
a night at the saucer

TIFA couldn't sleep. What kind of person ran a ghost-themed hotel anyway? That had to be a poor business decision. She'd got used to sharing bunks with the others: in most inns all eight of them were put in a dorm together, so it seemed odd and a bit wasteful to have a whole room to herself. She could hear the hum of the attractions at Gold Saucer, too; did those things never stop? They'd better be paying their staff well for working this late.

She turned away from the window, wondering whether she'd finally hit on a position that would let her sleep. A leg poking out of the blanket, an arm angled upwards with her hand resting on the wall behind the bed – you never could tell.

There was a knock at the door, and a voice: “Tifa?”

“Yeah?” she replied. She didn't know if her voice had carried, so she said it again. “Yeah?”

The door opened, and Aerith entered, fully dressed in her

day clothes and ... lively. "I'm so glad you're awake!" she exclaimed. "All the others are sleeping. You want to come outside with me?"

"Seriously?" said Tifa. "It's what, two AM?"

"Yes!" said Aerith, who appeared to be answering both Tifa's questions at once. "There's an event on tonight, all the attractions are open. We should go!"

Tifa considered. It wasn't as if she'd get any sleeping done otherwise. Besides, maybe if they went out she'd get so tired that she'd lose consciousness somewhere. "Sure," she said. "Let me just get dressed."

"Great!" Aerith exclaimed, and withdrew to the corridor while Tifa pulled her day clothes on. They smelled terrible, as did everybody's. Honestly, by the time they faced Sephiroth, it would be the stench that brought him down more than anything else ... well, that was something to look forward to. Once her gloves were on, she headed out into the corridor.

"OK, I've tried everyone else apart from Yuffie and Cloud so far," said Aerith. "They're all asleep, except Barret - he's out."

"How do you know -" Tifa began, but Aerith was already knocking on the next door. "Yuffie!" she called softly, before opening the door, peering in, and withdrawing her head with a look of disappointment. "She's asleep."

"What?!" Tifa exclaimed, scandalised on Yuffie's behalf, although to be fair, the girl probably wouldn't have minded.

“You can’t just walk into people’s rooms –”

Aerith shut the door carefully. “What’s the problem? We’re used to all sharing. And anyway, if they’re asleep they won’t know, and if they’re awake they ought to answer when I knock. It’s polite.”

Tifa had no good answer to that, and merely watched in embarrassment as Aerith moved on to the last room – Cloud’s – and began the same process. “Oh, he’s out,” she remarked. “Maybe we’ll see him and Barret down there.”

“You think they’ve gone down together?” said Tifa.

“Maybe. They’re probably arm wrestling each other in Wonder Square.”

Tifa rolled her eyes. “Oh god. I bet you’re right. With a crowd of weird guys cheering them on –”

“Placing bets on who wins, and they’ll all lose their money because none of them would ever think it’d be Cloud,” Aerith suggested. “Although I suppose he’d have to do it left-handed. I wonder if that would affect the result?”

They continued debating the mechanics of arm-wrestling as they left the hotel, stopping only when they came face to face with a Gold Saucer employee at the station.

“Tonight’s –” he began to announce, and then nodded at Aerith. “Ah, you’ve heard this before, miss.”

“You’ve been out already?” Tifa asked her.

“Yeah, but it’s no fun on your own,” she said.

“Fair enough,” Tifa replied, and turned to the man. “Hey, you’re getting paid properly for this, right? I’m sure there’s some employment law that says you’re entitled to double time if you work past one.”

He frowned at her quizzically. “Um ... I guess?”

“Look into it,” she told him, as she followed Aerith towards Event Square. “I was just thinking about that earlier,” she told her, feeling slightly foolish.

Aerith smirked. “Uh-huh.”

A second employee stood at the theatre entrance, and began to read an announcement from a cue card as they walked in. “Congratulations! You are –” he lowered the card and looked at them. “Oh wait. Never mind.”

“Never mind what?” said Aerith suspiciously. She snatched the card from him before he had a chance to react, and scanned it. ““You are our hundredth couple’? So what’s wrong with that? You think two women can’t be a couple?” She thrust the card back at him angrily.

“Er – well, I’m sure you’ll agree, miss. It is a bit *unusual*,” he said, initially baffled, but settling on a condescending smirk.

Tifa decided she should join in. After all, the guy was being a dick to the last remaining Ancient on the planet. “You calling me and my girlfriend unusual?” she growled.

His eyes widened, but he regained his composure again. “Well, miss, one of these is a male part.”

“Tifa’s taller, she can play that one,” said Aerith quickly. “Can’t you ... darling?”

“Of course,” Tifa agreed. She was suppressing laughter, and could tell Aerith was as well, especially after “darling”, but the man was too busy being a bigot to notice. He waved them forward with a grimace.

Backstage, they were given some confusing instructions. Tifa was to play “the legendary hero, Alfred”, who for some reason was continually referred to as “the legendary hero, Alfred”, as if that were his full legal name. After a long debate about how to conceal her hair, she was led onstage. “Is there a script?” she whispered as the curtain rose. The other actors shrugged.

She needn’t have worried, because the plot was so predictable that she could easily guess what kind of thing she was supposed to say; after a while, she even began to throw in the odd “forsooth” and “whomsoever”. It was all going extraordinarily well, in fact, until it got to the climax, and the wizard shrieked, rather dramatically, “A kiss! The power of true love!”

She had to kiss the princess. She had to kiss the princess, who was Aerith. She had to kiss Aerith?! Why was this such a big deal? Girls kissed each other all the time, right, as friends – hadn’t she read that somewhere? But that couldn’t be true, how many girls had she randomly kissed before?

Tifa stepped forward and bent towards Aerith, not catching her eye. With deliberately bad aim, her lips landed some-

where between Aerith's nose and chin, and she pulled away as quickly as she could, retreating towards the back of the stage while the final words of the play were spoken.

"You know, you could have just kissed her hand," one of her fellow actors suggested once they were offstage. "Lots of people do that. Or sometimes they go for one of the other characters, because they think they're so wacky and unique and *subversive*."

"Oh ... I wanted to play it straight," said Tifa weakly. The truth was, the other options hadn't even occurred to her. All the fairytales ended with a big old smooch, right?

Aerith emerged from the makeup department, which consisted of a stern-looking old lady and a mirror, and waved merrily at Tifa. "That was fun!" she said. "Want to see what else is on?"

"Sure," said Tifa, relieved that there didn't seem to be any awkwardness between them after whatever *that* was, and they headed towards the exit. The worker they had spoken to – argued with – before the play was still standing there.

"I thought you were supposed to be a couple? Wasn't much chemistry in that," he sneered.

"We don't usually go for making out in public," Aerith retorted. "Especially not when old perverts like you are watching."

"I'd still have expected your girlfriend to know where your mouth was."

“Why don’t you go and –” Aerith started, and Tifa hastily slipped an arm around her waist. “Come on, sweetie,” she said, in what she hoped was an intimate tone of voice. “We don’t need to justify ourselves for the male gaze.” Where did that come from? she thought. Although maybe it was marginally better than encouraging the guy to unionise.

Aerith looked at her. “You’re right, babe,” she sighed, before turning back to the man. “Fuck you, though.”

Tifa pulled Aerith through the doorway before they were able to hear his response. Once they were outside, Aerith doubled over with laughter: Tifa was glad of the excuse to let go of her waist, as she wasn’t quite sure when she would have been meant to stop the charade otherwise.

“That was brilliant!” Aerith exclaimed. “The look on his face! And we got to be in the play – I knew it’d be more fun coming out with you. What do you want to do next?”

“I don’t know, what else is on?”

“Speed Square?” Aerith suggested.

Tifa grimaced. “I’d rather not. I’m terrible at that. I’d rather just enjoy the ride, you know?”

“Oh!” Aerith’s eyes widened. “Round Square then, that’s perfect! Come on!” She darted into the tunnel that led to Round Square, and Tifa followed more slowly; the tiredness was beginning to set in. Maybe she’d finally sleep in the gondola, although it might be a bit of a waste of a ride.

Aerith had already got the tickets by the time Tifa reached the attraction, so she headed straight to the gate to meet her, and they climbed in.

“Oh, how pretty,” Tifa remarked as they gradually rose into the sky. Somebody was letting off fireworks behind the hotel. They were impressive ones, too – must have been imported from Midgar.

“Huh?” said Aerith, glancing through the window. “Oh yeah.” She looked thoughtful for a moment. “Tifa ... no offense, but ... do you need kissing advice?”

“What?!” Tifa exclaimed. “Wait, you think that was a serious attempt at kissing you?” The last two words echoed in her head after she said them: *kissing you*. Huh. Sounded weird.

“Well, I did wonder why you didn’t just go for my hand or something, if you didn’t want to.”

Tifa felt herself redden. “Why does everyone keep – I didn’t think of that, OK? Look, I was trying to do you a favour. I didn’t think you would want me to actually kiss you.” *Kiss you*. There it was again. Shut up, brain!

“Well –” Aerith glanced out of the window, and went on casually – “maybe you shouldn’t make assumptions.”

“You mean you *did* want me to?”

Aerith’s expression was unreadable. “I wouldn’t ... necessarily ... be opposed.”

“You don’t seem very sure,” said Tifa.

“Well, I don’t know, we haven’t tried it yet,” Aerith pointed out.

“So ... you want to? To try, I mean?” Tifa ventured.

“Why not,” said Aerith, with a shrug. “I mean, nobody’s watching.”

Oh boy, thought Tifa. The gondola seemed very cramped all of a sudden. Well, if Aerith wanted to try it, wasn’t now the time? And yeah, it might be nice. Her lips looked pretty soft, after all. Maybe she’d put a hand on Tifa’s hair and give it a gentle stroke. That would also be nice, she decided. Objectively speaking, of course.

Without meeting Aerith’s eyes, she carefully took off her gloves and laid them on the bench next to her. She stood up.

The gondola wobbled, and Tifa stumbled, lost her balance, and sat down again.

Aerith giggled. “Maybe we should save it for later,” she suggested.

“Sure,” said Tifa, and began to put her gloves back on, glad of the excuse to look at something that wasn’t sitting opposite her.

By the time she’d finished doing up the straps, she glanced back towards Aerith, who was looking out of the window, uncharacteristically quiet. Tifa let her own gaze follow Aerith’s to the fireworks. She had the feeling something had gone very wrong. Had the moment passed? Did Aerith not want her to

kiss her anymore? But hell, why did that matter? Was it really that important?

I thought I'd get to kiss her, so I was looking forward to it, she reasoned.

But hang on, that didn't make sense. You don't look forward to things just because you think they're going to happen. You look forward to things that you actually want to happen.

Out of the corner of her eye, she could see a little patch of mist on the window from Aerith's breath.

Tifa mulled over the facts in her mind. Was she, or was she not, disappointed that nothing had happened? Apparently, she was. Therefore, had she been looking forward to it? Indubitably, she had. And so, would she be glad of another opportunity? Most definitely, she would.

She cast her mind back over the night's events. Pretending Aerith was her girlfriend, slipping an arm around her waist: she'd done all that with no hesitation. She'd barely needed an excuse. Calling her – what had she said? Sweetie. Hell, even coming out with her in the first place, when, let's face it, she'd been feeling pretty rotten.

The verdict had been reached: Tifa, by all accounts, was quite keen to kiss Aerith. She was fairly eager to cradle Aerith's face in her hand and gaze into her eyes. She was, in fact, noticeably desperate to hold Aerith close to her, feel her breathe against her, take in her sweet flowery scent and run her fingers through her hair ...

She shut her eyes. Oh boy. Oh boy oh boy oh boy.

(When she was first in Midgar, people used to tease her for saying “oh boy” all the time. Ah, you’re a country girl, they’d say. She hadn’t said it out loud much since then.)

She’d lost her chance, right? Aerith had realised that she didn’t actually want it after all, and when Tifa had been thrown back into her seat by the damn ride, she’d taken the excuse to call it off. That had been the only window, and now Tifa wouldn’t get to kiss her at all, even though she’d had two opportunities already. And now they’d have to make the rest of the whole miserable journey to wherever Sephiroth was lurking around waiting for them without ever talking or thinking about it again. Well, that was just great. Typical, that she’d just pieced together what she actually wanted, and the moment had totally gone, and she was going to spend the rest of the godforsaken trip across the entire world regretting her own reserve.

If it had been the other way around ... Aerith would have just done it, probably. She’d probably be saying something now, if it were her. But the fact that she *wasn’t* saying anything was proof: any opportunity that there had been was now definitively lost. That whole idea was gone. They’d go back to their rooms and never speak about it again and hopefully, at some point, Tifa would forget it had ever seemed possible.

The gondola shuddered to a stop. Tifa allowed herself a final glance of longing at Aerith before they disembarked. Once

they were on the ground, she'd have to look at her normally again, so this was one last treat.

They climbed out, into the waiting area, and stood next to each other in the still night air, not speaking. Tifa looked away. She couldn't look at Aerith right now. Soon it would be fine, but not right now.

"Hey, Tifa," said Aerith, quiet, her voice incredibly close.

She turned, and felt Aerith's hand on the side of her face as Aerith drew her lips towards Tifa's. Tifa closed her eyes as she was met by Aerith's face, their noses brushing together, the feeling of Aerith's fingers on her cheek, her warm, tender mouth – how could a person be so soft? How could a moment be so perfect?

They withdrew from the kiss. Aerith's hand dropped to Tifa's shoulder.

"That was much nicer than the last one," she murmured.

"Hmm," said Tifa. "Best of three?" And she brought her face to meet Aerith's again, her arm reaching around Aerith's back to fondle her plaited hair as Aerith stroked Tifa's neck. Her fingertips felt like ice, but warm at the same time – that didn't make sense, but nothing made sense right now because she'd never imagined she would find herself having some kind of gay awakening on a fairground ride and then getting to experience this, probably one of the world's top five kisses, not ten minutes afterwards. And in Gold Saucer of all places. She was almost expecting somebody to turn up and charge her two

hundred gil for the privilege.

They broke apart, and Aerith called, "Hello boys!"

Tifa turned to see Barret and Cloud approaching. Fortunately, they had been too far away to be able to work out exactly what Tifa and Aerith were doing. Barret looked slightly annoyed – probably at being addressed as "boys" – while Cloud wore his usual oblivious expression.

"What are you up to?" said Aerith cheerily, when the others had drawn closer.

"Just out for a walk," Barret replied.

"We were going to watch the play, but it wasn't on yet," said Cloud.

Aerith raised her eyebrows at Tifa. "That's too bad."

"You didn't miss much," said Tifa hastily. "Are you going up?" She gestured towards the big wheel behind them.

Barret and Cloud exchanged an unenthusiastic glance. "Might as well," Barret grunted eventually.

Cloud shrugged. "Sure." The two of them headed towards the ticket booth. They made an odd pair.

"I think we're having a better night than they are," Aerith remarked.

"Much better," Tifa agreed. It would be hard to top the night she'd had, to be honest. Although by this point, she suspected she'd be too tired to fully enjoy anything else out here. She closed her eyes experimentally; they stung.

"You OK?" said Aerith.

Tifa opened her eyes. “Sorry. I just need to sleep,” she admitted.

Aerith gently ran her hand down Tifa’s arm. “You look like you could do with it,” she said. “Want to head back to the hotel?”

“I guess we should.”

They made their way there in contented silence. As the two of them walked through the graveyard, Aerith rubbed Tifa’s back in tiny circles. A ghost-themed hotel had never seemed a better idea.

Cait Sith passed them in the corridor leading to their rooms. “Morning, ladies,” he said cheerfully, before bouncing down the stairs.

Once he was out of sight, Aerith grasped Tifa’s wrists and pressed a quick kiss to her lips. “Don’t even think about inviting me in,” she whispered. “This isn’t going to be a one-night stand, OK? You get your sleep and I’ll see you in the morning.”

“Aerith ... you’re amazing,” said Tifa. A vacuous statement, but it was the best her brain could come up with right now, the next best being “this is extremely hot”. “Thanks for tonight,” she added.

“You too,” said Aerith. “See you tomorrow, love.” She retreated to her room.

Tifa smiled sleepily. “See you then.”

She headed into her own room, managed to get her gloves and shoes off, and threw herself onto the bed without bother-

ing to undress any further. Finally, she slept.