

Friday, March 16, 2068, 12:45 p.m., local time, Kabul, Afghanistan

Tin-Tin entered the cool lobby of the luxury hotel, sighing with relief at the air conditioning as it hit her face. The taxi ride from the plant had been hot in more ways than one. The taxi had been an older model, at least 20 years old from the looks of it, and its air conditioner was broken if, indeed, it had ever worked at all. The gap-toothed driver with the wildly curly black hair had leered at her, and had deliberately misconstrued her request, taking her miles out of her way, so that the ride which usually took twenty to thirty minutes became thirty to forty. It was only when she pulled out her cell phone and calmly began to dial the police that the man made a wild U-turn and headed back the way he was supposed to. Now the driver was dealing with the local law enforcers outside the hotel, while Tin-Tin, having given her statement, was finally cooling off, physically and emotionally.

Still, she was not cool enough, for when she was bumped while waiting for the elevator and her briefcase was knocked to the floor, she sharply scolded, "Why don't you watch where you're going, you clumsy, insolent lout!" To which she received the reply, "Oh, Mademoiselle Kyrano, you cut me to the quick! Here, let me help you retrieve your luggage." A pale hand raced her tanned one for the handle of the briefcase, and reached it just before she did, and as the clumsy, insolent lout stood with her attaché in his hand, she found herself meeting the pale blue eyes and the sardonic grin of Giles Tallman.

"Your portfolio, Mademoiselle," he intoned politely as he handed the case over to her.

"Oh, Mr. Tallman! I'm so sorry! The past hour has been very frustrating, and... well, I shouldn't have taken it out on you," Tin-Tin said in a hurry.

Giles shook his head. "No, my dear, the fault is all mine. I was not looking where I was going, for if I was, how could I miss someone as lovely as you standing there? No, Ms. Kyrano, mea culpa and I apologize profusely for bumping into you."

Tin-Tin looked at his now solemn face and laughed. "I accept your apology, Mr. Tallman. But in the future, please be more careful."

Giles smiled, his eyes twinkling behind his round-lensed glasses. "I shall." He hesitated, and then asked, "When do you and your escort leave today?"

Now it was Tin-Tin's turn to hesitate. She knew of Emily's dislike of the Englishman, and was wary of his motives, especially when he showed such a keen interest in her project. But she also abhorred lying; it reminded her too much of her father's half-brother and all of his deception.

"We are not leaving today," she said simply. "My project requires that I stay another day."

"Ah!" Giles said, a non-committal sort of exclamation. Then, as if weighing his words carefully, he asked, "Might I... might I make up for my insolent loutishness by inviting you to lunch?" He added

hurriedly, "And your chaperone, too, of course."

Tin-Tin regarded him carefully. He really did seem to be a nice man, and since her break-up with Alan, she had longed for a little masculine attention. Christopher was nice, and she liked talking and joking with him. Perhaps there was even a possibility of romance there in the future. But he was on Tracy Island, and Mr. Tallman was here, and... it had been a long time since she had been out to eat with a handsome man.

"I think I'd like that, Mr. Tallman," she said with a smile.

His thin face lit up with delight. "Oh! Well. I'm so pleased. Shall I meet you both down here in say, a half hour?"

"Yes, that would be fine. I would like to freshen up." I hope that Grandma Tracy will allow us to go. If anything, we can find more about him and why he is so interested in my project. Perhaps if I put it to her that way....

"Well, then. You toddle off and I'll wait here and try to find the London Times," Giles said with a grin. Tin-Tin returned the smile, and headed off to the elevator.

At least he didn't insist on coming up to our suite. I think that's a point in his favor, Tin-Tin thought as the elevator rose smoothly to her floor. She slid her key card into its slot and the door slid open obediently.

The suite was quiet, and there seemed to be no sign of Emily. "Grandma?" Tin-Tin called, pulling off her headscarf and heading to her room to put her briefcase away. When she had washed her hands and freshened up her make up, she returned to the sitting room. "Grandma?" she called again. She made her way over to Emily's bedroom and quietly opened the door. Grandma Tracy was lying on the bed, sound asleep.

I am not going to wake her, Tin-Tin resolved. I'm sure the change of time and of climate have made her feel poorly and she's sleeping off that headache she had this morning. I'll leave her a note and bring my cell phone with me.

Tin-Tin took a piece of hotel stationary and wrote a quick note to Emily, folding it and standing it up on the desk in the common area. Then she grabbed her cell phone and slipped it into her purse, adjusted her headscarf, and went back downstairs. She felt a tad guilty, but much more excited about going off on the luncheon date without Grandma Tracy.

I appreciate her motives in wanting to keep an eye on me and protect me if possible, but I am a grown woman and can take care of myself.

The elevator door opened, and Tin-Tin stepped out. She looked around for Mr. Tallman, and found him sitting in a comfortable armchair, reading the Wall Street Journal. He rose quickly from his seat when she approached.

"There you are! And you look lovely, too." He craned his neck to look around her. "Where is your chaperone, the scintillating Emily?"

"She's feeling indisposed, so I came by myself," Tin-Tin replied, raising her chin regally.

"Oh, I'm so sorry to hear she is ill, but frankly, and between us, I should think we'd have much more fun without her," Giles said in a confidential tone. Tin-Tin giggled. He formally offered his arm. "Shall we?"

"Oh, yes!" she replied, and they left the hotel together.

Their movements did not escape the notice of a well-dressed man sitting in a corner, seemingly reading a magazine. He frowned as Tin-Tin and Giles left, then got up to follow them. The two found themselves a taxi right away, but the well-dressed man was unable to hail one. Instead, he ran to his dusty truck, and got in, pulling out into traffic to follow the cab.

Post by Tikatu on 18/11/2004
