

Chapter Twenty-Nine: Refugees of Turmoil

"AVALANCHE has come for our heads." Titus

Elena couldn't believe they were on the move. Again.

//And all because Yuffie woke up and said the Running Man was coming to Junon// she thought sourly as she slouched in her seat in the back of the van. Elena wasn't making it a big secret that she had little faith in what Yuffie said. Hadn't the girl been suffering an extremely high fever only a couple of hours ago? Didn't the word "delirious" come to mind? Sometimes she was certain that she was surrounded by idiots.

Yet, here she was, sitting in the back of Kyra's monstrous, bus-sized van with Cid, Tifa, Barret, and Red XIII. Cloud got the dubious honor of sitting in the front with Rude since he was heap-big-AVALANCHE-leader. Rude was driving because he knew Junon better than any of them, and he had surprised everyone by saying that he had a fairly good idea as to the location of the abandoned building Yuffie was babbling about. Vincent had stayed behind to watch over Yuffie like a good man-on-a-guilt-trip. Rude hadn't allowed Kyra to come, much to the red-haired woman's consternation. Cait was busy repairing his busted circuits and lamenting his miserable existence. They'd left Reno singing in the shower. Sure, he was going to be royally PISSED when they got back, but with any luck, they would have the Running Man as a sort of peace offering to make up for their insubordination.

Frowning, Elena slumped even lower in her seat. She'd been in a dark mood all day...even darker once she found out about Kyra. Sure, the woman was nice and everything, but the fact that she was **Rude's** friend made liking her extremely difficult. Elena had no other friends save for Reno and Rude (and maybe AVALANCHE), and she had just assumed – wrongfully – that both Rude and Reno didn't have any other buddies either. The fact that Kyra was a pretty, strong, independent woman didn't help the situation. She was taller than Elena, too. And Rude treated Kyra with such respect, such kindness...

Elena glanced at the driver's seat, where she could just see Rude's large, strong hands gripping the steering wheel, guiding the van through the pouring sheets of rain with infinite care. She knew that she was jealous of Rude's old friend, and she had no idea what to do about it. A situation like this had never presented itself before.

//No use thinking about it, stupid!// she berated herself harshly. //You have to act strong, like a Turk is supposed to be.//

Sitting up straight in her seat, Elena folded her arms across her tattered suit and surveyed the others that were sharing the back of the van with her. She had no idea where Kyra had gotten a van like this, but instead of having two rows of plush, soft seats like a nice family van should have, it instead contained two long benches that protruded from both sides of the van's interior, much like the cell-like vehicles that prisoners rode in. The effect was rather disconcerting; it made Elena feel shut off from the world even though she was sitting right behind the passenger seat and could have poked the back of Cloud's head if she so desired. Which she didn't. Cloud wasn't in very good spirits; he'd probably poke her back with the Ultima Weapon or something.

//He has no right to be in a pissy mood anyways// Elena thought grumpily. //At least, he gets the front seat//

The Turk looked absently at Cid, who was sitting right across from her. He was **still** acting strange. For one thing, he hadn't had a cigarette in what seemed like a very long time. Normally, Elena would see him puffing away even in confined spaces, not caring whether he was contaminating others' lungs with secondhand smoke. Now he was just sitting there, hands wrapped around the Venus Gospel with the spearhead piercing the carpet of the van. His blue eyes were averted, not looking at anyone, but Elena could tell that something had shaken him deeply.

A flash of sympathy softened her features, and she nudged the tip of his boot with her shoe, even though she sort of had to slouch to do it. His glance flicked upwards, and she smiled at him. He didn't smile back.

Elena frowned as Cid's eyes once again found the floor more interesting than anything else in the van. She knew it wasn't good to bother him with this – after all, Cid was part of AVALANCHE, and she was a Turk – but still...

"What's wrong, Cid?" she asked, voice loud in the silence. "Did all your cigarettes get wet?"

No answer. It was like she hadn't even said anything.

"Jesus, Cid," Elena continued, her worry making her voice sharper than she had intended. "What happened to you?"

When Cid didn't reply, Tifa stirred slightly in her seat next to the pilot. "Cid," she said softly, "Elena's talking to you." The young woman slowly reached out to touch him on the arm, but he scooted away until his shoulder bumped the back of Rude's seat. Tifa clasped her hands in her lap, quickly hiding the look of hurt that crossed her face.

Elena made a face. "Cloud?" she asked. "What's wrong with Cid?"

Cloud twisted his body so that he could glance at the older man, who didn't even bother to look up despite the fact that he was the most popular subject of conversation at the moment. "I don't know," he said quietly. "I think you're going to have to be the one to tell us, Cid."

"Go to hell," the pilot suddenly snapped harshly. "I ain't telling you shit."

Cloud shrugged, unfazed by his friend's rudeness. "Your choice."

"Whatever the hell those brown things did to ya," Barret suddenly spoke up. "I'm sure it don't mean a damn thing."

//Huh? Brown things? What the hell is he talking about?// Elena wondered. Everyone else seemed to mirror her feelings.

"What brown things?" Cloud demanded.

"None of your business," Cid hissed, hands tightening on the Venus Gospel.

Cloud's Mako blue eyes narrowed, then shifted to Barret. "What brown things?" he asked.

Barret lost no time telling his leader, "Nasty hissing brown things we found in Yuffie's torture chamber. Whole shitloads of them that made a lot of goddamn racket. They did *something* to the old man here."

"What sort of something?" Red asked from his seat beside Elena.

The big man didn't answer this time, only lifted his gun arm so that everyone could see the underside of it. There was a gash etched deep in the supposedly unbreakable metal, about three inches in length. It wasn't much, but the Missing Score wasn't valued because of its delicate structure. She knew from experience that bullets fired from a high power pistol wouldn't even so much as *dent* the metal of Barret's gun-arm. There were only a few choice weapons in the world that could cause such damage. Cloud's Ultima Weapon was one. Vincent's Death Penalty was another.

Elena's eyes drifted down to where the spearhead of the Venus Gospel was imbedded in the carpet, unintentionally pushed into the floor of the van as its owner leaned his weight on the spear.

"The Venus Gospel did that damage?" Elena queried, unable to shake the image of the spear coming swooping down... Barret instinctively raising his gun-arm to block the blow.

"The goddamn spear didn't do it," Cid suddenly seethed, blue eyes finally looked at everyone with angry fire. "I did that damage. I cut the back of Vince's shirt, too. If he hadn't moved, I...would have stuck him in the side."

For a moment, there was only silence in the van, but then Cloud asked in a low voice, "Did you do it on purpose?"

Cid looked at him sharply, and the hurt and anger in his blue eyes said it all. "If you think I'd try and kill two of my closest friends on f***ing *purpose*, then there's something wrong with your f***ing head!"

Cloud lowered his eyes. "Sorry, Cid, but I just need to know if there's a chance you may freak out like that again. I need to know if everyone's lives are in danger."

Cid snorted and slumped in his seat, but the lines of his face were both annoyed and troubled all at once. "If I go crazy," he said quietly, "you run me through with that sword of yours, kid. Or get someone to shoot me. You got my permission."

"No one is going to shoot you, Cid," Rude suddenly spoke up.

"Or run you through with a sword," Cloud said angrily. "We're here to protect you, not kill you."

Cid looked down so that the shadows hid his face, but Elena had seen the scary look of relief on his features. "Whatever," he said, in his usual gruff manner. "Can we talk about something else now?"

"Let's talk about how many assassins are out to kill us," Red suggested.

Elena and the others looked at him sharply...before they realized he was being serious. There was no laughter whatsoever in that glittering golden eye. "Well," Cloud said slowly. "Since the Running Man abducted both Reeve and Yuffie, we're going to assume he's our enemy so that's one assassin so far. Two is that Ajax guy." Seeing the blank looks from Barret,

Red, and Elena, he hastened to explain, "Ajax was some creepy smiley guy down in the lair. He summoned a Faceless Man and would have attacked us if the big earthquakes hadn't started."

"The assassin named Montana also had a Faceless Man at his beck and call," Red added. "The creatures appear to be pawns controlled by some higher master."

"Some 'higher master' he was if *Reno* managed to escape from him," Barret scoffed, more out of habit than true malevolence.

Elena bristled and was about to snap at the man for insulting her leader when Rude spoke up, "That's not the point. The point is that the one named Montana is running loose somewhere above ground. Ajax is mostly likely still under the earth; he didn't strike me as the type who gets out much. The Running Man is for sure at our destination, according to Yuffie. Montana is still a dangerous unknown, though."

"We'll be prepared," Cloud said firmly as he faced forward again. "We'll be facing the Running Man for sure. We can't let him get away. This may be our only chance to capture him."

There really wasn't much more to say after that. The mood was heavy with dark anticipation, and Elena wanted desperately to do something to alleviate some of the tension, but once she beheld the intense, pensive looks on the others' faces, she realized that any efforts made would be in vain. Instead, she took a deep breath and started preparing herself for the prospective battle ahead. The Running Man had kidnapped her President, maybe even killed him. Something dangerous inside Elena wanted to blow his brains out just for that, but she had to keep her cool. She wouldn't disappoint Reno. She wouldn't disappoint Rude. And she wouldn't disappoint Tseng either...

Quite a while later, the van finally slowed to a crawl, then came to stop with a small jerk. Rude killed the engine, and the sound of rain hitting the metal exterior of the van was the only sound.

"This is it," Rude deadpanned. Without hesitating, he opened the driver's side door and stepped into the rain. Cloud followed in suit, leaving Elena and the others to file out of the back of the van.

* * * * *

The air of the basement was cold and smelled like mildew and rain, but after what seemed like days of traveling underground in rocky tunnel after rocky tunnel with a pissy Fa-Li following on his heels, Titus welcomed the morbidly beautiful new place. He stopped in the middle of the basement, emerald eyes glowing slightly in the darkness as they took in the rotting crates and burlap sacks of unidentifiable materials that littered the floor. Normally, abandoned buildings as such this one attracted dozens of homeless people looking for shelter, but for some reason, no one ever came to this building. The reason for their avoidance was probably due to the "bad aura" around the dilapidated structure. If they only knew...

Fa-Li stumbled to a stop behind him, huffing and puffing. "We're...finally...out!" she gasped.

Titus didn't even bother to look at her as he strode towards the basement stairs, hoping the rotting wooden steps would be able to hold his weight. Didn't matter either way, though. He could probably jump out of the basement even without the stairs. Not being human had its advantages sometimes.

"Where are you going, Titus?" Fa-Li demanded immediately.

The man rolled his eyes in annoyance. "Where does it *look* like I'm going? I'm leaving the basement, though you can stay down here if you wish."

"I don't think so!" Fa-Li exclaimed. "You're not leaving me behind."

"Oh yeah?" Titus said before he could stop himself.

Small hands suddenly fastened around his arm in vise-like grip though they elicited no reaction from its owner. "Titus," Fa-Li whispered, as if lowering her voice would make what she had just heard less real. "You're not leaving me behind again."

For some reason her words infuriated him. The tight clamp that he had put on his emotions suddenly popped off like the cork stopper of a bottle of wine, leaving his demons free to spill to the surface as they pleased. Wrenching his arm viciously from Fa-Li's grasp, Titus whirled on her, his movements stiff and jerky, like those of marionette. His angry eyes flashed on her dirty face, tangled hair, wide, frightened eyes, but they all failed to incite any feelings of pity or sympathy towards the creature in front of him.

"Who are you to tell me what I am to do or not do?" Titus seethed in a low voice, gritting his teeth to keep from screaming. "If you're suffering under the delusion that I was going to come crawling back to you, then know this: I have no intention of having any kind of relationship with someone like you ever again. I never want to see you again for as long as I live."

As soon as the words left his mouth, Fa-Li reacted as if she had been punched, though not in a physical fashion. Her face didn't crumple; she didn't burst into tears. But nonetheless, Titus could sense something inside her – that hungry thing that liked to feed off the misery of others – withering in the face of his convictions. Anger, hurt – a thousand swirling emotions – filled her dark eyes, but their intense gazes were nothing in the face of the veritable maelstrom that raged within the emerald depths of Titus' own two eyes.

In that moment, he meant every word he said. He cared nothing for no one. All reason and feeling was obliterated by the screaming bitterness that flowed through his body as completely as the blood flowed through his veins – streaming, surging.

"You're terrible, Titus!" Fa-Li suddenly yelled at him, her small form suddenly radiating violence. "I hate you, you know that?!"

His upper lip curled in a sneer, but the harsh words that would have spilled from his lips were abruptly cut off when a sound rang out from the rooms above. Several sounds, actually. Forgetting Fa-Li for the moment, Titus narrowed his eyes and listened, with senses both natural and unnatural.

Well, if it wasn't the pitter-patter of little footsteps. The girl, Yuffie, must have told them where to find him. He *knew* it had been her energy he had sensed.

In spite of herself, Fa-Li actually looked a little worried as Titus turned his gaze back to her, eyes glittering. "AVALANCHE has come for our heads. Better get a move on, Fa-Li. It's every man for himself now."

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The abandoned building where the Running Man was expected to emerge from was, to put it nicely, a humongous pile of crap. It was probably one of the only buildings in this area of Junon that had managed to remain standing during the social and economic decay of the city as well as the destruction wrought by Meteor. Elena had to admit to a begrudging respect for the pile of rubble and metal beams that had still managed to retain a ghost of its original shape.

"Tough little building," Tifa commented, walking up beside the Turk.

"Mm-hm," Elena nodded in response to the woman's observation, impatiently pushing her blond hair away from her face as raindrops sank into the flaxen strands. The clouds were still belching forth torrents of needle-sharp droplets, showing no signs of stopping either.

A few in feet in front of them, Rude turned around to face the others, water coursing down in his dark skin in little shimmering beads. "This building once had three floors, but most of the structure that remains is now severely unstable. We have to watch where we step."

"We probably won't be going onto the upper floors," Cloud spoke up, absently adjusting his gloves. "If there is a secret exit in this building, I'm betting it's close to the ground, basement perhaps."

"Yeah, and that basement is probably filled with all kinds of wood and plaster and crap," Barret said grumpily.

Cloud shook his head, strands of blonde hair falling across his face. "The Running Man wouldn't come if he knew his exit was cut off. Besides, this is all we have to go on. But I feel we're close." He gazed up at the building. "Very close."

And as they began moving in a loose group towards the dilapidated entrance of the building, Elena had to admit that she thought they were close to something as well. The building - with its shattered windows and chunks of missing walls - seemed to look down at them smugly, as if it had secrets that it had guarded carefully for a very long time. It stood there stubbornly, daring the intruders to discover that which had remained hidden for years and years.

The interior of the building was no prettier than the outside and infinitely more frightening. The darkness was thick and close, the shadows wrapping around them like ghosts made solid. Elena could barely see a thing; the only time the ravaged room was fully visible was when a flash of lightening would blaze outside one of the broken windows. She would try and memorize every detail that she could, but when darkness plunged again, she magically seemed to forget everything she had seen.

//I can't keep going like this// she thought. Rustling sounds in front of her indicated that the others were already moving further into the room. Elena experienced a brief moment of panic, not wanting to be left behind.

Taking two baby steps forward, she shot out her left arm, groping blindly in the darkness. Her hand closed on something soft that suddenly when rigid in her forceful grasp.

"Who's there?" Elena whispered.

"Tifa," a voice whispered back, the muscles in what had to be her arm relaxing. Elena felt a gloved hand come up to grip her elbow, reassurance that she wasn't alone in the darkness.

"Can you see anything?" Elena asked her companion.

"No," Tifa said, on the verge of nervous laughter.

Something shifted at Elena's feet, and she nearly drew her gun before she recognized the golden eye staring up at her.

"Follow me," Red XIII said calmly. The dull flame on the end of his tail glowed in the darkness, his eye glinting in the light.

Elena knew better than to argue. "Fine, but you'd better not let us walk into a hole or something."

Rumbling laughter issued from Red's throat. "Wouldn't dream of it."

Despite his assurance, however, Elena still had reserves about following **anyone** blindly through pitch darkness. She trusted Red to a great extent, but still, she would have rather been able to see with her own eyes what lay around her. She kept her grip on Tifa's arm, solid assurance that she wasn't the only one who would be shooting blind if worse came to worst.

Being that she might as well have had no eyes in such darkness, Elena hadn't any idea how long they moved through the room. Every once in a while, lightening would flash outside, and she would be able to see long enough to identify the figures of Cloud and Rude at the head of the group, with Barret and Cid following close behind. Red, the only one present with complete night vision, was guiding Elena and Tifa. The Turk experienced a moment of displeasure when she thought it was only her and Tifa having trouble navigating in the darkness, but every time she heard a crash and muffled curse, she was alerted to the cheerful reality that the others were tripping over things in the dark as well. Silly, but comforting.

She kept her eyes trained on the flaming end of Red's tail, realizing that he could probably control whether or not he wanted it to glow. Pretty neat trick, actually. The glow moved in a swaying motion as Red walked, and Elena followed it obediently. When it suddenly stopped moving, she did too, pulling Tifa to a halt.

"What is it?" Elena whispered, glancing around the room. There was a large window – or at least a very large hole where the window had been – that allowed a bit of light through; consequently, she could actually see shadowy outlines of Rude and the others in the darkness.

"Red?" Cloud's voice drifted from the darkness, sounding puzzled.

"I saw someone," Red said in a low voice.

Elena's heart leapt into her throat, and she unintentionally tightened her grip on Tifa's arm, her free hand dipping into her suit jacket and pulling out her gun.

"Where were they?" Cloud asked.

"I saw their shadow," Red replied. "Off to the far left side of the room. Probably going onto one of the upper levels."

"Are there any stairs?"

"I'm assuming there are."

"Okay," Cloud said. "Rude and Barret, you come with me upstairs. The rest of you stay down here and keep a close lookout. There may be more of them."

"You're only taking two of us?" Elena asked. She really didn't want to stay on the bottom level in pitch darkness. Any place was probably better than here.

"We're going up the stairwell," Cloud answered. "Fighting in such narrow space is virtually impossible with so many people. Rude and Barret both have long-range weapons so we won't have to get up close and personal with the enemy. It's as simple as that."

Elena would have preferred him to leave the last remark out, but she knew that now wasn't the time to argue. She felt the three of them moving off into the darkness, towards the left side of the room. Tifa squeezed the Turk's arm in reassurance, but Elena wasn't so easily placated. Out of the seven of them, only two could see even remotely well in the darkness. Their forces had been cut in half, and she was standing in a cold, dark building waiting for monsters to come out and gobble her up. Needless to say, Elena was not a happy camper.

Someone brushed past her, and she nearly screamed. "Who's there?!" she hissed, heart thundering in her chest.

"Me," came Cid's gruff reply. She sensed him shuffling away.

"What are you doing?" she demanded of him, using annoyance to disguise her fear.

"Lookin' for lights," Cid replied. "There's gotta be a power switch somewhere down here. 'Course, it might be in the---ouch! Shit!"

"There's a crate over there," Red warned belatedly.

"Thanks for telling me," Cid said sarcastically.

"Hey, Red?" Elena spoke up meekly.

A golden eye suddenly seemed to appear in the darkness below her. "Yes?"

"You'll tell us if any boogeymen come out of the shadows, right?"

"I shall, but I'd advise you to put up your gun for now."

Elena made a face. "Why?"

"I was watching you. If you had twitched a little harder a few seconds ago, you would have shot Cid."

Elena swallowed hard, tightening her grip on her gun. She didn't want to give up the only protective item she had on her. With the darkness robbing her of all vision, she felt utterly helpless. Sure, she knew Tifa was at her side, and she had a vague sense of Cid stumbling around close by, and Red she knew was in front of her, but other than that, there was nothing but shadows. She felt naked, a sensation she loathed.

She stared into Red's one visible eye. "I'm trusting you, Red XIII." She slipped her gun back in her coat.

He acknowledged her oddly formal statement with a single nod. He might have started to say something, but a loud crackling sound suddenly split the air. For a moment, Elena thought it might have been thunder, but once she heard the loud shouts that followed, she knew the cacophonous sound a few moments ago had to be...

"Gunfire!" Cid rapped out. "Sounds like Barret."

Elena drew in a sharp breath as the ceiling above them seemed to shudder with the roar of footsteps. She heard the loud barking of Rude's handgun, felt a blast of elemental energy that she had come to identify as magic. Looked like the others had found the Running Man.

"They're on the floor above," Red said tersely. Cid was already running towards the stairs.

"Wait, Cid!" Tifa cried. "Don't go up the stairs! You'll just be cannon fodder!"

"My ass isn't waiting around for the goddamn enemy to come to me!" Cid snapped, voice already getting distant.

Red let out a low snarl, and over the pounding of her own heart, Elena sensed his ambivalence. He wanted to go help the others, but he couldn't just abandon her and Tifa. Elena could sympathize with him, but only to a certain degree. She desperately wished she could go and fight beside Rude, but knew she would only get in the way. (Seemed like all she was good for these days). Red, on the other hand...

"Go after them!" she told Red. "Tifa and I will be fine."

//At least I hope we will// she added silently, trying to put on a brave front.

Red hesitated just for moment, but it was enough to make Elena pounce on him. "What? Do you think we can't protect ourselves since we're poor defenseless WOMEN?"

"You know it's not that, Elena," Red deadpanned.

"Then what are you waiting for?" she demanded, as the gunfire intensified above. "They need your help."

This time there was no hesitation. "You two be careful," Red urged softly, then raced off.

Elena swallowed hard and gripped Tifa's arm tighter. She suddenly felt very alone. "Well...what do we do now?"

"I want to fight with them," the other woman confessed quietly. "But I can't see a thing, and it sounds like they're having a hard enough time up there as it is."

"Even though there's five of them and only one of him," Elena added darkly. What kind of fighter was the Running Man that made him capable of holding up under such odds?

"Let's find another way up," Tifa suddenly suggested. "We can get the drop on the enemy, maybe."

Elena turned to stare at the space beside her that the martial artist had to occupy. "You want us to just stumble around blindly in the darkness until we find another set of stairs or something?"

"No, I have an idea," Tifa said, releasing her grip on Elena's arm. Her boots thudded on the concrete as she took a couple of steps away. She was quiet for a long while, and Elena was about to ask what the hell she was doing when a spark of light suddenly flared in the place where Tifa was standing. Elena caught her breath as she watched the light grow in intensity, illuminating Tifa's gloved, cupped hands, bathing in them hues of ruby and yellow. The light danced over the brunette's upper body; the white tank top was turned into a hard-edged shade of yellow, and it was only then that she realized Tifa was holding Fire in her hands.

"What are you doing?" Elena asked in alarm, stumbling back a couple of steps.

"Calling Fire," Tifa whispered, her eyes closed as the growing flame burned away the shadows. "We can use it as a light source, but I don't know how long I can let it build before I have attack...so try and find something before then."

Elena nodded firmly and backed away from Tifa and the orb of fire. Feeling that searing elemental energy building in the woman's very hands filled Elena with a sense of urgency that the gunfire on the floor above only quickened. She cast a worried glance at Tifa before looking feverishly into the semi-darkness. The fire bathed everything in a red, hellish glow, but it was so much better than the unbroken blackness of moments before. Elena's eyes roved over endless piles of crates, walls of plaster and concrete, the ceiling composed of only so many metal beams, but she didn't see anything that looked as if it could lead upstairs.

//Goddammit!// she cursed silently. //There has to be something!//

The fiery light behind her suddenly flared, and she was about to turn around and see if Tifa was alright when she noticed something the abrupt burst of light had revealed. The room they were in was actually two rooms, only most of the wall splitting it had been knocked down at some point or the other, making its dimensions less noticeable. Surely there had to be stairs in the next section!

Elena turned to look at Tifa and was stunned to see that the woman had lifted her arms straight above her head, trembling with the effort to contain the raging Fire energy in the rapidly growing sphere, which was almost big around as Cait's moogles now.

"Hang on, Tifa!" she cried desperately. The other woman nodded stiffly, sweat rolling down her face as the fire continued to churn above her uplifted hands.

Elena rushed to what was left of the wall and rounded the corner, only to let out a startled gasp at what she found. She stumbled to a stop, barely managing to keep her balance.

A woman stood in front of her. Elena nearly drew her gun, but then silently laughed at her own stupidity. Everything about the woman, from the narrowness of her shoulders to the immaculate perfection of her gilded fingernails, screamed vulnerability and utter femininity. The woman was small and slender, and probably would have been about five feet tall if she hadn't been wearing ridiculous heels that added a good number of inches to her height. Ludicrous! What experienced woman fighter wore heels in battle? (Elena conveniently forgot that she was wearing heels, too.) A waterfall of disheveled chocolate brown locks cascaded onto the shoulders of the woman's leather bodysuit, which fit her like a second skin and was cut low enough to reveal a great deal of cleavage. The woman's face was clearly Wutainese, with almond-shaped brown eyes and full lips. Her face was also fiercely beautiful despite the fact that dirt marred the flawless skin here and there, and once Elena saw this, her dislike of the woman leapt another ten notches.

And naturally, since fate was a cruel thing, the stairs were right behind the woman.

//Damn, just my rotten luck.//

Elena tugged at the bottom of her tattered suit jacket, trying to get her face as inanimate as Rude's. "Get the hell out of my way," she ordered firmly.

The woman's delicate eyebrows immediately lifted in amusement, and her naturally red lips turned up into a sly smile. "You dare give *me* orders?" she chided in a mock-friendly tone. "Shouldn't us poor innocent girlies stick together?"

Elena's brown eyes narrowed at the woman's mockery. "I said get out of my way," she repeated.

//Don't know how much longer Tifa can hold out//

The woman sniffed with disdain at Elena's rudeness, turning her short little nose up. "I can't believe *you're* a Turk," she said, her accented voice dripping with verbal poison. "It seems that they'll let anyone into the Turks these days. It's no wonder the once almighty Turks failed to prevent the fall of Shinra with worthless rookies like you in the group."

Red-hot rage scorched Elena's heart and consumed her senses. How dare this woman insult her and the Turks! What did she know about how emotionally and morally taxing a Turk's job was?! This pretty little thing didn't look as if she would do anything that would mess up her hair or break one of her nails, much less have the devotion to deal with the things that Elena dealt with everyday. God, this wench was going to pay!

"What makes you think you have the right to say such things?!" Elena raged, her brown eyes filled with angry fire as the woman continued to smile. "You don't know anything about me or the Turks, you stupid slut! Now move like I told you to!"

The woman shook her pretty head with mock sadness and put her small hands on her perfectly shaped hips. "Tsk, ts," she scolded. "Such language, my dear? You're spirited, but very rude. I don't tolerate rudeness, you know."

"Oh, I quiver with fear!" Elena mocked, her heart pounding faster as she sensed an impending battle. The woman clearly wasn't moving anytime soon.

The woman's Wutainese eyes narrowed dangerously. "You should, honey," she snarled. "You have no idea who you're dealing with."

Elena rolled her eyes. This woman didn't look like she could punch her way out of a wet paper sack, much less pose a substantial threat to anyone. "Bring it on, bitch," Elena growled, as adrenaline pounded through her system, sharpening her reflexes and tensing her muscles.

The woman shrugged good-naturedly. "You asked for it."

With that, the woman reached behind her back and, to Elena's utter shock, pulled out a slim metal rod a little less than a foot long. For a moment, Elena almost laughed at the prospect of the woman attacking her with what looked like a fairy's magic wand, but then the woman's slender fingers danced over the handle of the rod, and about another foot of metal shot out of nowhere, creating a harmless looking piece of dull gold into an electric nightstick of menacing length. [1] Though it was standard size for most nightsticks – three segments, two of which were retractable – what really made the cold sweat break out on Elena's forehead was that the end of the nightstick that discharged electricity didn't look like anything Elena had every seen before.

Instead of an open hole that spewed about electricity, there were two wickedly sharp spike things that glittered in the dim light. It looked more like a cattle prod than a nightstick. Light gleamed tauntingly off of its metal surface, laughing at Elena's overconfidence in her superiority to this woman. The mysterious stranger twirled the nightstick deftly with one hand, and Elena began thinking she had bitten off more than she could chew. The only other person she had seen handle a nightstick that artfully was Reno...

But she wasn't about to be frightened by this woman! Just because she could spin the nightstick a couple of times didn't mean that she knew how to use it. Right now the woman was just being an ostentatious show-off, and Elena immediately took advantage of that.

Moving as quickly as she could, Elena lunged towards the woman with her left fist on a collision course with her opponent's pretty face. Like all Turks, Elena was trained in all types of combat with various types of weapons. Though she usually used her gun in battles, Elena was a fair fighter when came to martial arts. The more complex moves that Tifa and Yuffie used eluded her, but even Reno had admitted that in hand-to-hand combat, Elena could pack quite a punch if her opponent was less skilled than she was. And certainly this woman had never done anything that would endanger her perfect façade so Elena thought that her rival would be an easy kill.

She was wrong.

Just as Elena's well-aimed punch was about to strike home and shatter all the bones in the woman's pretty little nose, the Wutainese lady suddenly pivoted to the left faster than Elena's eye could track. Shock registered on the Turk's senses as she felt her punch strike nothing but air. She was still trying to contemplate what had just happened when she felt the woman's nightstick slam into the back of her skull hard enough to send her stumbling to a halt a few feet away. For a moment, Elena saw stars, but the sensation quickly faded as rage boiled her blood. She knew from practice sessions with Reno that the blow she had just been given was often called the "warning blow," which was meant to embarrass the opponent more than it was to hurt them.

Elena was plenty embarrassed, but she was also plenty pissed. Still, she had enough of her wits about her to realize that she only had to take two steps, and she would be able to race up the stairs and join her comrades in battle. But then she thought of Tifa, standing alone in the room, concentrating on holding the fireball and not burning the place down. Elena didn't know if she was ready to consider Tifa a friend or not, but she refused to simply abandon her.

Her decision only took a second, but that was a second too long. Elena recovered her balance and whirled, sending a kick flying at the spot she believed the woman to be, but like her fist before, her kick struck nothing but empty air.

"What a rookie you are," the woman mocked from where she was standing a good ways away from Elena. The petite creature was certainly faster than she looked. Good for her, because Elena knew that if her kick had connected, the woman would have been in a world of hurt.

But at the moment she was smug and safe with her nightstick held expertly in one hand. The filtered light from Tifa's great ball of fire illuminated strands of her hair and danced on the shiny leather of her bodysuit, looking like someone had poured molten lava on the curve of her shoulders.

Elena held her ground, trying desperately to devise some sort of strategy for fighting this woman. Assuming that the Running Man was upstairs with the others, it would be a bad idea just to race upstairs blindly and possibly end up sandwiched between her two enemies if the woman decided to give chase. Of course, the woman could always choose to go after the semi-helpless Tifa in the other room, who was occupied with her...

//That's it! The fireball!//

"How's this for rookie?" Elena boasted with deliberate childishness before she rushed the woman, sending another kick flying at her head.

There was a brief peal of high-pitched laughter, a whoosh of wind as Elena's kick missed again, and then unimaginable agony as she felt the two prongs of the woman's nightstick bury themselves in her side. It was just a grazing shot, but the searing pain that raced along her nerve endings was excruciating. She had been shocked by Reno's nightstick before, and it was nothing like this. Just what level of electricity was this thing turned on?!

The only thing that saved her from being knocked unconscious was the fact that she was airborne when the prongs nicked her side; therefore, she didn't receive the full brunt of the voltage. Still, blackness was threatening to swallow her vision when the impact of her body hitting the ground literally knocked awareness back into her. She instinctively rolled, and felt the woman's boot lash through the space behind her.

Strangely enough, it wasn't the pain in her side or the coldness of the concrete that merited most of Elena's attention as she kept rolling along the floor. It was the satisfying sound of the woman's boots scurrying after her that she focused all her being on, praying those blessed thuds wouldn't stop.

A blast of fiery – not electrical – heat suddenly crawled over her skin like the warm glow of a blush, and Elena knew she had made it back into the room with Tifa and her fireball. And the boots were still coming. Perfect.

"Tifa!" she was already calling as she lurched blindly to her feet. "Over here! Attack now!" The room was spinning, but she could see well enough to register one clear image of a trembling Tifa doubled over with the effort of holding the blindingly intense, massive orb of fire in the air above her head. The thing had swelled so large that it seemed ready to outgrow the room.

"Elena, get down!" Tifa screamed, sweat dripping off her chin.

The Turk didn't ask questions. She hit the floor, pressing her body flush against the fire-warmed concrete and willing herself to disappear into it.

A flaming storm of fire suddenly roared past her prostrate figure, and Elena shut her eyes tightly against the blinding light. The skin on the back of her hands screamed in pain, as if a colony of fire ants had been released onto her body and was in

the process of devouring her flesh. Someone behind her was screaming, and the sounds of twisting metal and falling debris rose to join the all-too-human cries of pain.

Then the heat was gone, and though the concrete beneath her was still hot to the touch, Elena knew the fireball had fulfilled its purpose; there were no more screams.

A hand touched her back, shaking her gingerly. "Elena!" Tifa's voice came. "Are you alright?"

"Yeah," the Turk said weakly, opening her eyes and rising to her knees. The back of her hands stung, and she looked down to see the skin was red and angry, much like how her skin got when she went to the beach without sunblock. One side of her face was tingling, and she suspected that she had minor burns on that area as well.

However, her slight aches and pains were nothing compared to what she saw when she turned to stare at the aftermath left by Tifa's overgrown fireball. The thing had blown away the entire wall, leaving smoking and smoldering heaps of debris in its place. Minor fires had broken out all around the entire area, and though some part of Elena's mind told her that the fires were bad and might spread to the rest of the building, she was more grateful for the scant amount of light that they lent to the room. And sprawled right in the center of the debris was the unconscious figure of Elena's assailant.

"Is she dead?" Elena asked softly.

Tifa shook her head, wiping the sweat off her forehead. "No. Either her level of Spirit is very high, or she had some kind of Fire protection. The force of the blast knocked her out, but her burns are only superficial, it seems."

Elena made a sour face. "Great. She gets hit dead on by a fireball and only gets a few burns. That thing would have blown me to bits!"

Tifa smiled wearily. "Same here." She cast a glance at the ceiling, no doubt thinking of the others. "I'm drained for the moment so you'd better go on ahead. I'll make sure our little friend isn't going to be getting up and going after you."

Nodding quickly, Elena got to her feet, tottering slightly before recovering her balance. A few feet away from her, a board from one of the crates had caught on fire, but for some reason, only the end of it was burning. Elena lifted it out of the pile before the flames could spread to the rest of the wood, intending to use the flaming board as a torch.

"Make sure you take her nightstick!" Elena warned as she rushed off towards the stairs. "That thing hurts like hell!"

"Will do!" Tifa called. "Be careful!"

Elena ran around the corner, wincing at the painful twinge in her still-injured ankle. She held the torch in front and slightly to the side of her, using it to light her way. Her right hand dipped into her jacket and pulled out her gun, holding it at the ready as she climbed the dark stairs, listening carefully for any sounds on the next floor. There were none, and that could only mean one thing: someone – either her friends or the Running Man – had won the battle. Unless, of course, she was going to walk right into a stalemate and cause a minor catastrophe with her mere presence. But she couldn't just stand by and do nothing. If the Running Man had killed Rude or any of the others, he was going to pay for his sins with his life. Elena would make sure of that.

She reached the entrance to the second floor and was dismayed to find that the stairwell narrowed out so that she would have no cover if shots were fired. There was also no door (aka makeshift shield) to help her along.

//Great. Just me, myself, and my gun.//

Taking a deep breath, Elena crept up to the eerily silent doorway and shoved the makeshift torch over the threshold first, waving it around as if dusting the air beyond. If the Running Man had a gun, she would much rather him shoot the torch than her arm.

Fortunately, no bullets were fired, but a wry voice said, "Come on out, Elena. We know you're there."

//Cid...thank God!//

Elena stepped warily through the door to find all her friends standing about the room, unscathed.

"How did you know it was me?" she demanded, trying to ignore how happy she was to see Cloud and the others as well as Rude. She REALLY didn't want to become friends with AVALANCHE, but it seemed as if she couldn't help herself.

"Those clunky shoes of yours," Cid replied, gesturing to her heels with his Venus Gospel. "They just scream ELENA."

"Very observant. Pat yourself on the back, Cid," Elena said with a smile, only half-mocking.

Cloud suddenly stood up from where had had been crouched amongst some crates. "Elena, bring the torch over here, please."

It was the 'please' that did it. "Sure thing," she said, happy to hear him being polite. It was a welcome sensation after Reno's perpetual crudeness and Rude's monotonous one-word replies.

Her happiness turned to shock, however, when she saw the reason he had called her over. Lying in a small, claustrophobic space between two large crates was a young man dressed in dark clothing. His hair must have been some pale shade, but the torchlight turned the strands a rather intriguing orange color. His features were strong and graceful, cruel somehow, and even with his eyes closed, Elena could tell he was a handsome man. There were what looked to be two materia orbs embedded in the backs of his hands, and a small trickle of blood ran from his temple to the curve of his jaw.

Elena whispered, "Is this...the Running Man?"

Cloud nodded, the Ultima Weapon naked in his hand. "Yeah."

Elena's grip on her gun tightened. "How did you...I mean how...?"

"How did we kick his ass?" Barret asked. He had his gun arm trained on the man's unconscious figure, a tense, battle-ready Red XIII at his side.

Elena nodded mutely. So this was the notorious Running Man she had heard so much about...

"Rude took him down," Cid spoke up, sounding amused for some reason. "He headbutted the bastard. Finally put that bald head of his to some good use."

Surprised, Elena looked around the room and saw Rude standing calmly near the entrance of the original staircase, his green eyes devoid of their sunglasses and glittering in the torchlight. He looked as calm and collected as ever.

She couldn't help the smile that came to her face. "Well, Mr. Rude, what do you have to say for yourself?"

Rude put a large hand to his head. "Ouch."

~owari ch. 29

[1] Now everyone knows what weapon Fa-Li uses. ^^