

Chapter 9: The Humor of the Situation

"The bitch is back."-Reno Lynley

Dinah came to slowly, her eyes staying closed for several long seconds while she tried to assess where she was. She was lying on something long and soft, and could hear engines rumbling in the distance. Dinah opened her eyes to find that she was spread out on a couch, and seemed to be in the cargo bay of a plane. Airplane parts, furniture, and other unrecognizable items were set out in a broad tableau.

Dinah sat up swiftly, then winced, placing a hand to the side of her head and resisting the urge to lie back down again. Instead, she stood up and nearly ended up on the cold metal floor. She held still and blinked for several seconds, and the dizzy feeling passed.

She padded forward quietly but still somewhat unsteadily. Ahead she could see the door to the cockpit. Dinah peered through the door to the cockpit, and recognized a familiar tousled red head. Reno was seated in the co-pilot's seat with a headset over his ears and appeared to be laughing and joking with the pilot.

Her eyes narrowed and she flung the door open with a slam. Reno didn't even bother to turn around.

"The bitch is back," he muttered not-so-quietly.

"Shove it, Reno! Why the hell did you ditch me back there! For once I could have used your help!"

Reno turned and found himself face to face with an irate blonde woman.

"Whoa, whoa. Behave there, kids," drawled the other person in the cockpit.

Dinah's attention swung to the man in the pilot's seat. He was facing forward out the window, watching his instruments and the rapidly moving sky, but he turned for several seconds and Dinah got a good view of him. He was tall and thin, with a craggy, expressive face and leathery skin. He had a wild shock of chocolate brown hair sticking out in all directions from beneath his headset, and liquid brown eyes. Dinah guessed he was probably in his late 20's to early 30's. He was chewing on an unlit cigar, and was handsome in a rugged sort of way.

"Who the hell are you?" Dinah snapped bluntly.

He laughed jovially. "I like her, Reno. The name's Azrael Maiden, miss. And you are?"

"Dinah Selby. How'd you get roped into this whole mess?" Dinah offered her hand to shake, but Azrael took it and kissed the back of it gently.

Dinah gave an unwilling smile at the old fashioned and courtly gesture, but also at something else. Something about this man was just so familiar...

"I got 'roped into this,' as you so quaintly put it, when Reno showed up at my hotel room door early this morning to ask if he and a friend could bum a ride with me. Me and Reno go way back. I just couldn't say no." He grinned at Dinah, who smiled back. "And now I am most certainly glad I didn't."

Reno snorted and rolled his eyes, which brought Dinah back to the original conversation they had been having.

"I still cannot believe you just left me there to fight her alone, you bastard!" she said angrily.

"Y'know, if you'd fuckin' shut up for three tenths of a second, I could explain what happened, bitch!" Godsdamn, but she was annoying.

"QUIET!" Azrael roared. They both closed their mouths and turned to look at the pilot.

"That's better. Typhoon. You two are worse than my friends' little seven-year-old twins. First of all, Reno, that's no way to treat a lady, damn it! And as for you, Miss Selby, Reno saved your ass! If it hadn't been for him, old Whitey back there would still have you!"

"And how did he save my ass?" she asked dryly, crossing her arms over her chest.

"He came running up to me yelling, 'Take off, take off!' Very agitated, was our Reno. Much arm wavin' and pointin' and yelling and the like was going on. So he finally managed to convey his plan to me and we moved down the runway toward you. By the time we got there, ol' Whitey had knocked you out and was carrying you off." He paused for a moment to grin. "You should've seen Reno. It was the neatest trick I've seen in a while. He just hung out the back hatch of the plane and plucked you right out of Whitey's arms, and we took off. So Reno did the right thing."

Reno grinned with the unexpected praise.

Azrael swiftly brought him back to reality with a bump. "For once."

Dinah laughed as Reno held an outraged look on his face. "Hey!" he protested.

"You are my kinda guy, Mr. Maiden," Dinah chuckled.

"Please, just Azrael," he corrected her.

She nodded. "Azrael."

"Az, you're still the ladies man," Reno said, shaking his head. He turned his attention to the woman. "An' here I thought you'd be too smart to fall for his shit."

"If he's the ladies man, then what are you?" Dinah asked dryly.

"The whore's man?" Azrael suggested.

Dinah grinned and gave a whuff of laughter.

Reno simply shrugged. "Yeah, that'd be me."

She didn't bother to answer his inane response and glanced out the huge front window. "Where the hell are we?"

Azrael consulted his instruments, then looked out the window. "You've been out cold for a damn long time. Almost five hours. We were starting to get worried. But yeah, we're almost there. Rocket Town is just over these mountains." He pointed down, and Dinah caught a glimpse of snow-capped peaks.

"You mean we went from the eastern continent to the western continent and then right back to the eastern again?" she asked in dismay.

Reno nodded. "That about sums it up."

"By the way, how's your head?" Azrael asked, glancing away from his instruments for a moment and over his shoulder at her.

Dinah smiled at him, and his teeth flashed in his answering smile. "I'm feeling much better, thank you."

"Ifrit, why don't you two just fuck already and get it over with?" Reno questioned in disgust at the politeness. "If you need me, I'll be out back, barfing." He vacated both his seat and the cockpit.

"That's our Reno; always so courteous and refined." She caught a glimpse of him rolling his eyes.

Dinah gave a small smile, sitting in the seat that Reno had just vacated and placing his headset over her ears. She curled her legs up under herself and watched the snow-covered fields roll by for several minutes. Finally, in the distance, she saw something silver and shiny sticking straight up into the sky.

"What's that?" she asked, pointing.

He looked over at her, and again, she was struck by the attractiveness of his features. "That's the rocket that the town's building. I think the launch date's in two months; sometime in February. Most of the supplies in the back are for it."

"Oh." Dinah nodded, then returned to watching the small town grow closer and closer. After a few moments of him concentrating intensely on the instruments and preparing for the landing, the silence in the cockpit grew oppressive, and she stood, removing her headset. "I'm gonna go find Reno," she announced, and beat a hasty retreat.

Walking back into the cargo hold, Dinah found Reno sitting on the sofa that she had woken up on. He was staring into space and appeared to be lost in thought. She dropped down beside him.

"Mind telling me what we're doing in Rocket Town?" she asked.

Reno started and whirled to face her. "Fu--Oh. It's just you."

"Do I have to ask again?"

He shook his head. "Nah. I'll tell you. Az actually lives here, even though he isn't home very often, so I was gonna see if we could stay at his place for a bit while I figured out where to go from there. But now Whitey back there knows that we came to Rocket Town, or she can just find out by checking with the plane's flight path, so this'll just hafta be a stopover. One thing that works for and against us is that planes come here only once every two weeks, so it'll delay the guys that're after you from getting here quickly. But if they do somehow manage to get here fast, then the first place they'll look is Azrael's house-" He abruptly stopped. "That's it! I know where they'd never look for us!" Reno sprang up and dashed to the cockpit, where Dinah could hear him excitedly conversing with Azrael.

Dinah shrugged and stretched out, figuring that she'd find out their destination soon enough. She felt the engines shudder and slow as they began their descent into Rocket Town.

Reno blinked at the sudden onslaught of sunlight as he disembarked from the small cargo plane. Dinah and Azrael hopped out behind him. A crowd of townspeople was already gathering, and Reno heard Azrael giving out instructions for the unloading of the plane.

Dinah appeared beside Reno, hopping up and down to stay warm in the frigid air. "Holy shit, that's cold. You gonna tell me where we're going?"

Reno grinned. "It'll be a surprise."

Dinah eyed him warily. "I don't like that look on your face."

Azrael joined them. "We ready to get goin', then?"

The other two nodded.

"Right then. This way." Azrael lead them away from the crude, shoveled runway and into the snow covered town. The small village looked like scenes from an old fashioned Christmas card, with smoky tendrils climbing from the chimneys and snow everywhere. A light snow was falling as they made their way through the town.

"You do understand, Reno, that I'm doin' this against my better judgment," Azrael said gravely.

Reno waved him off. "Yeah, yeah."

"So you'd better stay quiet and polite in the background and let me do the talkin'. We're old friends."

Reno nodded. "Will do."

"'Cause you know they're not gonna be happy to see you."

They turned in at the gate of a comfortably sized nondescript home at the center of the village. Azrael marched up and rang the doorbell, Reno and Dinah following.

A woman's voice was heard from inside. "Kat! Could you get that please?"

The pitter-patter of small running feet could be heard. The front door was flung open, and a little girl stood there. She looked to be about five or six, and wore a pink shirt with a stained pair of overalls. Her long black ponytail was tied with a pink bow. She looked up at them with her almond-shaped, Wutaian eyes for a moment, but then her slightly chubby face creased into a smile. "Az!"

"Why, if it isn't Miss Katania!" Azrael exclaimed, laughing and scooping her up. He spun her around and around, the little girl shrieking with laughter.

"Kat? Who is it?" The woman appeared on the doorway with a baby on her hip. She was short, with long brown hair left loose around her face and wide brown eyes. She wore blue jeans, a cream-colored long-sleeved shirt, and a pair of cats-eye glasses. She was not the most beautiful of women, but she was pretty in her own right, and her smile was genuine.

"Azrael Maiden! Where have you been?"

Azrael hugged her, being careful of the little one. "You know me, Shera. I've been here, there, and everywhere."

Shera began to say something when she realized that Azrael wasn't alone. She began to smile at Dinah, but then she noticed Reno. The smile faded from her face, and she took a step back. "...Az? What's this?"

"I gotta admit, Shera, this isn't just a social call. May I present Dinah Selby and Reno Lynley. Reno, Miss Selby; Shera Highwind."

Dinah smiled and murmured, "Hello," while Reno nodded to the rocket engineer.

"What is he doing here?" Shera asked with a frown, making it clear who she was talking about.

Another voice called out from inside the house. "Hey Sheer! Did I hear someone at the door?" A man appeared behind Shera. He was of medium height, with short blond hair and icy blue eyes, and he wore a gray T-shirt and a pair of baggy dark green pants. His eyes lit up at the sight of Azrael.

"You've been gone for a while, Az! How've ya been?"

"I've been good, Cid. And you?"

"We've-" Cid abruptly stopped and his eyes narrowed. "What the f-" Shera's hand went over his mouth as she nodded meaningfully to the wide-eyed Kat.

"Kat, why don't you go inside and play with your brother?" Shera suggested, removing her hand from the man's mouth.

"Okay!" The little girl ran into the house happily. The adults all stared at each other for several long seconds.

"Az, what the hell is this?" Cid finally asked, manner weary.

"Cid, this is Dinah Selby and Reno Lynley. Miss Selby, Reno; Cid Highwind."

"Ma'am," Cid said distractedly, tipping his head slightly to Dinah. Then he turned back to Azrael. "Why is there a Turk on my doorstep?" His voice was calm and level.

Azrael winced, knowing well the signs of his friend's dangerous temper. "Reno's here because he and Miss Selby need your help."

"No way in hell I'm helping a Turk, Az!" Cid exploded, voice probably louder than it ought to be. "He killed so many innocent people! How the fuck did you get involved with him?"

The obscenity earned him a reproachful look from his wife, which he either ignored or didn't notice.

"We're old friends, Cid, from the days that we worked for Shinra. Would you please, for my sake, give these two a ride to Midgar on the Highwind? I'd do it myself, but I'd lose my job if I went off course, and I've got a shipment due in Wutai tomorrow morning."

Dinah started. Midgar, huh? And he told me that was the one place we wouldn't be going...

Cid smiled grimly. "'Fraid you're outta luck. The Highwind's under repairs at the moment."

"How long will it take?" Azrael pressed.

Cid studied him closely. "You're really serious about this, aren't you?"

Azrael nodded, meeting Cid's gaze. "He's my friend, Cid."

Cid sighed. "The repairs won't be finished for about three days. I guess I could give 'em a ride to Midgar once they're done." He shook his head slowly. "I wouldn't do this for anyone but you, Az."

Three days stuck in this dinky little place! Reno thought in dismay. I'm gonna go fucking crazy before this is over.

"Thanks, Cid," Azrael said in obvious relief. "You can just get them at the hotel when you're ready, right?" He looked to Dinah and Reno, who nodded.

"The inn's being renovated and is closed for six months," Shera pointed out quietly.

That stopped Azrael. He turned for a moment to speak to Reno and Dinah. "I'd say that you could stay at my place, but that'd be the first place that Whitey and the others would look for you..." he mused.

"I guess we could stay in tents outside of town," Dinah said hesitantly. When Reno opened his mouth to speak, she fixed his with a glare. "Note the emphasis on tents. As in plural."

Shera broke in, shaking her head. "Not for three days, and certainly not in this weather. You can stay here."

"But Sher" Cid started to protest, but Shera cut him off.

"They can stay here, Cid." Her voice was soft but firm, and she was looking up so that her eyes met his.

Cid sighed, then nodded. "Alright. But I'll be watching you, Turk." He stomped back into the house.

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Highwind," Dinah said earnestly.

Shera waved it off shyly. "It's no trouble at all. And please, just Shera."

"Thanks Shera," Azrael said. Then he glanced back down toward the crude runway. "I've really gotta get goin'."

"Thanks for everything, man," Reno said in response.

Azrael grinned at him. "No problem, Reno, though you owe me one big time. Behave yourself now. I'll see you later."

"Thank you." Dinah smiled at him.

He kissed the back of her hand. "You're very welcome. I hope to see you again soon, Miss Selby." Cool blue-gray eyes met warm brown for a moment, and Dinah was again struck by the familiarity of that gaze.

Then he turned away to look to Shera. "Are you sure you have to go now?" she asked.

Azrael nodded. "That shipment to Wutai just can't wait."

Her mouth twisted into a sad smile as she nodded. "Alright. Bye, Az."

"Tell the rest've your crew that I said bye." Azrael replied. He hugged her again, and patted the child in her arms on the head. "Bye Sheer." He strode down the snow-dusted path and was lost to sight.

Shera watched after him for a moment, then held the door open. "Won't you come in?" Reno and Dinah went inside, shaking the snow from their boots. Dinah hung her jacket on the coat rack, then took a moment to look around.

The house was good-sized, and they were apparently in the living room. The walls were a pale green color, with white trim, and there were several overstuffed armchairs and a couch around the room. Cid sat on the couch, reading a newspaper. There was a fire roaring in the fireplace, and Kat sat in front of it, playing with a boy that could only be her twin. Children's toys were scattered on the floor, and a playpen was set up in a corner of the room. A large cabinet that Dinah figured hid the TV and stereo was directly across from the couch. Dinah could see the kitchen, the dining room, and a hallway that lead to a set of stairs from where she stood.

Reno caught a glimpse of Cid glaring at him before his newspaper hid his face. This is going to be an interesting three days...

Shera walked over and set the baby down in the playpen. She and Dinah sat down almost immediately and began talking in those cautious small-talk circles that new acquaintances always follow. Reno sank down in a chair, and Kat and her twin brother were immediately all over him; asking questions and pulling his hair.

"What's your name?"

"Why's your head on fire?"

"Why wasn't Daddy happy to see you?"

"Why do you have sung'asses on your head?"

With Cid watching closely, all Reno could do was groan inwardly and start to answer their questions. I can't do this...