

Chapter Thirteen: The Dynamic Duo

"Why you'd want to stay some place you're not wanted is completely beyond me." Titus

The Running Man stood on the deck of the reanimated ghost ship, letting the screaming wind tear at his pale blond hair, completely oblivious to the rain beating against his face and soaking his dark clothes with hungry eagerness. His iridescent green eyes squinted instinctively against the rain that sought to blind them, and his gloved hands were curled lazily around the wooden railing. With a peculiar serenity, he gazed calmly at the turbulent sea, as if the towering waves that angrily tossed the ship back and forth and the branches of yellow lightening that streaked wildly across the sky were the most beautiful things he had ever seen.

"Titus?" the woman's voice came from behind him. "The hell you doing out here, sugar?"

Titus didn't even bother to turn around. "What does it look like I'm doing, Fa-Li?"

The woman snorted. "Standing there in the rain in the most hideous weather looking at the hideous ocean like an idiot."

"Watch your tongue," Titus warned flatly as the ship rocked violently. "The Mother just might decide that you are well-suited for her next meal. If I were you, I wouldn't risk angering her when she is not in her best of moods, like she is now."

Fa-Li laughed shortly, a sharp staccato sound of bitterness every ounce as unpleasant as the roaring thunder. The heels of her calf-length boots thudded on the deck as she strode up to stand next to Titus at the railing, disgusted by the rain but not wanting to stay below the deck where the ship's rocking motions were even more violent and nauseating. Her sensual lips curled into a sneer as she felt wayward raindrops slide underneath the collar of her leather bodysuit and trickle down her back. She angrily tossed her mass of dark brown hair behind her shoulder, her almond-shaped eyes narrowing in irritation.

"I never could quite understand you and your primitive little religion," she snarled at her dark companion, whose delicate yet majestic features cut a startling profile against the backdrop of the turbulent sea. "Worshipping the sea and everything," she continued grumpily. "Just don't make no sense to me, honey."

"That makes two of us," Titus commented distractedly, unperturbed as the "ghost ship" rocked to the right, the hungry waves trying to devour it whole.

"If you don't understand your own religion, baby, then why follow it?" Fa-Li snapped.

Titus sighed. "I tried to explain this to you several years ago, remember? You didn't understand then; why would you understand now?"

Fa-Li suddenly smiled, as if the rain dripping down her fiercely beautiful face didn't bother her a bit. "Remembering the old days, Titus? Thinking about the way things used to be between us?"

Titus stiffened. "Believe me, I try not to. Not very fond memories."

"Oh, come on now," she cooed, edging closer to him. "I was good to you, and you certainly had no complaints at the time. Admit it, you enjoyed our little relationship as much as I did."

Titus' eyes narrowed in irritation, though his emerald gaze never shifted from the turbulent sea. "Maybe," he admitted coldly. "But it didn't take me long to realize that you weren't worth a moment of my time."

Fa-Li grinned with remarkable friendliness considering the fact that Titus had just insulted her. "Now what's that supposed to mean, honey?"

The Running Man closed his eyes and lifted his face to the rain, letting the needle sharp tears from the heavens pound against his pale skin. "Let's just say that your little 'flings' did nothing to higher my opinion of you. I soon saw the light, you might say, and understood that all the bad names you had been dubbed among our little faction were very much accurate."

She gave a melodramatic sigh. "Titus, baby, you just don't understand me. You may be free of the 'faction,' as you call it, but you're still in a cage." She thumped a small fist against the wooden railing of the ship. "It's just like this blasted ship; it has the entire sea to wander for all eternity, but instead it always follows the same damn course, again and again. That's you, Titus."

Titus didn't reply.

Fa-Li went on, feeling a little pride at how complex she was sounding, "Well, not me, sweetheart. I'm as free as the wind. I have nothing to hold me back anymore. My philosophy is that you live life while there's still a life to live. Do people that are still worth doing; see things that are still worth seeing, if you know what I mean. In the world we live in, life can be gone down the drain as fast as it came into existence."

Titus laughed without mirth at the preposterous idea that Fa-Li could have anything resembling a philosophy. But then again, he knew that the woman had her dark secrets; maybe such a morbid philosophy was one of them. Whatever the case, he didn't bother to respond to her reply. Instead, he continued to keep his head upturned to the heavens, allowing the raindrops to beat ruthlessly against his face.

Fa-Li noticed what her companion was doing and snorted condescendingly. "Why are you doing that?" she snapped, watching the rain drip from Titus' pale blond hair. "Does it feel good or something, letting all that water go down your face and up your nose?"

"I don't do it because it feels good, silly girl," Titus responded without opening his eyes, knowing that Fa-Li would bristle at the name he had just called her. "Now that you mention it, the raindrops sort of hurt, but I don't worry about such petty physical things."

"What are you doing then?" she snapped, already growing tired of his deep and obscure phrases.

"Listening."

"Listening?" she scoffed, shoving her waterlogged hair away from her face. "Listening to what? The thunder, the rain? Even I can do that, baby. Anyone who isn't deaf can do that."

"Petty physical things," Titus repeated. "And you said I was in cage? There are some things you don't need ears to hear. I'm not listening to the thunder or the rain. I'm listening to the ocean - to her words, her thoughts. She always has much to say, but you humans never listen to her." He paused. "It...displeases her. She won't go unheard for much longer."

The woman snorted. "Is that supposed to frighten me, honey?"

"You should be afraid," Titus murmured in a low voice. "The Mother is not someone to be reckoned with. Her tides are violent and furious; her tsunamis swallow entire cities. She is a titan."

Fa-Li rolled her almond-shaped Wutainese eyes. "Please. Well, Titus, what does the ocean have to say? Do enlighten me."

Titus was silent for a long while, the roaring thunder and churning sea eagerly filling the jagged spaces that his words had previously occupied. His handsome face was still upturned to take in the rain, letting it pound against his tender eyelids and cling to his dark blond eyelashes. His hands still maintained a light grip on the wooden railing even as the ghost ship rocked violently on the ocean's surface.

Fa-Li watched his still face with a mixture of aggravation and fascination, the normal pairing of emotions that she experienced when she traveled with Titus for any long period of time. There was no denying that her ex-lover was drop dead gorgeous, and she knew from experience that he was just as good-looking without clothes as he was with them, but, then again, most of her ex-lovers were that way. Generous to a fault. The thing, however, that set Titus apart from her other "flings" was his obvious intelligence and foolish philosophical views on the world and everything in it. It seemed that Titus could just glance at something as insignificant as a rock with those luminescent green eyes of his and see the deeper meaning behind the stupid thing when all Fa-Li saw was...a rock. Something her heels would slip on if she stepped on it too quickly. Something that she could throw if they encountered an enemy. Something to bash her companion over the head with.

Titus was the only one who could unintentionally seduce and belittle her in one single sitting. His good looks and unconscious charm intrigued her; his complex way of thinking and talking made her feel as dumb as well...a rock.

This was one of those aggravatingly bewitching moments. Fa-Li just stood on the deck of the ship, letting the rain soak her hair and skin even though she was well aware that shelter was less than a few feet away, in the cockpit of the ship. Titus made her do stupid things like this sometimes, things that totally went against her prodigious amount of common sense. She could have been sitting in the cockpit, nice and dry, not a hair out of place, but instead she was standing out here in the rain watching her companion's handsome face as he let the rain beat it relentlessly. But, god, she couldn't help herself; she just loved looking at Titus. It was a major pity that he actually insisted on having relationships instead of just quick fixes. Relationships were too messy for Fa-Li; she wished Titus would simply submit to her and let her have her way with him. Things would be so much better that way...

Fa-Li's little fantasy realm evaporated into thin air as her companion suddenly opened his eyes, lowering his head so that the rain hit the top of his head and not his face. He stared out over the ocean, looking a little disturbed.

"She is angry," he suddenly blurted.

Fa-Li blinked in confusion. "Huh?"

Titus glanced at her briefly before looking back across the ocean again. "You asked me what the ocean was saying," he murmured. "She is angry, and I don't know why."

"Don't worry, honey," Fa-Li said cheerfully. "I don't know either."

Titus rolled his eyes, looking irritated. "I didn't expect you to."

Fa-Li scowled beautifully, her fake-cheerful mood dissipating in an instant. "Are you trying to insult me? You've got serious problems, Titus. Talking to the ocean and all." She sighed melodramatically. "I just don't understand you anymore."

Titus snorted. "You never did in the first place. All you were interested in was little escapades to the bedroom. Why did you even come on this mission? All you are is a bunch of dead weight."

"I have my reasons," Fa-Li snapped angrily, not liking being called "dead weight."

"And what might those be?" Titus deadpanned, not looking concerned either way.

Fa-Li crossed her slender arms over her ample chest and glared at him. "I don't have to answer to you, baby. My reasons are my reasons and that's that. And if you don't like it, then tough! Because I'm here and this is where I'm staying."

"Why you'd want to stay some place you're not wanted is completely beyond me," Titus said coldly, an almost-squint on his drenched face. "But being that my employer ordered that you assist me, there is very little I can do about it."

"Now that's more like it," Fa-Li said soothingly, running her slender fingers flirtatiously over Titus' sleeve, the tips of them finding little friction on the slippery surface. He pulled his arm away.

Undaunted by the repulsed vibes Titus was emitting, Fa-Li smiled and said conversationally, "So what's the game plan?"

"We're heading to Midgar," Titus clipped shortly.

She scowled. "Midgar? Why ever so? That place is dirty and war-torn. Why would you want to choose such a location to kidnap the Ksaragi girl?"

Titus was silent. The roaring sea devoured her question.

A dark thought suddenly crossed Fa-Li's mind. "You *are* going to follow your orders, aren't you?" she asked her companion earnestly.

Titus didn't reply. In fact, he didn't even look at her. She may as well have been talking to herself.

But Fa-Li wasn't giving up. If Titus was thinking about being pigheaded and stupid, she was going to have to go upside that thick head of his and pull him out of the ozone. Grabbing his arm in a vice-like grip, a considerable feat for such a slight woman, she leaned in closer to her motionless companion and stared hard at his handsome profile.

"Titus, you're not thinking about disobeying the Master now, are you?" she murmured feverishly, her nasal voice barely audible over the thunder. "Do you have a death wish or something? You are fortunate he even dares to associate with you after what you pulled a year ago! He could have easily ordered your death, but he spared your life, Titus! Don't defy him again, please!"

Titus was silent for a moment after her ranting, but then he gently pulled his arm from her grasp. Fa-Li let her fingers slide from his arm, watching his pale, inanimate face carefully for any signs that her words had sunk into his thick skull.

"All roads lead to Midgar," he said flatly, apparently choosing to ignore what she had just said. "AVALANCHE and the Turks have no other leads to go on. I am almost certain that they'll head back to Midgar to search for their missing friend."

And because that Turk saw me poking around the lab, he added silently. *What folly! So unlike me! I don't know what I was thinking! Why was I expecting to find anything at all in the lab of a madman? Stupid, stupid, stupid...*

"How can you be so sure?" Fa-Li asked suspiciously, as oblivious to Titus' thoughts as she was to the light spray of seawater that was hitting her porcelain cheek like the feathers of angel's wing.

"I'm *not* sure," Titus responded. "Nothing is ever certain or preset in this world. There is no such thing as destiny. I can simply guess and hope my instincts haven't betrayed me."

Fa-Li stared at Titus for a while after his words had already been dispersed into the air and swallowed by the roar of thunder and the turbulent sea. Eventually, she averted her almond-shaped eyes and stared blankly at the worn grain of the railing, tracing the swirling pattern with her slender fingers. Her dark brown hair, now laden with rainwater, hung in front of her face as rain dripped from it. For the first time, she was as oblivious to the tossing deck as her companion was, and just as silent...a first for her.

When she finally spoke, however, the subject wasn't the previous one they had been discussing. "Do you think the big guy's going to kill Mr. President down there?" she asked softly, fingers still dancing over the wooden railing.

Titus' gaze was far away, but he heard the thoughtfulness behind her question and thought it deserved an answer. "I hope not," he said softly.

Fa-Li looked at him in surprise. "Why?"

"If he dies," Titus replied. "AVALANCHE and the Turks will be unstoppable. The blood of their friend will be the driving force behind their revenge. They would not rest until the last of us lies dead at their feet."

Fa-Li couldn't think of anything to say. The fact that Titus was afraid of two rag-tag bands of veterans made her afraid. She was particularly cautious of the Turks, and the idea of both AVALANCHE and the Turks out for her blood was so terrifying that she didn't even wish to think about it. So she said nothing. Titus was as silent as his noodle-brained companion, lost in the deep thoughts that Fa-Li loathed. A war raged within the Running Man, a war of morals and duty, of ancient history and recent occurrences, of lust and common sense. His dual nature was once again tormenting him, and it didn't stop until the dark, ravaged shape of Midgar loomed in the distance, and the words of his employer rang clear and powerful in his head, inescapable. Duty won the battle over ethics, and Titus felt that familiar coldness settle over his soul, freezing his heart in his chest and turning his eyes into two chips of emerald ice.

He and Fa-Li were still silent as the ship beached itself on the shore of Midgar, an ungainly finish to the last trip it would ever make.