they would take it as a blood vow and protect Elisa and the kids with everything they had.'

Reno, ignoring the rest of his words for now, read between the lines of his statement. "The three of them went to Wutai and you stayed behind with Rufus 'I mutilate people who don't put the right amount of sugar in my coffee' Shinra?"

Again, the faintest hint of a smile hovered across his mouth. 'Yeah, I did. I knew that Rufus would immediately send troops after them, so I stayed behind to bargain with him. I bluffed; said that I had all kinds of proof about how he beat his wife and kids, and that I'd given this proof to a friend. I'd told that friend to release the information to the press the second anything happened to me, or I found out the three of them were in danger.'

"Hold up, Shinra caring about public opinion? He never really gave a shit, as far as I could tell," objected the ex-Turk, determined to punch holes in this fucking insane story. There had to be holes. He refused to believe that it was true.

'There's not caring about public opinion, and then there's committing public opinion suicide. Shinra wasn't about to stick a knife in his company's chest, which is what would have effectively happened if he'd let that information get out,' replied the executive, eyes hard.

"So he stuck you in Urban Dev," he muttered in a flash of understanding.

Reeve shot him an irritable look. 'Urban Dev itself isn't a living hell. He stuck me in the position of assistant to Blee, the ancient, bitchy head of Urban Development. That was a living hell. I inherited the position on her death--against Shinra's wishes--when they figured out that I was the only one who could make sense of her files.'

"And Kiyara, Az, and their mom?"

Again, his head shook back and forth faintly. 'Never heard from them again.'

The other man was left to blink in surprise once again.

'Shinra was censoring my mail and had a tap on my phone; I didn't dare ask about them in a letter or in a call. If I had to ask, he'd know that I wouldn't immediately realize if something had happened to them. That would have left him free to act. I honestly never knew--and still don't know--if they actually made it to Wutai or not.'

"What the fuck, couldn't you just ask Godo?"

'He's refused to say a word on the subject for years, and Yuffie insists that she was too young to remember. The only others that would know what actually happened are Lady Kisaragi and their house staff, but she died years ago, and their staff is completely loyal.'

"Az would know."

'He also wouldn't speak to me when I tried to talk to him yesterday, and contact him earlier today.'

Face furrowed in thought, Reno was silent for a moment, razor-sharp mind racing. "Well, y'know one thing for sure."

The brown eyes flicked to him, the inquisitive tilt of his face asking the clear question.

"Kiyara sure as hell never made it to Wutai."

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"I don't fuckin' trust her one godsdamn bit," Cid Highwind proclaimed to the open air, lit cigarette wagging between his lips as he spoke.

In the background behind his head, white hills meandered seamlessly as far as the eye could see, the monotony only broken by the nine sets of footprints. In front of him, far head, the dark, jagged edges of the Gaia Cliffs stabbed the low

gray sky, and there were several tiny blips on the horizon that were probably rock formations or cabins.

"That cat ain't cool," grumbled Barret Wallace in assent, forging a path through the snow beside the blond pilot.

"It's definitely suspicious that she was in the engine room right before the Highwind went down," put in Yuffie as she jogged to the pair, shuriken in hand.

In a smooth, practiced movement, the dark-haired young woman reached out and snatched the cigarette out of Cid's mouth, tossing it into the snow. In the same instant, she brought a booted foot down on the offending cancer stick and ground it into oblivion.

"Hey! Shit, kid, that was my last one!" Cid protested, face reddening with anger.

"I'm just protecting Shera's interests," she replied sweetly, flashing a wide smile and receiving an icy glare and rebellious mumbled curses for her trouble.

"Didn't see nothin' out there?" Barret broke in, ignoring their squabbling. His eyes followed the set of small bootprints that lead over a nearby rise and out of sight.

Yuffie turned her luminescent green eyes on him. "I did a full sweep around and found nothing," she told him, swiftly growing serious. "Something's not right; the Glacier was a hotbed of monster activity the last time we came through here."

"The crash could've scared 'em off," Cid pointed out, a new cigarette clenched firmly between his teeth to prevent thievery.

"How do you do that?!" exclaimed Yuffie, losing her somber attitude just as quickly as it had come.

"Do what?" he asked innocently.

"Produce a lit cigarette out of nowhere! I thought you were out!"

"He's the magic white man," Barret interrupted sourly, soliciting grins from the other two. "Shu' up, Yuffie. Be serious."

"Okay, okay, Leviathan." She sighed plaintively, earning not-so-sympathetic looks from her companions. "Did either of you get a chance to talk to Reno about what happened in the engine room?"

"Yeah, I did," responded Cid, taking a deep drag on the cigarette and dodging the skinny arm that reached for it. "Copper-Top said when he walked in, Rahilah was trottin' out. She'd almost got to the door when the engines cut out. Then I guess he anchored himself an' did a manual restart on the engines. That worked long enough for me to get the ship right-side-up an' blast toward land, then they caught on fire."

"She's definitely suspicious," crowed Yuffie, once again making a lightning-fast grab at his mouth as he ducked out of her reach.

"Did he say what kinda damage got done?" asked the dark-skinned man. At the same time, he grabbed Yuffie by the back of her jacket collar, swung her around to his right, and planted himself between she and Cid before setting her back down on the ground.

The pilot nodded grimly in response to the question, ignoring the physical switch that had gone on beside him. "He said it looked like four claw marks in the fuel tank. Then she must've poured sand in through the slashes."

"I knew it was that damn cat!" exclaimed Barret immediately.

"I never trusted her," Cid agreed.

"Damn, though, how we gonna tell Red?"

"Aww hell, you're right. I g--"

"Oi, numbskulls!"

Both men looked to Yuffie, both looking none-too-thrilled with the moniker.

"You're missing something important," she said, trudging along between them.

"No, you are," responded Barret.

"Definitely missin' her brain," affirmed Cid with a grin.

"You guys are such jackasses," she spat, eyes flinty and annoyed. "There were four slashes, right?"

"Right..." replied the shorter of the two guardedly.

"Red and Rahilah have five claws."

They both gaped at her for a moment, then Cid shook his head.

"That fifth claw isn't with the other four; it's off to the side, and she can pull it back, like this." He held out one heavily bandaged hand and painfully retracted his thumb, moving it behind the palm of his hand. "She could've slid the claw out of her way and scratched up the fuel tank."

"Yeah, except her and Red don't have opposable thumbs," Yuffie leaned around Barret to say, arms crossed over her chest.

Startled, the two men exchanged a quick glance.

"Y'know...she's right," begrudged Barret.

Cid questioned, "Damn...you sure?"

"Yeah." The big man nodded.

"Who the hell destroyed my airship, then?!"

She had obviously been waiting for this question, as she immediately launched into a well-prepared diatribe in the manner of a smug detective laying all of her evidence on the table. "Well, we know it's not one of us, or Tifa or Red. So the choices are Reno, Reeve, Kiyara, Cloud, and possibly--though probably not--Rahilah."

"Cloud," spat out Cid immediately.

"It's definitely Kiyara," came Yuffie's simultaneous response.

Barret continued walking, muttering to himself, "Why's everyone doubtin' Rahilah..."

"Why would it be Cloud?" questioned the ninja doubtfully.

"I dunno; it seems like the nasty-ass kinda thing he'd do," defended Cid with a shrug. At the skeptical glances from both of his companions, he hastily added, "An' he coulda made those clawmarks with his sword. What the hell makes you think your suggestion's much better, Yuffie?"

The self-satisfied detective-esque smirk widened. "Look, she escaped from Hojo, right? I'll bet you anything he's still controlling her, and he made her blow up the ship! Or, she could even be a willing traitor!"

"Been watchin' too many B-quality science fiction movies, brat," grunted Barret.

"No!" she contested hotly, two bright spots of color appearing on her cheeks. "I have evidence! Red saw her go onto the deck about an hour before we went down, and then nobody saw her again until after the crash. I was the only person in the cargo bay; plenty of you guys went by me and I didn't have a clue who you were, because my head was in a paper bag. She could have gone to the engine room, slashed the fuel tank with a dagger, poured in the sand, and then gone back to the deck without anyone noticing. Besides, don't you find it odd that the second the engines cut out, she knew she had to wedge herself behind the ladder?" As she spoke, she gesticulated wildly with her hands, as was her custom.

She was about to continue, but Barret help up one massive hand to forestall comment. "Quit it. We don't have no way of findin' out who did it--unless someone confesses--so stop makin' up crazy-ass theories." He glanced significantly at both she and Cid.

The blond pilot's face screwed up into a frown as he opened his mouth to retort.

But Yuffie beat him to the chase. "They are not 'crazy-ass theories'!" she protested noisily, glaring.

"What are not crazy theories?" questioned a new voice.

The Wutaian girl froze, then glanced down guiltily to find Nanaki padding along beside her in the snow, solitary golden eye trained in curiosity on her face.

"Crazy...theories...uhh...that Cid has!" she exclaimed lamely, pointing one mitten-clad hand at the man walking to her left.

The pilot was ready for her. "Barret can explain 'em better," he replied immediately.

Three sets of eyes turned to face the big man. He stared back for a moment, muttered, "Aww shit," and stared uncomfortably at the ground.

"Ahh. Those kind of theories," he said quietly, sounding slightly hurt as he glanced at his paws. "Rahilah theories."

"It's not that we don't like her or anything, Reddie," the dark-haired girl hastened to assure him, placing one hand on his back. "It's just that..."

"You have no trust at all in her and believe that she attempted to send us all to our fiery doom?" suggested the red beast with equal parts bitterness and dark humor.

The ninja empress visibly deflated, withdrawing her hand. "...Yeah. ...Sorry, Red."

To her left, Barret was mumbling under his breath and studiously staring at the horizon of the far-off Gaia Cliffs to avoid the one-eyed look that came his way, while Cid shamefacedly scratched at the back of his neck in an unconsciously guilty

gesture.

A heavy breath frosted the air around Nanaki's snout, and, sounding more than a little pained, he murmured, "Ahh. I see." There was an uncomfortable silence between the four friends for a moment as they forced their ways through the shin-deep snow side-by-side. Then the shortest among them spoke again. "All I ask is that you give her the chance to prove her loyalty."

" 'Prove her loyalty'?!" Barret burst out as though it had been an extreme effort to keep silent up to this point. His brown eyes, bright with emotion, were fixated on the creature walking beside Yuffie. "Ain't you the one that told Tifa you didn't know if we could trust her?!"

He halted dead in his tracks, single golden eye alighting on Barret's face with an expression that looked considerably annoyed. "Yes," the young warrior responded with more than a trace of snap to his voice. Then he gave a low sigh and calmed, though the solitary eye and deep voice still retained that same intensity. "She is the only other true member of my species that remains on the entire Planet."

"Don't mean you hafta like her," grumbled the massive freedom fighter, standing in the snow with his arms crossed over his chest as he stared down at his friend.

Nanaki shook his head slightly. "She and I are it, Barret. There are no more Tanduri to follow after us. I do not have a choice in the matter."

"Red, what the hell're you talking about?" queried Yuffie, brow furrowed as she crouched down to speak with him on his level. "You know that even if there were bazillions of you guys scurrying around the Planet's surface, you'd still only want her."

The dancing flame on the end of his tail suddenly leapt higher and was larger for a moment or two, and the young woman hid a grin as she recognized her friend's form of a human blush. He glanced in the opposite direction, then spoke, face still turned away from them.

"You are probably correct, Yuffie. I do care about her. I would choose her if there were...'bazillions' of other choices. And since this is so..." He looked back to them again, expression as unreadable as ever. "If I do not give her the benefit of the doubt, who will?"

Not a one of them had an answer to his question.

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A good ways behind the foursome, Reeve visibly winced at the redhead's words as though he had been stung, and his eyes refused to meet the frank green stare. 'If I had know that Hojo had her ... For every time I sat opposite him in a board meeting and stared at his oily face and wondered why the hells he was grinning at me...'

"There's no way you could've known, Reeve," he was reminded soberly by Reno, who walked at his side.

'Don't pull that shit, Reno. Hojo and I were both executives. You know as well as I do that there are a billion ways that I could have known.'

Reno shrugged his shoulders silently, feeling far out of his league. Emotion and all that shit was not his forte; this was typically Elena's job, not his. He had no idea what to say. However, the other man seemed to have stopped talking for the moment, which gave him a moment or two of time to think about how he should respond.

He was surprised when Reeve looked straight at him and began to mouth words slowly and deliberately once again.

'I didn't even know that any of them were alive until you called me about Kiyara a few days ago, and Azrael showed up in my boardroom. He split before I could talk to him, but I asked about his mother...'

The torn, anguished set to his face and light behind his eyes finished his sentence for him, but Reno spoke it aloud nonetheless, voice appropriately subdued.

"Dead."

There was a slight nod.

"Well, Az mentioned his family to me a few times. Mother, father, two sisters, and a brother. They lived in Sector 4," offered the redheaded killer neutrally, slowly beginning to understand the hell that this man's life had been.

'Sounds like he was adopted.' He kicked at a clod of snow, watching it explode into trillions of tiny white crystals.

"Yeah, I guess so..." Disbelieving, but finally beginning to grow certain of the truth behind Reeve's words, the smooth talker flexed his hands, hidden in his pockets, in an attempt to restore some semblance of feeling to them. "Shit, Reeve. You're sure you're not pullin' a major mind-fuck on me?"

'I almost wish I was.' As the incline of the terrain began to grow steeper and steeper, his breath came shorter and harder, turning to a smoky fog in the below-freezing air. Anybody who's old enough to be a grandfather is too old for this. Why did I think I could do this? I'm just going to get in the way; be a burden. Dumbass. Dumbass dumbass dumbass, Reeve.

"Are you gonna tell her?" Reno ventured after a moment or two, moving up the hill with a long-legged ease that left Reeve green with jealousy as he struggled to keep up.

'I almost did so many times since yesterday, but I kept losing my nerve. And now...' The redheaded man had finally noticed his plight, and slowed his steps down as they reached the top of the snow-mound.

The almond-shaped brown eyes fixated on Reno's face with an intensity that left the ex-glorified hit man almost feeling... uncomfortable. That was a rarity for Reno.

'Now it's not even physically possible for me to tell her.'

Reno coughed, an action designed to draw Reeve's attention, rather than to expel any dust from his throat and lungs. "I, uh, I guess I could tra--"

He was interrupted by a smack to his shoulder, delivered by Reeve's arm. 'Translate? I appreciate the offer, Reno, I really do, but no. In all honesty, I don't really see why she needs to know.'

"So she can meet one of her parents, and find out that her dad wasn't an alcoholic power-starved asshole who got hard on kicking the shit out of women and kids?" suggested the green-eyed man with a hint of acerbic snap to his voice and face.

Reeve frowned, puzzled by the frigid chill behind the words, then spoke. 'What I meant is she doesn't need the extra complication in her life.'

"I think you're wrong," responded the taller man seriously. There was no customary smirk, no mischievous twinkle to his eyes, no irreverent slouched posture... Nothing that he was famous for. Instead, Reeve was catching a glimpse of something that very few people ever had, did, or would: a completely somber, sober, non-manipulative Reno Lynley.

However, he didn't see this. No, what Reeve saw was red. A whole lot of it. 'I think it's funny that you suddenly take an interest in my personal life when it turns out I have a quote unquote "hot" daughter,' he replied coldly, face twisted in anger.

"It's not fuckin' like that!" Aware that the level of his voice had leaped to the point that the others were turning or peering ahead to look at them, Reno forced himself to quiet down, eyes flashing vehemently at the Wutaian's statement. "It ain't like that, Reeve."

'Just fuck off, Reno.' The brown-eyed man turned away from him in disgust.

"What the hell's the matter with you?!" Again, the annoyed male's voice skyrocketed to a high point, but this time, he really didn't give a damn.

'I don't know. Maybe it's finally sinking in that I'M FUCKING MUTE!' His mouth opened and closed energetically on the last three words, leaving no doubt that, if he had the use of his voice, they would have been shouted.

The pair stared heatedly at each other for a moment, having come to a dead stop in the center of the beaten path through the snow.

The rangy man felt his rage at the other man's bull-headedness slowly implode at the statement; he had been so caught up in the argument that he had forgotten that his opponent wasn't even able to speak.

Reeve saw the pity in the other man's eyes and hated him for it. He closed his own eyes for a moment, then spun and began to walk again, one gloved hand lifting to subconsciously pick at the red-tinged bandage wrapped around his throat. When he heard the footsteps begin to crunch on the ice behind him, he waved a hand, motioning to the other man to move forward. Just go. Please.

His silent plea was heard. "...Yeah." Jamming his hands deeper into his coat pockets, Reno began to stride away from his boss.

Thinking of something else, the Wutaian man quickly reached forward and grabbed a fistful of the back of the puffy white jacket. Reno whirled, and the two men were face-to-face again for a moment.

'I know how you treat women, Reno. You hurt her, and I will kill you.' The statement would have been laughable if it weren't for the hard, grim set of his face; the determined, angry lines around his mouth.

"What the fuck. What the fuck?!" the lanky man questioned, biting off the last word with the accuracy and cadence of a gunshot. Eyebrows raised, eyes glinting in a manner that only suggested how irate he really was, he spun on his heel and stalked off.

Neither of the two incensed figures noticed as the wind began to subtly pick up, pushing at their backs with invisible, dark, icy fingers.

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"Reno, what are you doing?"

The words were tired, lacking in their usual bite, and spoken by Kiyara without even turning her head to look back at the redheaded man trudging along behind her.

"Walking," he replied shortly, voice terse.

She did turn her head at that, eyes narrowing. Just as she had fathomed by listening to the footsteps, the ex-Turk was moving along several paces behind her, hands buried in his pockets and fiery head bowed against the wind.

"No, really. You're quiet and following me; what the hells do you want?"

The Mako eyes flashed dangerously for a moment, then faded into a blank, annoyed stare. "I don't want anything," he replied slowly and patronizingly, as though explaining a complicated matter to a small, stupid child. "Just leave me the fuck alone." He offered up a brilliant, obviously fake wide grin that offset the menace in his words. Despite the smile, though, the dark, angry look in his eyes suggested that he wasn't up for any company.

She shrugged off the harsh words and spun back around. "Suit yourself..." The blonde woman slowed, then came to a halt in the middle of the path.

The man walking behind her barely stopped short of slamming into her back. "What the hell are you doing?" he questioned sourly.

"D'you hear running water?" Kiyara asked, golden eyebrows pulled into a frown.

He was silent for a moment, eyes looking up, as though the answer would come from the darkening sky. Then he nodded, the green orbs returning to her face. "Yeah, I hear it. Think it's coming from that...whatever that is." He pointed toward a long, black smudge that squiggled across the landscape a little ways ahead of the pair.

The tall woman squinted and stared at it as she began walking again. Those four dots moving along quite close to it had to be Cid, Barret, Yuffie, and Nanaki; damn, they had gotten far ahead. "What's that?"

"I don't know. Which I thought was obvious by my use of the phrase 'whatever that is,' " came the sarcastic retort from the lanky man striding by her side.

"My, aren't we Mr. Sunshine today?" she replied tartly.

Her only response was a certain gloved finger that was held near her face for a moment or two before it was withdrawn.

She shot him an exasperated glance. "You're manic-depressive, I swear. What the hell's the matter with you?"

He opened his mouth to tell her to fuck off--and heard the sullen words, "Argued with Reeve," spill out instead.

Kiyara raised an eyebrow. "You argued with a mute who just had half of his throat torn out."

"Shut up," he grumbled.

"You're so compassionate, Reno, it's astounding," she replied with a faintly amused, faintly disgusted chuckle.

"Oh, fuck you," he mumbled half-heartedly and dropped back behind her again.

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It heard the voices first.

"Barre-- No, Barret, I didn't mean it; Barret, put me down-- BARRET, PUT ME DOWN, DAMMIT! IF MY BODYGUARDS WERE HERE, YOU'D BE SO DEAD RIGHT NOW!"

"You started it, little foo'!"

"Barret, keep the brat under control for Typhoonsakes; I--"

A wheeze and a delighted cackle.

"Fuck, Barret, I said keep her under control, not let her go the second she tickles you!"

"She didn't tickle me; she kneed me in the damn stomach!"

A yelp. "Cold, cold, cold, s'godsdamn cold! I'm gonna fuckin' kill her; GET BACK HERE!"

A sigh. "Humans."

Four sets of voices for four sets of--now rapidly running--footsteps. None of which was a match for its quarry.

It settled deeper into its hole directly under the lip of the crevasse and waited. New voices.

"This is the Gornay River."

"Is it? It's frozen over, but looks like it's pretty fast..."

"I believe it is known as one of the most dangerous waterways on the Planet."

"It's funny; I don't remember this being here the last time that we came through the Glacier..."

"That is because it was not here, Ms. Lockhart. It came about when a solitary stream of Holy energy strayed from the Crater explosion, and, for reasons that no one quite understands, corroded the ice and rock underneath to form this canyon. This crevasse extends all the way out to the sea, which is where the water comes in."

A suppressed yawn. "How interesting."

"Apologies. I often forget that not everyone is as fascinated with geology as I."

The two voices--and six legs--moved off, and neither was its quarry. But still, it waited.

"Some poor jackass is gonna fall in here."

"And by 'some poor jackass' and 'fall' I assume you mean Strife when you push him in."

Its entire body went rigid at the sound of that voice, and it crept to the edge of its small hole.

A snort of laughter.

A pause, then a shriek. "RENO! Gods, don't even play at that; what if I'd overbalanced and fallen in?!"

It didn't wait to hear anymore.

It lunged.