

Chapter 28

In the seven years since Sephiroth's defeat, the Gold Saucer had picked up a few new attractions. Dio had finally gotten off his butt and built a four-star restaurant in the thing, mainly because he was tired of watching the paying customers go elsewhere for a bite to eat instead of dropping their dough in the Saucer's confines. He had also built a little something to keep the grownups occupied while their spawn ran amok. This was Starlight Square.

Starlight Square, to C.J., was the final frontier. The sign posted on the door (No one under 18 allowed) gave the place that forbidden-fruit air, and she had often said she couldn't wait until she was old enough to see what lay on the other side of the door. Cid, in typical father fashion, had just as often told her it was a boring place with no video games or rides or anything. C.J., of course, was an intelligent child, and she knew that places you weren't supposed to go usually contained something interesting.

Naturally, in her apparently-over-18 state, C.J. was determined to get a look at the place on their visit...if only just so that she could brag to Zack that she did. This even took precedence over G-Bike on her list of Gold Saucer priorities.

Supposedly, Zack had somehow grown up just like she had. That was a relief. It was bad enough in C.J.'s mind that all of her school friends were afraid of her; she couldn't stand the thought of Zack hating her too. He would understand. He /had/ to understand.

Well, at least /she/ thought so.

Zack hadn't exactly greeted anyone warmly when they arrived at the Saucer; even his own mother barely got a hug and a peck on the cheek. Sure, this struck C.J. as odd, but she chalked it up to stress or fatigue or his usual just plain grumpiness. But when she moved to embrace him he pulled away, as if he had touched something slimy.

"Do I know you?" Zack queried, his nose upturned and his upper lip curled in what was obviously distaste while Sephiroth Obscura racked his host's brain to try and put a name to this new face. He failed.

"Zack--" Tifa stepped forward and took hold of his shoulder. "Honey...this is C.J."

Zack's brow furrowed as he gave C.J. a thorough looking-over. "Can't be," he murmured, shaking his head. "That's impossible."

While Tifa did her best to convince her son that yes, he was looking at his best friend in the whole world, Vincent took a moment to survey the situation. Everything seemed just right. Zack, other than his reaction to C.J., was being fairly pleasant. Cloud was thrilled to see everyone. And yet something just continued to rub him the wrong way about the whole affair. Zack's eyes, for one thing. They still had that blood-colored glow to them. And Cloud--although Cloud had never struck Vincent as being the sharpest knife in the drawer, he seemed--well, a bit vacant today. Like something was missing, perhaps.

"Zack--" Tifa nudged Zack a bit closer to C.J., and again he scowled at both of them. "C.J. missed you a lot. Aren't you going to at least--"

"/No./" Zack returned his gaze to C.J. and said, very slowly and clearly, "I. Do not. Know. You." With that, he shook away from Tifa and walked off.

As Zack spun on his heel and strode away from the gathering, Vincent made a mental note to keep an eye on him and slipped into the shadows to observe him from a safe distance.

"What the--" Reeve stared, slack-jawed, at Zack's back as the other walked off muttering things he couldn't quite hear. "Look, I may be out of line here and I know he's been through a lot...but that was just plain rude! She was worried sick about him, and he--"

C.J. chose that moment to burst into tears and wail something about Zack being scared of her too. Reeve found himself wanting nothing more than to wrap an arm around her shoulders and give her a shoulder to cry on and God help him, he actually took half a step in her direction to do so.

Cid stopped him. He did not so much as lift a finger in Reeve's direction. Not a word, of either clean or unclean origin, left the man's mouth. The look he pinned Reeve with said more than enough. /Touch her and I will break both your arms and tie them in a knot behind your back/ was the general idea Reeve picked up, and he stopped where he was. And then Cid did just what he had planned on doing; he took C.J. into his arms and murmured little reassuring things to her as she bawled.

Reeve sighed, muttered something mostly inaudible about getting a room, and strode away shaking his head.

\* \* \*

Raven sat there in Scarlet's chair with her feet propped up on Scarlet's desk holding a phone to her ear and cursing quietly. Where the hell was Stuart? He had not come to work that morning, and to do so without calling in was unheard of from the man. And he wasn't picking up the phone either.

Exasperated, she slammed the phone back down. Almost immediately, it rang again. One more SOLDIER hauled off to the infirmary in a myhril-reinforced I-love-me jacket gibbering something about a "reunion." God. That made eight in the last hour, including Donna. What the hell was going on?

Unknown to her, a rather odd little creature was at that very moment bouncing merrily down the hall toward the office she currently occupied.

\* \* \*

"This stinks."

C.J. sat in a sulking heap on the foot of the bed in her room. The others had all found things to occupy themselves with. Cid had made a beeline for Wonder Square and was probably at that very moment directing a few improper nouns at the Snow Racer machine. Reeve had apparently sequestered himself in his own room; he didn't seem to be enjoying this trip very much. C.J. had no idea where Zack had gone--not that she really cared to find him after the dubious greeting she had received. Butt munch.

Fine. She would enjoy herself without him.

Her first stop: Wonder Square.

Sure enough, her father was standing on the Snow Racer board, working in profanity as a painter works in oils or a sculptor works in clay. A particularly vile oath slipped past his lips as the digitized version of himself on the machine's screen executed a technically perfect face plant against a very large rock.

"Hi, Daddy," she said as she approached. "I'm bored."

"Hi, punkin," Cid grumbled as he fed the machine a few more coins and started over. "Daddy is going to kick the piss out of this machine in a few minutes."

C.J. shrugged and went off in search of other games to play. The arm wrestling game wasn't much of a challenge anymore, and after her third win it began to make odd creaking noises and smell a lot like smoke. Mog House failed to hold her interest as it once had. G-Bike would have still held her interest had it not been occupied, and she grew tired of waiting after a few minutes. And the UFO catchers were just plain lame now. Surely there was something here to entertain her.

As she leaned against the Mog House machine to count her winnings (and they were plentiful), she overheard some discourse between a little boy and her father at the Snow Racer machine.

"Hey, Mister!" the kid whined. "C'mon, you've been playing that for hours! Lemme on!"

"Where are your folks, kid?" Cid clamped his cigarette tightly in his teeth as he rounded a sharp curve and wiped out in a most spectacular fashion.

Aha. There was fun to be had here after all.

C.J. waved the kid over. "You wanna play that game?" she asked him, and the kid nodded emphatically. "Okay. Gimme a few minutes."

Again, C.J. strolled over to the machine and peered over Cid's shoulder. "You winning yet?" she asked innocently.

"No, punkin," came the grumbled reply, followed by more vulgarity as Cid's digital counterpart ran over a Moogole.

"Oh." C.J. was silent long enough for her father to regain some semblance of control over his snowboard...and then, at a crucial moment, she faked a rather convincing sneeze, nudging the tail of the board just enough to send the cyber-Cid sprawling into yet another rock. "Oops. Sorry."

"Junior--" Cid fed the machine a few more coins. "Can you go play somewhere else for a little bit?"

"But I wanna watch /you,/ Daddy!" C.J.'s grin was wide and toothy...and utterly evil. She remained silent for a few moments more. "Daddy?"

"What is it now, punkin?"

C.J. stood on the machine, careful not to disturb the board in the least, and rested her chin on Cid's shoulder. "Can I have some ice cream?"

"Sure," Cid replied, obviously not having heard a word. Perfect.

"Can I get a motorcycle?"

"Mmm-hmm."

"Can I go to the Starlight Square?"

"Mmm-hmm...damnit!" More coins down the hatch.

C.J. snuck a glance over at the kid, who was now lying on his side and holding his aching ribs as he laughed his little head off. It wouldn't be long now. "Daddy--" She watched Cid's image bounce back and forth off a series of walls in a long tunnel. "I think the pinball machines are over there."

"Goddammit--aaargh. Junior, please quit, you're makin' me waste all my money.../shit!/" The expletive was directed at a large cactus that had magically appeared at the end of the tunnel...and hit Cid's image right in the kisser.

"Ooh," C.J. observed with a wince. "That /had/ to hurt."

A single vein was beginning to stand out on Cid's forehead. "I don't--need--the commentary--Junior!" he ground out as he valiantly ventured forth yet again. With each obstacle his racer encountered and subsequently collided with, the volume--and vulgarity--level of his grumblings escalated. Parents twenty feet away clapped their hands over the ears of their offspring and hauled them to verbal safety.

And C.J. blinked innocently up at her father.

"Daddy?"

"/What,/ Junior?"

"Do you kiss Mama with that mouth?"

That did it. In a flash, Cid was off the snowboard (and the kid on it just as quickly) and running after his cackling and giggling daughter as she led him on a merry chase through Wonder Square. At first, there were serious threats of spankings and groundings, and then not-so-serious versions of same, and then just before Cid finally lost the race against his Mako-enhanced daughter, yells and laughs similar to hers. As C.J. disappeared down the transport tube that would take her to the Starlight Square, he stood in the lobby and shook his head, chuckling softly. "Aah, shit-" Remembering his unfinished game, he dashed back into the arcade...only to find that the damn kid was finishing it for him.

Well, there was always the submarine game...

\* \* \*

C.J. stopped and leaned against a wall to catch her breath, still laughing softly. Oh, the /look/ on Daddy's face when he'd jumped off the game and started chasing her...she looked up at the sound of familiar voices and watched Elena and Reno pop out of the tube and walk through the forbidden door. As she moved to follow them, she felt a hand clutch her elbow roughly. Instinct and training took over, and she tried to counter...but the hand was stronger than she expected. "What the hell--"

"Come with me," Zack said simply as he released C.J.'s arm.

"What do you want?" C.J. cast a pained eye upon him. "You're being a jerk, you know that?"

Zack gave a smile C.J. did not like one bit. "You know that sword everyone's talking about? I bet you could get it out of that rock. Why don't you come give it a try?"

"I don't want a stupid sword!" C.J. fumed back at him. "What's your problem, buttface?"

"My problem..." Zack shook his head and chuckled, a low, dark sound. "I should ask the same of you." He gazed at the door Reno and Elena had just passed through. "Such a bunch of fools you've gotten mixed up with. Carrying on like nothing's wrong with the world." His eyes traveled up and down C.J.'s body, and C.J. could almost see beams of rusty light sweeping over her. The sensation was not a pleasant one. It was not the same as the visual gropings she had gotten from Archer. This...this was like someone looking right through her, as if she were one of those models of people they had in the science room at school, the one with the clear skin one could see all the insides through. "Like nothing's wrong with having their children grow up in just a few short little days. Oh, of course the thought has crossed their minds...but it just hasn't /stuck/ like it should."

C.J. found herself unconsciously backing away from Zack.

"That was clever of him," he commented with a thin smile. "I honestly didn't see it coming. Not that it's going to make any difference in my plans, though."

"What the hell are you talking about!?" C.J. spluttered at him. "You're weirder than normal, Zack. Get away from me."

Zack regarded C.J. with a puzzled look, and then he nodded once, slowly. "I see...you don't remember what happened to you in the Lifestream, do you?...no, you don't...I wonder why he bothered to erase those memories? For your own protection?" He shrugged and turned away from her. "Doesn't matter. You're going to get me that sword...C.J." And with that, he vanished back into the transport tube.

C.J. stood there, shaken by Zack's words, staring at the tube. /How did he know--/

Again she felt eyes upon her, and she felt compelled to get out of the room in which she stood. Going down the transport tube was out of the question. That was the way Zack had gone, and now she /really/ didn't care to see him again.

That left the forbidden door. She opened it and passed through with nothing more than a smile and nod from the doorman. She was officially in Grownups' Territory.

The eyes she had felt upon her had indeed been of the red variety, but they had not belonged to Zack. Nor had they belonged to any other that wished her harm. Once C.J. was safely inside the Starlight Square, their red-cloaked owner slipped out of the shadows in pursuit of Zack once more.

\* \* \*

At about the same time that Zack was harassing C.J. an ocean away, Cait Sith IV achieved self-awareness, thought the immortal words "I think, therefore I am," and promptly forgot about the whole thing. He had more important thoughts to think.

He bounced down the hall, ducking into an empty office here and a janitor's closet there if he thought someone was approaching. He thought it a bit odd that security was as light as it was, but then again he'd been intercepting radio and cell phone transmissions about SOLDIERS flipping out and such, so maybe that was it. That was kind of creepy, though, even to Cait Sith.

Still, he was grateful for anything that would keep the attention of whoever might still be running around here off him.

He thought he heard footsteps once more, and ducked into another nearby office. The plaque on the door identified it as that of some guy named Archer Shinra-Langley. Okay, no problem, this guy was pushing up daisies according to the stuff Cait had been able to go through. He'd be safe in here for a bit. And while he hid, he could gather a little more info.

And make a couple of phone calls.

First, just because he could, he called a pizza parlor down the street and asked for seventeen ham, pineapple, and anchovy pizzas to be delivered to the Shinra tower. His predecessors had always wanted to do that. As he relayed the order, his eye was caught by a small framed picture on the corner of the desk. Its subjects, all three of them, were dressed in identical blue suits; one looked strangely familiar. The name his brain wanted to put to the face was "Rufus," but for some reason it didn't quite seem right. Cait's forehead wrinkled in a little cat-frown as he added ten large orders of breadsticks to the tab. No, that wasn't Rufus. The hair was in a slightly different style, and the face in general was a bit thinner. But the eyes were identical. He thought about the name on the door. That, and the fact that a baseball cap reading "Designated Drinker" was present both in the photograph on the man's head and in person on his desk, brought Cait to the conclusion that Archer was the designated drinker in question. As Cait threw in a request for five super-subs and one small diet cola, his little brain began to process the data. And by the time he finished ordering and asked the whole schmeer to be billed and delivered to one Bob Palmer, it clicked. And the answer was enough to make even Cait Sith shudder.

But again, he had more important things to think about. He made a quick long-distance call, rattled off a prerecorded message, and hung up with a wicked little grin on his face.

And finally, he dialed the number to the office of the president.

After five rings, someone answered. "This better be life or death. What do you want?" came the tired greeting.

Cait cleared his throat. "Hi. I was wondering if the network printer was running."

"Look, I'm not bloody tech support--yes, it's running, okay?"

"Well, you'd better catch it before it gets away!"

Cait cackled and slammed the phone down just as the shrieks began, and satisfied that the coast was clear, he bounced right back into the hall.

\* \* \*

Two words escaped C.J.'s lips upon seeing the alleged garden of unearthly delights that was the forbidden Starlight Square.

"That's IT!?"

Okay. The ceiling was glass, which offered a nice view of the night sky and the Gold Saucer's nightly fireworks display. That was pretty. There were a bunch of nice colored lights hanging up, most of them aimed at a large dance floor. That was nice. And there was some good music playing, and a few people were on the dance floor gyrating to it. Fine. Sure. But C.J. certainly didn't see a damn thing that merited the "no kids" label on the door of the place.

Well, maybe the alcohol. Okay. Whatever.

With a disappointed sigh, C.J. picked out a stool and perched upon it. A few minutes of patting her pockets rewarded her with the pack of clove cigarettes, and with hardly a thought about it she extracted one and stuck it in her mouth. A few more moments of pocket-patting later, she came up with a match which she struck on the sole of her boot, touched to the end of the cigarette briefly, and then deposited in a handy ashtray. As she did so, a bottle of cream soda appeared next to the ashtray, placed there by a smiling bartender.

"Um...thanks," she said, and dug in her pockets once more for money. The bartender shook his head.

"It's already been paid for," he explained, and pointed a way down the bar where Reno, Elena, and Reeve had claimed a trio of barstools. All three of them were waving her over.

"You oughta be ashamed of yourself, young lady," Reno mock-teased her as she parked herself on a fourth reserved stool. "Six years old and you're hanging out in seedy bars like this. What do you have to say for yourself?"

C.J. giggled. "I've been in worse. I was a bouncer for a couple of days when I was in Branford. This is nothing." She took a look around and pulled a face. "Boy, is it ever nothing. This place is kinda lame. I was expectin' something a little more--I dunno--"

"Grown-up?" Elena offered, and C.J. nodded.

"Yeah. It's just a bunch of people sitting around drinking and dancing and stuff." She flicked ashes into the nearby ashtray and took a shallow drag off the clove. "It's kinda boring."

Reeve watched her, watched the cigarette on its path from ashtray to lips and back, and laughed a bit. "Well, with most folks, all you have to do is get some booze in 'em and they think this is the greatest thing since sliced bread." As if to illustrate, he took a quick sip from the bottle at his elbow (which contained a fizzy amber liquid that was in all likelihood NOT cream soda).

Reno just laughed. "Including you?"

"Nu uh." Reeve shook his head and winced a little. "I'm in no mood to get faced right now. I still don't know what hurt worse, that gas or that hangover the other day." He put the bottle down. "And right now, I think I'm either still queasy or I'm hungry. I'm not sure which. Guess there's only one way to find out." He waved the bartender over and spoke a few words to him.

"Hungry, I think," Reno replied with a bit of a frown. "Come to think of it, getting something to eat sounds like a good idea..." He glanced toward the dance floor, then at Elena, then back at the dance floor. "After, of course, I go out there and show off my bitchin' moves." He winked at Reeve. "Don't do anything I wouldn't do, boss." With that, he was off to the dance floor. Elena sighed and rolled her eyes.

"I'd better go keep him from embarrassing himself," she said and followed. "Though I get the feeling it might be a little too late for that..."

\* \* \*

"Knock knock!"

Raven turned a weary eye up from the desk to the closed office door. "What?"

"You're supposed to say 'who's there!' Knock knock!"

/I do not have time for this shit./ "Who's there?"

"Banana!"

/All right,/ Raven thought with a mental sigh, /this is ridiculous./ Even as those words passed through her mind, the immortal words "Banana who?" left her mouth, and she cringed inwardly at the knee-jerk response invoked by, of all things, a lame-ass knock-knock joke.

Silence.

"/Fuck,/" Raven muttered under her breath, and tried to concentrate on just how the hell she was supposed to cover security for the whole tower with most of the SOLDIER troops being carted off to the funny farm. And just as she /almost/ had it, it happened again.

"Knock knock!"

Raven snapped her head up. "WHAT?" Silence. She rolled her eyes. "Who's there?"

"Banana!"

"Banana who," Raven sighed. Silence. A low, wordless growl seeped up from Raven's throat as she tried to recapture the elusive solution once more.

"Knock knock!"

Raven's hand clenched, snapping the pencil held within it. "Who's there?"

"Orange!"

"Orange!? What the fuck--"

"You're supposed to say 'Orange who...'" the annoying voice singsonged outside the door.

"Orange. Who." The words came through gritted teeth, and Raven was sure puffs of smoke were wafting out of her ears.

"Orange you glad I didn't say banana again?" This was followed by a cackle. A very...familiar cackle. Of course. That smartass with the "Is the printer running" call.

"You son of a bitch--" Raven tore out of her chair, knocking it over as she stormed toward the office door. When she flung it open, she found nothing in the outer office except furniture and empty air...

Wait a minute.

Raven glared at a strange-looking lamp in the corner.

For one thing, it was a little too short. For another, another lamp stood in another corner, sans shade. And for another, from the shade down, the lamp greatly resembled a Moogle. Raven scowled at it.

The lamp scowled back and blew her a raspberry.

And that was all Raven was going to take. "Why you little--" She rushed forward, any further words lost in a scream of rage, and tore the shade off the lamp.

"Hi, honey!" the cat thus revealed exclaimed, and then proceeded to leap up and plant a sloppy kiss right on Raven's lips.

Raven made a noise--/gak!/--and shoved the cat away. Once she was clear, she went for her guns.

But it turned out that the obnoxious little feline had some firepower of his own. From seemingly out of nowhere, he produced a cigarette lighter and an aerosol can, and he fired this makeshift flamethrower straight at Raven's feet. "How's about a hot foot, babe?" he cackled as Raven danced an absurd little jig to avoid getting her feet incinerated.

"Shit!!" Raven leapt out of the trajectory of the flames once more, watching with dismay and alarm as they decided to catch on the carpet. The sprinklers kicked on, drenching the office and everything in it, including her. She drew her pistols and fired--and missed. The cat and the Moogle were bouncing around the room like superballs, and she couldn't get a clear shot in. That didn't stop her from trying, though. By the time Raven went through the clips of both pistols, the office bore more than a passing resemblance to a slice of Swiss cheese. A shot or two had grazed the beast; small singed-edge holes in artificial fur revealed what was probably mythril armor beneath it. Raven reached into her pocket for the extra clips she usually carried and found them missing. Before she could remember what she'd done with them that morning, it was already too late.

Before she could react, a pair of large, furry hands clamped around her ankles and yanked hard, sending her crashing to the floor ass-first. "Where's your boss, Raven?"

Raven tried to kick her way to freedom, but it wasn't happening. The Moogle's hands were too large and its grip was too strong. "How the hell should I know?" she spat. In reply, the Moogle hoisted her up into the air by her ankles. She was, at that point, extremely grateful that her skirt was tight enough such that it did not flip down over her head.

"You know where she went, don't you?" The cat chirped, resting his chin on his forepaws. "You better tell me..."

"Go to hell!"

"Tsk, tsk. " And the cat grinned at her...a wide, evil, toothy "cheeeese" grin. "Let's see if the widdle Raven can fly," he suggested and gave his mount a kick. And the Moogle flopped Raven back onto the floor like a sack of flour and began to inexorably drag her down the hall.

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It seemed to Cloud as if he was viewing the room he and his son shared at the Ghost Square hotel through a sort of semi-transparent membrane; as if what he was seeing wasn't really there.

Or as if /he/ wasn't really there.

Everything seemed so perfect...and at the same time, everything was horribly wrong.

/What am I doing here?/ his mind queried again. /How did I get here? How did Zack get here?/

He sat on the foot of his bed staring at a wardrobe made to resemble an iron maiden, right down to the soft, safe foam rubber spikes lining the inside. As his eyes traveled over the bolts and hinges that held the contraption together, the room snapped into sharp focus before him. For a brief fraction of a moment, he got an image in his head of himself sitting right where he was, with the rest of the world and whatever it was that his mind simply refused to grasp at the moment closing around him like the fake iron maiden against the wall. Only the spikes on the inside would not bend harmlessly against his

body when it finally closed. Oh no. They would drive into him, sharp and wicked, piercing flesh and bone, sliding silently into his heart. Even then, he thought, they would not stop. They would not stop until they had sliced through his mind, his soul, and whatever remained of his sanity.

And then the thought was gone; only a slight acceleration of his heartbeat and a bare hint of a cold sweat on his brow indicated that it had come at all. It had been erased from his mind, whisked away by a simple thought of /Everything's fine./ The pale shadow of doubt was still there, lurking at the fringes, but ignored. Everything was fine. That brief instant of clarity had dissolved back into the slightly hazy view he had grown accustomed to over the course of the last few days.

Tifa was in the room now, he realized, and she was speaking to him. He heard her voice, but the words never quite made it to the part of his brain that distinguished speech from noise. It was as if he was hearing her underwater, through someone else's ears.

"...ng with you..."

Cloud grunted his assent to whatever it was Tifa had said and nodded dumbly.

"Hey!"

A hand gripped his shoulder--small, slim-fingered, but no less strong for being so, and shook roughly. "Cloud, are you even listening to me!?"

Slowly, as if he were sitting in a tub of molasses, Cloud swung his head around to face her. "Uh...sorry...what did you say?"

The look on Tifa's face was an odd mix of annoyance, frustration, and fear. "I said...there is something wrong here. Seriously wrong."

Cloud shook his head. "Everything's fine. C.J.'s okay. Zack's okay. We're all here."

"Zack is NOT fine!" Tifa stood up again, quickly, spinning to face Cloud directly. "And neither are you! You're acting like this is all perfectly normal! IT ISN'T! You saw how he acted when we showed up!"

/She's right.../ Cloud shrugged. "He's had a rough time."

"So has C.J., and look at her!" Tifa shook her head and sighed. This was getting nowhere fast. "Cloud, you saw it yourself...he's not--he's not Zack."

Cloud winced a little. /She's right./

/Everything's fine./

Cloud made a little grumbling noise and rubbed his forehead.

"Cloud..." Tifa sat next to him again; her hand went to his shoulder. "What's wrong?"

/Everything./

/Nothing./

Cloud's hand dropped back to the bed as the world again came into focus and he realized where he was, how he had come to be there, and what was happening all over again. "I..."

/This is wrong./

/Nothing's wrong./

"Cloud?" His name, wrought in Tifa's voice, reached his ears and passed them to the part of his brain that distinguished words from noise. "Are you okay?"

/No. No!/

/Yes./

/No...I'm not.../

/Yes. Everything's.../

"...fine." Cloud shook his head once as the veil descended once more. "Everything's fine."

And as he spoke those words, another formed in his mind.

/reunion/

\* \* \*

/reunion/

Scarlet pushed the word out of her mind for a second, just long enough to speak four more.

"I look like shit!"

Vail turned and regarded her with her usual cool stare. "You're worried about that now?"

"I can't go to the Gold Saucer looking like this," she stated plainly. "Look at me. What's left of my clothes is filthy, I can't wear these goddamned shoes, and my hair is a wreck." She threw said goddamned shoes aside with a snarl; they landed in a small thicket nearby.

It did not escape Vail's notice that Scarlet had neglected to mention the condition of her feet. They were out of the desert now, and had been for some time, but Scarlet's feet still bore that elephantine appearance, not just on the soles, but clear to the ankle. They had shifted a few times, smoothing a bit here and rippling a bit there, but she could not quite make them change back into something that passed for human feet again. And here and there, Vail had been noticing a few other unplanned changes. Like the vaguely reptilian tail she'd spied when the wind blew just right, lifting the hem of Scarlet's dress more than calf-high. Like the odd reverse-image coloration of her eyes; the pupils were white, the irises bright orange, and the whites black. Like the slight elongation of Scarlet's neck; it was not blatantly obvious at first glance, but obvious enough to not look right. It seemed that the closer they got to the Saucer, the more dramatic the changes became. And Vail was fairly sure that even Scarlet herself was not aware of them. "If it bothers you that much, we can buy you some clothes in Corel." /Not that it'll make a hell of a lot of difference.../

"Oh, that'd be just peachy." Scarlet rolled her eyes (the effect was unsettling in the least, as this expression revealed two expanses of black cornea shot through with tiny red veins). "I could use a bath, though."

Vail nodded; she could not argue that point. "We both could."

\* \* \*

Elena stood by at the edge of the dance floor watching Reno bounce around like an idiot. /I do not know this guy,/ she thought with a great deal of embarrassment.

Still, she had to admit, it took a lot of guts (or a lot of alcohol) to go out there and have that much fun and look that silly and not give a damn what anyone else thought about it.

But that didn't change the fact that he was making an ass of himself in public. The man /could not dance./ And even as embarrassed as Elena was to be within twenty feet of him at that point, she eventually found herself smiling and then laughing over Reno's antics. Okay, so he couldn't dance. He was doing a damn good job of faking it, at least.

Finally, the loud and rather obnoxious tune that had been blasting ended and was replaced by something much slower and mushier, and Elena started back toward the bar. The song was over, that would be that, and Reno would come back for the rest of his cold beer and act like a human being again.

But that wasn't what happened.

Elena had barely taken two steps back in the direction of the bar when she felt a hand grasp hers. "What--" She turned around, and found herself face-to-face with a disheveled and grinning Reno.

"I thought chicks liked this mushy stuff," he said, pointing a thumb back toward the dance floor where couples were beginning to pair up and slow dance.

/Good God,/ Elena thought crazily, /if I didn't know better I'd think he was asking me to--he IS./ "Forget it," she replied. "You're sweating like a pig."

Apparently, this didn't faze Reno in the slightest. "It washes off," he said with a little shrug, then he tugged at Elena's hand again, playfully. "You know I'm gonna pester you till you scream if you don't let me drag you back out there for one dance. I'll follow you around all night making bunny ears behind your head. I'll stand outside the door to your room and serenade you. I'll--"

"Okay, okay!" Elena huffed, rolling her eyes. "You're a pain in the ass, you know that?"

Reno offered a little bow. "And damned proud of it. C'mon."

As Reno dragged her out to the dance floor, Elena got a sudden burst of insight. In that moment, she understood exactly what must have been going through Reeve's mind on the way to the gas chamber. /Okay...let's get this over with.../ With a sigh, she flopped her arms loosely around Reno's shoulders. Reno wrapped his around her waist, a little tighter than she would have liked, but...well...okay, so it wasn't that bad. /If that hand goes any lower, though,/ she thought, /I will slap the bejeebers out of him./

And, as it turned out, Reno /could/ dance to this stuff.

No...actually, it wasn't so bad at all.

With a soft sigh, Elena let her head rest on Reno's shoulder. One of his hands left her waist and rose to gently stroke her hair.

"You looked like you were pretty glad to see me back in Neomidgar," Reno commented idly, and Elena nodded.

"Yeah," she replied simply. For a few moments more both of them were silent, just standing there on the dance floor swaying in each other's arms. For reasons not quite known to her, Elena suddenly had the urge to cry. "I was," she said, and her voice cracked a little.

"Hey..." Reno backed off just a little, enough to get a look at Elena's watering eyes. "You okay?"

Elena nodded and wiped a hand across her eyes...and then as soon as her eyes met Reno's, she lost it and burst into tears.

"Okay..." Reno held her again, closer than she would have liked under any other circumstances, and brushed stray bangs off her forehead with a gentle hand. "It's okay..." He sighed and kissed the top of Elena's head.

"It's been seven years," she sobbed against his shoulder, her fingers tightening their grip on his shirt. "I know it's stupid of me, but I can't help it..."

It took a minute, but Reno finally realized what she was talking about. "Tseng."

"Yeah..." Elena sniffled and wiped her eyes in vain. "I miss him, Reno...I miss him so much..."

"I know." Reno shut his eyes and held Elena close, still stroking the back of her head. "I do too."

"I just keep thinking about what Raven said, though--"

"Whoa. Stop right there." Reno abruptly stopped swaying and backed off a bit again, once more locking eyes with Elena. "Listen to me. If you have half a brain, you won't give a red fuck what that bitch says, okay?"

Elena stared at him, eyes wide and red.

"She was lying." Reno sighed. "He'd told her to piss off the day before we went to the Temple of the Ancients and she didn't take it very well. I think Tseng and Reeve were the only two big dogs she /didn't/ screw."

With a sigh and sob of relief, Elena dropped her head back onto Reno's shoulder.

"Are you gonna spend the rest of your life in mourning?" Reno finally asked, and Elena looked up at him as if he'd slapped her...which, in a sense, he had. "I know you miss him, and I know it hurts...but you gotta let him go sometime." He drew a heavy sigh, threw caution to the wind, and added, "And you don't know how bad it hurts me to see you cry like that... especially when there's not a goddamn thing I can do about it." And with that, he bent his head down and brushed a single gentle kiss against Elena's lips.

Elena jumped at the contact, and Reno fully expected her to haul off and deck him right between the eyes...but she didn't. And, to Reno's further surprise, she returned the kiss--timidly at first, and then with enough force to startle Reno into staggering backwards a little.

\* \* \*

Red XIII decided, once and for all, that four-leggers were not meant to ride roller coasters.

This revelation came after spending the better part of an hour strapped into the back seat of the Speed Square coaster in a most uncomfortable position--sitting up like a human with his tail tucked into a cramped little knot under his rump. He was not having a tremendous amount of fun there, considering it was impossible to work the coaster's gun with either paws or teeth.

So he sat there, offering halfhearted encouragement, as Barret and Rude plinked away at balloons and cacti and flying saucers and racked up points. He got the impression on more than one occasion that Barret was seriously considering ripping the laser cannon off the car and simply gunning down the targets with his usual hand-mounted artillery. His first indication of this was the steady stream of profanity emanating from the front seat of the coaster during one of the later rides, a cascade of epithets so vile at some points that Red would not have been surprised to see Cid pale at the sound of them.

The coaster sailed through a series of vertical loops, and between questioning the security of his jury-rigged harness and beginning to understand how Yuffie felt about ships and planes, Red made a mental note to himself to drop in a comment card suggesting accommodations in some of the Saucer's attractions for patrons possessing more than two legs.

The coaster finally came to the end of the line and pulled back into its station, and Red was more than a little relieved to hear Barret grumble "Awright, screw a buncha this, there's a beer callin' my name somewhere." It took a good five minutes for Barret, Rude, and the coaster attendant to extricate the beast from the web of belts and buckles that held him in the seat and help hoist him out of it. Red stood on the platform stretching his legs and swishing his tail to snap the kinks out of it while Barret claimed his prize.

"The fuck 'm I s'posed to do with a scale model of Sephiroth's goddamn sword?" Barret spluttered, walking away from the prize kiosk holding a two-foot plastic Masamune between two fingers like a cockroach. "That's the LAST goddamn thing I wanna see right now."

Rude shrugged. "Backscratcher," he suggested. Barret snorted in reply. Red snorted as well, although his snort was probably meant to be a laugh.

"Yeah, thanks a lot." Barret strode off the platform, followed by Red and Rude, and headed for the transport tube that would take him to the Land of the Cold Beer. "Lame-ass toy sword...thanks a whole goddamn bunch..."

\* \* \*

Reeve was impressed.

In his college days, he had been known as the Man with the Asbestos Stomach. He ate things so hot that most normal people couldn't come near them without wearing a fireman's suit and full-face respirator, and he loved them. He'd sent off for seeds of a dozen varieties of hot peppers (including the very ones Annie Wright used in her nuclear waste wing sauce) and grown them in the closet of his room at the frat house when most of his frat brothers were cultivating--uh, certain other varieties of plant life in their closets. There was one variety of pepper he'd grown fond of, rumored to have been developed and grown by insane asylum inmates in Costa del Sol, that had been known to cause week-long cases of heartburn. Reeve didn't remember the name for them in the native language, but he did know that it translated out to something like "hot enough to raise the dead." He'd eaten them like popcorn, sitting in front of the computer in the lab on long nights with a big bowl of the demon peppers and a cold beer playing whatever first-person 3-D death match game was popular at the time. He had never met anyone who'd shared his love of really hot stuff.

And now he sat on his bar stool at the Starlight Square and watched C.J. inhale half a platter of hot wings that were making every eye in a ten-foot radius water. Yes, that was impressive.

He stole a quick glance at the dance floor, where Reno appeared to be mortally embarrassing Elena. Bitchin' moves, indeed. What Reno lacked in dancing ability he made up for in enthusiasm...and he was lacking quite a bit in ability. It was obvious that he simply did not care, and he went on jumping around more or less to the beat of the music like a cross between a monkey and a rubber ball while Elena pretended not to know him.

Reeve laughed and shook his head, reaching out to snag a hot wing from the platter before C.J. could devour them all. The first bite of habanero-laden chicken assured him that he had indeed been hungry rather than queasy, and he was determined to get a good hot meal--in at least one sense of the word. Apparently, C.J. had been hungry as well. The first bite had caught her a bit off-guard, but after that her palate seemed to have adjusted just fine.

"Not bad once it burns the top layer of skin off your tongue," he'd told her, and she had laughed.

And then she had proceeded to shovel half the platter into her mouth. A pile of nude wing bones sat at the edge of the plate, looking a lot like some sort of sacrificial altar in miniature.

Reeve picked his wing clean and added the bones to the pile. "You want me to order some more?" he asked, and C.J. nodded.

"Yeah," she agreed. "These are great. But you woulda liked Annie's nuclear waste wings better, I think. They had more of a flavor to 'em. These are /hot,/ but they don't--y'know." She reached out for a drink, not really paying attention to where she was reaching, and found a bottle. She raised it to her lips and drank.

"Uh--" Reeve identified the bottle in C.J.'s hand as his. "I don't think you want to--"

"YUCK!" C.J. nearly dropped the bottle, and an almost comical expression of disgust and revulsion twisted her features. She spluttered into her napkin a bit, then grabbed /her/ bottle and chugged its contents in their entirety to get the bitter taste out of her mouth. "What the hell are you drinking?"

Reeve shrugged. "Garden-variety cold beer?"

"And you LIKE it!?" C.J. pulled a face as Reeve ordered another platter of wings and another cream soda. "That tastes like-- blaah, I don't know WHAT it tastes like--"

"It's an acquired taste, I guess." Reeve claimed one of the three remaining hot wings and went to work on it. "It sorta grows on you." With a laugh, he added, "Besides, after about four of them, you cease to care /what/ it tastes like."

C.J. wrinkled her nose a bit. "I'll take your word for it. Eww." As she spoke those words, the music changed; the infectious beat of whatever house mix du jour that had been playing was replaced by something a little slower, a little more melodic. C.J.'s attention was drawn to the dance floor by the shift, and she watched with some interest as folks on the floor began to pair up and perform something that looked like less of a dance than a sort of ambulatory hug. She noticed that Reno and Elena were also among the pairs of huggers on the dance floor, and something about the whole spectacle piqued her curiosity.

This did not escape Reeve's notice.

/Don't even think about it,/ his conscience threatened. /Cid will kill you. If you value your life, your unbroken bones, and the possibility of reproducing someday, get that thought out of your head./

Reeve listened, flinched, and attempted to drown the little son of a bitch with a few gulps of his beer.

/All I'm gonna do is dance with her,/ he thought as his conscience tried to dog-paddle to safety. /No harm in that. And then after that, we'll go somewhere and talk...and I'll tell her this just ain't right./

/Sure,/ Reeve's conscience burbled. /Get her hopes up and then break her heart. Just leave it alone altogether. It's dangerous. It's dangerous for you, it's dangerous for her, it's dangerous for everyone around you right now if you screw up and stand there thinking about her when you should be thinking about how the hell we're all supposed to put a stop to all this shit./

/I can't leave it alone./ Reeve punctuated that thought with another gulp of his beer. /I have to do something about it./ He listened for a rebuttal from his conscience, and found it silent. Right. The song was halfway over; it had to be now or never.

He also noticed that Reno and Elena had vanished from the dance floor, but didn't really register that fact.

"Hey..." Reeve reached out and laid a cautious hand on C.J.'s shoulder. "You, uh...want to give that a try?" He nodded toward the dance floor.

C.J. cleared her throat and turned an interesting shade of pink. "I...I dunno," she stammered out. "I don't know how to dance."

Reeve laughed softly. "Neither do I, but this looks pretty easy." He stood up and extended a hand to C.J. She took it and slid off her bar stool as well, following Reeve to the tiled expanse of dance floor. Once there, she looked at him with a bit of confusion--and more than a bit of embarrassment.

"Uh..." She giggled nervously. "What do I do?"

Reeve took her hands, guiding them to his shoulders, and then rested his own hands on her waist. "Not much, really...I guess you just sort of sway around a little..."

C.J. nodded a little, frowned, swayed, and stepped squarely on Reeve's left foot. "Oh, crap! I'm sorry--"

"It's okay," Reeve laughed, steadying C.J. before a second attempt. "It's just a foot. I've got another one."

"Okay..." C.J. frowned again, and Reeve patted her back gently.

"Hey, relax...that's pretty much the whole point of this."

"Sorry." C.J. offered up a sheepish smile. "I told you I didn't know how to dance." She looked around at some of the other pairs on the dance floor and noticed that there was considerably less daylight passing between the bodies of some of the other dancers than there was between herself and Reeve...and she remedied this condition by wrapping her arms around Reeve's neck and dropping her head onto his shoulder. "It might be a little easier this way," she suggested.

"H--hey--" /Oh shit.../ Reeve started to put up a protest to this, and his hands rose to push her back again...but in the end they betrayed him, circling C.J.'s slim waist and holding her close. And, as much as he hated to admit it, this /was/ a little easier. Feeling a bit paranoid, he turned his head a bit to get a look at the door, and in doing so his cheek brushed up against C.J.'s hair. He did not know what exactly she had been washing her hair with lately, but he did know that it smelled very nice. Something like fruit salad, with a little bit of clove from the cigarettes she'd been sneaking.

/God,/ he thought, closing his eyes. /Oh God. How can I tell her now...how can I pull her out of here now and tell her I can't do this.../

\* \* \*

Had Reeve taken his precautionary glance at the door twelve seconds later than he had, he would have seen Barret and Rude come through it, with Red XIII bringing up the rear (his hind legs were still rather stiff, and he was trying not to think about the nasty cramp in his tail which refused to go away).

A group of people near the door parted like the Red Sea to let the big man through, and Barret promptly marched up to the bar and demanded a cold beer. Rude did likewise. Red simply requested a bowl of water, again mumbling under his breath about the accommodations for quadrupeds as he tried to balance himself on a bar stool.

Rude and Barret got their beers; Red got his water (and noted with some degree of amusement that the bartender had garnished it with a wedge of lemon; Red ate the lemon, rind and all, made a most amusing face, and gulped the rest of his water. Apparently, he was not well acquainted with that member of the citrus family). Barret made one last face at the plastic Masamune he'd won and dropped it on the floor. As he did so, he spied two familiar faces on the dance floor and poked Rude in the ribs with his elbow. "Wouldya lookit that," he said, almost to himself.

Rude turned to lookit, and made a small snorting/chuckling noise. "Cute," he observed, and went back to his beer. Red XIII finished his water, requested another bowl sans lemon, and craned his head around to look as well.

"It's a good thing Cid isn't here," he commented.

"Yeah...huh, that reminds me..." Rude frowned and looked at his watch. "Reno and Elena were supposed to be here..."

Barret took a quick look around the bar and shrugged. "Ain't here now. They wouldn't be too hard to spot, y'know...Reno's hair sticks out like a goddamn sore thumb..."

"Hmph." Rude slugged away the better part of his beer and set the bottle down. "I'm gonna go see if Reeve knows where they went."

Red XIII made a soft snorting noise. "It would appear to me that Reeve and Junior don't want to be bothered." But the suggestion came too late; Rude was already making his way to the dance floor. He prodded Reeve's shoulder. Reeve jumped like a scared rabbit, then relaxed (apparently because the prodder was someone other than Cid), then exchanged some words and shrugs with Rude. And then he and C.J. made their way back to the bar.

"Huh...they were here a minute ago," Reeve said with another shrug as he entered Barret's earshot. "I didn't see them leave, though. Maybe they went to get something to eat."

Rude frowned and extracted his cell phone from his pocket. He dialed a number, hit "send," and put the phone to his ear. After about half a minute, he frowned again.

"What's up?" Barret asked, and Rude sighed and stuffed the phone back into his pocket.

"Reno's not picking up." Rude drummed his fingers on the bar. "That's not like him. When the phone rings, he answers it."

"Huh," Barret observed. "Wonder if somethin' happened to him," he mused, flicking a glance at C.J.

"Would you stop it already?" Reeve snapped back at him, and Barret shut up. "Okay, he's got to be around here somewhere. Split up. They probably got hungry and went to get some real food, or else they're off goofing around somewhere...but with Zack floating around the place as bugged-out as he's been, I'm not going to be reassured until I know they're safe for sure." With that, Reeve left Starlight Square, and C.J. followed him.

Barret watched them go and mumbled an almost inaudible suggestion that Reeve watch his back with that goddamn Turk behind him. The he shook his head. "Okay, Rude. What the hell do y'all do for fun, anyway?"

Rude shrugged. "Drink, mostly."

"Hmph." Barret snorted. "Hell of a lot of help there, Rude."

\* \* \*

Reeve and C.J. did not find the missing ex-Turks at the restaurant, nor did they find them in Wonder Square. They did, however find Yuffie racking up an alarming number of catches on the UFO catcher, and they did find Cid. Finding Cid wasn't too difficult. All Reeve had to do was follow the trail of swears to the submarine game and knock.

"This better be life or death," Cid grumbled, poking his head out of the machine to greet Reeve.

"Might be," Reeve replied. "Reno and Elena just turned up missing."

"What?" Cid attempted to exit the submarine game, conked his head on the door of the thing, and grumbled something that sounded like "motherfuckbucket" at it. "When's the last time you saw 'em?"

"At Starlight Square," C.J. piped up, and immediately regretted it.

Cid eyed her strangely. "What were you doin' there, anyway? No—never mind, we'll talk about that later...y'bother to check their rooms?"

"Not yet," Reeve answered. "Rude already tried calling Reno's cell phone, though. He didn't pick up."

"Okay." Cid nodded. "That's our first stop, then. Hey Yuf--" He looked over in the general direction of the UFO catcher and saw Yuffie standing in front of it, a gargantuan pile of small stuffed Mogs and chocobos at her feet. "Yuffie, what th' hell are you gonna do with fifty stuffed animals!?"

Yuffie shrugged. "I dunno. They're cute." She began to scoop them up into her bag, and Cid groaned.

"She's gonna have the goddamn things all over the Highwind," he sighed, turning on his heel and stomping out of Wonder Square.

The four of them took a transport tube to the hotel, where they proceeded to search the halls for Elena's room; hers was the first number they'd gotten from the front desk. Upon finding the room, Cid knocked on the door once...then again...then a third time before deeming the room unoccupied. Fortunately, Reno's room was right across the hall--

"What the hell was that?" Cid suddenly asked with a scowl, referring to the odd sound that had just come from behind the closed door of Reno's room.

Reeve frowned...and then he heard it. They all did, actually. It was a moan. A very female-sounding one. "That was Elena," he said flatly.

"That's Reno's room," Yuffie pointed out...and immediately began to giggle as another moan wafted through the door. "Oh gawd, here we go again..."

C.J. frowned. "What are they doing?" she wondered aloud, and Cid sweat-dropped.

"They're...uh...well, I think they're..."

Yuffie opened her mouth to say something; Reeve quickly cut her off with a reply of "They're, uh...rubbing each other's backs...y'know, like we were doing."

C.J. seemed satisfied with that. "Oh. Okay."

/Thank you,/ Cid told Reeve silently. /Oh, thank you. And thank you for shutting Yuffie the fuck up before she could--/

There was another female-voiced moan from behind the door, and a very male-sounding one in unison with it. C.J. caught it and scowled, and raised an eyebrow at Reeve.

"At the SAME TIME?"

Now Reeve sweat-dropped right along with Cid. "Well..."

"Oh, for crying out loud!" Yuffie rolled her eyes. "I mean, isn't it obvious!?" She noticed Reeve grimacing and making the traditional cutting-the-throat gesture for "stop it" but paid him no heed. "They're having sex, you dorks!"

This drew identical reactions from Cid and Reeve; both dropped their foreheads into their hands and groaned.

C.J. sighed and nodded. "All right," she began, calmly and quietly. "That does it. I want someone to explain this sex thing to me and I want it explained to me NOW."

Cid turned white. "Uh, punkin...this really ain't a good time for--"

"NOW. Anyone?"

"Okay, Cid," Reeve whispered, obviously amused. "C'mon, you knew you were gonna have to do this someday..."

"Like hell," Cid whispered back. "I was gonna make Shera do it."

C.J. tapped her foot impatiently as another series of moans drifted from behind the closed door. "Well?"

Cid cleared his throat. "Well...uh...it's how...well, it's how your mama and I made you," he replied, hoping to God that would satisfy the kid.

"Duh," C.J. replied flatly. "I kind of figured that part out."

/Shit./ Cid coughed nervously and lit up a cigarette. "Okay...well...y'see...wh--when a--when a man and a woman love each other very much, they...uh..." He looked up and saw Reeve turned away from him, his entire body shaking with suppressed laughter; Yuffie snickering and making no effort to hide it; and his daughter just staring at him, waiting for him to finish. "They...uh..."

C.J. sighed. "They /what?/"

"They..." Cid scratched the back of his head and tugged at his collar. "They, uh..." Finally, he let out an exasperated sigh. "I can't do it." Reeve burst out laughing, unable to squelch the urge any longer. "Someone else wanna tell her?"

Reeve stopped laughing. "Forget it," he said quickly.

Yuffie rolled her eyes once more. "Oh, gawd. C'mon, Chibi-Cid. We gotta get away from the men for a sec. First thing you gotta know is, women GROW UP faster." With that, she took hold of C.J.'s sleeve and dragged her down the hall, out of earshot of the menfolk.

Reeve and Cid traded a nervous glance.

"I got a bad feeling about this," Cid sighed, looking down the hall where Yuffie was whispering something to an increasingly wide-eyed C.J.

"You and me both," Reeve confided, trying very hard not to notice that the noise level behind the door of Reno's room was escalating rapidly. Cid appeared to likewise be feigning ignorance of the noise, but wasn't doing a very good job. Something told Reeve that as much as Cid hated the idea of his kid learning the facts of life from Yuffie, he would have hated even more for her to hear--/that./ And even over this din, a single word in C.J.'s voice carried down the hall:

"GROSS!"

Reeve winced. Cid looked rather relieved.

Yuffie, smiling pleasantly, escorted C.J. back down the hall to rejoin the men. "Piece of cake," she beamed.

C.J. pulled a face at her. "And people do that for FUN? Eww!"

The noise behind the door had ceased...well, almost. The four of them could make out Reno grumbling "What the fuck..." followed by footsteps toward the door.

"Uh oh," Yuffie said. "We're busted."

They were indeed busted. The door flew open to reveal Reno wearing nothing but his pants and not looking too happy. "Awright, show's over! Piss off!" he snapped, and then promptly slammed the door again.

For a few moments, Cid, C.J., Yuffie, and Reeve stood in the hall in shock. Then Cid shrugged and started back down the hall on his own, whistling merrily.

"O...kay." Yuffie smiled and patted C.J. on the shoulder. "Anything else you wanna know, Chibi-Cid?"

C.J. shook her head. "Nu uh," she replied flatly. "I'm sorry I even asked."

"Cool," Yuffie beamed, turning as well to head back to Wonder Square. "See ya!"

That left Reeve and C.J. standing in the hall staring at each other. "Okay," Reeve finally sighed. "We have got to get out of here."

C.J. nodded. "Yeah. I don't wanna go back to Starlight Square, though. That was pretty lame."

"Yeah," Reeve agreed with a bit of a sigh. "Listen...C.J..." He rubbed a hand over his eyes. /Okay...got to get this over with.../ "We need to go find somewhere we won't be bothered and talk for a little while, okay?"

\* \* \*

From his vantage point in the shadow of a transport tube, Vincent had stood and watched Zack Strife pace back and forth across the Battle Square lobby for the better part of an hour. Occasionally, he would stop and look around him, as if listening for a signal, and then he would resume his pacing.

At one point, Zack had stopped, looked around, and then homed in directly on Vincent.

/I see you,/ the boy's voice had sung to him, although Vincent had seen no movement of his lips other than a slow curl into a sweet and terrible smile. They had both been touched by Jenova at some point in their lives, and it was through this connection that Zack was able to transmit that thought, phrased in a mocking schoolboy singsong. /I see you. Yes I do. I see you./

And then Zack had once again resumed his pacing.

Now Vincent stood there, obscured by shadows although they did him no good against Zack's heightened perception, watching the boy pace back and forth. One thing was certain: Zack intended to get the sword on display in the museum. Why, he did not know. He only knew that for whatever reason, to let that sword fall into the hands of that boy would spell disaster.

Vincent did not intend to let that happen.

He emerged from the cover of the shadows and crossed the Battle Square lobby, all the time fully aware of Zack's eyes tracking him. /Let him watch,/ he thought, not breaking his stride for a moment. He had no way of knowing that Zack would let him pass, but his instincts told him that he would. And, as they almost always were, Vincent's instincts were right.

He passed into the museum and took up a position near the sword and stone. If that sword were to leave that room, it would have to get past him first.

\* \* \*

In the end, Reeve and C.J. decided that there was only one place in the entire Gold Saucer where they could go have their talk in private without even the remotest possibility of interruption: the gondola.

They boarded the first available car, settled themselves in on opposite sides of the thing, and patiently waited for the ride to begin.

And once it did, the first three minutes or so consisted of C.J. Oohing and aahing over the view and Reeve sitting there trying to put together what the hell he was going to tell her.

As the gondola passed the chocobo track, he finally bit the bullet. "Listen...C.J...there's something I gotta talk to you about..."

C.J. tore her eyes away from the spectacle below and turned them to Reeve. "Yeah?"

Reeve cleared his throat nervously. "Well...first...I think you should know something about Cait Sith."

"Oh no..." C.J. sighed.

"No, no, it's not--he's fine." Reeve laughed and tugged at his collar. "He's not..." He sighed. "He's not a real cat."

C.J. laughed softly. "Yeah...I know, I kind of thought so...when he got--when he got messed up, I thought I saw some wires and stuff, but--" And her brain began to put two and two together. Cait Sith. Wires. Reeve breaking something apparently very heavy to her in reference to the cat. "Oh no," she said again, in a much smaller voice. Spots of color began to creep into her cheeks.

With another, heavier sigh, Reeve reached into his pocket and pulled out a small device, much like Elena's little computer; he handed this little device across the gondola to C.J., who took it with a trembling hand.

When opened, it had a small screen and a keyboard with a few buttons normal computers didn't have. Buttons like "walk," "speak," and "fortune machine."

When closed, it had a little brass plaque on its cover that read "Cait Sith IV."

"Oh /shit,/" C.J. whimpered, handing the little computer back to Reeve. "You--you heard me when I--" And with that, she hid her now extremely red face in her hands and began to sob.

"Hey--" Quickly, Reeve stuffed the controls back into his pocket and reached over to lay a hand on C.J.'s arm. "Hey. Don't do that. It's okay."

"God, I feel like such a dork," she hiccuped.

"It's okay," Reeve repeated, with a nervous little laugh. "C'mon. Don't cry." He patted C.J.'s arm and reached up to pull one of her hands away from her face. "Oh, damn..." The sight of half of C.J.'s face, streaked with tears, nearly broke his heart; he quickly extracted a handkerchief from his pocket and handed it to her. "I owe you one of these anyway," he said as he pressed the hanky into her hand, and she laughed feebly.

The gondola passed over the Ghost Square hotel, and little animatronic bats flew into the air in a living cloud.

"Listen, C.J..." Reeve sighed and shut his eyes. "I have been spending the last couple of days and nights telling myself exactly /why/ this is wrong." He opened his eyes and saw C.J. watching him, dabbing at her eyes with the handkerchief, lower lip trembling. "I have reminded myself no small number of times that you're a six-year-old girl that just happens to have grown-up outsides..."

C.J. sniffled again and sat quietly in the other seat, waiting for Reeve to finish.

/I am going to have a migraine before this ride is over,/ Reeve thought grimly, rubbing his forehead as if to ward it off, and he let out another nervous laugh. "I have tried to convince myself that your dad will pound me into the ground if he even /thinks/ anything is going on between us...but the more I think about it, and the more I talk to you, the more I realize it wasn't just your outsides that grew up in the Lifestream.../you/ grew up. You don't act like a kid, you don't think like a kid. And everyone can tell, C.J...everyone knows it."

C.J. sniffled again. "Dad doesn't."

Reeve reached out again to pat her arm. "I think he does. He's just--he's just not ready to deal with it, that's all. Give him some time." He closed his eyes again. "I need to know something, C.J...do you--do you still feel that way--about me?"

For a long moment, C.J. just stared at him, eyes wide. And then she nodded. "Yeah," she whispered, and Reeve let out a sigh.

"I've been thinking about this ever since you pulled me out of that gas chamber," he said softly, his hand still resting on C.J.'s arm. "And I've been trying to tell myself this is wrong..." /Tell her already. Just tell her "no can do" and be done with it./

/I can't,/ Reeve thought grimly, watching C.J. as she sniffled and dabbed at her eyes in the other seat. /God help me, I can't./

"...and I can't do it anymore."

C.J. frowned at him, confused, and he continued.

"I can't lie to myself, and I sure as hell can't lie to you..." He took C.J.'s hand in his own; his fingers curled around hers gently. "I think...I think I'm falling in love with you too." His voice cracked a little, and he cleared his throat, trying to think of something else to say...but in the end, that was all that /could/ be said.

And C.J. burst into fresh tears.

Reeve cast a glance around the inside of the gondola. "Would this thing fall off the track if you sat on this side?" he wondered aloud, and C.J. laughed.

"I hope not," she replied, and carefully picked her way across the car to sit next to Reeve. His arm went around her shoulders as she sat down; her head rested on his shoulder.

Just before the gondola pulled back into the station, something interesting happened.

C.J. picked her head up to say something.

Reeve bent /his/ head /down/ to say something.

And they met halfway. For a second, both of them froze, shocked and trembling, their lips barely touching, both of them blushing madly.

"C.J.?"

"Yeah?"

"Can I...can I kiss you?"

C.J. thought about it. "Yeah."

And Reeve did; the contact was almost as soft as that accidental touch, but he did.

\* \* \*

C.J. stood in the door of her room at the hotel; Reeve stood just outside it. They were staring into each other's eyes, both of them sure they looked goofy as hell, neither of them caring all that much; in fact, they were both standing there snickering softly at the thought.

"I...uh, I'll see you tomorrow, okay?" Reeve said softly, and C.J. blushed. Reeve was sure he was red as a damned beet, too.

"Yeah." She giggled a little, which set Reeve off again. "Good night."

Reeve leaned over and kissed her softly on the lips, and they stood there for a few more minutes staring at each other like goofballs...which led to more giggling...which led to one more goodnight kiss and trading of parting sentiments...

"Okay. Look, we've got to go to bed," Reeve finally said, and kissed C.J. one more time.

"Okay. Good night," she laughed a third time, staring up at Reeve. For a second, it looked as if the whole thing was about to start over again. But this time, she slipped behind the door and closed it.

Reeve stood there, alone in the hall for a long moment. Then he laughed softly. "Good night," he said to the closed door, and then he turned and started down the hall toward his own room.

He wasn't paying much attention to the intersection he was passing. So naturally, he did not see the hand snap out behind him as he passed.

Something grabbed Reeve's collar and yanked backwards, hard enough to pull him off his feet. A small choked gagging noise issued forth from him as he was forcefully hauled around the corner.

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Author's notes: Well, this was a novel, wasn't it? ^^; Boy, C.J. Learned a lot tonight. First, the facts of life, and then the Truth About Cait Sith. Heavy. And yes--Archer is the illegitimate son (probably one of several) of President Shinra. Yup, a bastard in every sense of the word. ^\_^