

Final Fantasy VII

# *Sink to the Bottom With You*

—Volume 1—



*A Final Fantasy VII Fan Fiction by Catalina V.*

# -Final Fantasy VII-

"...If there's a way  
to infiltrate you  
Sway your mind  
and complicate you  
I'm gonna crash  
into your world  
And that's no lie..."

## Sink

"...Why, why  
do you always  
kick me  
when I'm high?"

## to the

"...I can see that she's trying to need me  
Suddenly I know  
She's going to change the world  
But she can't change me..."

"...You know,  
I used to be  
such a nice boy..."

## Bottom

"...Deep within I'm shaken  
By the violence of existing  
For only you..."

"...I prefer  
a sunless sky  
to the

## With You

glittering and stinging  
in my eye..."

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A Final Fantasy VII Fanfiction by  
**Catalina V.**

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- Volume 1 -

Final Fantasy VII  
*Sink to the Bottom With You*  
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#### **SINK TO THE BOTTOM WITH YOU**

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Final Fantasy VII  
*Sink to the Bottom With You*  
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# Final Fantasy VII

## *Sink to the Bottom With You*

### —Volume 1—

## FOREWORD



Heya, Ody here. Since working on the trilogy of *I Know What's Beneath the Snow Fields* books, I've come to understand that all authors of old novel-length *Final Fantasy VII* sequel fics are subject to an ANCIENT CURSE that caused them all to vanish forever in 2008, so I'll be writing the foreword again here.

*Sink to The Bottom With You* is a fic I was vaguely aware of since I had started work on the first *Snow Fields* book, as the doujinshi adaptation by The Art Engineer got brought up in my project thread. As *Snow Fields* was wrapping up, and I was in need of another project, I decided to finally look into that. What I found was another very good fanfic with a lot of unique ideas, and I knew I'd secured my next book project. I made sure to actually read the whole thing before starting this time, for the record.

*Sink* was written by one Catalina V., starting when she was 16 years old in 2000, and going all the way through to 2008 when Cat got abducted by the wendigo. It's set one year after the defeat of Sephiroth, and deal with Avalanche facing a mysterious new threat. Yuffie and Vincent take center stage, and the beginning of a romance starts to bud between them. Some might be put off by the fact it's a Yuffentine fic, and the raw age difference between Yuffie and Vincent is something Cat never quite manages to wrangle before the fic cuts off, but it's never taken far enough to be an issue in my eyes. If you can put that squick aside, what you get is a fic with a very good understanding of FFVII and its characters, with very good characterization for everyone and a healthy smattering of game stuff like characters' weapons and materia that shows a lot of care and attention that really helps it feel connected to the game in a way other fics may struggle with. It can sometimes get bogged down in very teenaged drama, as you'll see, but overall that's not enough to make me not enjoy it.

As somebody whose online face is literally a picture of Yuffie, I can say her characterization in *Sink* is very on point especially, and it makes me happy she gets to be the star of such a good and long story. She's still goofy and occasionally coniving, but underneath it all she's just insecure and is frustrated by how other people see her as a burden. I'd say she lacks a bit of the snark her game self has, but Yuffie in *Sink* is still a very enjoyable version of her to read. And even though Yuffie is the star of the show, everyone else has a healthy amount of screentime as well. Despite being Yuffentine on-paper, plenty of chapters go by where they don't even appear and other characters take center stage. It really helps it feel like a proper FFVII sequel. There's also a group of OCs that serve as the antagonists, which I have a lot to say about, but that can wait for another time.

Alright, so this ramble really isn't as much of a "foreword" as it is an endorsement, but all the same, I like this fic and I think you will too.

—Odysseus

Final Fantasy VII  
*Sink to the Bottom With You*  
—Volume 1—

## PLAYLIST

Music is at the heart of this fanfic. As you'll shortly see, Catalina regularly put song lyrics at the start of the chapters of *Sink to the Bottom With You* that are relevant to the events of that chapter, which were either chosen by Catalina herself, or occasionally suggested to her by her readers. Even the fic itself is named after a song! As such, it's only appropriate to have a playlist handy of all of the songs:

[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLmRqCtSNxZflhESIA6\\_nV1bfhwgjluzRh](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLmRqCtSNxZflhESIA6_nV1bfhwgjluzRh)

Please listen at your leisure while reading.



## Final Fantasy VII

*Sink to the Bottom With You**- Volume 1 -*


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*I wanna sink to the bottom with you  
 I wanna sink to the bottom with you  
 The ocean is big and blue  
 I just wanna sink to the bottom with you*

*Cars on the highway, planes in the air  
 Everyone else is going somewhere  
 But I'm going nowhere, getting there soon  
 I might as well just sink down with you*

*I wanna sink to the bottom with you  
 I wanna sink to the bottom with you  
 The ocean is big and blue  
 I just wanna sink to the bottom with you*

*Out on the highway, up in the air  
 Everyone else is going somewhere  
 They're going nowhere, and I'll be there too  
 I might as well go under with you*

*“Sink to the Bottom”  
 —Fountains of Wayne—*

---

This is the song that inspired “Sink”! Not so much the lyrics themselves, but the chorus....it would not get out of my head for the longest time. It haunted me so badly I ended up naming a fic after it. >.<

—Catalina

# Chapter One

---

## *The Ninja and the Gunslinger*

*“How about ‘Piss on yourself?’” —Vincent Valentine*

---



---

*It's a reason  
Why I'm down  
I am beaten  
And pushed around  
It's a ceiling  
Without a sound  
Everyone I know  
Considers me a clown*

*“Why I'm Here”  
—Oleander—*

---

A shadow hung over the docking bay, deeper than the bluest midnight. The sharp tangy smell of seawater permeated the night air like a thick blanket. At first, Yuffie Kisaragi had relished the smell of the ocean so close. At Wutai, if she stood on the top of the Da Chao Statue, she could see the ocean stretching for miles and miles and feel the gentle sea breezes caress her face. It had always given her a sense of peace and serenity, but not now. Nope, right now it felt as if someone had stuffed packets of salt up her nose. *Open* packets of salt. The saline smell hung so heavily in the night air that she had to resist the urge to hack and cough like she had a frog stuck in her throat.

A flock of thick and bloated thunderclouds obscured the full moon, not even allowing the faintest fingers of moonlight to peek through, and Yuffie couldn't decide whether that was a good or bad thing. The utter lack of light concealed their hiding spot behind a box of crates well enough, but it also made things a hell of a lot more difficult to see. She could barely glimpse the nose in front of her face, much less the person they were allegedly “following.”

She turned to her partner for what seemed like the millionth time and said, “Psst! Hey, Vinnie! Any sign of him yet?”

The shadow next to her, the one more ominous than the rest, shifted slightly, and for a moment, she saw a flash of a red bandana covering even redder eyes. “No,” Vincent Valentine said shortly, then turned away from her.



Yuffie folded her thin arms across her chest and made a face, shifting restlessly to get the blood flowing back into her legs. She and Vincent had been in the same crouching positions for what seemed like hours, with Vincent keeping a lookout around the side of the crate while Yuffie tried her best to keep herself entertained (which wasn't working at all). "If he doesn't show up soon," she threatened grumpily, "then I'm leaving."

Vincent didn't say anything so Yuffie continued venting her frustration.

"It's past midnight, and I'm cold and wet and tired and grumpy. Why did that dumbass Cloud have to send us *here*? We could have investigated Midgar just as well as freaking Reno, Rude, and Elena! But no, instead he sends us onboard an old stinky ship to look for some dude that we know next to nothing about. And just when we're about to leave, who shows up but the dude we're looking for! Then we have to stay on the damn ship and let it take us to who the hell knows where we are! And then, to top it all off, Vinnie here decides to push me into the water just as we're getting off—"

Vincent suddenly whirled around, startling her so badly that she jerked away from him, the edge of the Conformer poking one of her numb legs. "Yuffie, be quiet," the older man said calmly despite his sudden motion.

Yuffie scowled, refusing to be intimidated. "Vinnie, I'm cold and I'm wet and my legs are asleep. Can we *please* go home now? That guy already knows we're here."

"And whose fault is that?" Vincent asked flatly.

"Are you saying it's *my* fault?!" she demanded, squinting at him in the darkness until she could just make out his left claw braced on the concrete between them and his red eyes glittering faintly in the shadows. "You're the one that knocked me into the water, Vinnie!"

"No," Vincent said without a trace of emotion. "You slipped in a puddle and fell into the pool. I had nothing to do with your mishap. And while we're on the subject, our quarry would have no idea of our presence if you hadn't insisted on yelling and screaming after you had your accident."

"It was no accident!" Yuffie insisted, knowing she was whining and not caring. "Someone pushed me and that someone had to be you!"

"I told you before that you slipped in the puddle. All I did was pull you out of the water. Blame me if it will ease your state of mind and keep you from complaining. I don't care either way." He turned away again, the end of his red cloak brushing her leg in the darkness.

Yuffie pouted, but kept her mouth shut. It was bad enough that she was here, even worse that she was here with *Vincent*. Not that Vincent was a bad guy. In fact, he was okay if you wanted someone who didn't talk much, and he was kind of good-looking

in a twisted sort of way, but he definitely wasn't Yuffie's idea of amiable company. Why couldn't Cloud have partnered her up with Tifa, who would probably at least sympathize with Yuffie's soaking wet and miserable condition? Even Cid or Barret would have been better company than Vampire Boy. Cid's cigarettes could drown out the seawater smell, and both of them would have been more fun to fight with than Vincent, whose flat tones and one-word answers tended to kill any attempt at conversation.

"Hey, Vinnie," she said again, glancing at the statue-still shadow next to her.

"Yes, Yuffie?"

"I need to go to the bathroom."

"There's a lovely pool of seawater three steps to your left."

Yuffie's mouth dropped open. "Did the dark and gloomy Vincent Valentine just make a joke? Wow, and I was here to witness it. Tifa and Cid will be so jealous. But that still doesn't change the situation. I have to go to the bathroom!"

Vincent turned to stare at her again. "What do you want me to say, Yuffie?"

"How about, 'Oh, Yuffie, since I know you're wet and cold because I pushed you in the stinky seawater that was probably filled with gross amoebas and who knows what, let me go find you a nice clean hotel where you can rest, eat, and go to the bathroom.' I think you should say something like that, Vinnie."

"How about, 'Piss on yourself'?"

Yuffie's mouth dropped open again, but she managed to sputter out, "That was so rude, Vinnie Valentine! I see you've been hanging around Cid and Reno a bit too much!"

"Actually, I think it was spending two hours with you on a boat and then waiting here with you for one more hour that did the trick."

Yuffie punched him in what she hoped was his shoulder. "You're so mean to me, Vinnie! Next time, leave me in the sea water with the amoebas; I'm sure they'd be better company than you!"

"Forgive me, Yuffie," he said flatly. "I'm afraid I'm not in the best of moods tonight. I'm sorry for insulting you."

"No, you're not," Yuffie grumbled. "But I'll just pretend your apology was sincere. At least we can be cold and miserable together."

Vincent didn't reply; he simply turned away from her and continued to watch for their quarry. Yuffie drew her trembling knees up to her chest and shivered, pushing impatiently at her shoulder-length hair, which she had been allowing to grow out at Tifa's

prodding in the year since they had defeated Sephiroth.

The young ninja sighed inwardly and found herself reflecting on all the things that had happened in the past year, something she had started making a habit of. Reeve, formerly known as Cait Sith, was working hard on rebuilding what was left of Midgar. He had taken over the remnants of Shinra, going as far as calling the elusive Turks back in to help. Naturally, and with the Planet's best interests in mind, he had discarded the idea of Mako reactors and was in the process of changing all the reactors into electric generators to power the sectors. The progress was slow, but with Reno, Rude, and Elena to help him out, the former Urban Development manager was optimistic about the future of both the Neo-Shinra and Midgar.

Cloud and Tifa had taken up residence in Tifa's new bar at Kalm. Surprisingly, the two hadn't gotten married as most of the others, Yuffie included, had thought. Though they pretty much lived next door to each other in the rooms above the bar, their relationship didn't seem to be deepening all that much. Both Tifa and Cloud, however, seemed content with their neighbor-like existence, and though Yuffie thought that they should have gotten together, she was happy as long as her friends were happy.

Barret had taken his daughter Marlene and moved to his ravaged hometown of Corel, where he was working on revitalizing the town with the same dedication and uncharacteristic optimism that Reeve had for Midgar. Personally, Yuffie thought he should just put that dump out in the pasture and shoot it, but if that was what he wanted to do with the rest of his existence, then that was fine by her. Whatever floats his boat.

Red XIII had returned to Cosmo Canyon, of course, and was in the midst of reading all he could on the history of the Planet, the Cetra, and whatever other bits and pieces of information he had in that old, musty library of his. He would soon be the Guardian of Cosmo Canyon, and the lion-like creature was taking his responsibility very seriously. Yuffie visited him whenever she could and bugged the living hell out of him. Hey, the furball needed a little spark in his life.

Cid had immediately returned to Rocket Town and asked Shera to marry him. He was both surprised and overjoyed when she said yes. Yuffie was surprised, too. If someone who had used to treat her the way Cid used to treat Shera asked her to marry him, she would have told him to shove that ring up his you know what. Despite her personal biases, though, she was happy for her friends. Even from the very beginning, she had felt that Cid and Shera belonged together. It hadn't taken an idiot to see the unspoken attraction between them.

The wedding had been fun, too, with Cloud, Cid, and Reno all a bit giggly and tipsy during the reception after drinking too many shots of whatever it was they could get their hands on. Before the bride and groom had said their vows, however, Cid had been so nervous that he smoked cigarette after cigarette until finally Yuffie and her

unwillingly partner in crime, Reeve, had swiped his pack and flushed it down the toilet. That wedding had been one of most fun times of her life. Even if she had to wear that uncomfortable bridesmaid dress that made her feel half naked. The highlight of her evening, aside from watching Reno try to climb up and dance on a table only to fall in a very surprised and very unhappy Barret's lap, was when she managed to drag Vincent out onto the dance floor. She practically had to pick him up and carry him, but that had been the best part of it.

Yes, life had been good.

Then one day, out of nowhere, Cloud had called Yuffie on the PHS, sounding extremely morbid for a man who seemed to be leading a very happy existence.

*"Hey Cloud! What's up?" Yuffie asked as she lay on her futon, holding the PHS with one hand and juggling a mastered Fire materia with the other.*

*"We're having problems, Yuffie," he said dully, but the ninja could hear the underlying worry evident in his voice.*

*"Who? You and Tifa?"*

*"No," Cloud answered. "Reeve is missing."*

*Yuffie's heart skipped a beat. She forgot to catch the materia she had tossed in the air before Cloud's previous statement, and the emerald orb plummeted down to smack her right in the middle of the forehead. "Ow!" she cried, but quickly returned her attention to the situation at hand. "What? How can that be? When did this happen?"*

*"Last night. Reno was going to ask Reeve to go drinking with him and Rude when he heard scuffling sounds in the office. He burst in there, but it was too late. The window was broken, but there was no sign of Reeve or his attacker, whoever they were. Reno tried to call someone on Reeve's office telephone, but the lines had been cut and all he got on his own cell phone was static. He and Rude showed up at the bar at dawn today to ask me and Tifa for help."*

*"Who do you think could have done this?" she asked, trying to keep down the flutter of fear in the back of her throat and ignore the growing lump in the middle of her forehead. "A rebel group? I'm sure that there's plenty of people who would want to kidnap the President of Neo-Shinra."*

*"I don't know," Cloud said glumly. "There's rebel groups against almost everything, but somehow I have a feeling that this has something to do with Reeve being part of AVALANCHE. I'm calling in everyone and organizing a search. Can you bring all our materia to Tifa's bar in Kalm?"*

*"Okay," Yuffie said eagerly, surprised at how much she wanted to help. "What do we have to go on?"*

*Cloud sighed. "Not much, I'm afraid. Me, Tifa and the Turks searched the office, but the kidnapper left no trace of anything. We found drops of blood, however..."*

*Yuffie swallowed a lump in her throat, and forced herself to ask, "Were they Reeve's?"*

*"Yeah," Cloud said grimly. "They were Reeve's."*

*"Crap," Yuffie muttered, unable to think of anything else to say.*

*"We had pretty much the same reaction. There were only a couple of drops so we still have hope that wherever Reeve is, he's not seriously injured. But what we're really worried about is the man Rude saw in the remains of Hojo's lab a few hours after Reeve was captured."*

*"What kind of man?"*

*"Rude said he was dressed all in black with a ski mask covering his face. He was searching through old files of Hojo's when Rude surprised him. The man ran away and managed to escape through a place that we haven't been able to find yet. Turns out that Reno, Rude, and Elena had seen this man lurking around before, but he had always run away when they attempted to talk to him. We're calling him the 'Running Man'..."*

Which brought her to the present moment, soaking wet and stuck in the docking bay next to a rotting and seemingly abandoned boat that Cloud had wanted Yuffie and Vincent to investigate. Now she had no idea where she was, what time it was, how long they were going to be here, or if they would even get a chance to apprehend the Running Man. All she knew was that she was cold, wet, tired, and ready to let Reeve fend for himself, wherever he was. She had a broken and waterlogged PHS, a rumble in her stomach that sounded every bit as fierce as those damn green dragons at Mt. Nibel, and boy was she ever COLD!

Yuffie shivered again and rubbed her bare arms. She glanced over at Vincent, who despite what he had said earlier, looked warm and toasty in his long red cape and black pants.

"Hey, Vinnie," she spoke up again. "Can I use your—"

Her entreaty was cut short when her dark companion suddenly spun around and clamped a gloved hand over her mouth. Though her first instinct was to struggle until she was released, Yuffie quickly repressed it, trusting Vincent's senses and knowing that he rarely touched anyone for any reason. She flicked her eyes to the side and was just able to see a shadowy blur as Vincent shifted closer to her.

"I saw him," he whispered, lips close to the side of her face. His warm breath against her ear sent pleasurable chills running down her spine. Strands of ebony black hair flopped forward to caress her cheek, and she was suddenly aware of how close he was, close enough that she could feel the warmth radiating from his body. Suddenly, she wasn't

cold anymore.

“He went down a stairwell to a lower level,” Vincent continued, oblivious to the change that had overtaken her. “Just follow me. Got it?”

Yuffie nodded, not trusting her voice.

Vincent removed his hand from her mouth and crept closer to the edge of the crate, peering out from behind it to see that there was no one hanging around the docking bay. He took the Death Penalty from its holster, and seeing this, Yuffie followed in suit with her Conformer, trying to work the kinks out of her muscles as she did so.

Vincent stepped out from behind the crate and into the open, motioning for Yuffie to follow him. The young girl did so, wincing as her knees and back popped loudly, protesting so much movement after being inactive for almost an hour.

Keeping as quiet as possible, she followed her shadowy friend into the darkness until the inky black seemed to swallow them whole.

---

Author's Note:

Okay, there's the first chapter of what's probably going to be a pretty long fic. Not much so far, but the plot deepens as it goes along.

Addendum: The original version of this chapter was uploaded on 10-9-00, but I've found lately that I probably need to address some things for the hapless souls who are just stumbling onto this fic. One, I started writing this fic on a whim, five goddamn years ago [at the time of writing]. I insert "goddamn" not because I'm angry, but to emphasize that this fic began a long time ago, and I'll admit that I never thought it would go the places it would go. I'm uploading a new version with this note to tell everyone starting to read this that you will notice changes in my writing from this chapter to the most recent one, changes in characterizations and writing style that are probably for the better. Anyone who knows me personally knows that I'm rather embarrassed about how I handled this fic in the beginning. There are dozens of things I'd rather have done differently, and though I do plan on re-editing it, most of things in here are going to remain as they are because most of the flaws would cause deeper cracks in the foundation of the fic if I tried to fix them. I'm not interested in dedicating a lot of time and effort into rewriting the whole fic.

Consider this a warning to expect OOC-ness and odd characterizations in the beginning that diminish as the chapters progress. Comments and criticisms are welcome, of course, but just realize that critiquing these first few chapters is a moot point since I've probably realized for myself all you have to say. Also, this isn't directed at anyone personally; it's just a reaction to a pattern I've noticed among reviewers over the years.

—Catalina

# Chapter Two

---

## *I Think I'm Paranoid*

---

*"I have to hold onto your nasty claw?" —Yuffie Kisaragi*

---

It took several seconds for Yuffie's eyes to adjust to the darkness, and even then, she probably couldn't see half as good as Vincent. She found herself groping blindly in the darkness with her hands and allowing her fingers to graze the rough, wooden surfaces of crates on all sides of her while she kept her eyes locked on the dark form of Vincent's flapping cape just a few feet in front of her. From what her hands touched, she speculated that they were in a maze of crates and would probably have gotten hopelessly lost without Vincent's unnaturally acute eyes to guide them. All Yuffie could see was dark, hulking shapes all around her that anything could have been hiding behind.

Anything at all...

The instant she started thinking all paranoid like that, she couldn't stop the sudden influx of thoughts that inundated her mind. She had always been that way: make one crack in the dam that held back her fear and the whole thing came flooding out over her. But this time it was different. An unexpected irrational feeling of terror and foreboding bloomed in her heart, obliterating all other thoughts or emotion in its intensity. All of the shadows seemed to grow eyes and a wide, cavernous mouth that was just waiting to devour her should she venture too close. The concrete beneath her feet suddenly developed holes that led into pits of seawater, pits so deep that even Vincent wouldn't be able to pull her out. She would be trapped down there with only the amoebas and sea serpents to keep her company...

Yuffie suddenly noticed that in her terror, she had allowed Vincent to pull quite a distance in front of her.

"Vinnie!" she hissed, her heartbeat thudding in her ears as she hurried to catch up. "Don't leave me back here!"

The moving shadow that was Vincent suddenly stopped moving and faded into nothing in the darkness. She could no longer see which shadow was Vincent. Panic suddenly rose in her, unbidden and uncharacteristic. She hadn't even been this scared when they had been in the North Crater waiting to fight Sephiroth! What was wrong with her now?

"Vincent!" she whisper-screamed in a panic. "Where are you?! I can't see you anymore!"

There was a loud crash behind her, and if Yuffie had been thinking rationally, she probably would have realized that the sound was probably just a few crates collapsing, but in her panic, she was being everything but rational and immediately realized that some big sea monster had emerged from the depths of its watery grave to devour her.

She let out a scream of terror and ran forward, dropping the Conformer on the concrete floor. All she knew was that she had to get away; she just *had* to. There was no other thought running through her panicked mind but escape, and since the monster was behind her, she concluded that running forward would be the most logical way of staying alive.

Unfortunately, she had only taken two running strides before she ran into a different monster, one with red eyes, a crimson cape, and a claw of tarnished gold. It was this claw that immediately flew around her slender shoulders and clasped her to its warm body. Yuffie let out another terrified yelp and raised her fists to pound the creature before she realized that her “monster” was none other than the lovable, huggable...

“Vincent!” she gasped in a mixture of terror and relief, flinging her trembling arms around his slender waist, holding him tightly to her as if she could disappear into his tall figure and be rid of all her fear. Burying her face in his chest, she was ashamed and angry to find herself on the verge of tears. Instead of giving in to them, however, she gritted her teeth and clung to Vincent, her fingers digging into the flesh of his shoulder blades. Her heart thundered in her ears, and for a moment she was afraid she was going to faint.

Vincent’s claw tightened its grip around her shoulders with surprising gentleness. Glancing around and seeing no immediate danger, he put the Death Penalty back in its holster and rested his gloved right hand on the bare flesh of Yuffie’s lower back. The young ninja was shaking so hard he almost expected to hear her bones rattling.

“Yuffie, it’s okay,” he said in his soft, deep voice, attempting to offer some kind of solace even though it was out of character for him to do so. He couldn’t recall the last time he had held a female like this. All such emotions that were needed to instigate such an embrace Lucrecia had taken with her to her watery grave.

“What happened, Yuffie?” he tried again when the girl didn’t respond to his initial statement.

“I-I don’t know,” Yuffie said shakily, unconsciously tightening her death grip on Vincent’s waist. For the first time, she noticed that she could hear Vincent’s heart racing in his chest, and she realized that he had received quite a scare, too. That comforted her somewhat to know that the unflappable Vincent Valentine felt fear just like the rest of the little people.

She cautiously raised her head from the folds of Vincent’s cloak and craned her neck backwards so she could look into his face. All she could see in the darkness were his red



eyes staring down at her impassively. “There’s something here, Vincent,” she suddenly whispered, sweat rolling down her forehead in beads.

Vincent didn’t even blink. “Of course there’s something here,” he responded. “The Running Man. He went down below.”

Yuffie shook her head, dark brown hair sticking to the trickles of sweat that covered her face. “No, not just the Running Man. There’s something else here. Something we can’t see.”

“There’s no one else here,” Vincent replied calmly. “A bunch of crates fell over. That’s all that happened. Now go get your Conformer. We need to go after that man.”

He tried gently to disentangle himself from Yuffie, but the girl suddenly clung to him with renewed vigor, hiding her face in his cloak and squeezing his waist with strength he hadn’t known she possessed. She suddenly trembled so hard that she sent a tremor through Vincent’s body as well.

“Don’t leave me, Vinnie!” she gasped in a panic, her voice muffled in the fabric of his cloak. “I’m scared!”

“I’m not going to leave you,” he said without a flicker of emotion, but he had to admit that her fear was starting to catch. “Just go get your Conformer. I’ll be right here.”

“@#\$\$& the Conformer!” Yuffie suddenly exclaimed vehemently, voice harsh in her terror. “I’ll just use my ninja skills!”

“You’re being irrational.”

“I’m scared shitless! I have a right to be irrational if I want to!”

“You’ll need your weapon,” Vincent insisted.

“I don’t want it!”

“Keep your voice down. What do you want then?”

“I want to go home.”

“Besides that.”

Yuffie paused. “I want you to hold me.”

That remark caused a pang in Vincent’s heart for some reason, but he quickly shoved it away, telling himself that Yuffie was scared and not thinking clearly. “Very well,” he said. “You can hold onto my hand and we’ll go get your weapon.”

Yuffie raised her head and stared at Vincent with her stormy gray eyes. “Together?”

she asked softly.

That pang in his heart again. "Yes," he replied. "Together."

Yuffie nodded and slowly released her death grip on Vincent's waist, only to grab his right hand in an equally tight clasp.

"Yuffie, I need that arm. That's my gun arm."

She squinted up at him in the darkness. "I have to hold onto your nasty claw?" she blurted before she could stop herself.

"Given the circumstances, I'm afraid so."

She didn't say anything, wondering if she had hurt his feelings with her remark about his claw, but then she realized that it was *Vincent* she was talking to. Vincent wasn't supposed to have feelings, or at least he claimed he didn't, which she thought was the biggest crock of crap she had ever heard. She'd seen him show emotion several times, not much emotion, but he had shown it. Anyhow, she didn't even think his claw was nasty. She thought it was actually kind of cool looking, but she had always gotten the impression that if she grabbed and yanked hard enough, it would pop right off like the arm on one of the action figures she used to mutilate when she was a kid. That was the last thing she wanted to happen when she was scared to even let him out of her sight.

Moving quickly and making sure that one part of her body was in contact with his at all times, she moved around him and grabbed onto his claw, but instead of gripping the hand portion of it, she fastened her right hand up on his bicep, needing to feel his skin and not cold metal underneath her fingertips. With her other hand, she gripped his wrist tightly, the tarnished metal hard and unyielding. She pressed the entire arm against her body and looked up at Vincent's shadowy figure in the darkness.

"Okay," she managed to say through the lump in her throat. "Let's go."

Vincent nodded and began to lead her through the darkness back to where the Conformer lay meekly on the concrete floor. He instinctively unholstered the Death Penalty and looked around for any intruders who may have heard Yuffie's cries and come running. The docking bay was silent except for the gentle lapping of the water that the ghost ship rested in. Beside him, Yuffie was breathing heavily, her big gray eyes darting left and right as she apparently searched for whatever she thought was lurking in the darkness. He noticed with some discomfort that she had pressed his arm in the crevasse between her small breasts, and that the warmth from her skin was spreading to his own body. His first instinct was to jerk his arm away before the unbidden emotions started becoming too intense, but he knew that Yuffie wouldn't understand if he tried to explain his actions and would stubbornly refuse to budge if he didn't explain them, so he tried to ignore the flaming warmth of her body and his for the time being.

When they reached the shuriken, Vincent quickly dipped down and picked it up to prevent another argument with Yuffie on how she would have to let go of him to handle her weapon. He held the Conformer out to her, which she took in her trembling left hand while maintaining her grip on his bicep with her right. Vincent realized belatedly that Yuffie was right-handed and now would be forced to throw her weapon with her left, but with her clinging to him like this and not showing any signs of letting go, it couldn't really be helped.

Without a word, he led her to the stairwell that the Running Man had disappeared down. The steps were metal and almost every inch of them was spotted with rust, as if they had some terrible disease. They creaked under the weight of both of the travelers, and Yuffie let out a whimper and huddled closer to Vincent as the darkness all around them deepened. Though Vincent tried to keep his footfalls from making any noise, something that he usually had no trouble at all with, the creaking stairs apparently had other ideas and let out a loud cry every time his metal boots contacted their rusty surface. He just gave up after a while. Besides, Yuffie was making enough noise for both of them.

It wasn't long before they came upon a door constructed out of the same gray metal as the stairs. Like the stairs, it was rusty and practically falling off of its hinges. It would have been easy to simply knock the entire thing down, but Vincent wasn't willing to make that kind of noise yet. The Running Man knew for sure that they were following him due to Yuffie's ill-timed dip in the pool, but he still had no idea where they were or how long it would take them to find him. That gave them a little bit of an edge, not much, but a little.

Examining the door in the darkness with Yuffie practically glued to his side, he saw that it had no noticeable lock. He didn't know whether that was a good or bad thing. Without the presence of a lock, he and Yuffie would be able to get in easily, but the lack of that extra security might mean that whoever occupied this port had nothing to fear from strangers. And Vincent knew from experience that an enemy that lacked fear was a formidable enemy indeed.

He turned to Yuffie and said as calmly as he could, "We've come up to a door. It has no lock. I don't like this, but we're going in to investigate. Are you ready?"

Yuffie stared at him as if he was an idiot, but the fear in her eyes was heartbreakingly obvious. "Of course I'm not ready, but let's go ahead anyways."

"Hold onto my belt," he said firmly.

Yuffie balked and gripped his arm tighter. "No," she whined. "Why do I have to?"

"Do you want to open the door and go in first then?" he retorted.

The girl paused, seriously thinking about just flat out refusing to do as he asked, but she swallowed her fear and gripped his metal belt tightly, chastising herself for being

a pansy. She didn't even know why she was so afraid; so far no one had attacked them or made any threatening gestures. Hell, they hadn't seen another living soul besides the Running Man. Vincent was right; she *was* being irrational. *It's all in your head*, she told herself. *It's all in your head*.

But in the core of her heart, she knew it wasn't.

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Author's Note:

This was a fairly short chapter, right? I'm trying to keep them as short and sweet as possible, but it's not always easy. Writing from Yuffie's point of view is surprisingly fun, and she's not even my favorite character. Anyways, if you're waiting around to see something from Cloud and the others, you won't have to wait too long. I mean, come on. It's just not a fic without the rest of AVALANCHE and the Turks! They should be making an appearance in the next chapter or two, but for now, on with Vincent and Yuffie's deep sea adventure! Thanks to anyone who is reading this! It means a lot to me.

—Catalina

# Chapter Three

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## *The Men Without Faces*

*“You sure picked a hell of a time to develop a sense of curiosity.” —Yuffie Kisaragi*

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*Again I stand against the Faceless Man  
Now I saw a face on the water  
It looked humble but willing to fight  
I saw the will of a warrior  
His yoke is easy and His burden is light*

*“Faceless Man”  
—Creed—*

---

Vincent waited until Yuffie had appeared to have collected herself and had the Conformer gripped in a ready position. He reached out with his metal arm and wrapped the monstrous digits that passed for his fingers around the rusted doorknob. Yuffie suddenly tightened her grip on his pants, her fingers actually slipping inside the waistband. Vincent stiffened and almost jerked away, the touch of her cold fingers against the flesh of his hip startling him more than anything he had experienced that night. With a great force of will, however, he contained his feelings and turned the doorknob, pushing the rusted metal door open to reveal the room beyond.

Yuffie’s heart was beating so loud and fast that it was a wonder it didn’t create echoes. Her breath caught in her throat as the door slowly swung open, fully expecting to see some sort of gross, sea monster waiting with its maw gaping wide, but instead all she saw was a featureless room that was completely devoid of furniture except for a single wooden table and a pair of chairs. A lonely light bulb hanging on a rusted, time-devoured cord illuminated the room with its dim glow, revealing a spiral staircase of metal stairs tucked away in the corner like a neglected pet. The room smelled of seawater and smoke, but Yuffie had never seen a more beautiful sight in her entire life.

“Light!” she cried happily. “I see the light!”

She released her grip on Vincent and was about to bound into the room when his metal arm suddenly shot out and snagged her around her waist, yanking her back against his chest.

“You should know better than that,” he murmured into her ear again, holding the Death Penalty in front of him as he surveyed the room. “What if there had been an assassin hiding in the corner?”

“You’re overreacting, Vinnie,” she grumbled, relaxing against him, all her past fears sounding petty now that she was in a room with light. His metal arm was cold against the bare skin of her stomach, but his body was warm against her back, and she suddenly wanted nothing more than to remain like this standing in the doorway with the light in front of her and the warm safety of Vincent’s presence against her back.

The spell was abruptly broken as Vincent moved away from behind her and walked further into the room, holding the Death Penalty in front of him. A loud clap of thunder suddenly sounded from on deck, and Yuffie hurriedly shut the door in a fit of panic that hadn’t quite gone away yet. With the horrible darkness now behind her, she felt almost triumphant, but the feeling of impending doom that she had been getting ever since they had emerged from behind the crate refused to go away, staying in the back of her mind and only emerging once in a while to tease and terrify her before running away like a cockroach from a light. It was starting to get really annoying.

Defiantly switching the Conformer to her right arm, Yuffie turned her back on the metal door and watched as Vincent, satisfied that there was no one in the room, inspected the spiral staircase in the corner. Yuffie skipped over to him, making sure she stayed well within the circle of light from the bulb attached to the ceiling.

“See anything interesting, Vinnie?” she asked, peering over his shoulder. The staircase looked like it had been part of a giant drill that had burst through the wooden floor in a corkscrew motion, going all the way up to the ceiling.

Vincent gestured upwards with his claw. “There’s a trapdoor up there, but I can’t see any way to open it.”

“Did you try pushing it?” Yuffie asked smartly.

“Yes,” he answered patiently. “It doesn’t budge. Either it’s not even a door, or something is holding it in place from above. My guess is that the latter scenario is correct.”

Yuffie tuned him out like she always did when he started speaking in a language that didn’t sound like English. “So which way did the Running Man go?”

Vincent shrugged his broad shoulders. “Only two ways he could have gone. Up or down.”

Yuffie looked at her feet to see that the staircase spiraled down into an eerie glowing breed of darkness. Leaning over the hole, she could see that there was some sort of greenish light at the end of the staircase, and she caught a whiff of an ominous scent that awakened an alarm deep within her soul, a danger-sensing part of her brain that had lain dormant until that smell entered her nostrils and penetrated her consciousness. She hurriedly backed away.

“Well,” she said in a falsely cheerful tone. “Since we definitely don’t want to go down there, let’s just climb up and give this little trapdoor another shove now, shall we?”

Vincent stared at her. “We’re going down,” he said flatly.

Yuffie scowled, trying to ignore the fact that her heart was starting to pound in terror again. “What’s this ‘we’ stuff? I sure as hell don’t want to go down there.”

“Fine,” Vincent said, taking a step onto the metal staircase. “I’ll go down. You stay here.”

Yuffie nearly panicked. He was going to leave her here! No, he wouldn’t; he was just bluffing. Vincent was good at that. That’s why he always beat Cloud and the others at poker! But this time he had to be kidding, right? Well, two could play at this game.

“Fine,” she said matter-of-factly. “Maybe I will stay here. If some monster comes up and tries to eat you, just scream really loud and maybe if I’m in a good mood, I’ll go back outside, jump back into the water, and try and swim to the shore to get help. Other than that, take your time.”

She glanced down nervously to see how her little speech was affecting Vincent. He didn’t even look like he was paying attention. All she could see in the faint green light was the top of his dark head and his crimson cape billowing behind him as he descended the staircase. Yuffie waited for a grand total of two seconds before she knuckled under.

“Goddammit, Vinnie!” she called desperately. “Wait up!”

She took a quick but fearsome step onto the stairway, trying to ignore the feeling that she was going to fall, and began to descend at breakneck speed. The winding design of the stairs soon made her dizzy, and the eerie green light all around her was making her feel light-headed, but she continued to rush downwards, watching her feet the entire time, only intent on catching up with Vincent.

“Vincent! Vincent! Vincent!” she chanted, the sound of her own trembling voice offering her a sense of comfort. “Wait for me or you’ll regret the day you met me! If you leave me behind, I swear I’ll-”

She let out an involuntary cry of surprise as Vincent’s form suddenly appeared in front of her, bathed in the creepy green light, his red eyes staring at her impassively from his deathly pale face. Under the light, however, his flesh looked a pale minty green that for some reason didn’t seem nearly as horrible as the light from which it had been derived.

“Yuffie, be quiet,” Vincent urged tonelessly, his voice betraying neither annoyance nor exasperation.

She put her hands on her hips, trying to fight down the fear that was fluttering

rapidly in the back of her throat. "Why? The Running Man already knows we're here."

Vincent turned away and started descended the stairs again, his boots making no sound at all against the dark metal. "I know that," he responded without looking back at her. "I'm not expecting to apprehend the Running Man anymore. I just want to see what is down here."

"You sure picked a hell of a time to develop a sense of curiosity," Yuffie grumbled, keeping her eyes fixed on Vincent's flowing red cape as it brushed the stairs behind him.

"Allow me to rephrase myself," he replied. "I'm looking for a way out of here."

"A way out of here?" she echoed nervously. "But the boat is outside."

"We're not taking the boat."

"Why not?" she whined, knowing she was sounding like the brat that everyone thought she was and not caring.

Vincent suddenly stopped and spun around so quickly that Yuffie narrowly avoided falling over him. His red eyes suddenly bore into her frightened gray ones with an intensity that made her back up to the step above her. "What's wrong with you, Yuffie?" he demanded, and the girl thought she could detect a hint of frustration in his tone. "You couldn't wait to get off that boat and now you want to go get back on? You complained endlessly about being behind the crate and now when I say that I'm looking for a way out of here, you keep on complaining? You're just not happy unless you have something to gripe about, aren't you?"

Though Yuffie continued to fidget nervously, a spark of anger burst through her slowly building terror. "I'm scared, Vinnie!" she snapped. "I already told you so quit rubbing it in my face! I just want to go home and leave this place behind me. And besides, what do you care about whether I complain or not! Just ignore me like everyone always does! You don't care about me so just leave me alone!"

"You want me to leave you alone?" Vincent asked, his eyes burning into hers though his tone remained flat.

"No!" she exclaimed, forgetting her anger when faced with the prospect of him abandoning her. "Don't leave me alone!"

"Then quit being a nuisance while I look for a way out of here," he deadpanned and without another word, turned and started descending the stairs as if nothing had ever happened.

Yuffie followed him meekly, focusing on the way his ebony black hair floated against the crimson of his cape so she wouldn't have to look at the light that was getting steadily



brighter. She wouldn't have admitted for anything, but his treatment stung. His words had cut to her to the bone and made her feel useless even when she had laughed off meaner things said to her in the past. *Added baggage*, she thought with an intense sadness, *that's what everyone thinks I am. I just want to help find Reeve, and all I'm doing is dragging everyone down. But I can't help it if I'm scared. The thing is that I don't know why I'm scared.*

Everything from the green light originating from some nameless source below them to the ever-thickening smell that was seriously beginning to get to her spoke of danger and monsters from tales she heard old crusty sailors in the Turtle's Paradise bar talking about, monsters unheard of for centuries but that everyone knew still existed, watching and waiting for their moment to rise from the murky depths...

Yuffie shook her head wildly to fling the thoughts from her mind and pushed impatiently at her hair. It wasn't like her to be this paranoid about anything. She thought it had something to do with the fact that she hated riding ships in the water and now she and Vincent were practically going so deep into the earth that if she knocked down the walls around her, gallons of seawater would pour in. But the young ninja knew it was something else, something she knew was there and sought to grasp, but couldn't no matter how hard she tried.

Instead of dwelling on thoughts that only sparked more terror in her already jittery mind, she watched Vincent as he continued to descend the steps in front of her, unperturbed by the glow and smell of the spiraling staircase. The greenish blue light added more colorful tones to his already blue-black hair, and Yuffie suddenly wondered if those black locks were as soft as they looked. The green light seemed to embrace Vincent's entire form eagerly, making him into something that resembled a god, maybe the god Sephiroth wanted to be. Sephiroth, who now somewhere that Yuffie didn't even care to think of instead of a Promised Land full of...

"Mako!" she suddenly exclaimed. Vincent didn't even turn to look at her. "This glow reminds me of Mako!" she continued, caught up in her discovery. "It's the same color and everything! Do you see it, Vinnie?"

Vincent nodded, and she was surprised to see that he was even listening to her. "Yes, I think there may be a reactor down here. That's the first intelligent thing you've said all evening, Yuffie."

"So we're back to making fun of me?" she snapped.

"On the contrary, I'm trying to give you a compliment."

For some reason, Yuffie flushed slightly at this, but continued, "Well, while I'm in the middle of a brainstorm, do you happen to notice that smell?"

Vincent paused. "Yes. It's a most peculiar smell, unlike anything I've ever come across

before. I don't like it."

"Me neither," Yuffie agreed nervously. "Does Mako smell like that? I haven't been in too many reactors in my lifetime."

"No," Vincent replied. "Whatever that smell is, it's not Mako."

"Maybe rotten Mako then?" she asked timidly, making a poor attempt at humor to a man who practically had none.

Just as she had expected, Vincent responded flatly, "Mako doesn't rot, Yuffie." He abruptly lifted his head and cocked it to the side. "Do you hear that?" he asked softly.

Yuffie balked. "W-What?"

Vincent stopped moving and listened closer, his ebony black hair spilling onto the shoulder of his cloak. "It sounds like someone beating a gong...or a beating heart. I think there might be something alive down here. Something big."

Rampant images of sea serpents and monsters with huge mouths filled her head, and Yuffie pushed them away frantically. "Don't say that, Vinnie! Don't even think that!"

Vincent didn't reply; instead, he just resumed walking down the staircase with a nervous Yuffie just a step behind him. Below them, they could see that the winding stairs abruptly ended after descending down into what looked like another room. They still couldn't, however, see any source for the Mako-colored light that permeated the staircase. If Yuffie didn't know better, she would have thought that the metal walls around her were generating that light.

When they reached the bottom of the staircase, Vincent raised the Death Penalty and Yuffie followed in suit with her Conformer. Allowing Vincent to go into the room ahead of her, she watched as he glanced at his surroundings with an expert eye. Only when he had lowered his gun did she dare to venture forward, her heart pounding in her chest.

She found herself in a room that was quite different from the one with the light bulb, which was far above them now. The floor was made of wooden planks, which creaked beneath her yellow sneakers, and the walls were constructed of some smooth stone that she had never seen before. Its surface was shiny and reflected the light that occupied the room, the same color of light that had permeated the air in the staircase.

"Yuffie," Vincent called. "Over here."

The girl tore her attention away from the wall and quickly scampered over to stand close to Vincent, who was staring at a pair of tunnels in front of him. The light coming from the left tunnel was brighter and more intense than the one in the right. Also, some sort of white veil, stained green by the Mako glow, had been draped over the right tunnel

like a curtain, reminding Yuffie suddenly of a dressing room. The sheer material billowed in an unseen breeze.

“Which way do we go?” Vincent pondered, more to himself than to her.

“Neither,” Yuffie responded promptly. “Let’s go back up.”

Ignoring her, Vincent stepped forward and took a few steps into the left tunnel, sniffing at the air and touching the surface of the stone walls.

“The air in here is slighter colder,” he announced, coming out of the tunnel. “Indicating that it leads deeper into the earth. That smell and the light are also stronger, as I’m sure you have noticed. The beating sound is also louder.”

“Let’s not go rushing down there,” Yuffie said nervously, wringing her hands together. “I’m not at all interested in find whatever is making that light or that smell.”

“It may be a perfectly natural occurrence,” Vincent said, approaching the other tunnel. “Sort of like the Mako fountain in the Nibelheim mountains or the materia formation we saw before the Weapons emerged from the North Crater.” He suddenly stopped talking and lifted the end of the veil thing, and Yuffie saw dark stains on the underside that the eerie glow had hidden before.

“W-What is it?” she stuttered.

“Blood,” Vincent said grimly.

Yuffie’s breath caught in her throat. “B-Blood?” she stammered. “Is it Reeve’s?”

Vincent shook his head. “I don’t know. I don’t think that-”

A loud grinding sound suddenly cut him off, and Yuffie looked around wildly for the source, her heart stopping when she found it.

“Oh no!” she cried. “Vincent! The stairs! Someone’s pulling them up!”

The spiral stairs were indeed moving upwards, rapidly disappearing into the stone ceiling in a corkscrew motion. If they didn’t hurry, they would be trapped down here! Yuffie rushed over and jumped up, grabbing onto the bottom step as it pulled further off the floor.

“Come on Vinnie!” she cried, holding out her free hand. Vincent was already headed towards her, his cape flapping behind him.

It was at that instant that a section of the luminescent stone wall literally disappeared, just vanishing into thin air and leaving a gaping hole in the wall. Yuffie felt her heart plummet to her feet as she caught sight of three bald men dressed in all black rush from the opening and descend on Vincent, all brandishing guns like old pros.

As Vincent whirled to face off against his attackers, Yuffie cast a panicked glance up at the ceiling, which was slowly but steadily getting closer and closer. If she was hanging off of the last step like this when it reached the ceiling, she was going to end up like the squashed tomato Don Corneo had wanted her to be a year before.

“Vincent! Hurry up!” she cried wildly, wanting to escape but not wanted to leave her friend, as dull and stoic as may be, to face the assailants by himself...

The dark man didn't even glance at her. “Just go, Yuffie!” he cried, raising the Death Penalty and firing at one of his attackers. “Find a way out and tell the others about this place!”

Ambivalence tore at Yuffie's heart and mind. Logic screamed at her, telling her that it would do no good if both she and Vincent were killed or captured. If at least she escaped, she could bring Cloud and the others back here and free Vincent...if he was still alive. Then the soft, clear voice of her heart rose up in her, speaking and not screaming. Singing and not talking. Telling her gently of things and emotions and concepts that her mind could never grasp in a million years.

*Vincent...*

In a split second, Yuffie made her decision. She released her grip on the ascending staircase and landed on the wooden floor with a thud. The spiral stairs vanished into the ceiling with a clang of metal, eliminating one escape route. She saw that Vincent was locked in desperate battle with two of the assassins. The other one was lying in a heap on the floor, a pool of blood slowly forming beneath him. The two remaining attackers had managed to somehow corral Vincent into the corner and, instead of shooting, were pounding on him with the butts of their guns, a most peculiar tactic for men who seemed to be skilled in the use of firearms. The Death Penalty lay on the floor not far away, but unreachable to Vincent for the time being.

Seeing that her companion was about to be overcome, Yuffie pulled back her arm and launched the Conformer smoothly at Vincent's attackers. It struck the nearest one in the back, opening up a shallow cut.

The man didn't cry out or even clutch at the bleeding wound. Instead, he turned around quickly and advanced towards Yuffie. The girl was just about to throw the Conformer again when she looked up and got her first good look at the man's face.

He had no face.

Instead of eyes, nose and a mouth, the man only had small depressions like miniature craters in his pink flesh. The entire warped monstrosity of what she had once thought to be a human face was really just a mound of featureless pink clay molded into an abomination that just happened to resemble a man. And the greenish blue light that filled the entire

room with its ghastly glow only made her attacker's appearance more revolting.

"Grossness!" Yuffie exclaimed. "What the hell are you guys?!"

But of course, the man didn't have a mouth to answer with. He just continued to advance towards Yuffie, the mound of flesh that passed for his face locked onto her slender form even though he had no eyes with which to see her. He raised his gun menacingly.

The young ninja sidestepped his lunge easily, kicking him in the side as she did so. The Faceless Man counterattacked with surprising swiftness for a man with no eyes, hitting the corner of her thigh with the butt of his submachine gun. Yuffie cried out more in surprise than pain and retreated a couple of steps, trying to get far enough away so she could fling her weapon at him. The man, however, had different ideas and followed her closely, matching every kick she sent in his direction with a quick but painful counterattack with his own, his faceless head causing great unrest in the ninja and much as his silence did. It felt as if she were fighting a machine. She would have done better if he had at least made some sort of noise, maybe a muffled grunt or growl. Just because he didn't have a mouth didn't mean that he didn't have vocal cords, right?

She was so unnerved by her opponent that she allowed her guard to slip. The Faceless Man swooped in with amazing speed and swung his gun at her head. She jerked back at the last moment, avoiding a blow to the temple, which would have knocked her unconscious, but took the brunt of the blow to her left cheekbone. The force of the impact made her head snap to the side and she fell backwards, dropping her Conformer in the confusion. Pain, clear as daylight, assaulted her senses. She tasted blood in her mouth and for a moment, she feared that she was going to black out, but then she flopped over onto her back and caught sight of the Faceless Man looming over her, raising his gun to deliver the final blow that would send her falling into darkness.

Yuffie lifted her right leg and struck him as hard as she could between the legs, a blow that probably would have left any human man crouched on the floor in complete agony. The Faceless Man, however, didn't seem to feel her blow. As he raised his gun, Yuffie closed her eyes tightly and waited for the pain to come. Instead, she heard the sharp crack of a gunshot and the sound of something hitting the floor with a hollow, thumping sound.

Silence fell. *Wow*, she thought, *I never knew that the path to the Lifestream would be so... quiet and boring.* Maybe she had missed the scenic route somewhere.

"Yuffie?" a deep voice asked.

*Hey, that sounded an awful lot like...*

She opened her eyes. An ominous but familiar figure loomed over her, concern in its red eyes and a huge mass of midnight black hair spilling over one shoulder.

“Vincent!” she cried happily, ignoring the pain in her cheek. “You’re okay!”

She immediately hopped to her feet and tackled him with a hug, flinging her arms around his neck. Vincent grunted in pain, apparently trying not to let her hear.

Yuffie hurriedly backed away, cheeks flushing with shame. “I’m sorry!” she gasped. “Are you hurt?”

“I’ll live,” Vincent said dismissively. He reached out and grasped her face gently with his claw, turning it to the side so he could examine her cheek.

“Am I bleeding?” she asked dumbly. “Is the wound fatal?”

One corner of his mouth turned up in a “Vincent” smile. “No. But the Brother of Battle has blessed you with a kiss.”

“What?” Yuffie asked, totally confused.

Vincent released her, satisfied that she was okay. “Nothing,” he murmured. “I’ll tell you later. We need to get out of here. Where there’s three of these monstrosities, there could be three hundred more.”

Yuffie shuddered and picked up her Conformer. “Typical Vincent mentality. What do you think they are...or were?”

Vincent looked impassively at the three corpses, all who sported bullet wounds from the Death Penalty. “I don’t care to find out,” he said flatly. “Let’s just get out of here.”

Yuffie looked around the room. “How? The stairs went bye-bye, and I sure as hell am not going through either of those tunnels!”

“Then we’ll go through the door they came out of.”

“B-But that ludicrous!” she sputtered, appalled that he would even make such a suggestion. “You said there could be three hundred more just waiting for us!”

Vincent stared at her. “Would you like to try the tunnels then?”

Yuffie’s heart stopped at the very prospect. “No!”

“Then let’s go.”

With a whoosh of his cape, he strode over to the Faceless Men’s secret entry and took a step in, apparently listening for any sounds of approaching feet. Yuffie scampered up behind him, her paranoia returning now that the adrenaline from the battle was ebbing. To her right, the light from the left tunnel pulsed suddenly, calling to her, beckoning to her. She unwittingly let her gaze drift into the Mako-colored light that seemed to reach out its arms easily to welcome her, to accept her. A wave of that strange odor hit her face,

and her hair ruffled in an unseen breeze. With an enormous act of will, she turned her face away and followed Vincent into the secret tunnel, making sure she stayed close behind him.

Unlike the other two tunnels, there was no strange green light contorting and dancing for her. Embedded in the ceiling, there were your normal everyday electric lights like the ones in Reeve's office. Yuffie was grateful for that at least, and for the fact that this secret tunnel was not made of the same eerie stone as the Green Room behind her had been. Instead, it was made of brown rock on all sides and looked like the coal mines underneath Corel.

"Hey Vinnie!" she said as they continued to run along. "How deep in the earth are we?"

"Deep enough to fall out the bottom," Vincent commented.

"Not funny, Vinnie," she growled, panting for breath even though they had only been running for a few minutes.

"You asked," Vincent responded flatly.

Yuffie wanted to come up with some snappy comeback, but instead she decided to concentrate on breathing and keeping her feet running. Normally, she liked to think of herself as being in good shape, but tonight had been emotionally and physically taxing. Her legs were covered with bruises from the Faceless Man's counterattacks and her cheek was hurting like a bitch. All she really wanted to do was curl up and rest for the next forty years.

After five more minutes of running, her side began to develop a pain that rivaled the one on the left side of her face and she called out to Vincent, "Can we rest for a little while? I'm about to collapse!"

"We're running on an incline," Vincent answered, sounding only slightly winded. "If we keep at this pace, we should make it to the surface."

"Easy for you to say, Mr. Daddy Long Legs," she snarled, though she really wasn't in the mood to argue.

After another five minutes of nonstop running and nothing to do but stare at the rocky walls or watch Vincent's dark hair flop around his back, Yuffie's side was one mass of agony. She was about to just leap on Vincent's back and have him piggyback her out of here when suddenly he came to a halt. Yuffie crashed into his back and almost fell over, heaving for breath.

"What is it?" she gasped, her legs feeling numb and watery.

“Decisions,” he said simply.

Confused, Yuffie peered around him and saw that the next part of the tunnel branched off in three different directions, each path looking the same.

She let out a long string of curses that would have made Cid proud and kicked the nearest wall with her yellow sneaker, earning her an aching pain in her foot for her troubles.

“I’ve had it with this place!” she snapped after she was done ranting. “I’m just going to sit here and wait for God Almighty to send down one of his angels to escort me down the right path. And I’m going to have a word with Mr. Cloud Strife if I make it out of here sometime in the next year!”

“Would any of those angels you were talking about happen to be lacking faces?” Vincent suddenly asked, his eyes locked onto the tunnels.

“Cut the mystical crap, Vinnie!” she snapped, then quickly shut her mouth when she saw what he was talking about. What appeared to be an entire army of the Faceless Men was running straight towards them down the first and middle tunnels. Only the last one was clear.

“The third tunnel, Yuffie!” Vincent cried. “Run!”

The ache in her legs forgotten, she took off like a shot with Vincent only a step behind her. The stretch in front of her was blessedly clear of any of the faceless monsters, but that small comfort was negated by the fact that she and Vincent had an entire army of the little boogers right behind them.

“Hey Vinnie!” she called over her shoulder. “Why didn’t they just shoot us? They had guns!”

“They must want us alive,” he answered breathlessly.

Yuffie didn’t reply, needing all the breath possible just to keep air flowing in and out of her lungs. She couldn’t help but wonder who sent the Faceless Men after them. Or had they come after the two intruders themselves? They sure seemed more like mindless machines than sentient creatures that thought for themselves, but she could be wrong. And what part did the Running Man have in this? So many questions and so little answers.

It seemed as if they ran for hours with Yuffie in the lead, Vincent behind her, and an entire legion of Faceless Men following them relentlessly, never seeming to tire. Yuffie’s face and back were soon soaked with sweat, and behind her, she could hear Vincent’s labored breathing. And to make things worse, ten minutes into the third tunnel with the incessant pounding of the Faceless Men’s feet roaring in their ears, the lights above them went out and the entire tunnel was plunged into darkness. And with the darkness, came



the paranoia and terror.

But just as Yuffie was about to start freaking out, she felt a cool, salty breeze hit her sweaty face.

“We’re almost out!” she cried to Vincent, getting a second wind. “I can see light up ahead!”

Vincent only grunted in response, but Yuffie didn’t care. They were going to get out! She forced her arms and legs to pump faster and heard Vincent’s harsh breathing as he too picked up speed.

Yuffie burst free of the dark tunnel going full speed and narrowly avoided taking a dive into yet another pool of seawater. She skidded to a halt and examined her surroundings. They were in another tunnel, only this one was made of concrete and had a ceiling that towered above her head. To her right, the tunnel opened up into the deep blue sea. She could see the dark nighttime waters of the ocean tossing and turning in the storm that had finally blown in. Wind whistled through the concrete tunnel, and as Vincent burst free of the tunnel behind her, a flash of lightening suddenly illuminated the room as bright as day.

Sitting in the pool of seawater that served as a miniscule docking bay was a black and yellow jet ski with the words ‘Black Stinger’ emblazoned in bright letters on its flank.

Yuffie turned to Vincent and smiled evilly.

He stared at her, his red eyes shimmering in the darkness. “Oh no,” he said.

“Oh yes!” she exclaimed, leaping agilely onto the jet ski and exalting, “Yes! Some dufus left the keys in the ignition! We’re out of here! Climb on Vinnie!”

“I’m driving,” he said firmly, refusing to board. Sitting between two crates for two hours with a seasick Yuffie was annoying, listening to her gripe for one more hour was even more annoying, but Yuffie with a new toy that moved at very high speeds was just flat out dangerous.

Yuffie rolled her eyes at how stubborn he was being. “Quit being an ass, Vinnie,” she snapped. “Get on unless you *want* them to catch up! Besides, you have to shoot those freaks with your little pop gun if they decide to follow us.”

Vincent boarded the jet ski with great reluctance and slipped his arms around her narrow waist. “Do you even know how to drive one of these things?”

Yuffie shrugged, her dark hair bouncing on her slender shoulders. “How hard can it be?”

*God help me*, Vincent thought silently as the jet ski called Black Stinger roared to life.

# Chapter Four

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## Missing Comrades

*“You sent Yuffie to check on a boat? She’s probably somewhere in that cave blowing chunks all over the floor.”—Reno*

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*Put your head on my shoulder, baby  
 Things can’t get any worse  
 Night is getting colder sometimes...  
 Life feels like it’s a curse  
 I can’t carry these sins on my back  
 Don’t wanna carry any more  
 I’m gonna carry this train off the track  
 ...Gonna swim to the ocean floor*

*“Swim”*

*—Madonna—*

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“Hey Tifa, you okay?”

Startled, Tifa Lockhart turned away from the window of her bar to see the muscular form of Cloud Strife leaning against the doorframe, his huge Ultima Weapon strapped to his back.

She gave him a weak smile. “I’m alright, Cloud. Did you and Barret find anything in Junon?”

He shook his head and ran a gloved hand through his wild blond spikes, looking just as troubled as she felt. “Nothing at all,” he said glumly. “I practically interrogated everyone in town and no one has seen anyone matching the description of either Reeve or the Running Man.” He sighed and unstrapped the Ultima Weapon, leaving it on a table nearby.

“I really thought I would find some trace of them in Junon,” he said dismally, stretching in such a way that Tifa’s attention was drawn to the way the muscles of his bare shoulders bunched and flexed. In her opinion, Cloud was the exemplar of male beauty. Big Mako blue eyes. Wild yet soft blond hair. Short, cute nose. A mouth that could smile more easily than frown. A body of composed of steel muscles underneath smooth skin. The man of her dreams, but that was the kicker. Of her dreams. If only she could just work up the courage to say the words, then her dream could become a reality...if he was willing to meet her halfway.

She shook her head to clear her thoughts away and found Cloud staring at her strangely. “You okay, Tifa?” he asked, concern evident in his blue eyes.

She nodded quickly. “Yes, of course.” He didn’t look convinced, but she rushed on. “How did you get back so soon? Junon is quite a ways off. I thought you were going to stay the night?”

Cloud shrugged and walked to stand next to her at the window, his brown boots thudding loudly against the wooden floor. “The Turks came by in their chopper and saw me and Barret traveling so they decided to give us a lift.”

Tifa allowed herself a small smile. “I know. The chopper landed a few minutes ago. Nearly took down two houses with it, too.”

Cloud grinned. “Yeah, Reno was flying it even though I specifically told him to let Rude do it. But he said that if I had a problem with it then my ass could walk all the way home.”

Tifa laughed softly. “That’s our Reno.” She looked out the window, her smile fading. “Storm’s coming. Good thing you *didn’t* walk home.”

Cloud glanced at the beautiful young woman at his side, wondering what could be bothering her. Her wine-colored eyes were worried and distant. She fiddled nervously with a lock of chocolate brown hair; the corners of her mouth turned down slightly. It concerned him to see her like this. Tifa was always full of light and laughter, his one and only hope when all the odds seemed against him and the world was falling down around his ears. She was his rock, his constant, the one thing that he could always hold onto, no matter what the circumstances. God, how he loved her. If only he could find the words to say it...

“Tifa?” he said softly. “What’s wrong?”

She carefully avoided his gaze, knowing that she could easily fall into the depth of those beautiful Mako blue eyes, lakes she could bare her soul to and drown all her sorrow in. “Nothing’s wrong, Cloud,” she said reassuringly, forcing a smile for his sake. “I’m just worried for Reeve and all...”

Cloud leaned closer to her, trying to get her to look him in the eye. “I know there’s something else,” he said softly. “I’m not moving from this spot until you tell me what it is.” He grinned suddenly. “And you know what a stubborn ass I can be.”

Tifa couldn’t resist smiling back, as powerless to his smile as she was to his blue eyes. But her happy expression quickly faded as she lowered her head and said quietly, “I was

calling up everyone on the PHS to see how they were doing.”

Cloud raised an eyebrow, not comprehending. “And?” he prompted gently.

“I couldn’t raise Vincent or Yuffie,” she whispered, her throat suddenly thick with worry. “Not a dial tone or anything. Just utter silence. I have a bad feeling about this, Cloud. What if something happened to them?”

He put an arm around her shoulders, peering into her worried face. “I’m sure they’re fine, Tifa. I sent them to investigate that ghost ship off the shore of Midgar. They probably fell into the water and their PHS broke. Knowing Yuffie and those yellow sneakers of hers, she probably slipped and pulled Vincent down with her. That’s all. You know that Vincent and Yuffie are harder to kill than that. Don’t be so worrisome, woman, or you’ll work yourself into an early grave.”

Tifa smiled at his poor attempt at humor. “I know, but I just can’t shake the feeling that something’s wrong. I’m afraid they’ll just disappear like Reeve...”

Cloud was about to say something comforting when a loud clap of thunder drowned out his words. He looked at the window just in time to see a torrent of rain slam against the glass, individual raindrops beating incessantly against the opaque surface like demons begging to be let inside to work their ghastly deeds.

“It’s really coming down hard,” he commented.

Tifa leaned against his chest and said softly, “That’s another thing I’m thinking about. Vincent and Yuffie alone in that hidden cave with nothing but a ghost ship to keep them company, watching the ocean outside the entrance, watching the tall waves slam against the rocks as the rain starts to flood the cave...”

*She’s really worried, Cloud realized. It isn’t like her to worry this much. Something has to be wrong. She must sense something that the rest of us don’t.*

He knew from experience that Tifa had intuitive instincts to rival Vincent’s. That’s probably why she was able to run bars successfully. She was an excellent judge of character and was able to tell which costumers would cause trouble and which ones wouldn’t. Not just anyone could do that. It also took a lot to worry his childhood friend; she usually left the brooding to Cloud, Vincent and Red and focused on keeping the team’s spirit up. When Tifa got overly preoccupied about something that he wasn’t even considering a problem yet, that was usually Cloud’s cue to start worrying too.

He tightened his grip on her shoulders and said soothingly, “Don’t worry about Vincent and Yuffie. As soon as the rain lets up, I’ll take the Tiny Bronco away from Cid

and go investigate the cave myself. Everything's going to be okay, Tifa."

She lifted her face and finally met his eyes, and when Cloud saw the hope fluttering with its fragile wings in those burgundy orbs, he felt a warmth in a section of his heart that he didn't even know existed. He leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss into her hair, breathing in the deep scent of her shampoo as well as her own personal feminine scent.

Tifa sighed contentedly and pressed her face against the warm flesh of Cloud's neck, feeling that sense of hope and inner peace return as she rested in the circle of his arm. God, could he even conceive of how much she loved him? Without him near her, close to her, she would just...die. She inhaled deeply, taking in the scent of him that she loved. For some reason, Cloud always smelled of some sort of candy. Very fresh smelling. Peppermint, maybe.

Outside, thunder crashed with a horrendous cry that rivaled the screams of the Planet. Both Tifa and Cloud jumped slightly, pulling away from each other like two teenagers caught using the school's broom closet for a make-out room. Lightening flashed erratically outside the window, illuminating the room with its blinding light. They could see the ocean beyond Kalm churning almost angrily, waves rising and falling like gypsy dancers. The whole picture made for very disconcerting scenery, and for some reason almost crushed the fluttering hope where it struggled to remain aloft.

Finally, Cloud tugged gently on Tifa's arm, "C'mon. The others are all here. Maybe they've heard something from Yuffie and Vincent."

Mutely, Tifa nodded and cast one last fearful glance at the raging storm outside before following him out the door and into the main room of the bar. She'd closed down her business temporarily so that it could serve as a sort of base of operations. They usually used Reeve's office for such a purpose, but no one felt comfortable anywhere in the Neo-Shinra building for the time being. Tifa and Cloud had readily volunteered the Final Heaven bar, letting their friends, old and new, eat their food and drink as much as they wanted.

When she and Cloud entered the main room where the others were sitting around idly, Reno, who was in hog heaven with a beer in his hand and more lined up on the bar waiting for him, immediately grinned and slung an arm around Tifa's slender shoulders, making a point to ignore the fierce glare he received from Cloud.

"Hey, babe," he greeted. "Miss me while I was away?"

Tifa had just opened her mouth to snap at him when Rude said, "Leave her alone, Reno. You're making Cloud angry."

"Yeah Reno," Elena echoed from her place at the bar next to Rude where she sat

sipping from a Coke can. “Though it would be fun to watch her kick your ass...again.”

Reno scowled as Tifa and Cloud walked away from him and sat down at one of the tables across from Barret. “Some friends you guys are,” the redheaded Turk grumbled. “Just for that I’m not going to sit next to you.”

Elena rolled her brown eyes. “Oh woe is we. Whatever will we do, Rude?”

“I’ve got dibs on his beer,” Rude commented, a rare spark of humor in his deep, level voice.

Reno’s amazing aquamarine eyes narrowed, but he kept his mouth smartly shut and plopped down in a nearby chair, taking a sullen swing from his beer.

The door suddenly burst open and Cid ran in, his flight jacket soaked to an even deeper shade of blue and his goggles splattered with raindrops.

“Hot damn!” he exclaimed, shaking his head like a dog and sending water flying everywhere. “It’s rainin’ cats and dogs out there!”

“Watch where you shake dat water, foo!” Barret exclaimed in annoyance, putting one large hand in front of his face to deflect the shower of flying water droplets. “You gettin’ Tifa’s floor all wet and soggy!”

Cid cast a guilty glance at Tifa and shoved his hands in his pockets. “It was wet anyways,” he grumbled, the “Cid” version of an apology.

Tifa waved her hand dismissively. “That’s okay, Cid. Cloud will mop it up later.”

Cloud’s mouth dropped open in such a comical expression of indignation that she laughed and poked him in his belly as snickers spread across the room.

Cid, secretly relieved that he had been forgiven, strode across the room and flopped into a chair, immediately lighting up a cigarette and sending a long column of smoke spiraling towards the ceiling.

“Good lord,” he said with relief. “It’s a damn good thing these suckers didn’t get wet. Don’t know what I would have done without ‘em. Let me tell ya, an entire day flying the Highwind by yourself with barely any time to scratch much less take a break to smoke is the worst kind of hell.”

“Did you find anything?” Tifa asked hopefully.

Cid shook his head glumly. “Not a damn thing.”

“Not even in Costa del Sol?” Red asked from his place on the floor near Reno’s feet.

The pilot made a mean face at the soon-to-be Guardian of Cosmo Canyon. “I told ya, I didn’t see shit. I even got off and asked everyone there if they had seen the Running Man or Cait, but no one had seen a thing.”

“Same thing at Junon,” Barret added grumpily, apparently angry that he and Cloud’s long, hard search had come up with nothing. “I don’t see how the Running Man could have gotten himself and that damn cat across the other continent without bein’ seen in either Junon or Costa del Sol. It just don’t make no sense.”

“Remember, Barret,” Red pointed out calmly, his one good eye focused on the large man with a keen intelligence. “We are still not certain whether or not the Running Man took Reeve to the other continent. He could have disappeared somewhere in the ruins of Midgar for all we know.”

Tifa glanced at Rude with a flutter of hope in her eyes. “Did you guys find anything in Midgar?”

Rude looked at her, and though no one could see his eyes through his dark sunglasses, they all got the impression that he was reluctant to disappoint Tifa. “No,” he said after a brief pause.

Tifa’s face fell.

“But there’s still a lot more area to search,” he said quickly. “There are a dozen places he could hide. We’re not giving up.”

Reno snorted, the effects of the alcohol already beginning to take its toll. “Rude, we searched that place high and low. Even our resident bloodhound couldn’t find anything.”

Red stared up at Reno impassively. “It’s true that I could detect no scent outside of Reeve’s office, but I assure you that I am not entirely infallible.”

“Is it possible that the Running Man could have no scent?” Cloud asked.

Red hesitated, his face revealing none of his inner thoughts, but his flame-tipped tail started to twitch faster, a sign indicating that he was nervous. “I suppose it is possible,” he said uncertainly. “However unlikely. Almost everything has a scent. And if something doesn’t, you can be certain that it is not something that this Planet meant to be in existence.”

“Something outside of nature,” Reno mused, a surprisingly deep thought for one so intoxicated and seemingly shallow.

Cloud rubbed his face with his gloved hands and struggled to gather his thoughts. A feeling of helplessness and worry for his missing comrades kept getting in the way, but he asked Tifa, “Did you find out anything at the Chocobo Ranch? Unless the Running Man swam across the ocean, he had to have taken either a gold chocobo or some kind of boat.”

Tifa shook her head, long brown hair shimmering in the lights. “Nothing,” she said simply.

“Hey!” Barret suddenly exclaimed. “Cloud, didn’t ya send Vincent and Yuffie to see about some kind of boat?”

Cloud glanced at Tifa, and they exchanged a fearful look. “Yes,” he said slowly. “There was an abandoned ship in a hidden cavern in the mountains near Midgar. I thought it to be a ghost ship, but I sent Vincent and Yuffie to check just in case they might find something.”

“You sent *Yuffie* to check on a *boat*?” Reno asked incredulously. “She’s probably somewhere in that cave blowing chunks all over the floor.”

“That’s disgusting, Reno!” Elena exclaimed, her pretty face twisted in revulsion.

“Reno just says things that suit his nature,” Red said flatly.

While Reno pondered dimly over whether or not the red beast was insulting him, Cid glanced around the bar blankly.

“Hey!” he said. “Where the hell are Vince and the brat? They haven’t come back yet?”

Tifa wrung her hands together. “No,” she said quietly. “They haven’t come back. I can’t raise them on the PHS either.”

“Maybe due to the storm,” Rude said.

Cid snorted, blowing smoke out of his nose. He shook his cigarette in Rude’s direction, ash drifting onto the tabletop. “Not with the chips I installed, baldy! No little shitstorm like this could mess up the reception on any of our PHS thingies.”

“None of you have heard from them?” Cloud asked, grabbing Tifa’s hand and holding it tightly before she could start chewing on her fingernails, a childhood habit that she sometimes, but rarely, regressed to doing when she was nervous or incredibly worried.

Cid and Barret exchanged glances and shook their heads. Red, Rude and Elena also made negative gestures. Reno just burped loudly, and Cloud interpreted that as a “no.”

Barret suddenly pounded the table with his gun arm, upsetting a couple of empty



bottles. “Goddamn!” he cursed. “Now they’re missin’! We gotta go afta them!”

Cloud shook his head adamantly, sending Barret a stern glance. “Vincent and Yuffie are *fine*,” he insisted pointedly, not wanting to make Tifa any more worried than she already was. “They’re probably just trapped in the cave by the storm.”

“And what we gonna do?” Barret demanded, not getting the message. “Jes leave ‘em in there?! I don’t think so, Spike!”

“I think they’ll be fine,” Rude suddenly said calmly.

“Yeah,” Elena chimed in. “Vincent used to be a Turk.”

“And?” Barret snapped. “That somethin’ to be proud of?”

Elena scowled at him. “Better a Turk than a terrorist.”

“Okay, okay,” Cloud interrupted, sensing an impending fight. “You guys quit arguing. We’re going to check on them once the storm let’s up.”

“But they might not be there when the damn storm lets up!” Barret said angrily.

Cid sent a stream of smoke in his friend’s direction. “Just calm your ass down,” he snapped. “Vince knows what to do in all kinds of situations. Don’t know about Yuffie, but I’m sure Vince will be able to take care of her.”

“Besides,” Elena spoke up, apparently trying to optimistic, a rare trait in a Turk. “Can’t Vincent just morph Chaos and fly them out of there?”

Reno laughed. “Yuffie gets airsick, too. I’m sure Vincent doesn’t want puke on his lovely purple hide.”

“Would you quit it with the stuff about vomit!” Elena snapped. Reno only laughed.

“Hey, Cloud,” Cid asked curiously. “Why did you stick Vincent and Yuffie together in the first place? You know that they both work better by themselves. Yuffie’s probably buggin’ the living crap out of Vince as we speak.”

“I think they complement each other nicely,” Cloud responded, a bit testy from having one of his decisions, albeit a relatively minor one, called into question. “Vincent keeps Yuffie in line, and Yuffie keeps Vincent from getting a little too...detached and callous towards the situation.” He suddenly grinned. “Besides, guys, admit it, Vincent is the only one Yuffie can’t steal anything from. He’s too watchful to fall for her tricks.”

“But shouldn’t they be back by now?” Tifa fretted. “The cave wasn’t that far away. If

Cid said that the storm can't interfere with the PHS, then something must have happened to them."

"Maybe they found what they were looking for...or it found them," Reno suddenly said, looking into his almost empty beer bottle thoughtfully as if he could see all the secrets of the world in the swirling brown liquid.

"The hell you talkin' 'bout, Carrot Top?" Barret demanded in annoyance.

Reno shrugged. "Maybe they found the Running Man...or the Running Man found them."

Silence fell. The only sounds were the rain beating against the building and the thunder rolling angrily across the countryside, the dark forces of nature trying to find a way into the bar. Smoke from Cid's cigarette was gathered around the ceiling, the overhead lights mingling with the misty particles and giving the entire room an eerie, ghostly look. No one dared to speak.

Then Tifa said softly, "I hope they're alright."

# Chapter Five

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## *Vincent and Yuffie's Great Escape*

*"Oh my god! I almost fell in the water with the sharks!" —Yuffie Kisaragi*

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*Action boy now  
 Action girl now  
 Be prepared to surf across the ocean  
 Be prepared to take a hit  
 Be prepared to go for it  
 Be prepared for a sneak attack  
 Be prepared  
 Just don't look back  
 "Are You Ready?"  
 —Devo—*

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"Whoo-hoo!" Yuffie cheered even as seawater sprayed her in the face and went up her nose. "Having fun, Vinnie?"

"Loads," Vincent answered dryly, holding onto her slender waist for dear life as the Black Stinger blasted its way across the turbulent sea with a kamikaze Yuffie Kisaragi at the controls. Though she was seasick as a dog on ships of any kind, driving the jet ski apparently didn't faze her the least bit. She had sailed out of the tunnel and into the pouring rain going at breakneck speed with a severely uncomfortable Vincent hanging onto her. Now she was squeezing every ounce of speed out of the engine as she skimmed and barreled her way on the ocean's surface, oblivious to the angrily churning thunderclouds and flashing lightening that seemed close enough that they could reach out and touch them.

Vincent, however, was not having such a good time. Though he could see perfectly at night due to Hojo's twisted experiments, several factors, namely seawater, raindrops, and Yuffie's flapping hair, kept flying into his eyes and obscuring his vision a great deal. And he had also been given the dubious honor of sniping out the small squadron of Faceless Men that had obtained jet skis and were following them in the same relentless way in which they had pursued the two travelers in the tunnels.

"Vinnie!" Yuffie suddenly yelled, trying to spin around to look him in the face. "Are you gonna shoot those faceless freaks or just let them catch up to us?"

Instead of answering, Vincent twisted around and took in the layout behind him. In between the churning waves, he could catch glimpses of the Faceless Men riding jet skis

identical to the one Yuffie was piloting. Because of the abominable weather conditions, he couldn't tell how many of them there were, but he definitely didn't like what he *could* see. The Faceless Men drove the jet skis quickly but expertly, weaving around waves and sometimes even submerging for a few minutes to reemerge much closer to the Black Stinger that Yuffie and Vincent were fleeing on. Nevertheless, they were closing the distance and closing it fast.

Vincent's only consolation was that the Faceless Men hadn't used their submachine guns, which they had strapped to their backs. A bullet wound now would knock the two escapees into the water and leave them helpless prey for the Faceless Men...if a shark didn't get them first. If Vincent was going to shoot them, he would have to do it now before they closed the gap.

"Yuffie!" he cried, removing his right hand from her waist. "Hold this thing steady!"

"Easier said than done!" she yelled back, trying to be heard over the thunder and the roar of the Black Stinger's engine. "Have you seen some of these waves?!"

"Just do the best you can!"

Removing the Death Penalty from its holster, he raised it and took aim along its long barrel. Vincent was an excellent shot even back when he was human, and the Death Penalty was the most powerful gun he had ever handled, but he doubted even the bullets it discharged could pierce a ten-foot wave and kill a target on the other side of it. Like Yuffie, however, he was just going to have to do the best he could.

In a break between waves, he quickly centered a Faceless Man in his sights and fired, but it was in that instant that the Black Stinger unexpectedly hit a wave, and the bullet went wild. Unfazed, Vincent reloaded the Death Penalty and aimed again, blinking seawater out of his eyes. This time the bullet flew straight and true. But even though the Faceless Man had no eyes, it somehow saw the bullet coming and suddenly veered to the left, the metal slug sailing harmlessly past.

After attempting to take down the same Faceless Man in five more shots and failing each time, Vincent began to realize that his attempts were in vain. A mixture of the bouncing jet ski, the tall waves, the needle-sharp raindrops and the preternatural reflexes of the Faceless Men kept him from getting off a clear shot. The need to reload the Death Penalty every time he fired was also slowing down his progress. Finally, after his tenth attempt, he managed to strike one of the Faceless Men - he no longer knew if it was the same one he had been firing at all along - in the chest, directly where its heart should have been if it were human. But like Yuffie's low blow in the Green Room, the injury seemed to have absolutely no effect on it. The Faceless Man jerked back from the force of the bullet, and a dark substance that Vincent assumed to be blood flew from its chest and splattered the churning waves all around it, but the monstrosity gripped the handlebars of its jet ski

and just kept on coming.

Tossing his hair out of his eyes, the dark gunslinger grimly lowered his rifle. Vincent's suspicions were finally confirmed. In the battle of the Green Room, he had managed to take down the Faceless Men at close range with an almost point-blank shot to the head or a surprise attack from behind. Any other attacks he made had seemed to have no effect on them. And now shooting them from a long range gave the Faceless Men too much time to sense the bullets coming, providing them with an opportunity to evade the attack. Whatever these creatures are now or once were, he now knew that headshots were potentially the only way to kill them.

This new information severely limited his options. A headshot would be nearly impossible to pull off in these conditions. He could try using his materia, but he thought that if bullet wounds in the chest didn't even slow them down, then magic might not have much of an effect either. Besides, most of the powerful materia had been distributed to the others under the belief that their missions might be considerably more dangerous than the one he had Yuffie had agreed to undertake. For a moment, he entertained the notion of morphing into Chaos and attacking them from above, but with monstrous waves grabbing at him constantly and a torrent of rain plummeting from the sky, he knew that such an assault would probably be in vain.

Things were starting to look bleak.

"Hey Vinnie!" Yuffie suddenly called, jerking the handlebars right to avoid taking the full brunt of a wave. "Did you get them all?"

"No," Vincent said, still watching and waiting for one of the Faceless Men to emerge. They had all disappeared behind the waves for a moment.

"How many are there left?" Yuffie demanded, nervous that Vincent had fired so many shots and hadn't been able to get them all. She knew from experience that even when blinded, Vincent rarely missed his target.

"As many as there were to begin with," he answered flatly.

Yuffie's mouth dropped open. "What?!" she echoed incredulously as the Black Stinger crested over one of the smaller waves. "You mean you didn't even get a single one of them?!"

"You have to shoot these things in the head."

"So shoot them in the head!" she exclaimed shrilly, holding her breath as a wave washed over them. "Blow their nonexistent faces off!" she continued, spitting water out of her mouth.

"They keep using the waves as cover."

Yuffie studied the watery terrain in front of her and tossed her sea and rainwater sodden hair out of her face. "Well, they won't be able to do that any longer. The wind is calming down. No more big, big waves to deal with."

Vincent didn't reply, only kept his eyes focused on the waves he felt were hiding the Faceless Men. In a matter of seconds, the wind had died down almost entirely, and the ocean stopped rolling so angrily and retracted its towering waves sheepishly, exposing the Faceless Men's positions.

There were only five of them, spaced evenly out in what was probably some sort of strategic formation. Vincent wondered dimly if these things had some unseen way of communicating with one another or if they were being manipulated by some higher force. He didn't take long in his contemplation, however, because the Faceless Men suddenly did something that made the human part of him, the one that felt fear and emotions, shudder and freeze with a sense of foreboding.

In unison, each of the five Faceless Men reached behind themselves and took their submachine guns out of their holsters while holding their jet skis completely steady with only one hand and little effort. Vincent's heart began to pound in apprehension as they all raised their guns in perfect timing with each other, taking aim...

The stormy night was suddenly alive with a constant barrage of gunfire. The dark waters all around Vincent and Yuffie spat little exclamatory streams of seawater up into the chill air as the bullets struck their raindrop-battered surfaces. The bursts of yellow fire leaping from the barrels of the Faceless Men's guns flashed like lamplights on the road to Hell, intending to guide and deliver the two would-be escapees into damnation.

"Oh my god!" Yuffie exclaimed fearfully, chancing a glance behind her. "Are they shooting at us?!"

"Yes," Vincent said distractedly, crouching down calmly and fumbling with something on the inside of his metal boot.

"What are you doing dragging your ass, Vinnie?!" Yuffie demanded, watching fearfully as the explosions of water began drawing eagerly closer. "Return fire! Return fire!"

Vincent straightened up again, and Yuffie pivoted around to see that he had the Outsider clutched in his hand. "What the hell are you doing with that puny ass gun?!" she yelled shrilly, thinking Vincent must have left his brain back in the tunnels. "Use the Death Penalty, you idiot!"

"Don't call me an idiot," he ordered flatly, keeping his eyes trained on the Faceless Men with their submachine guns. "Keep this thing steady."

"No way!" Yuffie exclaimed. "We'll be easier targets that way!"

“If you want to live, Yuffie Kisaragi, you’ll do as I say.”

Yuffie shut her mouth and did as he said, holding the handlebars as steady as she could and trying to ignore the stream of bullets that kept getting closer and closer. Seawater stung her eyes, temporarily blinding her, only to be washed out by the blessed rain and her own tears of terror. Her heart thundered in her chest, obliterating even the equally thunderous roars of the jet ski and the churning clouds overhead, as she heard Vincent fire off several rapid shots into the night, lone staccato sounds of hope that had their salvation riding on them.

Suddenly, there was a great explosion behind her that lit up the night like the fires of Hell, blazing afterimage painting the dark waters with new demonic shades of yellows and reds. For a moment, Yuffie’s heart stopped in her chest, as she was sure that the Faceless Men had started throwing bombs at them. But the gunfire started to slack off, and hope with its fragile wings began to flutter in her soul.

“Vincent!” she cried. “What the hell happened?! What are you doing?!”

“Blowing up their jet skis,” he said calmly. The Outsider barked twice more, and another explosion rocked the night.

Yuffie resisted the urge to laugh at the simple solution and the simple way he said it. Leave it to Vincent to figure it out! The Outsider may have been a puny gun but the shots it fired were powerful - though not nearly as powerful as the Death Penalty - and more rapid than most of Vincent’s other guns. Good thing *she* had let *him* come with her on this mission. She suddenly had the urge to spin around and give him a good, hard kiss on the mouth for being so smart, but logic kicked in at the last moment, making her keep her grip on the handlebars and keep her eyes trained on the water in front of her. She couldn’t help smiling, however, when she thought of how Vincent might have reacted to such a thing.

Two more well-placed shots and two explosions later, Yuffie was daring to think that they were going to get away after all. Then the inevitable happened. There was, after all, still at least one Faceless Man left, and that one Faceless Man still had his submachine gun, and that one Faceless Man was still firing at them. It was only logical that he would hit something at some time or the other.

Unfortunately, that something that he had hit was Yuffie Kisaragi.

White-hot pain suddenly exploded in her left shoulder, quickly engulfing her entire arm like a hungry mouth that fed off of suffering. Red rainwater splattered her face as she screamed and sagged to the side, the Black Stinger miming the motion as she automatically released her grip on the left handlebar. She felt lightheaded and fuzzy, and the night was rapidly becoming darker than it should have been. Shades of yellow and red suddenly ran across her vision as the ocean seemed to tremble underneath her. Her skin was briefly

blasted with heat from an unknown source, but was quickly vanquished by the needle sharp raindrops and stinging saltwater that won the battle for domination. Somewhere in the background she dimly heard Vincent calling her name, but she couldn't get her mouth working correctly to tell him that she was alright. She suddenly realized with a start that the rainwater that had hit her face wasn't rainwater at all, but blood. *Her* blood. She had been struck in the shoulder by the Faceless Man's stream of bullets.

Vincent's claw suddenly tightened on her stomach, producing sharp pains that didn't hold a hair next to the soaring agony generated by the wound on her shoulder, but they brought her back from the brink of unconsciousness with the strange sort of urgency that they possessed. The world all around her reemerged into sharp focus. Saltwater stung her eyes. Blood ran down her shoulder in rivulets. The Imps of Pain were doing insane dances on her delicate nerve endings. Vincent Valentine was shaking her and calling her name.

"Yuffie!" he cried in a voice so panicked that she scarcely recognized it as his own. "Are you alright?! Answer me!"

She gritted her teeth against the pain, and managed to force out, "I'm fine. T-The bullet just grazed the skin. No big deal."

As if to prove her point, she ignored the pain in her injured shoulder and reached up to grip the left handlebar once again, determined to show Vincent that she was just fine. Halfway there, however, the pain suddenly became so intense that she nearly blacked out again. With a short but loud cry, she dropped her arm back to her side.

Vincent's metal claw suddenly released its somewhat painful grip on her waist and snaked out to grab the left handlebar, steadying the Black Stinger.

"Hey!" Yuffie yelped, her voice coming out harsher than she had intended. "I'm driving here! You just focus on killing the bastard that-"

"Hush now," Vincent said with surprising gentleness, his deep voice a balm to her nerves. "All the Faceless Men are no longer a threat. I'll drive now."

"You got them all?" Yuffie asked, still stubbornly keeping her grip on the right handlebar. She had been holding onto it so tightly that she had a feeling that her fingers had locked into that position permanently.

"Yes," Vincent said calmly, his mouth next to her ear. His gloved right hand suddenly appeared in front of her, the dark Outsider replaced by his red bandana, which was dangling from his pale fingers and flapping in the wind. "Here," he explained. "Use this to bandage your wound. I don't have a Restore materia."

"I told you," she snapped, viciously spitting saltwater out of her mouth. "I'm perfectly fine. I'm not a worthless baby made to be coddled every step of the way."



“Take my headband,” he ordered calmly, unperturbed by her unexpected angry outburst, which had come as a sort of surprise to her as well as him.

“I don’t want your damn headband!” she yelled, as the Black Stinger hit a wave and more saltwater was flung into her mouth and eyes. “And take that nasty claw of yours off the handlebar! I said that I’m driving, goddammit!”

It was just then that the Black Stinger struck a wave in an awkward way, pitching violently to the right side. Saltwater found its way under Yuffie’s tightly clenched right hand, and it slipped off the handlebar completely. Her legs suddenly went limp as wet noodles, the adrenaline from their great escape disappearing and leaving her as weak as a newborn kitten. To her absolute horror, she felt her feet losing their already slippery traction on the floor of the jet ski. Her body suddenly sagged to the right side, heading straight towards the dark water that eagerly awaited her...

Vincent’s right arm fastened around her slender waist with inhuman strength, yanking her back against him while straightening the jet ski with his left arm. In a matter of seconds, they were zipping smoothly across the gently rolling sea with Vincent driving the Black Stinger one-handed and holding a stunned Yuffie in the crook of his right arm.

The young ninja suddenly snapped out of her shocked trance as a loud burst of thunder crackled overhead and lightning shot across the sky, splitting into a million different branches and glinting off of Vincent’s metal arm.

“I-I-I almost fell off the jet ski!” she shrieked, her voice sounding shrill and wavering.

“But you didn’t,” Vincent said clearly, tightening his grip on her waist and resting his chin on the top of her head, which was an easy thing to do, considering that she was nearly a foot shorter than he was. If Yuffie hadn’t been in a major state of panic, she would have noticed that Vincent was hugging her.

“Oh my god!” she continued ranting even as her hair, heavy with water, fell over her eyes. “I almost fell in the water with the sharks!”

“But you didn’t,” he repeated calmly.

She managed to twist around and stare up into his face, which betrayed none of his emotions and was facing forwards. “I almost died, Vinnie!” she cried again, her gray eyes wide with some warped form of posttraumatic stress.

He glanced down at her, ruby red eyes taking in every aspect of her terrified face that was so close to his. His midnight black hair, unbound by his bandana and soaked with water, clung to the sides of his pale cheeks, a few wayward strands snaking forwards to touch her face, as if seeking to offer her the comfort that their owner couldn’t due to his nature.

"But you didn't die, Yuffie," he said softly, oblivious to the rain pounding against his head and the seawater spraying his face. "You're safe here...with me."

Yuffie experienced a whole new type of shock. She was suddenly aware that, in spite of the fact that both of them were soaked to the bone with rain and seawater, she could feel the warmth of his body pressed against hers. Raindrops clung to his long dark eyelashes, and his face was suddenly very close to hers, his beautiful garnet eyes never leaving hers.

Once again, it was Vincent who broke the spell, turning his face away and back towards the open sea on all sides of them. "Take my headband and bandage your shoulder," he clipped shortly, without looking down at her. "It's not a deep wound; all we need to do is stop the bleeding."

"Oh," Yuffie said, suddenly feeling a profound sense of disappointment and incompleteness. "Okay, Vincent."

Facing forwards again, she slipped his red bandana out of his right hand, which was still locked around her waist, and quickly tied it around her left shoulder. Though she was sure that plenty of saltwater had gotten into the wound by now, the skin around the cut had already gone numb, and she barely could barely feel the pain as she wrapped the red headband around her shoulder with her numb fingers.

With her job done, she sagged warily against Vincent's body, her head resting against his chest. Satisfied that she wasn't going to fall off the jet ski anymore, Vincent removed his hand from her waist and gripped the right handlebar, taking full control of the Black Stinger as it continued across the dark sea, going nowhere and getting there fast. It was then that the full effect of the emotionally, mentally, and physically taxing night caught up with her. Salty tears flowed down her already dripping face, mingling with the rain and seawater on her cold skin. She wrapped her arms around herself, colder than she had ever been in her entire life. Vincent unconsciously scooted forward so that his warm body was pressed more fully against her back, and Yuffie leaned on him gratefully. She felt Vincent's chin come to rest on the top of her dark head, a gesture that she found most comforting even if it had been unconscious on his part.

Even though the thunder and engine of the Black Stinger still roared in her ears, and rain and seawater pelted her body, Yuffie, nestled against Vincent, felt her eyes grow increasingly heavy. Soon, even given the impossible conditions, she drowsed against Vincent's tall figure with Mother Nature raging around her.

The next thing she knew was that somewhere in a world of raindrops and rolling thunder adding to the deadly countenance of a murderous ocean mother with dozens of secrets long unspoken hidden in her womb, a man whom tragedy had immediately taken as a lover was calling her name, and the air smelled of salt and dead things.

Yuffie snapped out of her uncomfortable drowsing state, greatly disturbed for some

odd reason. She couldn't remember if she had been dreaming or not. If she had, the Sandman had been in a cruel mood and given her a nightmare instead of a vision of euphoric bliss. That damn Sandman could be a real bitch sometimes...

"Yuffie," Vincent said again, looking down at the sleepy girl nestled in between his arms.

She blinked her gray eyes, now red and irritated from the salt water. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "Sorry Vinnie. Were you calling me?"

"Yes," he replied, reverting his attention to the endless ocean that had finally shown an end, and to the recovering but still diseased city in the distance. "We'll be getting off soon."

"Okay," Yuffie said distractedly, rubbing her eyes. Then she jerked violently in surprise. "What?! We're still in the water!"

"Not for long," Vincent answered patiently. "We're coming up on Junon."

Yuffie leaned forward, wincing as her stiff neck gave a loud protest, and squinted into the distance. She could just make out the now expanded city of Junon Harbor in the near distance even through the pouring rain, which had apparently refused to let up in the time she had been drowsing. The lights of "Upper Junon" pulsated brightly like a beacon in the darkness for weary souls like Vincent Valentine and Yuffie Kisaragi to latch onto. The equally bright but fewer lights of "Lower Junon" hid humbly but respectfully underneath their superior, a child prodigy that dreamed of grandeur and knew that it would have it one day.

Yuffie had never seen a more beautiful sight in her entire life...besides the little light bulb in that room in the deep-sea complex or whatever they called the place she and Vincent had just escaped from.

Ten minutes later, the jet ski named Black Stinger plowed up on the sand of Junon's narrow beach, and the two world weary travelers shakily disembarked, forsaking the vessel that hadn't failed or betrayed them once in their strenuous journey overseas. Meekly and dejectedly it sat there on the beach, watching wistfully as its passengers climbed up into the city of lights. It sat there all alone until the ocean mother, whose perfume Yuffie loved but whose waves and children sickened her, extended its tendrils of tides and claimed the jet ski named Black Stinger as one of her own, its boldly painted black and yellow surface sinking meekly beneath the watery terrain of the ocean, never to be seen again.

Then the beach was deserted.

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Author's Note:

This was sort of hard chapter to write. I'm not very good with battle scenes. I always feel like I'm leaving out something, but I guess this chapter turned out okay.

—Catalina

# Chapter Six

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## The Prisoner

*“He’s no good to me dead.” —The Running Man*

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*Silence now the sound  
My breath the only motion around  
Demons cluttering around  
My face showing no emotion  
Shackled by my sentence, expecting no return  
Here there is no penance, my skin begins to burn*

*“My Own Prison”  
—Creed—*

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Reeve awoke in a world of darkness and light, of hot and cold, a place where murderers murdered the innocents for noble causes. But Reeve did not know these things. He did not know where he was or even how he had gotten here. All he knew was that he was in pain, and he had no balm in Gilead to ease it. His muscles felt weak and watery, as if all the strength had been leeches from them by invisible parasites. All of his heavy limbs were aching and sore, and he felt as if someone had pounded him from head to toe with a sledgehammer. But worst of all was the pain in his head, the pain of all pains. He had the mother of all migraines that no human medicine could hope to cure. It beat against his temples like a mind’s demon trying to burst free of his skull and spread its disease to the rest of the world. Hot and cold raced across his scalp, pulsating like a thing alive.

All these physical sensations, were, of course only the half of it. A hellish fever was engulfing his entire head like a fiery shroud, and somewhere in the back of his agonized mind, Reeve knew that the madness that so many of the elderly succumbed to in their fugue, the madness that had destroyed Sephiroth, the madness that Hojo had fed on like a starving man on scraps, was now threatening him with its chaotic touch. All of his thoughts and memories were a jumbled mass of puzzle pieces that could never hope to be put together again. Memories of the past, thoughts of the present, and predictions of the future were all flung carelessly together in one haphazard pile in Reeve’s brain, a mess beyond help. Nothing made sense to him anymore.

Opening his eyes, the man struggled to make some sort of logic appear in what he saw yet did not see. His eyelids were as heavy as lead, and his black hair was soaked through with sweat and hanging over his eyes like a protective veil. The first thing Reeve saw when his bleary, crazed eyes came into focus was a strange world filled with an outlandish breed of light and darkness, looking like an offspring from a coupling by the colors of midnight and the otherworldly green light of the Lifestream. He was hanging in the middle of dark

void with thick wisps of green mist floating all around, not allowing his teary eyes to see more than a few feet in front of him—not that he could have made sense of what he saw anyways. The pain in his skull was so supernaturally intense that his vision kept blurring and distorting, just like his memories, thoughts, and emotions. The scenery ran together until all Reeve could behold through the hammering in his head was a massive blur of black and green.

An unwitting moan escaping his parched throat, Reeve shut his brown eyes tightly and waited anxiously for a sudden bought of unbearable nausea to pass. His head pulsed with madness and heat, and for a moment, he relapsed into unconsciousness, the darkness becoming whole and complete for a few precious moments before the odious realm he was imprisoned in yanked him back to reality, forcing him to bear witness to the torturous silence that it taunted him with.

Gritting his teeth as if the pain could bring his thoughts back into something resembling order, Reeve forced his eyes open and made them focus with the sheer force of his will. His long inactive neck muscles screamed in protest as he lifted his head slowly until he met some sort of strange resistance from behind. His feverish mind whirled, feeding him dozens of words at a time for the thing that was behind him. One stuck out beyond the rest.

*A wall. There's a wall behind me.*

His head lolled to the side, and Reeve saw that his right wrist was pinioned to the stone wall by some sort of metal cuff that cut rudely into the tender flesh of his wrist. Though he couldn't feel his hands (the blood had long since drained from them), he instinctively flopped his burning head to the left to see that his other hand was bound in a similar fashion, with another metal cuff. Racking his jumbled brain, he struggled to come up with a word...

*Shackles! That's what they are!*

It took a moment for Reeve's wasted mind to clank the thoughts together that being shackled to a wall with a high fever in a room that was completely black except for strange wisps of noxious green mist was a very bad thing. A very, very bad thing.

Reeve's heart began to pound in his chest with a fervor that matched the insanity threatening to beat his brain to a pulp with its chaotic weight. *What am I doing here?* he wondered wildly, trying to focus his eyes so he could discern something familiar in the world around him. *Who put me here?*

Phantoms of the recent past suddenly rose up in response to his soundless query, leaping like mnemonic demons out of the whirling maelstrom in his mind to reveal the cold, hard truth to him. Visions whizzed past him like an out-of-control slideshow, there and gone so quickly that he barely had time to grasp them, much less make sense of them.

Files. Papers. Lights. His office.

Shadow on the opposite wall. A presence behind him.

A man! Dark clothes. Ski mask. Can't see his eyes! Run!

Hitting the floor hard. Pain from his bleeding lip. Did the man hit him?

Something slamming against his head. Darkness coming. Reno's voice in the hall?

The man hovering over him! Who?

*The Running Man.*

Reeve was jolted out of his tumbled memories by the undeniable sound of voices somewhere in this room of light and dark. Jerking his chains—he belatedly realized that his feet were shackled, too—the President of Neo-Shinra opened his eyes wide and tried to pinpoint the source of these new voices. Somewhere in the back of his rational mind, which was buried deep beneath all the madness, Reeve knew that he should be afraid of what was developing. What if these people were here to hurt him? Chances were that they were in league with the Running Man, the kidnapper responsible for his being here. But the tattered remains of Reeve's common sense were just that—tattered remains. All he knew was that there was something else in here other than darkness and light, and he might be able to get answers regarding where he was and why he was here.

Try as he might, however, the man couldn't lock down onto the voices that seemed to originate from the thick mist itself. He could definitely hear them, however. Footsteps of several people echoed in the solitude of his prison, slicing through the heavy silence like a hot knife through butter. Their voices gained in volume as they apparently got closer and closer to where Reeve was chained to the wall. In a slight panic now and unnerved by the disembodied voices that would probably be deciding his fate, he squinted into the misty green and black gloom, trying in vain to see who his mysterious visitors were.

The footsteps abruptly came to a halt, and Reeve's blurry and distorted vision suddenly caught a brief glimpse of shadowy figures standing fearlessly in the exotically scented mist, wearing it like a protective cloak. Then he blinked, and they were gone. Their voices, however, remained, and, given their proximity, he was able to now make the scantest bit of sense from their words.

"...disappointing subject," one—a man—was saying, and his voice sent a sudden stream of shivers coursing down Reeve's spine. He had heard cold, heartless voices before, and until this man's words reached his ears, he would have said that Vincent and the late Sephiroth were in the lead as far as deep, icy, callous-sounding voices went, but this new man made Vincent sound like a peppy cheerleader by comparison.

"I expected much better results," the Cold One said, his terrifying voice reaching

out from its covering of mist and darkness to pierce Reeve's ears and penetrate his consciousness, making the prisoner's heart freeze in terror.

"There something wrong with him? Why is he all weak and wobbly like that?" a woman's voice with a thick accent of some sort asked.

"Nothing I'll concern myself with," the Cold One replied tonelessly. "Just an unfortunate result of the interrogation. He's as raw as an exposed nerve and probably insane, too. Given his current state, death would be a mercy for him."

Reeve shuddered violently.

Another man's voice, low and calm with some sort of rasp to it, spoke up. "No death will be issued," it said firmly. "I went through great lengths to bring you this one. You make sure to keep him alive, at least. There are some bounty hunters who will pay a good price for the President of Neo-Shinra. He's no good to me dead."

*The Running Man!* Reeve realized with a start.

"Sounds like he wasn't much good alive either," the woman snorted condescendingly, her nasally voice making Reeve grit his teeth. "I can't believe that Mr. Big Shot President here didn't know anything."

"I repeatedly told you two the same thing," the Running Man said coldly. "He may be President, but that's all he is. And he's only a normal human being, to top it all off. I knew obtaining him would produce no result, and now I have the entire crew of not just AVALANCHE, but the Turks, out for my blood."

"Turks," the woman suddenly said softly, then let out a high-pitched laugh as she apparently shared some inside joke with herself.

The Cold One ignored the woman's outburst and addressed the Running Man. "Capturing this one was easy enough, wasn't it?"

"All too easy," the Running Man agreed flatly.

"Then I will hear no other complaints from you," the Cold One deadpanned. "Your job is to hunt out the people that I tell you to."

"You don't control me," the Running Man snapped.

Unfazed, the Cold One replied, "No, but I did once. It wasn't that long ago. Do you care to recall?"

No answer.

"I didn't think so," the Cold One said tonelessly with no hint of pride or triumph in his voice. "You were a good acolyte, Titus, and now you make a good hunter even if you

don't work solely for the values I represent."

"Values?" the Running Man echoed acidly. "You represent *something*, I'll give you that, but they are not *values*. Nothing that goes on down here has any value to anyone. You and your followers are soulless, mindless, and heartless. You aid the Burrower, the Hungry One, the very thing that is the source of the Planet's disease. But you are no loyal worshipper. I know you intend to slay the monster you've idolized as a god for hundreds of years. I'm telling you, this ill-timed mutiny of yours won't work."

"What makes you say that, sugar?" the woman asked in an amused tone.

"The Burrower is thousands of years old," the Running Man deadpanned. "The last of the Beasts. Killing him isn't going to be as easy as you both seem to believe. Chances are more likely of the Planet dying all around us and withering away before you devise a fiendish plan to slay him."

"As I was saying," the Cold One continued, as if the Running Man and the woman had never spoken in the first place. "You're a good hunter, but tonight your work was... most displeasing."

Silence.

"You were followed," the Cold One continued, icy voice never wavering. "Two members of AVALANCHE were able to track you and follow you to the deep-sea complex. What if they had discovered our underground lair? Most humans would have run scared from the vibes of the complex. These two, however, did no such thing. AVALANCHE and the Turks are going to be formidable opponents."

"They wouldn't have made it to the subterranean tunnels," the woman interrupted haughtily. "The fear would have gotten to them eventually."

"I wasn't expecting the likes of Vincent Valentine to show up," the Running Man said coldly. "He's more monster than man." A sly tone entered the hunter's deep, gravelly voice. "He's almost as bestial as you, my ex-Lord."

"Vincent Valentine," the woman repeated with demonic thoughtfulness, as if tasting the name as it fell from her lips. "An ex-Turk, am I right?"

"You do know your Turks, don't you?" the Running Man grumbled.

"You bet, darlin'," the woman cooed, a nasty undertone prevalent in her nasal voice. "Who was the other one with him?"

"Just some ninja girl," the Running Man said flatly. "A thief to be exact. She is not—"

"Her name is Yuffie Kisaragi," the Cold One suddenly interrupted, silencing his two companions. "She is the daughter of Lord Godo of Wutai."



“Wutai...” the woman pondered thoughtfully.

“I want that girl,” the Cold One deadpanned.

“What about Valentine?” the woman asked suddenly, a pouting tone entering her voice.

“Oversexed whore-bag,” the Running Man suddenly snapped. “Vincent Valentine will not offer you the carnal pleasures that you seek from every man. I’m sure he would rather die first than submit to your feminine wiles.”

“Jealous, honey?” the woman taunted cheerfully. “Are you trying to say that you want to be *friends* like we used to be?”

“Valentine will be next to impossible to catch,” the Cold One interrupted. “The girl is our next best bet.”

“Why?” the woman pouted. “She’s just some ditzy teenybopper. What has she anything to do with Valentine?”

The Cold One ignored her and addressed the Running Man. “Titus, you will bring us the girl.”

*Yuffie!* Reeve thought wildly. *No! She’s only seventeen! What would they want with her?*

“Easier said than done,” the Running Man seethed coldly. “She will be flanked on all sides by AVALANCHE and the Turks. Besides, how much do you think one teenage girl can tell us?”

“You’re just a bounty hunter now,” the Cold One deadpanned. “You’re not meant to ask questions; it is not your right to do so. All you are is just more mindless brawn to be dispatched at the slightest gesture of my hand. You’ve fallen from grace, my old friend. My opinion of you, once so high, has been greatly hindered by your rebellious acts of several years ago.”

The Running Man ignored all these jabs. “And what if I refuse to bring you this girl?”

“It may be easier that way,” the Cold One responded flatly. “One of my other hunters may have better luck catching her. After all, AVALANCHE and the Turks do think that you are the mastermind behind the kidnapping of their friend here. You’re all they have to go on; they’ll be on the lookout for you. How long do you think you can run around freely without me to protect you from the combined might and fury of both AVALANCHE and the Turks?”

Silence.

“You are beginning to see reason, then?” the Cold One asked. “Will you bring us the

girl?"

A long pause, then, "Yes. I shall."

"I'm comin' with you, honey. This will be a fun way to pass the time," the woman said suddenly.

"You are most definitely not coming," the Running Man snapped in a low, dangerous voice, apparently not at all pleased with the situation.

"She goes," the Cold One said simply.

Another heavy silence followed, lasting so long that Reeve began wondering if he had been hallucinating about the voices this entire time. But then the Running Man - whose name was Titus, apparently - answered flatly, "Very well. It is as you wish."

"Get on it then," the Cold One deadpanned.

"What about him?" the Running Man abruptly asked, and Reeve suddenly felt three pairs of eyes focus on him from the cover of the misty darkness, unseen beacons of sinister light in this forgotten and unheard of place. He squirmed slightly, just a mere jerking of his limbs, jangling the chains slightly. He hadn't the energy to do anything more. Did they know that he had understood all of what they had been saying?

"I have not yet decided his fate," the Cold One said shortly, his soulless voice chilling Reeve to the bone. It was truly terrifying to know that this man held his life in his hands.

"His allies will not rest until he is found," the Running Man commented in a neutral tone, but Reeve thought he heard some strange double meaning in the hunter's deep voice.

The woman with the accent apparently heard it, too. "Are you saying we should return him to his friends?"

"No such thing will be done," the Cold One interrupted. "He shall remain here in his prison until I decide his fate."

*No!* Reeve thought wildly. *Don't leave me in here alone, not with the fever and madness! Please!*

But the footsteps had started up again, only this time they were moving away, getting softer and softer, taking Reeve's hope of escaping by some act of mercy with them. He jerked as hard as he could, which was not very hard, against his shackles, but that got him nowhere. The fever in his brain was making his eyesight blurry, and the dark realm of unconsciousness was suddenly returning to take him back. His limbs grew increasingly heavy as the pounding in his skull crescendoed to an insane degree, almost obliterating all other sounds.

Yet, the last things he heard before the darkness took him under were the fading voices of the Cold One, the Running Man, and the mysterious woman.

“Indulge me, big guy,” the woman said amicably, addressing the Cold One in a conversational tone. “Just what exactly do you intend to do with Mr. President back there?”

“Kill him,” the Cold One deadpanned.

“Wouldn’t that be a bit rash?” the Running Man asked flatly.

“Then I’ll just feed him to the Hungry One,” the other man replied in his icy tone of voice. “The Burrower is always up for the taste of modern flesh.”

Then they were gone, and Reeve was left alone, hanging limply from the shackles that bound him to the wall of his prison.

# Chapter Seven

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## Awkward Moments

*“Don’t worry everyone! The two dripping wet freaks have left the building!” —Yuffie Kisaragi*

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*I want to hold you and love you  
 In my arms and then  
 I want to need you ‘cause  
 I need to be with you till the end  
 Then I hear myself reply  
 She’ll never let you in  
 This time, tonight  
 If only I had the guts  
 To feel this way  
 If only you’d look at me  
 And want to stay  
 If only I’d take you in my arms  
 And say I won’t go ‘cause I need you*

*“If Only”*

*—Hanson—*

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As Yuffie and Vincent strode defiantly into the lobby of the hotel, onlookers turned and gasped at the sight of the ravaged and waterlogged travelers the tempest had blown in, eyes taking in their battle-worn bodies and sopping wet clothes. Yuffie had suspected that she and Vincent looked bad, but judging from the looks on everyone’s faces, she upgraded their appearance from just “bad” to something closer to ghastly and hideous. She nervously tugged at her tank top and hitched up her soaked shorts from where they had been sliding down her narrow hips. Shivering in the air conditioner and trying to avoid everyone’s horrified glances, she followed Vincent up to the counter where the manager was looking at them with a mixture of distaste, fear, and annoyance.

“We need two rooms for the night, please,” Vincent said with cold politeness as his waterlogged cloak and dripping hair made a puddle of water beneath his feet. Although he didn’t appear at all bothered by the stares of the other customers, Yuffie was uncomfortable enough for the both of them, fidgeting nervously and chancing glances around them, for some reason expecting to see the fleshly, black-clad figures of the Faceless Men staring at her with their eyeless heads glistening in the fluorescent lights. Instead, all she saw was a group of very cute guys in the corner staring at her in obvious disgust.

*Great, she thought, blushing fiercely and lowering her gaze. I must look positively horrid. They probably think me and Vincent are—grossness!*

She shivered at the thought, but it had nothing at all to do with disgust.

“Um, sir?” the manager said cautiously, obviously afraid of Vincent. Even soaking wet and missing his headband, the dark gunslinger was still one of the scariest things on the Planet. “We, um, only have one room left tonight. There was a major influx of tourists this evening on their way back from Costa del Sol. You know how those things go—”

“Oh gawd!” Yuffie exclaimed incredulously, temporarily forgetting her dripping state. “One room? Are you sure, mister? That would be *so* uncomfortable!”

“Could you check again, please?” Vincent asked flatly, ignoring Yuffie’s outburst.

“C-Certainly, sir,” the manager stuttered, turning to his computer and tapping a few keys as both Yuffie and Vincent watched intently, willing the machine to be wrong. The man squirmed underneath Vincent’s ruby red and Yuffie’s stormy gray stares; nervous sweat glistened on his brow, and his hands shook a bit. He, too, hoped desperately that his computer would be wrong, but his search came up with the same results.

“I’m terribly sorry, sir,” he said weakly, directing his answer at Vincent. “One room is all we have left.”

“That *sucks!*” Yuffie spat angrily. “Does this crappy little room of yours at least have two beds? Because I’m certainly not sleeping in the gutter outside, thank you very much!”

The man nodded quickly, blue eyes wide. “Y-Yes,” he stuttered. “Two warm, dry comfortable—”

“We’ll take it,” Vincent interrupted.

“Of course, sir!” the man exclaimed in relief, fumbling underneath the counter and producing a key, which he handed over to Vincent with shaking hands.

Vincent took the key. “How much gil will it be?”

“Oh!” the manager said, apparently having forgotten that even freakish, dripping wet, fishy smelling members of AVALANCHE had to pay to stay in hotels. “That will be 500 gil, sir.”

Yuffie’s mouth dropped open. “500 gil?! Since when did the price go up? Sheesh! Your service here had better be good, buddy! I mean, you’d think that you would be more flexible, being that we’re members of AVALANCHE and could seriously kick your—”

“Here you go, sir,” Vincent said politely, handing over slippery coins that he had pulled out of his waterlogged pocket, trying very hard to pretend that Yuffie wasn’t fuming beside him for the time being.

“T-Thank you,” the manager said. “Have a nice stay, you two!”

Yuffie rolled her eyes as she and Vincent walked towards the elevators. “Oh puh-lease!” she snarled under her breath, in a huffy mood and making no effort to conceal it. For some reason, she was extremely uncomfortable with the fact that she would be sharing a room alone with Vincent for the night. And like her irrational and unjustified fear in the complex they had recently escaped from, she had no idea why she felt that way. It wasn’t like Vincent was in the picture as far as prospective single men went. He was too weird, for one thing, and he scared the living crap out of her sometimes with his dark, gothic attitude, and unfeeling countenance. And he was old, too. Sure, he may only look 27, but in reality, he was way older than that. Definitely not able to meet Yuffie Kisaragi standards, whatever those were. She would rather go out with that drunkard womanizer Reno than Vincent Valentine. But if that was the case, then why was she so nervous...

The elevators chimed as they slid open with a gentle whoosh of air. Vincent strode in calmly, the room key clutched in one hand, but Yuffie suddenly turned around and glared at all the people in the lobby, who were still staring at the two travelers like they were the amazing Mud Monsters from Mars.

“Don’t worry, everyone!” she cried, sarcasm dripping from her voice. “The two dripping wet freaks have left the building! No need to gawp and panic like a bunch of retarded cows who have nothing better to do than—”

Vincent hooked his claw onto the waistband of her tan shorts and yanked her inside the elevator just as the doors whooshed shut.

Yuffie relaxed nonchalantly against the metal wall and smiled sweetly at her dark companion as he glared at her, dripping strands of ebony hair practically hiding his red eyes from view. She was fully expecting him to start bitching at her about proper etiquette, but he did no such thing, only kept glaring at her in a reprimanding fashion. Vincent was actually kinda cute when he was angry...

With a shudder that Yuffie thought didn’t belong there for a hotel that cost so much, the elevator began its ascent up to the fifth floor, where Vincent and Yuffie’s room was located.

“Hey Vinnie?” she suddenly asked as they watched the numbers above the doors light up as they passed each floor.

“Yes Yuffie?” he replied calmly, studying the closed doors, apparently having gotten tired of scolding her with his eyes.

She fidgeted nervously. “What if, you know, the room only had one bed? What would you have done then, huh?”

No! *Whatever* had possessed her to ask such a question?!

The elevator doors opened with a chime, and Vincent strode out without a glance at her.

Yuffie ran out after him, her yellow sneakers sinking into the plush carpet and making squishing noises when her feet meshed with the water in them. “Hey!” she called, ignoring the fact that there could be people sleeping in the rooms they passed. “I asked you a question, Vinnie!”

“I know,” he said calmly, ruby red eyes searching the numbers on the doors. “But I see no reason to answer it due to the fact that the scenario didn’t present itself.”

“Huh?” Yuffie asked dumbly as they stopped in front of the room marked 532 and Vincent inserted the key into the keyhole. “You know, Vinnie, since I’m really stupid, I would really like it if you would speak in English to me.”

“I don’t worry about situations that didn’t happen,” he translated.

“It’s all gone and past, you mean,” she said softly.

Vincent paused, and Yuffie received the distinct impression that she had surprised him. “Yes,” he said finally, “something like that.”

He opened the room and stepped back, motioning for her to precede him through the door. Yuffie quickly scampered through the doorway, flushing slightly at the chivalry he was showing a little brat like her. She had always thought Vincent was too damn polite for his own good.

Yuffie strode into the hotel room, relishing the sight of the obligatory bland color schemes of the beige walls and tan bedcovers. It was freezing, and room had that special “hotel” smell lingering in it like a phantom, but she didn’t care.

“I’ve got dibs on the window bed!” she cried, racing across the room and dropping the Conformer onto the spotless bedspread to reserve her space, having enough sense not to throw her dirty body on the clean bed along with her weapon.

Vincent didn’t reply, only shut the door behind him and walked calmly into the room, examining his surroundings with that same cool, detached way that he examined everything.

Yuffie turned and watched him a few moments before asking, “So Vinnie, what are we gonna do?”

He turned his fiery gaze to her, eyes unreadable. “What are you talking about?”

“You know!” Yuffie said, trying to make him sound like the idiot instead of her. “About our situation?”

“What situation?”

She rolled her eyes and put her hands on her hips. “Gawd, you are so thick sometimes! Are you sure you cleaned out all the cobwebs from your thirty-year long nap in that stinky coffin? I mean, I case you haven’t noticed, we’re in a predicament here!”

Vincent just stared some more.

Yuffie resisted the urge to scream. “What are we gonna do about Cloud and the others?” she said with exaggerated patience. “We were supposed to meet them back at Tifa’s bar like five hours ago! They’re probably worried sick about us right now! What if they go looking for the both of us in that cave? They’ll see that the ship isn’t there, and they’ll think we died or something!”

The man shrugged. “There is nothing we can do about it right now. Our PHS is broken; Cid will probably have to repair it again. I overheard two mechanics down in the lobby saying that the hotel’s lines are down due to the storm. We’ll stay the night here and leave in the morning.”

“Even if it’s raining?” Yuffie whined.

“You want to dish out five hundred gil to stay here another night?”

Yuffie pouted. “Well...no, but—”

Vincent waved his hand. “No buts. It’s already been decided.”

“Well, excuse me for breathing! Who died and made you leader?”

Vincent ignored her. “I’m going to take a shower...”

“No way!” Yuffie immediately exclaimed. “I’m taking a shower first, Vinnie! You’re not the one who almost had your shoulder blown off by some freak with no face! Now move it or lose it!”

Without giving him a chance to protest, she made a beeline for the bathroom, brushing rudely past Vincent and shutting the door behind her. After a moment, she locked it, too, not because she felt that Vincent was going to come sneaking in on her, but because, for some odd reason, she had become particularly big on having her privacy lately. Maybe she was starting to finally grow up, but she didn’t think so. After all, Yuffie still believed profoundly in the philosophy that if you whined and bellyached enough, you could get anything you wanted.

After figuring out how to work the water faucet in the bathtub (every hotel seemed to have a different mechanism just to annoy unaware people who stepped into the shower, turned a knob, and found themselves under a waterfall of either burning hot or freezing cold water. Not that such a thing had ever happened to Yuffie!), she glanced in the mirror



to see an incredibly horrid sight.

“Grossness!” she exclaimed, her voice echoing in the bathroom as she made an ugly face at her reflection. There was a huge whopper of a bruise on her left cheekbone, the ugly circle of flesh a myriad of purples and yellow and blacks. Already she could hear that pain-in-the-ass Reno laughing and making fun of her. Her dark brown hair was tangled almost beyond help and smelled of seawater and the remnants of terror. But even worse, she saw that her tank top was ripped in...very inappropriate places.

“Great!” she growled at her reflection. “I’ve been walking around with my boob practically hanging out of my shirt!”

*Goddamn that Vincent! Why didn't he say something?!*

Rearranging her tattered shirt so that she wasn't showing so much skin, Yuffie gingerly untied Vincent's red bandana from her wounded shoulder. She had gotten off lucky, at least in her opinion. The bullet had taken off a chunk of her shoulder, but after a couple of Hi-Potions all that was left of the gaping wound was a section of tender, shiny-looking scar tissue. The arm still ached when she moved it; she suspected that the dull pain was something that time and time alone could heal. She knew from experience that she would have to take it easy, or she would risk busting the wound open again, something that had happened to her in the past. Oh well, at least it wasn't spewing out blood anymore.

Making one last ugly face at herself, Yuffie turned away and proceeded to take a shower, eager to wash away all the aches and pains that plagued her, the physical ones, at least.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent waited until he heard the water going and was content that Yuffie wasn't so weary that she would fall asleep and drown in the shower before he sighed internally and removed the Death Penalty from his holster, setting it on the floor beside the bed would be sleeping in tonight, seeing that the other was reserved. He could hear Yuffie talking to herself in the bathroom, and the sound of her whining, high-pitched voice was a world of comfort. He had been worried in his heart of hearts that the girl might experience a sort of emotional aftershock that would reawaken the great earthquake of irrational terror that had gripped her in the deep-sea complex they had fled from. Apparently, she was, for the most part, unharmed and was only suffering from severe crankiness, a “Yuffie” trait that he had learned to put up with from his adventures with AVALANCHE.

Walking up to the room's dresser, metal boots not making a sound on the plush carpet, Vincent stood in front of the mirror and stared at himself coldly. His blue-black hair hung around his face like a shroud, sharply contrasting with his deathly pale skin. Shorter strands of tangled ebony locks hung over his forehead and into his face, but even the ominous darkness of those tresses couldn't obscure the faintly luminescent red eyes whose coldly bestial nature shone defiantly from behind the veil of black hair...laughing,

taunting.

Without any outer change in expression, Vincent stood unnaturally still and listened closer to the frozen wasteland that was his soul, searching the icy plains for the consciousness of the demon whose name no human tongue could pronounce, whose language no human, even a freakish hybrid like Vincent, could understand. Yes, this demon was almost another entity entirely, with thoughts and ideas of its own, a creature that was possibly as old as the Ancients, but to Vincent's callous mind it was simply... Chaos.

The dark man listened even more carefully, hearing the biting wind whistling through the valves of his frozen heart, until he could just barely sense Chaos. The demon glared out at him from between two glaciers with absolute apathy, its soundless voice stubbornly silent now. Vincent coolly turned away from the demon's resting place and emerged from his trance-like state, red eyes coming back into focus. Chaos may be subdued and recessive now, but it hadn't been so when he and Yuffie had been sneaking around the deep-sea complex. Though he had given no outward signs of discomfort, Vincent had been fighting the transformation the entire time he had been there. Chaos was being unusually assertive and clamorous, trying to forcefully take over Vincent's form by using its sheer and incredible will. So adamant and dominating it had been that he had almost lost control on the demon several times while descending the stairs into the Green Room.

Vincent thought that Chaos' aggressive behavior might be connected to the irrational fear Yuffie had felt. Maybe there had been something down there that was producing some sort of...vibes that were meant to incite fear in the hearts of mortals. In his wanderings, Vincent had encountered several creatures with such an ability, but their fear-inducing attacks had always proved ineffective on him. He supposed that he had no emotions—fear included—for them to manipulate. Or maybe he was already too much of a monster already, and his inhuman nature immediately nullified their attacks. Whatever the case, such “fear vibes” had never worked on him before.

Until tonight.

But it hadn't even been him who was perturbed, really; it had been Chaos who brutally shattered and shoved its way out of its abode in the darkness of Vincent's soul or wherever it resided. It had hovered there close to the surface of Vincent's consciousness, watching and waiting like it had never done before. The demon had gotten rowdier and more assertive as he and Yuffie had descended deeper into the earth, attempting to instigate the transformation without the consent of its host. It took all of Vincent's icy will power and grim resolve to contain Chaos. Everything from the eerie green light to the exotic stench hanging in the air to the rhythmic pounding from down below had—dare he say—disturbed the heartless demon.

Vincent was at a total loss to explain why, though. There were many things that he

didn't know about Chaos...many things he had no desire to know. He loathed the demon as much as he loathed himself, but if Chaos acted like this every time it came in contact with circumstances like the ones of the past few hours, then new problems could arise. Vincent couldn't afford to be fighting the demon with every mental tooth, nail and claw he possessed whenever it became agitated. And no matter how much distaste he felt when discussing his "other halves," he knew that he would have to tell Cloud about this.

Or maybe he wouldn't tell him anything and simply disappear into the night. It would probably be safer that way...for them and for him. Why subject their sublime innocence to his dark presence and risk tainting them with his poison?

A loud thud from the bathroom jolted him out of his customarily morbid thoughts. Vincent stiffened but did not turn his head. Instead, he listened carefully, suddenly gripped by incredible worry. He heard Yuffie swearing vividly with words she must have learned from Cid. Fortunately, the situation was completely benign. She had dropped a shampoo bottle on her toe and apparently was not very happy about it. No faceless monster had emerged from the toilet to attack her.

Vincent relaxed and, making sure that the door to the room and bathroom were both locked, removed his cloak, hanging it up to dry on a rack that was supposed to be used to hang clothes. Ignoring all the aches and pain generated just by moving, he slowly lifted the hem of his black shirt and pulled it over his head, hanging it up next to his cloak. Even though he wasn't standing in front of the mirror, Vincent could see that his chest and ribcage were covered in nasty purple bruises that splattered his pale skin like leeches. The tender, naked human flesh of his right arm also sported similar marks, silent testimonies to how narrow their escape had been indeed. He considered himself lucky that he had gotten by with only bruises; the strength of the Faceless Men had rivaled his own. In the worst-case scenario, he could have ended up with a score of broken ribs or a crushed skull, but instead the blows of the monstrosities had only left these nasty reminders that would be gone come morning. They always were. Even bruises found Vincent's presence so distasteful that they didn't hang around for long.

Sitting down on his bed, he pulled off his boots, making sure to hide the Outsider underneath the bed where it could be easily reached, Vincent realized for the first time that he and Yuffie didn't have an extra change of clothes. They had left their packs on their chocobos just on the outskirts of the mountain range near Midgar. A bad thing, considering the condition of their current garments. The lack of suitable clothes, however, didn't really bother Vincent. He would just sleep in his pants, knowing that his clothes would be dry in the morning. Unlike his human friends, embarrassment and discomfort weren't really two emotions that he experienced often. He didn't care what others thought of him...

Completely oblivious to the fact that the air conditioner was turned on high and he

was half-naked, Vincent climbed underneath the sheets, the human part of him feeling a strange comfort as the scratchy linen settled over his naked chest and damp pants.

As he lay there alone in the airy dark, listening to Yuffie sing softly to herself in her native Wutainese tongue, Vincent unwittingly let his thoughts drift to the thieving ninja who would be sleeping in the bed five feet away from him not long from now.

Even he had been surprised at how much she had changed when he had arrived in Kalm yesterday evening. Her short cap of dark hair with misplaced blonde highlights had been swapped with an ever-lengthening waterfall of deep chocolate locks that brushed against her smooth, slender shoulders as she walked. A year of growing up had added womanly curves to her formerly stick-like figure. A year hadn't been long enough to add much to her height, but the girl who had once stolen their materia and chased Barret around Choco Billy's ranch with a pooper scooper had taken on quite a mature air. Though the look in her deep gray eyes was still flat out mischievous, buried underneath that was a keen intelligence and burgeoning woman's mind. The way those youthful eyes lit up with happiness the evening Vincent had ridden up on his midnight black chocobo Lamia had made his frozen heart jump for some unknown reason. She had rushed up and hugged him around his chest the way she had done when AVALANCHE had parted ways a year before. He still recalled with surprising detail the way he had placed a tentative hand on her narrow back, thinking that she was still such a small slip of a girl despite her obvious strength. She had stepped away quickly, an attractive maidenly flush coming to her face as she sheepishly tried to explain how happy she was to see him.

Of course, her happiness had been a Yuffie sort of happiness...

*"Geez, Vinnie! You're the last one here! Even I was getting old waiting around for you! Look at me, I'm withering away! Hurry up!"*

Rolling onto his side and ignoring the cries of protest that his many aches and pains gave, Vincent thought wistfully that Yuffie was going to grow up to be a beautiful woman someday. He only hoped that he might be around to see it...

He suddenly remembered with startling clarity the way she had fallen asleep in his arms earlier, her slender, warm body pressed against his as they skimmed across the ocean on the Black Stinger. Her head had slipped from under his chin to rest on his shoulder, her face serene as she slept. He recalled how he had gazed down at her for what seemed like forever, unable to tear his eyes away from the girl—young woman, really—with the willowy limbs of a nymph who was nestled with complete trust in the arms of a monster. So many things he had wished then...

*Not wise to think of such things, Valentine, he told himself harshly. She's so young...*

As he felt his eyelids drifting shut, the sound of Yuffie's continuing song suddenly struck his mind with startling clarity. He could still hear her singing softly even as the

rushing water of the shower tried in vain to drown her out. Her voice was a beautiful, high soprano; he would have never guessed that Yuffie would have been able to sing. And that song, what was it? He couldn't understand the words, but the way the ethereal notes lingered in his ears made the little obstacle of language seem insignificant. He wondered vaguely what the enchanting song was about, but then sleep claimed him, and he was left with the mysterious aria to haunt his dreams.

In the shower, completely oblivious to the audience she had had, Yuffie abruptly stopped her song and cried out in pain as she dropped the conditioner bottle on her other toe.

*Rotten end to a rotten day*, she thought angrily.

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Tifa sat on the bottom step of the stairs leading to the upper level of the bar where the guest rooms were kept. From her vantage point, she could see the front room in its entirety. Lightening flashed outside, reflecting off of the shot glasses behind the bar. Thunder quickly followed its eternal companion, rattling the very same shot glasses so violently that Tifa briefly worried if they were going to fall over. The room was emptied and darkened except for the snoring form of Reno on one of the tables. Everyone else had gone up to their rooms a long time ago with heavy hearts that resulted from waiting around into the dead of the night for Vincent and Yuffie to return. Except for Reno, who had curled up on one of the tables and promptly fell asleep after amusing himself for hours by torturing Elena with all the stories about vomit and puke that he had locked up in his pea-sized brain. When Elena had turned a sickly shade of green and ran up to barricade herself in her room, Reno had switched subjects abruptly and started singing every version of the "diarrhea" song that he knew.

The woman curled up on the bottom of the stairs sighed, a lonely sound in the stillness of the room, and rested her chin on her knees, remembering what a pain in the ass Reno had been. He had been especially hard to deal with since Yuffie wasn't around to beat him up and distract him until he passed out. Rude had had to subdue Reno, a feat that had been quite amazing to watch. Big, scary Rude with his dark sunglasses and bald head coaxing his lanky, flame-haired companion to "take a nap." Reno had obliged almost immediately, curling up on one of the tables like a little kid with his knees drawn almost up to his chin. Tifa had almost expected him to starting sucking his thumb.

Getting up from her seat on the wooden steps, she walked gracefully over to a closet and pulled out a blanket. Maneuvering her way easily around tables and chairs whose positions she had long ago committed to memory, Tifa strode up to the warm, snoring shadow that was Reno's sleeping form and draped the blanket gently over him in a motherly fashion, the ends of the soft fabric trailing off the edges of his makeshift bed. Reno mumbled something under his breath, but didn't awaken.

Sighing again, Tifa turned away from Reno and looked glumly towards the closed door, her heart plummeting to the bottoms of her feet. Being with Cloud and her friends had given her strength and had relit the flicker of hope that Vincent and Yuffie would return during the night and laugh at how worried Tifa had been for them. She had even stayed up later than the others to wait for her two friends, but her efforts had been fruitless. Vincent and Yuffie hadn't come back, and as the storm worsened, Tifa felt that fragile hope begin to wither. Even now, the merciless rain continued to beat relentlessly on the windows, mocking her incessantly as thunder rumbled with laughter directly overhead, shaking the shot glasses again with its mighty sounds of mirth.

Reno suddenly snorted loudly and flipped onto his back, muttering something that sounded an awful lot like "Mika." Tifa, startled out of her morbid thoughts, turned to see that her ex-enemy was tossing and turning, apparently in the grips of some nightmare. Though she couldn't see his expression in the dark, she thought for a moment that she heard him whimpering deep in his throat, a sound that was very disarming coming from a tough guy like Reno. A motherly tenderness suddenly rose in her, and she reached over and gently readjusted the blanket around Reno's lean form, tucking it around his shoulders and brushing a lock of flame-red hair away from where it was making mischief by tickling his nose. She made a mental note to ask him about his strange mutterings in the morning.

Lightening suddenly flashed outside the window, illuminating the entire room as bright as day.

She saw a figure standing in the corner of the room, staring impassively at her with glowing Mako eyes.

Tifa's heart leapt into her throat, and she almost fell into a fighting stance, building a scream in her throat that would wake everyone up...but then she recognized the mysterious watcher.

"Cloud!" she gasped, clasping her hand to her chest. "Don't scare me like that!"

"Sorry, Tifa," he said apologetically, walking towards her across the wooden floor, trying to be extra quiet so as not to awaken Reno.

As he got closer, she finally realized why she hadn't recognized him at first. Her childhood friend was wearing a dark rain slicker that covered his entire body down to his ankles. He was also dripping wet.

"Cloud," she whispered, gesturing to his rain-sodden garments. "What happened? What were you doing out in the rain?"

She could just make out the curve of his shoulders as he shrugged. "I just had this hunch..."

Tifa squinted her eyes to see better in the darkness. “A hunch?”

Cloud shifted uncomfortably, and she received the impression that he was embarrassed about something. “Yeah,” he muttered. “Just a hunch. I went to check on the chocobos’ pen; I thought that maybe Vincent or Yuffie might have sent their chocobos back with a note or something in case they had been trapped or attacked.” He shook his spiky head slightly. “I found nothing. Lamia and Butterfly are still missing from the pen.”

“Wishful thinking,” Tifa commented weakly. “It was worth a try, though.”

Cloud nodded. “That’s exactly what I was thinking. I wish we had some sign that they were at least okay.”

She reached out and gently touched his cheek, which was wet from the rain. “They’ll be okay, Cloud. I know they will be.”

The leader of AVALANCHE nodded quietly, but in his heart, he was thinking differently. He had this strange sense of foreboding that he hadn’t felt since he had heard Aeris’ voice calling to him in the City of the Ancients. The feeling that something bad was brewing wouldn’t go away. It tickled at the back of his mind and ate a hole in his heart. And it didn’t help one bit that two of his friends were missing, maybe trapped in a cave that was being rapidly flooded by rain, a cave to which they had gone to on *his* orders. If Vincent or Yuffie died, it would be all his fault.

“Cloud?” Tifa asked. “Are you okay?”

He stared at her beautiful face for a few seconds, and felt his heart breaking. “Yeah,” he muttered. “Let’s go up. I don’t think they’ll be coming back tonight.”

Tifa hesitated. “I want to stay up a bit longer. What if we just miss them and there’s no one to let them in?”

“Tifa,” Cloud said warningly.

“Or what if Reno gets cold? We don’t have a heater down here.”

“Tifa,” Cloud said again, putting his hands on his hips.

“What if Reno falls off the table and hits his head? Someone will need to—”

“Tifa!” Cloud exclaimed, as loudly as he dared.

The young woman jerked in surprise. “Yes, Cloud?” she said innocently.

He resisted the urge to laugh. “You’re being a worrywart again. Everything’s going to be fine. If Vincent and Yuffie come by, they can always get in through the back door. And Reno will be fine; he’s a tough bastard...or maybe just a bastard.”

“Cloud!” Tifa said in surprise, wondering what had had made him say that. He usually made an effort be kind to their old enemies.

“What?” he asked grumpily. “Sorry if I don’t think too highly of the guy. He’s the one passed out on our table like any common drunkard tottering around in the slums.”

“Cloud! What’s gotten into you?” Tifa hissed, shocked by his sudden show of anger. She knew he wasn’t overly fond of any of the Turks, especially Reno. Tifa herself only put up with the redheaded spitfire because he was Reeve’s friend, but she got along okay with Elena, and Rude had always been nothing but polite to her. Reno, however, was always putting the moves on her, flirting with her and grabbing her butt and such, and that tended to make Cloud angry, but she never thought that he would be so vicious even when speaking about someone like Reno.

He was silent for a while, and though Tifa could only see a faint glow coming from his eyes in the darkness, she knew he was staring at her blankly.

Finally, he shook his head. “Sorry. I’m just worried. I’m going to sleep.”

He brushed past her without another word, heading for the stairs, but Tifa hurried to catch up with him. “Cloud?” she asked softly. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong,” he answered, slipping off his rain-sodden slicker and draping it on the coat rack to dry.

Tifa moved quickly and blocked him as he tried to proceed up the stairs. She put her hands on her hips and said sternly, “I’m not moving until you tell me what’s bothering you, Cloud Jeremy Strife!”

He sighed, shaking his head; he knew that when Tifa decided she was going to be stubborn about something, there was no stopping her. But he couldn’t tell her what was really bothering him. There were too many things on his mind. The Running Man. Reeve. Vincent and Yuffie. Her. Cloud had to suddenly fight down a raging jealousy and ache in his heart as he recalled watching how tenderly she covered Reno with the blanket, brushing a lock of hair away from his face with gentle fingers while he watched, unseen in the dark corner with crumbling emotions. He kept telling himself that Tifa was just experiencing maternal instincts; she was one of those kinds of pure, wonderful people who took care of everyone else before even considering their own comfort. She was just worried about Reno because he was having a nightmare. That was all. Maybe he was overreacting.

“Cloud?” Tifa’s voice suddenly cut through his thoughts, bringing him back to reality.

“I’m fine, Tifa,” he said softly. “Just tired.”

“Okay,” she said uncertainly, not knowing whether to believe him or not. “Let’s go to bed.”



“Yeah.”

She led the way up the stairs, and Cloud followed, suddenly aware of the deep, aching void in him. He watched wistfully the way the strong muscles of her smooth legs flexed as they climbed the stairs one by one, her long brown hair brushing the backs of her legs. Though he wanted this beautiful woman to be his wife more than anything in the world, he was afraid that if he asked, it would destroy what they already had, which was a companionable neighbor-like existence with rooms next to each other. Besides, she seemed happy with things just the way they were. Why should he go and bungle it with his selfish desires? Why ruin her happiness so that he could have his?

Cloud shook these thoughts away, trying his best to clear his mind of all his worries as he and Tifa emerged into the hallway where the guest room, including hers and his, were kept. He could hear Cid snoring from a room further down the hall, and that sound of unconscious contentment somehow lent a spark of life to the deserted hallway.

When they reached the door to Tifa’s room, she turned around and gazed up at him, relieved that she was able to see his face clearly in the lights from the lamps she had set up in either corner of the hallway. “So, oh fearless leader, what’s the battle plan for tomorrow?” she asked.

“Well,” Cloud replied cautiously. “As soon as dawn breaks, Barret, Cid, Red, Rude, Elena, and I are going to check on that cave I sent Vincent and Yuffie to investigate.”

“You’re leaving me here?” she asked, looking hurt. It broke his heart.

He fumbled for the words to explain this to her. “Well, you see, we need someone to keep watch here in case Vincent and Yuffie do come back when we’re away. I would call Marie back to work, but I gave her the week off, and besides, I don’t think she can quite handle the things we’ve seen.”

Tifa put her hands on her hips again, still looking hurt. “You’ve got to be more convincing than that, Cloud,” she said sternly. “Why can’t I come?”

Words rose in his mind from a treasure chest of forbidden phrases which he had sealed up tight in his heart and thrown away the key. *I don't want you to come because it might be dangerous. I can't let you get involved. If the Running Man is waiting for us, and I meet my death either by his hands or by the forces of Nature, I want to die knowing that you are safe. I want to know that when I'm dead and gone, you'll still be here, continuing, helping people, your heart made of gold, your beauty eternal and timeless, like that light in your eyes. I don't want you to come because I can't bear the thought of losing you...to anyone or anything. Without you, I would just curl up and die.*

Instead, he said, “Someone has to take care of Reno.”

*No! Whatever had possessed him to say something like that?*

Tifa looked puzzled. “Reno?”

*Okay, Strife, you dug your own grave, and now you have to dig your way out of it.*

“Yeah,” he stammered. “Um, Rude said that when Reno drinks like that, he wakes up with a major hangover, and to get him up bright and early is to listen to him bitch about every little thing. Rude and I both thought it would be best if we would leave him behind.”

“He’s going to be mad,” Tifa said in a flat tone with some indiscernible emotion in her wine-colored eyes.

“Yeah, I know,” Cloud replied hastily. “That’s why you have to stay here and watch him. If we leave him alone and he wakes up to find that we’re gone, he might try and follow us, leaving the bar unattended. And you know about Reno’s temper; he might decide to trash a few things before he leaves. I wouldn’t put it past him.”

“So I’m staying behind so I can babysit a 25 year old kid?” Tifa said slowly. “And make sure that he doesn’t trash the bar in his anger before he leaves?”

*Oh crap. She’s mad; she’s really mad.*

“Just don’t let him leave at all,” Cloud urged warily, looking for any signs that she was going to blow up in his face. “He’ll just get in the way.”

“Like me?” she asked coldly, her eyes emotionless.

“No!” he exclaimed loudly, his voice echoing in the empty hallway. “No,” he said softly, lowering his voice as Tifa continued to stare at him with an apathy that she must have learned from Vincent. “It’s nothing like that, Tifa. Nothing like that at all. I just that I don’t...I mean...you know.”

“No, Cloud, apparently I don’t know,” she said waspishly, and now he could see



Catalina occasionally inserts images from FFVII doujins into the story which have visuals loosely related to the accompanying scene. The dialogue is generally unrelated, but footnotes will be added with translations for those curious. —Editor  
**Doujin panel text:** “Cloud... He’s making a face I don’t recognize.”

that she was hurt as well as angry. “And I would think that after all we’ve been through together, you could trust me. Goodnight.”

With that, she whirled and disappeared into her room, shutting the door behind her and locking it, leaving a stunned and baffled Cloud in her wake. However, it only took a second or two of staring at the wooden door to realize that he had made a huge mistake.

“Tifa!” he whisper-screamed, knocking on the door with his gloved hand. “Open up!”

“Go to bed, Cloud,” she said flatly from the other side of the door. “You said you were tired.”

“Tifa, open the door.”

“No.”

“I want to talk to you. Please?”

“I’ve talked to you enough tonight. I already know my place is to stay here and babysit Reno. I have nothing more to say to you.”

“Tifa!”

“Go away, Cloud. Good night.”

“Tifa! C’mon, don’t be like this!”

No answer.

“Tifa, I know you’re there. Open up.”

No answer.

*Well, I really fucked that one up*, he thought miserably as he banged his head against the door and sighed in defeat. As far as he could remember, he had never made her this mad before. But Tifa was never one to hold a grudge, and he hoped she would get over it come morning. If not, he would apologize. However, a problem would arise if she asked him to justify his actions. If he started telling her how he felt, everything would come bubbling out. He couldn’t let that happen, not when she was so happy.

*I have to make a decision. I can’t go on like this forever. It just hurts too much. No, I can wait longer; I have to.*

“Goodnight, my love,” he whispered to the closed door.

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Author’s Note:

Just from the record, the whole Tifa/Cloud fight at the end wasn’t intended. It just sort of developed at the spur of the moment, and I lost control of my fingers. Crazy, huh? And what’s this? Cloud jealous of Reno? Hmm...this might go somewhere...

# Chapter Eight

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## Once Upon a Midnight Dreary

*“Vinnie Valentine, this is the voice of God. Wake your ass up!” —Yuffie Kisaragi*

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*Darling so share with me  
Your love if you have enough  
Your tears if you're holding back  
Or pain if that's what it is*

*“Eyes On Me”  
—Faye Wong—*

---

The light was all around her, green and stinking like the bodies of a dozen corpses. It kept brushing against her skin in wisps, like claws trying to get inside her thin shield of flesh. Long nails like pickaxes suddenly emerged from the seething light and dug themselves into her chest, creating a lacerating pain that was rapidly spiraling down to her heart, seeking to rip the pulsating organ from its rightful place. Yuffie screamed and slapped them away frantically, but the tendrils of light suddenly grew hands and snatched her up by her arms, dragging her along in their midst to some unknown place.

“No!” she screamed. “Let me go! Vincent, where are you?!”

But no one answered her; she was alone with the light and the amoebas. Someone in the darkness laughed, and she tried to whirl to see who it was, who would be in this godforsaken place, but the light was all around her now, and she could see nothing.

Therefore, when the pit opened up beneath her, smelling of salt and dead things, she was falling before she even had the chance to scream. When reality finally dawned on her, and she knew she was going to die, and die alone, she let out a scream that resounded off of the far corners of the Planet.

The green light laughed at her.

\*\*\*\*\*

Yuffie woke up with a soundless scream, clawing at the air with her dry, chapped hands. Her heart was pounding so loud that it drowned out the endless rain slamming against the window and the thunder rumbling overhead. She was freezing, and she was in a dark place that held no trace of the green light. It took her a few moments of breathing hard and glancing around in a panic for her to remember that she was in a hotel room.

Wrapping the blankets around her shivering body, Yuffie lowered her face into her hands and tried to calm herself down. *It was just a dream*, she told herself. *It was just a*

*dream. You're not in that horrible place with the green light and the endless pit; you're here in a hotel in Junon with thin blankets and a storm raging outside the window. And you're not alone; Vincent is less than five feet away from you.*

Raising her face from her hands, she looked to her left to see the dark figure of Vincent lying in the bed next to hers. He had gone to sleep without a shirt (or a shower. Grossness!) and she could see the curve of his naked back facing in her direction. The blankets covered him from the waist down, and his midnight black hair was spread out in an inky pool amongst the white sheets behind him.

Before she knew what she was doing, Yuffie had thrown back the blankets and was padding over to Vincent's bed. The floor was cold underneath her bare feet, and the air conditioner had made the room so freaking cold that the temperature rivaled the substantial lows on the Great Glacier. Yuffie realized belatedly that she had left her shorts and tank top to dry in the bathroom, and she was standing around in her undergarments. She immediately backtracked and grabbed the blankets off her bed, wrapping them around herself until she felt like one of those super thick burritos that Barret practically inhaled at that restaurant in Corel.

Walking as quietly as she could over to Vincent's bed, she stood peering awkwardly down at him, wondering what the hell she was doing. Vincent's pale skin practically glowed in the dark, and now that he was showing so much of it, she had no trouble seeing him in the darkness. When people first saw Vincent in his dark clothes and large red cloak, they always tended to receive the impression that he was severely thin. Even Yuffie had always thought Vincent to be underweight for a man of his prodigious height. Looking at him now, she saw that Vincent was actually quite muscular with strong-looking broad shoulders and a smooth back whose muscles rippled slightly as he shifted in his sleep. She suddenly remembered how she had loved the feel of those muscles when she had hugged him almost a day ago, when he rode up to Tifa's bar like a dark knight on his midnight black chocobo...

Yuffie flushed, a bit of heat on her cold cheeks, as she scolded herself for thinking of Vincent this way. He was a man, and she was just a skinny little nobody who everyone knew as "brat" or "pest." Why would he even want to be near someone like her? But she really, really, *really* didn't want to sleep in her cold, lumpy bed by herself with that window and the air conditioner less than two feet away from her...

*I can't believe I'm going to do this. I hope he's not going to wake up grumpy.*

Clearing her throat, she whispered, "Vincent, are you awake?"

The man shifted slightly, but didn't reply.

"Vincent," she called again, taking a step closer to the bed and feeling like a total idiot. "Vincent, wake up."

No answer. Yuffie frowned and contemplated getting her pillow and hitting him with it, but when she realized that he would probably wake up and shoot her, she wisely repressed the urge.

“Vinnie Valentine,” she sang, making her voice deep and manly. “This is the voice of God. Wake your ass up!”

He stirred, but didn’t wake up.

Frustrated, Yuffie reached over and touched his shoulder with her cold fingers. The results were instantaneous. Vincent woke up, his right arm reaching backwards at an almost impossible angle and grabbing her forearm in a death grip, cutting off her circulation almost immediately. Yuffie yelped in surprise and pain.

“Vincent!” she snapped, trying to pull away. “Let go! It’s me! Yuffie!”

Vincent rolled over onto his back, his red eyes open wide and focused. He stared at her blankly for a few seconds, then released her arm.

“Yuffie?” he asked in a voice thick with sleep. “What’s wrong?”

She scowled, her arm still hurting. “What’s wrong?” she echoed. “You were trying to rip my entire arm off, you idiot!”

He was unfazed. “What are you doing running around like that?”

Blushing, Yuffie readjusted her blanket covering and squinted at him in the darkness. “I’m cold,” she said awkwardly. “The window and the air conditioner are right by my ear. My bed is lumpy, too. Can I sleep with you?”

Vincent was silent for a long time as Yuffie shifted her weight from foot to foot, more uncomfortable than she had ever been in her entire life. She knew her face was bright red. God, if only Vincent wouldn’t stare so much! Didn’t the weirdo have any tact at all?

“You want to trade beds?” he asked finally.

*Damn! He isn’t going to make this easy.*

“I’ll still be cold,” Yuffie whined. “I can’t even feel my fingers and toes right now!”

Vincent stared at her, his eyes taking in her covering of blankets. “Are you decent underneath that?”

Yuffie’s blush turned even redder. “I’m as decent as I’m going to get,” she grumped. “Please, Vinnie. I just want to lie down. I won’t even get near you.”

Another long period of silence fell, and Yuffie fidgeted as nervously as she could without displacing her covering, refusing to meet his gaze. Readjusting her wrapping of

blankets and sheets, she thought that she would just die of embarrassment if Vincent sent her back to her bed, but she refused to beg him. It had taken enough guts just to wake him up and ask him about this. She had to keep some of her dignity.

Finally, Vincent gave his answer, not in words, but in actions. He scooted over a little and pulled the sheets back for her before turning to face the wall again.

“Thank you,” Yuffie said softly, slipping underneath the covers and rearranging her own layers of blankets that were serving as her pajamas. The bed underneath her was warm from Vincent’s body heat, and the scent of him was clinging to the sheets. Flipping over onto her stomach, she pressed her left cheek against the fluffy white pillow, feeling warm and safe with Vincent less than a foot away from her, even if his back was turned to her. Oh well, let him pretend she wasn’t there. His dark hair was still pooled behind him, a few stray tendrils lying close to her in curiosity of this strange girl who was sharing a bed with them.

Dark and dangerous, Vincent looked, sprawled out in this bed of whiteness. It was strangely enchanting, how good the darkness looked on him. How it leapt to cover his figure as if to hide it from her probing eyes. Lightening flashed outside the window, briefly throwing the inky shadow of the curve of his shoulders against the wall in front of him.

Quietly extending her fingers, which seemed to have suddenly developed a mind of their own, she reached out and gently lifted a tendril of Vincent’s ebony hair, amazed at how soft it was, especially considering what hell it had been put through tonight. She curled it around her finger, loving the silken feel of the strands as they slid over her skin. She wished that she had long, straight hair like this. There were so many things you could do with long hair, and that was why she had finally agreed to letting her hair grow out. She had loved Aeris and Tifa’s long falls of hair for as long as she could remember. Aeris’ little twisty thingy or whatever she called it, was the most hilarious thing Yuffie had ever seen. She loved to tug on it and go, “Ding dong! Anyone home?” especially when Aeris said something innocent or naïve that had made her sound like a noodle brain. It usually earned Yuffie an angry glare and the threat that she was going to get bashed over the head with the Fairy Tale, but it had been sort of an ongoing joke between her and the late Ancient. She missed Aeris.

“Yuffie?” Vincent suddenly asked, jolting her out of her reverie. “Are you going to yank on my hair for the rest of the night?”

“Oh!” she exclaimed, turning bright red and retracting her questing fingers like she had received a slap on the wrist. “Sorry,” she said quietly.

Vincent didn’t reply, but Yuffie hadn’t been expecting one from him. Silence hung in the air for a few minutes as thunder roared outside the window, and raindrops pelted the glass like the succubus begging to be inviting in to do their ghastly deeds. It didn’t take

long for Yuffie to realize that she wasn't going to be able to get to sleep.

"I had a nightmare," she said before she could stop herself. The sound of her voice in the cold hotel room as she lie next to this cold-hearted man of darkness and shadows resonated like a lonely echo, chasing after its duplicates as if in search for a companion.

"It was really scary," Yuffie continued, talking more to herself than to Vincent and not caring whether or not he thought she was being a chatterbox. She had to tell somebody about her nightmare, even it was the silence around her or the smooth skin of Vincent's back. "I was all alone in a strange place. I thought it was the Green Room at first, you know, because of the light and the smell and all, but now I'm not so sure. I don't even know if it was a room at all, maybe just a vortex of light because that's all I could see. But...this light was alive, it had claws and teeth; I knew it did, even if I couldn't see them. I felt it gnawing at me, at my legs, at my arms, clawing at my chest, trying to rip my heart out."

Vincent rolled over and stared at her, but Yuffie didn't notice. She was once again lost in her nightmare.

"It grabbed me," she continued softly, shuddering underneath her covering of blankets. "And it started dragging me towards...I don't know what. I was really scared. My heart was beating so fast I thought it was going to bust through my chest. Maybe that was what they wanted..."

"They?" Vincent suddenly asked, and Yuffie jumped slightly. She hadn't even known he was listening.

"Yes, them," she said quietly, studying his emotionless face. "The voices in the light; I heard them...laughing at me. I hated their laughter; I really did. It was the laughter of those that have completely gone fruit loops, you know? Only these people seemed to have lost their humanity along with their state of mind."

"What were they doing in the light?" he asked softly. "And why did they want your heart?"

Yuffie was silent for a long time as she tried desperately to recall something, a tale, or a song, or some kind of bedtime story, from her youth that she had forgotten in her adolescence. The answers were there, in her past, but for some reason she just couldn't remember. "I don't know," she said finally. "I almost remember why, but the answers just aren't coming. Sorry."

Vincent just lay there gazing at her with his garnet eyes.

Yuffie's dark eyebrows suddenly knitted together in a frown. "Hey Vinnie?"

"Yes Yuffie?"



“Is...it true...that if you die in your dream that you’re going to die in real life, or you’ll wake up dead or something like that?”

Vincent hesitated. “I don’t know, Yuffie. That part about the dream being a premonition of one’s upcoming death sounds too superstitious for my liking. Death comes when it chooses; it does not defer to the will of dreams. But I suppose it is possible that if one believes themselves to be dying in a dream, then the body may follow what the dreaming brain is telling it to do...and just die because the mind thinks that its cycle has come to an end. Sort of like when you weep in your dream and you wake up crying.”

Yuffie stared at him in the darkness, mesmerized by the faint luminescence coming from his eyes. When she had first met him, she had thought that the deep red color of his eyes was the scariest thing in the world, but eventually she had come to realize that Vincent’s garnet-colored eyes were actually quite beautiful, even if they could periodically turn as cold as the bitter winter or as empty as an endless void.

“Do you ever weep while you’re sleeping, Vincent?” she asked softly.

He stared at her for a long time, long lashes dropping down so that only half of his ruby eyes were visible. He slowly turned his face away from her and gave his attention to the ceiling, his metal arm resting gracefully on the pale flesh of his naked torso, which was as beautifully sculpted as that of a marble god’s statue fashioned by the dexterous hands of a sculptor from the heavens. His abdominal muscles rippled slightly as he breathed, and Yuffie barely suppressed the urge to reach out and run her hands over his hard belly.

But she did none of this, thinking her fantasy actions almost blasphemous during this delicate period of contemplation, of companionable silence and pain unspoken as she awaited his answer with a lover’s patience.

“I might have,” he finally answered, his deep voice so low that it was just a mere rumble coming straight from his chest. “When I was younger with the vibrancy and foolishness of a child. Those times have long since died out, though, just like this frozen heart in my chest. I no longer have the proper emotion it takes to shed tears, either consciously or unconsciously.”

“That’s so sad, Vinnie,” she suddenly whispered, for some reason feeling herself on the verge of tears, maybe tears that she would shed for him since he was incapable of shedding any himself.

He snapped his head in her direction, garnet eyes suddenly hard. “What’s so sad about it?” he demanded of her. “There’s no tragic flavor to what has befallen me. It was just irony. What goes around comes around. The monster finally has to look in the mirror and see his true self, what’s always been there but what he would never own up to.”

“You’re not a monster, Vincent,” she murmured feverishly.

“Yes, Yuffie, I am,” he said in a low, deadly voice, red eyes flashing. “I’ve always been monster, hiding my true nature behind the blue suit of the Turks. The only difference between what I am now and what I was then is that then I was a monster just pretending to be a man. I have been deprived of no human nature at all; the only thing Hojo took away from me was my delusions about my being human.”

“That horrible, Vinnie!” she suddenly burst out, oblivious to the lone tear that fell down her cheek. “You’re so morbid! You have people all around you that care about you and the potential to lead a happy existence, but instead you continue to punish yourself for something that was never your fault in the first place!”

Vincent stared at her apathetically.

“Go ahead and call yourself a monster!” she continued ranting, impassioned by some unknown and unfamiliar emotion. “Live out your life wallowing in despair and die a lonely, miserable old man! I don’t care!”

Yuffie rolled over sharply, turning her back to him and facing her abandoned bed, which looked meek and defenseless as it sat there stripped of all its sheets and naked against the ghastly low temperature of the room. The girl shrunk in on herself, curling into a little ball with her knees drawn up to her chest, gritting her teeth to hold back unwanted tears that were threatening to bubble out of her eyes like the rain from the thunderclouds. Why was she getting all worked up over this? She had heard Vincent speak of his “sins” and “punishment” time and time again, and she had just yawned and moaned, “Booooring!” Why was she so upset now? And she had to get all teary-eyed and emotional when she was lying next to him in bed, of all unforeseen situations! And with only blankets to hide the fact that all she was wearing was a bra and underwear! Talk about awkward and uncomfortable!

*It’s that damn dream,* she told herself angrily as she pulled the blankets tighter around herself and tried to ignore Vincent’s presence at her back. *All because of that stupid dream where I was all alone, and the mist was trying to tear my heart out, and they dropped me into the pit with the amoebas and then they laughed as I died... oh god!*

The sob she didn’t even know she had been holding had burst free of her chest and forced its way out of her throat before she had time to choke it back down. She hurriedly clamped a hand over mouth to prevent any of its brothers and sisters from following in its footsteps, but the tears rolling unbidden down her face distracted her and a whole plethora of sobs slipped past her weak guard and into the silence of the room. That was the final straw. Yuffie buried her face in her hands and burst into tears for a reason that was unknown to her except in her heart. Her back heaved with the force of her weeping, and inside, she kicked herself angrily for being such a wuss. She wasn’t a baby who cried over every little thing! What the hell was wrong with her?!

Yuffie didn't know for how long she had been crying when she suddenly felt the bed springs shift and the warm, hard feel of a body pressed against her shuddering back. An arm of tarnished gold suddenly reached over and gently grasped her around the waist, pulling her back against a chest of sculptured marble.

It took her a moment to realize that Vincent was holding her.

"Go away, Vinnie," she whispered through her tears, but her harsh words lacked a kindred emotion for them to fall back onto. In her heart, Yuffie knew that she wanted everything but for him to go away.

"No," was all he said, tightening his hold on her, and pressing his warm cheek against her tearstained one. She felt his knees touch the back of hers as he curled up against her.

"Leave me alone," she murmured, wiping the tears viciously away from her face, trying in vain to ignore the warmth that was spreading across her entire body, originating from every inch of skin in contact with his.

"No," he replied calmly, his mouth against her ear, causing the warmth to crescendo to an almost unbearable degree. "Just go to sleep, Yuffie. I'll be right here...to keep you warm."

"O-Okay," she said shakily, her head feeling a bit woozy for some reason. Maybe it was the concept and fantastical reality that Vincent Valentine, ex-Turk and monster by his own admission, was holding her against him so gently. Or maybe all the fear and unfamiliar emotions had finally slammed into her with the shattering force of an out-of-control freight train on the road to nowhere. Either way, she was completely worn out.

So, nestled warmly against Vincent's body, she finally slept.

She had no more nightmares.

Author's Note:

Okay, I think you can see where this whole Yuffie/Vincent thing is going. What can I say? I know they're extremely mismatched, but for some reason, I always pair them up. Anyways, for the record, this chapter was supposed to part of the previous one...Awkward Moments, was it? But, let's face it, this one took off and developed a significance of its own, so I had to give it its own spotlight.

—Catalina

# Chapter Nine

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## *The Devil's Love Triangle*

*“Reno, you wouldn't know ‘sensitive’ or ‘chivalrous’ if they came up and kicked you in the teeth.” —Tifa Lockhart*

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*I'm sorry about the attitude  
I need to give when I'm with you  
But no one else will take this  
Shit from me  
And I'm so terrified of  
No one else but me...  
Reach down your hand  
In your pocket and pull out some hope for me*

*“Long Day”  
—Matchbox 20—*

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The beach was deserted when the rising sun finally dethroned the night that had presided over Junon Harbor. But the forces of darkness were running rampant and unstoppable for the next few days, and even the mighty brilliance of Dawn with her fingers of rose could not penetrate the stormy thunderclouds that prevented her from touching her kingdom and its inhabitants. The dark interveners of the light still belched forth their endless supply of rain, thunder, and lightening, trying to forcefully take over the realm that was ruled by the sun and moon. And for now, it seemed almost as if it was going to succeed.

The nighttime raindrops had left the dark sands of the beach pockmarked and wet as if the compact grainy substance had contracted a horrible alien disease. The tracks that Vincent and Yuffie had made while fleeing to the shelter of Junon had long ago been washed away, along with their faithful jet ski the Black Stinger, all reclaimed by the insatiable ocean mother who had once owned the world and now wanted to devour the fruits that had abandoned her womb for that of the earth. Her furious tides, swollen by the rain, pounded hungrily and viciously on the sands of Junon, trying to take back what mankind had stolen from them.

But their efforts on behalf of their mother were in vain. They had been trying such tactics for an eternity now. Reclaiming the land was fruitless; human and Ancient alike had long ago ceased to worry about how dangerous the ocean was. They had forgotten her majesty, her fury, and her hungry children of the deep.

And so she decided to teach them a lesson.

From her dark depths, she smugly belched forth five war-torn figures.

The first of these figures washed up on shore like an unwanted child who was nothing nature had ever intended to create—an accident, an abomination. Its man-like figure was clothed in the remnants of black rags, and it was missing one entire arm and half of the other. Yet it was with these stumps that it dragged itself relentlessly on shore with some indomitable will that resided within its soulless, heartless, mindless shell of pink flesh. Its legs, whole and complete, but useless for the time being, dragged meekly behind it, waiting for their moment.

As soon as the creature had escaped the grips of the ocean that had decided she was done playing with it, the creature shuffled onto the wet sand, dragging itself along with the stumps that had once been its arms. Lightning flashed across the slightly lighter sky, reflecting off of the creature's glistening head. With the same relentless patience that had propelled it through the worst of the ocean's fury, the monstrosity that may have once been a man sprung to its feet in one swift movement and stood alone on the once deserted beach.

Four others soon followed, each the identical twin of the first refugee. The new arrivals also came from the hungry tides of the ocean, all missing limbs from various places on their bodies. But these absent appendages didn't deter the fleshly monstrosities at all. Their wounds no longer bled; they felt no pain. They felt nothing.

One by one, each of the four new arrivals came to stand beside the first one, looking like outdated and mutilated action figures.

Together again, the five war-torn but fully operational Faceless Men moved towards the awakening city of Junon.

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Cautiously, Reno opened one eye. The effort it cost him to accomplish such a feat, however, was so painful and unrewarding that he ditched the effort and shut it again. He felt as if an entire legion of oddball life forms had invaded his skull and were digging at his brain with tachyon lasers and superheated pickaxes or whatever oddball life forms used to perform their autopsies on humans. His mouth felt drier than the desert around Dio's prison (not that he'd ever been down there), and it tasted as if something had died in there. His limbs ached from top to bottom, and his nightstick was poking him in...an extremely sensitive place.

In short, he felt like crap. Week old crap. Crap that had been flushed so many...

"Reno?" a voice suddenly cut through his consciousness and assaulted his delicate nerve endings, intensifying the pain tenfold. He groaned.

"Oh, I see you're awake," the voice said dryly. Hey that sounded an awful lot like that

lady from AVALANCHE, the one with the boobs, the one that Rude was still obsessing over even after Reno had told him a dozen times to...

"Reno!" Tifa cried, shaking him roughly by the shoulder. "Get up and quit drooling all over my table!"

With a great effort, Reno forced both of his eyes open. Light exploded across his vision, drilling into his brain like an ice pick. Gritting his teeth, he forced both of them to focus at the same time. Ignoring the throbbing pain in his skull and the major annoyance he felt at being so rudely awakened at such an early hour, he squinted into the light above him. Eventually, Tifa's lovely face swam into view, a sight for sore eyes. Only now, as she stood at his side glaring down at him, that beautiful face now sported a severely irritated look.

"Ugh?" Reno grunted intelligibly, trying to work up the strength to move his limbs.

Tifa scowled. "What was that? I don't understand cavemen talk."

"Ugh," Reno said again, but this time followed up with, "Tifa...good morning."

She looked surprised. "Well, um, hello, Reno, good morning to you, too."

He squinted his bloodshot aquamarine eyes, trying to get the two Tifas to merge into one. "Can you turn off my nightlight?" he suddenly asked.

Now she looked amused as well as surprised. "I think you're a bit old for a nightlight, Reno."

Reno didn't hear her comment, noticing for the first time that he was not lying on his bed or his couch. "Where am I?" he slurred, clutching his lead-heavy hands to his aching head.

"My bar," she replied, looking down at him sternly.

"Bar?" Reno echoed weakly. Then, amazingly, he grinned up at Tifa's figure, which was still blurry at the edges. "Did we just get through a night of hot sex?"

Tifa's face darkened with rage almost instantly. Her jaw clenched, and her dark, graceful eyebrows drew together in a furious scowl. "Reno," she seethed. "If I wasn't happily imagining all the pain you're in right now and reveling in your suffering, I would punch you between the legs so hard you wouldn't be able to walk straight for a week. But since I'm a decent, moral human being *UNLIKE SOMEONE I KNOW*, I just can't bring myself to hit a drunkard with a hangover, even a mangy lowlife like you."

"Mangy lowlife?" Reno echoed with a frown. "Geez, I was just making a joke, Tifa. Are you always such a bitch in the morning?"

This time Tifa did hit him, and Reno, with his normally sharp reflexes dulled by alcohol, could only cry out and clutch his stomach in pain as she drove an expertly trained fist into his gut.

*I'm lucky she didn't hit me a few inches lower,* he thought with a painful giddiness.

"Get up, you pathetic slob!" she snarled angrily, putting her hands on her shapely hips.

"I will, I will," Reno wheezed, hands covering his abdomen to repel any more blows. "Just wait until the room stops spinning and I can tell which way is up and which way is down."

"Get off my table, now," she seethed, burgundy eyes burning with angry fire.

"Hey!" Reno snapped, starting to come out of the ozone. "I don't even know where the floor is so quit bitchin' at me!"

Tifa raised her fist menacingly, her face as dark as a thundercloud.

"Ah!" Reno yelped. "Okay, okay, I'm up, I'm up!"

He rolled over and off the table, the room spinning wildly around him as he did so. He tried to make a valiant attempt to land right side up, but at the last moment, however, his feet got tangled in the blanket, and he ended up falling flat on his butt on the wooden floor with a loud thud. The force of his posterior's collision with the ground made his teeth click together and sent a whole, new jarring pain up the length of his back.

*Damn. Today's just not going to be my day.*

"Ow," he moaned, rubbing his backside.

Tifa rolled her eyes in half pity/half anger as she glared down at the red-haired man in the rumpled blue suit spread-eagled on her floor. "Oh please, Reno, it couldn't have hurt that bad. Get your lazy, drunken butt up so I can give you a hangover remedy."

Reno lurched to his feet with a grunt, using a nearby chair as a crutch. His aching body and throbbing head screamed in protest at all his movement, but the Turk refused to give in to his ailments. Besides, he was used to be hung over. He practically went through this every morning of his life.

He waited patiently for the room to stop spinning before focusing on Tifa's retreating figure and asking, "You have a hangover remedy?"

"Yes," she answered, gracefully maneuvering her way behind the bar, where she promptly began gathering the materials needed for her hangover cure that she thought Reno should invest in a lifetime supply of. "When you run a bar, it's always good to

develop some kind of remedy for the disease that ails so many of your customers.”

Reno snorted at her sympathy for drunkards like him and began to shuffle his way unsteadily over to the bar. “You know, sister,” he said. “People drink because they want to. I say let the bastards suffer from their own ‘disease,’ as you so nicely put it. It’s a self-inflicted disease, after all.”

Tifa glanced up at him before busying herself again. “Not everyone drinks because they want to, Reno,” she said softly. “Alcoholism is a disease with no cure. Some drunkards can’t help themselves. It’s like they’re possessed or something.”

The redheaded Turk gingerly eased himself onto a bar stool in front of Tifa, careful not to miss the stool and land flat on his keister again. “You have a cheery outlook on life,” he commented with a sneer. “Have you done an extensive study on the psychology of drunkards, Dr. Lockhart?”

She shook her head, brown hair shimmering underneath the lights and brushing her creamy shoulders. “No,” she said quietly. “Just one.”

Reno raised an eyebrow curiously. “Oh really? And who would that be? Does Red have a drinking problem?”

“No,” she said calmly. “It’s you, Reno.”

He jerked in surprise. “Me?”

She nodded, carefully pouring a generous amount of a nasty brown concoction into a glass. “Yes, you. I don’t know why you drink, Reno, but I can tell that it’s not because you want to.”

Reno laughed loudly, ignoring the burst of pain it caused him. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard!” he exclaimed, leaning his weight on the bar, aquamarine eyes flashing with a mixture of harshness and mirth. “Let me tell you something, honey, I drink because I *want* to. I manipulate people and sleep with any woman who crosses my path because I *want* to. I run my own life. I don’t do anything I don’t want to do. So don’t give me any of that, ‘You have a disease, Reno’ crap, because I don’t want to hear it.”

Tifa met his iridescent blue-green gaze squarely with her burgundy one, unfazed by his harshly amused words or his blazing stare. “Whatever you say, Reno,” she replied calmly after he had finished his spiel. She placed the glass in front of him with an emphatic thud. “Here, drink up.”

The Turk eyed the overflowing glass dubiously. “Congratulations, Tifa baby, I think you’ve created a new color. What the hell is in this crap, anyways?”

One corner of Tifa’s full mouth turned up in a smile. “Don’t ask, Reno. Just drink.”



She watched calmly as the Turk carefully lifted the glass to his mouth, wise enough not to sniff it before taking a petite sip. She watched just as calmly as he gagged on the concoction, his face scrunching up in disgust as he almost spit all of the liquid on the bar top. Her respect for him climbed a tenth of a notch as she saw him succeed in keeping the remedy in his mouth. Not just anyone could do that.

“What the hell?!” he exclaimed when he had stopped hacking and choking. “What, are you trying to kill me or something?”

“The remedy is worse than the disease,” Tifa quoted wisely. “Just pretend it’s vodka, Reno. Drink it all.”

Ignoring the glare he was giving her, Tifa diverted her attention to wiping up the mess she had made while mixing her “remedy.” Watching him slurp and gag down the rest of the concoction out of the corner of her eyes, she silently wondered at the paradox of the fiery-haired Turk who had drunken himself into a coma a dozen times over, then claimed he did it because he wanted to. Who knew, maybe he did, but she didn’t think so. At first, she had thought that Reno was just as shallow as he made himself out to be, but hanging around him as more of a friend than an enemy had led her to witness the more complex layers of his “charming” personality. She now believed that there was more going behind those liquid blue eyes than others tended to assume.

Finished with his remedy, Reno took the glass away from his mouth in obvious relief and set it down on the countertop with a loud thud, looking proud of himself that he had finished the entire thing without throwing it back up. He had some of the dark liquid dribbling down his chin, and another thin stream had stained his shirt.

Tifa sighed. “Reno, you are probably the sloppiest person I have ever met.”

He smiled, Mako-enhanced eyes twinkling fiendishly. *Those eyes would rival Cloud’s in ethereal beauty*, Tifa suddenly thought, *if they didn’t always seem to be mocking people*. She immediately shook away the thought; now was not the time to be romanticizing every unseen aspect of Reno. She had to admit, the Turk was...stunningly attractive and had a unique personality that she hadn’t seen in any other individual in her lifetime. Actually, “unique” was too nice of word; “obnoxious” would probably suit him better.

“I may be the sloppiest person you’ll ever meet,” Reno said amicably in response to her insult. “But since I’m also the most sensitive and chivalrous person you’ll ever meet, I’ll thank you for your little ‘potion’ and that lovely compliment you just gave me, Tifa. I always knew you loved me.”

Tifa rolled her eyes. “Reno, you wouldn’t know ‘sensitive’ or ‘chivalrous’ if they came up and kicked you in the teeth.”

He grinned widely, showing her all of the objects that “sensitive” and “chivalrous”

would have kicked had they come across him. Tifa just shook her head, smiling slightly at his antics. Satisfied with himself, Reno clumsily wiped his chin off with his jacket sleeve as Tifa cleared away his glass and rinsed it in the sink.

Flicking a wayward lock of red hair away from his face, Reno glanced towards the window to see that though the sky was a lighter shade of gray than he remembered from the night before, rain was still pounding incessantly against the panes of glass with ghastly motivation.

"It's still raining," he commented, resting his scarred cheek on one hand, happy to find that his head was already starting to clear. Tifa's loony mad scientist/mud pie brew had actually worked.

She glanced at the window as she shut off the faucet, a distant and troubled look entering her eyes. "Yeah," she said softly. "The streets are already flooding. It let up for a little while right before dawn...when Cloud and the others left. But then it—"

"Wait just a damn minute!" Reno suddenly burst out, gripping the countertop tightly with his hands as he leapt to feet that still weren't quite steady. "You mean they already left for that cavern?!"

"Yes," Tifa replied wearily, knowing that the others' abandoning Reno would incite such a reaction.

"They went to go look for the Running Man, who kidnapped *my* President, and they had the nerve to leave me, *his chief bodyguard*, unconscious on a hard, uncomfortable table in a bar?!"

"Yes," Tifa sighed, suddenly feeling like crying at her own loneliness.

"THOSE ASSHOLES!" he exploded, blue eyes flashing with unchecked fury as he pounded the bar with both fists, shaking the shot glasses and making Tifa jump instinctively. "I'm going after them!"

"Reno, calm down," she said flatly, starting to wipe the counter again, as if to cleanse the Formica of all his rage. "You and your little hissy fits are so unnecessary and predictable. And you're not going after them so just sit back down. It wasn't their fault they had to leave without you because you drank yourself into a coma and they didn't want to hear you gripe and complain the entire way over there."

Reno sneered, aquamarine eyes glinting frostily. "It's not my fault either," he mocked. "I have a 'disease' and I don't drink because I want to."

Tifa sighed and rubbed her face with her hands. "Reno," she said patiently. "For what it's worth, you're not the only one they left behind."

His eyes widened in surprise. “They left without telling you, either?”

She shook her head. “No, Cloud told me, but...Look, Reno, I don’t really want to talk about it. Are you hungry?”

His stomach suddenly rumbled loud enough for everyone in Midgar to hear. “Um, yeah,” he muttered reluctantly, wishing his stomach had just kept quiet.

She nodded, relieved that she would be able to take her mind off of things by cooking. “Sit down and I’ll fix you something.”

Reno hesitated, for a moment contemplating rushing out the door, but his stomach rumbled insistently, demanding to be fed, and a sudden crash of thunder discouraged any more thoughts of sloshing around in rain outside. He trudged over to his stool again and plopped down on it with an internal sigh, still simmering with the residue of his rage.

*Oh well, he thought glumly as he watched Tifa remove eggs from the refrigerator, at least I don't have to parade around the mountains, slipping in the mud and getting soaked from the rain. Ha! Looks like Mr. and Mrs. We're-So-Independent-And-Can-Leave-Our-Leader-Behind-With-A-Hangover Rude and Elena came up on the short end of the stick. Who cares anyways? They can go to hell.*

But deep down, Reno knew that he wasn’t angry with his friends. He couldn’t afford to be angry at the only two real friends he had at the moment; unless, of course, he counted Cloud, Tifa, and all the other members of AVALANCHE as friends, but he wasn’t ready to consider them as anything more than acquaintances at the moment. No, Reno wasn’t angry that Rude and Elena had left him behind; he was hurt. Turks were supposed to stick together, no matter what. *Friends* were supposed to stick together. For almost a year, Rude and Elena were all he had had to rely on, and they on him as the three remaining Turks rose from the ashes of the tyrannical Shinra Inc. to become the new bodyguards/second-in-commands under President Reeve of Neo-Shinra. They had fought together, hurt together, laughed together, got drunk together, and now they run off and leave him here with Tifa...

*Hey... Tifa...*

Reno snapped out of his morbid thoughts and watched the young brunette as she fried bacon in a pan with her nimble hands. Already the smells of cooking food were making his stomach growl eagerly. He allowed a small smile to come to his lips as his eyes lingered on her curvaceous, slender figure with its tiny waist and large breasts. Yes, Tifa Lockhart was a fine piece of meat, Reno had to admit. Rude certainly knew how to pick them. Her wine-colored eyes were intent on what she was doing, and her long brown hair spilled across her shoulders as she pushed at it impatiently with her free hand, lost in thought.

It then became obvious to Reno that there was something bothering her. Her full, pink lips, usually having cautious smiles even for him, were turned down in the corners, ready to frown instead of smile. There was a nagging worry evident in her eyes, a worry that darted fleetingly across her beautiful face in wispy glimmers, only allowing Reno brief glimpses of what was going on inside her pretty head as she tended to his needs.

“Why did they leave you behind?” he asked suddenly, folding his arms on the countertop and resting his chin on the blue fabric of his rumbled suit jacket, the epitome of casualness.

Tifa glanced up in surprise, as if she had forgotten he was there. “Hm? Oh. I said I didn’t want to talk about it, Reno.”

The distress in her voice that she tried so hard to hide made him use a softer tone when he said, “Hey, I’m just trying to make conversation.”

“Let’s talk about something else, then,” she said tiredly, setting her finished bacon aside and turning her attention to the eggs.

“Tifa...” Reno said.

She looked up in surprise to meet a pair of curious but seemingly sincere aquamarine eyes that had lost all their mocking demeanor. For a moment there, Reno had sounded just like Cloud.

Tifa quickly averted her gaze and muttered, “Cloud told me I needed to take care of you.”

Reno jerked in surprise. “Me? Since when does the leader of AVALANCHE care about the well-being of any Turk, especially a worthless drunk like me?”

She shrugged. “I don’t know. I mean, no offense meant to you about the whole Turk/drunkard thing. Turks and drunkards are people, too, right?”

Reno ran his fingers absently over the scar that adorned his right cheek. “Pretty much, yeah,” he muttered.

“But I still don’t know why Cloud would leave me behind,” she fretted as she flipped an egg with her skillet and an amazingly steady hand despite her obvious agitation. “I mean, I know he’s not being sexist or anything; he is well aware that I can handle hiking and walking around in the rain better than Cid or Barret, who hate being wet. It makes them grumpy.”

“God forbid,” Reno laughed.

Tifa went on, oblivious to his attempt to ease her mood. “And Red can’t smell anything in the rain, and since he walks on all four feet, he’ll have a harder time maneuvering

through flooded areas. And Rude and Elena are Turks, and Clouds not even sure he trusts the Turks yet.”

Reno made no comment, realizing that she was talking more to herself than to him, and if she *was* talking to him, she wanted him to listen and not make any snide remarks.

“I mean,” Tifa rambled on, “if Vincent and Yuffie and Reeve were with us, then he probably would have taken Vincent or Reeve with him since they don’t complain too much and Vincent’s really agile and Reeve’s really smart even if he can’t fight that well. *Then* I could understand if he left me behind since only three people can fit in the Tiny Bronco comfortably.”

“Tifa—” Reno started to say, sensing that she was reaching the zenith of her agitation and frustration. He was afraid she was going to have a breakdown or something.

“But what I can’t understand for the life in me,” she went on feverishly, almost completely unaware of his presence now. “Is why he took everyone else and left me behind! I mean, he knows that Reno can take care himself here alone, and if Cloud had wanted someone to keep an eye on him so he didn’t break anything in a temper tantrum, Red could have stayed. He’s much better with all that ‘Let’s all calm down’ stuff than I am—”

“Tifa—” Reno said again, leaning forward and peering into her worried face, which was still focused on the cooking eggs as she went on with her frustrated tirade.

“Maybe he didn’t mean anything by it,” she continued, mumbling now. “Or maybe he was just looking for an excuse to leave me behind. Maybe he thinks I’ll have a breakdown or something, or maybe my presence just aggravates him so much that he can’t—”

“Tifa!” Reno bellowed, making her jump so violently that she nearly dropped the spatula.

She stared blankly at him for a few moments that seemed to last forever, lost for the time being in the aquamarine lakes that were his eyes and wondering why he had yelled so loud. Oh yeah, she had been...

“God, Reno, I’m sorry,” she immediately apologized, ashamed of herself. “I just got all caught up in my own problems. I didn’t mean to dump all that on you. I’ll be quiet now.”

Blushing profusely, she returned her attention to the patiently waiting eggs, trying to not notice how hard her hand was trembling as she handled the spatula.

Reno waved his hand in dismissal, wanting to comfort her and wanting to laugh at her at the same time. “You don’t need to apologize, sister. I put a crack in the dam, and it all came flooding out over me. That’s all.”

Tifa shook her head wildly, not meeting his gaze. "No, Reno, those were my problems, my petty worries. I had no right talk your ear off about them."

*And why did I have to tell Reno, of all people? He's just going to get drunk and blab out everything to an entire bar. Damn! I've really gotten myself into a predicament this time, and all because I was lonely and wanted someone to talk to. If Yuffie were here, I might have talked to her about this, but since she's not...*

Reno rolled his eyes and ran a hand absently through his untamed red hair. "Please, enough with the apologies. You're making me sick to my stomach. Besides, don't worry about anything concerning Spike. I'm sure he had some obscure reason for leaving you here that only he understands."

Tifa raised an eyebrow curiously, still not looking into his eyes. Was Reno actually trying to comfort her? Wow, that would be a first.

"But what was it?" she whispered, poking at the eggs. "I don't understand him."

Reno smiled, flashing rows of white teeth. "He's a guy, baby, you're not meant to understand him."

"Then what am I meant to do, Reno?" she asked with some apprehension, expecting a perverted or degrading answer.

"Beats me," was all he said, spreading his hands in a gesture of ignorance. "I don't understand women."

She sighed. "That's quite an amazing thing, Reno, considering that you've been with so many."

He scowled, graceful auburn eyebrows drawing together. "That's a pretty harsh thing to say when I'm being perfectly *chivalrous* to you. Besides, there isn't really much to understand about my bitches."

Tifa started to snap at him in anger, but held her tongue because he was being "chivalrous" to her for a change.

"Anyways," Reno continued, stretching his arms over his head and arching his back until a section of his pale, well-muscled belly could be seen. "I'm sure your precious Cloud only left you here because he had your best interests in heart."

She glanced at him briefly before returning her attention to the stove. "And what would those be, Reno?"

"Who the hell do I look like, the \*&\$%ing Answer Man? I'm not Cloud, thank God, but I *am* a guy, and if I were a guy like Cloud who was involved with an astoundingly attractive, kind, generous woman like you, then that's what I would be thinking."

“Rude and Elena left with your best interests in heart,” she said quietly, surprisingly the both of them.

Reno made a peculiar hissing noise through his teeth and narrowed his eyes resentfully. “Going for low blows today now, are we?”

Tifa shook her head. “I’m not trying to cause you any pain; I’m just telling you the truth. They both didn’t really want to leave you behind. I could tell when they were about to leave this morning. Elena kept glancing at you, and Rude was uncomfortable, too.”

He snorted disdainfully. “They were probably afraid I was going to wake up and bitch them out.”

“No, they were just worried about your well-being. Everyone knows that you blame yourself for Reeve’s disappearance.”

Reno lifted his upper lip in a sneer, but didn’t say anything, wondering if almost a year of no espionage or manipulating enemies had made him and his emotions transparent to the people around him. Usually, Reno was most talented at fooling people into thinking that he was someone that he really wasn’t. A Turk was required to know many techniques, after all, not just battle tactics. It was Reno’s charm and ability to make spur-of-the-moment decisions that had made him talented in this area of his job, at least during the reign of the Shinras.

The truth of the matter was that he *did* blame himself for Reeve’s disappearance. Who else was there to blame? One of the Turks’ chief jobs was to protect the President at all costs, and he had failed miserably. Reno didn’t feel as if he owed Reeve for anything, certainly not giving them a job again, but he was relatively upset that he had failed at one of the objectives he had been hired for—protecting the President. The kidnapping had taken place right around the corner, not ten feet from where he had been walking casually down the hall, and he had been too late to stop it.

*Failure.*

*Pathetic failure.*

He laid his head on his folded arms dismally, a scowl on his handsome face as he berated and bashed himself silently, hating himself more than ever at the moment. Couldn’t he do anything right? It seemed as if his whole life was a mass of failures and mistakes, one right after the other. His entire existence on this Planet was one big mistake. What world needs yet another born failure in a world of born failures?

Tifa finished with her eggs and glanced up, noticing with some alarm that Reno’s expression had taken on a morbid look that she had never seen on his face before. His chin was resting on the arms of his blue suit jacket, and his fine eyebrows were drawn low to

his eyes in a perpetual frown. He drummed his fingers idly over one of his scars, so close to the tender flesh around his fathomless eyes, which were misted in deep contemplation.

“Reno, it’s not your fault,” she said soothingly as she heaped his breakfast onto one of her plates, trying to ease the pain that she had unintentionally stirred up in his mind.

The redheaded Turk snapped out of his dark reverie and glared at her. “Hey, baby, if I want your opinion, I’ll ask for it. You don’t know anything about the way I am or the way I feel so just...leave me alone.” Those last words made his harsh comment sound more like a whine, and they both knew it.

Tifa didn’t respond to his remark, not even to scold him for calling her “baby,” a bad habit that he had developed. She knew he was hurting, and he was hurting because she had mentioned the source of his pain. So instead of snapping at him, she just smiled patiently and set his breakfast in front of him, handing him a fork to eat with.

Reno stared at her for one more moment before turning his attention to his food, eating with such vigor that one would have thought it had been years since his last meal. One of the first things she had noticed about Reno, next to his obnoxious personality and womanizing ways, was that he always ate his food quickly without even knowing that he was doing so. Living in the slums of Sector 7, Tifa had noticed that several of the children there ate in similar fashions, practically inhaling their food in fear that the nourishment they so desperately needed would be taken away from them, or, more accurately, stolen from them before they could finish. Reno was just an older version of those children, living proof that lifelong habits die hard. Even years after Tseng had taken him off the streets and polished him up, the Turk apparently couldn’t shake the nagging feeling that simple things such as food would be taken away if he weren’t careful. This unconscious habit of his made Tifa’s heart soften as she imagined how hard a life he might have had before Tseng rescued him.

“Hey, Reno?” she said awkwardly, wringing her hands together.

“Yeah?” he responded around a mouthful of eggs.

“Thanks for, you know, listening to me and all. It helped to get some things off of my chest.”

Reno shrugged casually, seemingly embarrassed by the simple words of gratitude and unable to speak around all the food in his mouth.

*I’d better give him something to drink before he chokes,* she thought with a hint of amusement as she watched him manage to swallow his mouthful in one big audible gulp.

Taking a glass out of the cabinet, she filled it with fresh orange juice from the refrigerator and set it before him, careful not to slosh any on the counter.



Reno glanced at it briefly before turning to her. “Orange juice? I haven’t drunk any of that crap since I got pneumonia and Elena insisted on playing Florence Nightingale. Don’t you have anything better...like some beer?”

Tifa shook her head and gave a short laugh. “No, Reno, no beer for breakfast. It’s bad for you.”

He batted his eyes, apparently over his bad humor of a few seconds before. “Please?” he begged, trying his best to look pitiful.

“No,” Tifa said firmly, attempting vainly to stifle a smile.

“Pretty please?”

“No.”

“Pretty please with a cherry on top?”

She burst out laughing at the sheer absurdity of tough old Reno asking begging her for alcohol in such a childish way, but shook her head again. “No, young man,” she scolded good-naturedly, wagging a finger in his face. “Eat your breakfast.”

Reno gave a melodramatic sigh. “Aw, you’re no fun, honey.”

Tifa gave another short laugh and walked out from behind the bar, leaving Reno to devour his breakfast. With her boots thudding loudly on the wooden floor, she walked reluctantly over to the window and looked out. Darkness everywhere. The angrily churning gray clouds continued to belch forth the rain that had upset the balance of nature within their wombs, becoming so heavy and burdening that it had to be released. The streets of Kalm were, for the most part, deserted as the citizens fled indoors to escape the torrents of rain that poured down on them incessantly. Only here and there, Tifa could see a die-hard workaholic trudging to their place of business, be it the Materia Shop or the Weapons shop or one of the other stores in the quaint country town, clad in slickers and boots. Tifa’s eyebrows drew together in distress as she once again thought of Vincent and Yuffie having to stay the night in a flooded cave. Her agitation only increased as she thought of Cloud and her other friends going to investigate the very same cave at this moment.

Pushing the thoughts away with a great force of will, Tifa turned away from the window and what dismal scenery it had to offer, undoing the drawstring on the curtains and letting them fall to cover the dark portal as she did so. A glance to the bar told her that Reno was still happily crunching his bacon, and she allowed herself a small smile when she noticed he was swinging his booted feet like any little kid, in sync with a musical tune that was only in his head. When Reno wasn’t being a disgusting, obnoxious, drunken, womanizing pervert, he was almost...cute.

*Oh, god, I’m so worried and lonely that even Reno’s beginning to look good. This is pathetic.*

Tifa strode over to the table that had served as Reno's bed the night before and picked up the mischievous blanket that had tripped him up and caused him to fall on his backside. She folded it carefully with her gloved hands just like she had watched her mother do so long ago and gently laid the quilt on the tabletop, smoothing it with her fingers as if giving it her seal of approval. That done, she rearranged the chairs Reno had upset in his collision with the floor, pushing them under their proper tables.

It wasn't until she had finished all her odds and ends that she realized that she and Reno had nothing to do but wait for Cloud and the others to come back. God, she hated feeling useless. And with all this time on her hands, all she had to occupy herself with was her own petty worries about...everything. Usually, she had Cloud around to keep her company, and if he wasn't there, Marie, Tifa's assistant, was always bustling around and making cheerful conversation about anything and everything. Her bar was always filled with light and laughter, and one of her AVALANCHE friends had usually been there on a visit or just passing through. Now, with just her and Reno to occupy the empty space and fill the silence, her Final Heaven bar seemed just as lonely and desolate as the town outside its wooden walls. There was nothing for her to do, nothing to keep her mind off of her worries and fears, unless, of course, fighting with Reno counted. She didn't want to even *think* about asking him what he wanted to do to pass the time.

A loud belch brought Tifa out of her idle thoughts. She looked to her left to see that Reno was finishing the last bits of his breakfast. With his back to her, he looked to be a lonely, dark figure in a blue suit slumped at the bar in some ghost town on the Road to Nowhere. His long red ponytail hung down to the space in between his shoulder blades, a single rope of liquid fire showing up vividly against the dark color of his signature blue suit. The rest of his hair stuck up wildly from the top of his head, a screaming part of his untamed, rebellious nature trying to break free from the cage of society. Other strands around the sides of his face drooped downwards to fall across his sunglasses and against his scarred cheekbones.

Tifa suddenly remembered brushing away one of those strands of fiery hair the night before when Reno had been in the grips of some horrible nightmare. She recalled the way his shadowy form had thrashed on the table, how he had whimpered deep in his throat, and how he had muttered endlessly about someone called Mika...

"Hey, Reno?" she said cautiously as she moved to stand next to him, staring at his scarred profile.

He was more interested in chugging his orange juice down. "Yeah?" he mumbled absently.

"Can I ask you a question?"

"Ask away, baby," he responded as he lifted the glass to his lips.

She took a deep breath, suddenly incredibly nervous. “Who’s Mika?”

Reno gagged on his orange juice, spitting it all on the counter in front of him in a great shower. The glass fell from his hand, hitting the counter with a thud and rolling over to the bar area before crashing into the sink with the tinkling of glass, spilling the remains of the juice like blood from an open wound as it went.

Tifa, shocked and alarmed, backed up a step in trepidation as Reno whirled on her, wiping his mouth viciously with one of his coat sleeves. His face was as dark as the thunderclouds outside, and just as angry looking, with his scars accenting the rage and suffering burning in his slightly luminescent eyes like a demon’s unchecked fury. His mouth was twisted into what might have been a grimace, or a sneer, or maybe even a primitive, bestial expression of anger. His hands were curled into tight fists. At that moment, Reno was the scariest thing Tifa had ever seen.

But when he spoke, his voice was surprisingly low, but it was a dangerous sort of low, a deadly breed of low.

“Where did you hear that name?” he asked slowly, putting careful emphasis on every word, daring her to lie to him. His eyes were burning her.

“Reno—” Tifa started to say, shocked at the sudden change that had overtaken him, every bit as horrifying as when Vincent shifted into his Chaos form.

“WHERE THE HELL DID YOU HEAR THAT NAME?” he suddenly raged, a dozen horrible emotions making his voice so agonized that the sheer force of it caused her to back up another step even though he had made no threatening gestures...yet. He hadn’t even risen from his seat.

“Where, Tifa?!” he hollered again, voice shaking the very foundation of the building. “Where?! Where did you hear that name?!”

“F-From you,” she managed to force out, clutching at the countertop with her right hand while keeping her left curled up in a cautious fist, knowing that if he attacked her, then she would have to defend herself the best way she could.

“From me?” he snarled angrily. “Liar! Lying bitch! Tell me where you heard that name!”

Tifa felt a spark of anger cut through her fear as that harsh name left his mouth and penetrated her consciousness. “I’m telling you the truth,” she snapped, refusing to flinch as she met his burning gaze squarely. “You were talking in your sleep last night, for your information!”

“And what the hell were you doing listening to me in my sleep?!” he demanded, apparently not satisfied with the answer.

"You think I came down here last night just to listen to you?!" she growled. "Of all the pompous, egotistical bastards! Why should I give a damn about the stuff you say in your sleep?! I was only up waiting for Vincent and Yuffie to come back, and you just happened to have fallen asleep on the table because you were so drunk you didn't know your left foot from your right! That's what happened, Reno, and if you don't believe me, well then tough shit! That's your goddamn problem, not mine! And don't you ever call me a bitch again, or I swear to God, you'll regret the day you were born!"

Tifa stopped her tirade, her chest heaving for breath and angry tears burning her eyes. She was caught between wanting to strangle Reno and wanting to run up to her room and never come out again. She couldn't remember the last time she was this angry.

Reno, in the meantime, was staring blankly at her, no emotion on his face at all. The silence between them was heavy and thick, broken only by the rain and thunder outside the bar and by the ragged breaths that Tifa drew into her chest as she watched Reno carefully through the haze of her anger. He looked like he was staring right through her, seeing things that weren't there; his aquamarine eyes were misted like they had been when she had mentioned Reeve's disappearance. All of his former anger had been washed away by a tide of melancholy emotions that only flitted briefly across his face in wisps.

Suddenly, the redheaded Turk snapped out of his trance-like state, blinking his eyes slowly as if the eyelids had the world's weight attached to them. His gaze fell on Tifa's flushed, furious face, and he hung his head in shame, fiery ponytail swooping from behind him to lie on his shoulder like a faithful companion.

"Sorry," he muttered, voice barely audible. "Sorry...so sorry...Tifa."

She didn't respond, unable to get her thoughts in order enough so that she could formulate an answer. For some peculiar reason, she thought that he wasn't apologizing just to her. The silence reclaimed the room until Reno broke it again.

"God," he whispered, not looking at her. "I'm so sorry...so sorry."

As Tifa stood there looking at him, looking at how he hung his head in shame, how he murmured the same words over and over again, how he nervously rubbed one of his wrists as if some unseen pain ailed him, she felt her anger begin to ebb. The blood stopped thundering in her ears, and the violent tide that had made her breaths fast and ragged suddenly dissipated as she realized that Reno was actually feeling remorse over the things he said.

"It's okay, Reno," she said soothingly, taking a cautious step closer to him. "You don't have to apologize. Maybe I just shouldn't have asked."

He shook his head miserably, strands of red hair flopping into his eyes. "No...I'm sorry. It's just...Mika..."

Suddenly unable to look upon even this ruthless Turk in such suffering, Tifa averted her eyes from his forlorn figure and knelt down to pick up the stool she had apparently knocked over in her haste to get away from him. Her hands were shaking, but she managed to put the stool back in its rightful spot without another mishap. Reno didn't even glance at her the entire time, his head solemnly bowed, lost in heart-wrenching memories that were his and his alone.

Rising shakily to her feet, Tifa rubbed her hands briskly over her miniskirt as if to purify them after committing some sort of blasphemy. She stepped over to stand in front of Reno, who still refused to raise his head. She fidgeted, not knowing what to do or say. It would have been easy just to go up to her room and leave Reno to his own suffering, but something kept her firmly rooted to the floor in front of him. Maybe she was remembering how he had listened as she vented her pain and frustration, or maybe she remained there because he had managed to make her laugh on a dark, gloomy morning when she, abandoned by the one she loved most and worried sick over her missing friends, had vowed that she would never be able to laugh again.

"Reno?" she said cautiously, talking to the top of his bowed head. "I wouldn't have said the name if I knew it would cause you so much...pain. If you don't want to talk about it, that's fine, but if you ever do...I'll listen."

He was silent for a moment, but then stirred slightly, spinning in his stool so that he was facing the bar again. He lifted his arms and rested his elbows on the countertop, burying his face in his hands. Tifa's face revealed nothing but pain and sympathy for a man she never thought she would ever feel anything for.

"What did I say?" he suddenly asked, voice muffled by his hands.

"Pardon me?" Tifa asked politely, unsure of what he meant.

"Last night," he clarified, voice thick with pain. "What did I say...while I was sleeping?"

Tifa shifted her weight from foot to foot, choosing her words carefully. "Well, not much. You were...in distress, I think, thrashing from side to side and getting tangled in the blanket. You were whimpering, deep in your throat, so low that I could barely hear it. You said Mika, but that's all you said. The rest was just incoherent mumbles that I couldn't understand. I think you were having a nightmare."

Reno laughed mirthlessly, rubbing his face with his hands. "Tifa," he said softly. "I don't remember anything from last night, but the words 'Mika' and 'nightmare' don't belong in the same sentence. Mika didn't belong to the nightmare world. She was... something else, something beautiful."

Tifa put a comforting hand on his shoulder, feeling him trembling slightly. She had

never seen Reno like this before; it frightened her.

“Who was she, Reno?” Tifa asked as gently as she could, not wanting to cause him any more pain but feeling that he needed to get this off of his chest.

The redheaded Turk stirred, removing his hands from his face and turning to look at her. The pain in his Mako eyes was almost a physical thing that gripped her heart and squeezed, begging for something to ease its suffering, a painkiller for its aching plight or a razor blade to put it out of its misery.

“Mika was...” Reno started, staring at Tifa intently with those new agonized eyes of his. “Mika was someone from the past, someone I failed to protect when I should have been there for her. She...actually loved me...and I let her die. I failed her, just like I failed Reeve.”

“Reno...” Tifa whispered tearfully, touching the side of his face gently.

“It’s all my fault, Tifa,” he suddenly said, voice rapidly gaining volume as his eyes bore into hers.

“No, Reno,” she insisted. “It’s not your fault.”

“Yes it is!” he burst out, leaping to his feet and staring down at her, their faces just inches apart. “My whole life has been just one big catastrophe after another! I’m a born failure, and you know it as well as me! First Mika, then Tseng, now Reeve! Where does it end, Tifa?!”

The young woman didn’t reply, only reached up and placed her hands on either side of Reno’s face, trying to calm him down with her touch, something that her mother had done when Tifa was younger, one of the only memories she had of her mother; the others were cloudy and blurred at the edges. Whenever little Tifa had gotten herself worked up over something, her mother would place one of her frightfully delicate hands on either side of her daughter’s distressed face, the gentle touch of those loving hands with their soft palms easing the turbulent emotions that had accompanied Tifa’s childhood years.

Now Tifa did the same thing to Reno, gently cradling his agonized face with her gloved, calloused hands, tender fingers touching both of his scars carefully, the smooth scar tissue feeling alien underneath her fingertips. Reno just stared back at her blankly, not pulling away, his arms limp at his sides as if too stunned to react. A dozen unnamable emotions flew across his face simultaneously, all peeking out at Tifa from the emerald-blue portals that were his eyes. She met their ferocious gazes bravely and patiently, trying to chase them away with the serenity and solace in her aura.

Reno suddenly exhaled sharply, his eyelids slowly coming down to cover his eyes, depriving the painful emotions from their view of Tifa or of the world. She watched

calmly as his dark brown eyelashes fluttered indecisively, wondering whether or not to pull back the gates and expose maelstrom of Reno's soul, letting his darkness seep into the world or perish in the light of the goddess holding his face so gently.

His eyes slowly opened, revealing his aquamarine Mako eyes once more. What Tifa saw there shocked her. A wound. A deep, festering wound that had been etched so deeply that it was a great rift in his soul that would never close. A wound that had been reopened and scarred so many times that it was tough, cold, and unfeeling to the world around it, oblivious to the light and love that others tried to offer. This wound thought itself to be impervious to all types of damage that the universe could dish out. Suffering had hardened it; time had deepened it. This wound was raw, big, and tough as nails.

This wound was bleeding, and its blood was thick and viscous. The liquid pain filled the crevasse, becoming a never-ending river of fire that flowed through the core of Reno's being, avenging its endless agony by inflicting harm on others, using harsh words and murderous hands as its outlet. Tifa saw all this through a pair of aquamarine eyes the color of Lifestream itself, a pair of eyes that belonged to a man, a man with a disease, a man whose nature had forgotten and had left out in the cold to fend for himself.

Forever alone.

Just like her.

It was then that she realized her wound was bleeding, too.

Before she knew what she was doing, Tifa found herself slipping her arms around Reno's neck and holding him gently against her, trying to ease his suffering that was kith and kin to her own. For a second, Reno stiffened in surprise, all of his muscles going taut and rigid like a cord ready to snap. He was still trembling with the ailments of his spiritual injury that had reared its head again. Tifa laid her cheek against Reno's flaming hair and rubbed his back comfortingly.

"You'll be okay, Reno," she whispered. "Everything will be alright in the end."

He didn't respond, but instead heaved a shuddering sigh and melted into her embrace, his muscles going slack as he yielded to the comfort she was offering him. Wrapping his strong arms gently around her tiny waist and burying his face in her shoulder, he pulled her to him, hugging her as tightly as he could. Tifa gently tugged on his ponytail, surprised at how soft the fiery strands were. As far as she could recall, she had never hugged Reno before. Well, he had hugged her once when he had been completely drunk off his ass and had been just looking for an excuse to grab hers.

She recalled with sudden amusement how she had stood there, shocked by his atrocious act until Cloud had reacted for her and tossed Reno out the door and into the muddy street, Rude and Elena apologizing profusely before leaving the bar. Tifa had hated

that side of the redheaded Turk, but she now realized that there were totally different sides to him, sides that he had unintentionally borne for her to see, sides that maybe his closest friends had never seen before. Reno was a walking mass of paradoxes and clashing emotions, but she had somehow connected and empathized with just one of those torturous emotions. She had suspected from the first time she had talked to him on a relatively friendly basis that there was something in Reno that mirrored a similar something in herself, but she hadn't known what it was until she had embraced him in a motherly fashion, and he had hugged her back, needing the comfort as much as she did.

Tifa sighed with a mixture of sadness and contentment, still rubbing Reno's back soothingly and rocking him gently back and forth, his body warm against hers. She hadn't known how much she had needed to be held until now. Silence reigned once more in the bar, but it was an anxiously peaceful sort of silence, a patient silence waiting for something to happen.

Then the door to the bar suddenly flew open, and Cloud Strife walked in.

Shocked at the sudden flurry of motion that neither of them had been able to hear or detect, Tifa and Reno both leapt back from each other and stared at the sopping wet figure standing in the doorway.

Silence hung in the air, gloating.

*It had to be him, Tifa thought guiltily. Cloud had to be the first one to walk in and see me and Reno like that. He doesn't know that it was completely harmless. He's doesn't know about Reno's wound; he doesn't know about Mika...*

But for all her rational thoughts, Tifa still felt an ashamed flush come to her cheeks as she stared back at the unnaturally still figure of her one true love, not even wanting to think about what was going through his head. Cloud's spiky blond hair had been plastered to his head by the rain, but a few rebellious strands still managed to poke out of his scalp in defiance to the elements. Most of the sun kissed locks had fallen into his face and into his Mako blue eyes, but even through that wall of hair, she could see that those beautiful eyes she loved gazing into had become as heartless and cold as the ocean upon seeing her and Reno. His mouth was set in a hard, grim line, and he didn't move.

"Hey, Strife," Reno said casually, his usual cocky grin in place as he reseated himself in his bar stool. "You're back early."

"Apparently," Cloud responded dryly, eyes darting apathetically between Tifa and Reno.

"Yo, Cloud!" Barret's voice thundered as the man's lumbering bulk appeared behind Cloud in the doorway. "Move your spiky ass or I'll move it for ya!"



Eyes still locked on the duo by the bar, Cloud stepped aside as the others came charging in to get out of the rain. They were all thoroughly soaked, and no one was at all happy. Elena's mascara was running down her pale face in rivulets, making it appear as if she had been crying black-tinted tears. Cid had pulled his flight goggles over his eyes, apparently trying to offer them some protection from the rain. Red was shaking the rain from his short, fiery coat, something he never usually did since he didn't like to splatter people or the floor with water, but since all of his friends and the floor were both wet, he figured, hey, why bother? Barret and Rude both didn't have much hair to get wet, but their clothes were still waterlogged, and whereas Barret was cursing at the top of his lungs, Rude remained stonily silent, never one to complain much about anything.

"Ew!" Elena exclaimed, wringing water out of her short blond hair. "It's so gross out there! My makeup's running and my suit is ruined! Why couldn't we have taken the Highwind?"

"Goddammit!" Cid bellowed, looking like an out-of-water scuba diver with his rain-splattered goggles and soaking wet flight suit. "I've explained that to you a dozen times over, woman! The Highwind doesn't fit in the cave! And we didn't want to have to swim in there and listen to you bitch the entire time, so we took the Tiny Bronco!"

"Yeah!" Elena snapped, putting her hands on her hips. "'Tiny' is the right word for your stupid, broken little plane!"

Cid's blue eyes grew wide behind his goggles. "The %\$#@ you'd just say?! I know you didn't just call my—"

"Glad you're back guys," Reno interrupted smugly, looking comfortable and dry leaning against the bar, all traces of the agonized man with the bleeding wound gone now. Tifa couldn't even believe she had ever seen that tortured soul through such leering aquamarine eyes.

"I see you didn't die yer sleep. Damn," Barret growled as he stared enviously at the haughty Turk sitting next to a very contrite-looking Tifa across the room. The young brunette still couldn't bring herself to meet Cloud's eyes.

"So," Reno said congenially as he stared at the waterlogged members of AVALANCHE and his fellow Turks standing close to the doorway and dripping water on the floor. "How was the cave? Did you find anything?"

Silence. Everyone glanced uncomfortably at each other before finally turning their attention to Cloud, their unspoken leader. The young man, however, didn't return their glances; he was still staring emptily at Tifa, his face absolutely emotionless. Water dripped from his blond hair and ran into his eyes, but he didn't seem to notice. All he saw was the beautiful woman fidgeting next to the red-haired demon across the room.

*I knew I shouldn't have left them alone. I should have let her come with us and left Reno here. Who cares about the damn bar? He's...taking her away from me. I shouldn't have left them alone.*

Everyone except Tifa stared at Cloud for a few more seconds, perplexed by his silence. They immediately perceived that something was wrong with him, but they were at a loss to guess what and were too wet and spiritually depleted to give it much thought.

Finally Rude said quietly, "The ship is gone."

Reno jolted in surprise, all arrogance leaving his form as he leapt off the bar stool. "What do you mean, 'the ship is gone'?" he demanded incredulously.

"He means the ship is gone," Cid grumbled, removing his wet goggles and wiping them on his equally wet jacket. "It ain't there anymore."

"I thought it was a *ghost* ship," Reno commented sarcastically.

"Ghost ship my ass," Barret growled, plopping heavily into one of the chairs, his prodigious weight making the wooden apparatus squeak in protest. "Someone sailed that sucker out of there, and you can bet your ass that Vincent and Yuffie were probably on it."

"Nice call, Strife," Reno said acidly, his upper lip pulled back in the patented "Reno sneer." "Some ghost ship of yours."

"Fuck you, Reno," Cloud deadpanned, stunning everyone. Cloud rarely swore so vividly.

Reno's aquamarine eyes narrowed dangerously. "Don't take out your frustration on me, Strife. I'm just the drunkard you guys left behind."

Big blue Mako eyes glittered with unchecked anger. "You're hardly an innocent, Reno."

Reno glared back unflinchingly. "And what the hell is that supposed to mean?"

Red suddenly cleared his throat, sensing the impending violence that hung in the air. "I believe we need to focus on the situation at hand, my friends. Save these petty disputes for another time. The stakes are higher now."

"W-What do you mean?" Tifa stammered, speaking for the first time.

Red glanced at her before continuing. "We found no ship in the cave. Though it could have been washed out to sea by the rain, such a thing is very unlikely considering how deep in the cave it was. It is the general assumption that someone steered it out of there, presumably the Running Man."

Reno folded his arms across his chest. "The hell would the cowardly bastard want

with an old, crappy ship?”

“Plenty of thangs, Turk,” Barret grumbled. “To get across the ocean for one; he wouldn’t have had to go through Junon or Costa del Sol that way. Or maybe to take Reeve somewhere for safe keeping, ya might say.”

“Where would he take him?” Reno asked impatiently, more frustrated with the situation than with Barret’s obscure phrases.

“The hell would I know?” the big man snapped. “All I know was that Vincent and Yuffie were on that ship, either as stowaways or as prisoners.”

“But *how* do you know?” Tifa asked desperately. She had been hoping that Cloud and the others would bring Vincent and Yuffie back with them, but now that it was obvious their two friends were in greater danger than they had originally assumed, she felt a yawning pit of despair opening beneath her. And the fact that Cloud was acting standoffish wasn’t helping to ease her state of mind.

“Their chocobos were outside the cave,” Red explained, the flaming end of his tail twitching in distress. “Both of the birds still had their packs attached to them, but no Vincent or Yuffie. The chocobos looked as if they had been out there for a while. They were starving.”

“Well,” Reno announced. “I don’t think they’re on the ship, wherever the hell it is now. You couldn’t *pay* Yuffie to get on a ship, even one that’s supposed to be abandoned. Unless, of course, you tempted her with materia.”

“Maybe she wasn’t given much of a choice,” Rude muttered darkly.

Tifa, thankfully, didn’t hear the tall Turk’s morbid comment, and said with a spark of hope, “Maybe they were hiding somewhere else in the cave? Who knows how many tunnels there are under there?”

Red shook his head miserably, padding silently across the wooden floor to get out of the puddle of water he had shaken from his coat. “We searched that cave to the best of our abilities, and we found nothing. The majority of it was already flooded from the rains. If we really wanted to do a thorough search, we’d have to assemble everyone and search when the water level goes down. The Tiny Bronco can only take us so far into the cave, and climbing is quite a difficult, if not impossible, feat to accomplish with all the mud and darkness.”

“What if they didn’t even go into the cave?” Reno suddenly asked. “You know what a pansy Yuffie can be sometimes.”

“They were in the cave,” Cloud said coldly, glaring at Reno. “But they didn’t come out.”

Reno still looked dubious. “How the hell do you know, Strife? Them Jenova cells in you send your whacked-out brain some psychic message?”

Cloud was unfazed. “Cid, show them what you found.”

Cid hesitated, glancing at the distressed and anxious Tifa back to his solemnly silent teammates and back to his cold-voiced leader. “Sure, kid,” he finally answered with obvious reluctance. He began fishing through his waterlogged pockets.

“What did Cid find?” Tifa fretted, wringing her hands together nervously.

“Cid took a dip in a big pool of water,” Elena said with a spark of amusement in her high-pitched voice. “He finally put those goofy goggles of his to a practical use.”

The pilot glared at her. “Goddammit, woman! I’ve been listening to your griping all mornin’! Next time your ass stays here! I’d rather have goddamn Reno with us than you!”

“No complaints here,” Cloud deadpanned, face still devoid of all emotions.

Only Tifa and Reno understood the statement that dropped from his lips so coldly, issuing from a heart that had frozen up in his chest at the sight of them in each other’s arms. The others, however, didn’t have time to ponder his strange statement because Cid suddenly pulled an object from the pocket of his jacket and held it up for Tifa and Reno to see.

Tifa gasped, her heart plummeting to the bottoms of her feet. Reno cursed under his breath and plopped down on his stool again, expression closed, and morbid emotions locked away tight. The object held from Cid’s gloved hands was a long piece of cloth, dark green in color, with a Wutainese symbol in the middle of it. A slender thing, the forest green cloth had seen bloody battle after bloody battle, and had been splattered in the process. It was well worn from traveling, having been stitched together again and again when it was sliced and diced by swords of its owner’s opponents. The ends of the cloth, however, were what really caught people’s attention. They were shaped like a pair of spades or hearts, a peculiar addition that Tifa had always wondered about.

It was Yuffie’s headband.

Author’s note:

I loved writing this chapter, even if it took me forever and it’s super long. Reno and Tifa are two of my favorite characters, next to Vincent, of course, and I loved writing something featuring just them. Like Tifa and Cloud’s big blowout a couple of chapters ago, this whole Tifa/Reno thing just sort of took off on its own. What do you think? Should Reno give Cloud a run for his money? I’m seriously considering it.

—Catalina

# Chapter Ten

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## *Revenge is Sweet*

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*“Do your ancestors proud, Yuffie Kisaragi.” —Vincent Valentine*

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“What is it, Yuffie?”

“My damn headband is missing!”

Vincent didn't bother to reply to Yuffie's insipid chatter. Instead, he gripped the reins of their rented chocobo named Olive and urged the yellow bird to go faster with a gentle kick of his heel. Olive reluctantly increased her speed to a trot, struggling slightly under the combined weight of her two riders. The bird's large feet sank into the mud that bubbled out between the green grass, leaving a trail of footprints that marked their passing. Vincent wasn't particularly happy about leaving such an obvious trail, or about the fact that the rain and thunder kept drowning out all other sounds, greatly deterring his ability to hear impending danger, which he felt was very near.

Pivoting around in the saddle, being extra careful not to upset the wet and miserable Yuffie sitting in front of him, Vincent took in the entire view of the mountains and hills around him, searching for anything that appeared to be out of place or threatening in nature. Ever since they had departed from Junon early that morning, Vincent couldn't shake the feeling that some unseen enemy was following them. His paranoia manifested itself in a peculiar itch between his shoulder blades that he kept reaching back to scratch repeatedly throughout their homeward journey to Kalm. His head felt unnaturally heavy, a sensation that he had always attributed to a danger that was waiting to surprise him in the near future.

Dissatisfied with the perfectly normal surroundings that he saw around them, Vincent turned his attention back to the trail and scratched his back with his metal claw while firmly gripping the reins with his right hand.

“Why do you keep scratching, Vinnie?” Yuffie suddenly demanded, her sour mood making her words harsh. “You have fleas or something?”

Vincent's only reply was to spur the chocobo into a faster trot, its feet squishing in the waterlogged grass that was filled with the rain the earth had gotten sick of absorbing and decided to spit out. Yuffie had been in a bad mood all morning. All traces of the frail young woman that had shared a bed with him last night and fallen asleep in the crook of his arm after she had shed tears for a monster that loathed his own nature—that young woman had vanished the moment they had started out in the ceaseless rain. Vincent felt

another strange burst of emotions as he recalled the peculiar serenity he had felt the night before, falling asleep with her in his arms. The heat of her flesh had seeped through her covering of blankets as he lay curled up against her, feeling that sweet warmth spread to his own body like a wild forest fire. The scent of her clean skin and recently washed hair had haunted his dreams like a most welcome phantom, triggering off emotions that had gone unfelt for years. Vincent was at an utter loss to explain the things he felt, so he locked them up for safekeeping, an addition to the nest of cherished memories that would probably reawaken when Yuffie was already a grown woman with a husband and children of her own. By that time, she would have already forgotten about the morbid, self-loathing man/monster who had held her as she slept against him one dark, stormy night.

“Vinnie!” Yuffie suddenly snapped, jolting him out of his thoughts.

Vincent glanced down at the top of her head, which was resting underneath his chin. “Yes, Yuffie?”

“Are we there yet?”

The dark gunslinger rolled his eyes. “What do you think, Yuffie?”

Her head shifted as she glanced around at her surroundings, which were composed of green, rolling hills that were already starting to overflow with water and huge heaps of mud that the violent rains had washed down during their siege on the earth. At the current moment, the two world-weary travelers were moving through a valley-like depression between two sharply rising hills, rain pounding their already thoroughly rain-pounded bodies like a warrior’s battering ram. The bruise on Yuffie’s cheekbone was aching something terrible and the beginning of a headache was starting to form at her temples. She was in no mood to be admiring scenery at Vincent’s request.

“I don’t know where we are,” she grumbled moodily, folding her slender arms across her chest. “I wasn’t paying attention.”

“We just passed the Chocobo Ranch,” Vincent explained, red eyes roving over the hills with obvious mistrust as they passed. “We should be coming up on Kalm in a little while.”

“Good,” Yuffie said with a satisfied tone. “I don’t know how much more of this I can take with the rain and this slow-ass chocobo and you all tense and stuff.”

“What?” Vincent asked in surprise.

“You’re tense,” Yuffie announced impatiently, clearly not happy about having to repeat herself.

“How can you tell?” he demanded, not liking to think that he could be read so easily.

Yuffie rolled her stormy gray eyes. “C’mon, Vincent. You may think I’m pretty stupid, but I’m smarter than I look. I’m practically sitting in your lap here, and you’re wondering how I know you’re worried about something? Your muscles are all bunched up in your stomach, and you’re holding the reins too tight. There are knots in your legs too.” She tapped his thighs with her palms as if to prove this point. “You need to loosen up, Vinnie. You said yourself; we’re almost home.”

Vincent didn’t reply, silently impressed at how much she had been able to discern about his state of mind just by taking note of his body’s condition. No one had pulled that number on him in years...

Yuffie sensed that her dark companion wasn’t relaxing, and twisted in the saddle so that she could look up at his face. The effort nearly dislocated the upper part of her body, but when she saw the intense look on Vincent’s face as he glared off into the distance, trying hard to see something that he knew must be there, she realized that he was more than tense—he was actually *jittery*, a trait she had never seen before in Vincent.

“What’s wrong, Vinnie?” she asked softly. “Is there something out there?”

He glanced down at her with those burning eyes of his, searching her face to see whether or not she was sincere. Yuffie stared up at him worriedly, her bad mood evaporating in the face of her friend’s anxiety.

Vincent stared at her a moment longer before returning his attention to their surroundings, scanning them relentlessly. “I sense...something. I’m not sure what it is, but I don’t like it.”

“Is it dangerous?” Yuffie asked, miming Vincent’s actions and examining the valley they were passing through.

“I don’t know,” he answered quietly. “Just keep your eyes open.”

Yuffie nodded in agreement, her right hand dropping down to rest on the Conformer, which was strapped to the chocobo’s flank. Since Vincent was holding Olive’s reins, she had to be on special lookout. If trouble just dropped in on them, Yuffie was ready to react quickly in case her companion couldn’t get to his gun in time to deal with the threat.

Another fifteen minutes of riding passed with nothing out of the norm happening. Both Vincent and Yuffie were on high alert, all their physical discomfort forgotten as they kept a constant watch for any impending threats. Yuffie pushed at her hair impatiently as it fell into her eyes, dripping with rain like a waterfall of silent teardrops from the heavens. Her keen gray eyes squinted to keep rain from seeping into them as they roved over the hills on either side of them. Now that she was looking closer, she did recognize this place. She, Tifa, and Cloud had raced chocobos down this valley before (Cloud won because he cheated, that little turd). Yuffie was silently shocked at how different this sun-kissed valley

looked in the middle of a thunderstorm that never seemed to end.

The young ninja was so absorbed with her surroundings that she nearly fell off the chocobo when Vincent suddenly reined it in sharply, earning an unhappy wark from Olive.

“Damn,” he muttered, so low that his voice could barely be heard over the thunder and rain.

“Crap,” Yuffie agreed when she saw what he was looking at.

They had come to a dip in the valley. It was a shallow dip and not very threatening when riding on a chocobo or in the buggy. Yuffie had always enjoyed driving the buggy into this particular depression in the land, making her fellow riders woozy with the undulating motions as she whizzed into the dip going at top speed. But now the dip didn't look so fun, particularly because it was filled to the brim with swampy looking water that made Yuffie's stomach churn with disgust. She didn't even want to think about what might be hiding in those murky depths.

“What a predicament,” she grumped, glaring at the water as if she could evaporate it with the fire in her angry gaze. “Can choco-butt here make it across?”

Vincent hesitated, then shook his dark head, oblivious to the strands of hair that were obscuring his vision. “No, I think that water's too deep. Olive's just your average chocobo. She'll probably get stuck in the mud that has to be hiding down there.”

“So we're gonna go around it?”

He nodded. “That seems to be the more preferable course of action...unless, of course, you want to try and swim across ourselves.”

Yuffie shuddered as she gazed at the gross-looking water. “I think I'll pass on that one. So, how are we gonna get around it?”

Vincent glanced warily at their surroundings. “We'll have to climb up one of these hills and go around the pool from above before we get back on the ground on the other side.”

She examined the hills that looked climbable and spotted one that looked friendlier than the rest. She pointed to her right. “How about that one?”

Vincent followed the direction of her finger and nodded in agreement. “Good eye, Yuffie.”

The young woman flushed under the unexpected praise, glad that he couldn't see her beet red face.



Vincent managed to maneuver the somewhat apprehensive Olive halfway up the face of the muddy hill before one of her feet got stuck, and she began to wark plaintively. The two riders disembarked and worked the kinks out of their stiff joints before turning their attention to Olive. Yuffie grabbed the reins and tugged while Vincent worked on freeing the chocobo's stuck leg, being careful not to let the bird kick him in the face. Together, the two AVALANCHE members hauled the chocobo the rest of the way up the hill with Yuffie leading the yellow bird and Vincent playing drogue, one hand resting instinctively on the Death Penalty as he glanced with intense suspicion at the land they now stood over.

*Something* was there; he knew it. All he had to do was wait for the threat to show itself, something that he hated doing. He would have much preferred it if he had the element of surprise, but he also knew that as long as they were ready for danger, their odds of surviving an attack were good. And he had the feeling that the attack would be coming soon; their unseen enemy couldn't stay hidden forever.

Yuffie waited with uncharacteristic patience as Vincent vaulted nimbly up onto the grassy ledge of the hill, which should probably more accurately be called a miniature mountain due to its height. The wide, grass-covered ledge that they now stood on was just one of the many smaller levels that seemed to wrap around the whole hill until the summit, which towered a good one hundred feet above their heads.

Gesturing to his left, Vincent said calmly, "Let's go. If we follow this path, we should be able to come down on the other side, close to Kalm."

"Can we rest under that overhang first?" Yuffie asked cautiously, knowing that he was anxious to get going. "Bird brain here has mud in between her toes."

Olive warked pitifully and held up her right foot, which was caked with mud.

Vincent stared at the girl and bird before answering reluctantly, "I suppose, but only for a little while."

Yuffie nodded, her hair flopping down into her eyes. "Of course."

With Yuffie leading the way, the trio strode to the overhang with their feet sloshing in the wet grass, which was literally drowning with water. The overhang wasn't very big, but it provided a little shelter from the pouring rain despite the fact that the area under it was already soaked from last night's downpour. Yuffie immediately strode over to a large rock and plopped down, narrowly avoiding sliding down its wet surface, and set to work getting the mud from between Olive's toes. The chocobo, which was very placid and obedient for an average "do-do bird" as Reno called them, stood patiently as Yuffie tended to her. Vincent didn't seek the shelter of the overhang, preferring instead to stand outside in the rain to keep watch, his hand resting on the Death Penalty. The path had taken them to a place about twenty feet directly above the swampy pool, which churned restlessly as the rain pounded it with unstinting ruthlessness. Vincent narrowed his luminescent red

eyes, trying to see what lie at the bottom of the pool, but the water was thick with mud and grass, preventing him from catching a glimpse of the murky depths.

Under the overhang, Yuffie finished cleaning Olive's feet and gave the chocobo a pat on the neck, leaving a muddy handprint behind on the wet yellow feathers. Olive warked softly and nibbled Yuffie's hair in some sort of chocobo gratitude. Laughing, Yuffie shooed the chocobo's beak away and pulled out a bundle of greens to give to the bird, which immediately transferred her affections to the leafy greens.

The young woman watched Olive eat for a while before glancing over to see that Vincent was standing unnaturally still in the rain, a dark sentry with unsurpassed majesty, a refugee from another life and time. His long hair, dyed an even deeper shade of black from the falling rain, hung down his back like a dark waterfall, showing up vividly against the blood-red cloak that reached to the backs of his knees.

"Hey Vinnie!" Yuffie called suddenly.

"Yes, Yuffie?" he responded without turning.

"Get out of the rain before you catch a cold!"

"I'm fine," he answered.

"If this hidden enemy has remained hidden this long, do you really think they're going to come waltzing out just because you decided to stand like a numbnut in the rain waiting for them?"

Vincent turned to stare at her calmly.

Yuffie patted the rock beside her. "C'mere and sit down. Me and Olive have run out of things to talk about."

Vincent hesitated, taking one last long look at the valley below before giving up and taking a seat next to her on the rock, his leg pressed against hers. Yuffie jumped slightly at the warmth that seeped through his waterlogged pant leg, but soon recovered and leaned against him slightly, her bare arm brushing his. There they sat in a strangely comfortable silence with Olive munching happily on her greens and Yuffie enjoying Vincent's company.

"How's your shoulder?" he suddenly asked, ruby red eyes focused on the falling rain.

"Oh," Yuffie said dumbly, surprised that he was instigating conversation. Her hand instinctively went to her left shoulder, which was still wrapped in his bandana. "It's a little sore," she replied. "And there's a really gross scar there, but it's not infected or anything. Why, did you want your headband back?"

He shook his head. "No. You can keep it."

“Okay,” Yuffie said, strangely pleased. “Thanks. Sort a souvenir of our little adventure together, huh?”

Vincent turned his head to stare at her, and Yuffie flushed when she realized how absurd and wistful her statement had sounded, like she didn’t want all this pain and strife to end just so she could keep him around a little longer. The words “our” and “together” made it sound as if her time spent with him chasing the Running Man and being chased by the Faceless Men was among her most cherished memories. And, she suddenly realized with a start, it was, but not because she could go back to the bar and brag about how she had survived through thick and thin. No, the events of the past few days were special to her because she had shared them with Vincent and Vincent alone.

It wouldn’t have been the same if it had been Tifa with her, or Reno, or even Cloud. There was something about Vincent that was starting to draw her to him like a moth to a flame. She couldn’t stop what she was feeling. Moreover, she didn’t want to stop it. Even years from now, if she was married and had kids, and Vincent had disappeared like a shadow into the night, never to be seen again, she would always remember falling asleep in arms as the Black Stinger zipped across a turbulent, hungry ocean that had tried to devour her whole. She would always remember how she had wept for him as she lie next to him in bed and how he had come up behind her, holding her to his body so gently, so sweetly, his chest against her back and his knees touching the backs of hers, his hair tickling her ear...

*My God, what’s happening to me?*

This new string of thoughts deepened her blush, and she looked away from Vincent’s burning gaze, staring at her yellow sneakers as water from the ground seeped into them. “Uh, sorry,” she stammered, more embarrassed than she ever been in her entire life. “That didn’t come out the right way.”

But she was lying, and she knew it. The words had come out exactly the way she had wanted them to, at least in her heart. But she couldn’t tell *him* that.

Vincent was silent for a long time, and Yuffie was about to hastily suggest that they be on their way again when she suddenly felt his cold, rain-sodden fingers touch her chin and apply gentle pressure, turning her face towards him. Reluctantly, she raised her gray eyes to focus on his face, her heart thundering in her chest with some nameless emotion.

Garnet eyes accented by flowing black hair and pale skin stared down at her upturned face with uncharacteristic tenderness that had virtually no roots in a soul warped and frozen from blood and heartbreak. Yuffie knew that time had not eased the suffering of Vincent Valentine, nor thawed out the frozen wasteland that had killed his heart and body, trapping him in the guise of a 27 year old man and making him believe that he was a monster, the ultimate crime against a man who had committed many in his life for reasons that were his own. Anyone else would have said that Vincent deserved all that had

befallen him.

But Yuffie didn't think that way. If Vincent was cold, heartless, and dead inside, then why was he staring at her like this? His red eyes, usually as cold as the bitterest winter, had a peculiar intensity to them now that made her breath catch in her throat. They bathed her in a gentle light, making her forget about her aching shoulder and soaking wet clothes. His long eyelashes were wet from the rain, tiny droplets shining on the ends of them like miniature crystals.

Yuffie's heart thundered in her ears as that all-too-familiar heat spread across her body. She couldn't stop staring up at him, suddenly as fascinated by the porcelain color of his skin as she was with the unnamable color of his ebony hair. She was shaking slightly, trembling...what was this she was feeling? His face was suddenly so close to hers, his warm breath touching her cheek gently.

A wark suddenly interrupted them, shattering the spell that had been wrapping them together. That one screeching sound of alarm brought the two companions back into the world of thundering rain, missing comrades, and aching pains.

Vincent drew back abruptly, a wall slamming down between them as his garnet eyes froze over again, all the gentle humanity in that gaze wiped out just as abruptly as it had come. Yuffie blinked, trying to discern whether or not what she had seen in his eyes just a few seconds ago had been real or just some fantasy of hers.

She wasn't given much time to contemplate this abrupt metamorphosis, however, because Olive suddenly rushed by in a panic, warking loudly and trailing her reins behind her.

Yuffie instinctively leapt to her feet calling, "Hey, bird-brain! Get back here!"

But as she reached for the dragging reins, Vincent suddenly rose to his feet, narrowly avoiding whacking his head on the top of the overhang, and grabbed her arm in an iron grip. Yuffie looked up at him in surprise.

"Let her go," he said quietly, red eyes distant as he apparently focused on something that Yuffie couldn't hear.

"But—" she started feebly, watching as Olive sped off down the hill like a bat out of hell, flapping her useless wings in fright and running back in the direction they had come from. The bird appeared to be in a major state of panic, and Yuffie was at a loss to explain why.

"Quiet," Vincent ordered softly, squeezing her arm slightly for emphasis. "This way."

He released his grip on her arm and took the Death Penalty from its holster, cocking the rifle with a hollow click that immediately sent Yuffie into instant battle mode. She

reached over and grabbed her Conformer from where it had fallen in the mud after that stupid bird had taken off. Walking as quietly as she could and trying to ignore the rain pounding on the back of her head, she followed Vincent to the edge of the hill's ledge, stopping short for some reason as if below the ledge, she would see into the fiery pits of Hell.

Vincent peered over the edge, looking down into the valley. His back suddenly stiffened, and he tightened his grip on the Death Penalty.

"Yuffie," he said quietly. "I think you'd better see this."

Gulping, the ninja walked over to the edge beside Vincent and peered down...

"No way!" she shrieked, her voice rising shrilly even over the sound of the thunder. "No freaking way! This is impossible! Vincent, what are we gonna do?!"

Vincent didn't reply, his mind trying to process the fact that he had failed miserably at his task the night before. A shot missed during a sniping order. A mission failed. Fellow colleagues endangered. Unacceptable.

Five men were climbing up the face of the hill.

Five Faceless Men.

Yuffie's heart leapt into her throat as she beheld her opponents of the night before when they had been blasting across the dark sea on the Black Stinger. Though the faceless freaks were still obviously mobile, they had come up on the short end of the stick. Vincent may not have been able to kill them, but the force of their jet skis exploding from underneath them had certainly crippled them. Most of the flesh on their bodies was now blackened and charred, some skin even falling off as they stubbornly climbed up the hill, slipping and sliding in the mud. Three of the Faceless Men were missing either their entire or more than half of one of their arms, making their climbing slow but steady as they made good use of their remaining arm and their legs. One of the other Faceless Men was climbing as soundly as his companions in spite of the fact that he was missing a leg. The one remaining Faceless Man had no absent appendages, but was very badly burnt, his dark clothes falling off his fleshy form and taking chunks of charred, pink skin with it.

All in all, they were a pitiful but terrifying sight.

"What are we gonna do, Vinnie?!" Yuffie cried again, fidgeting with her hands, as the approaching monstrosities got steadily closer. "If they can survive having their jet skis blown up from under them, what else can kill them?"

Instead of answering, Vincent aimed downwards with the Death Penalty and fired at the nearest Faceless Man, who was ten feet below him. Vincent's aim was, of course, flawless and impeccable, but even in its crippled condition, the Faceless Man still

managed to dodge the bullet, jerking its entire body to the left while maintaining its balance. As if that wasn't bad enough, just as Vincent was preparing to fire again, the Legless Faceless Man and the Crispy Faceless Man reached behind their backs in unison and...pulled out their submachine guns!

Yuffie's mouth dropped open. "Oh hell no! How did they managed to hold onto those things?!"

Vincent grabbed her around the waist and yanked her away from the edge just as a stream of bullets tore into the spot where Yuffie had been standing a millisecond earlier.

"Come on!" he yelled, running along the ledge with his cape flapping behind him.

Yuffie followed him, rain slapping against her face. "Where are we going? Let's run to Kalm and get the others! It's not that far away now!"

Vincent glanced behind him to see that the Faceless Men still had yet to emerge from the valley and climb up on the ledge he and Yuffie were on. "We can't go to Kalm," he told his young companion.

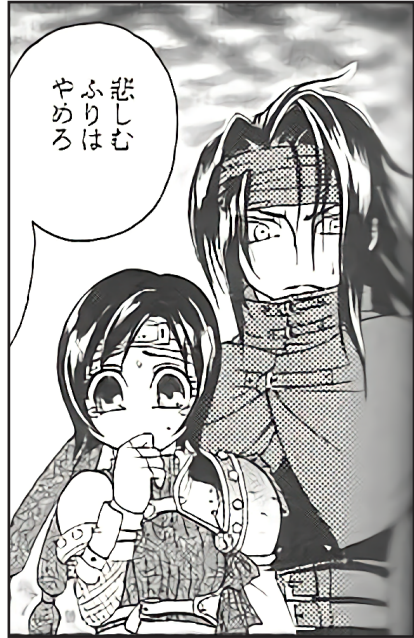
"And why the hell not?!" she demanded half in fear and half in anger. "We're completely worn out, Vinnie! Your bullets aren't working and I'm going to have to throw left-handed! Cloud and his big ass sword need to get down here and do the work for us!"

"We can't lead these monsters into Kalm," he said flatly.

Yuffie shut her mouth, feeling her heart sink to her feet. Vincent was right; they could run away to Kalm and risk dozens of innocents being killed by a stray bullet or by the fantastical strength of the Faceless Men. She and Vincent were going to have to kill these monsters, right here, right now, before they could hurt anyone else. But...god, why did life have to suck to so bad sometimes?!

Vincent turned around a bend in the ledge's pathway and pressed himself against the wall. Yuffie joined him just as a stream of bullets whizzed past her head, so close that she could hear the air scream as they flew by.

"What are we gonna do, Vinnie?" she asked, pressing herself against the muddy wall



next to her companion.

Vincent chanced a look around the corner of the wall before turning back to Yuffie. “This wall should provide us with some cover for a short while. Only two of them have their guns, and they’re remaining in one place to fire them. The other three are approaching us as we speak. We need to engage these things in close combat for our attacks to be effective.”

“Guess it sucks that we both use long-range weapons,” Yuffie commented weakly. “We’re gonna die.”

Vincent suddenly grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her slightly, surprising her so much that all she could do was stare up at him dumbly. “Yuffie,” he said firmly, red eyes boring into hers. “Get a hold of yourself. We are going to end this right here, right now. Now, I’m going to fire around the corner and try to disarm the two with guns. If the other three make it around the corner, you have to deal with them, hand to hand, understand?”

“Why me?” she whined.

“You’re better at close range combat than I am,” he said seriously.

Now *that* surprised her; she had never even thought that Vincent noticed her style of fighting, much less thought it to be better than his. “What makes you say that?”

“You’re a ninja, aren’t you? Of the Kisaragi-Chao bloodline?”

She squared her shoulders proudly at the mention of her family’s line of ninjas. “Yes, I am.”

Vincent nodded, and released his grip on her shoulders, gently touching her cheek with his gloved hand, an indiscernible emotion in his red eyes. “Do your ancestors proud, Yuffie Kisaragi,” he said softly.

She nodded gravely. Vincent nodded in return, then whirled away from her, cocking his rifle and scooting closer to the edge. His face turned grim, cold, and hard—the face of the Turk assassin he used to be 28 years ago. Yuffie glanced wistfully at her Conformer before strapping it onto her back, where it wouldn’t get in the way. Her “ultimate” weapon wouldn’t be much use in this battle.

Vincent waited only one second before firing around the edge of the mud wall with the Death Penalty, taking great care not to get his arm clipped off in the stream of bullets that flew past the wall like a colony of angry bees. Yuffie waited anxiously, stretching her arms and legs absently to prepare herself to do her part in the upcoming battle.

She didn’t have to wait long.

One of the Armless Faceless Men suddenly came rushing around the wall, his burnt

clothes and pink-and-black skin glistening with rain. Before he could turn his attention to Vincent, however, Yuffie rushed forward and kicked him in the gut.

“Come on, you faceless freak!” she taunted, not knowing if he could understand her and not caring either way. Battle adrenaline coursed through her body like wildfire, sharpening her senses and quickening her reflexes.

The Faceless Man lurched forward and swung his remaining arm at her head in a right cross. Yuffie ducked easily and swept his legs out from under him just as his two companions came running around the corner, as if sensing their brother’s plight.

Yuffie’s stormy gray eyes darted coldly back and forth between the two newcomers. “Okay, which one of you bastards is the one that shot me in the shoulder? Or is the prick back there with his little pop gun?”

The Faceless Men didn’t respond, but advanced on her even though Vincent was standing unprotected a few inches away from them. Either they weren’t the sharpest tools in the shed, or they were ordered to attack whichever of their opponents posed the greater threat. Yuffie backed up a few steps as the Faceless Man she had knocked over lurched to his feet and joined his comrades in their upcoming attack on her. Yuffie continued to retreat backwards, trying to draw them away from Vincent while matching their imposing pace step for step.

One of them suddenly lunged for her with a speed that she hadn’t, even with her past experience fighting in close range with these things, been expecting. Yuffie let out a cry of surprise and barely managed to evade the attack, doing a couple of rapid back handsprings to increase the distance between her and her attackers. She noticed in passing that she was moving in a sort of uphill direction, but being that she was very busy, it didn’t click in her mind that she might be leading herself into a trap.

She held her ground grimly as the Faceless Men bore down on her, looking like matching triplets from hell with their tattered clothes and missing arms. Her eyes hardened. Focusing on the Lightning materia she had fitted into a slot in her Conformer, Yuffie made the conjuring motions, lifting her arms and tucking one of her feet behind the back of her opposite knee.

“Bolt 3!” she cried. No sooner had the words left her lips than lightning eagerly rained down from the turbulent skies, only too happy to oblige her summons. The magic leapt onto the Faceless Men, super-powered bolts of pure nature’s electricity crisping their flesh even more as they staggered underneath the devastating blow that the mastered materia had dealt them.

Yuffie’s heart sank when she saw that the attack hadn’t even injured the Faceless Men, only slowed them down for a second. They soon were striding towards her once again in that cruel, relentless way of theirs, stonily silent, as always, but possessing an extreme aura



of menace.

“Goddamn!” Yuffie cursed angrily. “Don’t you guys ever give up?!”

The Faceless Men’s only reply was to bear down on her faster.

“I’ll take that as a ‘no,’” she muttered, backing up.

A quick glance behind her opponents showed that Vincent had succeeded in disarming the remaining two Faceless Men. However, they had decided that the dark gunman needed a lesson in manners and were now engaging him in close range combat, every bit as nimble and powerful as he was. Knowing that Vincent could take care of himself, Yuffie turned quickly and darted away from her pursuers, wanting to fight them on the open ground she hoped was at the top of the hill.

Stopping only to cast Bolt 3 a couple of more times, to no effect, of course, Yuffie scaled the top of the hill, heedless to the pounding rain and the thunder that was now so much louder than it had been in the valley. Her heart thundered in her chest, filling her entire body with adrenaline and blood, her steady, unhurried breaths pumping in and out of her lungs and fueling her body with their airy sustenance.

“Oh crap!” she cursed as she reached the top of the hill, seeing a death drop into the ocean ten feet in front of her, a plummet to some nasty, jagged looking rocks on her right, and a muddy hillside to her left. Not only were all her escape routes cut off, but the space on top of the hill was not even as big as the front room as Tifa’s bar. Yuffie’s bedroom at Wutai was bigger than this! How was she supposed to fight three nearly indestructible men in such conditions?

Whirling around and nearly slipping on the wet grass, she saw that the three Faceless Men were still coming on strong, intent on her small but determined figure on top of the hill. Yuffie gulped and quickly cast another Bolt 3 with the vain hope that this one would blow them to smithereens, and she would emerge from the battle victorious.

No such luck. The three Faceless Men shrugged off this attack like they had done all her others. They were only ten feet away from her now.

Taking a deep breath, Yuffie fell into a battle stance and screamed, “Come on, bastards! Bring it on!”

The Faceless Men were all too happy to oblige. The one in the middle suddenly sprang at her with a feline ease that would have given Red a run for his money. The agility and speed of the airborne attack surprised Yuffie, barely giving her time to leap to the left side of the hill before the Faceless Man came crashing down in the very spot she had just been standing on, landing nimbly on his booted feet in a crouch.

Sobered by her close call, Yuffie wrestled to her feet just as the other two men cleared

the top of the hill to join their companion. Together, they started to advance on her in a single, threatening row.

*I can't let them back me up too far, she told herself. They'll probably try and force me off the cliff. On the other hand, if I can get them to lunge for me, then they'll be ones to fall off of the cliff and go SPLAT on the rocks! Squashed tomatoes!*

Yuffie wasn't given any more time to devise a strategy, however, because one of her opponents suddenly executed the attack she had been dreading. He lunged forward like a football player, with his head lowered for maximum impact. Reflexes kicked in, and Yuffie dodged to the left...just in time to see another of Faceless Men heading towards her in the same lunge!

Letting out a cry of surprise and cursing herself that she hadn't figured that they would attack one right after the other, she rolled desperately across the wet grass, avoiding the second attack by the skin of her teeth. The third one, however, never came, but instead of being suspicious as to why her remaining opponent hadn't attacked her, she lurched to her feet for fear that she would roll off the edge and down the muddy hill.

A huge ball of pain suddenly exploded in her stomach, knocking the wind out of her as she fell to the wet grass, sliding across its slippery surface until she felt one of her arms dangling over the side of the cliff. It took a few moments for her head to clear, and it was only then that Yuffie realized the third Faceless Man had tackled her. She was now lying on her back in the wet grass with the humanoid creature on top of her, inches away from the 50 foot fall down a muddy hill.

"Get off me!" she wheezed, air whooshing back into her lungs. Thrashing from side to side, trying to throw the Faceless Man off of her, she pummeled it desperately with her fists, but, like her Bolt 3 attacks, her efforts seemed to have absolutely no effect on her opponent. Her lashing punches only met slippery resistance on its smooth pink skin.

Yuffie screamed in pain as she felt the Faceless Man's only remaining fist bury itself in her side like a battering ram. Multicolored spots danced in front her vision, but she viciously shoved them away. Burning with rage, she raised her arms above the monstrosity, laced her fingers together and brought them down as hard as she could on the Faceless Man's bald head. It was like hitting a brick wall. Pain shot up her arms, not stopping until it reached her shoulders. Unfazed by her attack, the creature punched her in the stomach, and this time Yuffie nearly blacked out from the pain.

A gunshot suddenly spit the air, and something wet that was definitely not rain splattered her face. The Faceless Man sagged forward, its nonexistent face striking the wet grass next to her own head, the charred smell of its burnt flesh filling her nose.

She let out a screech of pure disgust and beat on the thing with her fists, realizing belatedly that the creature was dead. Twisting out from under the monstrosity, Yuffie

gritted her teeth against the pain in her body and leapt to her feet, giving the dead thing a good kick in the gut as she did so.

Clutching her side in pain, she turned to see Vincent standing a few feet away from her, his cape torn, and the Death Penalty trained on the sprawled figures of the other two Faceless Men who had pursued Yuffie up the hill. Some sort of sticky web had bound the two monstrosities together, and they were the process of trying to break free.

“Vinnie!” Yuffie wheezed, relieved to see that he was still alive. He had obviously been the one who had killed her attacker. If he hadn’t been there...

Vincent turned to stare at her, and the young ninja was shocked to see that her companion had a split lip that was bleeding freely. His clothes were ripped in several places, exposing his porcelain skin to the elements. Even in their physically taxing travels with AVALANCHE a year before, she had never seen her friend look so ravaged.

“Are you alright, Yuffie?” he asked calmly.

She managed a painful nod, hunched over slightly. “What happened to the other two?” she asked.

“Dead,” Vincent said simply, keeping his eyes trained on the struggling Faceless Men.

“Are you sure?” she asked fearfully.

“As sure as I’m going to be,” he replied. “We need to get off this hill.”

Yuffie glanced around incredulously, not sure she had heard him correctly. There were death drops on three sides of them, and the Faceless Men were blocking the path she had used to get to the top of the hill. There was no way out.

“Are you kidding me?” she shrieked. “We can’t get off this hill! We’ll die if we go down any of the sides and those freaks will grab us if we try and jump over them to get to the path!”

Vincent looked around calmly, surveying his surroundings. “We can’t fight up here,” he said. “Eventually, they’re going to knock one of us off of the cliff. We can go down that way, however.” He pointed behind Yuffie.

Whirling around to see what he was looking at, she saw that he was gesturing to the humongous mud wall that made up one side of the hill. The dark mud was loose and slippery from the endless rain, some of it sliding down the hill in an eager avalanche, reminding her suddenly of the turbulent sea they had braved the night before.

Her mouth dropped open as Vincent came up beside her, studying the mudslide thoughtfully. “No way, Vinnie!” she exclaimed. “I’m not going down that way! Do you see how steep it is?! We’ll die!”

He turned to stare at her calmly, red eyes glittering. “We’re going down.”

Yuffie gulped, glancing at the Faceless Men, who had managed to get most of themselves disentangled from the web. Then she looked back at the mudslide that was her only chance of escape. She couldn’t do it; she hadn’t the strength or the endurance. But just because she was a coward didn’t mean that she had the right to keep Vincent behind due to her lack of valor.

“You go,” she said bravely, managing to speak past the lump in her throat. “Go to Kalm and bring the others back. I’ll stall them as long as I can.”

She turned to see Vincent still gazing at her with a strange expression on his face. For a moment, even with the rain running down his face like silent teardrops and the strands of dark hair plastered across his pale skin, she received the weirdest impression that he was almost smiling.

Then, without another word, he grabbed her around the waist, pulled her against him, and jumped onto the mud wall.

Vincent’s feet immediately went out from under him as they struck the sludgy hill, but he had been expecting that. He pulled a still stunned Yuffie into his lap, wrapping his arms around her. Wet mud sloshed against his back and hair as he curled up around the young woman, seeking to protect her fragile form from the ordeal they were about to endure. Vincent made a valiant effort to keep sliding down on his back, but soon their momentum picked up considerably, and he began to tumble head over feet down the muddy hill, with Yuffie held tightly in his arms.

Pain flared in every part of Vincent’s body, but he ignored it with the ease of long practice and concentrated on keeping Yuffie from getting pinned underneath his weight as they tumbled down the hill. Mud soon coated every inch of his body like a shroud, weighing down his cloak and seeping into some of his open wounds. He shut his eyes tightly as some of the foul-smelling substance sought to blind him. Yuffie, amazingly enough, still hadn’t made a sound. Her muscles were rigid, though, as she lay curled up against him. He knew he was going to get hell for this later on.

It seemed they rolled down the hill for an eternity, sharp rocks that protruded from the mud cutting into his pale flesh and battering his body. He was in so much pain that he barely noticed when the ground suddenly leveled off, and they began sliding across the mud instead of rolling. Vincent just happened to be sprawled on his back with Yuffie facing skyward. He offered a silent thanks to gods he no longer believed in that their positions hadn’t been reversed. Yuffie would have surely been crushed underneath his weight. A small, slender 114-pound girl and a 168-pound man/monster with a metal arm and abnormal resistance to pain just couldn’t compare. He instinctively dug his heels into the squishy mud, but instead of coming to a gentle stop like he had been hoping, his right

shoulder suddenly struck another one of those damn rocks with enough jarring force to make him cry out in pain. Yuffie went flying from his arms to roll to a muddy stop a few feet from where he was lying on the ground.

Making a point to ignore the pain in his aching shoulder, Vincent wiped the mud from his eyes with his equally muddy right hand and lurched to his feet, wobbling a bit, just in time to see Yuffie scamper up to him, her face as dark as a storm cloud and her gray eyes simmering beautifully with anger even through all the mud caked on her face. Vincent stared at her calmly, blinking mud from his eyes, knowing that she was about to start another one of her angry spiels.

She suddenly slapped him hard on the face, making his head snap to the side as sharp pain flared in his cheek. “Don’t you ever do that again, Vincent Orion Valentine!” she raged, clenching her small hands into fists. “Or I’ll kick your ass all the way to kingdom come!”

*How did she know Orion was my middle name?* Vincent wondered vaguely as he continued to stare impassively down at her.

She suddenly jumped forward, and he braced himself for another assault only to feel her slender arms encircle his waist as she laid her head on his mud-covered chest. She hugged him tightly, and he bit back a yelp as his battered body screamed in protest.

“Thanks for saving me, Vincent,” she whispered, so softly that even he could barely hear her over the rain. “That’s yet another one I owe you.”

Though he was a bit taken aback by her seemingly fickle shows of emotions, he sighed and wrapped his arms around her slender shoulders, holding her close for a few moments before saying, “We’re not in the clear yet.”

Yuffie shifted slightly in the circle of his arms, as if reluctant to let anything interrupt this moment. “What is it?” she asked.

Vincent released her and stepped back, gesturing towards the top of the hill they had just skidded down. Already the rain was erasing the evidence of Vincent and Yuffie’s passage, washing it away as if all their pain and strife were nothing to it. And at the top of the hill, two pink, fleshy figures with charred flesh and the remains of black clothing hanging stubbornly on to their ravaged forms, were rolling down the hill bowling ball style.

“Ah!” Yuffie screamed, burying her muddy fingers in her equally muddy hair. “Just give up!” she called up to the tumbling forms of the Faceless Men. “Don’t you bastards ever get tired?!”

Vincent coldly surveyed the approaching Faceless Men with his callous garnet eyes

before reaching into his waterlogged pocket and pulling out a Swift Bolt. Pulling his arm back as far as his aching muscles would allow, he launched the orb filled with compressed Lightning magic at the spot he predicted it would impact the rolling Faceless Men. Vincent's aim would have done any major league pitcher proud; the orb struck the first Faceless Man dead on, the Lightning magic exploding out of the orb and erupting onto the figures of their opponents like angry wildfire. The mud all around them simmered with the heat from the electric blast, tendrils of smoke rising up to the stormy sky. The Faceless Men, however, just kept right on coming.

"That crap doesn't work, Vinnie!" Yuffie exclaimed from somewhere behind him. He hadn't even seen her move away.

"Step back!" she urged. "Let me try something!"

Vincent whirled to see orange and yellow lights blazing around her small figure like a fiery shroud, their reflections dancing in her gray eyes. As she pulled the Conformer off her back, he realized what she was about to do and hurriedly backed away, careful not to slip in the mud.

Concentrating, Yuffie spread her arms wide, then crossed them in front of her Conformer, the oversized shuriken hiding her face from view. Intense purple-red light began to blaze around her intertwined hands.

"ALL CREATION!" she cried, voice rising to a fearsome level as the prodigious iridescent energy, more powerful than any Ultima, a power that every Wutainese ninja dreamed of wielding, exploded from her small figure in a tremendous funnel, blinding Vincent as it blew past him and hit the Faceless Men dead on, engulfing their rolling forms in its otherworldly light.

Then the radiance faded from view, dissipating in the distance as Yuffie lowered her hands and waited anxiously for the afterimage of her Limit Break to stop burning in her eyes so that she could see what its effect had been on the Faceless Men. Even Sephiroth's One Winged Angel form had shuddered slightly underneath the barrage of pure energy she had just unleashed, and what were two faceless freaks when compared to the might of that megalomaniac Sephiroth? Surely they wouldn't be able to withstand the intensity of the attack.

But the Faceless Men were unlike any creature ever known to man. They were things out of nature, monstrosities that the Planet had never meant to exist.

All Creation had no effect on them except to burn shreds of their deteriorating black clothes off. On and on, faster and faster, they came, oblivious to the mud and cuts that they received from the mischievous mud hill. They were unstoppable.

Yuffie screamed in frustration when she saw her most powerful attack had barely fazed

them. Vincent raised his Death Penalty and started firing wildly, his bullets sometimes striking the mud around their opponents and occasionally piercing their charred pink flesh, opening up new wounds that the Faceless Men paid absolutely no heed to. These creatures were smarter than both of them had ever expected; they knew to keep their heads covered so that the high-powered bullets the Death Penalty spewed forth would be unable to harm them.

Now in a slight state of panic after her ultimate Limit Break and Vincent's impeccable aim were having zero effect on the Faceless Men, Yuffie mentally racked all the materia she had in her Conformer and her Crystal Bangle, trying to find something that could be of use to them. *Lightening? Nope, been there, done that. Fire? No way. Fire and rain are not friends. Exit? I wish, but can't do that. Lucky Plus? I think that damn thing is broken, anyways. Haven't been having much luck. Deathblow? Not from this range. God, this sucks! I've got crappy materia!*

Then her eyes fell on the last orb glittering patiently in the remaining slot of her Conformer, rain beading on its ruby red surface. It glowed steadily and proudly, knowing that it was the one materia she had refused to part with, no matter how much Barret had cussed at her and told her she was being a greedy, little thief for hogging it to herself.

*If this doesn't work...*

"Stand back, Vinnie!" she cried desperately as she began the conjuring motions, glowing runes of all different colors appearing around her transparent form. Vincent stepped back obediently as his figure too turned transparent and she said the words that would hopefully bring about the...

"ULIMATE END!!!!!"

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Author's note:

Whoa, I think I made this chapter way too long. And the weirdest thing was that it was practically all battle, and I hate writing battle scenes! I'm just no good at them, but at least I tried. Guess I did some overkill on this one. Oh well...

—Catalina

# Chapter Eleven

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## *Idle Hands*

*“I’m tired of jes sittin’ here doin’ nothing!” —Barret Wallace*

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*Just when everything was making sense  
 You took away my self-confidence  
 Now all I’ve been hearing must be true  
 Guess I’m not the only boy for you  
 That’s what I get  
 How could you turn me into this?  
 After you just taught me how to kiss you  
 I told you I’d never say goodbye  
 Now I’m slipping in the tears you made me cry*

*“That’s What I Get”  
 —NIN—*

---

Silence reigned unchallenged for half an hour in the bar as Cloud and the others sat gathered around one of the tables, shifting in their soggy clothes and chancing cautious glances at the band of green material that Tifa had wrung in her hands like a handkerchief made for weeping. The young woman idly wrapped the headband of Yuffie Kisaragi around her gloved fingers again and again, perhaps weaving some pattern that only she could understand, then unraveling it again so that it pooled up on the wooden tabletop in a lonely pile. Then she would begin the whole process again as Cloud watched her blankly.

He sat back in his chair, the wood creaking as he did so, the only sounds made before the hungry, oppressive silence swallowed them up. On his right side, Barret and Rude glanced at him, as if expecting him to speak, to shatter the screaming silence so that plans could begin. But Cloud did no such thing. His Mako blue eyes were impassive as they kept themselves trained on the green material clutched in Tifa’s hands.

What fate had befallen Yuffie and Vincent such that his young friend had somehow lost the headband that she refused to part with no matter how much Cid bitched at her when it slapped him in the face while riding in the Tiny Bronco? And where had that ship gone off to? And what about Reeve? The Running Man? It was all his fault that Vincent and Yuffie had ended up lost or captured or... dead. He was the leader; the burden was on his shoulders. He had sent them off with the unspoken expectation that they wouldn’t really find anything. He hadn’t even given them a Restore materia—he had been so certain that they wouldn’t run



into trouble. Now it was his responsibility to take the blame for their plight and find a way to get them and Reeve back.

Cloud wasn't ashamed to admit that he needed both Vincent and Yuffie to help them locate their missing friend and get to the bottom of the whole Running Man/Reeve/Neo-Shinra mess. Though Vincent sometimes scared the crap out of him and Yuffie could only be accurately described as a brat, they both had certain abilities and traits that were exclusive to them and only to them. They were part of AVALANCHE, and they were his friends. At the moment, Cloud would have given anything just to see his two allies again, hear their voices.

But no matter how much he told himself that he needed to snap out of his melancholy state and get crackin' again, the horrific image of Tifa and Reno in each other's arms kept rising up before him like bile in his throat. He couldn't escape from it by closing his eyes; it was burned onto the backs of his eyelids. He couldn't escape from it by fading back into the depths of his rational mind; all his thoughts were occupied with that one image of Tifa stroking Reno's hair and rubbing his back while he lay his head on her shoulder and held her against him...

It wasn't until Cloud had seen them together that he realized that the very thought of another man so much as looking at Tifa, much less touching her, in such a fashion made him angry beyond all reasoning. And that fact that it had been Reno he had seen her with made it even worse. He hadn't liked Reno very much to begin with. Let's face it, trying to capture Aeris and dropping the plate on Sector Seven had left far more than just a bad first impression. By all rights, Cloud had every reason to want the redheaded Turk dead. But now Cloud, as leader of AVALANCHE, and Reno, as the unofficial leader of the Turks, would probably be working together more than any other two individuals in the search for Reeve. How was he supposed to work with the man that...that...

God, this got more unbearable by the minute.

Raising his dimly focused eyes from the headband in Tifa's hands, Cloud felt them settle on the woman who meant more to him than anything in the entire world. Her amazing burgundy eyes were trained on the headband in her fingers, and he could only see the perfect curve of her delicate eyebrows and how her long eyelashes shimmered in the light. Her chocolate brown hair had spilled over her bare shoulders, and he barely resisted the urge to reach across the table and run his fingers through it.

In the chair beside her, Red suddenly stirred, butting her shoulder lightly with his head, trying to ease her anxiety. As Cloud's empty gaze shifted to the fiery lion-like creature, Red turned to stare straight at him from across the table.

Of all the people gathered, Tifa and Reno excluded, Red was probably the only one that had guessed at what was bothering Cloud. He knew that only something involving Tifa could unsettle the spiky-haired leader of AVALANCHE so much.

Now the gaze he sent as his one good eye locked onto Cloud's Mako blue ones was quite clear: *She wants comfort from you, not me, not Reno, not anyone else. You need to be there for her no matter what.*

*If only it was so simple*, Cloud thought dismally as he lowered his gaze to the table, slouching in his chair. He didn't look up again.

The heavy silence dragged on for another two minutes before Barret's fuse expired and he pounded the table with his gun arm. If Spike was going to mope there by himself and not act like the leader everyone knew he was, then, by golly, he was going to have to get everyone in gear until Cloud could get his spiky head screwed on straight.

"I'm tired of jes sittin' here doin' nothing!" he bellowed as everyone looked at him. "We need to get to work on somethin'! We need some sort of plan!"

"Yeah, well since you're so full of ideas, do enlighten us," Cid grumbled, a cigarette dangling from his lips and his arms crossed over his chest. "I know I ain't got nothing that even comes close to resembling a plan."

"We need to get our priorities straight," Rude suddenly said.

"What do you mean by that?" Red asked calmly, but his golden eye glinted with suspicion.

"What Rude means," Elena picked up cautiously with a glance at her fellow Turk. "Is that we need to see what's more important: rescuing Reeve or finding Vincent and Yuffie."

Cid's eyes narrowed. "Does it matter? Chances are the same bastard that took Reeve captured Vincent and Yuffie, too. Don't go tryin' to make us pick favorites amongst our friends. They all mean the same to us."

"But think logically," Reno interrupted, defending the position taken by his friends. "If the same person that captured Reeve *did not* capture Vincent and Yuffie, too, then we need to see who's the one that needs the most help faster. Vincent and Yuffie are members of AVALANCHE, but that's all they are. Sure, Yuffie's pop may be some big shot Lord of Wutai, but she's just a little brat. Besides, much as I hate to admit it, Vincent and Yuffie are perfectly capable of taking care of themselves. Reeve, on the other hand is the President of Neo-Shinra and..."

Rude picked up where his friend had left off. "Alone and without Cait Sith,

Reeve is virtually helpless.”

Reno sat up straighter in his stool and placed his hands on his knees, staring hard at everyone gathered around the table. “You all know what Rude, Elena, and I are saying is true. Reeve’s more important here.”

“Says who?” Barret demanded, brown eyes glittering dangerously. “You and your Shinra buddies? Now, I ain’t sayin’ that Cat ain’t as important as Vincent and Yuffie, but he ain’t more important either, ya get my drift?”

“We understand,” Rude deadpanned, expression hidden behind his dark sunglasses. “I just have this bad feeling that Reeve’s in serious danger.”

Cid snorted. “And Vincent and Yuffie aren’t?”

Cloud abruptly grew tired of all the arguing. “Look, everyone,” he said flatly, gazing at his teammates and ex-enemies through the strands of his blond hair. “Face it, there isn’t much we can do right now. That cave is the only lead we have on Vincent, Yuffie, or Reeve. That cave is also basically off limits until we get the proper equipment and manpower to investigate it. When the rain dies down somewhat, we’ll go take another look at the cave.” His eyes darted coldly back and forth between Tifa and Reno. “And this time *everyone’s* going.”

Tifa shuddered slightly at the hidden meaning in his words as she wrung Yuffie’s headband tighter around her fingers and lowered her head, too depressed to get angry at how unfair Cloud was being. Reno, however, had enough anger for the both of them. If she wasn’t going to yell at Cloud for being an asshole, then he would gladly take up the job.

“You know, Strife,” he snapped, narrowing his aquamarine eyes. “You got serious problems with pride.”

Cloud glared at him. “And those would be what?”

“You’ve got too much of it, and you don’t know how to swallow it.”

Cloud didn’t reply as everyone except Tifa and Red wondered what the hell was going on.

Reno’s hard gaze never wavered from Cloud’s angry face. “You’re taking out your anger and frustration on Tifa there because you know you’re a failure...in more than one area.”

“Since when did you become her personal defender?” Cloud snapped, tensing in his seat.

“Ever since you became her attacker,” Reno counterattacked viciously.

The precarious damper Cloud had put on his anger suddenly snapped, and he leapt to his feet, knocking the chair down behind him. His Mako blue eyes blazed with anger. “Reno, I’m so goddamn sick of your @#%\$ing attitude!” he swore, hands clenched into fists.

Reno leapt to his feet, eyes on fire. “You gotta problem with me?!” he demanded furiously.

“You know I do,” Cloud seethed.

Reno dropped one hand so that it hovered over his nightstick. “You want to take this outside, then?”

“Reno, stop it!” Elena exclaimed, not because she favored Cloud over Reno but because she knew that this wasn’t going to help their situation.

Tifa suddenly leapt to her feet, eyes moist with tears and Yuffie’s headband clutched tightly in one hand. It was clear she was tottering on the edge of a breakdown and was horrified with the way Cloud and Reno were behaving towards each other...all because of her. She felt it was all her fault.

“Stop it, you two! Stop it!” she cried, her gloved hands flying to her hair as if in intense pain. “All this fighting is pointless! We need to look for—”

Just then, the door flew open, and Vincent and Yuffie strode in, covered with mud and looking like a pair of drowned rats.

Everyone in the entire bar felt their jaws hit the tops of their shoes (or in Red’s case, paws) as they beheld their two friends, who, a day before, had been in tip-top condition as they set out for a cave to investigate the strange presence of a ghost ship. Now they looked as if they had been through hell and back a dozen times.

Vincent’s hair was unbound and drenched with mud and rain, some of the larger mud clumps falling to the floor with thuds as rain dripped off of his ravaged clothes to make a puddle on the floor beneath his muddy boots. His black shirt and pants were ripped in several places, the cloth hanging open like gaping doorways to reveal bruises and cuts gracing his pale flesh. His shirt had become untucked during the trip, and his entire right sleeve up to the shoulder had been torn off, exposing a nasty black and blue bruise. His red eyes revealed nothing, but his split lip and disheveled state told the story for him.

Yuffie was the more battered and ridiculous looking of the pair, wrapped in Vincent’s cloak, which was so long that it dragged on the floor behind her. Her tanned legs were covered with mud and bruises; her yellow sneakers were in no

better condition. Rips and tears dotted her modest covering of tank top and tan shorts, and rain had plastered her hair, unbound by her headband, to the sides of her face, a few wayward strands dangling into her stormy gray eyes. A huge, yellow and black bruise was swollen under her left eye; similar ones graced her slender belly and her right ribcage.

They were a truly horrific sight, but Tifa had never seen them look better.

That is, until Yuffie stamped her foot on the floor and yelled, “Don’t just stand there gawping like a bunch of retards! It’s freezing balls over here! Do something, you idiots!”

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Author’s Note:

Alright! A short chapter, at last. Thought I’d give any readers a break after those two last novel-length chapters. Thanks to whoever’s reading this.

—Catalina

# Chapter Twelve

## One Big Happy Family

*“Goddamn. How the hell did you stand being around her  
for an entire day, nonstop?” —Cid Highwind*

*And we stare each other down  
Like victims in the grind  
Probing all the weakness  
And hurt still left behind and we cry  
The tears of pearls.  
We do it. Oh we do it.*

*“Tears of Pearls”  
—Savage Garden—*

Yuffie frowned at her reflection in the mirror and tugged on the bottom of her borrowed tank top, whose straps kept sliding off of her narrow shoulders. All of her and Vincent’s clothes had gotten wet when their chocobos were forced to wait outside in the rain for almost a day until the bird-brains decided being wet was not fun and ran for shelter. Both Yuffie and Vincent were going to be wearing hand-me-downs until their clothes dried.



Yuffie was now clad in a white tank top and a pair of slightly too large black shorts of Tifa’s since Elena had turned up her nose at the prospect of Yuffie wearing any of her clothes.

Wincing at the pronounced ache in her bones, Yuffie reached up and readjusted the wayward straps and pushed her hair, still damp from the shower she had taken, away from her face. She sighed with sudden wistfulness as she beheld the girl in the mirror, for some reason very dissatisfied with what she saw.

Why hadn’t she ever realized that she was so...unattractive? Her figure had acquired more curves over the past year, but they still weren’t enough to rival the voluptuous figure of Tifa or even the feminine curves of Elena. She had none

of their fresh beauty, either. If she tried putting on makeup, she looked like a clown. If she put on a skirt, she looked like, well... Yuffie in a skirt. If she cut her hair short, she looked like a boy. That was one of the other, secret reasons for letting her hair grow out—she was tired of being the bratty tomboy of the group. But in Yuffie's opinion, it would take nothing short of a face-lift to make her into something resembling beautiful. Her legs were too bony, her shoulders too narrow, her eyes too big, her hair too limp and plain, her face too round, her stomach too skinny. Damn! Why hadn't she ever noticed that there were so many things wrong with her?

*Maybe I did notice them, she thought, only I didn't care or I didn't want to admit up to my many faults. How could I have been so blind? No wonder no one likes me. I'm as ugly as homemade sin in the heat of summer, and now this nappy bruise on my face makes me even more hideous!*

Yuffie touched her reflection in the mirror with trembling fingers, an immense sadness darkening her gray eyes and making her mouth turn down at the corners. Then she realized with a start that Tifa was standing in the doorway behind her with a thoughtful expression on her face.

"Yikes!" she said, whirling around to face her older friend. "Tifa! I didn't know you were there!"

Tifa smiled and walked over to Yuffie, her boots thudding on the wooden floor. "Sorry," she said sheepishly. "I got caught up watching you. Your face is very expressive."

"Does that mean I show too much emotion?" Yuffie asked, tugging on her tank top again and wishing that she had the figure to fill it so it wouldn't be so loose.

Tifa just smiled again, reaching out to adjust the shirt. "No, expressive is a good thing, trust me." She fluffed up Yuffie's hair. "Your hair's getting so long! Soon I can do all sorts of neat things with it!"

"And I get to be a Barbie doll!" Yuffie said with mock cheerfulness.

Tifa laughed and picked up a brush from the dresser. "Can I put your hair in a ponytail? It's just long enough."

"Oh. Okay," Yuffie said uncertainly. She'd never worn her hair in a ponytail before; it had never been the proper length.

Tifa gestured to the chair in front of the dresser. "Sit there. I can't reach with you standing up. You're almost as tall as me now!"

“I wish,” Yuffie muttered, plopping down gratefully in the chair and trying not to focus on her reflection in the mirror. She knew Tifa was just paying her all these compliments because she’d seen her getting all depressed over her reflection. Yuffie wasn’t sure how to react. On one hand, she wanted to tell her friend it was okay to drop the act; she didn’t care about how she looked, right? But on the other hand, Yuffie was grateful for the support. Tifa had seemed sincere...

“Watch out. I have tangles galore,” she told Tifa as the brunette brought the brush to bear on Yuffie’s brown locks.

“Don’t worry, Yuffie,” Tifa said comfortingly. “I know how to deal with long hair. I’ll try and make this as painless as possible.”

“Good,” Yuffie replied nervously. “I’ve had enough pain for one day.”

Tifa laughed and started to get the tangles out of Yuffie’s still-damp hair, starting at the bottom and working her way up. Yuffie soon found out that Tifa *did* know what she was doing. Aside from the occasional tug on her scalp, she found the experience strangely comforting. Then, unexpectedly, a shadow from the distant past rose up in her...

*“Yuffie Pristina Kisaragi! Come here!”*

*Five-year-old Yuffie shuddered and burrowed further underneath the blankets in the sitting room. “No!” she shot back. “I don’t wanna!”*

*Ayami Kisaragi sighed good-naturedly and tossed a lock of chocolate brown hair over her slender shoulder. “Please, honey, I just need to brush your hair. Then you can go out and play.”*

*“Why can’t I go out and play now?” Yuffie whined. “My hair’s fine, Mama.”*

*“No,” Yuffie’s mother replied patiently, entering the sitting room and noting the misshapen pile of blankets in the middle of the floor with a smile. “My, my,” she said teasingly. “I wonder where my lovely daughter Yuffie could be hiding? Maybe under here!”*

*Yuffie laughed with delight as her mother attacked her ticklish stomach, squirming out from underneath the blankets. Still laughing and wishing her mother would just chase her around the house all day, Yuffie made a beeline for the door, only to be caught around the waist and pulled into her mother’s lap.*

*“Look who I found!” Ayami exclaimed in mock surprise, a smile on her pretty face as her almond-shaped eyes twinkled with laughter. “A bug underneath our rug! And what were you doing under there?”*



*“Hiding!” Yuffie said happily, still laughing from the aftermath of the tickle-fight.*

*“Hiding from who?” her mother asked. “The boogeyman?”*

*Yuffie shook her head, her long brown hair flopping around her face. “Nope! From you and Mr. Brush, Mama!”*

*Yuffie’s mother laughed and held on to her daughter as the little girl tried to wiggle out of her grasp. “Just sit still for one minute, honey,” she urged soothingly. “I’ll be done in a second.”*

*“Aw, Mama,” Yuffie pouted, but remained still as her mother brushed her hair, humming softly as she did so...*

“There you go!” Tifa said triumphantly, securing the elastic band around Yuffie’s hair and tightening the ponytail.

Yuffie snapped out of her reverie to find that Tifa had finished brushing her hair and had already put it in a ponytail, something that Yuffie hadn’t seen in her hair since she had been very young. Turning her head to examine the unfamiliar thing that was sticking out of her head, Yuffie had to resist the urge to laugh as the ponytail flopped around her head like something alive. She had always thought ponytails, especially short ones like this, were the goofiest things...

“What so funny?” Tifa demanded, trying to look serious and not being very successful.

“It looks like I have a turd sticking out of my head!” Yuffie exclaimed, bursting into giggles.

Tifa laughed at the sheer absurdity of the prospect. “That’s gross, Yuffie!” she scolded good-naturedly. “Well, I think it looks cute! It brings out your cheekbones quite nicely.”

Yuffie made a face. “What cheekbones? My face is so tubby you can’t even see my cheekbones.”

Tifa gave her ponytail a playful whack. “No, it’s not, Yuffie. You have a very pretty face.”

The girl rolled her eyes. “Yeah, sure, whatever, Tifa. You’re just so happy to see us that even my ugly face looks good.”

“Come on, Yuffie, don’t talk like that,” Tifa chided gently, beginning to sense that underneath Yuffie’s carefree exterior, there was a bit of a self-esteem complex. She hugged her friend gently, being mindful of the many bruises that graced Yuffie’s body. “If it’s any consolation to you,” she said soothingly. “Vincent’s still

as ugly as he was before.”

Yuffie laughed. “Tifa! That was mean!” She pulled back so that she could look at her older friend. “Do you really think Vinnie is ugly?” she asked, not sure whether or not Tifa had been serious. In Yuffie’s opinion, Vincent wasn’t ugly at all.

Tifa smiled and fluffed up Yuffie’s ponytail. “No, of course not. Actually, I think he’s very, very attractive, but don’t go around telling everyone that.”

“Of course not!” Yuffie agreed, glad that she had Tifa to talk about “girly things” with. “I think Vincent is, well, you know, um, kind of... nice-looking, too, in a weird twisted vampire/boogeyman sort of way.” By the end of her sentence, her cheeks were as red as tomatoes.

Tifa smiled knowingly, though she was a bit surprised. She had had no idea that Yuffie becoming conscious about her appearance all of sudden was stemming from a crush on Vincent, of all people!

“What?” Yuffie asked her friend, not trusting that smile. “What is it?”

Tifa grinned. “Nothing, nothing.” She hugged her friend again. “I’m just so glad to see you guys again. I missed you both so much. It’s been horrible around here with nothing but a bunch of men to talk to.”

“Elena’s not a guy,” Yuffie said smartly.

“I know, but Elena’s... Elena.” Tifa shrugged. “We’re not homegirls yet.”

“Homegirls?” Yuffie laughed. “Been taking grammar lessons from Barret?”

“Oh, shut up!” Tifa said. “Let’s go downstairs before they send someone up to get us.”

Yuffie hopped out of the chair and followed her friend to the door. “Sure thing, homegirl.”

Tifa stuck her tongue out at Yuffie. “You’re never going to let me live that down, are you?”

“Nope,” Yuffie said proudly.

Everyone was already seated around the table when the two girls came down the stairs.

“Hey, brat!” Reno exclaimed, a taunting grin on his face. “Showing some cleavage there, I see.”

Yuffie smiled sweetly at him and gave his ponytail a hard yank as she went by to plop down in a chair next to Vincent, narrowly avoiding getting her butt slapped in retaliation by Reno. Looking at Vincent, she saw that he had apparently found clothes that were of a much better fit than the ones Yuffie had borrowed. The black, long-sleeved shirt he was wearing was a bit large on him, but the black jeans and brown boots were a good fit.

Yuffie looked up to find Vincent staring back at her calmly. Blushing slightly, she said, "I see you've found some clothes that don't make you look like an evil blood-sucking vampire."

Vincent raised an eyebrow. "Charming, to the last."

"Goddamn," Cid commented from his seat beside Vincent. "How the hell did you stand being around her for an entire day, nonstop? You must be Superman, Vince."

Reno grinned. "Actually, I think even Superman probably would have flown into the sky and dropped her in the North Crater after the first two hours."

Yuffie slumped in her chair, a scowl on her face. "You guys suck!" she exclaimed.

"Leave Yuffie alone," Tifa added, looking strangely uncomfortable in her seat between Cloud and Reno. There was a peculiar tension in the air, a sort of electric crackling, but Yuffie didn't give it much thought, being that she was too busy being humiliated by her companions.

"So, what the hell happened to you two?" Barret asked, leaning his beefy bulk on the table. "Did ya find the Running Man?"

Vincent nodded, absently pushing a stray lock of damp black hair away from his eyes. "You might say that."

"Did you see any sign of Reeve?" Elena asked hopefully.

Cid pivoted in his chair to glare at the female Turk. "Hot damn, woman! Let them get a word in, why don't ya?"

Cloud nodded, speaking for the first time. "Yeah, start at the beginning."

"Very well," Vincent deadpanned. "I'll start, and Yuffie can fill in anything that I fail to mention."

"Sounds like a plan," Yuffie agreed, pleased that he had included her and hadn't just pretended like she had never been on the journey with him in the first place.

The dark gunslinger folded his arms across his chest, and everyone, except Yuffie, leaned forward in anticipation, eager to hear the story. So Vincent began the tale of how he and Yuffie had followed Cloud's orders and gone into the cave in search of the mysterious "ghost ship" Cloud had talked to them about. He gave a mild description of the ship, and Yuffie was surprised at how much more he had noticed about the ugly thing than she had. When she had seen the old, rotten, algae-crusted ship in the back of the cave, she had simply declared, "Oh, it's a ghost ship! No one home!" Vincent apparently had thought the abandoned thing to be more interesting than she had.

"That's all about the ship?" Cloud asked, apparently expecting more. "It didn't appear as if it had been used recently?"

Vincent shook his head slowly. "Not to my knowledge. There could have been something I missed, though."

"It don't matter now," Barret quipped gruffly. "That thang was outta there when we went to check this mornin'."

"Was it the Running Man who sailed the ship away?" Red asked.

Vincent nodded. "Yes."

"And you guys followed him onto it?" Cloud supplied, leaning against the wooden table.

"No," Yuffie spoke up grumpily. "We were already on it. Mr. I'm-So-Damn-Clever Vinnie here had this bright idea that we should explore the interior of the ship, like it was going to be any prettier than the outside! We ended up stuck in the cargo hold between two crates for the entire trip."

"We were investigating the cargo hold when the Running Man came on board," Vincent clarified. "For further reference, we found nothing on the ship, just old crates full of tea bags and skeletons of fishes. There were some blankets rotting in the crew's quarters, but they didn't warrant much attention, apparently. Yuffie and I were in the cargo hold getting ready to leave when we heard footsteps on the upper deck."

"Vinnie heard them," Yuffie jumped in, still in a grumpy mood as she recalled how miserable the old ghost ship experience had been. "I didn't hear a damn thing. I thought he was pulling my leg."

Cid rolled his eyes. "Vince doesn't pull nobody's leg, Yuffie. You should know that by now."

"I know," Yuffie said quietly, trying not to think that she and Vincent had

become close friends during their little adventure. If she got to thinking about that, then she was probably going to be brutally disappointed when he started shunning her like he did everyone else. Why should a little brat like her warrant any special attention from a man like him?

Yuffie slowly emerged from her morbid thoughts and listened to Vincent as he recounted the tale of how they had hidden in the cargo hold for two hours as the ship sailed off into oblivion. The young ninja felt her stomach becoming queasy again as she listened to Vincent's vivid description of the rocking waves and musty fish smell. Much to her embarrassment, she was almost ready to toss her cookies when Vincent finally ended the reliving-the-nightmare process at the time they had docked at the deep-sea complex and followed the Running Man off of the ship.

"You have no idea where the ship might have taken you?" Rude asked.

"No," Vincent deadpanned. "All I know is that we were in some sort of docking bay on the ocean. I received the impression that the complex wasn't very large, but we were either being held in the extreme front or the back of the complex so my judgment on such a thing isn't trustworthy. There were hundreds of crates in the area, and the ceiling was open so that we could see the sky. The ocean stretched in all other directions except the north, where there was a door to inner complex."

"And you followed the Running Man down there?" Red asked. "Did he have anyone with him?"

Vincent shook his head. "No, but we lost sight of him for about an hour's time before we actually followed him through the door."

Cid jumped slightly. "An hour? Damn, that's a long time. What was he doing in a docking bay with a bunch of boring crates for an entire hour?"

"Hiding from us."

Now it was Cloud's turn to be surprised. "He knew you were there?"

"Great spy job, you guys," Reno said sarcastically, reclining in his chair with a leering look in his eyes.

"Vinnie pushed me in the seawater!" Yuffie burst out before her companion could say that she had had an "accident."

Reno burst out laughing. "Way to go, Vincent!"

"I knew you had it in you, man!" Cid said approvingly, a big grin on his face.

Vincent didn't even blink. "Yuffie fell into the docking bay pool on accident;

consequently, the Running Man was alerted to our presence and hid amongst the crates.”

“Way to go, brat,” Barret snapped.

Face bright red, Yuffie opened her mouth to defend herself when suddenly Vincent stepped in. “It wasn’t her fault,” he deadpanned, red eyes steady from behind strands of ebony hair. “She was out in front. It was dark out and she couldn’t see. There was a puddle that I failed to inform her about, and she slipped into the pool. Therefore, it actually is my fault that she fell in.”

Everyone just sort of stared; they had never heard Vincent defend someone like that. Yuffie, in particular, was shocked out of her mind and just sat there with her mouth hanging open. Last night, Vincent had practically said that it was her fault the Running Man knew about their presence, and now he was defending her? Geez! She just didn’t understand this man! Never before in her entire life had she met someone who was as frustrating to be around as Mr. I-Need-To-Atone-For-My-Sins Valentine here.

“Okay,” Cloud said slowly, raising a blonde eyebrow curiously, probably making a point to ask Vincent about his peculiar behavior later. “What happened next?”

Vincent, unfazed by everyone’s curious stares, continued the story of how he and Yuffie had chased the Running Man through the maze of crates until they lost track of him and agreed that they would watch the only exit from the cargo area, assuming that the Running Man would try and enter the complex from there. He had to stop his recounting of the experience twice, once when Cloud asked him to describe the Running Man and when Elena interrupted to ask if he was sure the Running Man didn’t have any prisoners with him or on the ship. Yuffie had started to growl a response to the question that was starting to get redundant, but Vincent had quickly cut her off and given a more polite, monotonic answer. On the story went, with Vincent making vivid descriptions about things that Yuffie hadn’t even noticed while the others listening attentively, hanging on every word. Yuffie found herself almost lulled into a doze by Vincent’s deep, soothing voice, but she jerked herself awake every once in while to add something into the story, just to remind everyone that she was still there.

Cloud, in particular, hung on Vincent’s every word, his Mako blue eyes sharp and attentive as he leaned on the table, stopping Vincent every once in a while to fire another question at him. He even asked Yuffie for her opinion every once in a while, something that she gratefully provided. He stopped Vincent again when they started talking about the battle with the Faceless Men.

“Wait a minute,” Cloud said dubiously. “You said these men had no faces at all?”

“No faces at all,” Yuffie confirmed, stressing every word.

“Isn’t that, like, physically impossible or something?” Elena asked suspiciously, her brown eyes darting from Yuffie to Vincent. “You need eyes to see with, and a nose to breathe. Every living thing needs those to survive.”

Yuffie’s eyes narrowed. “Are you calling us liars?”

Elena glared back at her. “And what if I am?”

“Elena,” Rude said firmly but softly, eyes unreadable behind his dark sunglasses.

The blond-haired Turk looked in surprise at her tall companion. “Rude, I-”

“Elena,” Rude said again, this time more firmly. Elena opened her mouth as if to say something more, but instead she shut it abruptly and sank into her seat with a humiliated, if not hurt, look on her face.

After a few more moments of silence in which everyone wondered at how well Rude had handled the situation—not to mention *why* he had done such a thing in the first place—Cloud once again broke the silence.

“Describe these creatures to me,” he said to Vincent and Yuffie.

“Average man’s height,” Vincent clipped. “Male, or at least they appeared to be. None of them had any feminine features, but when Yuffie dealt one a...low blow, it didn’t appear to be affected by the assault.”

“Maybe these creatures do not feel pain,” Red suggested, looking intrigued with the story.

Vincent nodded. “That’s probably the most logical assumption.”

“Faceless Men,” Barret mused in a grouchy tone. “Do ya think these things were natural kinds of monsters?”

“No,” Vincent answered without hesitation. “These creatures were abominations, but, whatever happened to them, I feel certain that they were once human.”

“How horrible,” Tifa said quietly, eyebrows creased in distress. “I wonder what happened to them.”

“Who knows,” Vincent replied, his monotone the antithesis of Tifa’s

sympathetic one. “But whatever befell them left these creatures with abnormal strength and endurance. It appears as if the brain is the very center of these creatures’ activity. If you don’t destroy the brain, then these things just keep on coming with no let up.”

“How do you figure that?” Reno asked flatly.

“We busted our asses trying to kill five of these things over the past day,” Yuffie grumbled, the memory of the battle making her limbs ache all over again. “Vinnie blew up their jet skis while escaping the complex, but somehow they managed to crawl on shore and follow us all the way up to the mountains near the Chocobo Ranch.”

Reno snorted. “So what’s the big deal? Any human could have done that.”

“Not at the rate they did,” Vincent deadpanned. “Especially considering the fact that all five of them were missing either a leg or an arm. It took nothing short of summoning the Knights of the Round to kill two of them at long range.”

Cid’s mouth dropped open, and he had to scramble to hold onto his cigarette. “You’re kiddin’ me? Damn, that’s some heavy shit, guys.”

“Heavy, yes,” Vincent confirmed. “But frighteningly real. I shot one point blank range in the chest and it didn’t even stumble. And they seem to have at least the most primitive intelligence, for they attack in strategic formations, either in a pack or by using other methods.”

“Yeah,” Yuffie spoke up. “Three of them acted together to try and knock me off of one of those cliffs between Kalm and the Chocobo Ranch.” She absently fingered one of the bruises on her stomach. “Almost succeeded, too, if it hadn’t been for Vinnie. And while we were in the Green Room, three of them cornered Vincent and were pounding on him with their guns.”

“Pounding?” Cloud asked, a perplexed look on his face. “Why didn’t they just shoot you if they had guns?”

“I assume that up to a certain point in time, they wanted us alive,” Vincent answered. “Either that or the first three we encountered in the complex were a weak batch; they were dispatched easily enough, but apparently sometime during the course of our escape on the jet ski, they decided that we would be better off dead. They opened fire on us.”

“Are you guys okay?” Tifa asked worriedly.

Vincent shrugged. “I’m fine, but one of them shot Yuffie in the shoulder.”



Yuffie nodded, hand flying instinctively to her left shoulder, where Vincent's red bandana (clean, of course!) was still tied around the scar. She had no idea why she had left it on; all that remained of the bullet hole that had originally bled like Niagara Falls was a new, nasty-looking scar. For some reason, however, she hadn't wanted to untie it from her arm. Maybe it was really a "souvenir" like she had told Vincent. Her thoughts started to shift to what had happened, or what *hadn't* happened, under the overhang a couple of hours ago. Once again, she saw Vincent's beautiful garnet eyes lingering on her face and felt his warmth as he sat close to her with the rain pouring down inches from them.

"Yuffie!" Barret's voice suddenly cut through her thoughts.

She snapped out of her reverie with a startled flush coming to her cheeks. She had zoned out totally and hadn't even realized it! Now everyone was staring at her like she had grown another head.

"What?" she demanded, cheeks on fire, as if everyone at the table had heard what she was thinking about.

"Jes' making sure you was done wit your little trip to the Twilight Zone," Barret growled at her. "We gonna start the story again."

"I was part of the story," she grumbled. "I don't need to hear it again. It was hard enough living it."

"Yuffie, quit being a pest," Cloud said flatly.

Anger clenched her jaw. There was that word again! Pest! That's all they ever called her! Cid and Barret didn't even call her Yuffie anymore! It was always, "Great going, pest," or "Oh no, it's the brat." Reno and Elena called her even worse names when they were in bad moods. And now Cloud was starting! God, where did it end?! She was so sick and tired of this! Even she had to draw the line somewhere.

She was just about to open her mouth and start the biggest spiel of all time when she suddenly noticed Tifa staring at her desperately and making motions with her hands, obviously telling Yuffie not to say anything. Tifa shook her head emphatically yet discreetly, eyes darting from Cloud to Yuffie. The young ninja glared angrily at Tifa, then at Cloud, who was beginning to catch onto the silent communication between the two girls. In the end, Yuffie held her tongue out of respect for Tifa and the fact that a fight between two of the AVALANCHE members wasn't going to make planning go any faster. She still had no idea why Tifa didn't want to upset Cloud, but she was betting that it had something to do with the crackling tension in the air that Yuffie still hadn't been able to pinpoint.

Clenching her hands into fists, Yuffie bit the inside of her cheek and lowered her eyes to her lap, focusing all of her attention on the weave of her borrowed denim shorts to keep from exploding in anger. God, she was ready to go nuclear!

Silence hung awkwardly in the air.

“Awright!” Barret suddenly bellowed in irritation. “What the hell is going on here?!”

“Nothing,” Cloud said coldly, for some reason looking almost as peeved as Yuffie was.

“Like hell ‘nothing’!” Cid snapped, shrewd blue eyes darting all around the table. “I don’t know what the hell happened to you, Cloud, but you’ve been acting weird. Even Reno’s being more pissy than usual. And what’s wrong with Tifa? Yuffie, too?”

*Good thing he called me “Yuffie,” she thought, still staring at her clenched fists in her lap. Or you could have just forgotten about going nuclear. I would have gone positively ATOMIC! Wait a minute, aren’t those the same thing...*

“Nothing is wrong with us,” Cloud said apathetically, though the turbulent emotions in his Mako blue eyes sang a different tune. “We’re just all under a lot of stress right now.”

“As are we all,” Rude said calmly. “Fighting won’t solve anything, though.”

Reno snorted, flicking a lock of flaming hair away from his eyes. “Well, me and Tifa both know what’s bugging Cloud.”

“Reno!” Tifa gasped, hands flying to her mouth. “Be quiet!”

Reno cast his eyes away, but he was unable to conceal the smug yet strangely bitter smile that crossed his face. He knew his words had struck home, and the damage had already been done. Cloud was now staring blankly at the tabletop, looking like a zombie. Tifa was hugging herself with her arms, eyes on the floor, apparently not trusting herself to look at anyone at the table.

Cid raised an eyebrow. “The hell? Did we miss something here?”

“Seems like it,” Elena commented dryly, watching Reno carefully as if expecting him to bust out the answer at any moment.

But Red spoke up before anyone else could further exacerbate the already inflamed predicament. “I believe Rude spoke it true when he said that fighting won’t help us right now. Bickering amongst each other isn’t going to get Reeve back any faster. I believe it is the general consensus that our mutual friend is in

grave danger, and whether we like it or not, AVALANCHE and the Turks are going to have to work together to get him back.” He stared hard at Cloud, Tifa, and Reno. “That means putting aside these disputes to be dealt with later.”

Rude nodded. “We need all three of you right now. There’s no way we can make plans without you three.”

Cloud said nothing. Tifa lowered her head further, feeling ashamed. Reno yawned.

Barret looked at the Rude suspiciously. “Well, ain’t you Mr. Peacemaker now? You and your Shinra buddies up to somethin’?”

“Barret,” Red growled, beginning to lose his cool.

The large man glanced at the panther-like creature to his right before sighing and folding his arms across his chest. “Got a lot of things on my mind right now,” he grumbled as a way of explanation.

“We all do,” Vincent suddenly spoke up, glancing at the still simmering Yuffie out of the corner of his eye. “Yuffie and I have undergone a very taxing ordeal, and it appears as if problems arose while we were away.”

“What problems?” Cloud suddenly asked in a low voice, eyes never moving from the wooden tabletop. “No problems here.”

Everyone stared at him incredulously. He was the very embodiment of a man with problems.

Cloud suddenly sighed with world-weariness in his soul and rose to his feet, shoulders rigid with some nameless emotion and his eyes still averted. “I’m not up to this right now,” he muttered almost inaudibly. “We’ll do it later.”

He climbed out from behind the table and started to walk towards the stairs, his movements jerky and stiff.

Reno lost his cool almost immediately. “Okay!” he exclaimed, voice dripping with sarcasm. “Let’s just all jump when he says! Mr. Big Shot Leader over there thinks the world revolves around him and we have to do whatever he says!”

Cloud gave Reno the finger and stomped up the stairs while everyone stared in wonder at Cloud’s uncharacteristically vicious actions. A second later they heard a door slam upstairs.

Reno pounded the table with his fist, beside himself with rage. “@#%\$!” he exclaimed. “I’ve had enough for one goddamn day! We’re never gonna find Reeve with *him* as a leader!”

Silence hung in the air for a few moments before Tifa suddenly stirred. “I’m going to go check on the chocobos,” she said in a soft, wavering voice, her long chocolate brown hair hiding her watering eyes from view. “Excuse me.”

She quickly rose and literally ran out of the room and down a side hallway, her boots thudding on the wooden floor. A second later everyone heard the back door slam.

“Great going, Turk,” Barret snapped.

“Damn you, Reno,” Cid said at the same time.

Reno’s jaw clenched, and his face turned as red as his hair. “Man! %\$#@ all of ya’ll!”

He leapt to his feet, knocking his chair over, and stormed out of the front door, slamming it behind him and making all the shot glasses tremble. Rude and Elena leapt from their seats and followed him out, ignoring the fact that it was still raining.

With vivid and loud curses issuing from both of their mouths, Cid and Barret got up and left the room, Barret going down the hallway Tifa went, saying something about calling Marlene, Cid going upstairs to barricade himself in his room where he could smoke in peace. Red shook his head miserably and padded out of the room with his head hung low.

Vincent just stared at the empty table around him, as if noticing for the first time that everyone else had left. Unconcerned, he fingered his split lip gingerly, noticing that it was already healing. His thoughts were a million miles away.

Yuffie suddenly lifted her head, looking around to see that everyone had magically disappeared and it was just she and Vincent alone...again.

“Hey, Vinnie?” she asked, her voice echoing in the empty room.

“Yes, Yuffie?” he responded automatically.

“Are ‘nuclear’ and ‘atomic’ the same thing?”

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Author’s Note:

This was just a sort of recap chapter. It was also to emphasize just how much of a hard time AVALANCHE and the Turks are going to have working together. Hmm...I wonder if they will be able to work out some kind of compromise? Oh, by the way, this may be a little off subject, but I was watching Blade last night with Wesley Snipes and Stephen Dorff, and I noticed that Stephen Dorff looked EXACTLY like Reno! Same color eyes and everything! Sure you may need to dye his hair red, but the voice and everything was exactly like I imagined Reno’s would be. Um, just thought I’d share that...

# Chapter Thirteen

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## *The Dynamic Duo*

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*“Why you’d want to stay some place you’re not wanted is completely beyond me.” —Titus*

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

“Titus?” the woman’s voice came from behind him. “The hell you doing out here, sugar?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Titus didn’t reply.

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

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

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

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

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

"Listening."

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

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

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

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

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

Titus was silent for a long while, the roaring thunder and churning sea eagerly filling the jagged spaces that his words had previously occupied. His handsome face was still upturned to take in the rain, letting it pound against his tender eyelids and cling to his dark blond eyelashes. His hands still maintained a light

grip on the wooden railing even as the ghost ship rocked violently on the ocean's surface.

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

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

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

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

"She is angry," he suddenly blurted.

Fa-Li blinked in confusion. "Huh?"

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



know why.”

“Don’t worry, honey,” Fa-Li said cheerfully. “I don’t know either.”

Titus rolled his eyes, looking irritated. “I didn’t expect you to.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“We’re heading to Midgar,” Titus clipped shortly.

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

Titus was silent. The roaring sea devoured her question.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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Author's Note:

God, I was stuck on this chapter forever! These two are going to be playing a major part in the story, so I thought I'd develop their characters a bit more. Took me long enough, right? I just want to send a special thanks to Yuffie Valentine, who always has nice compliments for my crappy writing (namely my battle scenes)! Thank you so much! It provides more motivation than one might think. I also want to tell Kachan and Little One thanks for sending those e-mails that got my ass back in gear! Thanks! And, of course, thanks to anyone who has read and reviewed this story! Wow, I'm in a good mood, aren't I? I'm just happy that I finished this chapter! Whoo-hoo! ::does Rinoa Heartilly victory dance:: The next one is dim in my mind right now, but hopefully I'll get started on it soon.

—Catalina

# Chapter Fourteen

## *The Plight of the Raindrops*

*“What are you gonna do? Spank us and send us to our rooms?” —Elena*

*Every moment marked  
With apparitions of your soul  
However swiftly moving  
I'm trying to escape this desire  
The yearning to be near you  
I do what I have to do  
The yearning to be near you  
I do what I have to do  
And I had the sense to recognize  
That I don't know how to let you go*

*“Do What You Have to Do”*

*—Sarah McLachlan—*

Reno's blood was still boiling. The rain that brushed lightly against his pale skin as he stood out on the bar's deck could not cool the rage that coursed through his veins like liquid fire. His auburn eyebrows were drawn together in a fearsome scowl, and his eyes were blazing with fury. God, he couldn't remember the last time he had been this angry! He had to bite down hard on his own tongue to prevent himself from arching his back in rage and cursing Cloud Strife and the womb that gave birth to the little prick until his voice was hoarse. Reno folded his arms resolutely across his lean chest and glared at the falling rain, refusing to succumb to the urge to let out the longest string of cuss words he had ever said in his entire life.

Elena and Rude watched their leader and friend from a safe distance, discomfort written in their auras. Rude leaned stiffly against the closed door to the bar, expression hidden by his dark sunglasses. At his side, Elena fidgeted nervously, tugging at the still-damp bottom of her suit jacket and pushing at her tangled hair. She was caught between wanting to bug Reno until he told them what was wrong and just leaving him out here to be alone with his fury. The blond-haired Turk was not in her best of moods—she was wet, tired, hungry, Rude had just embarrassed her in front of everyone, and now Reno had had a major spat with Cloud that neither of them was likely to get over anytime soon. They were never going to get Reeve back! And what did that mean? Even more disgrace to the Turks' name! She could hear people talking now!

*“Those damn Turks! They let another President die under them! What wastrels! Can't even do their jobs right!”*

But despite her desire to keep the Turks' name somewhat "honorable," Elena was more wary of Reno's temper than any thoughts of future grandeur she could dream up. She knew that the anger she had seen Reno evince in the bar just now was only a taste of how angry he could really get. And the fact that Reno was still out here brooding only heightened her apprehension. Reno was the sort of person who could blow up in your face one minute and have his arms around you like the best of friends the next. It was rare that he held a grudge, but when he did hold one...

Elena shuddered at the thought.

Reno suddenly turned his head so that Elena and Rude could see the scarred profile of his handsome face against the backdrop of the falling rain. "If you two are just gonna stand there and stare at me," he growled. "Save yourselves the trouble and take a picture. It'll last longer."

The oppressive silence between the trio broken by Reno's harsh words, Elena and Rude left their positions beside the door and went to stand next to their friend and colleague as he turned to stare at the falling rain and weeping skies again. Elena fidgeted anxiously, wishing that Rude would say something to get Reno to come out of his shell. She would have made the effort, but since it seemed that *every* time she opened her mouth, she said something wrong that only made things worse. She was still a bit sour over Rude having embarrassed her in front of AVALANCHE. Why did he have to go and do that? Elena tried so hard to make herself look and seem professional, but if Rude kept treating her like a rookie, then she was never going to be able to earn the respect of others!

But Rude's scolding had hurt her as much as it had embarrassed her, and she didn't want him to speak to her in such a fashion again...

So, Elena kept her mouth shut. Silence hung in the air again except for the rain streaming down from the stormy skies in sheets, just inches away from where she and her friends were standing. Tickling, feather light droplets hit the ground and jumped back up to playfully touch Elena's face, and if she hadn't had a glowering Reno standing next to her like a time bomb waiting to explode, she would have smiled with sheer serenity.

Then Reno let out a sigh that was more like a growl and said, "So, are you guys just going to stand there? Why did you even come out here anyways?"

"Because you were out here," Rude said simply, staring out at the rain with his eyes hidden by his sunglasses. Elena didn't say anything; despite her bitterness over Rude's admonishment, she knew that he could better handle Reno than she would ever be able to.

Reno snorted, his eyes still hard with smoldering anger. "So now you want to be with me, huh? You two sure as hell were quick to leave me behind this morning."

Rude replied, "We left with—"

“—my best interests in heart,” Reno finished dryly, flicking a rebellious lock of fiery hair away from his face. “Yeah, I’ve heard that one before. Right now, I’m pondering on whether or not you two should be punished for leaving me behind this morning.”

“What are you gonna do?” Elena blurted before she could stop herself. “Spank us and send us to our rooms?”

Reno and Rude both turned to stare at her as the female Turk hurriedly clamped both hands over her full mouth, eyes widening as she realized what she had just said! Great! Why couldn’t she think before she talked?! Now Reno was going to go nuclear and stalk away again, and Rude was going to reprimand her for being such a loudmouth...

Then Reno’s surprised face melted into a grin. He flirtatiously winked one of those aquamarine eyes at her. “You’re just dying to be spanked by me, aren’t you, Elena?”

Elena’s mouth dropped open at his impudence. “As if!” she declared indignantly. “I swear to god, Reno, you are the most—”

Her displeased retort was suddenly cut off when Reno burst out laughing with glee and gathered her up in his strong arms, crushing her to his chest and lifting her off her feet.

“Reno!” Elena screeched into her friend’s shoulder as he spun her around in a circle with her feet flying behind her. “Put me down! This is so humiliating!”

“Aw, you know you like it, honey,” he joked, still chuckling as he lowered her to ground again, her heels finding blessed leverage on the wooden decking. For a moment, he hugged her close, her nose filling with the mixture of alcohol and cologne that she had come to identify as Reno’s scent.

Then he released her and stepped back, still laughing for some odd reason. Even Rude was looking at him a little strangely, and Elena was beside herself with annoyance.

“What was that all about?” she demanded grumpily, placing her slender hands on her narrow hips. “Next time warn me before you do something like that!”

“You two crack me up,” Reno laughed, tossing his ponytail back over his shoulder as he walked away from them and plopped down in one of the wicker chairs that were placed on the wooden decking. He sank casually into the piece of furniture with a grin still on his face, his right elbow inches away from the pouring rain that was still descending like angry tears from the enraged heavens. He was still chuckling, as if he couldn’t control his sounds of mirth.

Elena glanced at Rude in bewilderment, and the tall man lifted an eyebrow at her, a gesture that very clearly said, *You cut it close that time. Watch what you say the next time.*

She narrowed her brown eyes and gave her companion a withering glare, sending her own message: *Don't you dare look at me like that. I'm the one who fixed this situation so just leave me alone.*

With that she turned away from Rude's impassive glance with a toss of her hair and strode over to where Reno was beginning to get over his little giggling fit. "What's so funny?" she asked, still a little peeved after the look Rude had given her. She hated it when anyone, especially Rude, looked at her like she was nothing.

Reno turned a half-amused but strangely serious gaze to his fellow Turks. "What's so funny?" he echoed. "You two are. You know, I'm glad you two are my friends."

Elena's heart immediately melted, and she felt sudden tears sting her eyes. "Oh, Reno!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands over her heart. "That was such a nice thing to say! That's probably the kindest thing I've ever heard you tell anyone!"

Her flame-haired colleague rolled his eyes and snorted, but not before both Elena and Rude noticed the slight pink flush that came to his pale cheeks. "Don't get all overworked and mushy on me now, Elena. I didn't mean nothin' by it."

Undeterred by Reno's aloof attitude, Elena smiled sincerely. "Aw, Reno, you don't have to be embarrassed. Everybody has to have friends."

Reno shrugged like it didn't matter. "Whatever," was all he said. "Friendship is the most overrated idea on the face of the Planet. You can't define it; there's no way of telling who fits what criteria and why. It's just...pointless."

Elena scowled and put her hands on her hips. "Don't say things like that Reno! Friendship is defined by *personal* criteria, that's why not everyone meets everyone's standards and why some people drop friends as fast as they get them. We're all different; we can't all be judged by the same set of criteria."

Reno stared at her for a moment, then rolled his aquamarine eyes again. "Thanks for that lovely moment of enlightenment, Elena. I'm certainly on the road to spiritual salvation now." His face suddenly darkened, and his eyes became cold. "But speaking of friends, you guys certainly aren't very good ones, leaving me behind this morning."

Before Elena could protest, Rude stepped in. "Is it all going to come back to that, Reno?" he asked in a strangely terse tone. "It certainly didn't seem as if you had anything to complain about while we were gone."

Elena blinked in confusion as silence fell heavily in the air. Oddly enough, Reno made no snappy comeback to Rude's statement. Instead, he just stared at his friend with a half-amused, half-sympathetic look in his eyes. Sinking deeper into the chair, the wicker creaking as he did so, Reno drew one leg up and rested an elbow on it, the embodiment

of contemplation as his aquamarine gaze remained fastened on Rude, never wavering. For a few moments, Rude, or rather, Rude's sunglasses, stayed trained on Reno's eyes, but a sudden crash of thunder seemed to shatter the tall Turk's resolve, for he looked away from his friend and into the pouring rain. Elena was beside herself with confusion, her eyes darting from one friend to the next, completely baffled. What had just happened? Why did everyone get so quiet all of a sudden? Well, if she just waited for a while, someone was bound to say something...

Finally, three loud crashes of thunder later, Elena couldn't take it anymore. "Okay!" she exclaimed. "Did I miss something here?"

Reno didn't even glance at her. "Go away, Elena."

Her mouth dropped open. "W-What?"

Reno flicked his gaze briefly to her before turning back to Rude. "Go somewhere over there," he said, gesturing off-handedly to the other side of the deck, where the rain was senselessly beating a wet wooden rocking chair.

Elena glanced at the pitiful-looking chair, then turned back to Reno with a half-furious, half-hurt look on her face. "You want me to go sit over there in the rain? Why? What did I do?"

"Rude and I need to talk," Reno said shortly, still studying Rude and only paying minimal attention to Elena's protests.

"But why can't I—" she started to say.

"Guy talk," Reno snapped, losing patience. "Now go."

Elena opened her mouth to say something more, something to tell Reno how unfair he was being, but her throat had stopped working, and nothing but silence came forth. She looked to Rude for help, for comfort, for anything, but he was still staring out into the rain as if the conversation didn't interest him in the least bit. Some dark emotion stabbed at her heart. Never before had she felt so alone in her life.

*Fine*, she thought to herself glumly. *I know where I'm not wanted. I'll just go sit by myself...alone over there in that chair...out in the rain, out in the cold.*

With that, she stalked away, heels making lonely sounds of defeat on the decking as she crossed it and plopped down in the wet chair, her damp clothes and hair now sharing the suffering the piece of furniture had to endure from the ruthless rain. She folded her arms across her chest with grim resolve and tried not to let her loneliness carry her under.

But it wasn't easy.

Reno glanced in passing over to where Elena was sulking at the other end of deck,



sitting in the rain. A frown suddenly creased his handsome face. Maybe he had been a little...harsh with her.

*Naw...*

“Why did you send her away?” Rude suddenly asked, face still impassive as he gazed out at the rain.

Reno looked at him in surprise. “What?”

Rude didn't glance over at him, only kept staring at the waterfall that was pouring out of the gutter lining the roof of bar. The great tides of rainwater spewed forth from the mouth of the gutter and splattered the already-saturated grass below the decking that Rude and Reno now stood on.

“You hurt her feelings,” Rude continued in a monotone. “You know she doesn't like to be left out.”

One corner of Reno's mouth curled up into a small smile. “I know that. I'll apologize later. I just didn't think she would be very happy to hear what we're going to discuss, though.”

“And that would be what?” Rude asked calmly.

Reno stared at him for a moment with some indiscernible emotion flickering in his aquamarine eyes. “Tifa Lockhart,” he said softly.

Behind his sunglasses, Rude winced, but he maintained his code of silence and said not a word.

Reno sighed when Rude didn't reply. He hadn't really been expecting one, but still, it would have helped if his friend had at least said something that would have let Reno know what he was feeling. Reno didn't want to say anything that would hurt his friend too much.

“Look, Rude,” he began cautiously, staring out into the rain like his silent companion was doing. “We've known each other for a long time, you know. Don't you think that by now I know what bothers you and what doesn't? And things concerning Tifa Lockhart tend to get you all worked up.”

Reno glanced at his friend. Rude said nothing.

“Why are you still caught up on her, man?” Reno asked softly.

Rude was silent for a long time, watching the rain fall inches away from where he was standing. His light green eyes, hidden by his dark sunglasses, tracked the movements of choice raindrops as they plummeted from the dark heavens to strike the saturated earth.

From the angry, abusive skies they fell, seeking refuge and comfort within the womb of the warm earth, but they were immediately rejected and spit back out by the dirt and grass, both who had had their fair share of rain for the day. *A pity to come such a long way down, Rude thought, only to be rejected again and again, to float away endlessly and become lost in a puddle or a river, losing their shapes and themselves.*

Rude felt sorry for the raindrops. He knew how they felt. He knew what it was like to scale obstacle after obstacle, bumping shoulders with vicious opponents and sometimes being blown off course entirely. He knew what it felt like to see the finish line, the goal, the dream, looming in the distance. And Rude knew what it was like to trip over a little pebble and fall flat on his face, outstretched fingers inches away from the refuge that was so desperately sought.

Yes, Rude knew the plight of the raindrops, who fell such long way only to meet rejection. But he couldn't tell Reno that. He knew that his red-haired friend tried to empathize with Rude's unspoken emotions, but sometimes...he fell short. Reno just lacked the kind of selfless, father-like traits that were needed to open up and listen completely to what others were feeling. The late Tseng had had those traits, but Reno didn't. Rude could understand that, though. People like Tseng were rare and few, and Rude knew that the death of the former Turk Commander had been a crippling blow to the blue-suited organization...possibly even a death blow. Rude, Reno, and Elena were almost entirely lost without their warm-hearted assassin father to watch over them and listen to their deepest thoughts and feelings. Reno tried his best, but he just couldn't fill the hungry gap that Tseng had left behind. But, still, Rude had to give him a chance. Maybe he could understand...

Face impassive, Rude glanced at his friend, who was watching him with a carefully neutral expression, apparently not wanting to do or say anything that would make Rude clam up and become unresponsive, as was the tall Turk's nature to do.

"Why am I still caught up on her?" Rude echoed softly. "Because...I don't know why. I just am. It's like I can't escape from...her."

Reno shook his head slightly, strands of blood-red hair falling across his eyes. "But why her, Rude? She's a forbidden fruit, and you know it, buddy. She's already spoken for."

*That sure didn't seem to stop you, Rude thought with uncharacteristic harshness. But then again, it never does, does it?*

The poisonous words were there on the tip of his tongue, fiendish imps dancing in the fires of fury, begging to be spoken, but Rude had long ago conquered these demons. He bit back the stinging words that would have angered and even wounded his best friend. Instead, he said, "I know that, Reno. I knew that from the moment I laid eyes on her way back when Sector Seven was still...there. Cloud was never far from her, and I

could easily perceive that she had feelings for him, but that didn't stop me...I just don't know how to let her go, Reno."

"She doesn't even know how you feel, Rude," Reno said softly, staring at his friend's profile.

Rude shook his head slightly, his voice acquiring a tinge of sadness. "She doesn't need to know. Besides, it would only complicate things even more...than they are now."

Reno sat back in his chair, the wicker creaking in protest to his movement. "I suppose you think it's all my fault, don't you?" he asked quietly, but there was no stinging edge in his voice. He sounded more tired than anything else.

"I never said that, Reno," Rude replied, glad that the conversation had taken a different turn, even if it was the lesser of two evils. He had never liked discussing his feelings with others.

"But you implied it," Reno insisted, eyes faraway and misted as he stared out into the rain. "Don't put too many things past me, Rude. I'm a cold-hearted asshole, but I'm a *smart* cold-hearted asshole, and it's gotten me this far."

Rude didn't know what to say to that.

Silence hung in the air for a few moments before Reno suddenly asked, "Don't you wanna know what happened?"

Rude glanced over at his friend. "Whatever you want, Reno," he said quietly. "If you wish to talk about it, I'm here to listen."

"I know. You always are, but I'd understand if you don't wanna hear this."

"I doesn't matter to me," Rude deadpanned, feeling uncomfortable. He *did* want to hear this, but then again, he didn't.

Reno narrowed his eyes at his friend. "Okay, then, if it doesn't matter to you, then I'm going to start talking. Just remember, buddy, you dug your own grave by saying you had no opinion on the matter."

*Turks aren't supposed to have opinions*, Rude thought. *Old habits are hard to break, I'm afraid.*

For a moment, Reno floundered for words, something he never did, as Rude waited with suppressed expectation for the explanation that everyone in the bar had been practically begging for. When it didn't come immediately and laced with harsh or perverted overtones, as was the typical Reno style, he braved a glance at his friend and was surprised to see confusion and perplexity creasing his brow. Reno's eyes were misted and strangely troubled as he gazed out at the ill-fated raindrops, and Rude suddenly got the

idea that maybe Reno had forgotten he was there.

But then the redheaded Turk suddenly said, “Ya know, I don’t know what the hell happened in there, Rude.”

“Something must have,” Rude said quietly. *Something that upset Cloud so much that he felt his place in Tifa’s heart was threatened*, he added silently.

Reno laid his spiky head against the back of the chair, the blood-red strands of his hair dancing like flames against the white backdrop of the painted wicker. “Oh, hell yeah,” he said in response to Rude’s statement. “*Something* happened, definitely. I just don’t know what it was. Something...passed between us, and I don’t think that...” His voice trailed off.

“Don’t think that what?” Rude prodded him, though his heart was screaming at him to stop while he was ahead. *I can’t take this anymore*, it told him. *Certain words drop off of Reno’s wagging tongue, and I’ll shatter into a million pieces. Then what would you do?*

Reno, oblivious to Rude’s plight, shifted his gaze to his tall friend. “Things might be different,” he said softly. “And all because of what happened in there. Because of what happened between me and Tifa, and because of what Cloud saw.”

“And what did Cloud see?” Rude asked hollowly, staring at the wooden decking beneath his feet. The wood was a little rotten; maybe he should tell Tifa later to be careful when she walks over here...

Reno snorted. “Cloud saw something that very clearly gave him the wrong impression about the whole thing. I’m telling you the truth when I say that Spike is completely misinterpreting the situation. What he saw was...completely innocent.”

*Nothing is ever innocent with you, Reno. Stop dodging the question and just...tell me. I can handle it...maybe.*

“Innocent?” he echoed.

“Innocent,” Reno clarified, watching Rude’s reaction carefully. “Harmless, benign, not threatening in nature.”

“Cloud found it threatening,” Rude deadpanned.

“*Cloud* is an asshole,” Reno snapped, as if that statement would justify everything.

“Things are going to get rocky,” Rude warned.

“Of course they are,” Reno growled. “He’s part of AVALANCHE, and I’m a Turk. Things are always going to be rocky between us.”

“Yes, but things are going to be worse after what happened in there. We need to find

Reeve, and you and Cloud bickering isn't going to help our efforts."

"What are you trying to say, Rude?" Reno snapped, stiffening in his seat. "You blame me, don't you?"

"Blame you for what?"

"You're not helping the conversation, Rude!"

"That's because I'm not quite certain what exactly you're trying to tell me, Reno."

"I'm not trying to *tell* you anything," Reno snapped. He hesitated for a moment, studying Rude carefully, then said, "I guess, I'm just trying to warn you that—this thing with Tifa." He lowered his head, red ponytail flopping over one shoulder. "Something passed between us, and we connected somehow. I can't explain it, Rude, but it was real, whatever it was. I'm just gonna tell you that I intend to...take it further, I guess, though that's not the right way to phrase it."

"What about Cloud?" Rude asked, his own voice suddenly sounding very far away.

Reno suddenly shook his head so emphatically that his ponytail was whipped around to the other shoulder. "Cloud is an insensitive prick," he growled. "He shouldn't feel at all threatened by what he saw. It's not like that, Rude."

"So, you're saying you're not interested in Tifa at all?" Rude asked, afraid to hope. *Not like I stand a chance either way...*

Reno shook his head, watching his friend with shrewd eyes. "I don't think so. Not in the way you're saying. I mean, the woman's flat out gorgeous, but you already knew that, right?" He grinned.

One corner of Rude's mouth twitched. "Right," he agreed.

"But I'm not promising you anything," Reno rushed on. "I just don't know how things are going to turn out. Just...be prepared for anything, okay?"

"Sure," Rude deadpanned, his heart beating painfully in his chest. "But just promise me one thing, Reno: that you won't ever hurt her."

Reno nodded gravely. "I promise, Rude. You have my word."

On the other side of the decking, Elena forlornly held out one of her manicured hands, palm upwards, and watched as hundreds of little raindrops gathered there in her palm, all curled up and cozy against each other, sharing their space easily with one another and losing themselves in a single embrace. Millions of such raindrops had also soaked her suit and pants, clinging to her skin and hair as if trying to offer her comfort - comfort for the lonely woman in the lonely rocking chair sitting alone in the rain even though her

friends were not even ten feet away from her.

Shoving her saturated hair away from her face with her free hand, she glanced dimly over to where Reno and Rude were deep in conversation. Or rather, Reno was deep in conversation with the stoic Rude, who was gazing at the decking beneath his boots, his fine, strong back facing in Elena's direction. Looking at them, Rude in particular, Elena felt her heart begin to beat with an even more painful emotion than the loneliness she was feeling.

Quickly averting her chocolate brown eyes, Elena turned her gaze back to the falling raindrops that were inundating the city of Kalm, seeking a place to rest their weary, rejected souls in peace. Though the mixture of thunder and pouring rain prevented her from hearing a single word of her friends' conversation, Elena knew that Reno would only send her away if he and Rude were going to talk about one thing. Reno could normally discuss the lewdest, most twisted things without giving a damn who was listening, but Elena knew that the mention of a certain woman in front of Rude tended to make things get really uncomfortable, really fast, especially if Elena was present at the time. And Elena knew the name of that woman...

What Rude saw in Tifa Lockhart, she would always fail to see. So, the Final Heaven bartender was pretty, fought with her fists, and had big boobs, who cared? Okay, she was a nice, good person, too, but...that was beside the point! Besides, she belonged with Cloud—yeah, that was it! Rude knew that Tifa was probably in love with Cloud, and Cloud with her, so why did he insist on obsessing over her? He was just going to get his heart broken, and he deserved so much better...

*What am I thinking? Elena berated herself. Why am I so bothered by Rude liking Tifa Lockhart all of a sudden? It's been obvious for a while now that he had it big for her. Why is it starting to bug me now? Why?*

"Why?" she whispered to the falling raindrops, as if they could plummet to the earth and murmur in her ear the answer they had received from the heavens themselves.

Drawing her knees up to her chest and resting her head on them, Elena allowed her thoughts to drift to the stoic, seemingly emotionless man named Rude. When Tseng had first introduced her to him, there had been something about the tall, levelheaded Turk that caused something strange to stir in Elena. Maybe it was the flat yet soothing tones in his deep voice that were music to her ears even though they tended to frighten others. Or maybe it had been the warmth of his fingers brushing her palm as she shook hands with him. There had been something *right there* beneath the surface that had called to her, something behind those dark sunglasses that were custom made to hide the heart and its thundering emotions...

But whatever it had been, Elena hadn't dwelled on it. All she could think of then was

the Turks and Tseng. Everything she did, she did with Tseng in mind. Every test she took, every trial she underwent, she was constantly thinking, “What will Tseng think of this? Will he be impressed? How would he handle this?” Her earth, moon, and stars revolved around Tseng. To her, everything about him was perfect, everything from his long, silken black hair to his deep brown Wutainese eyes. He was a good leader, and he was a good friend. He was flawless, an idol. He was a god.

Then a demon, the god wannabe, a little being with big dreams, that horrible Sephiroth, had tumbled the celestial god from his pedestal in one swift swipe of his sword. Tseng’s body had already been cold in death when Reno, Rude, and Elena had rushed into the Temple of the Ancients after having received a call from Reeve saying that Tseng had stopped answering his cell phone. Every detail of the horrific scene was still fresh in her mind, never dying. She remembered Tseng’s body lying against the earthen wall, long legs out in front of him, chin on his chest, black hair spread out on either side of his face like the protective plumage of a raven-winged angel. But most of all, she remembered the deathly pale pallor of his skin and the ghastly wound on its chest that had stained his white shirt red with its never-ending flow of bloody tears.

Yes, she remembered it all; she remembered the beastly cry that had suddenly ripped its way out of Reno’s throat, echoing forever in the farthest recesses of the Temple. She recalled the way Rude had sagged against one of the pillars in disbelief, his limbs shaking almost uncontrollably before he regained his composure and crouched next to Reno at the fallen Tseng’s side. Elena had been the last to join them, running over and burying her face in Tseng’s shoulder, trying in vain to muffle her sobs while blubbering to Tseng’s dead body about how much she had cared for him, how much had meant to her, and how lost they would be without him. She didn’t know how long they had remained there, three Turks mourning the loss of their leader, their friend, their father, the man who had been their world. A man who would never walk, talk, breathe, smile, or laugh again. They were lost.

And when the Temple had started falling down around their ears due to the efforts of AVALANCHE, Reno, fearing for his life and the lives of his friends, had ordered a hasty retreat into the forest. So, they had abandoned Tseng’s body, left it to be buried with the Temple as its tomb, and they had escaped with their lives, but had all left pieces of their hearts behind at the god’s booted feet as sacrifices, silently begging him to forgive them for not being there when he needed them.

And so their world ended, and it never was the same again. The tyrannical, money-hungry Shinra Inc. fell not long after, and the three Turks, finally free of their cage, didn’t even bat an eyelash. They were finally released from Shinra’s control, fledglings testing their wings, but now it was the memory of Tseng that haunted them and kept them from taking flight. With no one to turn to and nowhere else to go, Elena clung desperately to Reno and Rude, her only two friends in the world. And so, she came to love them, despite

their faults. And she'd like to think that they loved and respected her, too.

When anyone asked her why she cared so much for the loud, rambunctious Reno and the silent, scary Rude, Elena could immediately make a huge list for them about all the traits in her two friends that she cherished and appreciated. But when someone asked her *how* she loved each of them, that was when she had trouble explaining. She could easily say that she loved Reno like a brother, for she knew that there would never really be anything else between her and Reno than sibling affection and constant bantering back and forth. But when she went to explain in what way she cared for Rude, she started to stumble over her words. She didn't love Rude in the same way that she did Reno. She couldn't say that Rude was like a brother to her because she knew that the thoughts she sometimes had about Rude were not at all sisterly. Elena had no idea why she felt that way; she just did.

Her feelings for Rude, whatever those were, apparently had either been nonexistent or had chosen to lie dormant during her first years with Shinra, when Tseng had been alive. But after his death and the fall of Shinra, Elena had felt her thoughts straying more and more to the tall, baldheaded Turk who hid his amazing liquid green eyes behind a pair of sunglasses. She found herself thinking about what might have been, about what they might have had if she had just...just...

*No use thinking about it now*, she thought sadly as she watched the raindrops fall from the weeping heavens. *It's obvious that he's still caught up over Tifa. I wouldn't be surprised if he's in love with her. Seems like everyone is already. How can I compete with someone like that? I can't, that's how.*

Elena was so caught up in her morbid thoughts that she almost fell out of her rocking chair when Reno suddenly came up behind the chair and yanked it back as hard as he could, causing Elena to become almost horizontal with the decking as her feet kicked at nothing but air. All she could see was Reno's smiling face and the ceiling of the porch.

"Reno!" she cried, holding onto the arms of the chair for dear life. "Stop that! Put the chair down!"

Reno grinned down at her as some of his red hair flopped into his eyes. "What are you doing sitting here in the rain, Laney?"

God, she *hated* it when he called her that. Reno came up with the *strangest* names for her.

"You sent me over here, remember?" she growled up at him, trying to remain as still as possible, lest she tip the chair over with her struggles. Reno still had the chair bent back so that it was balancing precariously on the back ends of its two rockers.

Reno smiled again, aquamarine eyes dancing with impish delight. "I did, didn't I?"



Sorry about that.”

“You’d best be sorry,” she growled at him good-naturedly, the laughter in his eyes sweetening up her sour mood.

Reno raised an eyebrow. “What was that, Elena dear? You weren’t just being impolite to me now, were you? You know, this chair is awful slippery...”

Elena’s eyes widened. “No, Reno!” she cried, tightening her death grip on the arms of the chair. “Don’t you dare drop me!”

“Leave her alone, Reno,” Rude suddenly spoke up from somewhere in front of Elena. She suddenly felt warm hands settle over her rigid ones on the arms of the chair. Her world pitched forward as Reno’s face disappeared from view. The chair rocked back to its rightful place, glad playtime was over, and Elena found herself staring right into Rude’s sunglasses.

“Oh!” she exclaimed, her cheeks flushing with surprise at finding him so close. “Thank you, Rude.”

He nodded politely and released his grip on the chair - and her hands - backing up until he stood a more comfortable distance from her, oblivious to the raindrops pounding on his broad back in search of a companion.

Elena suddenly remembered that she was supposed to be angry with them. “So,” she grumbled, folding her arms across her chest as Reno draped his long arms over the back of her rocking chair. “Have you two finished your little male bonding time? Can I be part of the Turks again now?”

Reno smiled at her and patted her on the head, something he did all the time because he knew she hated it. “Of course, Elena. You’ll always be part of the Turks.”

Elena smiled up at him, thankful for his considerate statement, a rarity for Reno. All three of them settled into a comfortable silence as they sat in the rain, alone together in the cold, not wanting to reenter the bar that they all felt they weren’t welcome in. Elena started to gather lonely raindrops in her palms again, giving them a place where they could be together for a short period of time before the water flowed over the edge of her hand and into her lap. Reno stood with his arms draped over the back of Elena’s rocking chair, being careful not to upset his friend’s puddles of raindrops. Rude looked at Elena and her raindrops with silent affection before turning away from his friends and looking out into the city of Kalm, which was in the process of being drowned by the angry heavens. He stood far away from the others so that he could be alone with his thoughts, but not so far away that they were denied the comfort of his presence, should they need it. All their thoughts were a million miles away.

Reno thought of Tifa and Mika.

Elena thought of Rude and Tseng.

But Rude thought of nothing. He was watching the raindrops.

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Author's Note:

Whew...finally finished. It took forever in a day, but I'm finally done. Sorry it took so long, but I had a Resident Evil series that I was trying to finish before I ran out of ideas. Anyways, thanks again to everyone who kept on my case to get on with the next chapter. You guys are the greatest!!

—*Catalina*

# Chapter Fifteen

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## *The Agonies of Having Emotions*

*“This sucks.” —Cloud Strife*

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*Mirror, mirror hanging on the wall  
 You don't have to tell me  
 Who's the biggest fool of all  
 Mirror, mirror I wish you  
 Could lie to me  
 And bring my baby back  
 Bring my baby back to me*

*“Mirror, Mirror”  
 —M2M—*

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“Must be nice,” Tifa told the chocobo as she held out gloved hands full of greens for him to devour. This particular chocobo was an attractive mountain bird with lovely green feathers that shimmered like gems when wet with dew. Tifa had bred him all by herself, and had named him Stefan after one of her childhood friends from Nibelheim. The chocobo was, of course, very happy to see her and immediately warked, rushing over on the slightly damp ground of his pen and bowing his head to eat the greens from her hands.

Despite her melancholy mood, Tifa smiled as his beak tickled her palms. She was glad that when she and Cloud had built the Final Heaven bar in Kalm, they had had enough room to put in a small pen for eight chocobos in the back. Sure, things tended to get a little cramped, especially when everyone was together like this, but Tifa considered it well worth the effort. She loved chocobos, and she loved having her friends around.

So why wasn't she happy now?

Her smile faded as her thoughts began to spiral downward into darkness. God, why did life have to be so complicated sometimes? Couldn't she be allowed a little smidgeon of happiness and serenity after all she had been through? For a while there, she had thought she was happy. She had her bar, she had her friends, she had her health...and she had Cloud. Happiness for all eternity had been right in front of her face sitting on a silver platter, but she missed out on it due to lack of valor, due to tender words that she kept locked inside of her. How many times had she and Cloud been sitting alone, talking peacefully as if the whole world didn't exist, just enjoying the comfort of each other's presence? And how many times had that Silence fallen, the particular breed of Silence that just screams for words to be spoken, but not just any words, oh no, *The Words*, the ones that would change everything, the ones that would make or break the future of their

relationship. One step in the wrong direction, one word neglected, one word too many, and her world could have come crashing down around her ears.

She hadn't had the courage to speak the words then, and now she regretted that more than anything. Her shyness seemed so petty now that things were getting turbulent. Would it really have taken much out of her to just look Cloud in those eternally beautiful Mako blue eyes of his and tell him everything, all her thoughts, all her feelings for him? Would it have killed her to do so?

No, it wouldn't have, not then. But now, oh, now it might be a death sentence to go treading onto such thin ice when the lake beneath their feet was so angry and churning. And the fact that their great lake of unspoken thoughts and desires now had another person balancing on its precarious surface was going to make the tangled web into a prodigious labyrinth with a menacing Minotaur lurking around every corner.

*Reno...*

What had gotten into her then, what had she seen in those eyes that had made her heart and soul respond in such a fashion? It had been like looking in a mirror and seeing her own shadows and pains reflected with equal intensity. And her emotions, rejoicing at having found someone to know their grief, had lurched out desperately to touch that aching soul, to seal that wound. But surely it had been a one-time thing...

*No, something in Tifa's mind sneered. It most definitely wasn't a one-time thing. It'll happen again, rest assured. Every time the name of "Mika" is spoken, that wound in that cold, callous man will begin to bleed again, and you, being the over-sensitive, do-gooder that you are, will stumble over your own two feet trying to help ease his suffering. And in doing so, you will dig your own grave by pushing away the one you've been in love with your entire life. Every time you touch Reno's face with gentleness, you widen the rift between you and Cloud. Every time you pull him into your arms, you flood the rift with water. And every time you stroke that fiery hair with such tender hands, you fill the rift with venomous snakes. Soon that rift will turn into a pit, and that pit into a canyon, and that canyon into an ocean; it will become larger and larger until the one with the Mako blue eyes will be as unreachable as the stars themselves. Pity...*

"No," Tifa murmured softly, the hands holding the greens for Stefan shaking a bit. "It can't be that way."

But she knew in the darkest region of her heart that things were rapidly plummeting down in that direction. And she was scared, God, was she ever scared. Scared of what could happen if she said or did the wrong things to the wrong people. Scared of hurting either Cloud or Reno. And most of all, the fear that formed the basis of all her other fears was the terrifying prospect of losing Cloud.

She had never thought of it as a possibility before, especially after all they had been

through together. She recalled the silly things he had done for her, or had said to her. Dressing up as a girl to get her out of Don Corneo's greasy paws. Braving those precarious cliffs in the Da Chao mountains to pick a flower that had caught her eye. Allowing himself to be dragged on stage at the Gold Saucer during Enchantment Night. Fumbling for his words as he tried to tell her all the "things" he had planned to say to her.

She had taken for granted that he would always be there, that she would always wake up every morning and come downstairs to see him sweeping the floor or building pyramids with the shot glasses, his bottom lip caught gently between his teeth as he concentrated, knowing that he would catch holy hell if he so much as cracked one of the glasses. Golden hair shimmering in the overhead lights. Blue eyes lighting up as he saw her standing in the doorway. The grim, hard line of his mouth turning up in a smile as he looked at her sheepishly.

God, what would she do without him? Wither up and die, surely. Tifa had failed to realize just how much her world revolved around Cloud until she stood face to face with the hideous possibility that she might actually lose him. And she would be the one to blame. It would be all her fault.

*But what do I do?* she wondered futilely. *I want nothing more than to be with Cloud forever, but Reno...I can't just leave him like that, with that horrible wound festering inside him like a sickness. It'll kill him one day; I know it will. He has to get help before he's gone to the point of no return... But Cloud...*

Everywhere she turned in this endless labyrinth of emotions, she ran into that godforsaken Minotaur. She needed to help Reno; she *wanted* to help him. Something inside told her that this mysterious "Mika" was the key to every unseen pain, every unseen grievance that plagued the fiery-haired Turk. But in helping Reno save his own life, she knew that she ran of the risk of driving Cloud out of her life. She was torn. What should she do? The consequences on either side of the coin were heavy, but she knew that this could very well be a lose-lose situation. There was no in-between; she couldn't choose by not choosing. She had done enough of that in her life...

So many decisions. Against Reno's pain and suffering, against his unspoken need to release his demons, she weighed the frigid landscape of Cloud's eyes as he stared at her. Again, she saw the water dripping down his face like tears, his eyes cold and heartless, his voice flat and toneless. She never wanted to experience that again. But then Reno's face and eyes loomed in front of her. The scars—from what? And that horrendous internal scar, that gangrenous wound deep in his soul that began to gush again as she spoke that forbidden name. And again she heard Reno whimpering deep in his throat as he tossed and turned in the dark of the night. Again she saw Cloud's cold, dead eyes.

She couldn't take this anymore.

A wark suddenly jolted her from her dark reverie. Tifa's eyes came back from their journey to the Twilight Zone, the place where they tried to make sense of the labyrinth and dodge the Minotaur. It was then that she realized that Stefan had long since finished devouring the greens in her palms and was now nibbling at her hair in a comforting fashion, cooing softly, as if he sensed her pain. His green feathers tickled her cheek.

"Must be nice," she whispered to him, patting his head gently as she felt a lone tear roll down her cheek. "I wish I were you, so simple, living life without all the agonies of having emotions. Must be nice..."

\* \* \* \* \*

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*Why did I let you walk away  
When all I had to do was  
Say I'm sorry  
I let my pride get in the way  
And in the heat of the moment  
I was to blame  
I must be stupid, must be crazy  
Must be out of my mind  
Now in the cold light of the day I realize*

*"Mirror, Mirror"*  
—M2M—

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The blades of the fan spun slowly on the ceiling, stirring the dead air of the room and sending small breezes down to the man lying on the bed. The reluctant wisps of cool air brushed across his pale, inanimate face, trying again and again to ease the tension written in every feature, every muscle. They swept over the grim, hard line of his mouth, trying to get the jaw to unclench and the lips to soften. When they failed there, the breezes whispered over the muscles around the eyes, which were narrowed in some warped form of inward concentration. Again, they gently touched the dark blond eyelashes, whispered through the thin eyebrows, trying to get the muscles to relax and make the man's expression less forbidding.

But Cloud was in no mood to relax, and the breezes soon gave up and dissipated into nothing, leaving the burden of their job to their descendants that were already being birthed from the fan's spinning blades.

Outside, thunder still rumbled with contentment at its own strength, beside itself with narcissism as it gave forth its mighty roars. Cloud snorted in annoyance and rolled onto his side, making sure he was facing away from the window and the rain was that was pounding against it in such an aggravating fashion. But now that he couldn't occupy

himself by watching the fan blades spin around and around, he had nothing else to do but study the swirling grain of the door that was clear to his Mako-enhanced vision even though the door itself was a considerable distance away. Cloud traced the spiraling swirls of the door's wood for as long as he could, but then his emotions caught up with him again, and he flipped back onto his back, giving up his effort at distracting himself.

He was very ashamed, not to mention embarrassed, for the way he had acted in front of his friends. Cloud knew that he had many, many faults, but losing complete control of his temper like that had never been a very serious one of them. The only time he could recall that he had let his emotions wield total power over his actions was when he had desperately rushed into the Nibelheim Mako Reactor and impaled the maniacal Sephiroth with Zack's<sup>1</sup> sword. Back then it had worked to his advantage—sort of—but now it was making him look childish and out-of-control, the last thing anyone needed at the moment.

*And all because I saw Reno and Tifa together like that,* he thought sourly, the vivid image of them in each other's arms once again rising up before his unfocused eyes like the ghastly visage of Lucifer in the pits of hell.

Shaking his head violently and barely containing the urge to yank at his hair, Cloud shoved the picture from his mind and strove to concentrate all his thoughts on planning, something he had failed to do when he had had everyone together.

*Okay, he told himself. Vincent and Yuffie are back and safe and are not missing any body parts. Good. I pissed Yuffie off, but she'll get over it. Memo to self: don't call her a brat again. Now...Reeve. Still missing. Where could he be? No earthly clue.*

*I shouldn't have left her alone with Reno...*

*No, Cloud! Focus! Reeve! Okay, find the Running Man. Where's the Running Man? Hell if I know.*

*I should have known Reno would take advantage of her...*

*Damn me! Running Man! Now, Rude saw him in the remains of Hojo's lab. Would he go back there? It would be pretty stupid of him to do so, but it's all we have to go on. We're not going to go on another ghost ship chase...*

*What will I do without her?*

Cloud let out a cry of frustration that was happily mimicked by the rumbling thunder. He couldn't concentrate on anything! One of his closest friends was missing, probably in the hands of a madman or maybe even dead by now, and all he could think about was one

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<sup>1</sup> This was "Zax" originally, but Catalina changed it in the Fanfiction.net upload of *Sink*. Zax is what Zack is called in Japan, and many early western fans also referred to him as that. —*Editor*

woman! What did that tell him? Gee, well, maybe he was in love...

And he was, he knew he was. Would there have ever been anyone else for him? Aeris had been a possibility for a while, but now she was dead. Sure, he missed her a great deal and sometimes it hurt even to think about her and all she had done for them, but all along, something inside him had told him that Tifa Lockhart was the only woman for him. Maybe it was the memory at the water tower from so long ago that kept this thought pounding through his head, or maybe it was the knowledge that he had gone off to join SOLDIER just to get her to notice him. Then again, it very well could have been the fact that she had remained faithfully at his side when he had had Mako poisoning, basking him in the warm comfort of her presence even though he had no recollection of her being there. She had braved the voices and fury of the Lifestream for him, all to help him rediscover himself, the Cloud Jeremy<sup>2</sup> Strife that he had thought was lost forever, lost into the horrible servitude of being a mere Sephiroth-clone, the puppet Jenova had believed him to be. Tifa had taught him to believe in himself, in the memories they had together. She had taught him how to feel, to smile, to cry, to...love.

And now she was fading out of his life, it seemed, being sucked into the abyss by a fiery-haired demon to which lies and treachery and deceit meant nothing. Love meant nothing to Reno. Devotion meant nothing to Reno. Tifa as a person meant nothing to Reno. All the redheaded Turk was interested in was her body, with its generous curves and creamy skin. That's all Reno was ever interested in. A man like that didn't know the meaning of the word love; to him, love was synonymous with lust, with carnal desire. Such a man would defile Tifa, taint her with his poison. Cloud couldn't let that happen.

*God, what am I thinking?* he wondered. *Maybe I'm overreacting completely. Maybe what I saw didn't mean anything to either of them. But is there any other logical explanation for it? Who does Reno think he is, moving in on my...*

*And who do you think you are, Strife?* a voice in the back of his mind suddenly sneered. *You're treating the one you love most as if she's some sort of possession, a cherished item your macho defense mechanism refuses to let go of because you think it belongs to you and you alone. What kind of person does that make you? A coward, that's what! You had your chance to make her your companion for the rest of your life. For a year you danced around your emotions, filled with uncertainty and ambivalence, wimping out when you had just gotten the courage to ask her what you've probably been planning to ask her your entire life. You were on top of the world, and you refused to see the beauty that was all around you, refused to submit to its majesty because you thought it was too good to be true. And now look what happened. You missed the boat, buddy, and now you're drowning in the cruel sea, all alone. Don't you think all the other fish were just waiting for you to do something like that so they could have an opportunity to hoist themselves up onto the boat with the sea goddess? Man, you really screwed*

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<sup>2</sup> For some reason Cloud's made-up middle name was changed to "Jacob" in the FanFiction.net version of this chapter, but not on the AngelFire version. It's still "Jeremy" in both versions of Chapter 7. Odd. —Editor



*up this time...*

It was times like this that Cloud wished that Sephiroth had been right, that Cloud was only a puppet who had no emotions, who only pretended to be sad or angry. A puppet, a clone to whom tears came easily but without meaning. Cloud wished he felt nothing. He wished he were cold inside, his soul a frozen landscape of hollow thoughts and no feelings whatever. He wished he was heartless and aloof, his eyes empty and icy. Sort of like Vincent.

But no such luck.

Shifting his weight slightly on the soft mattress, Cloud rolled onto his side and growled into the pillow, "This sucks."

And the thunder rumbled in agreement.

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Author's Note:

Fairly short, really crappy chapter. Well, I couldn't just leave Cloud and Tifa hanging like that! Don't worry, though, more Vincent and Yuffie in the next chapter. You have my word!!! ^\_^ Thanks to anyone who is reading!

—Catalina

# Chapter Sixteen

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## *The Stuff Nightmares Are Made Of*

*“And he’s about as interesting as a pile of bricks,  
so who suffered more, huh?” —Yuffie Kisaragi*

---

*If there’s a way to infiltrate you*

*Sway your mind and complicate you*

*I’m gonna crash into your world*

*And that’s no lie*

*“Violet”*

*—Savage Garden—*

---

“Ow! Stupid chocobo!” Yuffie cried, clutching her punctured hand to her chest. “That hurt, you dumb bird-brain!”

Butterfly just warked loudly and turned her face away from the indignant girl at the front of her pen, refusing to acknowledge the presence of the master who had left her to stew in the rain for an entire day.

“Gawd!” Yuffie exclaimed, putting her hands on her hips. “It’s not like I meant to leave you behind, dummy! Besides, you had Lamia with you keep you company. Look at me! All I had to keep me company for the past day was Vincent Valentine! And he’s about as interesting as a pile of bricks, so who suffered more, huh?”

Butterfly just stared at her with her big blue chocobo eyes.

Yuffie smirked at the bird. “That’s what I thought. Yeah, you’d better shut up. Who’s the dumb one now?”

Butterfly blinked at her.

Yuffie sighed, leaning against the gate of the pen. “Yeah, yeah, I know, I know. The idiot ninja girl who’s standing here talking to her chocobo like the bird-brain could actually answer back—that’s who’s the retard, right?”

Butterfly warked in agreement, swishing her feathered tail back and forth proudly as if it was the plumage of a peacock rather than just several plain blue feathers.

Yuffie scowled at the azure bird, but started digging through the bag of greens hung near the door. “You know, Butt-butt,” she said conversationally, using her charming pet

name for her chocobo. “You’d better watch what you say to me, or I’ll just ask Cid to feed you from now on, and you know how inconsistent he is with his feedings. He’s worse than Barret, you know.”

Butterfly smartly ignored Yuffie’s babbling, more interested in what Yuffie was going to dig out of the bag than in any lecture the girl was giving her. She was still sticking stubbornly to the back wall of her pen, like she always did when she was being standoffish with Yuffie. But the young ninja knew that as soon as she had one of the magical greens in her hands, Butterfly would be stumbling over her feet trying to be her friend again.

The girl yanked a Curiel green out of the bag and smiled at Butterfly, waving the leafy sustenance in the air enticingly. The blue chocobo immediately perked up, her foul mood starting to evaporate as her appetite got the best of her.

“Lookee here!” Yuffie sang cheerfully. “A yummy, tasty green for my favorite chocobo! Hmmm...should I give it to her or not?”

“I think she’ll take your hand off if you don’t,” a deep voice suddenly said.

Yuffie screamed in shock and whirled around, the Curiel green falling from her hand and into Butterfly’s pen, where it was immediately consumed by a very contented blue chocobo.

“Vinnie Valentine!” Yuffie bellowed, angry gray eyes fastened on the dark figure that was standing in the threshold of the door leading into the chocobos’ barn. “You scared the living crap out of me! If you ever do that again, I’m gonna run over there and smack you upside your head so hard you won’t know what hit you!”

Vincent didn’t even blink or show the least bit of interest in what Yuffie had been blathering about. She could have been rattling on about the price of tea in Junon for all the attention he seemed to be paying her. Not even bothering to reply to her tirade, he simply moved away from the threshold and padded across the hay-covered floor of the chocobos’ barn. Yuffie, who was trying to desperately stop her heart from pounding right out of her chest, glared at the dark man indignantly as he brushed past her without a word.

“Vinnie!” she snapped, putting her hands on her narrow hips and realizing belatedly that her borrowed shorts had begun to slide again. She hurriedly hitched them up and continued, “I was talking to you, Vincent! The polite thing to do is answer back, you know!”

Still refusing to reply, the dark gunslinger strode over the pen that housed Lamia, his chocobo. Only seconds after he had reached the front of her pen, a soft wark could be heard as Lamia roused herself from her resting spot on the hay-softened floor and rushed over to greet her master. Vincent leaned against the gate to the pen and patted the ebony bird gently on the head with his normal hand, pale, naked fingers stroking the soft

feathers lightly. Lamia cooed softly and started nibbling on Vincent's jet-black hair, which was still hanging majestic and loose around his head.

Yuffie stared at the two of them for a second before sighing. "You're so lucky," she told Vincent.

"However so?" he asked without looking at her.

"Your chocobo is so cool," she lamented, shooting a venomous glare at where Butterfly was combing her feathers with her beak. "My chocobo is being a...well, you know what she's being."

Vincent didn't reply. He pulled a bag of greens off the shelves next to Lamia's pen and threw a couple of bundles into the chocobo's pen, where they landed on the ground right in front of the large bird. Lamia cooed her thanks to her master, and immediately began to devour the greens as Vincent looked on, his long arms draped over the wooden gate and one booted foot hooked into the space between the wooden boards.

Yuffie leaned thoughtfully against Butterfly's pen, forgetting that she was supposed to be angry at her chocobo. She fell into staring at Vincent, her mind light years away from the barn. Vincent's still had found nothing to tie his hair back with, and the soft-looking black tresses shimmered in the dim light that the lanterns provided the barn with. He stood watching his chocobo with a calm, almost serene expression on his face, red eyes downcast so that his long eyelashes were all the more obvious now that the brilliant majesty of his garnet eyes didn't distract from them. The man shifted slightly, lean muscles flexing underneath his loose covering of clothes. Now that she saw him standing instead of sitting, Yuffie realized that the shirt and pants he wore were actually a few sizes too big for him. The black pants sort of bunched up around the ankles, and the collar of the shirt hung low enough to expose his collarbone and a blessedly small section of his well-muscled chest.

All in all, he was a sight for sore eyes. He looked almost...normal.

So enraptured Yuffie was with the uniqueness of her companion's appearance that she didn't notice that she had been staring at him until she saw cool garnet eyes locked onto her gray ones, staring back.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, turning bright red and floundering for words. Why did this always happen with Vincent? It seemed he was always catching her staring at him like a total moron.

"Um," she said, trying to make up for her little faux pass. "Whose shirt is that?" she suddenly blurted. "It's too big."

"Rude's," Vincent answered calmly, undeterred by her bluntness.

Yuffie lifted an eyebrow. “Are you sure?”

“He’s the one that gave it to me. Why?”

“Half of the buttons are missing,” Yuffie responded, proud of her observation. “Rude would never have a shirt with missing buttons in his wardrobe.” She pointed matter-of-factly to the bottom of Vincent’s shirt. “See there.”

Vincent nodded. “I noticed.” He didn’t say anything more.

Yuffie resisted the urge to stamp her foot in frustration. Vincent was so freakin’ hard to talk to! “Well?” she prompted. “What happened to it?”

“Rude lent it to Reno one day. In a drunken stupor, Reno got the bottom of it caught in a door, and, instead of opening the door and pulling it out like any sober person would have, he yanked on it until the shirt came free of the door, hence the missing buttons.”

Yuffie placed her hands on her hips and grinned at Vincent smugly. “See!” she said. “Now, was that so hard? You could have just said that from the beginning and it would have saved me a lot of breath.”

“And why would I have wanted to do such a thing?”

Yuffie scowled, not sure whether or not Vincent was insulting her. “Because if I lose all my precious breath, I can’t talk!”

“What a pity that would be,” Vincent said, turning away from her and starting to pet Lamia again.

Yuffie’s gray eyes widened, and she raised her fists, about to go off on him, but then she suddenly sighed and dropped her hands at her sides. “You know what, Vinnie, just punch yourself really hard in the shoulder right now. I’m too sore and tired to go over there and do it.”

“What happened to your hand?” Vincent asked suddenly, still not looking at her.

The girl blinked dumbly for a couple of seconds before she realized what Vincent was talking about. “Oh? My hand? Butterfly-oh my god, you stupid chocobo! You made me bleed!”

And sure enough, the hand that Butterfly had pecked with her beak earlier had a small droplet of crimson blood welling up in the puncture wound and starting to dribble down the side of Yuffie’s hand. Between fighting with Butterfly and arguing with Vincent, Yuffie had failed to notice her injury. But now that she beheld the damage her chocobo had done, the little hole in her hand stung like crazy, and Yuffie was definitely not happy about it. Her temper vanished in an instant.

Butterfly warked in alarm and scampered to the back of her stall as Yuffie kicked the pen's door with one booted foot. "Dumb bird!" she cursed angrily. "As if I don't already have enough holes and bruises on my body, you had to go and add one more! Are you happy now, huh?! Well, guess what? How would you like to find out what it's like not to eat for *two* days instead of one, or maybe...two weeks! How would you like that, huh?!"

"It's not her fault, Yuffie," Vincent said flatly, his calm voice easing the violent words that still hung in the air.

"Great! And now Vinnie's siding with the damn chocobo!" she raged, turning her scowling face to her dark companion. "Thanks for making my day end just perfectly, Vincent!" Somewhere in the back of her mind, Yuffie knew that she was taking out her stress and worries on Vincent, but she was far too aggravated to really notice much of anything at the time.

Vincent, of course, showed not a shred of emotion in response to Yuffie's outburst. He gave Lamia's head one last pat, the kind of resigned gesture one makes when they're about to make an exit from a situation suddenly turned awkward. Vincent placed the bag of greens back on the shelf and started to walk away, his blue-black hair shimmering in the lantern-lit barn.

All of Yuffie's anger immediately evaporated. *Crap!* she thought. *I did it again! Leave it to me to chase him away just when he might have started to get chatty. Damn me! Why can't I do anything right? Now he probably thinks I'm Super PMS Woman...*

But, to Yuffie's surprise, instead of walking towards the barn door, Vincent strode silently over to where she was shifting uncomfortably in front of Butterfly's pen. Before she could react or open her mouth, his claw reached out and took gentle hold of her injured hand, lifting it up in front of him so he could see it better in the light. A thin stream of blood was still running from the small puncture hole like a liberated imp, and Vincent suddenly produced a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped away the red stream before it could drip onto the barn floor.

"The blood should clot in a little while," he said calmly, wrapping the handkerchief around the small wound and tying it there.

"Um, thanks," Yuffie muttered, not knowing what else to say. Having Vincent this close to her, touching her, was making her dizzy. There was so little space between their bodies that she was practically standing on his feet, the warm closeness of his presence soothing her in ways that were outside physical comprehension. The clean smell of soap drifted from his unbound hair, and Yuffie barely caught herself in time when she found herself leaning closer to Vincent, trying to breathe in his scent even more deeply. The man was lightly running his fingers over the tender flesh surrounding Yuffie's puncture wound, each unconscious brush of his callused fingertips sending waves of pleasure coursing

through Yuffie's body.

*He keeps doing that, she thought giddily. And I'm going to have to beat a hasty retreat out of here.*

She felt a mixture of relief and disappointment when Vincent suddenly stopped his ministrations, but her heart suddenly leapt up into her throat when she felt the fingers of his human hand brush against her bruised cheek with startling gentleness.

"Ow," she said automatically, more out of surprise from his caress than any pain she was in. The bruise had actually stopped hurting long ago.

"Forgive me," Vincent apologized in his typical monotone, his soft breath whispering gently across her skin as his warm fingers brushed over her bruise again. She was staring right up into his face, her punctured hand still gripped loosely in his claw.

"No," Yuffie replied hastily to Vincent's apology. "You didn't hurt me. I was just surprised, that's all."

Vincent didn't respond, only continued to run his fingers over her bruised cheek. Yuffie's head was swimming with the intoxication of having him so close, and she was having a difficult time getting her thoughts straight. She kept thinking about how warm Vincent's fingers were, or how the light from the lanterns flickered in the depths of his garnet eyes like fires in the night. His lips were very slightly parted as he studied her bruise, for some reason making him look too vulnerable for a man of his age. A lock of blue-black hair suddenly flopped over his right eye, and he tossed his head unconsciously to put it back in its rightful place.

*Oh my God, Yuffie thought dumbly. He's absolutely gorgeous! How come I never noticed that before? I wonder what he thinks of me? Does he... No, Yuffie! Get those thoughts out of your head right now! This is not the time to be getting a crush on Vincent Valentine! He's a grown man... and you're just a girl. It can never be...*

"Does it still hurt?" Vincent suddenly asked.

Yuffie blinked. "Um...does what still hurt?"

"Your bruise," Vincent answered calmly, garnet eyes not even flickering in her direction.

"Oh!" Yuffie exclaimed, feeling like an idiot. "No, not too much anymore, I mean, you know." She laughed weakly. "Guess the Brother of Battle was gentle with me, huh?"

Vincent's eyes suddenly fastened onto hers in surprise. "You remembered that?" he muttered, fingers still hovering over her bruise.

Yuffie nodded. "Of course, Vincent. It's not like I never listen to what you say. You

said the Brother of Battle had given me a kiss.”

Vincent continued to stare, a strange emotion flickering in the crimson depths of his eyes.

“So,” Yuffie floundered after letting the silence drag on for a few more seconds. “Who exactly was the Brother of Battle anyways? You said you’d tell me.”

For a moment, Vincent’s garnet eyes remained locked onto hers with a gentle intensity, but then he suddenly averted them, apparently finding the wall more interesting at the moment. “I’ll tell you later, Yuffie.”

Yuffie scowled at his profile. “No fair, Vinnie. You said the same thing back at that horrible place with that...green light.” She repressed the urge to shudder, barely. “C’mon, Vinnie! Tell me!”

Vincent stared at her, his fingers suddenly brushing her cheek lightly. “I’ll tell you,” he promised. “If you’ll tell me what song you were singing last night.”

Yuffie blinked, horribly confused for one second, but then she flushed in embarrassment when she realized what he was talking about. “You mean, when I was singing in the shower?” she stammered. “You were listening?”

Amusement suddenly flickered in Vincent’s eyes, even as a lock of black hair suddenly tried to hide that emotion from her view. “It’s not like I never listen to what you say, Yuffie,” he said softly.

The young girl’s eyebrows shot upwards, and a smirk came to her face. “Oh my god! Vinnie made a funny! Vinnie made a funny!”

Vincent cast his gaze away, looking uncharacteristically bashful, and he gave a short peal of rumbling laughter that came from deep in his chest and never entered his throat. Though he never cracked a smile once, Yuffie perceived a strange relaxation in his demeanor that she would never dream of finding in Vincent. Was he comfortable around her? Wow, that would be a first. The notion of Vincent Valentine actually relaxing and “chilling” for a change was as inconceivable as Cid surviving without cigarettes for five minutes.

Unfortunately, his relaxed state didn’t last for long. His gaze suddenly shifted back to her face, so quickly, in fact, that it actually startled her. Her body suddenly froze up as a rabbit’s does when it senses danger. A dark shadow seemed to fall over Vincent’s face, subtly contorting his features until he seemed more like a creature that was to be feared than pitied. The shade of his eyes could suddenly be more accurately described as “demon red” instead of “garnet.” A mass of uneven bangs suddenly rushed forward to fall over one eye, as if trying to prevent Yuffie from seeing what lay in those fiery depths. But that red eye, that one red eye, still glared out at her from between spaces in the strands of midnight



hair, the crimson glow refusing to let up its soundless assault. She was suddenly all too aware of the fact that her hand was still gripped in his claw, about how wickedly sharp the digits of the false appendage were...

Yuffie let out a startled gasp as Vincent suddenly moved past her, fingers falling away from where they had been hovering close to her cheek. Later on that night, when she would be fighting sleep, fighting the nightmares, Yuffie would reflect on that one moment as Vincent moved past and away from her. She would realize with a start that she had memorized every single detail about that one motion. She would remember how his human fingertips, callused from all kinds of hardships and labor that he had been faced with in his lifetime, brushed like a ghost's whisper across her face, just under her bruise, one last time. She would remember his long blue-black hair tickling her bare shoulder as he strode past so coldly, so suddenly. She would remember the sound his rustling clothes made, the sudden whiff of clean soap that drifted to her from his body as he moved past her. She would remember even minute detail of his passage, down to the soft fabric of his borrowed shirt, to the aching void in front of her that Vincent had previously occupied.

Then, just like that, the moment was gone. She was facing empty air, her hands limp at her sides, her eyes overbright as they stared at the spot where Vincent Valentine had been standing just a second before. She could hear him moving away towards the door of the barn, his boots only making the faintest noises on the ground as he moved like a phantom in a dream.

Her next actions were on pure reflex. Somewhere in the back of her rational mind, she knew that Vincent had left suddenly for a reason, and that reason was probably to be alone with whatever dark emotions she had glimpsed in those crimson orbs before he made his great escape. Her common sense told her that the man with those eyes of hellish fire was a *dangerous* man, an assassin, a murderer. The logic of her human mind told her that she needed to be deathly afraid of Vincent Orion Valentine.

But Yuffie Pristina Kisaragi, daughter of Kira Ayami Kotori and Lord Godo Kisaragi, had never been known for her common sense. Her heart was at the controls now—her heart was pulling the strings to make her dance, and her blessed, bleeding heart told her that she needed to stop him, that something was wrong with him. Her heart said that Vincent needed her help.

“Hey!” she cried, her own voice sounding far away as she whirled around. “Vincent! Where are you going?”

“Sleep,” came the flat, cold answer. No life in his words at all. Just sharp sounds that were soon lost in the air of the barn. He never once stopped walking.

“Oh,” Yuffie said, feeling rejected. “But I thought we were going to talk about my song...”

*No! What are you doing, fool girl?! You can't tell him about that song! Are you crazy?!*

“Later,” was all Vincent said. His hair danced a little goodbye waltz for her as he flung open the door leading into the bar and vanished, the wooden door slamming violently behind him.

Then Yuffie was alone, and all was quiet. She lowered her head in dejection, a few wayward strands of brown hair coming out of her ponytail to flutter lonely in the air in front of her bowed head. Her lower lip suddenly trembled, and she bit down hard on the pink flesh in anger of her own weakness. Her view of the hay-covered ground suddenly became blurry as unexpected tears sprung into her stormy gray eyes.

“No!” she suddenly whisper-screamed, clenching her hands into fists, her punctured hand protesting loudly. “You *will not* cry! You *will not* cry!” she told herself fiercely though clenched teeth. “You are not a baby anymore! You are a young woman, and you are not going to cry like a sissy!”

*Sure, you big baby, tell yourself that all you like! You know you won't be able to do it! Go ahead and cry your little eyes out! You were just snubbed! He can't stand being around you...*

Yuffie hissed under her breath and covered her face with her hands, pressing back against her tightly-shut eyes as if that harsh pressure would stop the tears that were threatening to flow out like raindrops forsaken by their respective heavens. Her breaths were coming thick and ragged, and her entire body was shaking from head to toe.

*God, what is wrong with me?! He's just a man! He's just one man! He has issues! It was nothing personal, you big wuss! Pull yourself together!*

Despite the way she had been treated by her master in the recent past, Butterfly just couldn't cower at the back of her pen while her rider was shaking and trembling in the middle of the barn. The blue chocobo cooed softly, her big eyes alight with the chocobo version of concern as she took a cautious step towards the gate of her pen, closer to Yuffie's quivering form. In the pens on either side of Butterfly, Vincent's chocobo, Lamia, and Cid's green chocobo, Jet, also cooed in an attempt to ease the soul aches of the young girl who smelled of suffering and tears.

But Yuffie didn't hear the soothing voices of the birds behind her. She suddenly dropped her hands away from her face, wetness glistening on the palms as the lantern light struck the tears she hadn't been able to prevent. She raised her face up so that the light also glinted off the two glittering, silver tracks on her cheeks.

“Vincent,” she said softly, her voice somehow rising above the sympathetic cooing of the chocobos. “What's wrong with you, Vincent? Why are you like that? Why? I don't understand you, Vincent. For a moment there, you were almost human again. Why did you return back to the monster you think you are? Why? I don't understand, Vincent

Orion Valentine. I just don't understand..."

Silence descended once again as Yuffie's words died in the air. All was quiet for two seconds before Yuffie spoke again, her voice ringing out softly, without wavering or trembling—the strong voice of a woman.

"Without you beside me tonight, Vincent, I'll have nightmares."

But, of course, no one was around to hear her admission but the chocobos.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Planet was bleeding. The earth was dry, cracked and barren, and the blood raining from the churning heavens was a poor substitute for what the land really needed. The rivers ran red. The horrible stench of death and decay and fear was everywhere, absolutely everywhere. Not one inch of the land was spared from the wings of...of...whatever was doing this destruction. Bodies lay festering in the heat, bloated and stinking, all of their expressions frozen in the epitome of terror. Some of these bodies had primitive weapons of destruction lying beside them, and that was fine. Their deaths were either honorable or well deserved, if they had died the warriors that they appeared to be.

### **...WAR...**

The battlefield was alive with motion. Millions upon millions of bodies, all bearing indistinct, insignificant faces upon their bodies, screamed from unseen mouths as they murdered and slaughtered each other in the name of whatever it was they were fighting for: religion, honor, loyalty, freedom. Blood stained the cracked earth in mass amounts as weapon after weapon tore into sensitive flesh, opening up horrendous wounds that spurted the thick red liquid like bile from the throat of a sick child. Metal clanged against metal as the two—three? Four? Five?—titanic armies clashed on the barren battlefield, all bathed in a hellish red light that emanated from the glowering heavens above. There were flashes of multicolored light amongst the writhing, battling bodies as several of the warriors called upon their coveted magic abilities to endear them to Victory's heart. Yes, all this blood, all this fighting, all this death, all this suffering, all this...chaos.

### **...YES, WAR IS GOOD...**

But all in the name of what? These faceless armies have forgotten their meanings. They've ceased to be individuals and are just one seething, murdering mass of bodies, no, of machines. Wars have no meaning at all. It is only in the talks before, during, or after

the wars that the leaders of the armies discuss the cause for which they fight. Peace, justice, freedom. Yes, worthy, noble causes, all of them. But when the first platoons of killers in the guise of saviors set foot on the battlefield, how many of them still recall the reason they are out there? A few might, a few who are strong, noble, and true to themselves and to others. But the vast majorities suddenly have no cause at all. They have forgotten or just don't care. Wars with true, noble causes are beautiful, and the blood left behind by them sows the seeds of the land and may in turn bring great things. Wars without qualm or conscience are hideous things, great and terrible, eaters of their own children, destroyers of their own land, ghastly mothers as titanic as the ocean itself, spawning only more and more killers from their bloody wombs and laughing maniacally as their offspring give birth to yet more pointless fighting.

Vincent Valentine was at the center of this bloody matrix, and yet he did not understand it all.

### **...WAR IS GOOD...**

Blood.

*"Who are you?!"*

WAR. More blood.

*"What is this?!"*

Blood, ceaseless and flowing eternal. The rivers are as blood. The mountains are covered in it. The ocean belches its tides, chock full of the red stuff. The angry skies spit torrents of it down to the parched earth.

### **...YES, WAR IS GOOD...**

*"What?!"*

Consciousness. A sense of self. A sense of humanity.

*"Why?! I don't understand! Why are wars good?!"*

### **...WARS ARE CHAOS...**

“Chaos?! No...”

Vincent woke up.

For a moment, he just laid there in bed in the cold dark, letting the light drizzle pattering against the window soothe his frazzled nerves. He was completely still, as still as death. The sounds and motions all around him moved on without him, as most of the world tended to do to an abomination like him. Lights from a streetlamp outside seeped in through the opaque glass of his window and danced in neat patterns on his bedspread, only broken by the glittering raindrops that slithered down the window. The fan above him creaked softly as it spun, drying the sweat that had appeared on his bare chest and upper lip sometime during his restless sleep. Vincent’s garnet eyes were open wide in the darkness. He blinked slowly.

The bed creaked softly as he suddenly rose up into a sitting position, the handmade bedspread falling away from his muscular chest and down to his waist. The room suddenly spun, and Vincent had to brace himself with one hand against the mattress to avoid falling onto his side.

He rubbed his face with his human hand, wiping away the salty sweat from his forehead and trying desperately to get his heart to stop pounding so loud. He felt cold and hot at the same time, a sensation that he had rarely felt in his entire life, a sensation often attributed to severe illnesses. For a moment, as the room whirled around him and his heartbeat thudded in his ears, he felt his head become dizzy with fever, but it was gone as quickly as it had come.

“Was that a dream?” he suddenly whispered, his deep voice lonely in the darkness of the room.

*No, he argued with himself as he rubbed his eyes. Too vivid to be a dream. More like a memory. But even though a monster like me has many bloody memories to reflect upon, that horrific battlefield with faceless warriors is not one of mine. And if it’s not mine, then it must be...*

“You!” Vincent suddenly gasped, his hand falling away from his face in shock as realization dawned on him. “You, unholy demon! Chaos! Your memory? No! How can that be!”

The very idea was horrifying even to a cold, callous man like Vincent. A demon with memories? A demon with thoughts? A demon with dreams?

“Of course, you bloody fool,” Vincent whispered harshly to himself. “It thinks. It reacts to stimuli like any human would do. It has thoughts, and it seems to have the ability

to feel at least the most primitive of emotions, but...memories..."

Vincent's mind was trying vainly to use logic to process the recent unveilings. *If Chaos has memories of battles such as those*, Vincent thought, *that would mean that Chaos had once been free, that it had once lived, a creature with a beating heart and skin that could be touched, pierced. It could bleed. It could suffer. It could scream. It could...die? It's intelligent, but I already knew that. It thinks, but I don't hear its thoughts. It doesn't let me. Does it feel? Does it know what fear is? Does it know what honor is? Is it aware of its situation right now? Is it aware of...me?*

"Are you listening?" Vincent demanded of the darkness around him, a lonely man in the inky gloom of his room, speaking to the air as if it could respond. "Do you hear what I think, Chaos? Do you know that I am the host and you live within me? Do you know...me?"

No answer, external or internal. The demon was silent, as it always was, for it never used words. It had no use of them, at least that's what Vincent assumed. It was then that the man realized that everything he supposedly "knew" about the Chaos beast were just mere assumptions or theories. He knew it was powerful, and that it was destructive, and he knew what it looked like, but that was basically all. The rest of his knowledge was just ideas he had about the demon, about its life span, about how it came to be, about its personality, if such creatures could have personalities.

Vincent lowered his head, staring at the blanket still draped over his legs. His long black hair swooped forward to cling comfortingly to the small trickles of cold sweat still sitting on his cheeks. He closed his eyes.

"Chaos," he said to the darkness behind his eyelids. "Who are you?"

No answer, but he felt a shifting in his mind and couldn't help but wonder if the beast had somehow heard his words.

Sighing, Vincent flung back the blanket and lowered his feet to the hardwood floor, reaching for his discarded shirt in the same fluid motion. There would be no more sleep for him tonight.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Take one drink when you hear thunder," Cloud muttered to himself, poking at the shot glass with one naked finger, as if the glass were something distasteful that he didn't trust himself to pick up with his bare hands. The alcohol sloshed against the sides in amusement.

Thunder roared outside, and Cloud downed the glass in one gulp, wincing as the liquid burned his throat. He hated drinking, but it helped with the pain. But when had

he become such a weakling, using alcohol to tell his problems to? This was more like something he would find Reno doing...

*Reno...*

"Take one drink when you see lightening," Cloud told himself, refilling the shot glass with a bottle of...whatever he had picked up beneath the counter. He watched the clear liquid fill the glass, then set the bottle back on the counter beside his elbow. He waited.

Lightening flashed outside the window, lighting up the front room of the bar where Cloud and his bottle sat alone in quiet companionship. He lifted the shot glass and downed more of the alcohol. It didn't burn so much this time. He wondered what Tifa would say if he drank the whole bottle...

*Tifa...*

Cloud suddenly swept the shot glass aside with one violent brush of his strong arm, not bothering to see if it had shattered on the floor or not. He scowled at the bottle of whatever in front of him, a sudden anger making his vision turn red at the corners. "Take one drink when your life sucks so bad that you feel like maybe that crazy bastard Sephiroth had the right idea when he was going around killing people and threatening to blow up the world!"

With that said, Cloud grabbed the bottle by the neck and took a long chug, the potent liquid searing his throat as it went down and making his head spin. He grunted and took the bottle away from his lips, wiping the small trickles of alcohol that had seeped out of the corner of his mouth. The room was spinning, the darkness beyond the area he stood in all melding into one shapeless mass of shadows.

Then, suddenly, a creature loomed out of the darkness of the room. Cloud's mouth dropped open as he saw the red eyes, the long black hair, so black that it was almost blue...a monster!

As the creature sat down at the bar, Cloud's buzzing mind kicked into terrified mode. His heart leapt into his throat, and he started violently, letting out a small cry of fear and dropping the bottle onto the floor, where it shattered into a million pieces, clear liquid flowing like blood onto the hardwood floor.

Cloud stared blankly at the mess he had made, forgetting for the moment that he had just seen a "monster" in the room. *Great, Tifa is gonna kill me...if she can tear herself away from Reno, of course.*

"Cloud?" the creature suddenly asked, his voice breaking the silence.

"Hn?" Cloud grunted, tearing his bleary gaze away from the broken bottle and back to the creature that had scared the crap out of him. "Vincent?!" he exclaimed, suddenly

recognizing the red eyes and golden claw, which was resting contentedly on the bar countertop.

“Yes,” Vincent replied calmly, watching as Cloud’s Mako blue eyes strained to focus on him. “I’m sorry. Did I frighten you?”

Forgetting about the mess he had made for a moment, Cloud put his hands on his hips and leaned against the refrigerator behind him, waiting for Vincent’s figure to come into focus. “Vincent,” he said, voice slightly slurred. “Coming from anyone else, that question would be called innocent, but since it’s coming from you...”

“Then it’s either malevolent or idiotic in nature,” Vincent finished.

Cloud blinked dumbly. “Huh? I didn’t understand a single word you said, man.”

Vincent shook his head, raven hair detaching itself from the shadows around him so that it could frame his pale face. “Never mind, Cloud. Do you need help cleaning that up?”

The younger man stared at Vincent for a while longer before shaking his spiky head wearily. “No, I can do it myself.” He grabbed a dishtowel from the rack by the sink and kneeled down to mop up the mess behind the counter while Vincent looked on.

“Be careful with the glass,” the dark gunslinger warned, eyes watching Cloud’s ungloved hands for any sign of unsteadiness. “Don’t cut yourself.”

“I won’t,” Cloud muttered, and his voice was steadier this time, the insta-buzz he had received from the alcohol fading as his Jenova cell and Mako-enhanced bodily processes broke down the poison in his system. He finished cleaning up the broken bottle and wasted alcohol without any mishap and threw the shards in the trash, dishtowel and all. Vincent raised an eyebrow, wanting to ask whether or not Tifa wanted one of her good dishtowels carelessly thrown away, but once he saw the pained look on Cloud’s face, the other man decided it would be inappropriate to ask at the moment. Instead, he watched as Cloud wiped his hands on his sweat pants, the only piece of clothing he had on, and turned to Vincent.

“What are you doing up?” he asked the dark man, not looking like he cared about the answer either way.

“Couldn’t sleep,” was Vincent’s simple reply.

Cloud leaned against the countertop, elbows resting on the Formica. “Oh,” he said flatly. “Me neither.”

Vincent let the silence hang in the air for a few more seconds before speaking. “Would it be out of place to ask what is bothering you, Cloud?”



Something flickered in Cloud's blue eyes, but then they froze over in apathy and bitterness. "Why should you ask? You don't care."

"You're right," Vincent answered just as flatly. "Your problems are none of my concern, but it seems that whatever is bothering you at the moment is affecting your abilities as a leader, and I don't think you want that to continue."

Cloud suddenly dropped his cold façade and sighed, all of his pain suddenly welling up in his soul like acid. "I know," he muttered. "I need to pull myself together. I'm afraid I behaved rather badly today. Sorry about that."

"There's no need to apologize to me. I sense the maelstrom within you. It is no big surprise that you let your emotions manipulate your actions."

Agonized sapphire eyes locked onto emotionless garnet ones. "You know, Vincent," Cloud said wearily. "Sometimes I don't know whether you're insulting me or not."

"All I was saying was that your actions were perfectly normal for your average, sentient, human being."

"Oh. Thanks, I guess." Cloud looked away, never able to hold Vincent's gaze for long. There was just something about those fiery orbs that had always shaken him to the core, and for that reason he could never endure the naked intensity of Vincent's stare for a long period of time. "Anyways," Cloud continued hastily, wondering if Vincent had noticed how quickly he had averted his eyes. He didn't want to insult his friend. "Hopefully, I'll have my damn head screwed on straight by tomorrow. Now that you and Yuffie are back with us..."

Yuffie. The moment that name left Cloud's lips, Vincent's thought processes seemed to freeze up. He suddenly recalled the horrific episode in the barn with grim clarity. He was ashamed of himself, leaving Yuffie there all alone without even so much as a goodbye or a goodnight. What unacceptable, impolite actions. Vincent hadn't been raised to mistreat women in such a fashion. He'd have to ask her forgiveness tomorrow, but he'd have to do it in such a fashion that she would not ask questions concerning his abrupt departure. Which meant he would probably have to give a coldly polite, seemingly insincere apology to discourage her from holding up conversation with him. Vincent was in no condition to explain his uncharacteristically ungentlemanly actions—even he didn't know what had come over him in the barn earlier. He had just gotten the sudden urge to get out the barn and away from the charming smile and disarming eyes of the young girl as quickly as possible, which was completely irrational. Yuffie was just a girl—more like a young woman, actually—but that was all she was.

*Yes, a voice in his mind suddenly sneered. She's a woman, and you're a man—and a lonely man, at that. Now it's only natural for a man and a woman...*

“Vincent!” Cloud suddenly called loudly.

The gunslinger blinked, realizing that he had completely zoned out of the conversation. If he had been more human, he would have blushed in embarrassment, but since he wasn't...

“Forgive me, Cloud,” Vincent apologized immediately. “What were you saying?”

Though he continued to look at Vincent strangely, Cloud responded, “I was saying that now you and Yuffie are back safe and sound, thank God, we can focus all our efforts on finding Reeve, wherever he may be.”

“What do you believe our next move should be?” Vincent asked.

Cloud drummed his long, tapered fingers on the countertop, looking a little bit more like the leader Vincent knew him to be. “Though it may sound crazy, I think we should head back to Midgar and search there again.”

“But didn't Red and Turks already investigate, with Red on the ground and the Turks in the air?”

Cloud leaned easily against the counter, eyes shrewd as he thought out the situation. “Yeah, but they came up with nothing. Red could pick up no scents outside Reeve's office, and the Turks, though they were in the air, really didn't have the chance to go through all of Midgar as thoroughly as I would have liked. On the other hand, if we all went and investigated Midgar together, not leaving an inch of it untouched, I think we might have a better idea as to what happened to Reeve. We might want to search the surrounding areas as well, though I really don't see much need to, being that we are now certain the Running Man escaped on the ‘ghost’ ship.” He glanced at Vincent with a strange breed of childish hope flickering in his eyes. “Do you think that is a good plan?”

Vincent shrugged. “It's all we have to go on, but I have one question: If the Running Man did abduct Reeve from his office, as Reno said, why couldn't Red find his scent?”

Cloud looked his friend square in the eyes, easily locking onto the slightly luminescent red orbs in the darkness. “We thought it was because the Running Man wasn't a normal human being.”

Vincent's brows drew together, and he folded his arms across his chest. “I wouldn't doubt it,” he deadpanned. “If the Running Man is from the same people that employed or created the Faceless Men, then I certainly wouldn't be surprised to find that the Running Man isn't human at all.” He paused briefly. “In fact, now that I think about it and remember what little I saw of our quarry, the more certain I am that he isn't human in the slightest.”

Cloud blinked in surprise; Vincent rarely ever made such bold statements. “What

makes you say that?”

“The man moved with unnatural grace,” Vincent responded without looking at Cloud. “His movements were fluid and unnaturally agile, and I received strange vibes from him, you might say. I didn’t want to mention it at the time because I thought I was imagining things, and I didn’t want to frighten Yuffie anymore than she already was.”

Cloud frowned upon hearing this. “Yuffie was frightened? Was she in the way, then?”

Vincent’s eyes locked onto his, and his voice suddenly became cold. “No, she was not in the way. Besides, it wasn’t her fault...”

Vincent stopped, immediately wishing he could retract his words. He couldn’t tell Cloud about Yuffie’s irrational terror without telling him about the way Chaos had been behaving during their time spent in the deep-sea complex. But Cloud was the leader; he certainly needed to know if one of his friends would be a danger to the others. Of course, Vincent wouldn’t have to worry about anything if he were just to leave...

“Vincent?” Cloud asked, noticing that his friend had drifted off again. “What wasn’t Yuffie’s fault?”

The other man snapped out of his stupor and stared at Cloud for so long that he began to get severely uncomfortable. He wondered if Vincent knew just how intimidating he really was? The red eyes, the pale skin, and the black hair all made for a very unsettling person to have staring at you. He was just about to ask what was wrong when Vincent suddenly spoke again.

“Never mind,” he said softly but firmly. “I’ll tell you later.”

*If I’m still here,* he added silently.

Cloud repressed his curiosity and nodded. They knew that Vincent kept certain things to himself, and he had no other choice but to respect the other man’s privacy, knowing that Vincent didn’t react very well to overly nosy people. “Then,” Cloud said. “We’re going to Midgar together in the morning after a brief meeting here to discuss the groups.”

*And I’m going to make sure that Tifa and Reno are separated,* he thought as Vincent nodded silently. *I need time to sort out my feelings without having to worry about what they’re doing. It may sound selfish, but if I want to be operating with a sound mind, this is how it must be. Sorry, Tifa. Sorry, Reno.*

“Well, I’m going to bed,” Cloud said, moving away from the countertop and turning towards the stairs. “You going to sleep again?” he asked Vincent.

“No,” he said simply, spinning around in the stool and walking into the darkness

towards the front windows, a phantom in the gloom. Cloud could see the shape of his shoulders and head silhouetted against the rain-ravaged windowpanes through which light from the streetlamps filtered in, as if seeking refuge from the terrible night that they strove so hard to pierce.

“Okay,” he said quietly, knowing better than to second-guess Vincent. He started to walk to the stairs again, but halfway there, he stopped and said, “And Vincent?”

“Hn?” the other man responded without turning. He seemed to be watching the night.

Cloud shifted uncomfortably, not sure what to say. He didn’t want to upset his friend after the gunslinger had unconsciously talked a little bit of sense back into him. “If you ever, you know, want to tell me what *really* happened in that deep sea complex, I’ll be ready to listen.”

Vincent didn’t move or reply, and after waiting for a few moments for an answer that he knew would never come, Cloud resumed his walk back to the stairs, disappearing up them and leaving Vincent alone in the darkness.

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Author’s Note:

Whew...sorry it took so long! I had to deal with midterms, deadlines, and a severe Gundam Wing obsession (I love Duo!!). ^\_^ Thanks to everyone who is still reading and sending me feedback on this story! I really appreciate it! Those reviews and e-mails are what keeps me going! You guys rock!! Now, to go and FINISH that Resident Evil series...hopefully...

—Catalina

# Chapter Seventeen

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## *All Roads Lead to Midgar*

*“I just can’t believe this shit!” —Cid Highwind*

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Cid Highwind’s deep blue eyes were as thunderous and stormy as the ocean as he stood underneath the wing of the Tiny Bronco, covered from head to toe in a black rain slicker, complete with dark boots over his already booted feet. A cigarette dangled from his thin lips, the lighted tip of it the only thing that lent illumination to the shadow cast by his plastic hood. The light danced over his cheekbones, set high in his almost haggard face, creating hollows of inky shadows beneath the strong bones. It also lent an orangish-yellow illumination to his deep blue eyes, making them look like they were smoldering with fire in the literal sense as well as the figurative.

“Bastard,” he suddenly mumbled, cigarette dancing on his thin lips as he spoke. A bit of ash floated down to sand beneath his feet.

Barret turned to glare at him. “You talkin’ to me, foo?”

Cid blinked at his companion. “Naw.”

Barret snorted and turned away again, the movement of his head unsettling the stubborn raindrops still clinging to the hood of his slicker. “You talkin’ to yerself, then?”

“No,” Cid growled, blowing smoke out of his nostrils in annoyance. “I just can’t believe this shit!”

“I hear ya,” Barret echoed grumpily, shifting his weight from foot to foot. The man was so tall he had to crouch slightly to fit under the wing of the Tiny Bronco.

“I mean,” Cid continued to rant. “We busted our asses yesterday, climbing the mountains, riding the waves, to get to that cave to look for that *damn ship*, and the @\$%&ing thing ends up on the beach!”

And sure enough, fifty feet away from where Cid and Barret were standing miserably underneath the wing of the Tiny Bronco, the “ghost ship” that had very un-ghostlike qualities was sitting on the beach with a certain smugness that seemed directed at the two men. Everything about the ship from its broken mast to the rotted boards of its hull appeared to gloat at Cid and Barret, teasing them about the hard work they had endured the day before, belittling their actions and making fun of their anger. *Look at me*, it seemed to say. *I’m made of rotting, termite-filled wood held together by rusty nails, and I outsmarted you! Hahahahahaha!*

Cid spat at the sand. "Goddamn hunk of crap," he cursed.

"Well, getting your panties in a twist about it ain't gonna make all our hard work worthwhile, ya know," Barret grumbled, striving to be the sensible one now that Cid was all huffy and puffy over a stupid ship.

Cid crossed his arms over his chest and cursed softly when his cigarette was almost extinguished by the water sitting on his sleeve. "Shut up," he told his companion. "I had a feeling something like this was gonna happen."

"Then why the hell did ya drag me out here this morning?" Barret growled, adjusted his way-too-small slicker with his normal arm. "I'm cold, I'm wet, and this damn slicker thang smells like booty!"

"Probably 'cause I gave you the one that was kept outside by the septic tank," Cid said, calmly puffing on his cigarette.

Barret turned an amusing shade of green and whirled on his companion, glaring down at the smaller man. "Foo, you'd best be joking or I'm gonna bust a cap in your ass! I did attach my gun-arm this mornin' ya know!"

Cid grinned. "I can see that. I ain't blind. I was just joking, anyways."

"Best be," Barret grumbled, folding his arms across his chest, a little peeved that his companion had managed to make him lose his cool with one off-the-wall comment. He had promised Marlene that he was going to work on keeping his temper in check, and goddamn it, he was gonna try his hardest!

Then Cid went and ruined it. "I gave you the one I found in my chocobo's pen."

Barret blew his cool again. "What?! The hell you put a coat in the chocobo's pen anyways, foo?!"

Cid scowled and blew smoke out of his nostrils. "He didn't have no hay! Didn't want the poor bird-brain to have nothing to lay on! Are you gonna shoot me for being nice to my chocobo?"

"You ain't nice to your bird, Cid! You didn't even feed him yesterday!"

"Did too! I fed him in the morning!"

"Yeah, well, I fed him again in the evening, seeing that you didn't do it!"

"You ain't supposed to feed chocobos that much food! Now he's gonna get fat!"

Barret's scowl deepened. "You supposed to feed chocobos two times a day! Two, foo!" He held up two fingers of his normal hand.

Cid's mouth fell open, but he managed to keep an expert grip on his cigarette. "You shittin' me?" he demanded of his tall companion. "I didn't know that."

Barret threw his arms up in exasperation. "No wonder the damn bird is always eating my birdie's food!"

"Birdie?" Cid repeated, then burst out laughing.

Barret flushed and made another mean face at his amused friend. "Shu'up, foo! That's what my little girl calls 'em!"

Cid continued laughing, clutching his sides in mirth.

Barret folded his arms across his chest again, offended. "I give up on you, Cid! Ya need serious help or somethin'! Now what was we talkin' 'bout before?"

"Where I got your coat from," Cid managed to say through his snickering.

"Before that, foo!"

Cid gave it some thought after he finished his laughing fit. "Hmmm. Oh yeah! We was talking about how @#%\$ing stupid it was for us to be out here in the rain, all wet and cold, just staring at a stupid ship on the beach!" He pointed to the "ghost" ship sitting on the shore to prove his point. The rotting thing stared back as if to say, "Who me?"

"If it's so stupid," Barret grumbled. "Then why did ya drag me out here? Yeah! That's what I was askin'!"

Cid shrugged. "You were the only one awake and dumb enough to come with me."

Barret gritted his teeth and counted to ten (just like Marlene told him to do) before he trusted himself to answer Cid. "Let's go back to the bar, foo. I'm done standing out here admiring this old hunk of crap. The brat Yuffie was right; it sure is one ugly son of a jackal."

Cid snickered at Barret's euphemism, but made no move to restart the Tiny Bronco. Instead he said, "You think Cloud will have his head screwed on straight and right side up when we get back?"

"He'd better," Barret growled, eyes still on the falling rain. "Or someone else is gonna have to take command." He glanced at Cid. "Be ready, foo. We probably nominate you."

Cid chewed on that for a while, then shook his head. "Naw. You know there ain't nothing that can keep Spike down for long. I think he's gonna be just fine by the time we get back. I believe in the kid!"

Barret scowled down at his friend, offended. "So do I! Don't talk like I ain't got no faith in the spikey-headed idiot! 'Sides, probably ain't his fault, what happened yesterday."

It's that goddamn Reno!"

Cid snorted in distaste, smoke exiting his nose in two funnels as he did so. "That @#\$%ing Turk," he snarled. "Trouble follows him wherever he goes."

"I can't believe we has to work wit 'em," Barret mumbled.

"It's only for a little while," Cid said. "He's good in a battle, and them Turks are friends of that damn cat so I guess they can't be that bad once you really, really, really, think about it."

"That's a lot of 'reallys', man. I don't think I can think that hard."

Cid ignored him. "Now, Rude and even that loud-mouthed Elena ain't bad at all. Rude don't say much, and Elena usually don't put up too much of a fight about our decisions because she so insecure about herself. It's just that Reno that I think is gonna give us problems." He looked up at Barret from under the shadow of his hood. "What you think?"

Barret shook his head with sudden weariness. "I ain't in no mood to be thinkin' right now. I just want to find Reeve and get this whole damn thing over with. I have a daughter to raise and take care of. She's gonna be going to school soon, ya know."

Cid nodded silently. He knew that Barret probably loved his little girl more than anything on the face of the Planet. Probably more than the Planet itself. But Barret's love for his daughter was something Cid could understand. He loved his wife, Shera in such a fashion. All that stuff about fighting for the Planet was all just a load of crap, to put it in a not-so-nice way. Cid was fighting for Shera. Everything he did, he did with his wife's wellbeing in mind. Sometimes, he was surprised at how much he had changed in only one year, and he had Shera and AVALANCHE to thank for it. It may have taken him years and years to realize just where his heart belonged, but now that he did know, he couldn't have been happier.

"I can understand, you know," Cid suddenly told Barret. "About Marlene and all."

Barret glanced at him thoughtfully. "I know ya can. You probably the only one that can, once ya really think about it."

Cid grinned up at his large companion again. "I thought you said you wasn't in the mood for thinkin'?"

With a frustrated cry, Barret threw his hands up in the air again. He could tell it was going to be one hell of a long day.

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Tifa sighed as she pulled the shoelaces tight on her fighter's boots, double knotting



them like she always did so they wouldn't come loose in the middle of battle. She hadn't gotten much sleep last night, and she knew that her lack of rest was seriously going to be weighing her down today if they got into any skirmishes. She hadn't been in a serious, life-threatening battle in months, and the fact that she had tossed and turned all night worrying about Cloud, Reno, and Reeve wasn't going to help her situation at all. Too much to worry about and so many things to do.

*Might as well just give up on having a normal life,* she thought glumly, pulling on her Premium Heart fighter gloves.

There was suddenly a knock at her door, and Tifa's heart jumped slightly when she considered that it might be Cloud. He hadn't spoken to her all day yesterday, not that she had given him much of a chance, though. From the barn, she had gone straight upstairs and barricaded herself in her room, and she had spent the whole afternoon trying to watch TV and ignore the fact that Cloud was locked up in his room only two doors down. She had thought she had heard him talking to someone in the bar late last night, but the thunder had been too loud and she had given up on listening. Probably just a figment of her imagination, birthed from her wishful thinking and longing for Cloud.

"Tifa?" a voice suddenly called through the door, and the young brunette realized that she had spaced out.

"Yuffie?" Tifa asked, recognizing the voice.

"Yup, it's me. Can I come in?"

Tifa tried her best not to sound gloomy. "Sure! Come in."

The door opened, and a very sleepy-looking Yuffie Kisaragi trudged into the room with her feet dragging and her eyes drooping. The young girl offered her older friend a half-hearted wave with the ghost of her normal spunkiness. Then she practically collapsed on Tifa's bed, rumpling the sheets and almost sending Tifa bouncing to the floor.

"Are you okay, Yuffie?" Tifa asked with concern flickering in her burgundy eyes. "You look absolutely exhausted."

"I am," Yuffie mumbled, opening one eye to glance at her friend. There were red veins around the stormy gray iris. "I didn't get any sleep last night."

"Bad dreams?" Tifa asked sympathetically, smoothing back some of her young friend's chocolate brown hair.

Yuffie nodded miserably, closing her eyes again. "Horrible nightmares. The only sleep I got was when I dozed off taking a shower this morning. It totally sucked. I almost drowned!"

Tifa laughed softly. “Poor Yuffie. Are my clothes still working out for you?”

Yuffie nodded, absently adjusting one of the straps of her sleeveless tank top. “Yeah, but I was sort of hoping that my boobs would miraculously grow to fill out the shirt overnight, but no such luck. Darn.”

Tifa laughed again. “And the shorts? Those are practically the only pair I had that were small enough to fit you.”

Yuffie nodded sleepily. “They keep slipping, but that’s okay. I like them loose.” She yawned widely. “So tired...”

“You don’t have to come with us today if you don’t want to,” Tifa suggested, getting off the bed and adjusting her suspenders absent-mindedly.

“No!” Yuffie exclaimed suddenly, rising up to a sitting position. “I’m definitely going with you guys! I’ve been out of action for too long, and I’m not going to miss out on any more of it!”

Tifa raised her hands in mock surrender, a bit surprised at her friend’s vehemence. “Hey, hey, calm down, Yuffie. It was just a suggestion. Besides, you and Vincent have been experiencing most of the action lately, fighting with those Faceless Men or whatever they were called. All we were doing was sitting around worrying about you two.”

“Vincent,” Yuffie muttered under her breath, eyes spacing out for a second before coming back into focus. “Is Vincent awake yet?” she suddenly asked.

Tifa blinked. “I think so. You never know with that man. I heard Cid and Barret tripping over stuff earlier this morning so I know they’re up. As for all the others, I have no earthly idea.”

Yuffie made a half-hearted effort to stifle a yawn. “What are we going to do today? Did Cloud say anything important that I might have missed?”

Tifa winced inwardly at the mention of Cloud’s name. “No, he didn’t say anything else, but I figure we’re going to do something today now that we’re all together again. Let’s just go downstairs and see who’s up.”

Yuffie nodded dully, her eyes half-shut. That didn’t stop Tifa from seeing the spark of humor that suddenly twinkled in their iron gray depths. She lifted her hands towards Tifa. “You might have to carry me down the stairs, Tifa. I’d fall and crack my head open otherwise and Cloud would have to mop it up.”

Tifa laughed and tugged Yuffie to her feet. “That makes two of us, you know. This is going to be like the blind leading the blind.”

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Cloud drummed his fingers absent-mindedly on the table and stared at his two friends that were sitting across from him. “You guys have got to be kidding me?” he muttered under his breath.

Barret heard him, however, and snorted at the young man’s lack of confidence. “You want to go out there in the rain in that damn broke plane and take a look for yerself, Spike? We tellin’ you the truth, boy! That ship jes be sittin’ there on the beach, all old and rotten-like!”

Cloud sighed and rubbed his face with his hands, letting the rough texture of his gloves grind against his skin. He relished that dull pain. “I know, Barret. I wasn’t calling you guys liars. I just didn’t think we’d ever see that damn thing again, that’s all.”

Cid blew a cloud of smoke towards the ceiling. “You and me both, kid.”

Cloud allowed a silence to descend on the almost deserted bar as he fought to gather his thoughts. After he had left Vincent alone in the darkness the night before, he had returned to his room and had actually managed to get a couple of hours of sleep before waking up at the buttcrack of dawn that morning. Cloud had no idea whether the alcohol lingering in his system or talking with Vincent had eased his mind enough to sleep, but whatever had done it, he was eternally grateful for. For some reason, talking with the dark gunslinger had always served as a sort of balm to his nerves. It wasn’t that Vincent’s presence was comforting or anything like that. No, nothing so simple. It was kind of sad actually. Whenever Cloud looked at or spoke with Vincent, he was always thinking in the back of his mind, “Wow, all my stupid-ass problems are nothing compared to the hell this guy has gone through. I got off lucky with just fractured memories and glowing Mako eyes. Look at his guy! Damn, to think I could have ended up like this! Whew!”

Sad, and mean as hell, but it was heartbreakingly true. Cloud was happy he hadn’t ended up like Vincent, so cold and callous, leaving even his friends to wonder if there was a heart behind those ruby-red eyes of his. But he hated thinking like that, especially when Vincent was around. He was always afraid that those piercing garnet eyes would suddenly turn their soul-searching beams on him and dissect his every thought, exposing the darkest corners of his mind to a man that was practically darkness given shape and form.

Hell, maybe Cloud felt better after talking with Vincent because deep down he thought that Vincent was the only one that could understand him. In any case, Cloud had actually gotten some sleep last night before he had roused himself from his bed to once again sheathe himself in the guise of a leader—a mixed up kid ready to lead his friends and enemies alike onto the battlefield. That’s all he really was, after all.

Cid and Barret, however, had beaten him in the race to be the earliest riser. Cloud

had heard the two older men down in the front room while he was getting ready. From the sound of it, they had been tripping and stumbling over chairs in the darkness, and cursing loud enough to wake the dead. Cid and Barret were definitely not the most graceful or soft-voiced men in the world, and that was for damn sure.

After trying to catch them before they left and failing, Cloud had spent about ten minutes standing in front of Tifa's door, wondering if he should knock and try and smooth things over there and then. In the end, however, his weak, prideful heart had failed him, and he had gone downstairs to stare at the rain and wonder why Cid and Barret would be taking the Tiny Bronco out so early in the morning.

But the news they had brought back with them was definitely worth the trip, in Cloud's opinion.

*So, the ghost ship is beached on the shore near Midgar,* he thought, brow creasing as he sought to derive something useful from the piece of information. *According to Vincent and Yuffie's story, the thing was out on some deep-sea complex the night before last. And we know it wasn't there yesterday morning because we would have seen it when we went to investigate the cave. I know the seas are all turbulent right now, but could it have really drifted all this way in less than a day? My instincts tell me no, unless of course...that's it!*

Barret raised an eyebrow when he saw the look on Cloud's face become dangerously contemplative. "Whatcha thinkin' 'bout, Spike?"

A short, mirthless laugh emerged from Cloud's throat. "Something bad. But let me ask you guys something: do you think the ship just kind of floated over to the beach, or did someone pilot it there?"

Cid's eyes widened when he realized just what Cloud was getting at. "The Running Man! He might have been on the ship! That's what you sayin' right, kid?"

Cloud nodded, some unruly strands of blond hair flopping into his face. "Yeah, and did you notice how close that shore is to Midgar?"

Barret caught on immediately. "You think the Running Man is in Midgar right now, then?"

Cloud's mood was becoming grimmer by the minute. "Yeah, and that is exactly where I was planning on heading today."

"Why do you look so sad?" Cid demanded. "If he's there in Midgar, we'll be able to find that bastard and finally get information out of him! This is a good thing, I'm telling ya!"

"I suppose so," Cloud muttered, still unnerved by the idea that the Running Man had somehow predicted their next course of action. That could only mean one thing:

there was a spy. But he didn't know who it could be, so he didn't want to be making any premature accusations. Of course, the Running Man could have been heading to Midgar just by coincidence. Maybe he had left some unfinished business behind. But either way, Cloud wasn't at all comfortable with the fact that the man who had kidnapped his friend was going to be running around the same place as they were. And they were going to all split up, making it easier to target one group at a time. He had to protect Tifa...

Just then, the central figure in his thoughts—in his life—came walking down the stairs dragging an exhausted-looking Yuffie by the arm. “Good morning, everyone,” Tifa said cheerfully as she guided Yuffie over to the table and dumped her in the seat next to Cloud. The young ninja immediately swayed to the side, her head landing heavily on Cloud's shoulder, chocolate brown strands tickling his bare skin. Though he wasn't too happy about all the extra weight, Cloud hadn't the heart to shove her away. Besides, he was too busy fretting over the fact that Tifa hadn't looked at him once.

Cloud's preoccupied thoughts were interrupted when the door suddenly flew open, and Red XIII bounded in, soaking wet and severely unhappy. Reno, Rude, and Elena came running in right after him, equally displeased and dripping water onto the floor. After Reno and Cloud's big blowout yesterday, the Turks had decided to stay at the hotel instead of at the bar, which was sort of pointless, being that the hotel was right next to the Final Heaven bar. Not trusting himself to go and wake them up in order to assemble for their next operation, Cloud had sent Red to go fetch them from the hotel. That had been an hour ago, and from the looks of it, it appeared as if they had had some...difficulties along the way.

Cid took one look at the waterlogged foursome and grinned wolfishly. “Hey guys, is it still raining outside?”

“Shut up!” Elena snapped, wiping at her mascara, which was running...again.

A look of fatherly disapproval appeared on Barret's dark face when he saw the huge puddle of water on the floor. “The hell did you guys do? Swim all the way over here?”

“Practically,” Red replied dryly, shaking raindrops from his coat and splattering the walls—and Reno—with water.

“Goddamn it, Red!” Reno cried, stepping away from the lion-like beast as if Red had suddenly grown another head. “Did you have to do that when you're right next to me?!”

Elena ignored her companion and addressed everyone else in the bar. “Actually, Red *did* have to doggy-paddle over here. The water out there is rising!”

“Serves you guys right for staying at the hotel!” Yuffie interjected cheerfully, apparently ignoring her own exhaustion long enough to taunt their ex-enemies. “What—do you think we have cooties or something?”

“Is it really that bad?” Tifa asked worriedly, rushing up to the Turks with three towels in her slender arms.

“Red had to swim through the deeper parts, like Elena said,” Rude answered as he took a towel and wiped his face. “Thank you, Tifa.”

“You’re welcome,” Tifa said politely as she handed a towel to a miserable and pouty-faced Elena, who only grumbled her gratitude. Tifa didn’t seem to notice, however, as she focused all her attention on avoiding Reno’s gaze as she handed him his towel.

“Thanks, Tifa,” Reno said clearly, trying to get her to make eye contact with him.

“You’re welcome,” she muttered almost inaudibly as she knelt to help Red get his waterlogged mane out of his eyes. Basically, doing anything to give her an excuse to avoid Reno’s eyes. She did a very good job of it, but both Reno and Cloud weren’t fooled. Reno snorted his annoyance before attacking his wild hair with the towel. Cloud just stared, trying to unravel the physics behind the love triangle he had somehow gotten caught up in.

“So, is everyone here now?” Cid asked, noticing that Cloud was zoning again. He wished the kid would stop doing that...

Yuffie looked around, her loose hair brushing the sides of her face. “Vinnie’s not here yet, is he?”

“Right here,” a shadow near the stairway suddenly said.

Yuffie whirled with a gasp as the others looked on in surprise, watching Vincent’s figure discard its cloak of shadows and walk into the light. He was still wearing his borrowed clothes, but he had gathered his glorious hair in loose ponytail, which was cinched with an elastic band below the nape of his neck. “Are we moving out yet?” he asked flatly.

Reno took the towel away from his face and glared at everyone in the room as if they had done something to wrong him. “Moving out?” he echoed suspiciously. “I didn’t hear anything about moving out.”

*God, Cloud thought in annoyance. He’s already being problematic. Keep cool, Strife, keep cool. Don’t get angry.*

“Barret and Cid found the ghost ship,” he said clearly, keeping his eyes trained on the three Turks. They didn’t say anything so he continued, “It was abandoned on the beach near the city of Midgar.”

Elena blinked. “So?”

“We’re thinkin’ that the Running Man is in Midgar,” Barret responded impatiently.

“Really?” Yuffie asked, wide-awake now as she recalled the dark figure she and Vincent had just barely glimpsed a couple of nights before. “Then what are we waiting for? Let’s go!”

“Not so fast,” Cloud warned, before his young friend could get too excited. “The Running Man isn’t the main objective of this trip.”

“What do ya mean?” Reno demanded, flinging his damp towel onto a nearby chair. “If he’s the one that took Reeve, then he sure as hell is the main objective right now!”

Vincent suddenly spoke up, his deep, cold voice silencing any fiery protests that may have been hovering on Reno’s tongue. “Just because this Running Man took Reeve doesn’t necessarily mean that he knows where he is right now. Remember, the Running Man boarded that ship alone when Yuffie and I were on it. He didn’t have Reeve with him when he sailed to the deep-sea complex. It’s possible that he turned Reeve over to a different group of people before he boarded the ship.”

“You mean he’s some kind of bounty hunter?” Tifa asked.

Vincent nodded wordlessly.

Cloud picked up, grateful that Vincent had taken up the task of explaining. Cloud wasn’t sure if he could have sounded even half as eloquent or logical. “And that’s why he’s not the main objective of this mission. But he’s still a very dangerous factor so I want everyone to be careful. Watch out for him.”

“What exactly will we be doing in Midgar, then?” Red asked from his seat on the floor, tail swishing back and forth placidly.

“We’re gonna turn that place inside out,” Cloud said in a hard, determined voice. “We’re going to split into teams and search every inch of that place until we’re sure that Reeve isn’t being held right under our noses. That’s the objective of this mission.”

“Midgar’s a big place, man,” Barret warned.

Cloud nodded. “That’s why we’re splitting up.”

“And I’ll bet anything that you’re choosing the teams,” Reno sneered, eyes glittering maliciously.

Cloud’s glare was icy. “Yes,” he said flatly. “I will be.” Before Reno could start bitching again, Cloud went on, “I am going to be investigating the remains of Hojo’s lab. I’m taking Tifa with me...”

“Figures,” Reno muttered.

“And Rude,” Cloud finished.

“WHAT?!” Reno exploded, the look in his eyes turning positively dangerous in an instant. “No way! Turks stick together! You ain’t separating us! No way!”

“You can’t take Rude away from us!” Elena protested. “We work best as a team!”

*And there is no way I’m letting him go anywhere that Tifa Lockhart is going,* she added silently.

“I have no problem with Cloud’s decision,” Rude suddenly said.

“WHAT?!!!” Reno and Elena both demanded, whirling on their friend and colleague, wondering what had gotten into him.

“I understand if you don’t trust us yet,” Rude said calmly, directing his words at Cloud. “I’ll go with you and help you in any way I can.”

Cloud nodded, grateful that Rude hadn’t put up a fight. “Thanks.”

But Reno still wasn’t finished yet. “Wait a minute! You’re taking Rude with you as some kind of security blanket so we won’t turn on you?! That’s dirty, Strife! Using people like that!”

“Don’t talk to me about using people, Reno,” Cloud counterattacked in a flat, cold voice. “And if you have to know, the primary reason I’m taking Rude with us is because he’s the one who saw the Running Man sneaking around Hojo’s lab. Remember? He’d be of great help to us.”

“Fine!” Reno declared, teeth gritted in anger. “But why are you taking Tifa, then? Tell me that, Strife!”

“Because I want to be with her,” Cloud said simply, carefully hiding the longing in his voice.

Tifa lowered her head, feeling tears sting her eyes. *Please, everyone, stop it,* she pleaded silently. *This hurts so much...*

“You mean you don’t want me to be with her,” Reno sneered.

“Can we please get back to discussing the mission,” Red interrupted with a growl, noticing Tifa’s state of distress. “I see no need to take this battle to a personal level.”

“Red’s right,” Cid interjected, glaring at the still-smoldering Reno. “The first team is decided. Go on, kid.”

Cloud fought to get his emotions under control. “Cid and Barret—you guys are going to go the former Shinra headquarters.”

Barret blinked. “That dump? Why?”



*Goddamn*, Cloud thought. *Is everyone going to be interrupting me after every other sentence?*

But instead of snapping at his friend, Cloud said patiently, “You are going to reactivate Cait Sith.”

Cid’s eyes widened. “That damn cat? Why?”

“We’re going to need all the help we can get,” Cloud answered. “Wasn’t Reeve saying that he had finished with all the adjustments he needed for Cait Sith to work on his own?”

Surprisingly, it was Elena who answered him. “Yeah. He came down to the office one day to tell us about it. He said that he had given Cait the same personality that he had had when he was traveling with you all. Only now Cait can work on his own without too much help from Reeve.” She smiled, and her voice became sad all of sudden. “He was really excited about it. Poor Reeve.”

Reno put an arm around her shoulders and hugged her gently, surprising everyone.

Cloud nodded at Elena, acknowledging her answer and sympathizing with her pain in one gesture. Then he turned back to Cid and Barret. “Cid, you know how to work Cait, right? Didn’t Reeve show you one day?”

Cid puffed thoughtfully on his cigarette. “Yeah, I think I remember. And even if I didn’t, it shouldn’t be too hard to figure out.”

“Leave to us, boy-ee!” Barret said amiably.

Cloud grinned at him, then turned reluctantly to the task of telling Reno what he needed to do. “Reno, you and Elena are going to investigate all the underground tunnels in Midgar, and see if there is any way at all that the Running Man could be using them to get from place to place. And yes, that includes the sewers. It may take a while, but do the best you can, okay? I figure you two know Midgar pretty well.”

Reno rolled his eyes. “You mean you figure a worthless slum kid like me should know the sewers well.”

Cloud ignored him. “Take Red with you. He can’t smell anything in the rain anyways.”

*Please don’t give me hard time on this one*, he begged silently. *I’m not in the mood.*

Everyone in the bar waited.

Reno and Elena blinked. Red blinked. Reno and Elena stared at each other. Then they stared at Red, who stared back at them. Elena and Red stared at each other. Then they both stared at Reno, waiting for him to start bitching.

But all he said was, “Cool.”

Everyone in the bar breathed a sigh of relief.

Then Yuffie grumbled, “Something tells me I’m with Vinnie again.”

Cloud nodded, turning in his seat so that he could see both of them at the same time. “You two are going to Reeve’s office and see if there is anything else that we might have missed the first time. And watch out for the Running Man. I have this feeling that he might be returning there.”

“How come I have to be with Vinnie again?” Yuffie whined.

*He’s probably tired of me, she thought sadly. I don’t want to bother him with my annoying presence anymore.*

Cloud stared at her. “Fine. You want to go with Cid and Barret then?”

Yuffie glanced warily at the two older men sitting across from her on the table. Cid was blowing smoke out of his nostrils. Barret was scratching his armpit. “Um,” she floundered. “No thanks. I’ll go with Vinnie.”

Cloud looked at the dark man standing close to the shadows. “That okay with you, Vincent?”

The man nodded silently.

Cloud nodded, feeling as if a great weight had been lifted from his shoulders. “Okay,” he said. “The teams are decided. Now, how are we going to get to Midgar?”

Immediately, he regretted his words. Everyone started talking at once.

Elena: “Let’s take the Highwind!”

Cid: “You can’t fly the Highwind in a thunderstorm!”

Yuffie: “Let’s take the Tiny Bronco!”

Reno: “We don’t all fit in the Tiny Bronco!”

Cid: “You can’t drive the Bronco on land! Only in the water!”

Elena: “Besides, it’s broken...”

Reno: “...and ugly.”

Cid: “Don’t diss my plane!”

Red: “As long as I don’t have to walk...”

Barret: “Let’s take the chocobos.”

Yuffie: “In the rain???”

Barret: “You got a better idea?”

Reno: “I’m flying the helicopter!”

Cid: “Yeah, and I’ll be laughing my ass off when you get struck by lightning and die!”

Barret: “You said it, foo! Hell, I’ll laugh right now! Hehehehehe!”

Cloud soon got fed up. He’d have much preferred listening to voices of Jenova and Sephiroth living in his head than all this silly arguing. “Everyone, shut up!” he roared. The talking died off. “We’re taking the buggy,” Cloud seethed, the look in his eyes leaving no room for arguments. “Two people in the front with the driver. The other six doubled up in the back with Red across their laps.”

Silence as everyone chewed on that, then Yuffie asked innocently, “So...who’s driving?”

Reno: “Oh! Mememememe!”

Elena: “No, don’t let Reno drive!”

Reno: “Why the hell not?!”

Elena: “He doesn’t have a license!”

Rude: “I think I should drive...”

Reno: “Sure as hell I have a license!”

Yuffie: “Let Red drive!”

Elena: “That license is fake!”

Tifa: “Red?????”

Reno: “Is not!”

Barret: “I’m not sittin’ in no guy’s lap!”

Elena: “Is too!”

Cid: “Whatever you do don’t let Yuffie behind the wheel!”

Reno: “Is not!”

Yuffie: “I’ll take that as an indication my expert driving makes you jealous.”

Elena: “Is too!”

Cid: "Expert drivin' my-"

That's when Cloud rose from his chair and grabbed the keys from their hook and started walking towards the garage. Everyone followed silently.

When they reached the garage a couple of minutes later, Cloud flipped on the lights to reveal the buggy sitting peacefully in the middle of the floor, red surface gleaming in the electric lights. It was totally oblivious that it was about to become the source of a major battle.

"Shotgun!" Cid and Reno cried at the same time, racing to the car as Cloud rolled his eyes.

"Door seat!" Cid yelled, flinging open the car door and plopping himself down in the passenger seat.

Reno glared at him. "Move, old man!"

"@#\$\$% off!" Cid said cheerfully.

"That's not fair!" Reno whined, scowling down at the pilot. "You got in first so move over!"

"Quit your bitchin'," Cid growled.

Reno's eyes suddenly gleamed mischievously. "Fine, but I'm gonna have to climb over you."

Cid narrowed his eyes suspiciously, making it apparent that he thought Reno had something up his sleeve, but he still wouldn't relinquish his seat. "Go ahead, Turk, knock yourself out."

So, Reno climbed over Cid, making sure to step on his feet, sit on his hands, hit him in the face, elbow him in the chest, crush his legs, and knee him in the groin as he did so.

"Sorry, my nightstick slipped," Reno apologized profusely as Cid cursed and clutched himself in pain. Reno was grinning from ear to ear, quite pleased with himself. *Damn, I'm good*, he thought.

"Move over, asswipe," Cid wheezed. "You're crowdin' me!"

"Fine," Reno grumbled, but when he tried to move over, Cloud chose that moment to sit down in the driver's seat.

"Ew! Strife, get out of my lap!"

"Hey! I'm the one who's driving! Move over!"

While Cloud, Cid, and Reno were fighting over the front seat, the others were trying to find a way to fit into the backseat without having legs and arms sticking out of the windows.

“Okay,” Barret said, taking control. “Three guys, three girls, and...Red. The guys get in first, and then the girls sit in their laps, and then Red climbs in, awright? Ya’ll got that all down?”

“Wow, Barret, you’re a genius,” Yuffie said sarcastically. “I never could have thought of all that.”

“I know,” Barret said as they opened the car door and started to file in. But they seemed to take forever, and soon Yuffie got tired of waiting around with nothing to do but fidget and stare at everyone’s butts as they went in. So to speed things up, she ran around the car to the other side, and opened the door.

Vincent stared up at her. Yuffie stared back.

*Great, she thought nervously. It had to be him. I don’t want to sit in his lap because... I’m afraid I’ll like it. God, I bet I’m blushing!*

“Watch out, Vinnie!” she said as casually as possible, plopping down into Vincent’s lap as he watched without a flicker of emotion. But the scent of clean skin and herbal shampoo drifted to his nose, and he found himself inhaling as deeply as he could without making it obvious.

“Vincent, your legs are bony,” Yuffie commented suddenly, trying to get comfortable. She was so nervous!

“Your butt is bony,” Vincent muttered before he could stop himself.

Yuffie pinched him on his human arm, the only piece of his anatomy that she could cause damage to at the moment. “I can’t believe you just told me that, Vinnie! You don’t tell girls their butts are bony! Apologize immediately!”

“I’m sorry, Yuffie,” he said as sincerely as he could manage, and he really was sorry.

“You’re supposed to argue with me, Vinnie!” Yuffie said in a scolding tone. “It’s more fun that way.”

Vincent didn’t bother to reply. Instead, he wisely moved his human hand out of the way before Rude could sit on it. Wouldn’t help to lose his other hand, now would it?

After Rude had gotten in, Barret crowded in his beefy bulk next to Rude; consequently, Vincent and Yuffie in his lap were shoved up against the door. “Hey!” Yuffie cried. “Watch it people! We *are* sitting over here, you know!”

“How could we forget with all that damn noise you’re makin’!” Barret snapped as Tifa, then Elena, climbed into the car, hunched over as they searched for a lap to sit in.

Tifa found herself staring right into Rude’s sunglasses. *Oh well*, she thought reluctantly. *I guess I don’t mind...* “Hey Rude,” she greeted casually. “I guess I’ll be—”

She was interrupted by a loud cry. “Woman, you are *not* sitting in my lap!” Barret was telling Elena. “You all wet and smelly!”

“I am not smelly!” Elena screeched, and Tifa had to refrain from covering her ears.

Tifa maneuvered herself around so that she could look at Elena. “Do you want to sit in Rude’s lap?” she asked with a sympathetic smile.

Elena flushed and made a face. “N-no!” she stammered. “I mean, um, I don’t want to sit in anyone’s lap! But I guess anyone is better than Barret over here!”

“Same to you, smelly woman!” Barret retorted as the two girls filed out of the car and came back in, only this time Elena went first and sat down in Rude’s lap and Tifa sat in Barret’s. Rather than get into another “sensible discussion,” Red chose the more impulsive approach and simply leapt into the car, trying his best not to hurt Tifa, Elena, and Yuffie with his claws. Unfortunately, he was only mildly successful.

“Ow! Red, be careful!”

“You scratched me, you dumb mutt!”

“Gawd, Red! That hurt!”

Red ignored all their grumbling with the ease of long practice and settled himself carefully in their laps. He ended up stretched across the entire length of the back seat, with his head in Yuffie’s lap, his front paws and upper body in Elena’s and his hindquarters in Tifa’s lap. Red was not a happy camper.

“I’m not enjoying this any more than you are,” he grumbled as Elena accidentally kned him in the belly. “This is a very uncomfortable position.”

“You’re telling me!” Yuffie exclaimed, patting Red on the nose just to annoy him. He growled up at her.

“Is everyone okay back there?” Cloud called, twisting around the best he could with Reno squashing him.

“NO!!” was the unanimous response.

“Okay, just checking,” Cloud said with a grin. “Let’s go.” He started to reach for the shift, and realized that they had a problem. Reno’s legs were in the way. He had them all bunched up on one side of the shift, making it impossible for Cloud to shift gears without

breaking one or both of Reno's legs in the process. Not that that would be a *bad* thing, but...

"Reno," Cloud said. "Spread your legs."

Reno whirled on him with an incredulous expression on his face. "What? I didn't know you swung that way, Strife."

Cloud rolled his eyes. "Straddle the shift. I can't move it with your legs all bunched up like that. You're blocking me."

"Fine," Reno muttered, apparently realizing that it was the logical solution to the problem. So he did as Cloud said and placed one leg on either side of the shift, almost knocking out the windshield, breaking the radio, and cracking the dashboard in the process.

"Okay," Cloud said again. "Now we're ready to go."

"To Midgar, foo!" Barret cried for no apparent reason.

"Whoo-hoo!" Reno exalted sarcastically, trying to ignore how awkward it was to have Cloud reaching between his legs to shift gears.

The going was tough from there on. After Cloud had already started the car, Cid wisely pointed out that the garage door wasn't open. Then after the garage door was open, Tifa noticed that it was still raining and suggested that it might be a good idea if they put the buggy's hood on. So after all that was done and the buggy was out of the garage, Cloud had to run through the rain to close the door because everyone else was "too comfortable." They ran into even more problems when they realized that they couldn't drive the buggy through Kalm because all the roads were flooded. After another minute of arguing and some of Reno's "wise suggestions," Cloud took matters into his own hands and, with a quick apology to Tifa, drove right across the lawn, tearing up the grass as he went. As Tifa lamented the fate of their front lawn and everyone, even Elena, promised to help her replant it, Cloud half drove/half hydroplaned across the grassy fields beyond Kalm until they reached the highway leading to Midgar.

After scraping the bottom of the buggy getting onto the road itself, they were finally on their way. Cloud breathed a sigh of relief. He just hoped this trip was going to be worth all the trouble they were going through to get there. But he was in for a lot more trouble along the way...

Two minutes after they had gotten onto the highway, Reno decided that he didn't like Cloud reaching between his legs every time he needed to change gears.

"Strife, stop doing that!"

Cloud scowled. "I need to change the gears, Reno. Unless you want to be going 15 miles per hour all the way to Midgar?"

"Well, no!" Reno said. "But why do you need to keep changing the damn gears so much? Just go to a really high speed and stay there!"

Cloud pointed to a big puddle sitting in the middle of the road. "See that there?" he asked impatiently. "If I hit that going 60 miles an hour, we're gonna skid off the road and into the grass and then we'll be walking all the way to Midgar!"

Reno floundered for words. "Well, um, I have an idea! I'll change the goddamn gears from now on!"

Cloud was in no mood to argue. "Fine. I'll tell you when to change them."

Reno made a face and gripped the shift with one hand. "I don't need you to tell me! I can change gears without your help. I have a standard car, too, ya know."

Cloud had to bite his tongue to keep from yelling, but he decided to let Reno have his way if they wanted to get to Midgar within the next year. Unfortunately, their little arrangement didn't work out very well. Reno had no idea when Cloud needed to have a gear shifted because he insisted that he didn't need to watch the speedometer. As a result, he kept shifting gears at the oddest times, making the buggy jerk and stall and make very ugly-sounding noises. More than once, Red ended up falling from the girls' laps and sliding to the floor of the car. Finally, Cid threatened to skewer Reno with the Venus Gospel if he didn't relinquish control of the shift. Noticing that the pilot was serious, Reno reluctantly surrendered control back to Cloud with the complaint that he still felt "violated" every time Cloud changed a gear.

The trip went as smoothly as possible for the next five minutes until Barret broke the tranquility.

"Okay, it smells like arse up in here! Who farted?"

"You smelt it, you dealt it!" Reno declared cheerfully.

"Maybe it's your upper lip," Elena snapped, using her anger to cover up the fact that sitting in Rude's lap made her nervous as hell.

"Well, it sure as hell wasn't me!" Cid exclaimed.

"You denied it, you supplied it!" Reno said immediately, ignoring the fierce glare Cid shot him.

"Actually, it smells more like a wet dog," Barret corrected himself, sniffing at the air.

"That would be me," Red said flatly. "Now hush."



Barret hushed because he couldn't think of a snappy comeback to say. Cloud unconsciously began to drive faster, eager to get to Midgar before they all went stir-crazy and started killing each other or something. He counted the minutes of peace and got up to ten before Tifa, of all people, spoke up.

Hers was the nice kind of interruption, though.

She smiled and said in a hushed tone, "How cute! Look! Yuffie's asleep."

And sure enough, Cloud turned around briefly to see that Yuffie had fallen asleep in Vincent's lap with her head nestled fearlessly underneath the man's chin. Her eyelids fluttered slightly as if she sensed their stares, and she cuddled closer to Vincent as if to hide her sleeping vulnerability from their prying eyes. Vincent was looking out of the rain-splattered window with his arms wrapped absently around Yuffie's waist, watching the clouds churn and dance angrily over the horizon. He paid no attention to the curious looks the others gave him.

"No wonder she was so quiet," Elena muttered after everyone was done wondering how Yuffie could have possibly fallen asleep in *Vincent's* lap. Most people were so afraid of Vincent that they were scared to *breathe* around him.

"Don't jinx it woman!" Barret whisper-screamed. "Maybe she'll stay asleep for the rest of the trip."

Actually, when Cloud pulled up in front of the entrance to Sector Five on the outskirts of Midgar, Yuffie was still slumbering peacefully in the circle of Vincent's arms, completely trustworthy of her companion. She only awakened when everyone else was piling out of the car in search of breathable air and Red accidentally scratched her on the leg.

She was awake immediately, shrieking, "Eeep! Something bit me! Vinnie, something bit me on the leg!"

"Don't worry, Yuffie," Vincent said calmly, opening the car door with his claw. "It was just Red."

"Red bit me?!"

"No, he accidentally scratched you when he was climbing out of the car."

"Oh," Yuffie said, stretching and rubbing her eyes. "Are we here yet?"

"Yes."

"Okay," Yuffie said, trying not to sound disappointed. She didn't want to climb out of Vincent's lap just yet, but if she stayed any longer, then it would start to look like she actually *liked* sitting in Vincent's lap. So, with great reluctance, she hopped out of the buggy and onto the muddy ground, wincing as her borrowed boots sunk into the goopy

substance. *Good thing I'm not wearing my sneakers*, she thought as Vincent climbed out and shut the buggy's door.

Trying to work the kinks out of her stiff limbs and ignore the raindrops hitting her head, Yuffie walked around to the front of the buggy where everyone else was already gathered, all staring silently up at the diseased city of Midgar. It was still as ugly as sin. Sure, it was on its way to recovery, but it was still a long way away from discarding its gloomy countenance in exchange for one that looked even the least bit inviting. And the rain pouring down and all the dark clouds that *always* seemed to be gathered right on top of Midgar did nothing to change the way she looked at the dilapidated city. Yuffie had never really liked traveling around in Midgar, especially in the slums. It depressed her. Every time she saw a homeless person begging for food or one of the little delinquent pickpockets casting furtive glances at her items pouch, it always made her think that no matter what poor Reeve did, Midgar would always be a worthless cause, something that was already beyond help.

"Midgar," Barret suddenly said. "I hate to be sayin' this and all, but it's gonna feel good to be back home."

"Just remember," Cloud said firmly. "Be careful where you tread, and this place is gonna be searched high and low! Everyone has their PHS?"

All of the AVALANCHE members nodded.

"And cell phones?" Cloud asked.

The Turks nodded.

"Okay, then! Let's move out!"

\* \* \* \* \*

"There they are," Titus said, more to himself than to Fa-Li. The blonde-haired man didn't seem at all bothered by the fact that there was rain pounding down on his back and the top of his head. He adjusted the lens of his binoculars and focused more closely on the miniature army approaching the gates of Sector Five. He and Fa-Li had been hiding on the top of a pile of rubble and keeping a close lookout for the past hour. Titus had figured that even members of AVALANCHE wouldn't be so reckless as to parachute into Midgar again in the middle of a thunderstorm. He had also figured that they would use the entrance closest to the direction from which they would be approaching, and he had been right. Of course, he took no pride in being correct. The hard part was still yet to come.

"Well, it's about time they arrived, baby," Fa-Li snapped from where she was cowering under a small alcove created when the rubble plummeted to the ground. She was soaking wet and being even more of a bitch than usual. "Where's that stupid little ditz we're going after?"

“Hmm...hold on,” Titus replied absently, studying each of the members closely. He recognized the three blue-suited Turks immediately. How could one not know them? There were only three left in the world. And he recognized Cloud Strife, the one with the spiky blond hair and blue eyes, for there wasn't a single person in the farthest corners of the world who hadn't seen a picture of Cloud Strife at least once. It's not every day a Sephiroth clone saves the world from total eradication.

Then, Titus' slightly luminescent eyes fell on the last pair entering the gate, and he cursed softly. “Dammit.”

Fa-Li immediately snapped to attention. “Damn what, sugar? Somethin' wrong?”

“I found the girl,” Titus said, tracking the movements of Yuffie Kisaragi with his binoculars. She was a lot younger than he had been expecting...

“Then what are you damning?” Fa-Li grumbled, pushing her damp hair away from her eyes.

“She's working with Valentine,” Titus said grimly, putting the binoculars away and pulling a black ski mask from his item pouch. “It's not going to be too hard to capture her, but it's getting the drop on Valentine that I'm worried about.”

Fa-Li was starting to look interested. “Valentine's out there? Really?”

Titus rolled his eyes and tossed the binoculars in her direction. “Take a look for yourself if you don't believe me.”

Fa-Li started to inch towards the binoculars, but she suddenly stopped short and drew back into her little hiding place. “Are the Turks still down there, Titus?” she asked softly.

Titus flicked his gaze quickly to the small army walking fifty feet below them and immediately saw three blue suits. “Yeah,” he muttered, voice muffled by his ski mask as he pulled it over his head.

The Wutainese woman suddenly drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her arms around them, looking like a little girl. “That's alright, then,” she murmured. “I'll take your word that Valentine is down there.”

Titus finished adjusting his ski mask and turned to stare at his companion. Against the backdrop of dark cloth, the slight luminescence in his eyes was all the more obvious. “What's wrong with you?” he asked grumpily.

Fa-Li averted her gaze. “Nothing, honey.”

“Don't call me that,” Titus snapped, rising to his feet, a silent signal that they were about to move out. “Are you afraid of the Turks, Fa-Li?”

“You might say that,” she whispered softly. “I’ve heard...stories. Yes, Titus, I’m deathly afraid of the Turks.”

Titus snorted and said coldly, “Well, I think that you had better swallow that fear. You don’t want something like that getting in the way of your mission. Or mine.” He walked away without a second glance.

“Asshole,” Fa-Li muttered under her breath as she rose to her feet and followed her companion down the rubble pile and into Sector Five.

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Author’s Note:

Okay, I know this is a filler chapter with a little bit of angst, and a bunch of pointless humor thrown in for good measure, but I don’t care because I had so much fun writing it! ^\_^ Barret, Cid, and Reno are just too hilarious, and I wanted to develop Cid and Barret’s characters more. I felt like I was neglecting them. I’m glad that I got this chapter finished in time. School’s about to start up again. ::sighs:: Send in those reviews and e-mails! I’ll need the support now more than ever. Thanks!

—Catalina

# Chapter Eighteen

## *The Midgar Nightmare I*

*“Because I’m the only one who has the patience to deal with your pissy attitude.” —Red XIII*

“This place smells like shit,” Reno grumbled, wrinkling his nose in distaste as he panned his flashlight around one of the “underground tunnels” beneath Midgar. There were heaps of green algae (and other stuff that Reno didn’t even want to think about) clinging stubbornly to the stone walls and glaring indignantly at Reno as he sought to violate their putrid sanctuary with his presence. There was the sound of water running nearby, and a quick inspection with his flashlight showed that a small sludgy “river” had decided to make its home in the Midgar sewers. The waters were dark with all sorts of rancid substances such that not even the light from Reno’s flashlight could pierce their oily surfaces. Fascinated by anything that he could gross out Elena with, Reno took a tentative step across the concrete and winced as the bottom of his boot slid across another patch of algae, almost sending him to the water.

“I hate this place!” he exclaimed angrily, once he was sure that he had recovered his balance. “I’m gonna to kill Cloud for sending me down here!”

“Quit your complaining, Reno,” Elena snapped as she descended the ladder heading down into the sewers, her heels clanging loudly on its rusted surface. “It’s not like I’m having a good time, either!”

Reno rolled his eyes. He could already tell that this was going to be a fun trip. He, Elena, and Red were already dripping wet due to how freaking *long* it had taken them to find a manhole that had a ladder that didn’t lead straight into pool of solid or liquid waste. Parading around Midgar in the rain with a bitchy Elena and a silent Red had already put Reno in a sour mood, and the rancid stench of the “underground tunnel” was only serving to exacerbate his grumpiness.

*That goddamn Cloud,* Reno thought, pushing at his wild hair with a gloved hand. *He knows that the only underground tunnels in Midgar are the sewers. I don’t care if there might be something to find down here, I think he only sent me down here to keep me away from Tifa, which is stupid because I need...I need...*

Reno shook his head violently, the wet strands of his ponytail striking the sides of his face like miniature slaps. What the hell was wrong with him? Now wasn’t the time to be thinking such things. Now was the time to be bitching as Reno of the Turks was obligated to do when he was cold, wet, tired, grumpy and running around shit-filled sewers.

“This sucks,” he announced, wrinkling his nose as his flashlight beam hit upon a log that probably wasn’t a log at all.

Elena stumbled over to his side and saw what his light was trained on. “Ewww!” she moaned, her voice echoing in the dark sewers. “That is revolting! Totally disgusting! I *hate* it down here!”

Red landed on the ground with a clack of claws behind them. “I assure you that none of us are enjoying or will be enjoying this trip, Elena,” he said flatly, shaking water from his coat for what seemed like the millionth time that day.

“Oh, be quiet!” Elena snapped at Red for no apparent reason, gesturing with her arms so violently that her flashlight almost flew from her hands. “At least you can get the rain off of you by splattering it all over us! And I can’t see a thing! This is going to be a whole lot harder on us than it will on you!”

Red blinked, his one eye faintly luminescent in the darkness. “First of all, Elena,” he said calmly. “You probably can’t see anything because you don’t have your flashlight on. And while we’re on the subject of the hardships of this trip - try having your face only three feet off the ground with an enhanced sense of smell *in the sewers*, and then tell me who is going to have a harder time.”

Reno rolled his eyes. “Quit your complaining.”

Red eyed Reno coolly as he took a couple of experimental steps down the algae-covered concrete. “Certainly,” he replied. “As long as you do.”

The redheaded Turk growled under his breath as he followed Red’s beast-like form with his flashlight. “Why did we get stuck with you?”

“Because I’m the only one who has the patience to deal with your pissy attitude,” Red answered without looking back at Reno. His flame-tipped tail swished in the rank darkness, a lonely beacon in an endless pool of eerie black.

“Well, at least we’re out of the rain,” Elena grumbled, hugging herself with her arms as if cold. “What’s the game plan? I want to get the hell out of here as quickly as possible, you know.”

Red almost sat down on the concrete, but apparently thought the better of it and remained standing. “The way I figure it,” he said. “All our job really entails is following this tunnel and searching for anything that may appear out of the ordinary.”

“What’s your definition of ‘ordinary?’” Reno grumbled, examining the interesting substances on the wall with his flashlight again. “Everything down here looks a little... eccentric.”

Red acknowledged the Turk's observation with a nod. "I suppose we should be looking for things that appear to have been disturbed recently. It's unlikely that anyone would ever come journeying down here for normal, everyday matters."

"Except idiots like us," Reno muttered.

Red ignored him and started to walk off into the darkness. "Let's get going."

Elena groaned and followed him, switching on her flashlight as she did so. After debating whether or not to protest on how the mutt had suddenly taken charge, Reno reluctantly followed, keeping his flashlight trained on the floor in front of him so he didn't slip on any more algae. He had only taken two cautious steps before felt a strange feeling run down his spine and spread across the width of his back. Reno hissed under his breath and reached behind himself to pat his back with his free hand, certain that some oddball lifeform had detached itself from the ceiling and slid down the back of his suit. But all his questing fingers found was the damp material of his navy blue suit.

Still not trusting his results, Reno whirled around and shone the beam of his flashlight down the expanse of tunnel they had just left. Nothing. Just the same algae covered walls and rancid water running merrily along its shit-filled way. A little bit of light filtered in from the open manhole cover as raindrops plummeted through the open hole and into the sewers, eagerly exploring this fun, new, dark place. Reno's aquamarine eyes narrowed in outright suspicion, their slight Mako glow accusing the dark of hiding things that he needed to know.

*Something's wrong*, he suddenly thought. *I know this feeling...*

"Reno!" Elena suddenly called, her nasal voice jolting him out of his thoughts.

The redheaded Turk spun around to get a face full of light blaring in his eyes. "Dammit, Elena!" he cried, throwing up his arms to shield his smarting eyes. "Watch where you point that thing!"

Elena lowered her flashlight. "Well, if you hadn't started lagging behind like a slow-pokey turtle, then we wouldn't have had to come—"

"Spare me the sob story," Reno snapped angrily, blinking in order to make the red spots leave his field of vision.

"What's wrong, Reno?" Red asked calmly, padding up to stand next to Elena.

"Nothing, nothing," Reno grumbled, too embarrassed at being caught in an act of paranoia to tell them about the peculiar feeling he had in his gut. "Let's just get goin' already, okay? I don't want to be down here too long."

"Trust your instincts, Reno," Red suddenly said softly, golden eye glittering in the

dark with a natural bestial gleam.

Reno scowled. “What the hell are you talking about?”

“Is there something bothering you?” Red insisted.

“No!” Reno declared immediately. “It’s just...should we shut that manhole cover or not? Rain’s coming in and all.”

Red snorted and turned away again, as if disappointed in Reno somehow. “Close it if you wish,” he said calmly. “Because I certainly can’t do it.”

“No!” Elena cried. “Don’t close it! It lets a little light in after all. We’ll be able to find our way back if we get lost.”

Casting a suspicious glance over his shoulder and panning his light around one more time, Reno nodded reluctantly. “Fine, we’ll leave it open.”

“Good,” Elena said, and turned to follow Red into the darkness.

But Reno lingered for one moment more in the darkness of the tunnel, breathing the rank air and listening as the star-crossed raindrops fell into the filthy sewer and struck the concrete with lonely splashes. Something was wrong; he could feel it in his bones. Three years as a Turk hadn’t just earned him an endless supply of blue suits and a pair of hands stained with blood that could never be washed away. Reno had an incredible intuition and senses as sharp as they needed to be for a professional assassin. Red had told him to trust his instincts.

*Yeah, well, instinct tells me to get the hell out of here and go get plastered at a bar, he thought. And that sure as freakin’ hell ain’t gonna happen so...I’m leaving now.*

With that, he spun and followed his companions into the darkness, forcing himself not to look back once.

\*\*\*\*\*

Titus stood as still as a statue in the pouring rain, letting the pitiful droplets course down his leather clothes and soak whatever skin they could find. Underneath his ski mask, his platinum blond hair was already soaking wet, and there were raindrops clinging to his long eyelashes. Beside him, Fa-Li was shifting her weight from one heeled boot to the other, the epitome of misery with her dripping hair and soaked skin. The leather bodysuit she was wearing offered defense against the sadistic little raindrops, but the form-fitting outfit was more for show than protection against the elements. In other words, she had enough skin exposed for the rain to soak. It was bugging living hell out of her, and the fact that Titus was standing still in the rain like an idiot again wasn’t helping to ease her sour mood.



“Well, what the hell are we waiting for?” she finally snapped at him. “If we stay here any longer, we’ll lose the trail of the Kisaragi girl.”

Titus didn’t reply. His incredible eyes remained closed, the pale flesh of his eyelids looking thin and vulnerable against the cloth of his ski mask. Fa-Li was about to repeat her question in a meaner tone when Titus’ eyes suddenly snapped open.

“Through with your little nap?” the woman snapped, trying not to let herself think of just how damn beautiful those emerald eyes were. If she got to thinking like that, then she began to actually miss what she and Titus used to have, and that was never a good thing. People weren’t meant to be missed or grieved over.

As Fa-Li watched in bafflement, Titus suddenly strode across the wet pavement, his boots splashing through puddles as he went. Rolling her eyes and resisting the urge to scream, Fa-Li chased after him, careful to overstep the puddles that Titus had just plowed through.

“Baka!” she called when she saw her companion suddenly stop his puddle splashing and kneel on the ground. “What the hell are you doing now?”

“Just be quiet,” Titus deadpanned. “And quit calling me stupid. I don’t appreciate it one bit.”

“Fine,” Fa-Li snapped, shoving at her waterlogged hair away from her face as she splashed up behind Titus to see that he was staring down an open manhole, his gloved hands wrapped around the edge. The cover was discarded a few feet away, apparently having been dragged off, judging by the scrape marks on the pavement that the rain hadn’t washed away yet. The sewer gaped open like the hungry mouth of some sea beast...and it smelled just as bad, too.

“Titus!” she immediately exclaimed, wrinkling her nose and backing away from the odoriferous stench. “I am not going down there! I mean it, Titus!”

“I didn’t say we were,” he answered calmly, rising to his feet and crossing over to where the manhole cover was lying meekly on the pavement. Titus hunched over it, sliding his slender fingers underneath the edge and pulling it over easily. He carefully slid it back over the open manhole, shutting its rank breath off from the world.

“Now, why did you go and do that?” Fa Li asked as he straightened up.

Titus stared at her, the fabric of his ski mask moving along with his mouth. “Didn’t you see three of them go down here?”

Fa-Li scowled. “No.”

“Well, I did,” Titus replied, the look in his eyes reprimanding. “I don’t want any outsiders interfering with this mission so I’m eliminating the possibility of them intervening.”

“By trapping them in the sewers?”

“Precisely.”

Fa-Li suddenly smiled prettily, stroking the wet leather sleeve covering Titus’ right arm. “You’re so smart, honey.”

Titus jerked away as if she had bit him, scowling so hard Fa-Li thought his face would crack. “Whatever,” he snapped, turning his back to her. “Now help me look for something to hold the cover down with.”

Fa-Li followed her companion with a sigh. Men...

\* \* \* \* \*

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Fa-Li followed her companion with a sigh. *Men...*

\* \* \* \* \*

With a loud grunt of exertion, Cloud slammed one booted foot against the door, putting

all his weight into the kick. The twisted metal groaned in protest at the abuse it was receiving, and to his relief, Cloud felt it give a little underneath his foot. Taking a deep breath, he backed away from the door and steeled himself to give it another kick. This time, the battered metal fell away completely, collapsing and giving Cloud, Tifa, and Rude a lovely view into the darkness that used to be a home for Artemis van Hojo and all his sick scientific secrets.

There was a moment of silence in which the trio gazed into the hungry darkness, perhaps remembering all the pain and strife that Hojo had caused when he had been alive and wishing that they didn't have to go venturing into the man's former home and breathe in the evil-tainted air. Then Cloud wiped his hands on his pants and said, "Okay. Is everyone ready?"

Tifa adjusted her gloves, trying to hide her discomfort. "I guess so, but one thing?"

"Hn?" Cloud responded, not looking at her but instead peering into the darkness, trying to discern something with his Mako-enhanced vision.

Tifa glanced at Rude with a questioning look in her burgundy eyes. "Weren't you just in here a couple of days ago, when you saw the Running Man?"

Rude nodded. "Yes."

"Then how come we had to break down the door?"

Rude hesitated for a moment, then said, "Turks know of secret passageways within the building often used when the President decided that he needed one of his employees... silenced."

Tifa's eyes widened. "You've killed members of your own organization?" she asked quietly.

Rude looked away from her beautiful face, absently fiddling with his fingerless gloves. "The Turks are assassins, Tifa. They kill indiscriminately."

"How sad," Tifa commented snappishly, folding her arms across her chest and looking away from Rude sharply. She wasn't trying to mean to a man who had been nothing but polite to her, but she was starting to think that she would never be able to see eye to eye with an assassin. Even ex-assassins.

Cloud noticed that Tifa wasn't going to continue her questioning any further and decided to pick up where she left off. "So, if you know about a secret passageway, then why did I just go through all the trouble of kicking down the door?" Cloud wasn't in a very good mood, either. He was thinking that he pulled muscle in his leg. The damn thing was hurting like a bitch...

“Because,” Rude said in response to Cloud’s question. “Reeve ordered all the secret passageways to be torn down immediately, and that’s what I was doing in there that day. He said that the Turks would no longer have any use for them now or ever again.”

“And were you relieved?” Tifa suddenly asked, turning back to Rude again and watching him carefully.

The overhead lights flickered on the lenses of Rude’s sunglasses as he looked at her and said sincerely, “Yes, I was.”

Tifa didn’t reply, but the look in her eyes was one of approval.

Cloud snorted, shifting his weight to his unhurt leg. “So even Turks have hearts, I guess?” He knew he was being shallow and problematic, but he couldn’t help it. He had a bad feeling in his gut that would go away.

“Turks have as much of a heart as terrorists do,” Rude answered calmly. “And I’m not trying to insult you, Cloud. Just merely stating facts.”

Cloud sighed in resignation. “Yeah, I know. Sorry, I just...” He turned away abruptly, not wanting to make everyone else nervous with his paranoia. Something was wrong; he just knew it even though he was at a loss to explain what precisely it was that was making him so nervous.

“What’s wrong, Cloud?” Tifa asked his back, speaking directly to him for the first time since she had slammed the door in his face a couple of nights ago. That day seemed so far in the past already...

Cloud shook his spiky head without turning around. “Nothing,” he said quietly. “Let’s just move out already.”

That said, he took a bold step into the darkness of Hojo’s lab, his entire figure disappearing into the hungry shadows. The vise of memory immediately closed around his chest along with the darkness, and he had the sudden urge just to turn around and leave. But Cloud knew that he could never allow himself to do such a thing. He had given himself the task of investigating Hojo’s lab for one reason: he didn’t want anyone else to get hurt. After he and AVALANCHE had rescued the late Aeris from the Shinra tower over year ago, she and Red both had mentioned that there were more specimens than just the two of them and the monster that Cloud, Barret and Red had defeated. And though Hojo was dead and gone (good riddance), Cloud had a bad feeling that some of those specimens might still be lurking around the shadowy corners of the lab, and they were probably not happy. If anyone was going to deal with those living phantoms of the past, it was going to be him.

But as Cloud moved gingerly into the darkness so that Tifa and Rude could enter the

lab, he was starting to think that maybe he wasn't the most competent one for this job. He had only been in Hojo's lab once, and that had been over a year ago. Besides, now that he saw just how whole and complete the darkness was, he realized that his Mako-enhanced vision, no matter how good it was compared to a normal human being's, wasn't really much of a help.

*I should have brought Vincent and Red with me, he thought grimly. Vincent can see almost perfectly in the dark, and Red could have used his sense of smell... but I wanted to have Tifa with me so that I could protect her. And Rude was the one that saw the Running Man. What if I made a mistake choosing the teams? Maybe Tifa would have been safer with that goddamn Reno in the sewers than up here with me and Hojo's reject specimens. What if we get lost in here? What if Red and the others get trapped in the sewers? What if Barret and Cid can't reactivate Cait Sith? What if the Running Man decides to take revenge on Vincent and Yuffie for following him? I can't protect them all!*

*Yeah, a voice sneered in the back of his mind. And what if your head explodes because you've been worrying too much? Focus, Strife!*

A shadow suddenly shifted on Cloud's right side, and the leader of AVALANCHE nearly had a heart attack right then and there before he realized that it was only Tifa's shadowy figure standing close to him. The meager light streaming in from the hall outside the door danced briefly in her burgundy eyes before the darkness swallowed that, too.

"That you, Tifa?" Cloud asked, just to make sure.

"Mm-hm," Tifa said, moving again so that Cloud could be sure of her presence. It was then that she realized that he probably couldn't see any better in the dark than she could, and that was going to cause some problems. She had been thinking that Cloud's Mako-enhanced eyes would be able to pierce the blackness easily, but now that she saw that that wasn't true, the fluttering feeling of anxiety was blooming in the pit of her stomach.

*If he can't see anything, then this is going to be the blind leading the blind, she thought gloomily, watching the steady but suddenly weak light from Cloud's Mako eyes gleaming in the darkness. She could see nothing else. It was strangely bewitching, watching those two floating orbs of Mako blue hover in the darkness like earthbound stars, their lights only flickering when Cloud blinked. They were misted and beautiful, focused on nothing until they lit upon her figure in the gloom. The light suddenly narrowed and became more intense as Cloud apparently squinted to see her better.*

Tifa waved in spite of herself, forgetting that she was supposed to be angry at Cloud for being a butt for the past two days. "I'm right here," she said softly, relishing that long lost feeling of his eyes on her.

The two blue eyes bobbed up and down as Cloud nodded slightly. "Where's Rude?"

he asked.

“Right here,” Rude’s calm voice issued from bunch of shadows right behind Tifa’s left shoulder. She jumped a bit at finding him so close behind her; she hadn’t even heard him moving around in the darkness.

“Where exactly did you see the Running Man?” Cloud asked, disembodied voice floating like a ghost in the darkness.

“In the main lab,” Rude answered in his deep voice. “You know, the one where he usually conducted the experiments on the specimens.”

Cloud winced. “You mean the one with the specimen elevator?”

“Yes,” Rude said.

“Isn’t that a little far away?” Tifa asked, remembering the time she and the others had stormed the Shinra Headquarters to find Aeris. It hadn’t exactly been a short walk to get over there.

“Yeah,” Cloud said grimly. “And we have no source of light to guide us. I’m assuming there’s a lot of debris around here?”

“There is,” Rude confirmed matter-of-factly. Tifa suddenly heard the rustling of clothes. “But I also have this.”

A beam of light suddenly struck Cloud in the face, setting his Mako blue eyes and golden hair alight with artificial fire and dancing across his strong features.

“Hey!” he exclaimed, flinging his strong arms in front of his face to shut out the light. “Watch out! Did you have that all along?”

“Yes,” Rude said calmly, steering the flashlight away from Cloud’s face.

Now that there was light in the room, Tifa could see Cloud take his hands away from his face and scowl deeply. “And why did you fail to mention that before?” he demanded of the stoic Rude.

“Forgot,” was Rude’s simple answer. Then he shone the flashlight beam into the darkness over Cloud’s shoulder and started to walk away, sufficiently ending the conversation then and there.

Cloud and Tifa had no other choice but to follow him and hope that they weren’t in over their heads.

\* \* \* \* \*

“You put a *what* down there in the sewers?!” Fa-Li demanded of her companion as they

paraded through the rain toward the office of President Reeve, where Titus believed they would be able to kidnap the Kisaragi girl.

“An *Evict*,” Titus answered matter-of-factly as he tore through another puddle. “I locked it in one of Hojo’s old tunnels. You know, the ones he used to use to transport human specimens?”

“I know the ones,” Fa-Li snapped, “but where in Leviathan’s name did you ever get your hands on an *Evict*, for crying out loud?!”

“I have connections,” Titus said flatly.

“But those things are monsters!” Fa-Li cried, fighting to keep up with her companion’s taxing pace. “Faceless Men that failed to submit to the treatment that turns them *into* Faceless Men. They’re nothing more than zombies! They’ll eat anything!”

“That’s the idea,” Titus said coldly.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Thissucksthissucksthissucksthissucks*, Reno chanted over and over in his head, anything to distract himself from the disgusting, suspiciously warm water sloshing around in his boots. He decided then and there that he was going to kill Cloud Strife once he got out of here. What the hell did the little turd think he had been doing, sending Reno down into the sewers to look for “abnormal things.” Everything Reno had seen so far had been abnormal! Everything from the greenish brown pool of...whatever...that he, Elena, and Red had literally *swam* across to get back on the concrete path to the green moss-like growths that were suddenly dangling from the walls and ceilings, every once in a while swooping down to tangle themselves in Reno’s spiky hair. He was cold, tired, and filthy, and it didn’t help that he now had no earthly idea where the hell they were. Getting lost in the sewers was something that didn’t appeal to Reno one damn bit. He at least hoped that Red knew where they were. If he didn’t, then they were in deep shit.

Not that they weren’t already, of course. Literally and figuratively.

“I wanna go home,” Elena suddenly whined, sounding ten years younger than she really was.

“Shut up,” Reno snapped, focusing his flashlight on her back instead of the nasty sludge on the floor. He was still in the back of the line. “It’s not like I’m having any more fun than you are.”

“Nor I,” Red added from the front of the line, his fiery coat stained and clotted with all sorts of gross-looking stuff.

“What are we even looking for down here????” Elena whined again, waving her hands



in the air and making her flashlight beam dance and swirl along the walls. “Why can’t we go back up the surface and just say that we didn’t find anything?!”

Red stopped and whirled around, fixing the female Turk with a bestial glare that made her stop dead in her tracks, a grumpy Reno almost plowing into her back. “Do you want to find Reeve or not?” Red growled up at Elena, golden eye alight with inhuman intensity and one lip curling slightly over his sharp teeth.

Elena blanched and said weakly, “Yes.”

“Then would you kindly shut up?” Red asked calmly, though the annoyed rumble that Reno heard in the back of the beast’s throat sang a different tune.

“Hey,” Reno snapped, walking up beside Elena and glaring down at Red. “Leave her alone, mutt.”

Red’s hackles rose, then settled just as quickly. He closed his eye briefly and sighed, his entire form relaxing a little. “Forgive me,” he said to Reno and Elena as he reopened his eye. “I’m not in my best of moods right now.”

“I think we need a break,” Elena suggested hopefully, glad that Red wasn’t angry anymore.

Reno rolled his eyes. “Yeah, let’s just plop down on the floor and have ourselves a little rest.”

“We need to discuss our next course of action,” Red deadpanned.

Reno scowled. “Our next course of action is to get the hell out of here. You and I both know that the only reason that Strife sent us down here is to keep me away from Tifa. And if I were you, Red, I would be pissed that I got sent along as a babysitter.”

The red lion-like beast stared at him with unshakable calm. “You don’t know Cloud. He wouldn’t have sent us down here if he didn’t believe there was something down here for us to see.”

“What’s there to see?!” Reno demanded, his grumpy mood making his voice harsh. “All I can see for the next fifty yards are piles of shit and more piles of shit! All three of us are dead tired, and you know it! Let’s just go back up! If Strife wants to see all this crap lying around, he can do it himself, on his own time!”

Red’s flame-tipped tail continued to swish calmly in the dark, unperturbed by Reno’s anger. “Instead of complaining, Reno, why don’t you tell us something useful for a change?”

“Like what?” Reno growled, shifting his weight and wincing as he felt the goop that was sheathed happily in his shoes.

Red glanced at both Reno and Elena before continuing. “You two were both members of Shinra, Inc. Just how much contact did you have with Professor Hojo?”

An unwelcome and unexpected shiver suddenly ran down Reno’s spine at the mention of that horrid name. “Minimal,” he clipped, trying very hard not to remember all the terrible things that Hojo had done in his twisted lifetime. “Turks weren’t allowed up into the labs without special permission.”

*Not that anyone would have wanted to go anyways,* he added silently.

Elena had no problem expressing her fear and disgust in a violent shudder that nearly shook the flashlight from her hands. “As little as possible,” she said quietly, her face looking glaring and ghostly in the light from their flashlights. “That man terrified me. Him and his specimens—he must have done such horrible things to them!”

Red looked off into the darkness, golden eye glinting briefly in the light. “He did,” the beast said calmly, but both humans could hear the repressed anger in his gravelly voice. “Trust me, I know from first hand experience what it is like to be a specimen.”

“That must have sucked ass,” Reno said with his normal eloquence, eyes straying to the tattoo “XIII” on Red’s left foreleg.

“It did,” Red replied, shifting his gaze back to Reno and Elena. “What else can you tell me about Hojo and his specimens?”

Reno suddenly got the impression that he was being tested, and he didn’t like it one bit. He always failed other people’s tests. “Why all this sudden interest in Hojo and his specimens?” he demanded of Red. “It’s not like we were his goddamn lab assistants or anything.”

Red’s golden eye stared hard at the two humans while the shadows and artificial light danced over the folds of the stitched one. “When I was imprisoned in Hojo’s lab, I noticed that there an unusual batch of specimens that I’m sure even a horrifically immoral man like President Shinra would never have permitted Hojo to experiment on, at least in the multitude I saw them in.”

“Just what were these unusual specimens?” Elena asked, making a vain attempt to hide the tremor in her voice.

“Civilians,” Red said flatly. “Human beings.”

Silence, except for the sounds of dripping water.

“He kept them in cages,” Red continued, staring off into the dark again as if in that inky embrace, he once again experienced the terror that he had apparently witnessed during his captivity. “I could hear them scratching and clawing at the metal bars like

animals, even from my cell in the specimen lab. And their screams—their screams were so loud I was surprised all of Midgar couldn't hear. But no one ever did hear. No one but me and the other specimens. But, of course, I was the only specimen there with something remotely resembling intelligence. All the others were simple beasts or had had what little emotion they contained in their forms obliterated by Hojo's ghastly experiments. But the humans...they were the worst."

"Oh my god," Elena breathed, bringing her hands to her cheeks, heedless of the filth that covered them. "Did you ever see any of them?"

Red glanced at her. "No, but their screams were real enough."

"B - But," Elena stammered. "How could he have gotten them up there?"

"There was really no 'up'," Reno suddenly cut in. All eyes turned to him, and silence once again descended. The redheaded Turk stood with his arms casually folded across his chest, the epitome of calmness even though his aquamarine eyes dared the others to challenge what he was saying.

*Damn you, Red,* he thought silently. *Damn you for bringing this up and making me look like an even bigger monster than everyone already thinks I am.*

"They were kept down below," Reno continued in a level voice. "Where Hojo apparently thought no one could hear them." He glanced in passing at Red. "Apparently, however, someone *could* hear them after all."

Elena's mouth was hanging open. "Reno? You knew that these humans were being held captive?"

"Yes," Reno said coldly, aquamarine eyes glittering frostily.

"And you didn't do anything?" Elena squeaked, the look in her eyes straddling the line between horror and outrage.

Reno looked off into the darkness, glad that he couldn't see all of the nasty things that were hiding out there. "Elena, I was second in command of the Turks, but I was also known for my belligerence and my insubordination. Shinra couldn't have such an important, dangerous man misbehaving now, could he?" He paused briefly to recover himself, then said, "Hojo showed me from the very beginning just what would happen if I betrayed Shinra Inc."

"Oh, Reno..." Elena whispered, her eyes filling with tears of pity. She suddenly rushed forward and hugged her friend hard, trying to offer him comfort.

Reno brushed her rudely away, his eyes harsh. "Leave me alone," he hissed.

"But, Reno," Elena began, still trying to grasp what had happened to her friend. Reno

had had such a cruel life and had seen such terrible things, and why did Fate still continue to mistreat him? And how strong he was, never giving up. At that moment, Elena had never felt such respect and love and sympathy for her uncouth, redheaded friend.

“You mean President Shinra authorized the experimentation on these humans?” Red asked Reno in a flat voice.

“Of course he did,” Reno snapped. “But in a very discreet way, of course. I believe his exact words were, ‘Do whatever you think will further the power and development of Shinra Inc.’ You should know that everything about that fat bastard was under-handed and sneaky.”

“But in such multitudes?” Red asked skeptically.

Reno shrugged. “He probably didn’t know that Hojo was going to bring in so many, but it didn’t matter in the end. Hojo did what Hojo wanted to do, and there was no one on Earth that could stop him.”

“But surely too many humans being held captive would create quite a stir,” Red pressed on, watching Reno’s reaction to his words carefully. “Rumors would get out, and that is not what the late President Shinra would have wanted now, would he?”

“Why are you asking me?” Reno snapped angrily, thinking that Red was trying to get at something. “I can only assume that Hojo had ways of silencing those that found out about the experiments, and he probably had secret...passageways...”

Reno’s voice trailed off, as he realized just why Red had started this conversation in the first place.

“And where would those secret passageways be, Reno?” the lion-like beast asked, suddenly sounding like he was talking to a two-year-old.

A scowl appeared on Reno’s handsome face. “In the @\$%ing, *shit-filled sewers!*” he snarled, glaring down at Red. “You did all that fancy-talking and subtle questions just to make me look stupid, didn’t you? You crafty mutt!”

Red snorted a bit at the name-calling. “Actually, Reno, I just wanted to confirm one of my suspicions about the experimentations. You know, make sure I wasn’t hearing voices in my head the entire time I was in the lab.”

“Just shut the hell up!” Reno snapped, suddenly feeling the urge to throw a tantrum. “You’re not funny!”

“I wasn’t trying to be.”

“Yeah right!”

“Excuse me,” Elena suddenly cut in, waving her hands in the air between the tranquil Red and the fuming Reno. “So are you saying that the secret passageways we’re looking for are the ones most likely used by Hojo to transport the human specimens underground?”

Red nodded approvingly. “I think that sums it up rather beautifully, Elena. It’s good to see that someone here still has their wits about them.” He spun and started down the concrete path again.

Reno’s glare followed him. “Okay, you mangy mutt, I’m just gonna pretend like that comment wasn’t directed at me.”

“Pretend all you want,” Red countered, not looking back. “But it was.”

Reno let out a cry of frustration and anger, squeezing his flashlight so hard that he almost cracked the plastic. On a wild and crazy impulse, he swooped down and scooped a handful of goop lying on the floor and flung it at Red’s retreating back, his aim going wild in the darkness.

Red dodged it easily and kept going as if nothing had happened. Elena took one look at the fuming Reno and his sewage-covered hand and took off after Red, apparently deeming him to be the more stable one at the moment.

Mumbling curses under his breath, Reno stamped after them, wiping his filthy hand on his filthy suit instead of wiping it on the filthy wall or the filthy floor. He never could remember being this miserable in his entire life.

After five more minutes of walking, he just as miserable. He had no freakin’ idea what the secret transport tunnels were supposed to look like, so how the hell was he supposed to find one? It was still pitch black in the sewers, and the only things his flashlight was showing to him were the river of sewage to his left, which was still gurgling and bubbly happily, and the nasty looking walls overgrown with green algae. Not very nice things to look at. He was pretty sure that the transport tunnels were dug into the walls somewhere, but if Red wanted to find them, then he was going to have to sweep away all the gross crap that had made its home on the concrete walls himself, because Reno sure as hell wasn’t going to do it and Elena was probably too afraid that she was going to break a nail.

Reno had been walking for another five miserable minutes when he suddenly heard *something* moving in the water on his left. His nightstick was immediately in his hand and his flashlight trained on the murky waters, but he saw nothing. Nothing at all.

“What the hell,” he muttered, glaring at the flowing water as if they were going to give up their secrets if he stared at the murky waters meanly enough. He was *sure* he had heard something...no, probably just his imagination...yeah, that was it.

“Reno?” Elena asked, suddenly noticing that her companion had stopped following

them. “What’s wrong, Reno? Hurry up, or you’ll get left behind.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Reno muttered, slowly walking away from the water in question and moving back towards his friends.

“Is something wrong, Reno?” Red asked gruffly, his tail swishing back and forth rapidly.

“No,” Reno grumbled, lowering his nightstick reluctantly and turning towards the lion-like beast to give him another nasty *Leave-Me-Along-Because-I’m-Still-Mad-At-You* glare. Then he noticed that some of Red’s fur was standing up on end and his hackles were up.

“What the hell happened to you?” Reno demanded. “You bite into a live wire or something? You got a serious fro going on there, my friend.”

Red shook his head like a dog as if doing so would flatten the fur. It just made it puffier. “Do you smell something?” he asked the two humans.

Reno took a big wiff of the air...and immediately regretted it. “I smell shit, shit, and more shit.”

“Ew,” Elena commented, wrinkling her nose. “Same here, Red.”

“But...do you smell anything else?” Red asked with a strange hopefulness in his voice. His fur still had yet to resettle itself.

Reno sniffed again. “Shit,” he confirmed. “And sewage. Nothing else.”

Red started to pace uncomfortably. “Well...I smell something else. It’s an odd smell...almost like Mako, but not quite. It’s something different, and I don’t like it one bit. It makes me...afraid.”

“You think there’s something alive down here, then?” Elena asked in a hushed tone, her eyes wide in the meager light given off from their flashlights.

Red suddenly shuddered violently, and Reno took an unconscious step back from him, a little nervous. He had never seen Red do that before...

“Elena,” Red said. “I *know* there’s something alive down here, but I don’t understand what’s making me feel all this...fear all of a sudden.”

Reno was about to make another witty comment on the way Red’s fur was standing up on end when a loud, echoing moan suddenly filled the sewer tunnel like the awakening rumble of some age-old beast. It was pitched low and seemed to vibrate the concrete beneath their feet, and all three of them froze upon hearing it, muscles going rigid in their bodies. On and on it echoed like the eerie moan of a restless ghost, rebounding off the

walls and jumping back at them until the sound seemed to become the very air, burning their lungs as they inhaled.

“Okay,” Elena whispered fearfully after it was done. “What...the hell...was that?”

The moan came again, louder this time. Reno and Elena shone their lights around wildly, trying to pinpoint the source.

“It’s coming from down there,” Red snarled, crouched in battle-ready mode as he glared at the section of the sewer tunnel that they had yet to investigate.

Once again, the moan split the air of the tunnel, harsher and almost sounding like a human voice.

“Holy shit!” Reno cried, his heart thundering in his chest. “That sounds like a @\$%ing person!”

“Oh my god!” Elena screeched, her eyes so wide they practically bugged out of her head. “Is someone trapped down here?!”

Red shuddered again, suddenly reminding Reno of a person having spasms. “I don’t like this!” he growled, pacing like a caged beast.

“Hello!!” Elena suddenly called before Reno could tell her to shut up. “Is anyone down here?!”

The moan came again, sharper and louder than before. Whatever it was, it now knew that they were there.

“This way!” Reno cried, rushing past the shivering Red and slipping and sliding down the tunnel. “Hey you!” he called. “We’re coming!”

“Reno, wait!” Red snapped as Elena ran past him in pursuit of her friend. “Something’s not right here! Wait!”

But Reno didn’t even hear him. The redheaded Turk ran almost blindly into the darkness, following the source of those ghastly moans that sounded like funeral music from beyond the grave. All he could think about was someone trapped down here, in the sewers, alone for who knows how long. And damn his lying soul to hell if that didn’t sound like a godforsaken human being! A human trapped, like those poor specimens in Hojo’s lab...

“Hold on!” he cried, his flashlight in one hand and his nightstick in the other as he raced across the concrete, shoes slipping and sliding on the goopy surface, almost sending him flying into a couple of walls.

“Reno, wait!” Red called again, bounding after them. “Wait, I said!”

A wall suddenly loomed up in front of Reno in the darkness as the everlasting sewer tunnel came to end. Reno cursed and backpedaled furiously, narrowly avoiding sliding into the algae-covered wall.

“Damn it!” he swore, his heart thundering in his chest. “Where is that sound coming from? There’s no more tunnel!”

Elena skidded to a stop behind him, huffing and puffing. “Reno,” she gasped, wiping her forehead with the sleeve of her suit. “Look, right there!”

Reno whirled back around to look at the wall, wondering what Elena was babbling about. Then he realized that a section of the filthy wall wasn’t as filthy as the rest. The algae had been unsettled recently, some of it scraped and shoved away to expose a circle of dull, rusted metal embedded in the wall. Before he could stop himself, Reno reached out with his hand and wiped away even more of the clingy algae, which, in its battered state, was forced to submit to his superior strength and relinquish control of the domain upon which it had rested for years.

Squinting in the darkness, Reno shone his flashlight on the tarnished surface, and suddenly the letters “Transport Tunnel E-14” jumped out at him.

“Hey, Red!” he cried, proud of himself for making a discovery. “I think I found one of those tunnels! What if one of the humans is still stuck in here! I’m gonna open it up!”

Red rushed up to him from behind, startling Reno so bad that he nearly unloaded a full charge of electricity into his furry friend. “Reno, you mustn’t!” Red cried, his fur still standing up on end. “Don’t open it!”

“Dammit, Red!” Reno cursed, turning his attention back to the tunnel door and clearing algae away from the handle. “Get a hold of yourself!”

Red shook himself violently again, baring his teeth. “Reno, I’m warning you, don’t open that! We haven’t heard that sound again.”

The Turk scowled and took hold of the handle, starting to pull. “But that doesn’t mean it’s not—”

Reno never got a chance to finish his sentence because the tunnel door suddenly burst open from within, a ghastly moan erupting into the rank air and rising to a shrill degree. The door slammed hard into Reno, sending him flying into the wall behind him, his nightstick falling from his grasp as spots danced in front of his vision. He heard Red let out a bestial snarl of alarm, then heard a loud splash, but Reno was unable to see what was going on since the door was blocking his view. And the shrill moaning continued.

Elena, who had been waiting a distance away from the tunnel, suddenly let out a terrified scream, her eyes riveted on the opening to the tunnel and her face as white a



ghost.

Reno was about to ask what was wrong when he saw a human figure run at Elena, shrieking in a ghastly voice and flailing its stick-figure arms in the air, hands flopping on the ends like some sort of rag dolls. It was dressed in the tattered remains of what might have been clothes, and it ran blindly towards Elena, the only thing it could see, screaming the entire way.

“What the @\$% is that?!” Reno cried, hand fumbling through the muck on the floor for his nightstick. That thing was gonna attack Elena!

The monstrosity let out another feral shriek that froze the blood in Reno’s veins and suddenly lunged in Elena’s direction, its bony hands curled into claws.

Suddenly, Elena’s gun was in her hand and trained on the abomination. Reno heard her scream as she fired three bullets right into the creature—two in its chest and one in its head.

But the thing refused to be silent even as it went to its death, crumbling to the floor like a sack of potatoes and giving one last gurgling cry of madness before it at last was quiet, lying on the concrete in a still heap, its face pressed to the floor and its limbs arranged bonelessly around it.

For a moment, no one dared to speak a word, both Elena and Reno staring at the monstrous mold of demon clay fashioned into the figure of what might have once been a human being. It was completely bald, its pink head shiny and glistening, and its ratty clothes barely covered its emaciated figure. Its hands, or what was left of them, were still curled into monstrous claws as it lay there dead on the floor, unmoving, as blood pooled out around it.

“R-Reno,” Elena suddenly whimpered, her hold on her gun trembling. Her flashlight, which had been held in a death grip in her other hand, suddenly clattered to the floor. Her knees started to crumple.

Nightstick forgotten, Reno was on his feet in an instant, rushing over to his friend. She all but fell into his arms, her brown eyes still riveted on the motionless figure of the creature she had just killed. Reno tried desperately to still the pounding of his own heart as he wrapped his arms around Elena, holding her small body tightly against him.

“You’re okay, ‘Lena, you’re just fine,” he said in the most soothing tone that he could manage, smoothing back her blond hair. His hands were trembling like crazy.

Elena buried her face in Reno’s chest, her back heaving with silent sobs as she started to babble, “Oh my god, Reno! It was so hideous! My god, Reno, it nearly killed me! I wanted to! I know it did!”

“It’s dead, Elena,” Reno said firmly, burying his face in her blond hair and trying to ignore the horror they had just experienced. “You killed it. Nice reflexes, there, Elena. Very good.”

“It was human!” Elena suddenly cried, arms locked around Reno’s waist in a vise-like grip. “That thing was human, Reno! Oh god, what did they do to it!! It was human!”

Reno cast a dubious glance at the lifeless figure lying facedown on the floor, illuminated in the light from Elena’s discarded flashlight. Human? Could it be? Maybe Red would know...

It was then that he noticed Red was missing.

“Hey,” he told Elena gently, squeezing her tightly for a second and then releasing her. “Where’s Red?”

Elena wiped her eyes with her hands, her gun still held tightly in one of them. “That...that thing came bursting out and knocked him into the water.”

Reno’s eyes widened, and he shone his flashlight into the murky, sewage-filled river at his side. “He fell...in there?”

Elena nodded mutely, reaching down with a trembling hand and picking up her flashlight, keeping a safe distance from the creature’s dead body.

Reno took a step closer to the nasty sewer river, wrinkling his nose in disgust. “Ugh... well, I’m not going in there after him so he’d better—”

Just then sewer water exploded everywhere as *something* jumped clear out of the water, growling and snarling as it did so. Elena let out another scream and raised her pistol, and Reno was just about to dive for his nightstick before he realized that the sewer monster was none other than their furry friend...

“Red!” he cried, pissed that the mutt had startled him to bad. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?!”

Red landed gracelessly on the concrete, covered from head to toe in sewer water and dripping more of the nasty stuff onto the concrete. He had a panicked look in his one golden eye.

“Run!” he cried, teeth bared to the gum, fighting to keep his balance. “There’s something down there!”

Reno barely had time to say, “What?” before the river rose up again, this time spitting enough water up in the air to splash Elena and Reno with its nastiness, blinding the humans for the time being. A high-pitched bestial roar suddenly split the air, louder than the cries of the insane creature that had attacked Elena. This mighty shriek seemed to

shake the very foundation of the sewers, threatening to bring everything toppling down on the three travelers.

*What is it?!* Reno wondered furiously as sewage water stung his eyes and he flung his arms up to cover his face. He heard a loud hissing sound.

“Snake!” Elena suddenly screamed. That word made Reno’s blood freeze in his veins.

*Snake? Oh no...holy shit...*

Heart thundering in his chest, he wiped the last of the rank liquid from his eyes and opened them to see the head of a giant snake towering over them in the light from Elena’s flashlight, its forked tongue darting in and out of its fanged mouth and its cold, slitted eyes alight with dark hunger. Poison dripped from its sharp fangs and fell into the water, making pained hissing noises as it did so. Water cascaded down its scaly hide, glistening with godly danger, silently telling the weak little mortals that they had no chance against something of this might.

“A giant snake!” Reno confirmed, hand flying to his left hip before he realized belatedly that he had lost his nightstick.

*IhatesnakesIhatesnakesIhatesnakesIhatesnakes*, he thought wildly as he stared dumbly at the monstrous creature that was eyeing him hungrily. He abruptly felt his consciousness slipping...

Teeth sank into his leg, and Reno nearly shrieked like a pansy before he realized that it was Red.

“Run!” he cried, darting away...back towards the tunnel that the monstrosity had emerged from.

“Where?!” Elena shrieked, pushing Reno along in front of her as she followed Red. For some reason, Reno couldn’t get his feet to work properly.

“This tunnel!” Red cried, hopping up into the entrance. “It’s the only way!”

“But we don’t even know where it leads!” Elena cried.

“Doesn’t matter,” Red retorted. “Anyplace is better than here!”

Reno abruptly returned from his little venture to the Twilight Zone. “My nightstick!” he cried.

“Leave it, Reno!” Elena cried, still shoving him along.

But the snake, infuriated that its prey was escaping, suddenly lunged forward with a bestial roar, intent on devouring whatever it got to first.

Reno sensed the thing coming behind him, but he could do nothing about it. His reflexes were dulled by fear, and besides...all he had was a freaking flashlight! What was he supposed to do?! Blink it to death?

Suddenly, Red's figure appeared in the entrance of the tunnel again, yellow and orange lights blazing around his lean figure like the fury of a thousand suns.

"STARDUST RAY!!!!" he roared, the air around them turning dark and star-filled as he threw back his head and let out a ferocious howl that shook the very bones in Reno's body.

*Please let me make it out of this alive*, Reno prayed as he heard the giant snake let out a pained scream behind him. But as he and Elena ran past Red's blazing figure, Reno sent a silent plea that his friends would make it out alive, too.

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Author's Note:

Heep! Sorry to take so long and then to leave you hanging like that! O\_O Please don't kill me! I'll hopefully be back soon with the next chapter! The reason why I posted this one now was because the chapter itself was getting so huge that I didn't want to put the whole big old thing up at once! So...see you guys soon...hopefully...

—Catalina

# Chapter Nineteen

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## *The Midgar Nightmare II*

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*“Should you really be walking around on top of that?” —Rude*

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“Cid?”

“What do you want?”

“Yer goddamn chain-smokin’ is giving me a headache!”

“So hold your breath, then!”

Barret cursed under his breath and resisted the urge to pound his friend into the floor of the elevator. He was well aware that neither he nor Cid was in a very good mood at the moment, but in Barret’s opinion, he was the one that had to suffer more since, not only was he wet and tired, he had to breathe in a lungful of secondhand smoke every time he inhaled. Given the rate at which the slow-ass elevator was moving and the rapid rate that Cid was filling the confined space with cigarette smoke, Barret figured he’d probably be dead by the time they reached the top levels of the Shinra Building, where Cait Sith was safely stored in an office that hadn’t been damaged from Diamond Weapon’s assault on the Shinra Headquarters.

Barret eyed Cid evilly. “I mean it, old man!” he growled. “Put that damn thang away!”

Cid turned and gave him a withering glare, continuing to expel smoke from his mouth. “Me, old? Look at you! Yer three years older ‘n me! And I ain’t puttin’ this thing away till it’s done, for your information!”

“I’m gonna be dead by the time we reach the top!” Barret protested angrily.

Cid shrugged and leaned against the glass elevator wall behind him. “Better hope we get there quickly, then. Why did that damn cat put his little stuffed toy so far up anyways?”

Turning away from Cid (and the main source of the smoke), Barret stared out the opaque, rain-streaked elevator glass and into the city of Midgar, which was fighting to survive the torrents of rain plummeting from the dark sky. “Don’t know,” he said in response to Cid’s question. “‘Jes ‘cause he wanted to keep anyone else from getting to it, I guess.”

Cid snorted, smoke exiting his nose and fighting for a place in the already smoke-

filled air. “Who the hell would want a stuffed moogle and an annoying cat that fights with a goddamn megaphone?”

“Hell if I know!” Barret snapped, trying to ignore the smoke-induced migraine that was pounding at his temples. He knew that he should have volunteered to go with Tifa, Cloud, and Rude to pay a visit to Hojo’s lab. Anything would be better than staying here and being forced to inhale all this damn smoke with Old Man Chimney...

The elevator continued to head upwards with agonizing slowness, and every second was torture for Barret. He could practically feel his lungs turning all gross and charred and blackened with every breath he took. Soon they’d shrivel away into nothing, and he’d have to rely on a respirator to do all this breathing for...

“We’re here!” Cid sang happily as the elevator chimed.

*Eureka!* Barret thought, nearly running Cid over in his haste to get out the smoky elevator. He stumbled to a stop and hunched over his knees, inhaling deep breaths of air that was blessedly free of secondhand smoke.

Cid walked up behind him, taking one last puff of his cigarette before grinding it beneath his boot. “The hell’s that matter with you?” he demanded of Barret. “You huffin’ like you just ran a marathon.”

“Sure as hell feels like I did,” Barret snapped, straightening up. “I’m taking the stairs next time, old man.”

“Do what you want, old geezer,” Cid counterattacked, blue eyes roving over their surroundings. “Where to now?”

Barret took the cue from his friend and examined the floor they had exited on. He quickly recognized it as the sixty-third floor, the one with all those goddamn annoying doors that never wanted to stay open at once. Fortunately, when Reeve had become President of Neo-Shinra, he had deactivated all the superfluous security and turned the entire level into a huge storage facility. The only problem was that the power to this area only worked when it felt like it, and it was apparently in a bad mood at the moment.

“Where are the goddamn lights?” Cid demanded, squinting the gloom. He took a few experimental steps forward.

“They ain’t workin’ right now,” Barret replied, trying to remember if Reeve had ever told him which room Cait was stored in. Then his eyes flicked over to where Cid was stumbling around. “Yo, Cid!” he cried. “You about to run into a wall!”

“Shut your flapper!” Cid snapped, still walking. “I know where-ow! Mother @\$%er! Who the hell put that @\$%ing wall there?!”

“Heh, heh,” Barret laughed, but said nothing to his friend, knowing that Cid would probably blow his top and whip out the Venus Gospel if Barret dared so much as to snicker.

“Hey, old fart!” Cid said grumpily, his voice echoing in the storage level as he rubbed his aching nose. “Where the hell is that damn robotic cat hiding?”

Barret’s eyes roved through the darkness, only to find nothing. He could see shadows of walls and corners, but other than that, he was completely blind. He knew the layout of the floor fairly well, though, from when he had helped Cloud and the others clean out the floor. He knew it better than Cid, at least.

“Follow me,” he ordered Cid, taking a step down what *looked* to be an empty space between storage blocks.

“Follow you?!” Cid echoed, his boots making loud stamping noises and he rushed to catch up with Barret. “I can barely see you!”

Barret waved his arms in the air and started making a lot of racket by stomping on the floor. “Get yer dumb arse over here!” he told Cid.

A humanoid shadow moved until it was in front of him. “I’m here,” Cid said grumpily, not liking being ordered around. “Now what?”

“Now we move out,” Barret said matter-of-factly, and started off into the darkness, trusting Cid to follow him.

Though he could see next to nothing in the blackness, Barret was pleased to find that he *did* remember what the room looked like. He had always had better-than-average night vision, and he was able to sense the hulking bulks of the storage blocks as he went past them, keeping him from running headfirst into one and ending up with a huge goose egg on his head. But although he may have known the layout of the floor, Barret knew that their search would be futile until he knew exactly where Cait Sith was.

“Hey, foo?” he called to Cid.

“Yeah?” came the terse reply.

“You know where that damn cat put his robot?”

“No,” Cid grumped. “Haven’t we been through this question before?”

Barret stopped, and Cid plowed into his back with a loud curse.

“Watch it!” Cid snapped, retreating a couple of steps from Barret’s shadowy figure.

“Shu’up!” Barret told him, scowling at the darkness all around him, cursing it for its impenetrable armor. “We don’t know where Cait is! Whatcha wanna do, Cid? Search all

the storage blocks one by one?!”

“Ain’t there three main storage blocks?” Cid spoke up. “Wouldn’t that damn robot be in one of those, then?”

“Oh,” Barret said, wishing he had thought of that. “Good thinkin’ old man!”

“Yeah, yeah,” Cid muttered, deflecting the compliment. “Let’s just hurry up to the first block. I wanna get outta here. This place gives me the creeps.”

“You jes’ sayin’ that because you can’t see,” Barret said as they started to walk again, with Barret in the lead and Cid playing drogue.

“You can’t see either!” Cid exclaimed.

“I can too!”

“You can not!”

The two men let their arguing voices fill the silence as Barret continued to lead the way through the darkness. Barret had purposely baited Cid into fighting with him. The idea of stumbling around in the darkness with nothing but silence pounding him on either side was not an attractive one. Besides, arguing was one thing that Barret was damn good at, and he always loved a good challenge, but Cid would have to do. Besides, he didn’t want the other man to be getting too nervous during their walk, or he would eventually turn paranoid. Barret had no idea how long they would have to search, and he also didn’t know if this floor was as monster-free as it had been last time. Who knows what demented specimens still lurked around Hojo’s lab and had wormed their way down to this floor? He wanted to get in and out as soon as possible, and if he had to argue with Cid the entire way to keep a cool head, then that was just the price he would have to pay.

But as luck would have it, the two men found Cait Sith almost right away.

They stumbled into the first storage room they could find, and nearly jumped for joy when they saw a small lamp sitting on a desk across the room, trying its hardest to illuminate the room with its gentle glow.

And bathed in that meager light was the dormant form of Cait Sith, the crowned cat slumped over the gigantic form of the pink robotic moogle.

Barret and Cid turned to each other simultaneously and grinned, glad to finally be able to see something in the dark.

“Bingo,” Barret said.

“Right on, old fart-meister!” Cid exalted with a wide smile, putting his gloved hands on his hips and staring across the room at the huge stuffed moogle and the immobile cat on



top of it. The oversized moogles seemed to grin at the two men, and Cid could practically hear Cait's annoying voice saying, "Geez! What took you guys so looooooong?!!!"

*Great, and I'm gonna bring the dufus back to life,* Cid thought grumpily, then rubbed his hands together with anticipation of working with something mechanical.

"You gonna be able to fix him?" Barret asked his eager companion.

"Sure!" Cid replied cheerfully. "It'll be simple." He started to walk across the floor to the waiting form of Cait, but he suddenly stopped and started digging through his pockets feverishly.

A feeling of impending doom washed over Barret. "Oh no," he warned Cid. "I know you ain't..."

Cid triumphantly pulled out a cigarette and lit it, inhaling contentedly and expelling the smoke through his nose. "Ah," he sighed.

"Put that shit away!!" Barret roared, throwing his arms in the air, appalled by Cid's audacity.

The pilot sent him a withering glare. "You don't like it, then wait your ass outside!" he snapped, then stalked off towards Cait Sith.

Barret let out a few choice phrases and went to go do just that.

\* \* \* \* \*

Tifa sighed and let another file drop into her "worthless" pile. "Nothing," she announced glumly.

"Nothing at all?" Cloud called from across the room where he was hunting through a pile of debris.

"Nope," Tifa said with another sigh as she got up from her seat on a surprisingly intact chair and walked over to Cloud. "You find anything?"

Cloud kicked at a scrap of metal with his boot, as if blaming it for the entire incident. "No," he said gloomily.

Tifa folded her arms across her chest and looked around the room she and Cloud were working in. After long minutes of stumbling around blindly after Rude, the trio had happened upon a room that, thank God, had a couple of lights that worked. The room had apparently once been a storage unit for all sorts of files and papers, most of which

had been reduced to pools of ashes floating around the corners of the room like miniscule phantoms. Rude, however, had immediately confirmed the room to be the one that he had seen the Running Man searching around. According to the tall Turk, their suspect had been looking through files at the very spot Tifa had been sitting at a few seconds ago. The three had agreed that Tifa and Cloud would stay behind and see what the Running Man had found so interesting while Rude went on to see just how the Running Man might have escaped from the lab unnoticed.

And Tifa and Cloud, after nearly thirty minutes of scouring every inch of their assigned room, had come up with nothing.

“I wonder if Rude found anything?” she wondered aloud, more to herself than to Cloud.

He came up behind her, a bit of warmth in the darkness. “Who knows?” he said rhetorically, his sheer closeness to her making her heart skip as if he were some girlish crush of hers and not a friend she had known for her entire life.

“Do you think he found something?” Tifa forced herself to ask, looking at Cloud out of the corner of her eye.

Cloud sighed and scratched his head absently, his gloved fingers sinking into the golden spikes. “No,” he said gloomily. “I don’t think we’re going to find anything in this place.”

“Tifa, Cloud,” Rude suddenly called. “Come over here. I think I found something.”

This time, Tifa couldn’t resist turning to Cloud with a gently amused smile curling her lips.

Cloud turned bright red and made a face. “Go figure,” he grumbled and stalked off in the direction they had heard Rude’s voice coming from.

Tifa bit back an affectionate laugh and followed him, carefully avoiding sharp scraps of metal that sought to puncture her legs as she passed. The two AVALANCHE members found Rude in a room even darker than the one they had been in. Looking around, Tifa realized that it had probably been two rooms at one time, only Diamond Weapon’s attack had completely eradicated one of the walls, leaving a pile of plaster, metal, and broken glass as a tombstone for the structure. Rude was standing by the wall farthest from them, shining his flashlight in their direction to show them where he was.

“Rude!” Tifa called, waving.

“Over here,” he said, motioning for them to come over.

“What did you find?” Cloud asked dryly as the two of them stumbled over broken

flasks and overturned boxes on their way over to their friend.

“Something strange,” Rude answered, staring at them with his pale green eyes. He had removed his sunglasses a long time ago since it was obviously imprudent to be wearing them in pitch darkness. Both Tifa and Cloud had been shocked to find the eyes normally completely masked by those glasses a stunning shade of bright green.

“What’s so strange?” Cloud questioned, looking around for the big thing Rude was supposed to have discovered. All he could see in the darkness was debris and miscellaneous broken objects.

Rude turned and gestured with the beam of his flashlight, silently shining it into the darkness. Cloud and Tifa instantly saw what he was talking about, and their eyes widened in surprise. Tucked furtively away in the corner of the room was what looked to be a strange metal well. Only difference was that this “well” was two times as wide as a normal one and had a featureless hatch sealing off the top of it.

Tifa lifted an eyebrow. “You’re right, Rude. This *is* strange. Any idea what it is?”

“Looks like a well or something,” Cloud commented, striding fearlessly up to the anomaly and peering at it.

“That’s actually a more accurate description than you may think,” Rude said flatly.

Cloud looked at him in surprise, knocking on the surface of the “well” with his hand. “You know what this is, Rude?”

“Transport tunnel,” Rude answered without hesitation, but Tifa heard something akin to disgust in his deep voice.

Cloud looked up from his examination and stared hard at Rude, suspicion flickering in his Mako blue eyes. “Transport for what?”

“Human specimens,” Rude replied flatly.

His words hung in the air for a few seconds before Cloud finally found his voice. “Human specimens?” he hissed, straightening up and clenching his hand into a fist. “Hojo’s human specimens, I presume?”

“That is correct,” Rude said, watching Cloud carefully, as if afraid the blond-haired man was going to snap at any moment.

Cloud shut his eyes tightly, eyelashes fluttering as if they alone were holding in the whirlwind of heartache and hurt that churned within him. “That...bastard,” Cloud uttered in a low, guttural voice, sounding completely unlike himself. “That...monster.”

“Cloud,” Tifa whispered, her heart aching for him as she started to walk towards him.

She couldn't even imagine the pain he must be in, remembering back to the time when he was imprisoned by Hojo—as a human specimen.

Cloud abruptly turned his back to her, the lonely circle of Rude's flashlight hitting him square between his tense shoulders, bits of light dancing in his golden hair and glinting off the metal buckles on his suspenders. He put his hands on his hips and lowered his head as if in intense concentration, the muscles of his arms bunched and rigid as he fought with some internal demons still haunting his fractured memories.

Tifa was just about to call Cloud's name again when he suddenly leapt onto the top of the "well," not even pausing to think what would happen if the hatch had given out underneath his weight.

"I wonder what's down here?" he asked rhetorically, pacing around the wide hatch as if he were walking on normal ground instead of a metal door leading to tunnel formerly used for Hojo's sadistic purposes. Though his tone was vastly calmer than it had been a few seconds before, Tifa could still hear the anger simmering underneath that cool surface. And she couldn't blame him; Cloud, of all people, had a right to be angry. Hojo had nearly destroyed his life with his atrocious experimentations.

"Should you really be walking around on top of that?" Rude asked, striding over to the massive cylindrical well. The top of it nearly reached past the tall man's waist. "It probably will be a long fall if it gives out underneath you."

Cloud stared down at him, Mako blue eyes glittering in the meager light from the flashlight. "Is there any way we can open it?" he asked flatly, ignoring Rude's warning.

Tifa strode over to stand next to Rude, looking up worriedly at Cloud's face. "Cloud, do you really want to open it?" she asked, running her hands lightly over the metal surface of the hatch's door. It seemed sturdy enough, but she wasn't going to be too careful when it was *her* Cloud that was prancing around on top of it.

"We need to open it," Cloud insisted, squatting on his haunches and running his hands over the surface, long fingers searching for any hidden grooves. "Rude, shine the light more over here."

"This is probably where the Running Man escaped from the lab," Rude commented as he moved closer to where Cloud and Tifa were examining the hatch, directing his flashlight beam at the dull surface of the metal "well."

"Where do you think it leads?" Tifa asked Rude, the light from the flashlight dancing in her burgundy-colored eyes and highlighting the fine bones of her face.

"To the sewers. That's where all the transport tunnels lead." Rude answered without hesitation, unable to bring himself to look Tifa in the eye. It just didn't seem right somehow,

talking of the ghastly things he had seen as a Turk while looking upon her beauty.

*Whoa*, Tifa thought, blinking in surprise. *That was a fast answer. Wonder how he knew about all that...*

Cloud raised his slightly luminescent eyes and studied Rude. “The sewers?” he echoed, glancing down at the metal hatch underneath his boots. “That’s where Reno and the others—”

He never got a chance to finish his sentence because a faint scream suddenly ripped weakly through the still air of the lab, making Tifa’s heart skip and beat before the blood turned to ice in her veins.

“What was that?” she gasped, her burgundy eyes wide. Cloud and Rude had similar looks on their faces.

The scream came again, only this time a shriller, more high-pitched shriek could be heard alongside it, with a strange howling noise in the distant background. They melded into one horrible cacophony of terrified sounds before dying off just as quickly as they had begun.

“I think it’s coming from beneath you, Cloud,” Rude said quietly.

Cloud stiffened, and then abruptly leapt off the top of the closed hatch, landing on the floor beside Tifa. “You mean someone’s down there in the tunnels still?” he asked, looking halfway between downright perturbed and strangely angry.

Tifa wasted no time. If someone was down there calling for help, then she was going to do something about it. Heart thundering in her chest, she placed her hands on the top of the metal hatch and yelled as loud as she could. “Hey! Is anyone down there?!”

“You bet your ass someone is down here!” a faint voice screamed, startling the trio.

Rude was the first to recognize the voice. “Reno!” he cried, face actually registering the surprise he must have felt in his heart. “Is that you?”

“No!” came Reno’s faint voice again, dripping with sarcasm. “It’s the almighty Sephiroth! Get us the hell outta here!”

“Hey, it’s Rude!” came another faint voice.

“Elena!” Rude called.

“Open the hatch!” Tifa cried, talking to everyone and no one at the same time. Without hesitating, she leapt up onto the top of the hatch like Cloud had been doing seconds before, her gloved hands searching with blind desperation for anything that could open the hatch and let them into the tunnel. The sounds of Reno and Elena yelling filled

her ears, urging her on, and the only thing on her mind was getting her friends out of the tunnel. After placing the flashlight on a nearby table, Rude leapt up and joined her as Cloud ran around the sides of the “well,” searching for a button or trigger hidden on the scratched and tarnished metal. Bits of debris crunched under his boots and others cut into his legs, but he kept on going.

“Hurry up you idiots!” came Reno’s voice. He sounded panicked.

“Reno, where’s Red?” Cloud yelled, hands making a dull thumping sound as they lightly stuck the sides of the hatch, searching for any strange shapes or levers.

“He’s fighting the giant snake!!!” Elena screeched, and Cloud was surprised all the glass in the lab didn’t shatter just from the incredibly high tone her voice was pitched at.

Cloud felt his blood freeze in his veins. “Giant snake?” he echoed incredulously.

“That’s what she @\$%ing said, you dumbass!” Reno cried. “Get us the hell outta here before it eats us!”

“Reno,” Rude called, his voice amazingly calm. “Is there a door or a button on that side that can open the hatch?”

“Yeah, but we can’t reach it!” Reno replied. “The ladder leading up to the hatch is broken! Shit! You guys hurry! Please!”

The desperation in Reno’s normally mocking voice was surprising. Cloud had never heard Reno say “please” for anything before, and that was enough to make him pick up his pace. His gloved hands raced all over the metal surface on the sides of the hatch, fingers searching blindly for something, anything that would release the hatch. He had to get Reno and the others out of there! He was the one that had sent them into the sewers! If they died, it would be all his fault...

His fingers suddenly hit something. It felt like a depression in the metal that gave slightly underneath his fingertips. A button!

“I think I found something!” Cloud cried, and before anyone could say anything, he punched the button.

There was an immediate whoosh of air like a giant releasing a breath of relief. Then Rude and Tifa let out cries of surprise as the hatch beneath them suddenly started to reel backwards, sending them both flying to the floor of the lab, where they landed amongst shattered test tubes and plaster debris.

“Are you guys okay?!” Cloud demanded, regretting that he hadn’t given them a bit more of a warning.

“We’re fine,” Tifa said breathlessly as Rude helped her to her feet.

“Guys!!” Reno’s voice cried, much louder now that five feet of metal wasn’t standing between them.

Acting fast, Cloud grabbed the flashlight from the table and peered over the edge of the “well,” nearly recoiling from the stench that drifted upwards to ram itself into his face. Wrinkling his nose, he shone the flashlight straight down.

“Hey!” Elena cried, throwing up her arms to shield her face. “Not in the eyes, if you please!”

Cloud’s eyes widened at her appearance. The blond-haired Turk was soaking wet and was covered head to toe with a dark substance that looked like dirt but probably wasn’t, given the place she and Reno had just emerged from. Her short hair was tangled and clotted with all sorts of nasty-looking things. A quick glance to the left showed that Reno was in the same condition, his fiery ponytail ravaged and scraggly and his suit ripped in several places.

“What happened to you guys?!” Tifa asked worriedly as she and Rude crowded in on either side of Cloud.

“Now’s not the time for stupid questions!” Elena screeched, her head craned backwards to stare at the trio. “Get us outta here!”

“And quick!” Reno added, glancing back nervously at the length of tunnel they had apparently emerged from before it abruptly took a shift upwards to become the “well” in Hojo’s lab, precisely where Cloud and the others now stood.

Cloud panned his light around, taking in the whole situation. He quickly came to the conclusion that things were not cheery. Reno and Elena were on level ground at least twenty feet below them without any means to get up. The rusted ladder, which must have served Hojo’s diabolical purposes for years, was lying in a cracked heap around the two Turks’ feet, algae already growing on it. The section of tunnel separating Cloud, Tifa and Rude from Reno and Elena was almost a 90-degree vertical climb with no visible handholds.

“Well!” Reno cried impatiently, a deep scowl on his dirty face. “Do something! Don’t just stand there!”

“Rude, help!” Elena echoed, her brown eyes wide and frightened in the light from Cloud’s flashlight. “Before it comes!”

Rude turned to Cloud and said with amazing calm, “Is there a rope or anything up here that we can use?”

“I’ll look,” Tifa said quickly, and ran off into the dimly lit lab, searching the tops of tables and amongst the debris.

Cloud was about to ask if Reno and Elena had any way to get up the wall when an unearthly screech split the air, shaking the very metal underneath Cloud's hands. Every muscle in his body went rigid with fear as the bestial scream rang through the tunnel and the lab, the echoes rebounding off the walls again and again until it seemed that the scream would go on forever.

*I guess that's the snake...*

"Shit!" Reno cried. "It's coming!"

"Hurry!" Elena begged. "Please!"

Tifa suddenly came rushing back to Cloud's side, sweat on her forehead and her face pale with fear. "There's nothing," she said quietly. "No rope, no anything."

For a moment, Cloud felt panic rising in him, but he quickly repressed it, telling himself that he needed to be strong for his friends. They were depending on him to see them all through safe and sound, and he couldn't abandon that trust.

"Strife!" Reno suddenly called, and Cloud looked down in surprise to find Reno's aquamarine eyes drilling him with their Mako light. "Don't disappoint me, Strife," Reno said with iron control in his voice. "You're going to get us outta here. You're going to save our lives."

Realization suddenly dawned on Cloud. *He's scared*, he thought in wonder. *Good God, Reno's terrified... unreal...*

"Hey, where's Red?" Tifa suddenly cried, some of her long hair dangling over the edge as she leaned down.

"I'm right here," a gravelly voice called, just before Red himself came bounding out of the tunnel, nearly plowing into Reno and Elena. He was in no better condition than his human companions, only he had several wounds on his body, the blood running thinly to tangle and clot the fur around it. His ragged breaths filled and echoed in the tunnel as he fought for breath.

"Did you kill it?" Elena demanded immediately. "Please tell me you killed it!"

"No," Red said calmly, scratching his ear. "But I hope you know how to swim."

*Swim?* Cloud thought in confusion, and the looks on Reno and Elena's faces showed that they shared his bafflement.

Reno was about to say something sarcastic when a low roaring sound filled the tunnel, making everyone stop and listen. To Cloud's surprise, he found the sound vaguely familiar; it was almost like the noise water made when it was going down the drain in the shower...or when he turned on the water hose outside. Or maybe it was more like the



sound of the waterfall outside of Lucrecia's...

"Holy shit!" Reno suddenly cried, grabbing Cloud's attention and forcing it to focus on the scene that was unfolding twenty feet below him. Reno, Elena, and Red barely had time to shield their faces before a humongous wave of water forced itself into tunnel, washing over them and filling every crack and crevice it could find. It rose at an alarming rate, eating up several feet of tunnel in only one second, getting closer and closer to Cloud and the others.

"Water?!" Cloud said incredulously, shining his flashlight on the murky surface, looking for any sign of his three friends. They had vanished beneath the surface.

"It's flooding the tunnel!" Tifa cried, gripping the edge of the "well" tightly.

*She's right,* Cloud thought grimly as his eyes searched for any shadows beneath the water. *I hope it doesn't overflow into the lab. And where are Red and the others? Damn... what if the currents in the water carried them back down the tunnel... towards the snake?*

Cloud's worries were short-lived, however, because three spouts of water suddenly exploded from the murky surface as Red, Reno, and Elena burst free of the water's liquid hold, sucking in huge gasps of air into their squashed lungs, their limbs clawing desperately for some sort of salvation.

"Guys!" Tifa cried in relief, one gloved hand resting over her heart. "You're alright!"

"For now!" Elena sputtered, wiping water out of her eyes. "Get us outta here!"

"Where's the snake?" Cloud demanded as he judged the distance between the two groups and saw that things were actually looking up. Hmm... the water had cut it in half. Maybe if he dangled over the edge...

"The snake was too large to fit in the tunnel," Red answered, doggypadding and trying to see through the fall of his mane that had flopped into his one good eye. "It made the water flood the tunnel with some sort of spell. It's going to use it to act as a sort of lubricant to help it along. I don't think we have much time!"

"Don't worry!" Tifa said consolingly, but the look in her eyes was one of almost pure panic. "We're going to get you guys outta there!"

Everyone looked at Cloud expectantly.

*Damn,* Cloud thought, shifting nervously under their gazes filled to the brim with panicked trust in the man they had come to call leader. *It's times like these that I wish they wouldn't rely on me so much. What if I can't get them out in time? But... I have to... I won't fail...*

Determination flashed in his Mako eyes. "Rude," he ordered. "You're the tallest! Lean

over the edge as far as you can! See if you can reach one of them!”

“Don’t make Rude do it!” Elena screeched as Rude started to obey. “What if the snake jumps up and eats him?”

“We’re the ones in the water!” Reno yelled. “It’s gonna eat us first!”

“Be careful, Rude,” Tifa said softly as both she and Cloud watched the tall Turk bend over the edge and stretch his arm out as far as it would go. Cloud’s heart was thudding in his chest as the air throbbed with adrenaline and anxiety. If Rude couldn’t make it...

“Someone hold my legs,” the Turk suddenly ordered as Reno jumped for his hand and missed, crashing back down into the water. “If I can make it down a little further, I think we’ll be okay.”

Cloud moved to comply, but Tifa beat him there. “You keep a watch out for that snake, Cloud,” she said, fastening her hands around Rude’s calves, a look of determination on her pretty face. “We’ll take it from here.”

Worry consumed Cloud. “But Tifa...” he started to protest, thinking that Rude was going to be way too heavy for her.

His exclamation was stopped when the brunette smiled gently at him. “I can hold him, Cloud,” she said calmly. “You try and reach one of the others!”

But despite her words of encouragement, Cloud couldn’t stop himself from watching with anxiety as Rude dipped further over the edge, pulling Tifa forward with him. Rude’s feet left the floor completely, and Tifa’s face creased with the effort of holding onto him. Her boots make squeaking noises as they slid across the floor of lab, but she planted them firmly against the edge of the “well” to prevent herself from sliding further. Cloud could see the muscles of her slender arms lock as she fastened them around Rude’s legs in an iron grip, and there she stood: the powerful goddess unwavering in her fate.

Cloud forced himself to tear his gaze away from her and pay attention to what was happening below. Reno had dived underwater and was now pushing Elena up from below as she leapt for and caught Rude’s hand, her fingers digging into his gloved palm.

“I got her!” Rude called as Reno reemerged from the murky water with a loud gasp, strands of blood-red hair falling across his eyes.

“Tifa!” Rude cried, wrapping his other hand around Elena’s arm to reinforce his grip on her. “Can you pull me up!”

Tifa didn’t reply; she was too busy focusing on not dropping Rude. Sweat rolled down her face and dripped down her chin, and her eyes were shut tightly with exertion.

“She can’t!” Cloud answered for her. “Elena, you’re going to have to use Rude as a

ladder...”

“O-Okay,” Elena said weakly and started to obey, grabbing a hold of Rude’s jacket and starting to pull herself up.

“Strife!” Reno suddenly cried, treading water next to Red. “Do something to help the rest of us! We don’t have time to wait!”

Cloud shook his head violently, feeling utterly helpless, a feeling he despised. “I can’t do anything!”

“Well, think of something!” Reno yelled, hitting the water with his hand in anger and splashing Red. “We’re waiting!”

Cloud pressed his gloved fingers against his temples and pressed hard, trying to shut out all the sounds whirling around him like a tornado of suffering and battle. He forced himself to calm down until his breaths flowed deep and easy in and out of his lungs and his heart wasn’t beating so fast.

*Ok...I need a rope or something. Anything that they can grab onto. My sword? No way... they'll cut their fingers on it. Any of my armor? No! Damn it! Any of my clothes? No, the shirt won't reach, and the pants will take too long to get off with the boots and suspenders...hey! That's it!*

“Reno, hang on!” Cloud cried, unsnapping his suspenders from his belt in one swift motion. He tugged on the leather, testing its strength. A look of worry creased his face. The leather was well worn from the toils of endless battles; would it be enough to hold Reno? Well, it would have to be!

Putting the flashlight in his mouth, Cloud rushed up to the edge and leaned over as far down as he could, holding the end of the suspenders tightly in his fist and dangling the other end down to where Reno was treading water.

“Grab on!” Cloud tried to say around the flashlight, doing his best to hold the makeshift rope steady.

For once, Reno didn’t have something pert to say in return. All harsh or sarcastic words he might have said died in his throat when he saw the lifeline Cloud was offering. Placing his palms flat against the side of the metal tunnel, Reno pushed down so that he sunk a little deeper in the water. Then he pushed up hard, springing up out of the water higher than Cloud thought he could have gone. Reno’s hands shot forward and grabbed the leather suspenders in a death grip, and though Cloud had been prepared for the abrupt change in weight, the force still jerked him forward, the suspenders burning his palms as they tried to slither from his grasp.

“Shit!” he cried, arms locking as he was forced to support all of Reno’s weight. “Reno,

you're heavy, goddammit!"

"Shut up and pull me up, Strife!" Reno shot back, shaking his head to get his ponytail out of his eyes. He was dangling about a foot off of the water, his hands locked indefinitely around the leather straps that were keeping him from plunging back to a watery doom.

Cloud flexed his muscles dubiously, seriously doubting his ability to pull such a large amount of weight for the entire ten feet of tunnel between Reno and final salvation. He hadn't been expecting Reno to weigh so much! For such a skinny guy, it felt like he was as big as an elephant.

But still, Cloud refused to give in. Steeling himself and gritting his teeth so that they sank down into the plastic covering of the flashlight, he braced his feet against the edge of the tunnel and leaned backwards as far as he could. Slowly but surely, he began to pull in the leather straps in a methodical hand-over-hand technique, trying to ignore the sweat rolling down his face and Reno's weight at the end of the suspenders.

Cloud didn't know how long he was at it before his muscles started burning from overexertion. His limbs felt weak and watery, and the poor flashlight was now adorned with permanent teeth marks along its sides. He didn't know how much longer he could keep it up, and he also had no idea how far Reno was from the tunnel's entrance.

A series of scrabbling, scratching noises suddenly rang through the air, and Cloud froze, expecting the worse. His eyes, which had been shut tightly in concentration, flew open only to see a dripping wet Red sitting on the floor a few feet away, panting heavily. Cloud blinked in surprise, nearly losing his grip on the suspenders. Last time he had looked, Red had still been in the water...

Red noticed Cloud's stare and said with amazing calm, "It helps to have four legs and sharp claws."

Realizing that the scrabbling noises he had heard had been Red scaling the wall of the tunnel, Cloud nodded stiffly and resumed the excruciatingly painful process of pulling Reno up inch by inch...

"Argh!" Reno—quiet until then—suddenly cried. "Strife! Get over here!"

Rolling his eyes and snarling under his breath, Cloud wound the leather straps around his aching hands to reinforce his grip and walked over the edge of the tunnel, poking his head over the side to see what Reno was shrieking about.

Cloud didn't see anything out of the usual, just Reno hanging about a foot over the water like he had been before.

*Wait a minute,* Cloud suddenly thought. *Why is he still in the same spot? I KNOW I pulled him up higher than that!*

“What’s going on?” he asked aloud, his voice muffled because of the flashlight in his mouth.

“The water just rose!” Reno yelled, casting a rather panicked glance at the liquid surface waiting eagerly underneath him, ready to swallow him if he were to fall again.

“Something’s in the tunnel,” Red observed, placing his paws on the edge of the tunnel and peering down at Reno calmly.

It took only a second for Red’s words to sink in.

“The snake!” Cloud cried, his teeth unsheathing themselves from the plastic covering of the flashlight, losing their hold on it simultaneously. Cloud watched helplessly as their only source of light plummeted from his mouth and into the tunnel, missing Reno’s head by a millimeter and...

...hitting a green, scaly snout that had just begun to emerge from the water. The flashlight bounced off of the shiny surface and rolled into the water in defeat, its small but powerful light illuminating an impossibly long, ghastly body before the water reached its batteries and extinguished its light forever, plunging Cloud and the others into almost total darkness.

Indeed, the only thing that managed to completely slice through the darkness was the slitted eyes of the snake as its head, huge and hideous, emerged from the water, its forked tongue lashing the air inches from the soles of Reno’s shoes.

All the blood drained from Cloud’s face as he beheld the monstrous creature whose head almost filled the entire tunnel. The anaconda rose from the water with calculating slowness, the water falling away from its scaly hide in sheets and leaving a ghastly glitter that Cloud could barely see in the darkness. He was vaguely aware of Elena screaming and the straps of his leather suspenders biting into his gloved hands, trying to bring him back down to earth. But the light from snake’s eyes and the way its slitted pupils dilated and contracted like a beating heart had him mesmerized. An odd smell suddenly drifted up to him, and Cloud found that his heart was pounding with irrational terror. Why was he so frightened?! He had fought the Midgar Zolom before, and the swamp dwelling reptile had only been a little smaller than this one. But he was so afraid...

Maybe it was the Mako glow in Reno’s aquamarine eyes that finally drew him away from the snake’s frighteningly silent approach, but Cloud suddenly felt his gaze slid from the snake’s luminescent eyes to the placid, unnaturally calm eyes of Reno, who was still dangling about three feet out of Cloud’s reach, the form of the snake rising slowly beneath him, hissing suddenly as it did so.

“It’s right behind me, isn’t it?” Reno asked Cloud, Mako eyes boring into Mako eyes with a strange sort of detached intensity.

“Yeah,” Cloud said quietly, watching the battlefield in Reno’s eyes as all his training as a cold, callous Turk fought a losing battle with the simple emotion of human fear.

Then something in those aquamarine eyes suddenly snapped as terror got the best of Reno. The Turk’s muscles suddenly locked desperately, and Cloud felt a pair of gloved hands fasten around his wrists in a death grip, driving the metal of Cloud’s Crystal Bangle into the tender skin of his wrist. And as he felt the suspenders slid limply from his hands, Cloud realized belatedly that Reno was no longer at the end of them.

He was holding onto Cloud’s wrists instead, the overpowering stench of sewage and fear plastering the blonde man’s face with all the fury of a tsunami.

“Reno!” Cloud cried in surprise, as the sudden weight on his body dragged him forward, his feet almost leaving the floor. The tunnel and the snake suddenly loomed beneath him, more of a threat than before. “Let go!”

But Reno was past listening to what anyone had to say. Cloud could hear the other man’s breaths coming in hard, fast gasps as his fingers scraped across the skin of Cloud’s arms, searching in blind terror for some sort of leverage to save him from the abyss. Cloud grit his teeth in pain as he realized that Reno was clinging to him like a drowning victim would cling to a lifeguard, trying to save his own life at the expense of the one that was trying to rescue him...

Cloud fastened his arms around Reno’s back, his fingers digging into the waterlogged suit. Whether he was trying to help him along or shove him off, Cloud himself didn’t know because the anaconda, drawn to all the sudden movement, suddenly let out a loud hiss and bared its fangs, which dripped perpetually with acidic venom that smelled so foul that Cloud felt his stomach churn with nausea.

Slitted bestial eyes suddenly locked onto wide Mako blue eyes, and the hunger Cloud saw in the those yellow orbs was an almost tangible thing in the air between them, making his heart pound in terror. He suddenly knew that the snake was about to attack, and there was nothing he could do about it with Reno pinning him like this.

*Is this...the end?*

“Yeeesssss,” the snake seemed to hiss as it drew back its head to strike, opening its mouth wide so that Cloud could see the hungry lining on the inside, pulsating and quivering.

*Then...Tifa...goodbye...*

“Bolt 3!!!” Red suddenly cried, and the tunnel was filled with light so blinding that Cloud had to shut his eyes. The smell of ozone seared his nostrils, overpowering even the rank stench coming from Reno’s jacket and tangled hair. And over the pounding of his

own heart, the roar of the lightening, he could hear the pained screech of the anaconda rising so loudly that he could almost feel the very bones in his body quaking, as if in the grips of the same terror that inundated his heart.

“Reno! Cloud!” he suddenly heard Elena yell from somewhere to his left. “Hurry up and pull back! Rude and Tifa are ready to close the hatch!”

*Tifa...she's safe, then. Rude and she managed to get Elena out of the tunnel...it's just me and Reno, then...*

“Elena!” Red suddenly cried. “Grab Cloud and pull them away from the tunnel’s entrance! He’s about to fall in!”

*I am?* Cloud wondered in confusion as the Bolt 3 attack started to fade, spots dancing before his eyes. Then he realized that his feet weren’t touching the floor anymore, and the only thing keeping him from falling was the fact that Reno was balancing out the weight on his back and Cloud’s belt buckle was rammed against the tunnel’s edge, preventing him from sliding further.

He was about to try and move back from the edge when he suddenly felt small hands bury themselves in the back of his shirt and tug hard. The next thing Cloud knew, he was spread-eagled on the floor of the lab, staring up at the dark, deteriorating ceiling with Reno lying a few feet away from him, his face pressed against the floor.

*Hey, he thought, I'm alive!*

“Shut the hatch!” Elena suddenly cried, bringing Cloud back to earth. The battle was still not over.

As Cloud lurched to his feet, he saw Tifa and Rude behind the hatch and shoving it with their arms, faces creased in concentration. The heavy metal hatch moved with agonizing slowness at first, and Cloud was all too aware of the fact that the snake was still in the open tunnel and could come bursting through into the lab at any moment. He was about to go and help them when the hatch lid suddenly pitched forward and began to slide shut using its own momentum.

But just as it was about to hit the edge of the “well” and consummate their safety, a shadow with luminescent slitted pupils suddenly shot upwards and slammed into the lid, stopping it in its tracks with a hiss. The giant snake’s eyes glittered in the darkness that had nearly shut it off from its meal with an anger that seemed to be almost human. It was not pleased.

“That damn snake!” Cloud cried, anger rising in his throat. “Just die, dammit!”

*Never,* the snake’s eyes mocked him. It forked tongue suddenly lashed out from underneath the hatch resting on its head, tasting the air of the lab.

With a loud cry, Tifa suddenly leapt onto the top of the hatch, slamming her boots into the metal with a bang. The lid dropped a few inches as the snake hissed in surprise at the sudden added weight on its skull. Before it could recover, Rude threw himself on the lid next to Tifa, and the hatch dropped a few more inches. It was almost shut now.

Then the snake recovered its dignity—if such creatures even had dignity—and suddenly pushed upwards with a violent thrust, almost flinging Tifa and Rude off of the hatch.

“Help, you guys!” Tifa cried, falling to her knees and grabbing a hold of the edge of the lid to keep her balance. Rude reached out a hand to steady her.

“We’re coming!” Elena cried as she and Red rushed up to the hatch. The snake almost seemed to sense what they were doing and hissed loudly, its tongue flailing in the air and lashing out at them as they ran by. Undaunted, Elena and Red flung themselves onto the hatch lid with Tifa and Rude, adding about two hundred more pounds to the weight already resting on the snake’s head. The lid dropped violently this time, until it was inches from closing. But it stopped there, and there was now no more room on the hatch lid. The only thing Cloud could see of the snake was its forked tongue still lashing out in the air beyond the hatch, whipping back and forth as if searching for something.

Ignoring the pronounced ache in his arms, Cloud reached behind himself and pulled the Ultima Weapon from its sheathe in one deft motion, the weight of it settling easily into his hands as he gripped the hilt. The screams of the snake and his friends filled the lab, and his eyes narrowed with determination; he was going to end this battle right here and now. He had had enough of fighting with this damn monstrosity!

But just as he was about to rush forward and slice off the snake’s tongue, he suddenly felt something run past him and towards the hatch.

“Reno!” he cried in surprise, shocked at the Turk’s speed as much as he was by the fact that he saw Reno was wielding a shattered beaker as a makeshift weapon. Cloud briefly wondered what happened to Reno’s nightstick, but all rational thought was suddenly obliterated when he saw the meager light in the lab flash across the beaker as Reno raised it high over his head and brought it down with all his might on the snake’s lashing tongue, grinding the piece of red flesh into the floor of the lab.

From underneath the hatch, the snake let out a high-pitched shriek that Cloud was to remember for the rest of his life. He could see it trying to desperately retract its tongue, but Reno was ruthless, twisting the razor-sharp beaker from side to side even as blood spewed from the wounded tongue and splattered his face and clothes, drops of brightness against his pale skin.

The snake began to thrash wildly, the lid of the hatch jerking up and down as it tried to yank its bleeding limb from Reno’s hold, but to no avail. Reno refused to let up. He



kept the ripped tongue pinned to the floor, and the blood leaking onto the floor of the lab was as red as his hair, as red as the rage that Cloud perceived in his mind. Finally, it seemed as if the snake knew it had lost to an opponent more ruthless than itself. The tongue suddenly became taut, and then ripped off as the snake gave an agonized shriek, retracting its severed tongue underneath the hatch lid, its cries becoming fainter as the lid suddenly crashed down on the edge of the hatch, an automatic lock clicking in place, consummating their safety.

The smell of sweat, blood, fear, and sewage hung heavily in the air of the lab long after the snake's cries had faded as it retreated back to its habitat. Cloud dropped to his knees in sheer exhaustion as the adrenaline in his system ebbed, leaving his body feeling watery and weak. Driving the tip of his sword into the floor of the lab, he rested his forehead against the hilt, the cool metal soothing his overheated skin. Tifa and the others were lying in a tangled heap on top of the hatch, gasping for air as they let the silence cleanse them of their fear. Reno was sitting on the floor of the lab next to the snake's severed tongue, oblivious to the blood staining his face and hands. His head was lowered, and his hair was in such wild disarray, clinging to the sides of his scarred cheeks so that Cloud couldn't tell whether there were streaks of blood or strands of hair plastered to his pale face. His sweat-soaked chest heaved for breath, the air whooshing in and out of his lungs so raggedly that Cloud was afraid the Turk was going to faint on them.

But it turned out that Reno was the first to recover from their ordeal.

Slowly, he lifted his bloodstained face and said flatly, "Guys? Can we get the hell outta here now?"

And Cloud was no one to argue.

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Author's Note:

You know "The Midgar Nightmare" was just supposed to be one chapter? I need to stop writing so much! Anyways, don't worry! The next chapter is all Yuffie and Vincent! ^\_^ Comments always welcome!

—Catalina

# Chapter Twenty

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## *Messenger Who Comes From the Dark*

*“And of course you would know about being stupid.” —Vincent Valentine*

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*But you, you're not allowed  
 You're uninvited  
 Unfortunate slight  
 Like any uncharted territory  
 I must seem greatly intriguing  
 You speak of my love like  
 You have experienced it like mine before  
 But this is not allowed  
 You're uninvited  
 Unfortunate slight  
 I don't think you unworthy  
 But I need a moment to deliberate*

*“Uninvited”  
 —Alanis Morissette—*

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Fa-Li watched Titus' leather-clad back tiredly as she followed him down yet another infernal alleyway. It seemed they'd been around Midgar five times over, what with all the walking she had been forced to endure. She wasn't used to so much exercise, and her heels were killing her. She had given up keeping track of their path a long time ago and had surrendered just to watching the raindrops course down the back of Titus' leather jacket like a thousand tears from a pair of unseen eyes. Looking at all those poor little raindrops, Fa-Li was reminded of the very last time she had cried real tears of joy or sorrow. It had been quite a long time ago, actually, back when she could actually say that she still lived something remotely resembling a normal life, even if it had been in the slums Midgar.

But that life was now forever unattainable to her. She could never go back, and after all that had happened that fateful night so many years ago, she wasn't sure she ever wanted to go back.

Fa-Li was jolted out of her unusually contemplative thoughts when Titus suddenly stopped walking and leaned against the gray brick wall behind him, those beautiful luminescent eyes of his sliding shut in an expression that she had come to loathe. He could stay like that for hours on end, listening to whatever the hell he was listening to, apparently finding it more interesting than her presence.

Well, this time she wasn't going to let him go without a little arguing. “Why did you stop, honey?” she asked him, staring at his darkness-cloaked profile and wishing that she

could see the face underneath the ski mask. Titus was such a tragically handsome man. In her life, Fa-Li had only seen one other man whose looks rivaled Titus', and that man she could never face again...

"Waiting," Titus replied to her earlier question.

Fa-Li blinked. "For the girl?"

"Who else?"

She scowled. "No need to get all huffy. What makes you think the girl will come this way?"

"This is the President of Neo-Shinra's office building. This is where she and Valentine were headed, remember?"

Fa-Li repressed the urge to shudder as she recalled instead where President Reeve was at the moment—shackled in a dungeon in the Master's lair, swathed completely in those horrible green mists...

She shook the memory away and said, "But this place has a back door. They'll probably go through there."

"No, they won't," Titus said calmly.

"Why not?"

"Because I locked that door."

"Oh," Fa-Li said, feeling like an idiot. Titus seemed to be an expert at making her feel that way. That was probably one of the reasons their little relationship hadn't worked out. Titus was always so different from the other men she had been with...

"You think of everything, don't you, Titus?" she suddenly said with a sigh, leaning against the wall next to him. She felt so tired all of a sudden.

Titus opened his eyes and stared at her, surprised that she had actually called him by his real name instead of "honey" or "baby", as was her habit to do. He found her face completely devoid of anything resembling the promiscuous woman she had become. Instead, all he saw was a deep sorrow etched in the lines of her beautiful face, as if the rain had washed away the outer layers of her personality and brought this tormented, melancholy creature into the light for the first time in years.

He turned away, refusing to become entranced with her beauty again. "Valentine might be with her," he clipped, eyes watching the area in front of the lobby doors relentlessly. "If that's the case, I'll distract him while you get the girl."

"Fine," Fa-Li said quietly. "I understand."

\* \* \* \* \*

“Yuffie, I believe that stop sign was there for a reason,” Vincent commented after the young girl had run her third one in a row.

“What stop sign, Vinnie?” she asked cheerfully, keeping her eyes on the road.

“Never mind,” Vincent replied, folding his arms across his chest.

Yuffie glanced out of the corner of her eye at the man in the passenger seat. He had barely said anything to her the entire journey, and any attempt at idle conversation made by her was usually answered with silence or a one-word reply. She was grateful that Vincent had been kind enough to let her drive, but his constant silence was making her edgy.

“You’re not in a very chatty mood today, are you, Vinnie?” she asked lightly while she stopped at a red light.

“When am I ever, Yuffie?” he countered, staring out of the rain-streaked windshield and not even looking at her.

Yuffie laughed, albeit a little nervously. “Never.”

And so ended that conversation.

Resisting the urge to sigh, Yuffie forced herself to look away from Vincent’s tragic profile and focus on driving. But it wasn’t easy. Vincent was radiating even more dark energy than usual, and it was making her nervous and agitated, not a good thing while one is driving. She was tempted to ask him what was wrong, but she knew that she would get no response from the stoic man across the car from her. Yuffie was pretty sure she wouldn’t understand even if Vincent was willing to explain to her what was wrong. The man was just so complex and darkly mysterious that it often left her feeling overwhelmed just by listening to the sounds of his silence filling the air. Maybe one day, she would be able to interpret the language that his silences spoke, but for now, she had no other choice than to listen and wish for the day that she would be able to see the man that was surely hiding behind Vincent’s mask of ice.

“Yuffie,” Vincent said suddenly.

The girl turned to him with wide gray eyes. “He speaks!” she declared with a grin.

Vincent ignored her. “Get in the turning lane,” he ordered. “This is supposed to be our turn.”

Yuffie looked at the road in front of her and noticed her blunder. She was almost passed her turn, and she still had yet to get in the turning lane! Damn. Oh well...who needed turning lanes ANYWAYS?!

“Hold on Vinnie!” Yuffie warned, just before throwing the wheel hard to the left, cutting clear across the turning lane and the other two lanes of traffic without even so much as a signal to warn the other drivers. Their rented car fishtailed, almost slamming into a lamppost on the corner before righting itself and continuing down the alley Yuffie would have missed if it hadn’t been for her mad driving skills.

She grinned at her companion smugly, knowing that he would be fuming. “Pretty cool, huh, Vinnie?” she asked cheerfully. “I’m a pretty damn good driver, aren’t I?”

Vincent glared at her from underneath the locks of ebony hair that had snaked into his eyes. “No,” was all he said, then added, just for overkill, “I don’t think you’re ever going to get your license if you continue pulling maneuvers like that.”

Yuffie just smiled and continued speeding down the rain-soaked street, the tires shooting up humongous waves of water as she plowed through puddles the size of small swimming pools. “Aw, Vinnie!” she declared. “You’re such a stick in the mud! Lighten up a little bit, my bestest buddy ol’ pal!”

Vincent folded his arms across his chest and stared forward again. “Now is not the time to be fooling around,” he deadpanned. “We are in a very serious situation here, Yuffie.”

“Gawd! Gimme a break, Vincent! You know Cloud just sent us off on another crappy mission! He knows the Running Man isn’t going to show up again at Reeve’s office! No one is that stupid!”

“And of course you would know about being stupid.”

*What?! Oh, I KNOW he just didn’t...*

Yuffie’s eyes practically bugged out of her head as she glared daggers at her stoic comrade. “Vinnie!” she shrieked. “That was mean and cruel! Take it back! You’re developing a very nasty personality, young man!”

*Great...I sound like my dad now!*

Vincent turned to her with some strange emotion flickering in his eyes. “I’m learning from an expert,” he said calmly, one corner of his mouth curling up in what suspiciously looked to be a smile.

Yuffie was too pissed-off to care, though. “If that was joke, it was SO NOT FUNNY!!!!!!” she yelled at him, narrowing her eyes into slits.

Vincent looked like he was about to reply, but his crimson eyes suddenly flicked toward the windshield. They widened. “Yuffie!” he said sharply.

The young girl quickly shifted her gaze to the front of the car to find herself on a collision course with a brick wall! She shrieked loudly, more out of surprise than fear, and

quickly punched the brakes, feeling the pedal shake underneath her boot as the anti-lock brake system kicked in. She squeezed her eyes shut tightly, expecting an explosive impact to end her life in one huge fireball of pain.

Instead, all she felt was a slight bump as the rental car came to a squealing stop.

*What the hell?* Yuffie thought in bafflement as she opened one eye, then the other, expecting to find herself floating on a huge fluffy cloud and approaching the golden Gates of Heaven with a not-so-amused Vincent Valentine next to her. Instead, all she saw was the brick wall, which was staring at her mockingly, its lines of cement appearing to be turned up in an amused grin.

“Hey!” Yuffie cried happily. “I didn’t hit the wall!”

“Just the curb,” Vincent muttered grumpily.

Yuffie made a face at him. “You say that like it’s a bad thing, Vinnie! At least we’re not dead.”

“Whatever,” Vincent clipped. He suddenly opened his car door and stepped out into the rain.

*He’s leaving?! Crap! Was it something I said?*

“Vincent!” Yuffie cried, putting the car into “Park.” “Where are you going?!”

Vincent leaned back into the car and said, “We’re here.” Then he slammed the door.

For a moment, Yuffie thought Vincent might have hit his head on the dashboard or something. Then she opened her door and saw that the building she had almost put a hole in was actually Reeve’s office, only from the back. She was used to going through the lobby area.

Feeling like a total idiot, Yuffie grabbed her Conformer from the backseat and slammed the door behind her, rushing after Vincent in the rain. He was already halfway across the parking lot, his loose ponytail hanging like a rope of smoldering blue-black fire against his borrowed shirt. Making a face at his back for not waiting up for her, Yuffie wrapped her arms around herself and hunched her shoulders to protect herself from rain, not that it helped any. She was drenched for what felt like the thousandth time in the past two days by the time she reached the back door.

To her surprise, she found an equally soaked Vincent waiting there for her, completely undaunted by the thick strands of jet black hair that had snaked into his eyes, trying their hardest to dim the intensity in the crimson orbs.

“Gee, thanks for waiting, Vinnie,” she told him sarcastically even though she was happy to see him there. “You’re a pal.”

“The door is locked,” he deadpanned, brushing past her and back into the rain.

“What?!” Yuffie cried, watching dumbly as he began splashing through puddles in the parking lot, his head turned upwards as he appeared to examine the upper floors of the building.

Though she was pretty sure that Vincent was telling the truth, Yuffie stomped over (almost slipping three times) to the back door and gripped the doorknob with her slippery hands. She yanked hard, but nothing happened. The damn door just stayed stupidly shut, making little squeaking noises of laughter as it did so.

“Damn it!” Yuffie cursed angrily as she gave the door a good, stuff kick with her boot, happy to see that she had left behind a scuff mark on the paint. It served the damn thing right! How dare it be locked on such a miserable day?

*Great, Yuffie thought grumpily, turning her back on the unmoving door. Now I have to go BACK into the goddamn rain...*

“Vincent!” she called, realizing that he was a ways along the side of the building and staring up at something. She held her Conformer over her head like an umbrella and splashed through a million and one puddles to reach his side.

“What’s up, Vinnie?” she asked him, not willing to lift her face into the stinging rain to see what he was staring at.

“That window,” he deadpanned. “We’re going up that way.”

Yuffie’s eyes widened incredulously. She removed her Conformer from the top of her head and shifted her gaze to see that Vincent’s window was at least three floors above their heads and reachable only by a series of soggy wooden crates that had been stacked haphazardly up against the wall, balanced precariously on top of one another.

She stared at Vincent’s strong-boned profile and watched the rain drip down his face before laughing and saying, “Hahaha! That was a funny joke, Vinnie! Now let’s go around the front and through the lobby like normal people would do!” She pointed to her right. “See! There’s an alley we can take around the building and go to the front and everything will be just peachy keen!”

Crimson eyes turned away from the window and focused on her face. “We’re going through the window,” Vincent said firmly.

A tide of stormy anger began to rise in Yuffie’s gray eyes. “No, we’re not,” she growled. “Do you see how high up that is?! I’m not going up there!”

“We’ll use the crates.”

Yuffie cast a dubious look at the flimsy-looking wooden boxes. “Those hunks of crap

don't look like that could support *Marlene*, much less you or me!"

"They'll do just fine," Vincent insisted.

Though something in her mind was telling her that Vincent wasn't going to give in this time, Yuffie kept on fighting him. "If you want to crawl through a window so goddamn bad, there are plenty on the ground level near the lobby doors!"

"The Running Man will be expecting us to enter from the front," Vincent said rationally. "He'll be waiting there."

"No, he won't!" Yuffie counterattacked, refusing to see the logic. "That's dumb, Vinnie!"

Something akin to annoyance flashed across Vincent's usually calm face, and when he spoke, Yuffie thought she heard impatience in his voice. "Yuffie, why don't you listen to reason for once?"

Yuffie's scowled deepened. "Don't patronize me!" she cried, glaring up at him angrily. "What you're saying makes no sense! It's irrational!"

"No," Vincent said firmly, eyes glittering down at her. "The way you're behaving is irrational. And immature. You're about to throw a hissy fit just because things aren't going your way. You're seventeen years old, Yuffie. Act your age."

Without another word, he whirled away from her and began to climb on the first crate.

Yuffie was hurt. Hurt and angry. No, pissed-off was more like it. For some reason, Vincent's words were like stakes being shoved in her heart, but instead of releasing a flood of tears, they inundated her senses with red-hot rage.

"Damn you, Vincent Orion Valentine!" she suddenly screamed at him as he continued to climb methodically from crate to crate like he hadn't a care in the world. Even her outburst had no effect on him. He didn't even ask her where she had learned his middle name from.

"I'm not going up that way!" she continued yelling, her hands clenched into fists at her sides.

Vincent ignored her, using his strong arms to pull himself up to the next level, muscles of his back flexing underneath his black shirt, which had been plastered to his skin by the rain.

Yuffie was so furious she thought she would explode. "Fine then!" she screamed as loud as she could, resisting the urge to throw her Conformer at him if she wasn't so sure he would shoot it out of the air and ruin it. "You go up your goddamn window! I'm going around the front!"



She whirled on her heel and began to stride away in a rage, but then she turned back and said, for good measure, “I hope you’re happy, Vincent! You managed to get rid of me!”

Not waiting to see if she had managed to get any reaction out of him, Yuffie spun around and ran off, Conformer in her hand and her hair plastered to the sides of her face. She didn’t know why she was running. All she knew was that she wanted to get away from Vincent. So through the puddles she ran, and didn’t stop running until she had turned off into the alley than ran along side the office building, a long narrow pathway with two straight gouges etched permanently into the pavement by the tires of vehicles that liked to take the easy way from the front of the building to the back. Stupid lazy people. Yuffie hated lazy people, even though Barret was constantly telling her that she was the dictionary definition of the word.

*God, I’m so mad! I feel...I feel...*

She felt like crying, and she HATED feeling that way. She wasn’t a big baby, bawling just because something hadn’t gone her way...argh! Why did she even give a damn what stupid Vincent said?! His opinion didn’t matter to her at all!

*Yet, here you are, a cruel voice taunted her. About to cry because a man hurt your feelings. You feel rejected, don’t you, Yuffie dear? You’ll always be nothing more than a little, immature girl to him. A little brat...*

“Shut up!” Yuffie cursed, putting all her frustration behind that scream as she leapt up high in the air and crashed down into a puddle, ignoring the water splashing her already drenched legs.

She remained standing in the puddle for a few moments, letting water seep into her boots as her rage began to trickle away slowly like the raindrops racing down her skin. Then she stomped off, cursing her all too human emotions and the cruel Fate that had bestowed them upon her. Why was she so upset? She shouldn’t be upset at all! Why did one man have so much sway over her? She didn’t need him! She didn’t need any man! And she didn’t want one! She had her materia and she had her life! And as soon as they found stupid-ass Reeve, she was gonna pack up and leave stupid-ass Vincent and the others... behind...yeah...whatever...

She knew that she didn’t want to leave any of them, especially Vincent, behind.

It didn’t take long for Yuffie’s angry stomps to turn to depressed, contemplative trudges. Water sloshed in her boots and seeped in between her toes, but she neither noticed nor cared. The fires of fury dissipated from her gray eyes, leaving behind stormy pensiveness that shone even through the chocolate brown locks of waterlogged hair that had fallen into her eyes. Her thoughts were a million miles away as she rounded the corner and started to advance towards the doors of the lobby.

*Why do I even bother having friends?* she wondered as dragged her feet through another puddle, the double doors of Reeve's main office building looming in front of her. *I never had any before I met Cloud and the others. All they do is hold you back and make you do and think things that you normally wouldn't think under any other kind of...*

Her train of thought was abruptly snapped when her eyes absently flicked in the direction of the alley on the right side of the building. Yuffie was later to wonder if Fate or chance had guided her gaze to that shadow-filled alley, but in any case, she saw the figure, swathed in darkness though it was, watching her from the alleyway like a hungry wolf.

Dark leather clothes soaked and glittering with wet rain. Black ski mask. Gloved fingers curled almost delicately around the corner of the wall, miniature pillars of darkness against the gray building. It was the Running Man...

*"The Running Man will be expecting us to enter from the front. He'll be waiting there."*

*"No, he won't! That's dumb, Vinnie!"*

Vincent, Yuffie thought, wishing for nothing more to see him at that moment, if only to say goodbye. *You were right. I'm...I'm sorry... Vincent...*

"Running Man," she whispered, unable to take eyes off of the figure in the alley.

He was waiting for her. Waiting to take her back to the place with the sea water and the horrible light that made her afraid. Back to the Faceless Men that never died and the things that were watching her in the cargo hold. No! She was never going back to that place! Never!

"I won't go back!" Yuffie cried as panic and rage took hold of her at the same time. She scarcely knew what she was doing when she pulled back her arm and let her Conformer fly from her fingers, the shuriken slicing easily through the rain on a collision course with the ominous figure responsible for Reeve's disappearance.

Only when her weapon struck the spot where the Running Man had been standing, her quarry was no longer there. The Conformer whizzed past the wall and started to return to its owner, but before she knew what was happening, Yuffie sensed, rather than saw, a dark blur approaching from her right side with a speed that even Vincent couldn't hope to match.

Yuffie barely had time to scream before she felt an unbelievably powerful force slam into her side, stealing her breath from her lungs and sending her on a painful flight to the pavement five feet away. Pain wracked her body like wildfire dancing across her delicate nerve endings, but years of training kicked in and she was on her feet in a matter of seconds, adrenaline pumping through her system and her muscles locked for another attack.

The Running Man stood in the spot she had been standing in seconds earlier, her

Conformer held loosely in one of his gloved hands and his eyes—which were some indiscernible glittering color—staring intensely at her from his ski mask. He didn't say anything, not so much as a threat, or an evil diabolical, "Mwahahaha! I have you now!" He just stood there in the rain. Like a big fat dork.

"Come on, you bastard!" Yuffie taunted, though she was in no position to be doing so. "Show me what you got!"

He didn't move.

Yuffie flung her bangs out of her eyes and ignored the raging pain in her side. "Tell me where Reeve is!" she ordered, raising her fists to show him just how goddamn serious she was.

The Running Man wasn't impressed. He suddenly dropped her precious Conformer on the pavement and rushed at her. Only this time, his attack was a lot slower, and Yuffie was actually able to track his movements as he approached her. She could see his boots slapping the wet pavement and the way his right hand suddenly shot out to the side, fingers stiff as boards. Yuffie felt an instantaneous chill go down her spine as she saw the way his fingers were locked.

*He's going for one of my pressure points. I know that stance! That means I'd better move my ass!*

Yuffie managed to fling herself up and out of the way, executing a neat flip through the air just as she felt a humongous whoosh of wind as the Running Man passed beneath her. She no longer felt either the rain or the pain in her side as she twisted her body so that she landed on the wet pavement in a crouching position, her battle-darkened eyes riveted on the Running Man.

Before the ominous man could turn around and attack her again, Yuffie raised her right arm, not in self-defense, but so that her opponent could see the glittering green materia sheathed in her Crystal Bangle. She wanted him to be afraid of what she was about to do.

"Bolt 3!!" she screamed in a rage, raising her arms towards the stormy sky and focusing all her thoughts on the Mastered Lightening materia in her armor.

Instantly the angry clouds and dark skies complied with her wishes and sent an enormous bolt of white-hot lightning streaming down to earth to strike the figure of the Running Man.

And as the magic engulfed her opponent in blinding white light, Yuffie made a decision she was to regret the rest of her life. Suddenly becoming aware of the fact that the Conformer was lying only a few feet behind her, Yuffie figured she had enough time to reach it before the Running Man could recover from the Bolt 3 attack. Without even thinking twice, she twisted her body and lunged for her weapon.

But just as her fingers touched its ornamental surface and Yuffie was starting to think that victory would be hers, she became aware of *another* dark clad figure rushing to her from the left, some sort of weapon flashing in its hand.

*There's two of them!* she realized, a moment too late.

Something slammed into the side of her head, creating a burst of agony that had no equal in the entire universe. Despite the life she lived, Yuffie had never been knocked unconscious by a physical blow before; she was too quick for most opponents. Magic had always been her weak point. Good ol' Sephy's Super Nova had knocked her flat on her ass, and Jenova-Life's Aqualung had sent her flying top over teakettle into darkness, but never before had she been sent into oblivion by a single, physical attack.

Well, Yuffie learned right then and there that there was a first time for everything.

Darkness threatened to take her under as she felt her body crumple to the pavement, the Conformer inches away from her numb fingertips. She was fighting to keep her heavy eyelids from closing eternally when she suddenly felt someone dig a boot into her aching side and flip her over so that she was facing skyward, eyes roving over a feminine figure that she could barely see, skin being hit by raindrops that she barely felt, her mind thinking thoughts that she never would have thought before...

*Please, Running Man, she pleaded silently as she saw the figure above her abruptly disappear, only to be replaced with the familiar figure of Reeve's kidnapper. Have mercy on me. I want to see my friends again. I want to see Vincent again. I have to tell him I'm sorry, sorry that I doubted his knowledge, sorry that I was wrong. I want to see Vincent again...*

But if the Running Man had any way of hearing her thoughts, he had no intention of complying with final wishes of Yuffie Pristina Kisaragi. Through the darkness clouding her vision, Yuffie vaguely saw him kneel at her side, his darkness-cloaked face inches from hers and as cold and distant as that of a judge in Purgatory. Suddenly, she realized what color his eyes were, and that she had seen them somewhere before.

"Aeris?" she whispered, her pupils dilating and contracting as the darkness threatening to swallow her grew more demanding.

The Running Man blinked in surprise and shock. Blinked those heartbreakingly familiar eyes.

*Green eyes, she thought giddily. Pretty green eyes. The Running Man has green eyes.*

Those were her last coherent thoughts before the darkness took her under.

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Author's Note:

Finally! Catalina actually wrote a short chapter! ^^

—Catalina

# Chapter Twenty-One

## Gone Up in Flames

*“I’m the man here, not you, goddammit!” —Cid Highwind*

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*Everybody needs a human touch.  
I can’t live without it,  
It means too much to me.  
Everybody needs one true friend,  
Someone who’ll be there ‘til the very end.  
And absolutely everybody breathes,  
And everybody, everybody bleeds.  
We’re no different,  
We’re all the same,  
Players in the game.*

*“Absolutely Everybody”  
—Vanessa Amorosi—*

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“What the hell was the matter with you?!” Barret raged, pounding his fists on the bar table with such force that everyone in the bar, even Reno, couldn’t help but wince as the wood creaked meekly in protest of the abuse it was receiving.

“You were supposed to take care of her!” Barret continued, leaning his intimidating bulk over the table so he could peer down into the face of his victim.

Vincent didn’t reply. He sat motionless in the wooden chair, hands clasped rigidly in his lap and garnet eyes riveted on the wooden table in front of him. Most of his ebony hair had come out of its clasp to tumble about his face like a shroud, clinging to his pale cheeks and snaking into his red eyes. Though it appeared as if he was completely oblivious to the intimidating, angry bulk of Barret Wallace not a foot in front of him, the others could tell from the strained set of his mouth and the bunched muscles of his shoulders that Vincent wasn’t very comfortable.

“Barret,” Tifa spoke up softly from her place at the bar. “Leave him alone, please. I think he knows what he did wrong.”

“I ain’t done with him!” the large man exclaimed, never removing his angry gaze from Vincent’s emotionless face.

Vincent didn’t respond.

“What were you doing?” Barret continued, leaning all his weight on the table so that he was eye level with Vincent. “Huh?! Where the hell were you when she was being

hauled off?!”

Silence, except for the mighty laughter of the thunder outside.

“Answer me, damn you!” Barret roared.

“These questions do not require answers,” Vincent deadpanned, no trace of emotion in his voice.

“The hell they don’t!” Barret retorted. “Why did you leave her side?!”

“As I told you before,” Vincent replied, not lifting his eyes, “she stalked off in a rage.”

“And you didn’t go after her?!”

“I saw no need to.”

Barret’s eyes widened in anger, and everyone saw his jaw bulge as he clenched his teeth. “Saw no need to?!!” he raged, slamming both of his fists right in front of Vincent, who didn’t even flinch. “Yuffie’s gone, you heartless bastard! And all you can do is sit here on your ass and act like you don’t give a shit what’s happening!”

“And what if I don’t?” Vincent said coolly, eyes still riveted on the tabletop.

Barret faltered. “What?!” he asked incredulously.

“What...if...I...don’t...care?” Vincent repeated slowly. “What if I just want to leave right now and leave you to find Yuffie and Reeve all on your own?”

For a moment, total and utter silence hung in the bar as Barret floundered for words. Everyone had heard the subtle threat in Vincent’s words: *Either you leave me the hell alone, or I’m outta here.*

From his seat next to the rain-streaked window, Reno let a bitter smile curl one corner of his mouth. *I can see why this guy used to be a Turk*, he thought. *He’s cold, callous, and boy, does he ever have guts...*

Reno’s thoughts of admiration were abruptly cut off when Barret finally exploded. “Leave?!!!” he roared, the sheer volume of his voice causing some of the shot glasses to shake. “The hell you talkin’ about?! Leave?!”

“My presence here seems to cause many problems,” Vincent responded flatly. “If you seem to think that all I can do is lose people, then wouldn’t you all be better off if I was gone?”

“All you CAN do is lose people!” Barret yelled.

*Crap...I think he’s going to say something he’s gonna regret*, Reno suddenly thought.

“Barret, back off!” Cloud suddenly said sharply, apparently sensing the same thing Reno was.

But Barret was too far gone into rage to hear anyone. “You been losing people ever since that time in Nibelheim with that Luc-”

“Silence!” Vincent suddenly roared, getting to his feet so quickly that he knocked his chair over. The piece of wooden furniture clattered to the floor with a cry of defeat, like an animal drawing its legs up in meek cowardice, responding to a sudden danger that hadn’t been present seconds before.

As everyone in the bar watched in shocked silence, a suddenly very animated Vincent leaned forward and pressed his palms flat against the wooden table, metallic claw digging ruthlessly into the wood and leaving five gouge marks that would remain there long after everyone had departed. All his motion unsettled the hair tie’s tenacious hold on his hair, and it fell from the ebony strands with the same defeated countenance with which the chair had plummeted to the floor. Unbound, Vincent’s midnight black hair, damp though it was, spilled around his shoulders, some of the shorter strands swooping forward to frame a face that had suddenly gone as cold as primal ice. These same dark locks offset a pair of crimson eyes, usually cool and distant, that were now filled with what appeared to be the fires of Hell itself.

“I am well aware of my own miserable failures,” Vincent seethed angrily, eyes boring into the stunned Barret with barely contained rage as everyone shifted nervously. “I will not, however,” Vincent continued coldly, “stand here and listen to you remind of them in such an offhand, careless fashion. They are my sins to suffer and live with for all eternity, and you are NO ONE to condemn me for them. I won’t have it...”

Slowly, as his voice trailed off, Vincent’s face darkened further, if such a thing was possible. His brows drew down low over his eyes, accenting an age-old rage in the depths of the crimson irises. Perhaps a rage that was not his own.

“And if you EVER dare to speak her name to me again,” Vincent threatened. “I shall show you the reason why I have come to call myself a monster...”

Silence, horrible and complete, descended in the wake of this threat. Barret just stood rooted to the floor in stunned silence, his eyes wide as he slowly burned in the intensity of Vincent’s blood-red glare. As for Vincent, he was a demon frozen in time, never moving from his position—hands palm down on the table, claw digging into the wood, garnet eyes virtually glowing with rage, face cold and menacing.

And at that moment, as thunder crashed dramatically outside and lightning illuminated the room with its ghastly glow, everyone believed that Vincent was well deserving of the title “monster.”

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Tifa stirred boldly, but with a certain unobtrusiveness that made approaching the two men easier.

“Barret,” she said softly, walking up to the large man slowly, her burgundy eyes darting every now and then to where Vincent was still leaning over the table menacingly. It was clear she was a bit scared of Vincent at the moment. Hell, everyone probably was.

Carefully, Tifa grabbed Barret’s normal arm and tugged on it gently, trying to get him to tear his gaze away from Vincent’s crimson stare. “Why don’t you go help Cid tune up Cait?” she suggested, eyes on Barret’s face. “I’m sure he could use your help, Barret.”

Barret blinked, and his gaze almost drifted away from Vincent’s glare, but it seemed he couldn’t disengage himself from the staring contest. “S-Sure, Tifa,” he stammered. “I-I’ll go.”

But he didn’t move. Silently, Vincent’s dark stare forbade such a blasphemy.

That’s when Red suddenly slunk out of the corner he had been seated in, his claws clicking loudly on the hardwood floor as he kept himself low to the ground, not wanting to attract Vincent’s attention. He walked up to where Barret was standing and nudged him in the knee hard enough to almost knock the big man off balance.

In surprise, Barret’s gaze slipped away from the tenacious hold of Vincent’s glare and dropped down to the fiery lion-like creature at his feet.

“Let’s go, Barret,” Red ordered gruffly, striding pointedly past him and heading towards the hallway that led to the rest of the first floor of the bar.

“Right,” Barret muttered, all but running after his friend, careful not to raise his gaze for fear of being snared by the net of Vincent’s fury again.

But he didn’t have anything to worry about. Vincent had already dropped his gaze to the table the moment Barret’s eyes had been torn away from his. Without a victim to torment, his internal demons had forsaken the crimson eyes they had been using as a channel for all their ghastly voices and hellish screeches. Now, there was no one left to listen to their dark prophecies of doom and despair but their host body, Vincent Valentine, who was once again alone with the demons of his past even though he was in a room filled with the people he had come to call friends.

For a while no one in the room moved, as if afraid they would interrupt the delicate balance of the isolating net Vincent was weaving around himself to shut his demons off from the world. But then Tifa suddenly strode determinedly around the table over to Vincent’s side and picked up the fallen hair clasp from the floor. Heedless of any instability she might have sensed in Vincent’s heart and mind, she carefully gathered his thick hair in her graceful hands and pulled it back from his face, securing it with the hair clasp into



a loose ponytail similar to the one he had had that morning before everything had gone up in flames.

“Thank you,” Vincent said quietly as Tifa stepped back. Everyone relaxed a little to hear all the rage was gone from his voice, but the promise of violence still hung in the air like a foul musk, and everyone knew it, scented it, felt it awaken danger sensors deep within their souls, and so they said nothing to ease whatever torment Vincent may have been experiencing at the moment. For what could they say? What could they do?

Everyone knew that any attempt at solace would be rejected with the same cool and cold with which Vincent always deflected every human emotion directed toward him. What could anyone say to a man who wished for nothing more than to be alone with his pain?

Nothing, that’s what.

And nothing was what they said as Vincent silently brushed past Tifa and ascended the stairs just as soundlessly, like a weeping devil retreating to its cold hell once again. No one said anything, or moved to stop him, but the words were there in the air, swirling around him, and they could only hope that he might have heard them in the farthest reaches of his heart, where he was still human...

*We forgive you, Vincent, the winds whispered to him. We know your pain, and we are here for you. Always...*

Reno watched the melancholy looks on everyone’s faces as they heard Vincent’s door shut softly upstairs. Tifa picked up the chair Vincent had knocked over in his anger and seated herself in it stiffly, gripping the edge of the table with trembling hands. Cloud hesitated a moment, then slid off of his bar stool and came up behind the brunette, putting his gloved hands on her shoulders and squeezing gently. Seated across the room from Reno, Elena sighed sadly and lowered her head, tangled blond hair hiding her face. Beside her, Rude placed one of his large hands on her shoulder in a rare gesture of solace. Reno couldn’t see the expression behind Rude’s dark sunglasses, but he could easily sense that what had just gone down had disturbed his tall friend.

*We’re falling apart, Reno thought bitterly, lying his head against the cold glass of the window and feeling the tiny vibrations as the rain struck the other side, so close to his face yet so far. Piece by fucking piece, we’re falling apart. Reeve’s gone. Yuffie’s gone. Soon Valentine will leave. We don’t even know who our goddamn enemy is yet, and they’re already beating the crap out of us...*

Sighing softly, Reno closed his eyes and allowed the world around him, people and all, to fade into nothing. He vaguely heard Cloud saying something about the sewers and maps and Rude and Elena replying with some answer or another, but these otherworldly phrases did not penetrate his consciousness.

Lightening split the dark night sky over Kalm, bathing the small town in its unholy illumination, tracing the outlines of shops whose doors had been forced to close due to danger of flooding. Several people had abandoned their homes in search of higher grounds, and Reno knew that when they returned, they were probably going to find all their belongings ruined by the floodwaters that were threatening to swallow Kalm. What a waste. What a goddamn waste.

As Reno's aquamarine eyes traced the ill-fated paths of the raindrops plummeting through the night air, he felt his thoughts slipping back to the terrifying nightmare in Midgar that they had just experienced. Once again, he was traveling in the sewers, seeing the snake, and feeling the terror that froze the blood in his veins. And once again, he felt the humiliation afterwards; he was utterly and completely ashamed of his terror. Reno of the Turks...afraid of snakes? Afraid of anything? Reno had convinced himself that he had no shame, but the events that had occurred just a few hours ago had made him realize that he was dead wrong. His old fear of anything that slithered and hissed was still there, buried in his past and rearing its ugly head every now and then to torment him.

*Damn you, Reno, he told himself harshly. All you are is a goddamn wuss. You nearly killed Cloud because you were being a coward. All because of some phantom from your past has returned to haunt you...*

Pain suddenly tightened his throat, and his heart throbbed in agony in his chest. Of course, he knew which phantom had returned bearing all his old fears, his old insecurities, his old life before Tseng had rescued him from his personal hell and brought him to work for Shinra.

All of it—all of this pain, the pang in his heart, the tears in his eyes, the tightening in his throat, the trembling in his murderous hands, could be attributed and linked back to one and only one name.

Did he dare speak it? No way in hell. The voice of the man that had once whispered her name was long dead, and now Reno of the Turks could only speak her name in his heart.

*Mika...it's you...all you, love...*

Then he closed his eyes, not wanting to see the raindrops anymore. Everyone one of them was now wearing her face.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Owww!! That hurt, Cid!"

Cid scowled deeply at Cait. "Shut up your face!" he snapped, talking around his cigarette. "You're lucky that I'm kind enough to fix your sorry ass!"

The robotic cat huffed, planting his gloved paws on the place where his hips would have been if he had been real. “It’s not my fault you and Barret took me out into the rain and my circuits got fried! You two should know that I’m delicate!”

“Delicate my foot,” Cid muttered distractedly as he reconnected another wire in the pink moogles, trying to ignore the bits of stuffing scratching his arms and the way-too-talkative form of Cait Sith sitting on the moogles, right above Cid’s head.

“You’ve been through tougher things than rain,” Cid continued as Cait watched what he was doing with interest. “If you can help beat that demented Sephiroth in the North Crater, you can handle a little bit of rain.”

“It’s because you forgot to close my circuit board when we left the storage room!” Cait told Cid.

Cid gave the robotic cat a withering glare. “You’re so damn ungrateful!” he exclaimed. “I brought you back to life instead of leaving you to collect dust in that storage room! And all you can do is bitch about how we took you out into the rain! You should be thanking me! I’m the man here, not you, goddammit! I OWN you! You belong to ME!! You should bow before me and—”

“I was under the impression that dictatorships had been overthrown years ago,” a gravelly voice said dryly.

Cid whirled around and glared at Red as the lion-like beast and Barret strode into the garage. “I’m tryin’ to keep this guy in his place!” Cid protested, gesturing up to Cait, who stuck his tongue out at Cid. “You’re not helping the situation!”

“Cid’s trying to control me!” Cait whined to Red.

Cid wagged a pair of pliers in the robotic cat’s face. “I got the power here!” he declared. “You belong to Cid Jericho Highwind right now and you better show some goddamn respect!”

Cait was about to say something in return when he suddenly noticed Barret standing still in the middle of the garage, right next to the buggy.

“Hey, what’s wrong with you, Barret?” he asked worriedly, hopping to his booted feet, not at all frightened of tumbling off the top of the moogles.

Cid peered around the stuffed pink mog and saw that Barret’s eyes were wide and staring. His brow creased. “Old geezer! What’s up with you? You look like you just seen a goddamn ghost or something.”

“He had a close encounter with an angry Vincent,” Red explained calmly, easing his bruised body down carefully a few feet away from where Cid was working on Cait Sith.

Cid's blue eyes widened, and he stood up to stare at Barret incredulously. "You pissed off Vincent?!" he demanded.

Barret nodded blankly. "Uh-huh."

"Why the hell did you go and do a stupid-ass thing like that?" Cid all but yelled, gesturing wildly with his hands and nearly knocking Cait off of the moogle.

Barret scowled, Cid's accusing words thawing out the fear that Vincent's blood-red stare had frozen his heart with. "Whatever, ya old fart!" he told Cid, leaning against the hood of the buggy. "I didn't do it on purpose..."

Cid snorted and crouched on the floor to resume his work on the stuffed moogle's semi-metallic innards. "Whatever," he said gruffly. "I pity the man who manages to piss off Vincent Valentine." He suddenly hopped to his feet again and wagged his pliers in Barret's direction. "No, wait! I DON'T have no pity for ya! You should know better than to go around making Vince mad! What the hell was the matter with you?!"

Barret folded his muscular arms across his chest and turned his face away. "I was mad, foo," he snapped. "I shouldn't have said what I did, but I did, and it's done...and now I gotta avoid Vincent for a while."

Cid pulled his cigarette from his mouth and expelled a long stream of thoughtful smoke. "You *that* mad that the brat got taken?" he asked, voice as gentle as his natural gruff manner would permit.

Barret snorted condescendingly at the prospect of being worried about Yuffie, but his voice was serious when he said, "Brat ain't got her father to watch out for her while she's running around the world like a numbskull so I figure I got to take care of her while he can't."

"She's become another daughter to you," Red observed from his place on the concrete floor.

Barret made a face at the lion-like beast. "Whatever. You think what you want to think and I think what I want to think. All I know is that we got to get Yuffie and Reeve back quick. This Running Ass person managed to snatch two—not one, but TWO—people right from under our noses, and I ain't giving up until we get both of 'em back!"

"Amen, brother," Cid murmured, turning his face up to the heavens for a moment before lowering it again.

"I don't believe in a god," Red commented. "But I'm with you until the end."

"Hey guuuuuuyyyysss!" Cait suddenly whined, tugging on Cid's blue flight jacket.

"The hell you want?" the pilot demanded, glaring down the small robotic cat.

“I’m with you, too!” Cait exalted, pumping a small, gloved fist in the air. “Now, fix me, darn you!”

\* \* \* \* \*

Tifa could only listen to so much rain before it began to gnaw at her mentality. Personally, she found the sound of raindrops against the windows and against the roof rather soothing, but not when she was weary in her soul and feeling an empty void in her heart that her two missing friends needed to fill for her to be whole. No, she couldn’t listen to the rain when she had been listening to it for the past two nights, knowing that those horrible floodwaters were trying to devour Kalm. All the roads were already flooded, and she knew that it was only a matter of time before the mayor might call for an evacuation of the city, which would only make matters worse for them.

Sighing, Tifa sat up in bed and flung the covers off her legs, lowering her feet to the floor, not at all worried about tripping over things in the dark. She had long ago committed the objects in her room to memory. Grabbing her robe from the back of a chair to cover the shorts and sleeveless shirt she had worn to bed, she wrapped it around herself and quietly opened her bedroom door, peering out into the hallway.

Everyone had long ago gone to bed, worn out after a day that had drained them physically and emotionally. As she closed her door behind her, Tifa could hear Barret’s loud snoring from the room at the end of the hall. Strangely enough, it offered her a bit of comfort as she quietly crept past everyone’s rooms until she reached the stairwell.

She was just about to place her bare foot on the first step when she suddenly became aware that the door to the room behind her was open, and that the lightening outside the room’s single window was lighting up the entire stairwell.

Turning around, she cautiously crept up to the door and peered inside, realizing with a start that she was looking into Vincent’s room. After what had happened that evening, she didn’t want to see what he might do if he found her peeping into his room and invading his cherished privacy. But as far as she could tell, he wasn’t even in his room. The bed was empty, and there was no one seated in the only chair in the room.

She experienced a moment of trepidation when she thought that he might have actually left them like he had been subtly threatening to do. But then she saw the Death Penalty resting against the far wall and relaxed. The high-powered rifle was a gift left for Vincent from his lost love, Lucrecia; he never would have gone anywhere without it.

*I better just close the door, Tifa thought. He probably went for a walk or something.*

But just as she was putting her hand on the doorknob and preparing to close the door, a shadow next to the window suddenly shifted, and Tifa found herself the focus of a pair of luminescent red eyes.

She let out a startled gasp and jumped away from the door, her hand flying to her chest and feeling her heart beating out of control within its fleshly cage.

“Vincent!” she whisper-screamed, barely remembering to keep her voice down. “Good God, you scared me to death!”

He said nothing. His eyes blinked once, but that was all.

“You should know better than to go around scaring people like that,” Tifa scolded him, holding onto the doorframe for support.

“Forgive me, Tifa,” he said calmly, turning away from her and staring out the window. “I assure you that it was not my intention to frighten you.”

“It’s okay,” she said immediately, feeling bad for snapping at him.

*It must be bad enough, looking the way he does, but what probably makes it worse is when people are constantly screaming every time they lay eyes on him. But red eyes are just so unnerving to stare into...even worse when they're staring AT you...*

“Can...Can I come in?” Tifa found herself asking. “I’d like to talk with you, Vincent.”

“Do as you wish,” Vincent said flatly as lightening flashed outside the window and threw the shadow of his tall figure against the wall on Tifa’s left.

“Thank you,” she said politely, walking nervously over the threshold and into his bedroom.

She had no idea why she was so cautious about entering his room. It wasn’t like she had never been in it before. She had furnished the damn thing, after all, and painted the walls and picked out the kind of bedspread she wanted. Under any normal circumstances, she would have felt right at home, but for some reason, with Vincent inhabiting the room, the air seemed to surge against her with some kind of gothic darkness, infecting the surroundings so that the room around her was almost as alien to her as a room in a stranger’s house.

“Vincent,” Tifa said, breaking the silence. “I-I just want to apologize for what Barret said today. He didn’t mean it, and I think that he knows he was out of line. He...He didn’t mean it,” she finished lamely.

“I am not angry with Barret,” Vincent said calmly. “But what he said was true, and that was most likely what angered me.”

“Oh no, Vincent,” Tifa said fervently, walking forward until she was standing next to him in front of the window, staring up at his pale profile. “It’s not your fault,” she told him. “But what exactly happened there in Midgar?”

Vincent lowered his head, shorter strands of midnight black hair slinking forward to lie against his cheekbones. "It's just as I told you," he said calmly. "She and I argued, and she stalked off in a rage."

"Argued about what?" Tifa asked earnestly.

"A petty thing," Vincent replied, and she thought she heard a faint tinge of sadness in his voice. "I wanted to enter the office through a window, and she didn't want to. So, I started going up my way, and she ran off and went around to the front, where the Running Man was apparently prowling the area."

"And she got caught," Tifa finished, feeling her heart sink as she imagined her young friend being captured by the dark man who had most definitely become their enemy.

"I blame myself," Vincent said, sounding a little disgusted. "I should have been more adamant and kept her at my side. Then, none of this would have happened."

"You blame yourself for too many things," Tifa said softly, watching as lightening split the sky over the ocean. "Yuffie can be rather difficult at times."

"Yes, but I believed I transgressed unforgivably when I scolded her like a little child."

Tifa glanced at him in surprise. "You scolded her for what?"

"For being immature," Vincent replied. "I told her to act her age, and to a child who is not used to discipline, that statement didn't go over very well."

"I imagine not," Tifa said quietly, absently tugging on a thread that was dangling off of the seam of her robe. "But we're going to get her back. Both her and Reeve." She looked up at Vincent's emotionless profile. "Aren't we, Vincent?"

He didn't reply.

Resolve hardening her features, Tifa turned so that she was facing him completely, an almost-sowl on her face. "You're going to stay with us, aren't you, Vincent?" she asked softly but not without a certain unmovable steel in her voice.

Lightening split the night again, dancing in his crimson eyes and speaking to her of the dark realities that stood before her, hidden in the fathomless depths of those eyes, if she only dared to look that far. Vincent didn't say anything.

Tifa was just about to repeat her question more forcefully when Vincent suddenly whirled away from the window so quickly that his hair struck her lightly on the arm, whispering across the fabric of her robe as he passed by her without a word, heading towards the door of the bedroom, intending to leave her alone in the dark with her questions.

An irrational rage suddenly gripped Tifa as she stared at his retreating back in the darkness.

*How can he do that...just walk away? God! It's wrong! It is!*

"And just where do you think you're going?" she demanded, the slither in her voice surprising even her.

Vincent stopped and said without turning, "Out for a walk."

But before he could start moving again, Tifa scrambled to get in front of him. Planting her hands on her hips, her burgundy eyes stared harshly out at him from her pale face, her skin made even lighter by the sporadic streaks of lightening that illuminated the night.

"And where will you go after that, Vincent?" she hissed in a whisper, fearful that if she raised her voice, she would start yelling and not be able to stop. "Will you all of a sudden disappear on us and not show your face again for another year? Two years? Huh?!"

Vincent just stared down at her. With the window and the lightening directly behind him, the only thing Tifa could see was those entirely unique blood-red eyes staring down at her with the ghost of some alien emotion flickering in their depths. He didn't reply.

"You're our *friend*, Vincent," Tifa continued, putting all her heart into that one word. Her eyes now shimmered with tears of pain as well as anger. "We need you here with us. We need your help, Vincent. We need *you*."

Vincent turned his face away and didn't say anything.

Tifa suddenly grabbed him by the shoulders, ignoring the fact that she had to reach up to do it. She shook him slightly, and even though he refused to look her, she knew that he was listening.

"Promise me, Vincent," she begged, her heart thudding painfully in her chest. "Promise you won't leave until we find Yuffie and Reeve!"

Silence. He didn't even bat an eyelash.

"Promise me!" Tifa cried, raising her voice and shaking him again, knowing that he could have thrown her away if he really wanted to. "You have to be with us, Vincent! We need you! Reeve needs you! Goddamn it! *Yuffie* needs you, Vincent! You have to be the one to rescue her!"

"Because I'm the one that lost her," Vincent finished bluntly, still gazing off into the darkness as if he found solace in the shadows.

"No!" Tifa shot back adamantly, fisting her hands in the loose sleeves of Vincent's black shirt. "Because I know her, Vincent. I know she wants to see your face when she's



rescued!”

“Why would anyone want such a thing?” Vincent asked, staring at her out of the corner of his eye.

“Vincent!” Tifa snapped. “Is it so implausible that someone might actually find comfort in your presence?”

“Hn,” Vincent grunted, but Tifa thought she saw the harsh light in those eyes soften a bit.

“Now, give me your word,” she insisted. “Promise me that you won’t abandon us! Vincent!”

“You have my word,” Vincent said sharply. “I will not leave until Yuffie and Reeve are found.” He turned his face to her, eyes glittering in the darkness. “Now, if you would be so kind as to unhand me?”

Silently, Tifa released her iron grip on his shirt and stepped to the side, clapping her hands in front of her and feeling emotionally drained once again. Vincent seized the opportunity and strode quickly past her, a shadow moving like liquid amongst its brethren.

He was just about to reach the door when Tifa suddenly spoke again. “You know, Vincent...” she said softly, her voice barely audible over the thunder’s mighty roar.

He stopped again, his profile silhouetted against the doorway. “What is it?” he asked, a bit of irritation evident in his voice.

A bit taken aback by his abrupt mood swing, Tifa felt the words dying in her throat, but she still said, “I...I think...that...Yuffie...Yuffie...” Her voice trailed off into nothing, a lonely sound swallowed by the shadows.

“What about Yuffie?” he asked, a bit too quickly.

*I think Yuffie’s falling in love with you.*

“Nothing,” Tifa said softly. “Nothing at all.”

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Author’s Note:

Thanks to Kaley for recommending the song at the beginning to me! It really does have a catchy beat! ^\_^ And also, something else that I’ve been meaning to get to but keep forgetting. Lagophobia (sorry, don’t know your real name, just your e-mail address), I tried to send you a thank you e-mail for the e-mail you sent me, but the mail wouldn’t go through or something so if you’re reading this, thank you!! ^\_^

## Chapter Twenty-Two

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### *The Thin Line Between Man and Monster*

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*“W-What are you going to do with those?” —Yuffie Kisaragi*

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Time passed by so slowly for Reeve. He had no sense of what was reality and what was just a manifestation of his feverish, deteriorating mind. Names and faces passed by him in a flurry of motion, and Reeve didn't know whether or not the owners of these names and faces were living or deceased. Madness had planted its seeds deep within his brain, and those horrible embryos were just beginning to hatch, their burgeoning growth ripping away his sanity piece by piece, memory by memory. In a few days—months? Years? Weeks?—he'd be just a hollow shell, an empty vessel hanging from the shackles in this insubstantial prison that Reeve was no longer sure was a real place or just a portion of his nightmare world.

But sometimes, in the midst of the chaotic whirlwind that Reeve used to call his waking mind, he sometimes knew the real world for a few moments. All of the faces and voices would disappear, and he would open his eyes and see the mist-filled, rank dungeon in which he was imprisoned, and he would know without a doubt that what he was seeing was complete and horrible reality at its most hideous worst. And Reeve would feel hopelessness start to blossom in his heart like a night bird flying to infect the world of the light with its harsh cries of exquisite darkness. And the madness, which was never really gone completely from his brain, would seize this opportunity and leap out to reclaim its victim, sending Reeve back to the pool of chaos that he was rapidly drowning in.

It was during one of these moments that Reeve realized that he had a visitor.

Of course, he couldn't see this mysterious figure, but he knew it was there, hidden in the mists. He could feel its eyes on him, watching him intensely as he struggled to raise his head and focus on the figure. But he couldn't. His eyes had lost the ability to focus long ago, and Reeve knew in the back of his mind that it was only a matter of time before he lost his sight altogether.

“Your condition has worsened,” a voice commented, ringing through the silence of the dungeon to reach the ears of its only prisoner. Reeve could have sworn he had heard the voice before—deep and raspy.

“It's a small miracle you're still alive, you know,” the voice said again, and this time Reeve was able to match up the voice with a face...or rather a face covered with a ski mask.

*The Running Man!*

“The madness won’t leave you alone, will it?” the dark man asked as Reeve tried vainly to lock down on where the voice was coming from. “It must be terrible for you.”

All Reeve could see with his permanently blurred eyes was a mass of green and black all around him. He could see no indication that the Running Man was even in the room with him. For all he knew, his kidnapper’s voice could be coming from the mists themselves.

“I would think that death would be a mercy for you by now.”

*No!* Reeve thought, jerking violently against the chains with the sheer force of his will. *I can’t die! Not yet!*

For a while, the Running Man was silent, as if surprised by Reeve’s reaction, and when he spoke next, his voice was somewhat softer.

“You hear and understand every word I’m saying...don’t you?”

*Yes, I do,* Reeve tried to say, but nothing emerged from his mouth. The words didn’t even reach his throat.

There was a brief pause before the Running Man spoke again. “Your friend Yuffie Kisaragi is down here now.”

Reeve’s blood turned to ice. *N-No! Yuffie! No!*

“She put up quite a fight,” the Running Man continued flatly. “It seems that all members of AVALANCHE have wills made of tempered steel. I didn’t think she would be so hard to capture.”

*Damn you! Let Yuffie go!*

“I’m going to see her right now. She will undergo the same torture processes that you did.”

*No...no...don’t do it to her! Please!*

“I don’t even know why I’m telling you this,” the Running Man said quietly. “It’s not to torment you, despite what you’re probably thinking at the moment. Anyhow, I’m leaving now.”

Reeve suddenly surged against his chains, long inactive muscles abruptly reanimating themselves. The chain links jangled together loudly, wordlessly demanding that the Running Man stop and pay heed to the indomitable will of the former Shinra director.

“You have something to say to me?” the Running Man asked, the mists delivering his words for him.

*If you hurt Yuffie, I’m going to kill you!* Reeve tried to say, but all that emerged was a

bestial snarl that he couldn't believe had come from his throat.

"That's what they all say," the Running Man deadpanned.

\* \* \* \* \*

*Drip.*

"Vincent!" Yuffie cried, running across the liquid-like surface beneath her feet, saltwater splashing her bare legs as she chased after the painfully distant figure of Vincent Valentine.

"Come back!" she yelled, gasping for breath as she tore across the watery plain as fast as her legs would carry her, all too aware of the fact that no matter how hard or how fast she ran, Vincent's figure wasn't getting any closer.

He had his back to her, raven's wing black hair billowing in some unseen breeze until it seemed to meld into the perfectly black sky that hovered ominously over their heads. His dark clothes fluttered around his tall figure like silk, the motion of the garments much like undulating dance of water itself.

"Vincent!" Yuffie called again, running for all she was worth. "Please, Vincent, turn around!"

*Drip.*

"Vincent!" she gasped, stumbling and almost falling. "It's me, Yuffie! I...I want to see your face, Vincent!"

But it was no use. She felt her legs give out beneath her from sheer exhaustion, and she could only watch helplessly as Vincent's already distant figure slowly faded like a shadow returning to the darkness that had birthed it.

She was all alone.

*Drip. Drip.*

Her heart was in so much agony that Yuffie felt it was going to shatter into a million pieces. Tears violently stung her eyes, and she lowered her head, allowing her unbound hair to cascade all around her in a waterfall of chocolate.

"Vincent," she whispered, as a tear rolled down her cheek. "I'm sorry, Vincent. I'm so sorry. Sorry that I was wrong, Vincent...please...forgive me..."

*Drip. Drip.*

"I just want to see your face, Vincent. One last time..."

*Drip.*

“Vincent...I...”

*Drip. Drip. Drip.*

Slowly, the realm of dream abandoned the weeping form of Yuffie Kisaragi, sending her tumbling back into reality with a thud. She suddenly became aware of a splitting pain in her head, like some wacko was trying to saw her head open or something gross and deranged like that. There was a strange odor in the air, faint yet very displeasing; Yuffie couldn't resist wrinkling her nose in distaste. Something hard and cold was supporting her head and back, and it took her a few seconds to realize that it was the floor.

*Where am I?* she wondered, starting to open her eyes. *Gawd! This floor is freaking hard! And what the hell is that annoying dripping sound?*

Even though her eyes were fully open, they were almost entirely out of focus, and it took precious seconds of waiting for Yuffie to be able to see clearly. But when the world around her finally emerged, all she saw was that she was being held in a cold, damp cell with stone walls and a ceiling to match. There was light coming in from a door with a barred window, but other than that, her new home was inhabited by purebred shadows.

*Boring,* she thought, groaning slightly.

“I see you're finally awake,” a voice behind her suddenly deadpanned.

Yuffie was up like a shot despite the roaring pain in her head. Trying to ignore the loud pounding of her heart in her chest, she wrestled to her knees and trying to pinpoint where the voice had come from.

“Who's there?!” she demanded, her voice ringing loudly through the cell.

The darkness in front of her seemed to shift, and the Running Man stepped out of the shadows.

Her heart skipped a beat as she stared up into those eyes that she had recognized just before she had blacked out in Midgar. Up close and out of battle, she saw that the Running Man was a lot taller than he had originally seemed. He was a lot thinner, too, but her expert eyes could easily spot the well-developed muscles even under the folds of his leather jacket and dark pants. His face was still covered by his black ski mask, the dark cloth offsetting those horribly familiar eyes.

“You've stolen Aeris' eyes,” Yuffie whispered, blurting out the first thing that came to mind, as was her tendency to do.

The objects she had been referring to narrowed dangerously, their natural glow becoming so concentrated that they seemed to bore into her face with the intensity of two

lasers. Squirming underneath that icy gaze, Yuffie was reminded of just whom she was dealing with here. Reeve's and now *her* kidnapper.

Without warning, the Running Man lifted a gloved hand and took hold of the bottom of his ski mask, pulling it off of his head before Yuffie could even blink.

"Um...whoa," she stammered, eyes wide as she was finally able to see the face behind her kidnapper's mask.

The Running Man could only be accurately described as "drop dead gorgeous." He was around Cloud's age, with longish white-blond hair that shimmered in the darkness and was long enough to nearly cover one of his eyes. Strong facial features gave him an aristocratic look, as if he were a noble from some forgotten time and place. But, of course, the most striking and disturbing feature was his eyes. They were large and green, just as Aeris' eyes had been, only this man's eyes held none of that fresh innocence that Aeris had been known for. No, the Running Man's eyes were as cold as primal ice, silently telling her that her life meant absolutely nothing to him.

"Uh...hello," Yuffie said nervously, not knowing what else to do.

"On your feet," the Running Man ordered, the look on his face daring her to disobey him.

Yuffie made a face. "But I'm on my knees. Isn't that enough? I'm really tired right now and—"

"On your feet *now*," he suddenly snapped, eyes hard as steel.

"Fine," Yuffie muttered reluctantly, climbing shakily to her booted feet, trying not to stumble. "There," she told the Running Man. "Are you happy?"

Face emotionless, the Running Man suddenly reached behind his back. Yuffie stiffened as she heard a metallic, jangling noise resound through her cell like the dark laughter of an unseen being. For a moment, she feared that the Running Man was going to pull out some kind of weapon, but when his hand came back into view, a pair of gleaming shackles was clutched in his gloved fingers.

"Turn around," he ordered flatly.

Yuffie laughed nervously, her eyes on the shackles. "Hehe. W-What are you going to do with those?"

The Running Man's eyes narrowed menacingly, not at all pleased with her belligerence. "Yuffie Kisaragi, you are a member of AVALANCHE and a descendent of the Kisaragi-Chao bloodline. Wutainese ninjas are known for their unmatched skills and powerful magic attacks. I'm not taking any chances with you. Now, turn around."

Yuffie blinked dumbly at him, surprised with how much he had known about her and her ancestors. The way he had talked about her had made her feel like she ranked up there with the Cetra as far as importance went. Yet, surprisingly enough, she wasn't sure she was flattered by the comparison. After all, the Cetra were extinct.

Yuffie made sure to keep her hands out of the Running Man's reach and stammered, "Oh, those aren't really necessary, you know! I'm not going to try and run away or anything!"

*Yeah right*, she thought.

"Yeah right," the Running Man suddenly said dryly. "Don't make this any more difficult than it has to be or I'm going to have to get rough."

Yuffie had the audacity to roll her eyes. "Like I'm so sure, Running Asshole! I whooped your sorry ass back in Midgar! Your dumb little partner—whoever they were—had to knock me out because I fried your ass with my *totally* powerful Bolt 3 spell!"

The Running Man glared at her, spinning the shackles around with one finger, as casual as a bounty hunter like him would get. "Fortunately," he told her. "We won't have to worry about such pesky spells anymore, will we?"

A cold feeling washed over Yuffie, and she looked down at her wrists to see that she had been completely stripped of all her armor, and her materia was nowhere to be seen.

Anger darkened her pretty face as she glared at the Running Man. "You slimy bastard!" she declared, clenching her small hands into fists. "Where the hell did you put my armor and all my materia?!"

*Shit...I was carrying the Knights of the Round! Cloud's gonna murder me! If I ever get outta here, that is...*

The Running Man smiled coldly at her. "It's in a safe place," he said mysteriously.

"Bastard!" Yuffie spat, scowling deeply at his amused expression. "I hope you SUFFERED during my Bolt 3 attack!"

"Not really," he said flatly, suddenly tossing the shackles into one of his hands and pulling back the cuff of his leather jacket to reveal a metal bangle hanging around his wrist, the runes etched on it turning into deep pools of shadow in the meager light.

Yuffie recognized the armor immediately. She remembered how she had had to surrender it over to Red before going down into the center of the Planet to fight Sephiroth. Little fuzball put up quite a fight over it, too...

"Bolt Armlet," she growled. "Aren't you just the luckiest bastard, to be wearing it at the time?"

“Quit calling me a bastard,” the Running Man ordered coldly, pulling his cuff back down over the Bolt Armlet. “That is not my name and so I will not tolerate being called such.”

Yuffie sniffed. “Fine. So...what IS your name, then?”

The Running Man paused, then, to her utter surprise, said, “Titus.”

Yuffie blinked. “Oh. Hey! That’s a pretty name! It’s probably fake, but it’s still pretty.”

Titus rolled his emerald-green eyes and suddenly strode over to the door and shoved it open, letting the light from the hall filter into the cell. Even then, some of the deepest shadows still lingered in the corners of the room.

“Out,” he ordered flatly, holding the door open with one hand and gesturing with the other, shackles jangling unpleasantly as he did so.

*As long as they stay in his hand and not on my wrists, I’ll be just fine,* Yuffie thought nervously as she slowly walked towards the door, keeping her hands as far away from Titus as possible.

Making sure to keep a certain amount of distance between her and Titus—which was rather hard, being that they were both in the same doorway—Yuffie cautiously poked her head out of the cell and took her time examining the hallway, noting that there were more cell doors lining either side of the corridor. Her heart skipped a beat as she wondered if Reeve was being held in one of them, but something told her that Reeve was somewhere else entirely. The other cells were silent and appeared to be unoccupied, and this simple observation was enough to placate Yuffie for the time being. She also noticed that one end of the hallway was more brightly lit than the other.

*I’ll bet the exit is that way,* she thought, a plan beginning to hatch in her devious little thief’s brain. *Let’s just hope good ol’ Titus here is the impatient sort.*

Finally, after another thirty seconds of watching her continue to examine the empty corridor, Titus—usually a very patient man—got fed up with waiting. Placing a gloved hand on her narrow back, he gave her a somewhat hard shove that sent her flying out into the hallway.

*Big mistake,* Yuffie thought with an internal grin. *Can’t believe the sucker actually fell for it!*

She pretended to be on a collision course with the hard floor, but instead, she twisted gracefully around and bolted to the right, thinking that there was no way in hell that Titus would be able to catch and swift, nimble creature such as herself.

But after only two running strides, she suddenly felt two hands close on her arms and



yank them behind her back...rather painfully, too. Her flight to freedom was brought to a brutal close when she felt the cold metal of the shackles bite into her wrists and heard the loud snap as Titus clicked them shut with an air of smug finality.

“Damn it,” she cursed under her breath, feeling her hopes of escape fluttering away.

“Nice try,” Titus praised, and Yuffie thought he sounded genuinely impressed. “I wasn’t expecting that, you know. Well done.”

“A trick is only well done if it works,” Yuffie grumbled as Titus spun her around to face him, her hands now completely immobile in her new bindings.

“A good philosophy,” Titus commented, lifting a pale blond eyebrow. “But if you try something like that again, you’ll give me justification to kill you.”

“She just *gave* you justification, honey,” a new voice suddenly said. “Why don’t you just kill her now? She’s probably going to end up dead anyways.”

A scowl already marring Yuffie’s features at the arrogance in the accented voice, she spun around to find her face to face with a Wutainese woman dressed in a leather bodysuit that fit her like a second skin. Her dark brown eyes glared down at Yuffie snootily as she walked closer to the pair, heeled boots clacking on the floor.

“Who the hell are you?” Yuffie demanded in the nastiest tone she could muster.

Titus suddenly laid his hand on her shoulder, drawing her attention away from the woman. “Who she is doesn’t matter,” he said curtly. “Let’s get going.”

He started to drag Yuffie down the hallway but stopped short when he saw a mischievous grin on the young girl’s face. “Is this your *girlfriend*, Titus?” she teased, nudging him her elbow and winking at him as if they were old friends instead of kidnapper and prisoner. “Why don’t ya introduce me to her? Huh? Huh?”

Titus glared at her angrily.

The woman suddenly planted her hands on her narrow hips and huffed. “You told her your name, Titus?” she asked incredulously.

“What does it matter in the end?” Titus said coldly, directing his words at the woman even though he was staring down at Yuffie. “She’s never going to see daylight again.”

Yuffie swallowed hard, and for the first time, she realized that there was actually a chance that she may not get out of here alive.

The woman threw up her hands suddenly. “To hell with it all!” she declared. “I’m Fa-Li. Now, let’s go!”

Yuffie found herself being ushered somewhat roughly down the hall with Titus on

her left and Fa-Li on her right. Both of them hand one of their hands wrapped around Yuffie's upper arm, like she was REALLY going to try and run with her hands in shackles. (She probably would, but that was beside the point!) She had no idea where she was in the first place, which put her at a disadvantage. She had no doubt that even if she, by some miracle, managed to get away from her captors, she would quickly find herself lost in this outlandish place. Knowing her rotten luck, she would probably end up stumbling into a place much worse than where her two escorts were taking her.

Her soul deflated slightly as thoughts of escape grew dimmer and dimmer. *Maybe the others will come for me*, she thought hopefully. *I'm sure stupid Vincent will notice when I don't show up in the office building and start raising Cain for having to walk all around the building in the rain. They'll come and rescue me...I hope...*

But how were Vincent and the others even to know where she had been taken? Unless Titus had left some sort of trail this time, the others were shit out of luck...and so was she.

Sighing internally, Yuffie focused on her surroundings as she passed them since neither of her escorts seemed to be in a chatty mood. The walls on either side of her were lined with cell after cell, barred windows high up on the doors resembling gaping mouths lined with stained teeth. Were there other people in these cells? So far there was nothing but silence hanging in the air, and as she passed the barred windows, she could see no sign that the cells were occupied. Still, she had a feeling that at least a few of these cells held horrible secrets for her to witness.

The prison corridor seemed to go on forever, but soon Titus and Fa-Li stopped at a rusted metal door that had a circular handle resembling those on submarine hatches. Yuffie had no interest in the nasty old door, but what *did* interest her was the fact that Titus and Fa-Li released their grips on her arms so that they could open the door. Well, at least *Titus* started to open the door. Fa-Li just stood there in a bratty fashion, practically tapping her foot with impatience.

Yuffie was just about to open her mouth and start annoying her captors when she suddenly heard a scuffling noise from the cell on her left. Leaning back slightly so she could see around Titus, she narrowed her eyes, trying to pierce the darkness beyond the window's bars. She could see nothing, but she suddenly heard the rustling noise again.

Yep, there was definitely *something* in there.

Now, Yuffie was a curious person by nature, but she tended to shy away from situations that might end up with her pushing up daisies with "Curiosity killed the cat" written on her tombstone. But, hey, there was a cell door between her and whatever was in the darkness. No harm with a little peek now, was there?

Even though Yuffie felt Fa-Li's watchful eyes on her, neither of her captors moved to stop her as she slowly approached the occupied cell, intent on finding out what was

in there. She hadn't heard the scuffling noise again, but she felt *something* watching her from behind the barred window. But stopping a foot away from the cell, she could still see nothing in the darkness.

Frustrated, Yuffie strode right up against the door and, standing on her toes, practically shoved her face up against the bars, peering curiously into the darkness.

She saw the creature coming almost a moment too late.

A head suddenly materialized out of blackness, oversized and monstrous, and Yuffie was just about to scream when two hands came flying through the bars, grabbing for her throat with the fervor of demon reaching from its fiery pit. A grotesque moaning suddenly split the air, and Yuffie felt hands clamp down on her shoulders and yank her backwards so that she collided with something hard: Titus' chest.

Yuffie just stood there for a moment, leaning unwittingly on Titus for support as she tried to recover her wits. Her mouth kept opening and closing, and she knew that she was either trying to scream or talk; she couldn't decide which to do. The horror standing before her had banished all rational thought.

Her first thought was that the thing screaming in the cell was a Faceless Man. It the same bald head and glistening pink flesh as the ones she had fought a couple of days ago, but the only difference was that this one...had a face. Or what was left of a face. Whereas the Faceless Men had had only indentations where its eyes, mouth, and nose should have been, this horrific creature actually had something resembling the parts its predecessors had been lacking.

Only, instead of a real nose, this creature had a gaping hole in which Yuffie could see gray tissue and something white that might have been bone; it looked much like someone had just ripped the entire nose off of the thing's face. There was a bandana covering the thing's eyes, thank God, but there was a clear watery substance trickling out from underneath the cloth that Yuffie didn't even want to guess the nature of. She somehow knew that the thing no longer possessed organs with which to see. But the most horrible thing was the mouth, or what was left of it. The creature's lips had been literally *stitched* together with some sort of thick leather straps, making it look like some sort of diabolical rag doll come to life. But it wasn't so much the sight of the mouth being prevented from fulfilling its natural purpose that made Yuffie freeze in terror.

All the Faceless Men Yuffie had fought so far had been eerily silent, and though at the time Yuffie had been unnerved by the lack of sound that the abominations made, she now had a newfound respect for the silent ones.

For this one—this monstrosity in the making—was trying to scream. No, it was trying to *TALK*, but the only sounds that emerged from its stitched mouth were horrible moans that echoed down the hall and made Yuffie's heart shudder in her chest. She could

hear the desperation and fear in what was left of the thing's voice, and it suddenly struck her as unbelievably cruel that a creature could be such a condition and still be emotionally aware of the nightmare it was in. Too cruel...

Suddenly, Yuffie found her voice and realized she was in the mood for screaming.

"Ohmygodwhatdidyoudotoit????!!!" she shrieked, suddenly feeling more angry than frightened.

Titus squeezed her shoulder painfully, a signal for her to shut up.

But Yuffie was beyond listening to reason. "What did you do it?!" she raged as the thing in the cell moaned again, its pink, emaciated hands slicing the air inches from her face.

Fa-Li suddenly jerked her out of Titus' grasp, her manicured fingernails digging brutally into Yuffie's arm. "Shut up!" she screamed at the girl, then turned to Titus angrily. "Titus! Get that thing in there to stop its moaning!"

"It?" Titus echoed, looking amused. "I don't think he or she is so far gone into the transformation to be considered an 'it' yet."

Something in his words broke through Yuffie's haze of rage. "He or she?!" she cried, tearing her eyes away from the monstrosity clawing for freedom and shifting her gaze to Titus. "I thought the Faceless Men were only men!! No wait! This...thing—it was *human*????!!!"

*Just like Vincent said...*

"Key word being 'was'," Titus commented dryly as he strode fearlessly up the cell, just out of reach of the Faceless Man/Woman's clawing hands. "Well?" he suddenly demanded of the creature. "Were you male or female...or do you even remember?"

The Faceless Man/Woman's response was only to screech louder, trying desperately to swipe at Titus with its clawed hands. The watery substance was still streaming out from under the bandana, and Yuffie realized for the first time that the liquid was actually tears. The thing was crying.

"Stop it!" Yuffie hollered at Titus, surging against Fa-Li's grasp. "It can still understand you!! Stop it!! Please! It's crying, goddamn you!!!"

Faster than lightening, Titus suddenly sprung forward, grabbing the creature's flailing hands and yanking them forward so that the thing's face—or what was left of it—was shoved up against the bars. It moaned plaintively.

"Oh gawd!!" Yuffie hollered at Titus, trying to kick the back of his leg with her boot. "Leave it alone! Please!!"

Titus turned around to glare at the half-crazed girl held in the grip of Fa-Li, which was surprisingly strong for such a slight woman. “Why should I leave it alone?” he demanded coldly, his gloved hands still wrapped around the thing’s arms. “If he or she doesn’t submit to the treatment, then in two or three days, they’ll turn into an Evict.”

“And what the hell is a goddamn ‘Evict?’!” Yuffie raged.

“Think zombie,” Titus replied, turning away from her disinterestedly. “Think smart zombie. Think smart zombie that can move fast when it wants to. Think smart, fast zombie that screams a lot and eats anything it can get its claws on. That, my little friend, is an Evict.” Then he added, as an afterthought, “I let one loose in the Midgar sewers, you know.”

Yuffie’s heart froze in her chest. “What did you say?” she gasped.

Titus’ cold voice drifted back to her. “You heard me.”

“But three of my friends were in the sewers!!!” Yuffie burst out, gray eyes full of pain.

“Not anymore,” Fa-Li muttered under her breath.

Yuffie felt something in her shatter and wither away. She shut her burning eyes tightly and gritted her teeth, unwittingly sliding from Fa-Li’s grasp and to the floor, the stone cold underneath her bare legs.

*Reno... Elena... Red...*

“G-God damn you!!!” she roared, her entire body trembling. “God damn you to hell!!!!!!”

Titus suddenly appeared in front of her and yanked her roughly to her feet, gloved fingers digging into her skin. Yuffie opened her eyes and glared up at him angrily, the fire of hatred scalding her veins. Somewhere in the background she could hear the Faceless Man/Woman moaning plaintively, but all she knew was the unearthly light in Titus’ green eyes, which were right in front of her. She wanted to do something to him. Punch him or kick him. But her hands were still bound by her shackles, and her legs felt weak and watery. All she had left was her voice and her fury.

“How could you?!” she spat, oblivious to the tears of rage and heartbreak rolling down her face. “They were my friends! You’re a goddamn monster! I hope you burn in hell!”

Titus’ eyes narrowed, and a bitter smile crept across his lips. “This *is* my hell,” he whispered softly. “And now it is yours as well. Better get used to it because you’re never leaving this place.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Cloud massaged his temples in an attempt to ease the headache that was threatening to make its home in his skull. The thunder in the night outside rumbled in sinister amusement at his pain, and the blonde man cursed the storm that wasn't showing any signs of letting up. Kalm was already mostly flooded, and soon an emergency evacuation would be called for. That would not be a good thing, of course. Where else would they station their base of operations? In Midgar? No way, not when the Running Man may or may not be prowling the city still.

Yet Cloud knew—somehow he just *knew*—that the Running Man was no longer in Midgar.

Sighing wearily, he tried to force himself to focus on the maps spread out on the table in front of him, but the many lines and curves blurred before his overworked eyes, and he let out a growl of frustration. Elena and Rude had been nice enough to make the trek back to their hotel room to bring back old maps of Midgar that Reeve had given them a while back in case of an emergency. Strangely enough, Reno had declined to go with them and instead had trudged upstairs without a word to almost anyone.

*Don't know what's wrong with that guy,* Cloud thought. *He didn't even drink himself into a coma tonight like he usually does. Maybe he's embarrassed because of the whole snake thing.*

Unconsciously, Cloud's gaze shifted to the long scrapes that now ran almost the entire length of both of his arms, courtesy of a certain redheaded Turk and his massive fear of snakes. Cloud absently ran a gloved finger along one of the angry red lines and winced as a jolt of pain went through him. The scrapes weren't enough to merit a Cure spell or even a Potion, but the things sure stung like crazy. Like big, long paper cuts. Reno must have literally been *clawing* at him in his attempt to get away from the snake earlier that day. And Cloud was just lucky enough to be the steppingstone.

He was still prodding at the scrapes when he suddenly heard a light footstep on the stairs leading to the upstairs bedrooms. Looking up, he was surprised to see Tifa standing there, barefooted and wearing a pale blue robe.

"Hey Cloud," she greeted a little nervously, tucking a lock of dark brown hair behind her ear.

He managed to muster up a weary smile for her. "Hey Tifa. What are you doing up so late?"

"Couldn't sleep," she said, smiling wanly at him and padding over to take a seat in the chair across from him, heedless of the maps consuming most of the table space. "Did you see Vincent pass through here?" she asked.

Cloud blinked in confusion. “No, but he might have gone through while I was sleeping.”

Tifa’s brow creased. “You fell asleep down here?”

Cloud nodded. “Yeah, right on the maps, hence the drool spot on Sector 2.”

She laughed softly, smiling a little. “Cloud, have you been down here all night?”



He nodded his spiky head, staring wearily at the maps between them. “These are maps of Midgar and the Midgar sewer system,” he explained tiredly.

Tifa leaned forward and peered at one of the maps, brushing aside rebellious strands of her hair when they made clear that they wanted to see the maps too. “How can you make any sense of this?” she asked dubiously. “It’s just a bunch of lines to me.”

“To me, too. But somehow, I *have* to make sense of them.” He tapped the map with one gloved finger. “Something keeps telling me that the key to finding both Yuffie and Reeve is in the sewers.”

“Because that’s where the transport tunnel led?” Tifa asked.

Cloud nodded. “Yeah, so we’re pretty sure that the Running Man left the lab by way of the sewers. And also, that snake was huge. Something that big couldn’t have been slinking around the sewers for a long time and not be noticed by someone. It had to have come from somewhere.”

“And you think that somewhere might lead to the Running Man,” Tifa finished.

Cloud looked at her helplessly. “It’s all we have to go on right now.”

Tifa propped her elbows up on the table and rested her chin in her hands. “So we’re heading back to Midgar tomorrow?” she asked softly.

Cloud shook his head. “No, not tomorrow. We need to recuperate a little.”

“But Cloud!” Tifa suddenly exclaimed, eyes filled with worry. “We have to find Yuffie and Reeve! And quick, too!”

Cloud felt a similar worry rising in his heart, but he held it back with a great force of

will. “I know, Tifa,” he said as calmly as he could manage. “But Cid still needs to fix up Cait. With Yuffie gone, we’re going to need Cait’s help as much as possible. And everyone’s a little shaken up right now.” Avoiding her gaze, he said, “Especially Reno.”

Tifa didn’t say anything. She lowered her dark head, and Cloud was starting to wonder if he had accidentally hurt her feelings when she suddenly said, “Do you want me to tell you?”

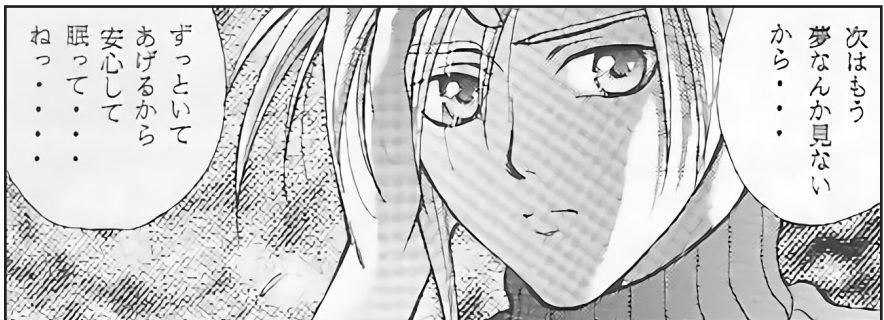
He looked up in surprise. “Tell me what?”

“About me and Reno,” she replied softly.

Though something in him desperately wanted to cry “Yes!” Cloud shook his head and returned his attention back to the maps. “That’s between you and Reno,” he forced himself to say.

“But don’t you care?” Tifa asked suddenly, raising her head and fixing her burgundy gaze on him.

Avoiding those beautiful, pained eyes, Cloud said, “Of course I care. More than you’ll know, but...that’s between you and Reno,” he finished lamely, not knowing what else to say. He never had been a man of many words.



“Cloud...” she whispered softly, and he heard the longing and the love in that one word, but he refused to believe it, not when things were the way they were.

“I’m sorry for the way I acted the other morning,” he rushed on, speaking blindly now. “It’s just...I didn’t...I mean...I just...if Reno needs help, you should help him, you know? I...I won’t stand in the way.” He practically choked on the words as he said them.

He was in so much emotional trauma that he didn’t even see Tifa leave her chair and come to stand beside him. One moment he was staring at the maps without seeing them, the next he was feeling soft, graceful arms slipping around his shoulders and gently pulling him so that his head was resting against a slender stomach.



“I’m sorry for your pain, Cloud,” Tifa whispered softly, stroking his hair. “I know you’re feeling confused and helpless right now. Don’t worry. We’re going to find Yuffie and Reeve. Everything’s going to be alright.”

Something in Cloud seemed to give and he shuddered violently, his eyes slipping closed and he wrapped his arms around Tifa’s waist and buried his face in the soft cotton shirt that covered her lean stomach, breathing in the scent of clean clothes and Tifa’s personal feminine scent. And for the first time in a long time, he felt a sense of peace settle over him, like the calm after a storm.

True, he knew that he may still be in danger of losing the woman he loved, but... she was with him now, holding him and understanding his pain. And that was more than enough.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent shut his window quietly behind him, water streaming from his soaked clothes to pool on the ground at his feet, shimmering like puddles of pure night on the hardwood floor. He knew it was rude to be getting Tifa’s floor wet like this, but he would just have to clean it later. He didn’t want to have to go through the bar itself to get up to his room because that would have meant bothering Tifa and Cloud during their moment of solitude, something that he felt he had no right to disrupt. And being that the back door was locked, Vincent had had no other choice but to enter his room using the very same method that had indirectly made Yuffie Kisaragi meet her doom.

Turning away from the window, Vincent looked dispassionately around at his room. He knew that Tifa had stayed in his room long enough to watch and wave to him as he walked away along the beach to stare at the churning ocean and violet, stormy skies. Now he could hear her and Cloud talking softly downstairs in the bar’s main room, their voices hushed and soothing, meant entirely for each other. He had no right to even listen to such rhythmic emotion.

*You should just leave, he told himself viciously. You are good for absolutely nothing around here. Thirty years in a coffin atoning for your sins was not nearly enough to lift the burden from your shoulders. You need a great spiritual cleansing, Vincent Valentine. Something that will purge your horrid, tainted soul of all the wrongs you have done.*

Raking his human hand roughly through his tangled hair, Vincent realized that he had lost his hair clasp sometime during his midnight meanderings. Almost against his will, he walked over to the full-length mirror that was hung on the wall and looked to see just how ghastly his appearance was.

It may have been a man who had gone to take a walk outside, but the tempest had returned a monster to Tifa’s bar.

Vincent's dark hair hung around his face like a shroud, clinging to the sides of his ghostly white face like spindly fingers of pure darkness. His borrowed clothes were waterlogged and felt like lead weights holding him down. And, as always, his crimson eyes gleamed in defiance of everything about Vincent Valentine that might be called human. One look at his eyes, and he knew that it was no man staring back at him from the mirror's reflected realm.

He spun away from the mirror in disgust, hating himself, hating the world, hating the very womb that had birthed him and the evil man that had made him into a monster on the outside—an appearance to mirror the soul within. For Vincent had always been a monster at heart. After all he had been a Turk, hadn't he? Only good for ending human life, not saving it.

*"I hope you're happy, Vincent! You managed to get rid of me!"*

"Leave me alone," Vincent whispered feverishly, rubbing his eyes with his human hand as if he could erase the image of Yuffie's face from where it was engraved on the inside of his eyelids, beautiful and inescapable.

He had failed her. Failed her badly. And to think of her, innocent and teeming with life, in the hands of the creature known as the Running Man only generated in Vincent an even deeper sense of self-loathing than ever before. He had always hated being called "Vinnie" but at that moment, he would have given anything in the world to hear Yuffie calling his name. If she died, he would never *ever* forgive himself.

*So leave, he told himself. That way when Cloud and the others find out she is dead, you'll never have to face up to the sin. You'll never have to face up to the fact that you abandoned her when she needed you the most. You monster. Cowardly monster. Go ahead. Run from the truth like you always do.*

Something inside him—something that felt suspiciously like his heart—began to break, and in his moment of vulnerability, Vincent suddenly felt an extreme sense of ominous foreboding wash over him. Hot and cold chased each other across his skin, and a wave of dizziness hit him like a freight train and disappeared just as quickly.

Something behind him suddenly demanded his attention, and Vincent whirled around to look in the mirror.

Chaos was staring back at him, monstrous and terrible, its dark form filling the entire mirror without enough room left for the wings that Vincent couldn't see but knew were there. And as he stared in horror, the demon...smiled.

With a scream of rage and fear, Vincent's hand shot out, snagged the lamp from the dresser and flung it blindly at the mirror. The image of Chaos dissolved into a thousand lethal shards of broken glass and crumpled to the hardwood floor with a dozen ringing

cries, shards shimmering in the moonlight like a puddle of crystalline tears. The thunder roared outside, as if shocked by the atrocity of his actions.

Silence fell for a second, broken only by the sounds of Vincent's ragged breathing and the rain pounding the window like demons crying to be let in.

He suddenly became aware of someone pounding up the stairs and heading towards his room.

### **INTERVENERS. STOP THEM.**

Before he knew what he was doing, Vincent leapt clear over the bed with inhuman swiftness and threw his body weight against the door, barely glimpsing Cloud coming up the stairs before the door slammed shut with a bang. Dizziness hit him like a fist in the gut, and Vincent sank to the floor with his back against the door. His head was throbbing. Someone started pounding on the door. "Vincent!" Cloud cried. "Are you alright?! What happened?!"

"Vincent!" Tifa's voice echoed her companion's cries.

"I'm fine," Vincent gasped, suddenly finding it hard for him to breathe. "Just leave me!"

"What was that breaking sound?!" Cloud demanded. Vincent dimly heard the other man trying to turn the doorknob, but the sound was distant, like he was hearing it from underwater.

"Vincent," Tifa's voice suddenly whispered, right next to his ear. She had apparently kneeled down so that she was basically level with him even with the door between them. "Vincent, open the door," she begged. "Please!"

"I'll still be here in the morning, Tifa," he whispered back, forcing the words through his mouth. "I'll still...be...here..."

He blacked out for a second, and when he reemerged from the abyss, he vaguely heard Tifa trying to convince Cloud that everything was fine and Red XIII's gravelly voice asking what was wrong. But Vincent wasn't interested in what was going on in the world outside his door. All he felt was the fever throbbing in his head and the cold that was making his limbs shiver uncontrollably.

Was he getting sick? No, he knew that he was immune to all diseases. If the whole Planet were suddenly wiped out by a plague, he alone would remain unaffected. Such was his curse, his penance for his well of sins. But if he couldn't fall ill, then what was happening to him? What was burning his flesh and freezing his blood? He felt detached from the world around him—completely unaware of his surroundings. The voices of Cloud, Tifa and Red were unreal, as if he were dreaming.

Vincent knew only one creature was to blame for this. Only one creature on the Planet could exert this much power over him.

*Chaos?! he demanded silently while hugging his shivering body and fighting to remain conscious. What are you... what are you doing to me?!*

And this time, he heard it, unmistakable. He felt it rolling across his soul like a dark, sinister wave. Laughter. The beast was *laughing* at him.

*So it was you! Leave me be! Back to the dark with you, demon!* Vincent focused all his energy behind these words.

The rumbling laughter seemed to increase at this ancient incantation. Vincent felt the demon shifting in the well of his soul, a strange demonic babbling issuing from its unseen mouth. Something clicked in his feverish mind that the demon was speaking in its native tongue, the language of all things evil and demonic, but something inside Vincent—perhaps something just as evil and demonic—could make primitive sense of the words.

**BANISH ME TO THE DARK?**

**BANISH YOURSELF TO THE DARK...**

**YOU ARE MY DARKNESS**

**I AM YOU!**

A tidal wave of images suddenly washed over Vincent without warning, plunging him into what could only be described as utter and complete chaos.

A corridor. Rows of cells on either side.

A door with a circular handle.

Another hallway.

Hallway.

Hallway.

Hallway.

Endless hallway.

A room. A torture chamber! Raised platform and a walkway circling around the entire room. Green light. A girl stood on the platform, chains around her wrists.

“Yuffie!” Vincent cried, hands reaching out to grab her, but the image of her suddenly dissolved before his eyes, falling apart and fleeing from the hands that sought to liberate the one they had failed to save the first time.

Slowly, Vincent’s vision cleared, and he saw the raindrops rushing down the window across the room from him. He felt the wetness of his soaked clothes against his feverish skin and the incessant throbbing in his skull. He was still shivering with unexplainable chills, his back firmly against the door to his room, preventing the outside world from being tainted with the darkness that had just passed through him.

And Chaos was where it was supposed to be—furtive, hidden deep within his being, but always there.

“Chaos,” Vincent whispered weakly, feeling as if all the life had been drained from his body. “You...show me the way to her, demon? Why? Why do you want me to find her?”

But apparently Chaos declined to answer, for Vincent heard nothing from the demon, not even a whisper.

He let the silence fill the niches of the room before whispering, “Yuffie...I will find you. I promise.”

Then he sagged against the door and curled up into a ball, closing his eyes and letting the fever run its course.

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Author’s Note:

Whew! Finally got this chapter done! Took me half of the day, but I did it! However, I have a feeling this is going to be the last chapter for a while since the next one is going to be hard to tackle. O\_O It’s about Reno and the entire story of Mika. I’ve been dreading writing this next chapter since I have a feeling it’s going to be difficult! But I just want to thank everyone who has supported me so far! You’re wonderful! And all I ask is for your continuing support to help me through this next chapter! Thanks again! You guys are great! ::sniff:: I’ll dish out a chapter or two of Clash of the Titans just to let everyone know I’m still alive. ^\_~

—Catalina

# Chapter Twenty-Three

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## *The Pain of Love: Reno's Story*

*"I'm not going to abandon you, Reno." —Tifa Lockhart*

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*She clings to me like cellophane  
 Fake plastic submarine  
 Slowly driving me insane  
 But now that's over  
 So what if the sex was great  
 Just a temporary escape  
 Another think I grew to hate  
 But now that's over  
 Why, why do you always kick me when I'm high?  
 Knock me down till we see eye to eye  
 Figured her out I know she  
 May not be Miss Right but she'll do right now  
 I used to hang on every word  
 Each lie was more absurd  
 Kept me so insecure  
 But now that's over  
 She taught me how to trust  
 And to believe in us  
 And then she taught me how to cuss...that bitch!  
 It's over  
 You know, I used to be such a nice boy  
 "Right Now"  
 —S.R. 71—*

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Elena blinked blearily and tried to focus on not tumbling down the stairs in front of her. One hand, the formerly manicured nails now snagged and chipped from one too many battles with giant sewer-dwelling snakes, groped for the handrail and gripped it tightly, using it as a brace for her weary body as she carefully placed one foot in front of the other, the wood creaking underneath her stockinged feet.

Elena was not what one would consider a morning person. The female Turk had a generally sweet personality once she had at least two cups of coffee in her system and a head of hair that didn't make her look like she had stuck a wet finger in an electrical socket. Oh, and make-up wasn't bad either, and neither was a set of decent clothes, but considering what had happened to her last two suits, Elena had decided that her coming down in her pajamas and bathrobe would be a statement that she needed a break. No more running around sewers for her, at least for a day or two.



As she continued to descend the stairs with great care, she heard voices in the main room of the bar. Sounded like Cloud and Barret were up, and she had glanced in Reno's room on her way down and saw that his bed was empty. Unless he was in the shower or something, he was probably down there as well. Normally, Elena would be embarrassed that anyone other than Reno or Rude would be seeing her in her nightclothes, but lately, she found herself getting more and more comfortable around the members of AVALANCHE. The only one that still creeped her out a bit was Vincent Valentine. And Cait Sith.

"Ew, look what the cat dragged in," a gruff voice commented as Elena entered the bar with a yawn, not bothering to cover her mouth.

Elena's yawn turned into a growl as she put her hands on her hips, realizing that Cid was apparently up as well. "I should have figured you'd be down here," she huffed, her voice still hoarse from sleep. "I didn't hear any earthquake-caliber snoring coming from down the hall."

Cid, who was completely dressed except for his flight jacket, blew a cloud of smoke in her direction. "Nice to see you're Ms. Sunshine today," he commented with a grin.

"Whatever," Elena commented distractedly, eyes roving around mechanically for the coffee maker that she knew had to be hiding somewhere.

Barret, who was seated at the table with Cid and Cloud, glared at her. "Be quiet," he hissed. "I'm talkin' to my daughter!"

For a moment, Elena had no idea what he was talking about until he turned his attention away from her and she realized that the big man had the phone pressed to his other ear, talking loudly to be heard over what had to be a bad connection. The blonde contemplated annoying him some more, but another yawn erupted from her mouth, and her search for the coffee took top priority once again.

Cloud noticed what she was doing and pointed to the end of the counter with a bare hand, absently sipping from his coffee cup as he did so. Elena noticed in passing that he had finally changed out of his ratty, torn uniform and was instead dressed in a simple white button-down shirt and a pair of blue jeans. His wrists were completely devoid of any type of armor or gloves, and his spiky blond hair looked slightly damp, probably from

a shower unless he had taken a dip in the floodwaters outside.

*Hope all this casual dress is a good thing,* Elena thought warily as she poured herself some coffee, the scent of the dark liquid filling the pristine cup enough to make her perk up a bit.

Turning away from the coffee maker and gingerly sipping the steaming liquid, Elena surveyed the bar in front of her. Cloud, Cid, and Barret were seated at a table, sipping coffee (in Cloud's case), smoking cigarettes (in Cid's case), and talking on the phone (in Barret's case). For the first time, she noticed the lean form of Red XIII resting on the floor near Cloud's chair, one golden eye staring up at Elena calmly.

"You're welcome to come and sit at the table," the lion-like beast said politely, raising his head.

"Yeah, woman," Cid echoed absently, loudly yanking out the chair next to him. "We don't bite. C'mere and sit down."

"Thank you," Elena said, happily surprised that they were being so nice to her. Probably because she wasn't wearing her Turks suit.

Whatever the case, she was pleased that they had at least invited her to join them. If there was one thing she hated, it was feeling like an outcast. Padding over to the table, she paused to pat Red XIII on the head briefly before seating herself between Cloud and Cid. She sipped her coffee contentedly, realizing for the first time that the Final Heaven bar was starting to feel more home to her than her apartment in Midgar. Fancy that. Before she knew it, she might actually be calling AVALANCHE her friends!

*Not that they would be bad friends to have,* Elena thought as she poked Red with her toe and stuck her tongue out at him when he turned to glare at her. *They're actually kind of nice to be around...sometimes.*

"I'm hungry," Cid announced suddenly.

"So eat," Cloud replied smartly, amusement flickering in his eyes.

Cid made a face at him, fiddling with his pack of his cigarettes absent-mindedly. "There isn't any food. Where's Tifa?"

"Shower," Cloud replied shortly, eyes focused on the window across the room and the rain rolling down the glass.

"Why don't you make your own breakfast?" Elena demanded of the pilot. "Why do you always have to have Tifa make it for you?"

Cid glared at her, blue eyes sharp underneath the thick blond eyebrows. "Why don't you make us some breakfast?" he shot back.



Elena's scowl melted into a grin. "Cid, you don't want to see what happens when I decide to make use of the kitchen. I couldn't cook to save my own life."

"Same here," Cid echoed grimly.

"Same here," Cloud said.

Barret suddenly whirled to glare at them. "You guys shut yer holes!" he roared. "I'm trying to talk here!"

"So go outside or something!" Cid bellowed back, matching Barret glare for glare. "We havin' a nice conversation here and you keep interrupting us!"

Barret's face darkened with anger. "Goddamn asshole," he started to curse, but Elena suddenly heard a child-like voice exclaim on the phone, "Papa!"

All the anger immediately evaporated from Barret's face, and his tone became apologetic. "Sorry 'bout that, Marlene. I jes' yelling at your Uncle Cid."

"He's mistreatin' me, Marlene!!!" Cid called loudly, a grin spreading across his weathered face.

"No, honey, Uncle Cid's just fine," Barret said into the phone, giving Cid a dark glare, which caused the pilot to break out into hysterics. Elena laughed into her coffee cup and saw Cloud doing the same thing.

"You people so goddamn noisy!" the big man declared, leaping up from his seat and storming out of the room with the phone still held to his ear. Cid laughter turned to a wheezing half-cough/half-laugh, and Elena reached over to whack him on the back until he stopped.

Tifa suddenly came down the stairs, her hair damp and dressed in a plain sleeveless black shirt and a pair of denim shorts that showed off her muscled legs, but with more tact than her miniskirt.

*More casualness*, Elena thought, trying not to be jealous of that fact that Tifa at her worst probably looked better than Elena at her best. *Things are looking up. She doesn't even have her gloves on.*

"Was that Barret I heard yelling?" Tifa asked, glancing around the bar.

"Who else can yell that loud or storm off so eloquently?" Cloud responded with a smile.

Tifa returned his smile, but then her brow suddenly creased as she continued looking around the bar. "Where's Reno?" she asked worriedly. "He wasn't in his room, and I haven't seen him anywhere."

“That guy’s been acting funny,” Cid responded, sounding a little concerned in spite of himself. “He just came down and sat there for a while, then left when Barret got on the phone. Maybe he didn’t want to hear that old geezer’s babbling?”

“He left out into the rain?” Tifa asked, anxiety written across her features. “But Kalm is almost completely flooded...”

“He probably went down to the beach,” Cloud said quietly, staring into his coffee cup as if it were the most interesting thing in the world. “Maybe you should go after him, Tifa?”

Tifa’s burgundy eyes were overbright as she shifted her gaze to the blond swordsman seated next to Elena. “Cloud...” she said softly, and everyone else in the room could sense some entirely private communication passing between the two of them, something that Elena, Cid and Red—as outsiders—dare not disturb.

Cloud looked at her, all gentle smiles and sad blue eyes. “Go,” was all he said, the word spoken so tenderly and with such tragic meaning that the others felt ashamed for bearing witness to such private emotion.

Tifa, for all her awareness of the pain of others and her compassion for those with bleeding hearts, only nodded her thanks to Cloud and strode from the bar and into the rain. But everyone knew that she didn’t need to speak for Cloud to understand and hear the words residing in her heart. He had seen all he needed to see in her eyes—saw things that everyone else was blind to, and they knew it as well as he.

That’s why after Tifa had temporarily forsaken the warmth and company in the bar for the endless fall of raindrops and the bleeding soul of Reno calling to her in the distance, no one dared to speak to Cloud about it, ask him what had just passed between him and Tifa. The knowledge was not theirs to have.

So silence hung in the bar until Cid finally whimpered, “She just *left*. Who’s going to make me breakfast now?!”

“Oh good God!!” Elena exclaimed in exasperation, rolling her eyes. “Eat cereal or something!”

“Can it, woman,” Cid snapped at her before suddenly leaning down so that he could peer under the table.

“Hey! What are you—” Elena started to protest.

“Hey Red!” Cid called, maintaining his hold on his cigarette with a sheer force of will. “You wouldn’t know how to whip me up some breakfast now, would you?”

On the floor, Red rolled his eye and answered flatly, “Certainly. Let me just put on

my apron and mosey into the kitchen.”

Cid’s blue eyes widened. “Really?”

“No, not really.”

\* \* \* \* \*

Tifa stood on the edge of the deck outside the bar, looking miserably out at the town that she had come to call home. The water had risen so high that the steps leading down from the decking were completely submerged, and the water was already lapping at the upper level with hungry intent. And still the cruel raindrops plummeted from the dark heavens above, continuing to flood Kalm as if to fulfill some ravenous grudge that they had against the small town. Most of the townspeople had already left, but Tifa could still see some families literally paddling out of town in rafts, clad in rain slickers, with their belongings wrapped up in plastic bags. Tifa wondered how long it would be until she would have to join them. The only reason the bar had remained unscathed so far was because it had been built on stilts (making for a longer fall when she tossed troublemakers out of her bar). But the water trying to get onto the upper deck was swollen and possessed by some insatiable hunger—the same hunger that had made its brethren swallow Kalm whole. What had the small village done to merit such unfair treatment from the heavens? And why now, of all times?

Sighing, Tifa tried to push the thoughts from her head. Standing there moping and lamenting the inevitable wasn’t going to get her to Reno any faster. Bracing herself, she raised one booted foot and stepped down onto the first step, and consequently, out from under the cover of the porch roof. Rain eagerly soaked into her clothes and hair, and she felt the floodwater seep into her boot with astounding quickness.

*Well, there’s no use prolonging this experience,* she thought grumpily before walking down the steps, her legs entirely underwater in a mere matter of seconds. Wincing whenever hidden debris would brush teasingly past her bare legs, she stopped at the bottom of the steps and realized that she was standing at the very same place that the walkway leading from the bar would have been, had the flood not swallowed it up. She was waist deep in the murky rainwater, and was not looking forward to wading through the rest of it to get out of town and to the beach.

But wade she did, one step at a time, fighting the currents the entire way and trying to ignore whenever random items would float near to brush against her sides. Refugees from flooded houses, everything from children’s toys to actual doors were floating on the surface of the water, all alone until they sank to the bottom with the dozens of other household items that had preceded them. For some reason, seeing the floodwaters swallow things such as baby rattles and stuffed animals that a child had probably adored at one time or another only increased Tifa’s resolve to beat out Mother Nature. Gritting her

teeth, she forced strength into her legs and determination into her heart. Strands of dark brown hair flopped into her eyes to join the raindrops in their attempt to obscure her vision. The currents tried their hardest to knock her legs out from under her and send her floating back to the bar.

Yet still she pressed on. She could feel in her heart that Reno needed her. The magnitude of emotion was so strong, in fact, that it was as if she heard his voice calling to her from afar, pleading, begging. And when she heard that soundless voice and scented the blood from that horrible internal wound, rank and vicious on the winds, her own heart began to ache.

Finally, after what seemed to be an eternity, fifteen minutes found her striding wearily to the beach, boots sloshing through puddles and into grass that was already laced through with the sand that foretold of the inevitable destination of her path. Tifa hugged herself with her arms in attempt to preserve what little warmth she had left in her body. In front of her, the sight of the ocean spreading out in all directions with the storm clouds churning angrily overhead incited such a deep terror—an abysmal feeling of utter *helplessness*—that she nearly whirled on heel and strode back to Kalm.

The only thing that kept her advancing was the lonely figure with fiery red hair seated in the sand, staring out to sea. Reno had taken off his navy blue suit jacket, and the article of clothing was lying next to him on the sand, rain pooling in the saturated cloth. His back was to her, and his waterlogged white shirt, made transparent by the rain, clung to his skin like Shiva's icy embrace. The rain had also dyed his hair an even darker shade of red, so that his ponytail looked like a river of blood frozen in its course down the middle of his back. Amazingly enough, the wild spikes that stuck up from the top of his head—physical evidence of his belligerent nature—hadn't been forced into submission by the rain, and were still sticking up in all their rebellious glory.

*He looks so lonely*, Tifa thought sadly as she came up behind him cautiously, boots sinking into the wet sand. He was seated with his one of his long legs drawn up to his chest, his elbow resting on his knee. The other leg was spread lazily across the sand in front of him, rain pooling in the dent that the heel of his boot was making in the sand. Her heart ached for him.

"Hey, Reno," she greeted softly, wondering if he could even hear her over the rain. "Can I sit here?"

"Free country," he said shortly, not even bothering to turn his head. He had probably already known she was there, anyways.

Still hugging herself protectively, Tifa eased her body down and knelt in the sand close to Reno's side, folding her legs beneath her as gracefully as humanly possible. She suddenly felt a fluttering in her stomach and labeled it as "nervous." This was the first time

she and Reno had been alone—first time they had really *spoken* to each other—since their ill-timed embrace a couple of days ago. Tifa had a sinking feeling inside her that Reno had worsened since then. He wouldn't have been out here otherwise, then, would he?

“What are you doing out here?” Reno suddenly asked quietly, aquamarine eyes riveted on the churning sea ten feet away from where they were seated.

*You called me out here*, Tifa wanted to say.

But instead, she said softly, “I was worried about you.”

Reno snorted. “Why?” he demanded harshly.

Tifa immediately grew tired of the little game he was playing. “Don't run from it, Reno,” she said as unobtrusively as she could, lest she anger him. “I know it's hurting you, maybe even killing you. I'm...I'm here for you, Reno.”

“Are you?” Reno asked flatly, suddenly reaching over and picking up his suit jacket from the sand next to him. Wringing water out of it, he continued, “What if I told you that you had come all the way out here just to hear me say that I'm not going to tell you jack shit about what I'm feeling?”

Tifa turned her head to the side and stared at him, suddenly feeling tears dancing in her eyes where sparks of anger should have been forming. She could hear the pain in his voice, and she knew that he heard it as well. Only, Reno was never one to give in to pain, so he twisted and mutilated it into harsh words laced with bitter poison, meant to drive people away and thus protect the impregnable walls he had erected around his heart.

*How lonely*, Tifa thought, *if he's been doing this his entire life, shoving people away repeatedly...he must be so lonely...all the time.*

Tifa suddenly smiled, surprising them both. “I don't care,” she said lightly. “I'll just stay out here and watch the sea with you. I'm not going to abandon you, Reno.”

The redheaded Turk suddenly turned to her, suspicion clouding and disguising the pain in his eyes. “Are you for real?” he asked sharply, clutching his damp jacket to himself as if he were ready to leave at any moment.

Tifa turned to him and smiled gently. “I'm not going anywhere Reno. I'm here for you.”

Reno's harsh expression wavered violently, his walls crumbling under the barrage of friendship as her soul searched for his, seeking to ease his pain.

“Tell me about her,” Tifa urged softly, eyes locked fearlessly onto his.

His brow suddenly creased in distress—a most disarming expression when seen

on Reno—and he abruptly turned his face away from her, staring at the jacket he had clutched in his lap, heedless of the raindrops rolling down his scarred cheeks like tears. For a split second, it almost seemed like the scars themselves were weeping.

“Who was she, Reno?” Tifa whispered, almost bold enough to touch his shoulder. “Who was Mika?”

Reno flinched, something that Tifa had never seen him do before. She knew she was risking a lot, going at him like this—urging his wound to bleed even more—but it was the only thing she knew to do. Her mother used to squeeze the flesh around her cuts when she was little, Tifa recalled.

*She had said the wound would be cleansed by its own blood.*

“Why does it matter who she was?” Reno suddenly asked softly, his eyes still averted. “She was just a person in my past...”

“But your past is still part of you, Reno,” Tifa said quietly, feeling his pain starting to trickle out, drop by lonely drop. Just like hers.

“She’s dead, you know,” Reno suddenly said coldly.

“You still grieve for her?” Tifa asked softly, knowing how hard this was for him.

Reno closed his eyes, rain cascading from his fiery hair and down his eyelids. “Maybe,” he admitted quietly. “A part of me does. A part of me always will.” His voice suddenly hardened. “But Mika belonged to another man.”

“Another man?”

“Yeah. Another Reno. The person I was then is drastically different from the person I am now. I was another man, then. And now...” he opened his eyes and looked at Tifa “...that man is *dead*.”

Burgundy locked onto aquamarine. “Are you sure, Reno?”

Once again, the harshness in his eyes faltered, long eyelashes fluttering closed over his Mako eyes and then opening again. “I used to be sure,” he said quietly. “But lately...” His voice trailed off, but Tifa already knew what he wanted to say.

*Ever since you mentioned her name in the bar, her ghost has returned to haunt me.*

“Are you sure you want to stay?” Reno asked, eyes boring into hers.

Tifa nodded silently, words escaping her for the moment.

The redheaded Turk looked away and sighed deeply—a heartbreakingly sad sound—and suddenly reached out to drape his jacket around Tifa’s shoulders, shielding her from

some of the raindrops.

“Thank you,” Tifa said softly, touched by the thoughtful action. She drew the jacket closer around herself, not caring that the cloth was just as soaked as her own clothes were.

Reno shrugged and turned his face up to the sky, letting the raindrops strike him ruthlessly on the face again and again. His aquamarine eyes glittered dully even though there was no sunlight to ignite their glow.

“I’ve never told this story to anyone, you know,” Reno whispered.

Tifa nodded in understanding, her heart aching for him. “I know this isn’t going to be easy for you,” she said, slipping her hand into his. “But for what it’s worth, I’m here with you.”

Reno looked down at her hand held in his. Her slender fingers, though callused from years and years of extensive training, were dwarfed by his hand. Without her gloves, her hand looked pale and naked and lonely, and she wondered if his would look the same if he were to remove the fingerless gloves that were like a second skin for him. Gently, he rubbed his thumb against the back of her hand, as if fascinated by such soft skin on a tough woman like her. The touch sent pleasurable shivers down her spine, and though Tifa was slightly surprised at the intimacy in that simple gesture, she only held onto Reno’s hand more tightly.

Fingers intertwined with hers, Reno returned his gaze up to the sky, eyes slipping closed against the sight of the piercing raindrops and the sky-shattering lightning streaking across the horizon. The pale skin of his face shone like the porcelain skin of some marble god, flawless except for the twin lines of those two scars, marring his rugged good looks forever. Raindrops rolled down his face like tears as Tifa watched his eyelashes fluttering slightly.

Then his eyes slowly slid open, and she suddenly received the impression that a different man was now sitting with her. There was no laughter in those eyes, no mockery, no humor. The rain had washed these things away. Beside her now was a man with sad eyes shot through with bitterness that hid a deep well of hatred in their depths.

Reno lowered his face from the churning sky, eyes half-closed as he fell deep into the embrace of memory.

Then he began to speak.

“I guess it must have been seven years ago that this whole shitty mess began. I was eighteen, then, and it was way before Tseng picked me up off the streets and cleaned me up, so to speak. I didn’t even know what the Turks were back then, and Shinra was still a few steps short of total world domination. As you probably already know, I grew up the

slums. My father was a drunkard, and my mom had run off on us a long time ago. I was independent and in the streets by the time I was twelve. I had killed a man when I was ten. Not a very clean killing, mind you. Got my hands and clothes drenched in the guy's blood. For some reason, ever since then, I just didn't have the nerve to make any friends or get close to anyone. I kept getting the stupid idea that everyone I met was going to bleed all over me or something dumb like that."

"Anyways, so I didn't have any real friends. Just a bunch of lowlifes like me who I bought drugs from once in a while. They would cover my back in a fight if they felt like it, and I would do the same, if I was in the mood. You know, not real close or anything. A couple of them had sisters who would give me a lay once in a while for free, but I was mostly on my own in those days."

"I had been living in a neighborhood in Sector 2 for a while when I heard about a new girl who worked the corner near my apartment." He looked at Tifa. "You know what that terminology means, right?"

Tifa nodded. "She was a whore."

"Yeah. Believe me when I say that the Sector 2 I lived in then was a lot worse than any of the Sectors during the rise of Sephiroth a year ago. Much as I hate to admit it, Shinra did manage to cut the petty crimes down just a little bit. But Shinra was too concerned with their war to deal with issues back home at that time, and so crimes and prostitution were really bad then. Not that I minded or anything. Anyhow, to spare all the gory details, I decided to see what was up with this girl. We didn't get many new people back then, and all the other girls in the neighborhood were getting boring. It was just simple curiosity, really. At least, that's what it started off as."

"Well, it was nighttime when I first laid eyes on her, naturally. She was...stunning. The most beautiful woman I had ever seen in my entire life, and I had thought I had seen them all. But there was something different about her, and I think that's what drew me to her in the first place. I watched her from the shadows for a little while, just to see how she worked. She didn't seem to be incredibly bright—a rather naïve and maybe even dumb one, that woman, actually. It was obvious that she didn't really know what she was doing. Hell, maybe I was moved to pity by her sheer ignorance. Or was it just her stupidity? I still don't know today, but that night I decided to approach her. Why I did it, I don't know. I didn't have any money or any need to take her to bed even though it was clear that she was attractive. Maybe I just felt sorry for her or something."

"That's probably it, because when I got up to her, I told her in so many words that I basically wanted to 'be her friend.' And she, in so many words, told me that if I didn't have any money, I should 'buzz off', to put it nicely."

"So, I buzzed off. For a day or so. I was back again the next night."



“Of course, she wasn’t very pleased to see me, but I didn’t care. I was having a good old time. I liked her, I guess. I wanted to protect her. I didn’t want just any sleazy guy touching her. It took while, but eventually we hit it off. At first, she didn’t like me hanging around because I ‘scared off’ her clients, even though I didn’t—and still don’t—think I’m that much of a scary guy. But then she actually started to look happy to see me whenever I walked up to her every night to bug her. I guess that surprised me a bit. No one had ever looked happy to see me before. Made my heart feel kind of funny, but that’s beside the point. To make a long story short, we started seeing each other during the day as well. I got her off the streets and we started living together.”

“Her name was Alette, and she told me that she had come to Midgar from some land very far off, to escape from an oppressive family or something. Actually, the words she used were ‘family curse’ but I just assumed she had had abusive relatives or something. She didn’t seem particularly smart or shrewd or anything, which you had to watch out for since in those days some of the slum girls were more intelligent and cunning than the men that claimed to control them. But I thought Alette was basically harmless, so I wasn’t at all worried. Looking back, however, I remember that she used to get this dark look in her eyes whenever she was alone—a dark, pensive look that now makes me think that she might have been feigning stupidity the entire time. But I was young then. Young and stupid, and I thought she was even younger and even stupider than I was.”

“Of course, when a man like me is living in an apartment alone with an attractive woman like her, it’s hard to keep oneself restrained. So soon we started sleeping together, and one day I came home only to have her tell me that she was pregnant.”

“She wanted to get rid of it, but I didn’t. I was curious as to what it would feel like to have a baby around the house. I was damn excited. Alette wasn’t nearly so happy. She was yelling and crying and telling me that we couldn’t afford a baby and that we were too young to be raising a family. I was laughed at her for a while and then I asked her to marry me. That sold her. I knew it would. It had always been one of her dreams: to get married.”

“So, we got married—legally, mind you—in this shitty old church with a priest who had had one tequila too many and one of the local pimps as our witness. It was great. Alette was ecstatic, and I had to admit that I felt kind of warm and fuzzy and all that good shit when I said, ‘I do.’ It was like nothing else existed but me and her. I think that during those first months, I actually knew some measly shred of happiness.”

“But I didn’t want to be happy. I knew all too well that when you were happy, there would always be someone to come along and take that happiness away. And what were you left with then? Nothing but the shards of a broken heart and a razor to slit your wrists with, if you were lucky. So I reverted back into my old laid back self, with half-hearted smiles and hollow words. But if Alette noticed, she didn’t care. She was nervous about having the baby, but I could tell that she was taking some pride in walking around with

that swollen belly and getting the nursery ready. Sometimes, at night, I would wake up and hear her talking to the baby while it was still in her womb, and I would strain to hear what she was saying, but she was speaking a different language—her native tongue. I could only understand a few words of it, so I always went back to sleep.”

“Finally, one day when I came home from work to see her lying on the floor in the living room, her body shaking with the contractions that always came before the birth of a baby. She was sweating like a goddamn pig and breathing so hard that I thought she was going to freaking die or something! I’m not ashamed to admit that I freaked out. I mean, we lived in a shitty apartment in the shitty slums with shitty neighbors so there was no one who could have given us advice on what to do in these kinds of situations! I spent about five minutes running around the apartment like a chocobo with its head cut off, and every time Alette would yell at me, I would just yell back at her. I had no idea what to do! But eventually, after I had decided that she didn’t have just gas or cramps or anything like that, it hit me that, hey, this damn woman is having a baby on our living room floor!”

“It took a lot of coaxing and yelling at each other, but I finally got Alette down to the car and on our way to the nearest hospital. We had a ‘medical center’ in Sector 2, but I didn’t trust the freakos there as far as I could throw them. So, I got the bright idea to drive clear over to Sector 5, where there was a place that could actually be called a real hospital. Of course, Alette was in labor in the passenger seat, and there I was going berserk in the driver’s seat, so the trip was far from pleasant. I don’t even remember it that well, to tell you the truth. I think I knocked over a couple of mailboxes and ran over a fire hydrant, but...oh well. The point is that I made it to the hospital in time for the doctors to deliver the baby. It was a baby girl.”

“That girl was named Mikayela Dayanera Mitsuru.”

“But from the very beginning, we just called her ‘Mika.’”

Something caught in Reno’s voice, and he suddenly fell silent, words trailing into nothing as he squinted against the rain, staring out at the churning ocean. Tifa squeezed his hand, reassuring him of her presence while her mind virtually clanked out loud, trying to process all she had just heard.

*His...daughter. I had been expecting a wife on an ex-lover, but never a...little girl. Mika...*

Tifa wanted to say something to him, encourage him to get his entire story out and purge his soul of the pain festering within, but words failed her. She didn’t feel as if it was her right to speak at a time like this. Her throat was unbearably tight, and she could only gaze at Reno’s scarred profile with overbright eyes until he finally pulled in a deep breath...and continued.

“I loved that little girl. Loved her with every fiber of my being. I had never really

loved another human being until her. Mainly because I believed that all of mankind was foul and corrupt, and everyone was out to get me. I cared for Alette, and after Mika was born, I *did* love that woman, but it was an obligatory sort of love. She was the mother of my child. I *had* to love her, you know? But with Mika it was totally different. I loved her the very second I held her in my arms. I didn't care that she was screaming her little head off and was covered with all that gross nasty stuff that newborns always have on them. She was just the most beautiful thing I had ever seen. She had red hair, but it was much darker than mine—more like auburn. Her eyes, when she opened them, were brown like Alette's, but they had blue-green flecks around the pupil. I had never seen anything so delicate or innocent as her."

"It was then that I decided that I would protect this baby, my daughter, with my life. The poison that had tainted me would never touch her. Never."

"So I gave up everything for that baby. Everything. Drinking. Smoking. Running around with my gang member friends. I held down two jobs and managed to get us out of that crappy old apartment and into a real house. It was still in the slums, but, hey, beggars can't be choosers. Alette stayed home and took care of Mika during the day while I worked. Alette loved Mika almost as much as I did. She played with her and took her to the park in this old baby stroller that I had 'bought' from our neighbors. I didn't like her taking Mika out by herself since a woman and a baby alone just scream vulnerability, you know? But Alette just laughed and said that she was 'one tough bitch' and could take care of Mika by herself. I laughed with her."

"That first year was hard, but damn it, I was happy. Nothing else existed for me but my wife and my daughter. Shinra was still at war with Wutai, fearmongering among the Midgar citizenry all along the way, but I really didn't give a damn. As long as nothing intruded on my little world, I was fine. I worked my ass into the ground to keep my family fed and to bring home toys for Mika every once in a while, and as long as I could see that little girl when I got home, no work was too hard or strenuous for me. I brought her home baby rattles even though I got bashed in that head with those things I don't know how many times. Mika was also fond of flinging baby food at us, but...what was the loss of a couple of shirts pitted against the laughter of my daughter? So many things were insignificant when compared to my little girl. Drugs and drinking were things of the past, and I felt a strange sort of pride that I was no longer reliant on those sorts of things. I'd like to think that I was a good person, all those years ago."

"I was a nice guy. I really was."

"But...but...I should have learned my fucking lesson years before. Life is a bitch. Life is the biggest bitch anyone will ever have to deal with. Fate will chew you up and spit you out and trample over you if given half a chance. Human life isn't shit in the Planet's eyes. Anyone who believes that is seriously deluded. Surrendering to total happiness is

just flat out stupid, and that was the biggest mistake that I have ever made in my entire miserable life.”

“Five years ago, I believe, is when the shit hit the fan. Mika was two by then. I was twenty. I never knew Alette’s age so I couldn’t tell you how old she was. I came home from work one day and Mika toddled up to me like she usually did. She was always happy to see me, that little girl. But this time, she tugged on my shirt until I picked her up, and then she refused to let go. I didn’t know what was wrong with her, and I couldn’t find Alette anywhere in the house. I tried to put Mika down so that I could look around, but she just held me tighter. Poor girl was trembling; she was scared to death. Most little girls her age were afraid of dogs and spiders and snakes, but Mika was never one to scare easily. For something to frighten her so bad that she became clingy like that was rare.”

“The only thing that I could think of that might have scared her was, obviously, the fact that she was alone in the goddamn house...for who knows how long. Alette was nowhere to be found, and I searched the place high and low to the best of my abilities with Mika clinging to my neck. It was only after half an hour of searching that I thought to ask Mika where her mother was. But when I did ask, she started to cry. Now, I can’t stand to see people cry. It bothers me. And when women or babies, especially little girls, start bawling, I just can’t take it. It’s like I can’t breathe or something. And this was my own daughter crying so that made me all the more nervous.”

“It took a lot of soothing and rocking but eventually she told me that there had been a ‘tall man’ in the house. Of course, every person is ‘tall’ to a two-year-old girl, but the point was that there had been a stranger in the house. I was immediately thinking some cutthroat thief had snuck into the house, taken Alette, but had somehow passed up Mika. She had just gotten a new set of building blocks the week before, and she was real quiet when she was building her ‘dollhouses’ so she wouldn’t wake the ‘babies’. It was only logical that an intruder would pass her up.”

“But then Mika told me that the ‘tall man’ had talked with her ‘mama’ and then the two of them had left the house together, through the front door. That just stunned me. Alette had let a strange man into the house and then gone out with him, leaving a two-year-old in the house by herself? Alette’s purse was still in our room, and she had apparently had enough time to lock the door behind her, so I really didn’t think that she had been forced out of the house. If it was a thief, he would have told her to bring her purse. And Mika said that the ‘tall man’ didn’t even touch Alette and that Alette had just followed him out the door.”

“For me, that description only meant one thing: she was messing around with someone behind my back. Nowadays, I really could care less about that sort of thing. Some of the women I sleep with are married. But at that time, it was unforgivable. It was even worse that she had let the bastard into the house where Mika could see him.”

“In short, I was pissed. *Royally* pissed.”

“By the grace of God, Mika was asleep when I heard the front door open and shut quietly. It was Alette, of course, sneaking into our house like she was some sort of dirty prowler.”

“I flew off the handle. What can I say? I’m not known for my patience and tranquility. I was yelling and screaming and ranting. It was ‘how could you leave Mika alone in the house, you stupid bitch?!’ and ‘don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing, you damn whore!’. Some of the most horrible things I’ve ever said in my entire life were said on that night. And the entire time, Alette just stared at me with this dumb, vacant look on her face. She didn’t say anything in her defense, just stood there looking stupid. No remorse. No apologies. No anger. Just...that empty look, like someone had torn her brain out of her head and she could no longer function.”

“I made her sleep on the couch that night, and she did without any protest. I stayed in our room with Mika, but I didn’t sleep at all that night. I just sat in the chair beside the bed, watching my little girl while she slept, and all my thoughts were filled with rage and vindictiveness. The only thing that I could think about was how to make Alette sorry for how much she had frightened my daughter. Now, as I look back, I wish I had been thinking differently. I wish I could have just reflected on Mika and how much I loved her, and how her two years of existence had been the two happiest years in my life. I wish my thoughts hadn’t been so poisonous, and now it seems a blasphemy that I gazed upon her sleeping form and thought those kinds of angry thoughts. Visions of violence were just something that you didn’t see when in the presence of Mika. Unforgivable. Just as what Alette did was unforgivable. I suppose that dumb bitch and I really were suited for each other, in the end.”

“The next morning dawned like any other. I got ready for work, and Mika went to play with her blocks like she did every single day of her short life. Mika, bless her heart, didn’t seem to realize what was happening. She ran up and hugged her mother first thing in the morning, babbling cheerfully like most two-year-olds do, painfully oblivious to everything, a silent repellent for evil. Mika never guessed what a foul creature her mother was.”

“But I did. I knew. Yet, it was an epiphany that I hadn’t wanted, really. I like delusions as much as the next human, after all.”

“I really didn’t want to leave Mika home alone with Alette, but...I guess...I really honestly didn’t think that Alette would do anything to harm her own daughter.”

“Yet, somehow, deep inside of me, I knew that something bad was going to happen. I’ve always been that way. Tseng once said that it was the Wutainese blood in me that whispered such secrets to me, but of course, I didn’t know this at the time. But I remember

Mika exactly as she was just as I was getting ready to go out the door. Sitting in the living room, building a castle with those old wooden blocks of hers that she loved so much, despite their simplicity. She was wearing a pink dress that was way too big for her. Have you ever heard the saying that redheads shouldn't wear red or pink since it'll clash with their hair or something? Well, apparently the rule applied to all other redheads but my daughter. She looked beautiful in that dress even though it practically reached down to her feet and hung off of her shoulders a little bit."

"I called goodbye to her, like I always did. She looked up and smiled happily at me, waving goodbye silently since she didn't want to wake up the queen's baby that was living in her castle."

"And that was the last time I ever saw my daughter alive."

"I came home that evening with a heavy heart. An odd feeling had settled in my chest sometime during the day, and it didn't fade no matter how hard I tried to ignore it. And somehow, I knew that it had something to do with Mika."

"So, I rushed into my house, only to be greeted by silence. Mika knew by instinct the time that I came home, and she was always there to run up and hug me. But this time I didn't see her or Alette. All I saw were Mika's blocks abandoned on the floor of the living room, still resembling the castle she had been building earlier that morning. But my daughter was nowhere to be seen."

"I knew something was wrong. I ran all over the house, calling Mika's name and looking in all the rooms, but I found nothing. I did, however, find Alette sitting in a chair in our room. She wasn't doing anything, just sitting there staring at something in her hands, completely unaware of anything around her. I yelled at her and demanded where Mika was, but she didn't reply. She didn't even *look* at me, goddamn her."

"I cursed at her and left the room, searching the house again and even running over to the neighbors and asking if they had seen Mika. They hadn't. By then my sanity was tottering on the edge of nothingness. I stormed back into my house and somehow found myself back in our room. Alette was still there, just sitting in that goddamn chair, all close-lipped and shit. I start yelling again. I don't even remember what I said. All I knew was that my daughter was gone, most likely dead. And I knew that Alette had done it. Or had had something to do with it."

"But still, I didn't really truly believe it until I saw what Alette was fiddling with in her hands.

"It was one of Mika's blocks. And was blood on one side of it. I know what blood looks like. I grew up on the streets, after all."

"*That* is when I snapped. I've never hit a woman in my entire life—outside of battle—

but once it dawned on me that I was facing the woman who had killed my daughter, I just couldn't take it. I hit her. Hard. Right on the face, too. She nearly fell out of her chair, but then she bounced back like some kind of rag doll and went back to toying with that godforsaken block that had belonged to the daughter she had killed with her own hands. By then I was crazy. I was running around the room and breaking things left and right. Screaming. I think I was crying as well. I couldn't get the image of Mika in her pink dress out of my mind. Then I thought about the bloody wooden block in Alette's hands, and it just drove me closer to the edge."

"I was out of control. There wasn't shit left in the room when I was done with it. I had even overturned the whole goddamn bed, possessed by some demonic strength that came with the knowledge that my baby girl was gone forever. The only things intact were Alette and her goddamn chair. Even though she still wasn't looking at anything but the bloody block in her hands, I stormed over to her, my hands clenched into fists."

"But I didn't touch her. I yelled at her, and I can recall very clearly what I said to her. These words are engraved in my mind to this very day."

"'I'm leaving,' I told her, my voice so twisted in rage that I barely recognized it as my own. 'You'd better run away while I'm gone, because if I get back and you're still here, I'm gonna to fuckin' kill you! Hell, if I ever SEE you again in my entire life, I'll twist your head off your neck! You hear me?! I'll KILL you!'"

"And I meant it. Every. Single. Word. I've never truly hated a person in my entire life until Alette, and that day began my rapid descent into darkness."

"I left the house for... I don't even know how long. We had been putting away money for Mika's schooling, but I went and sucked the account dry. Spent all that money on booze and drugs. I don't know where I slept that night or who I slept with, but the next day I tottered home with a gun in my hand and a beer bottle in the other. Alette was gone. I never saw her again, either."

"A week—two weeks? Three weeks? Time meant nothing to me—later, there was a news report saying that the body of a dead child had washed up at the local sewage plant. I was in a bar when I heard the report, and I shattered the TV in a grief-stricken rage. Stupid thing to do, actually. I ended up with a bleeding hand and two days in the slammer."

"Of course, they let me out. They always did. And of course, I went back out to the slums and back to being the street rat that I am. You know, it's terrible now that I try to look back and realize that it's as if an entire year of my life is missing. I really remember nothing in that year after Mika's death and Alette's disappearance. I was a body without a soul or heart. Never once did I stop to ask myself why in the world Alette would have killed her own daughter. There was no motive. I never asked myself just who Mika's 'tall

man' was or if he might have had something to do with her death."

"For a year, I was just in a void. A dead man walking. Once in a while, a face will float in my mind, and I know that the person is from that time period, but my story and my life ended the day my daughter died."

"And everything else is just history, and my life is nothing but a scratch in the Planet's timeline. Petty and insignificant, just as it was meant to be. And...there's nothing more to tell, really."

The silence seemed so loud after Reno's voice had trailed off into nothing. Tifa was at an utter loss for words. Nothing she could say would be capable of expressing what she was feeling; nothing she could say could come close to surmounting the exquisite pain held in the story that she had just heard with her own ears—a story about the pain of love and a man's descent into darkness. A darkness that had sunk sinister talons into his heart, refusing to give up its victim.

Was it dark—where Reno was? Was there even a slim possibility of light reaching him? Would he even see it if it were there?

All these thoughts ran through Tifa's mind, but her heart would not allow her to give them voice. For a moment, she could do nothing but stare at Reno, her fingers still numbly clutched in his, as if afraid he would drift away if she were to let go. The man's eyes were lowered so that only a slim line of aquamarine was visible, still misted with the pain of his story and very, very distant, seeing a place that no one else could see. Tendrils of blood-red hair hung down into his face, dripping silent tears of rain onto his already saturated clothes, heedless of the other raindrops that had already made their homes in the fibers of his clothing. And his scars seemed to weep along with every other part of him.

"I like the rain," Reno suddenly said, voice low and quiet.

Tifa blinked, and her voice suddenly came back to her. "Really?" she whispered. "Why?"

Dark eyelashes curled by rain lifted slightly, exposing more pained aquamarine. "Because," Reno replied. "No one can tell the difference between rain and tears..."

"Reno," Tifa murmured, his name one single, breathless exclamation before she wrapped her arms around him.

It was not a warm embrace—at least, in the physical sense. Her skin was cold, as was his. Cold from rain and other things. But the heart's whisper that had told her to take him in her arms was warm in the purest sense of the word, as was the blood that coursed through his body in a river of pain. For a moment, Reno's body was as rigid and immovable as a marble statue, but something in him seemed to relax, like a sigh expelled



into the rain-clouded air, and he wrapped his arms around her slender waist, burying his face in her shoulder.

Tifa tightened her grip on his shoulders, fingers digging into the skin whose pale pallor was visible through the saturated dress shirt he wore. She was afraid to let him go, and she didn't know why. Or maybe she did. Maybe she knew that this "Reno" that she was holding in her arms didn't have much time left before he returned to being the Reno that had made his domain in the present. She knew that in a few moments, Reno Mitsuru, father of Mika, husband of the treacherous Alette, would buckle and surrender to the man that was only known as Reno of the Turks. No last name. Turks didn't need them.

But to think that this seemingly callous, insensitive creature resting in her embrace had the heart in him to keep ties with the man he used to be. She was certain that Reno knew his past had made him into the man he was today, for what else could have done it? That one face, that one little girl in an oversized pink dress playing with her blocks on the floor, had managed to innocently endear herself to a man that made his living by murdering others until a year ago. That such an innocent child could exercise such unwitting control over Reno even from the grave was something Tifa had thought unthinkable. Unthinkable and impossible.

Reno was a Turk. He was supposed to be a monster. All Turks were supposed to be monsters. They weren't supposed to love anyone.

But Reno defied all the above assumptions. And with his defiance, all of Tifa's prejudices against the Turks were forced down from their lofty height where they had previously blocked her reasoning and closed her normally open mind.

Unobtrusively, Tifa raised her hand and placed it on Reno's head, fingers sinking into the blood-red strands. Warmth seeped from his scalp into her cold palm. Yes, this was a human in her arms. A human with a heart that bled just like anyone else's. A man whose only real mistake in life had been to fall in love with a little girl and believe that he could lead something resembling a normal life. How sad it was, the fate that had befallen Reno Mitsuru.

Tifa had to shut her eyes against the tears that were threatening to spill from them. "Reno," she whispered to the darkness behind her eyelids. "Is there...anything I can do for you?"

He shifted in her arms. "I don't know," he said seriously. "I don't know many things right now. I don't know why I dream of Mika so often as of late. Even in drunken stupors, I still see her face. I don't know why her ghost has returned to haunt me now. And I don't..." he pulled back from her embrace and suddenly touched her on the face, forcing her to open her eyes "...know why I told this story to you, of all people."

Tifa smiled weakly, seeing only quiet curiosity in his eyes. "Am I really that bad of a

person to tell it to?" she joked.

No grin came to Reno's mouth, but a flash of amusement flickered in his eyes, a ghost of his old humor starting to return. But a dark cloud seemed to fall over his face, and he said, "I'm poison, Tifa. You know that, don't you? I really meant what I said to Alette all those years ago. If I ever see that woman again in my life, I WILL kill her. It's the only way I can put my daughter's soul to rest."

"By spilling the blood of her mother," Tifa whispered, and the beat of her heart in her chest was suddenly more painful than before. "But...surely there's another way?"

Reno looked away, eyes turning back to the sea again, back to the churning waves and dark horizon. "It's the only way I know how to deal with it," he said, voice sounding a bit melancholy.

"I see," Tifa replied quietly, voice so soft it could barely be heard over the rain. She looked down at her hands, which she had apparently wrung together in her lap at one point. Each hand was embracing the other, looking cold and frightened, especially without her gloves.

Another hand—clad in a black, fingerless glove—suddenly swooped down to cover her own clasped ones, completely dwarfing them. A faint wave of Reno's warmth suddenly surrounded her, and she felt him press a soft kiss to her forehead, brushing aside the soaked bangs that were obscuring his way.

"Thank you, Tifa," he whispered, lips moving against her skin, his body so close to hers. "Thank you for listening to me."

She had never thought that hands so murderous could be so gentle. But they were. His fingers tenderly brushed aside the tendrils of dark hair clinging to her cheeks, cradling her face with both of his large hands and smiling gently at her until she couldn't resist but smile back, the silent between them speaking louder than any words could have.

But the words were still there. *I'm sorry*, Tifa desperately wanted to say. *I'm sorry for your pain, Reno. I'm sorry that I feel so helpless right now. I want to help you, Reno. I really do.*

Yet, she knew that now was not the time for such words. All she could do was squeeze his hands gently as they slid away from her face, fingers lingering for a second that maybe shouldn't have been there, but for once, she didn't care.

As his aquamarine gaze slipped sadly back to the sea, she asked, "Are you coming back to the bar now?"

She knew his answer before the words left his mouth. "No. You go on back. I'll stay here for a while. I need to return to myself."

Tifa nodded with great reluctance, forcing herself to get to her wobbly feet. “Of course,” she told him softly, removing his Turks jacket from her shoulders and slipping it back onto his. “But don’t forget to return to us after you’re done, alright?”

Reno didn’t respond, but she knew that he understood.

The walk back to Kalm seemed so much longer this time around. She kept turning around to glance back at the solitary figure on the beach, lonely against the backdrop of the monstrous ocean whipping and churning in the distance. Her heart ached for him. And she kept hearing his voice, over and over, saying, *”I’d like to think that I was a good person...I was a nice guy...I really was...I really was...was...”*

---

*Could you sympathize with my needs  
I know you think I need a lot  
I started out clean but I’m jaded  
Just falling in  
Well, just breaking the skin  
Can you help me I’m bent  
I’m so scared that I’ll never  
Get put back together  
Keep breaking me in  
And this is how we will live  
With you and me...bent*

*“Bent”*  
*—Matchbox 20—*

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Author’s Note:

Well, there it is. Can’t say I’m really happy with it, but that’s just me! Hmm...I had a lot to say, but I can’t seem to remember what I wanted to say. Oh yeah, if you didn’t read the lyrics in the beginning, go back and read them now! They describe Reno’s story perfectly! And if you’ve never heard the song...what wrong with you? ^\_^ It’s great, really. And there was something else...I found a Yuffie clone in the anime fandom! If you’re looking for someone whose personality and appearance are so similar to Yuffie’s that it’s creepy, check out Misao Makimachi from Rurouni Kenshin! She’s so freaking hilarious, just like Yuffie! And she’s a bandit, as well! I think she appears in Ep. 30-something. She’s great! One last thing: I saw the FF movie yesterday. Did anyone else think that it was sort of...bad? -\_- Shouldn’t have tried to go “science fiction” on us... Anyways, thanks to anyone who’s reading this! Ja ne, minna-san!

*—Catalina*

Coming Soon from Catalina’s Lazy-Ass Extraordinaire Productions:

“Sink to the Bottom With You Ch. 24: Yuffie in Chains”

You won’t wanna miss it! ^\_^

# Chapter Twenty-Four

## *Taste of Fear*

*“Hey, Vincent, are ya dead, man?” —Cloud Strife*

*A court is in session, a verdict is in  
No appeal on the docket today  
Just my own sin  
The walls are cold and pale  
The cage made of steel  
Screams fill the room  
Alone I drop and kneel*

*“My Own Prison”  
—Creed—*

Yuffie tugged on her shackles experimentally, testing the strength of the new chain links. A frown creased her face. These new ones were even stronger than the previous ones she had been wearing while Titus and Fa-Li had been escorting her to the chamber she was now held in. Her heart sank when she realized that there was little, if any, chance that she was going to be shattering these chains, but she wasn't about to let her captors in on her fatalistic little conclusion.

“You know,” she said to Titus in a pseudo-friendly tone. “This was a really STUPID way to chain me up.”

The blond-haired man stared up at her calmly. “You don't say?” he replied. “It's worked for every other prisoner who has been tortured down here.”

Yuffie's heart clenched at the word “torture”, but she forced herself to remain calm. Unfortunately, while she was still trying to gather her wits, her motormouth was chattering away without her.

“Yeah, see, this method is *totally* imprudent since the chain length is way too long, leaving too much exposed length for, like, someone to shoot, for example. And why did you have to pin my arms up like this? I'm going to lose circulation in my hands, and then I won't be able to feel any pain so that would kind of defeat the whole purpose of torturing me in the first place, you know? It was, however, pretty darn smart of you to chain up my feet because, let me tell you, I got one mean—”

“Oh god!” Fa-Li exclaimed in exasperation from where she was leaning against the wall across from the platform Yuffie was standing. “Someone shut her up, *please!* For the love of god!”

Titus didn't share his companion's frustration; he actually looked rather amused. "Come now, Fa-Li," he chastised the woman, though his gaze remained locked on Yuffie. "She's just babbling because she's frightened. Have a heart, why don't you? Enjoy this girl's company while she's still alive, ne?"

Yuffie suddenly became angry—angry at Titus, angry at her helplessness, just flat-out *angry*. "You're full of SHIT," she spat at Titus, a scowl darkening her pretty face. She tried to lash out at the man by kicking him, but unfortunately the chains on her ankles only permitted about a foot of movement in any direction, and Titus was wisely standing out of her kicking range.

A mirthless smile came to Titus' lips as he watched her struggling. "So you don't think you're going to die down here?" he asked conversationally.

Yuffie made the meanest face she could muster, tugging on her chains while doing so. "No! My friends are going to come for me, and when they do, you're going to be sorry!"

"How very cliché of you to say so," Fa-Li commented.

Titus only laughed softly, green eyes glittering in the dimly lit room. He didn't reply to Yuffie's passionate claim, but she had the distinct feeling that he didn't quite believe her. Hell, she wasn't sure that she believed herself. Giving Titus one last scowl, she focused her attentions on examining her bindings, trying to ignore the fact that both the Running Man and Fa-Li were watching her every movement like a rat watching a piece of cheese.

Her gray eyes followed the length of chain holding up her right arm and saw that it ended at the edge of a circular walkway that completely wrapped around the upper level of the torture chamber. Her left arm was pinned in an identical fashion, successfully immobilizing her arms and leaving her virtually helpless. But as she had told Titus before, the chains were ridiculously long, practically begging to be shattered by one well-placed shot by a gunman or one fell swoop by a swordsman.

*Vincent could shoot off both of these chains, Yuffie thought triumphantly. He never misses a shot. If only he and the others could find some way to get down here...*

Turning back to where Titus was watching her, Yuffie smiled at him charmingly. "So, Titus, my good friend, where exactly AM I anyways?"

"In a torture chamber," the man deadpanned.

Yuffie rolled her eyes. "Geez, not very bright, are we? I *know* I'm in a torture chamber, Running Ass! I meant where *am* I, as in the *general* location?"

Titus replied calmly, "I know what you were asking, and if you were a bit smarter, you would have noticed that I evaded the question. Not very bright, are we?" he mocked.

“Shut up,” Yuffie snapped at him, frustrated that she couldn’t come up with some witty comeback. “Let me ask again. Where the hell am I?”

“Let me repeat again. You’re in a torture—”

“Okay, okay, okay!!!” Yuffie roared, stamping both of her feet wildly and making her chains jangle unpleasantly. “Geez, Titus, you are *such* an *asshole*, you know that? I mean, I expected you to be KIND OF an asshole, being that you were the one who kidnapped Reeve and...hey! Where is Reeve, anyways?!”

Titus didn’t reply. Just stared at her like a dumbass.

*Gawd. And I thought Vinnie had a thick skull.*

“Tell me!” Yuffie demanded, trying to make herself look intimidating. “You’d better tell me right now!”

Titus flicked his hair away from his eye.

“I mean it! I’ll kick your ass!”

Titus yawned.

A bad thought suddenly crossed Yuffie’s mind. “He-He’d better not be dead!”

Titus looked away and scratched his face with one gloved hand.

In the face of his indifference, Yuffie blew her top again. “Goddammit! Would you at least LOOK at me when I’m talking to you?! I swear to God, some people have NO manners whatsoever! You’re worse than Vincent, and yes, THAT is an insult! Vincent never listens to me when I talk to him!”

*And that hurts my feelings.*

“All he does is just stand there like a frickin’ lump on a log and not even bother to reply to me whenever I...”

*I miss him.*

“...am in the middle of some important speech that he REALLY should be listening to. You want to hear something?! The other day, he and I were in the chocobo barn...”

*I want to see him again.*

“...and he was more interested in feeding his damn chocobo than talking to a sparkling conversationalist like MYSELF!!! And you know what made matters worse?! My stupid chocobo pecked me on the hand with her damn beak and it started to bleed and...”

It all happened in the blink of an eye. One second Titus was standing on the floor beneath her, his eye twitching in a rather odd fashion, and the next minute he was suddenly on the platform with her, emerald green eyes glowering down at her coldly, his warm body pressed up against hers. Legs against legs. Hips against hips. Belly against belly. All over.

Many thanks going to the lightening-fast thief reflexes she had acquired over the years, Yuffie only took a moment to stare up at him dumbly before she recoiled from the sudden bodily contact, scrambling back as far as her chains would permit, which wasn't very far at all.

And once again, her mouth took off before she could reign it in.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?! Get off! There's only room on this platform for one person, you know! Unless of course you want to be tor—"

Titus' long arms suddenly shot out and snagged her around the waist, crushing her against him again, his gloved fingers locked together at the small of her back. Yuffie's eyes widened considerably as an unfamiliar feeling of violation washed over her. Instinctively, she made an attempt to squirm her way out of his firm embrace, but all her movements only reassured her of the fact that she was utterly and completely at this man's mercy.

As long as she was bound and in chains, he could do anything he wanted with her.

Something foul stung the back of her throat, but at the moment, Yuffie had no desire to identify it, as she found herself forced to meet Titus' green eyes. So much like Aeris' that it was downright creepy. Same color, same glitter. Even the light—what meager light there was—hit them in the same fashion, setting alight the ring of azure that resided near the pupil, a color combination that Yuffie had thought only Aeris had. She fidgeted as best she could under Titus' cold glare, for once finding herself at a loss for words. Their faces were only inches apart, and as Titus tossed his head to remove a lock of platinum hair that had flopped into his eye, Yuffie felt a blush rising high in her cheeks.

*Why couldn't he have been ugly?* she wondered furiously. *I was expecting him to be ugly as sin, and instead I get... THIS!! Too gorgeous. Too cruel.*

Dark humor flickered in Titus' eyes. "You're blushing," he observed, breath fanning gently against her face. "Why?"

Yuffie was about to open her mouth to give a sharp retort when a horrible thought suddenly crossed her mind, and she found herself giving voice to that instead.

"Are you going to rape me?" she blurted.

A sinister smile curled one side of Titus' mouth. "Maybe," he murmured, eyes boring into hers. Yuffie gulped, feeling a seedling of fear settle in her heart.

*No...anything but that...how goddamn disgraceful...*

“No!” Fa-Li suddenly said sharply. “He’s NOT going to rape you!”

Yuffie jumped slightly; she had been so engrossed in her sudden fear of Titus that she had almost forgotten that the woman was there.

With Titus blocking her view, the young ninja couldn’t see her, but Yuffie knew that Fa-Li was coming closer by the rapid, agitated clicking of her heeled boots on the stone floor. “Rape is not an option,” the Wutainese woman continued in a scathing tone. “It’s just not how we operate down here. Those that reside down here would never sink to such a ghastly low!”

“R-Really?” Yuffie stammered, feeling a sort of meek hope blossom within her.

“You’ll have to excuse my companion,” Titus suddenly said, his raspy, calm voice recapturing Yuffie’s attention. “She’s rather slow, and doesn’t quite grasp the fact that not everything down here is what it seems.”

“And YOU should know!” Fa-Li huffed angrily, stomping up to the platform where Titus and Yuffie’s forms were crowded against each other. “Since you so kindly forsook us and abandoned the organization over a year ago! What do you know! You haven’t the right to say anything, Titus! And GET OFF OF THERE!!!”

“She’s such a bitch sometimes,” Titus whispered to Yuffie confidentially.

“Damn you, Titus!” Fa-Li raged. “I said GET OFF OF THERE!!”

The small woman suddenly leapt forward and hooked her dainty fingers through Titus’ belt and tugged hard, giving a whole new meaning to the phrase “put your back into it”. Judging from the force she applied, Fa-Li was clearly expecting Titus to give some resistance, if not a whole lot of it. But on a moment of mischievous whim, Titus surprised her by releasing Yuffie and hopping backward off the platform at the same time Fa-Li yanked on his belt. The lack of resistance sent the woman completely off balance, and the end result was Fa-Li landing flat on her ass on the floor, with a perfectly composed and rather amused Titus standing next to her. Yuffie just stared dumbly, only thinking of how freaking GLAD she was that Titus was over THERE now instead of crowding up HER torture platform.

“Oh!” Titus suddenly said mockingly, offering a gloved hand to a still stunned Fa-Li. “You appear to have fallen. Please, let me help you up.”

“@#\$\$ you, Titus!” Fa-Li spat viciously, slapping his hand away and wrestling to her feet rather clumsily, leather bodysuit squeaking with mirth as it hindered most of her movements.



“Are you alright?” Titus asked with a straight face, though his amusement shone loud and clear in his emerald eyes.

“Go to hell,” Fa-Li sniffed, still in a fit of rage as she tried to smooth her hair back into place. “You’re a bastard!”

“That seems to be the popular title for me today,” Titus replied, turning his face away from his prissy companion as he seemed to lose interest in the conversation.

Yuffie was starting to feel left out, a sensation she despised like no other. “You know,” she spoke up, her pseudo-cheerful mood returning now that Titus wasn’t literally breathing the same air as her. “You have a very dry sense of humor, Titus.”

“Really?” he deadpanned.

“Yep,” Yuffie said with a nod. “You remind of my friend Red XIII.”

*If Titus’ stupid Evict didn’t eat the little furball...*

A pale blond eyebrow lifted upwards. “I thought you were going to say your friend Vincent Valentine.”

The very mention of the name stirred up painful memories that were all too recent, but Yuffie found herself keeping up her façade with the ease of long practice. “Vinnie has NO sense of humor at all! Well, there was this one time that he told me that I could piss on myself and—”

Her voice trailed off abruptly as she noticed something interesting on the backs of Titus’ gloved hands. Two interesting “somethings”, actually.

“What the hell are THOSE?” she demanded, leaning down as far as her chains would permit, curiosity shining in her steel-gray eyes. “Grossness! Those things are, like, STUCK onto the backs of your hands! Ew...wait! Are those...MATERIA???? Wow! They are, aren’t they? Man, I’ve never seen PURPLE materia before!<sup>3</sup> How about passing some of that over here? Well?”

Rather belatedly, Titus jerked his hands behind his back, hiding the curious objects from Yuffie’s materia-hungry eyes. The look on his face was cold and forbidding, silently telling her that it would be in her best interests not to ask any more questions.

Yuffie just stared at him with childish expectance, her vacant expression carefully hiding the whirlwind of questions and observations that a single fleeting glimpse of the strange objects had provided her with.

*WERE those materia orbs?* she wondered furiously. *Couldn’t be...they were PURPLE,*

---

3 Yuffie, you dumb idiot, you had a Luck+ Materia earlier. That’s a purple materia. —Editor

*for one thing. Secondly, they were literally EMBEDDED in the backs of his hands! Total grossness! Or were they just attached the gloves? I don't know! If only I could see them again...*

"Well?" she prodded Titus.

He scowled. "Well what?"

"Aren't you going to let me see those things again?"

"No. Whatever's on my hands is no business of yours, little girl."

Yuffie made a sour face at him, brows snapping together over stormy gray eyes. "I'm not a little girl! And while we're on the subject of hands, mine are numb!" She jangled the chains holding up her hands to demonstrate.

Titus was unfazed. "Your entire body could lose feeling in it, and the torture would still work," he said flatly.

A vise closed on her heart, and she tasted that foulness in the back of her throat again. "B-But, when you say 'torture', don't you mean whips and knives and stuff like that?"

"I'm not telling you," Titus replied. "It's a SURPRISE."

It was as if someone dropped lead weights on her shoulders. Yuffie sagged against her chains wearily, trying to still the heart that was pounding out of control in her chest. The reality of the situation suddenly came up and brutally slapped her in the face.

"My friends aren't coming for me, are they?" she asked quietly, lowering her head with the hopes of avoiding Titus' eyes, but given their present positions, Titus and those heartbreakingly familiar orbs of emerald-green were always going to be lurking beneath her, inescapable.

"It's not that your friends won't come for you," Titus said seriously. "They'll try their damn hardest, but they won't find this place. No outsider has ever succeeded in accomplishing such a thing. You mentioned before that the lengths of your chains are imprudent. They are that way because no one has ever tried to free a prisoner down here. No one has ever managed to break into this torture room."

"I'm going to die down here, aren't I?" Yuffie asked, her voice dull and robotic. She was thankful for that; at least they wouldn't be able to hear the fear that was stinging her throat.

"Die?" Titus echoed, folding his arms across his chest casually. "That is possible, yes."

"Is Reeve dead?" Yuffie asked him quietly, the glittering green of his eyes suddenly reminding her of the living mists in her nightmares.

Titus looked at her sharply. "What's this obsession with death?" he demanded. "You

talk as if death is the most horrible fate in the world.”

“It is!” Yuffie suddenly exclaimed vehemently.

“How do you know? Have you ever been dead?”

“No! Of course not!”

“Then don’t regard death as the fate to end all fates,” Titus told her coldly. “Down here, little girl, death is a MERCY. I’ve seen countless people BEG for us to kill them. You’re about to learn that there are thousands of fates FAR worse than the abyss of cold death.”

Some of Yuffie’s fear shifted into anger. “If you’re going to torture me, just do it and get fucking over with!!!” she screeched at Titus, her attempt at kicking him once again brought to a clanking halt by her chains. “I’m tired of standing here listening to you talk your crap and spout nonsense at me!!”

*And I’m scared. I want to see my friends again.*

Titus gave her a cold smile. “Fortunate for you AND me, I’m not the one doing the torturing. It’s not something I’m required to do given my current rank in this faction. The one who—”

A door clanged somewhere far off and above them, the sound echoing in the torture chamber, small as the room was. Forgetting all her anger, Yuffie’s eyes widened with fear as she craned her neck back as far as it would go, her gaze flicking from left to right, left to right, all around the walkway, expecting an entire horde of monsters to pop out.

“What was that?” she whispered feverishly, more to herself than Titus or Fa-Li. She could see no one on the walkway surrounding the top of the room. However, she COULD hear a sound; it was quiet and echoing, but it was a sound nonetheless, and it was one that she recognized immediately. Footsteps. Slow, deliberate, unhurried footsteps. Whoever was approaching had no fear of what awaited him or her at their destination. Whoever was approaching was in complete power. Yuffie’s heart sank. She had a feeling she was about to meet Titus and Fa-Li’s boss.

Somehow, the prospect failed to excite her.

Though Yuffie had been expecting the leader to emerge sometime soon, she was still startled when movement suddenly flickered out of the corner of her eye. A small gasp escaped her lips as she pivoted her head up and to the right, eyes widening as they fell on a figure standing on the walkway, towering over them all and throwing its ominous shadow over the lonely figure of Yuffie Kisaragi, helpless in chains, standing on the center of the torture platform. In the darkness of the chamber, her vision was severely limited, but there really wasn’t much to be seen of the new figure. It was covered from head to toe in a brown

robe, complete with a large hood that cast a deep, unbroken shadow over the figure's face. No other features were visible. Even its hands were swallowed by the wide, long sleeves.

"Who are you?!" someone's voice, harsh with fear, demanded. It took Yuffie a second to realize that it was hers. Out of the corner of her fear-ridden eyes, she saw Fa-Li bowing deeply to the figure. Titus just stood there.

"I am the master of this faction," the Cold One said, and Yuffie flinched at its voice. Fathomless and infinitely colder than Vincent or Rude's could have ever hoped to be.

"What faction?" Yuffie heard herself ask. "So far, I've seen THREE whole people and one poor freak locked up in a cell. Some faction."

The Cold One's attention abruptly shifted to Titus. "I see you make an excellent hunter, Titus," it said. "You've brought this girl to us in record time. Hopefully, she will yield better results than the unfortunate President Reeve."

*Reeve...*

"Where's Reeve?" Yuffie demanded of the Cold One, the words tumbling out of her mouth before she could stop them.

Slowly, the figure's attention flickered back to her. "An odd time you choose to worry about your friends," it said flatly.

"She's an odd girl, Master," Fa-Li quipped.

"And she's all yours now," Titus spoke up in a monotone, something in his voice making Yuffie tear her attention away from the Cold One. "My job here is done." His eyes were hard as steel as he gazed up at the Cold One. "I'll collect my pay and be gone."

Fa-Li looked stricken as she gazed at the Running Man. "Titus..." she whispered, sounding hurt for some odd reason.

"You're leaving?" Yuffie asked, feeling betrayed somehow. All along, their plans had revolved around the Running Man, and now he was...running again. Figures.

"Your job isn't done," the Cold One said flatly. "Information needs to be extracted from this girl."

Titus bristled. "Do it yourself," he seethed, eyes flashing angrily. "I am no longer under your control."

"I am the one paying you," the Cold One deadpanned.

A horrific sneer twisted Titus' handsome face. "I figured you'd do something like this," he spat, hands clenching into fists. "You can't stand the fact that I broke free of your control, and now you'll do anything and everything—use every dirty trick—to try and

make me into one of your mindless servants once again.”

“Your departure was an extreme blow to the faction,” the Cold One said in that horrible, hollow voice. “Rebels began to form within our ranks, trying to follow your example. You were well-liked as the High Priest.”

*High Priest?* Yuffie thought in confusion, her gaze darting back and forth from Titus to the Cold One. *But if Titus was the High Priest, then why did he quit and become a bounty hunter? Gawd. Too mind-boggling. I can't think under these conditions!*

“My affiliation with this organization has long since passed,” Titus said firmly. “I don't intend to return ever again, either.”

A long silence fell in which Yuffie was scared to even breathe. She felt the tension in the air like a heart's resolve stretched taut, ready to give way at any moment. She saw Fa-Li's eyes darting nervously around the room, flicking from Titus to the shadow-wrapped figure of the Cold One above their heads, hovering like a demon in waiting.

Finally, that empty, never-ending voice drifted once again from the unbroken darkness of the Cold One's hood. “Cry for liberation all you want, Titus, but you'll never be truly free. You know this as well as I.”

The look on Titus' face darkened considerably, and Yuffie shuddered as she felt a strange power vibrating through the torture room, lancing through the air and stinging her heart like the prick of a thousand needles. A cold feeling washed over her soul, and it was suddenly as if the room was filled with mist that hadn't been there a second before. She saw THINGS shifting in the green-stained air, and for a second, she heard a screaming cacophony of voices crying for release.

Then she blinked, and everything was gone, leaving her soul cold and trembling inside her.

Titus was speaking.

“...don't care whether you pay me or not anymore. My greatest mistake was coming back here to serve you, even if it was for a brief time! Kidnapping AVALANCHE members is what you told me to do,” he pointed to Yuffie, the violet “materia” embedded on the back of his hand flashing oddly in the dim light, “and THAT is what I have done! What you do with her or her friend is now your business!”

“...*her friend*”, Yuffie thought. *So Reeve must be alive!* The thought alone was enough to lift her spirits a bit.

“On the contrary, my eternal friend,” the Cold One deadpanned, still addressing Titus. “It is not I who is going to do anything with her.”

Titus' eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

"The Hissers will be the ones extracting the information from this girl."

Fa-Li gasped, eyes widening. "B-But Master, the Hissers—they're not always... accurate. They often damage...other things...in their 'extraction' process."

Yuffie's heart plummeted to the bottoms of her feet, and to her humiliation, she felt her knees ready to give out from underneath her.

"Um," she suddenly spoke up nervously. "I think I want Titus to torture me! These Hissers don't sound too...nice."

"But are you so sure you want Titus to torture you?" the Cold One asked her. "He wasn't my chief servant for no reason. He is very good at what he does."

"Chief servant? But I thought he was your '*eternal friend*'?" Yuffie had the audacity to mock. "You guys don't seem like friends to me..."

Fa-Li suddenly rushed up and punched Yuffie on the kneecap with her tiny fist, a blow that, surprisingly enough, made Yuffie's leg buckle. "Shut up!" the Wutainese woman hissed at the girl, brown eyes fierce. "You talk too much!"

"Step down, Fa-Li," the Cold One suddenly snapped. "We WANT her to talk."

Panic suddenly seized Yuffie as she recognized the hidden meaning in those words. "But I don't have anything to say!" she yelled up at the Cold One, jerking on her chains fruitlessly. "I'm just a stupid little airheaded ninja! I don't know anything, I swear it! You kidnapped the wrong person, I tell you!"

*I want to get outta here! Leviathan forgive me, but I'm freaking SCARED!!*

"I think this girl will yield very good results," the Cold One suddenly declared.

"No she won't! No she won't!" Yuffie chanted, unnerved by the fact that he was speaking of her as if she wasn't even THERE—as if she wasn't a living, breathing, sentient creature that could cry or feel pain. To the Cold One, she was nothing but a well of useless knowledge to be sucked dry, leaving nothing but a hollow, broken shell in its place. See ya later, Yuffie! Nice knowing you!

*But I don't KNOW anything, Yuffie thought furiously. Nothing at all. Nothing that these people down here would be interested in...*

*I should have seen it,* a voice suddenly said, ringing clear and true in her mind, pounding between her ears silently. It was raspy and distinctly male, or at least she thought it was.

Despite her surprise, she responded to it the only way she knew how. "What?!" she

demanded, gray eyes darting fearfully around the room, searching for the owner of the voice.

*How could I have been so blind?* the voice lamented bitterly.

Nothing. Everyone in the room was staring at her as if she had lost her mind. Or at least, Fa-Li was. She could see nothing of the Cold One's face, though it seemed that his attention was utterly riveted on her, the intensity of his hidden gaze burning her. Titus was staring at her deeply, and quite suddenly she realized...

*Don't tell them anything!* Titus' soundless voice urged. *You mustn't say anything to them!*

Yuffie was baffled. Completely baffled.

His green eyes burned with hidden meaning. *You are the One Who Knows*, his voice rushed on. *If you love your Planet, don't say a word!*

"But I—" Yuffie suddenly started to blurt, the words forcing themselves past her lips before she could stop them.

"Titus!" the Cold One suddenly said sharply, the first inflection in its hollow voice she had heard yet. "If your business is done here, please leave the room."

It took Yuffie a moment to realize that no one, not the even the Cold One, had heard Titus' words to her. But they knew that he had been saying SOMETHING to her, and the scent of emotions in the air was mixture of confusion and jealousy from Fa-Li and fury and animosity from the Cold One—a horrible mingling of rhythm emotion that assaulted her senses like the smell of decay in the air. Titus was acting like nothing had happened, of course, and Yuffie was just standing there with her mouth hanging open.

In response to the Cold One's less-than-cordial order, Titus simply nodded his head slightly and sent the figure on the walkway a dark glare before whirling and leaving the room, the heavy iron door banging shut behind him.

"Where's he going?!" Yuffie shrieked, senselessly wanting her kidnapper to come back now that he was gone. "He's supposed to torture me! I don't want the Hissers to torture me! Hey...are you two listening to me?! Yeah, me! Over here! The girl with the chains!"

Fa-Li ignored Yuffie completely and focused her earnest gaze on the Cold One. "He didn't mean it, Master, really. He's not usually that rude with people, especially someone of great esteem such as yourself. I don't know what's wrong with him. I have an idea! I'll go speak with him!"

"You do that," the Cold One said dispassionately as the woman bowed her head deeply and hurried out of the room, her heels clacking on the floor.

Silence descended after Fa-Li's abrupt departure. Yuffie wanted her to come back. The

room seemed colder without Fa-Li and Titus in it. She knew that it was irrational that she was even enjoying the presences of the two people who had kidnapped her, but ANYONE was preferable to the figure on the walkway. She could feel the Cold One's apathetic gaze on her, looking at her as if she wasn't a creature worthy of even the smallest shred of pity or sympathy. Her life was nothing to him.

To Yuffie's dismay, she felt her limbs trembling. Her knees felt weak and watery, and her shackles jangled with dark mirth whenever her arms or legs would twitch of their own violation. She felt as if she couldn't breathe.

A blinding light suddenly snapped on right above her head, and it was as if Yuffie's world vanished into that abysmal whiteness. She was blinded, and the light beating down on her shoulders, weaving its way through her hair, was almost painful in its intensity. She vaguely heard herself yelling at the Cold One, demanding to know what was going on, but she wasn't really listening to her own words.

She was instead listening to a low hissing that was coming from all around her, rising and falling like the waves of the ocean. Now she knew why they were called "Hissers."

And she was finally able to identify that foul taste in the back of her throat that had been plaguing her ever since she had come down to this forgotten kingdom of unspeakable monstrosities.

It was the taste of fear.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Cloud? Shouldn't you check on Vincent?"

"Hm?" Cloud looked down at Red questioningly before returning his attention back to his task of draining the last of the coffee from the coffee pot. Elena and the others were playing poker at the table with Rude, who had just come downstairs recently and was—to be quite blunt—kicking everyone's asses. No one could beat the Turk's poker face.

"Vincent," Red repeated. "I think you should go check on him. He didn't seem well last night, and he hasn't come down at all this morning."

Cloud stared into his empty cup thoughtfully, Mako eyes misted. "I don't know," he said calmly. "You know Vincent is a hell of a lot tougher than he looks, and he values his privacy above all things. He might not respect us barging in."

Not at all fazed with the difficulty Cloud was giving him, Red stole a glance at where the others were busy making fun of Elena for calling a "royal flush" a "royal blush".

"You lose! You said 'blush' instead of 'flush'!!"

"That's SO unfair, Cid!! It was a slip of the tongue!"



“Sure it was, Turk.”

“Shut up, Barret! Why do they call it ‘flush’ anyways?!! You flush TOILETS, not cards!”

Red turned away from the arguing group and back to Cloud. “There’s another reason I would like you to check on Vincent,” he said quietly.

Cloud lifted an eyebrow, a silent signal for Red to continue.

“Last night at Vincent’s door, I picked up a scent that wasn’t Vincent’s or any of ours.”

Suspicion caused Cloud’s Mako blue eyes to narrow. “You mean there was someone other than us in the bar?”

“Not ‘someone,’” Red corrected. “*Something*. It was the change of scent that Vincent undergoes whenever he shifts to his Chaos form.”

“You lost me, Red,” Cloud admitted, a bit of frustration evident in his tone. “You mean Chaos was in the room at the same time Vincent was?”

Red hesitated, doubting his own recollection. “I’m not quite sure. You see, when Vincent shifts into Chaos, his entire scent changes along with his body. He loses the scent he has as a human and instead takes on the scent of the demon. What I smelled last night was the beginnings of the transformation. In other words, the coming of Chaos’ scent, but the abnormal thing was that Vincent’s scent wasn’t losing any power.”

Dark emotions flickered in Cloud’s eyes. “You mean it was as if Chaos was developing as a separate being from Vincent?”

Red shrugged, looking as helpless as he could look. “Not precisely. My conclusion would be that Vincent was losing control of Chaos. Your theory is a lot scarier, actually. I’d hate to think of that Chaos creature loose and running around of its own accord.”

“But is it any safer for Vincent to have it inside himself?” Cloud pondered darkly, his eyes half-lidded in contemplation. He was worried about Vincent, truly he was, but after the gunslinger had exploded at Barret last night, Cloud was extremely reluctant to approach his friend. Yuffie’s kidnapping and Vincent’s unwitting, indirect contribution to the unfortunate occurrence seemed to have sent the ex-Turk slightly off-balance. Instability in a man like Vincent—with such raw energy inside of him—was a dangerous thing indeed. Cloud knew that Vincent kept many secrets to himself. The swordsman was still convinced that Vincent hadn’t told him the whole truth about what had happened at the deep-sea complex, and Cloud was starting to wonder if Chaos was somehow a part of that “truth.” He wouldn’t be surprised, but, still, it was terrifying to think that Vincent might be losing control of the demon. Chaos had never failed to incite a deep fear in Cloud even though he KNEW that Vincent was inside that monstrous form somewhere.

It was somewhat difficult for Cloud to fight alongside the hovering form of Chaos in battle. His first instinct was always to attack the demon before it could kill him or one of his teammates, and it was only with a great force of will that he repressed such an urge.

Cloud sighed, forcing himself to act rather than think. Red was still waiting patiently for his decision. Cid and the others were once again engaged in another noisy argument. They probably wouldn't notice if Meteor came through the ceiling and crash-landed next to them.

"Alright," Cloud told Red. "Let's go check on Vincent."

\* \* \* \* \*

Dark lashes fluttered slightly, warily, their owner clearly expecting pain to follow any movement he made. But when he felt not a thing, the eyelashes stopped their cautious flickering and instead opened slowly, revealing crimson irises and too-large pupils that adjusted to their sudden exposure with abnormal quickness.

From his place where he was sprawled gracelessly on the floor, Vincent forced himself to twitch each of his limbs as his eyes flicked instinctively around the room, an old habit from his Turk days that he had yet to break. It was better to evaluate one's surrounding while the eyes were still closed in some semblance of sleep (the better to fool the enemies), but Vincent had been floating in darkness for far too long. He desired substantial objects that he knew he could touch if he wished to, even if these long-sought-after objects were the forms of his perfectly-made bed, the shards of glass lying dangerously close to his face, and the discarded form of the lamp strewn haphazardly on the floor amongst the broken glass, its cord curled around it protectively.

Once he was assured that all of his limbs were still attached to his body, Vincent shifted experimentally. The only pain he was experiencing was in his right arm, since had obviously been sleeping with it pinned underneath him, cutting off the flow of blood to the limb. Grunting slightly, he rolled onto his back and let his arm flop onto the floor next to him, feeling a flush of coolness over his skin as the blood began to rush back into his veins.

Staring up at the ceiling and listening to the rain that was still beating on the window, Vincent was, for a moment, baffled as to what he was doing on the floor. Then he remembered the sudden illness that had stricken him the night before. The pulsing fever. The body-wracking chills. The soundless voice of Chaos rumbling across his soul. The vision of Yuffie in shackles.

"Yuffie..." he whispered, closing his eyes as the name dropped from his lips. "I know where to find you..."

He suddenly heard the quiet thumping of someone coming up the stairs. His eyes narrowed immediately, his muscles going rigid until he realized it was probably just one of

the others coming back up to his or her room. Sounded like it was just one of them, but he heard the faint clacking of claws - a sound almost hidden by the footsteps of the other individual - and realized that whoever was coming up the stairs had Red XIII with them.

However, the footsteps stopped right outside his door, and it suddenly occurred to Vincent that they must have been coming to check up on him. He frowned, thinking he wasn't deserving of such kindness.

"Vincent?" Cloud voice called, pitched at the level everyone used when they want to wake someone up, but didn't wish to SOUND like they want to. "Are you in there, Vincent?"

Vincent rolled away from the door so that it wouldn't slam into him when they opened it.

Rubbing his eyes wearily, he called, "It's not locked."

The door creaked open, and the next thing Vincent knew, one golden eye and two deep blue eyes were peering down at him worriedly. The gunslinger blinked up at them in surprise.

"Hey, Vincent, are ya dead, man?" Cloud asked needlessly, putting his hands on his knees and leaning down so he could get a better look at Vincent's emotionless face.

"No, unfortunately," Vincent replied dryly.

Cloud lifted an eyebrow and studied Vincent, taking in the tangled-beyond-any-hope-in-the-world ebony hair spilled beneath him, the paler-than-usual face, the bloodshot garnet eyes, and the wrinkled clothes that were too big for Vincent's figure.

"You look like crap," Cloud blurted, then he winced. "Sorry."

"Sorry for what?" Vincent asked seriously.

"What happened HERE?" Red suddenly demanded, sounding shocked. Vincent glanced past Cloud's boots to see that Red had discovered the results of his little...close encounter...with the mirror last night.

"Holy crap," Cloud breathed as he turned around, wondering how he could have missed thousands of glittering shards of broken glass lying on the floor not a foot away from him. A lamp lay amongst the carnage at the bottom of a now-glassless mirror frame, staring meekly up at Cloud, as if to say, "Hey, it wasn't me! That guy lying on the floor over there made me do it!"

"Vincent," Cloud said. "I don't care who you are, Tifa is going to STRANGLE you when she sees this."

Rubbing his temple with his human hand, Vincent sat up slowly. "I'll be happy to pay for the damage."

Cloud glanced down at the man sitting on the hardwood floor. "You and what money?"

A flash of annoyance crossed Vincent's features, but he quickly contained it. "I have money," he said simply.

"It doesn't matter," Cloud said dejectedly, plopping down on the end of Vincent's bed, boots crunching wayward pieces of glass. "We're going to have to leave Kalm soon anyways."

"Flooded?" Vincent asked shortly.

Cloud nodded, casting a dark glare at the intrusive rain pounding noisily on the window. "Chances are the water will be leaking in through the bar door by tomorrow morning, maybe by this evening if it starts raining really hard."

"And we'll lose our headquarters," Red added.

"Where is everyone?" Vincent asked suddenly, noticing that neither Cloud nor Red had any armor on them.

"Cid, Elena, Barret and Rude are downstairs playing poker," Cloud answered. "Cait Sith is restoring his power reserves in the garage. Tifa is probably on the beach healing Reno's soul. And Red and I are up here talking to you."

"And Yuffie and Reeve are in the hands of torturers while everyone is just sitting around," Vincent said, voice frozen with cold anger.

Whether it was the tone of Vincent's voice or his choice of words that made Cloud's eyes narrow, Vincent had no idea, but narrow they did, the Mako glow becoming almost as intense as his own crimson orbs.

"What with that attitude all of a sudden?" Cloud demanded. "And what do you mean 'torturers'?"

"We need to find Yuffie quickly," was all Vincent said.

*Damn*, Cloud thought grumpily. *I forgot about this guy's one-track mind.*

"What about Reeve?" Red asked shrewdly.

"Sorry," Vincent said. "I don't know anything about Reeve, but I know where Yuffie is being held...to a certain extent."

Cloud folded his arms across his lean chest and looked down at Vincent carefully. "And how did you find out? Did Chaos tell you?"

Crimson eyes suddenly fastened on him from behind a curtain of damp black locks that had fallen across Vincent's eyes. It was most unnerving, having blood-red eyes glaring

up at him from behind pillars of midnight black-blue, but Cloud didn't waver. His own Mako blue gaze was steady.

Vincent suddenly rocked backwards onto his back, putting his palms flat down on the floor beside his head and drawing his knees up to his chest. Then, in one rapid, fluid motion, he snapped his entire body upright, landing on his feet with unnatural speed.

*Chinese get-up*, Cloud thought. *I forgot how agile he was, too. If it were anyone else, I would say they were showing off, but this is VINCENT.*

"It doesn't matter where I obtained this information," Vincent said flatly, straightening his clothes. "All that matters is that I have a general idea about how to get to her."

"Vincent," Cloud said, worry and a bit of fear sharpening his tone. "I NEED to know. Are you losing control of Chaos?"

There was a brief hesitation, then a sigh slipped past Vincent's lips. Shifting his gaze back to Cloud, he said seriously, "I wish I could tell you, Cloud, but I honestly don't know." He looked away. "However, I can tell you that I don't believe Chaos poses a danger to anyone...yet."

Cloud wasn't at all pleased with that "yet", but he let it slide, knowing that Vincent was only telling him the truth.

"So, Vincent," Red asked, flaming tail swooshing gently behind him. "Where exactly is Yuffie?"

Vincent turned his gaze to the rain-battered window, eyes misted with recollection. "Somewhere...underground," he said, sounding a little uncertain. "Stone tunnels. Doors like one might find on a submarine. Lots of hallways. A torture chamber. I know the way to the chamber, but that's about it."

Cloud paused only briefly before throwing his hunch up in the air. "Midgar sewers sound good to you?" he asked Vincent.

"Excellent," Vincent deadpanned, striding over to the desk, and Cloud was vaguely surprised to see him pick up one of his red bandanas and wrap it around his forehead, knotting it in back of his head, the crimson of the bandana showing up well against the ebony hair. He had forgotten that Vincent had more than one of those things. The other, Cloud knew, Yuffie still had tied around her arm like some sort of lover's gift.

"Vincent," Cloud suddenly said, something in his voice making the older man turn around. "Even if we didn't move out today, you'd go to Midgar by yourself, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, I would," Vincent answered without hesitation.

To find Yuffie, Cloud added silently. A strange thought suddenly occurred to him, but he

pushed it away, unable to believe such a thing.

Cloud rose to his feet quickly, his boots crunching over glass shards as he strode to Vincent's door. "I'll go rally everyone," he said over his shoulder. "Looks like we're moving out today, after all."

"No rest for the wicked," Red muttered darkly.

Vincent didn't reply, but he agreed whole-heartedly.

\* \* \* \* \*

There were days when Fa-Li cursed everything and everyone that crossed her path, and this was definitely one of those days. Her brown eyes were full of thunder as she stomped down the stone hallways that she had seen every day for years and years. She hated them. Hated them with a passion. So boring. So featureless. So JUST LIKE EVERY OTHER FREAKING STONE HALLWAY IN THEIR LITTLE "SUBTERRANEAN WORLD"!!! But she knew these hallways like the back of her hand. Some of the priests and priestesses got lost in such a labyrinth, but Fa-Li never did.

But much to her dismay, after a year, she found that she didn't know Titus quite as well as she once thought she did. He wasn't as predictable. Not NEARLY as predictable. She had already checked all of the places he used to retreat to when he wanted to sulk or be alone, but her searches had yielded no results at all. However, Fa-Li was a stubborn individual, and she wasn't ready to admit that Titus would just LEAVE without saying SOMETHING to her. It may have been on account of a bloated ego on her part, but what she was really hoping for was that Titus hadn't changed so drastically that he was a completely different person than he was a year ago.

*Only one place left to check,* she thought furiously, cursing her heeled boots and the stone floor that was so unyielding beneath her feet. *And that place just so happens to be one I hate the most.*

Rounding a sharp corner, Fa-Li nearly collided with someone coming in the opposite direction.

Harsh words on her lips, the woman started to spit out a heated curse, but froze when she saw whom she had almost plowed into.

Deep brown eyes cold and empty, like Death. A lean, beautiful body that put Fa-Li's to utter shame. Flowing, wavy brown hair shot through with natural blond highlights that burned brightly in the sea of chocolate brown.

As Fa-Li stared, the woman leaned forward and sniffed the air between them.

"I smell a skank," she stated nastily, her slums' accent making her words harsher than

they already were. “Get the hell outta my way before I have to go THROUGH you.”

Fa-Li stepped aside hurriedly, a stunned expression on her face as the other woman brushed past her without a second glance.

*Gods...it's HER, Fa-Li thought. I have to tell Ti-*

But just as she was whirling around to resume her walk, she collided with someone else.

“Whoa there, Missie,” a light, male voice chided as a large hand settled on her shoulder, steadying her.

Fa-Li's heart jumped at the voice, and turned around to find herself staring up at a man with spiky brown hair that stuck up in all different directions. He would have look absolutely ridiculous if it hadn't been for the long scar on his left cheek, which crinkled as he smiled down at her, an expression that didn't quite reach his eyes.

“Watch where you step,” the tall man warned amiably. “You might end up stepping on things far more vicious than me.” He winked, well aware of the irony in his own words.

Then he, too, brushed past her, walking at a normal, unhurried pace, hands shoved deep in the pockets of his pristine cotton pants, his bare feet making no sound at all on the stone floors. His open white coat gently floated behind his figure like a ghost.

Fa-Li watched him until he disappeared down the hall.

*Montana, she thought grimly, still feeling weight of the man's assassin-heavy hand on her shoulder. And the woman was Jezebel. The Master's personal bounty hunters. I have to tell Titus!*

This time Fa-Li made SURE there was no one standing behind her before she took off at a dead run, ignoring her aching feet. Stone hallway after redundant stone hallway flew past her until she found what she was looking for. It was literally a hole in wall, so narrow that even a person who was just considered “hefty” wouldn't be able to fit through it. And certainly no claustrophobic people would make it through. Fa-Li herself wasn't fond of close, tight spaces, but her encounter with Jezebel and Montana had made her even keener on finding Titus and warning him.

If he wasn't here...then he was already gone. Left her behind...again.

Sucking in her gut as far as it would go and cursing her mother for passing down her large breasts to her daughter, Fa-Li turned sideways and slipped into the narrow passageway, moving along its length as quickly as her heels and the stone scraping her back would allow. The trip wasn't that long, but by the time Fa-Li made it out of the passageway and into open air, she felt as if she had been trapped in the passageway for years.

Brushing bits of loose rock off of her leather bodysuit, Fa-Li glanced furiously around the cave, wincing at the smell of death in the air. She could never understand why Titus liked coming here. The cave's "owner" really wasn't an amicable creature...

Fa-Li was just starting to think that maybe Titus really was gone for good when she suddenly caught sight of him crouched on the ground, his back to her. He was quite a distance away, and the knowledge that she was going to have to WALK that distance after RUNNING the entire way down here didn't make Fa-Li a very happy camper. In fact, it pissed her off.

Sending out a silent prayer that the cave's owner wasn't around, Fa-Li began to stomp over to where Titus was crouched, not bothering to call his name. No, what she planned to do was give him a good, stiff kick for making her come all this way to—

She was ten feet away from Titus when she froze dead in her tracks.

As it turned out, the cave's owner WAS around.

The massive anaconda was resting on the ground in front of Titus, over half of its massively long body lost in the darkness of the cave. Now that her anger wasn't drowning out all her other senses, Fa-Li could hear the silent hissing of its scales as the snake shifted and flexed.

"She's hurt," Titus' voice suddenly split the air of the cave, and it took Fa-Li a couple of seconds to realize that he was talking to her.

"S-She is?" the woman echoed dumbly.

Titus didn't seem to mind, though. Rising to his feet, he turned around to face Fa-Li, and the giant snake also swiveled its massive head to pin the woman with its reptilian stare. Fa-Li gulped. She forgotten just how BIG the snake was. One of its slitted eyes was as big as a basketball, and its head alone was almost as long as Titus was tall. It hissed its displeasure at finding her in its lair, a dark substance spewing from its mouth as it did so. Titus patted the creature reassuringly on the snout, and the snake ceased its annoyed hissing, but Fa-Li knew that it wasn't very happy with having someone other than Titus in its home.

Titus glanced sadly at the dark substance dripping out of the snake's mouth. "Someone cut off her tongue," he said quietly.

Fa-Li blinked. "Oh," was the only thing she could think to say, especially with the snake glaring at her in that oddly human fashion.

Titus turned and patted the anaconda's snout again, and the beast immediately reverted its attention back to him.



“You should go see Dominic,” Titus said to the snake, talking to it as he would a human. “He can at least cauterize the wound so you won’t bleed to death. Next time, don’t bite off more than you can chew, ne?”

The giant snake almost seemed to rumble its displeasure at Titus’ joke, but it nudged him affectionately with its nose and took the time to give Fa-Li one last contemptuous glare before slowly slithering away into the darkness. Fa-Li could hear the sliding of its scales over the rocks long after it was gone, though.

Fa-Li suddenly let out a breath she didn’t even know she had been holding. “Gods!” she breathed. “I forgot how BIG that thing was!”

“She’,” Titus corrected, but there was no fire in his voice. “That snake is a female.”

*He sounds like he missed the damn snake more than he missed me,* Fa-Li thought grumpily.

“Titus...” she started, still not brave enough to just walk over to him. She was afraid the snake would suddenly come back and bite off her head or something.

“Quiet,” he said, but once again, there was no argumentative tone in his deep voice. “I already know what you’re going to say.”

Fa-Li wiped the sweat off her forehead in annoyance; the cave was uncomfortably hot. “Then?!” she exclaimed. “Why did you speak to the Master in such a flippant tone?! Titus, you know how the Master gets when he’s angry!”

“Of course I do,” Titus said, not bothering to turn around. “But, quite frankly, I don’t care. I’m too *valuable* for him to dispose of.” The words weren’t spoken in pride, only in contempt and self-hatred. Titus had always hated himself more than anyone else.

“Titus!” Fa-Li insisted, covering the distance separating them in three strides. “The Master has sent for Jezebel and Montana!”

“I know,” Titus said flatly, green eyes faintly luminescent in the darkness. “I don’t care.”

Frustration and anger consuming her senses, Fa-Li maneuvered so that she was standing right in front of him. “Don’t you care about anything?!” she demanded of him, her voice echoing in the cave.

“I hope Kisaragi won’t break,” Titus suddenly commented, looking worried.

Hurt stung the back of Fa-Li’s throat. “So all you care about is that stupid girl?! Don’t you even think...don’t you...even...notice...or consider...you’re still so goddamn naïve! That part of you hasn’t changed one bit!”

Titus just stared at her, and those cold green eyes suddenly looked wide and innocent in the darkness as he blinked, a little more rapidly than usual.

*His eyes. I love his eyes.*

Fa-Li let her head drop down against Titus' chest, the leather blessedly cool against her flushed cheek. He didn't stiffen or jerk away, but he didn't wrap his arms around her in a comforting embrace, either. But she heard the beating of his heart underneath his jacket, and the sound was unbelievably soothing to her. It was then that she finally realized how much she had missed him.

"Was she happy to see you?" she heard herself asking, her voice gone quiet. Her hands were limp at her sides; the only contact she would permit was her face against his chest.

"Hn?" Titus grunted.

"The snake," Fa-Li clarified. "Was she happy to see you?"

"She wasn't happy in the sense that you mean. She hasn't emotions like you do. But my return pleased her, so I guess...she was happy to see me." He paused. "She told me many things."

"Like what?" Fa-Li asked.

This time Titus' silence was long and drawn out, but eventually he whispered into the still air of the cave, "A storm. A storm unlike any other. It's coming, and its rains and tides of fury may drown us all..."

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Author's Note:

Whew...I wrote most of this chapter in one day: today! O\_O I'm so sleeeeeepy! I didn't mean for it to be this long, and I didn't want to end with the Titus and Fa-Li part, but I felt it needed to be in there for some reason. Anyhow, please send me your comments! ^\_^

—Catalina

Next Chapter: Sink to the Bottom With You Ch. 25, AVALANCHE on the Rise

# Chapter Twenty-Five

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## AVALANCHE *on the Rise*

*“Go splash in some puddles outside.” —Red XIII*

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*I look at her in that paper dress  
I wonder why she won't burn  
She's just a paper doll that's all  
Just a paper doll*

*“Paper Doll”  
—Kittie—*

---

“Holy SHIT!” Cid cursed angrily, manhole cover nearly falling from his rain-slick hands. “Spike, get your ass over here!”

Cloud maneuvered his way over to the pilot, tossing his wet bangs out of his eyes as he did so. “What is it?” he asked.

Cid scowled. He hadn't had a cigarette in the last five minutes, and already the nicotine withdrawal was making him cranky. “The hell you mean ‘what is it’?! Take a look down the hole, kid! Ain't nothing but water down there now!”

“What?!” Elena practically screeched, pushing past Cid and nearly knocking Cloud down the manhole simultaneously. “No way! It wasn't like this yesterday, I swear it! If Reno and Red were here, they could tell you the same thing!”

“The water must have risen,” Cloud stated grimly.

Cid tossed the manhole cover to the side angrily, not noticing when it rolled and made a small dent in the side of a car abandoned in the street. “No shit, Sherlock!” he yelled at Cloud. “Anyone who ain't blind can see that! What the @\$% are we gonna do now, smart guy?”

Cloud didn't reply, just glared down the manhole at the veritable RIVER that was now flowing along its merry way. The cement portion that Elena, Reno, and Red had been traveling on yesterday was nowhere to be seen—covered completely by rushing water. DIRTY FILTHY rushing water. Cloud resisted the urge to scream. The sewers were the only way to Yuffie, according to his opinion and Vincent's as well. So far this was the only entrance they could find to the sewer tunnels that wasn't flooded. Another option would be to trek all over Midgar in search of another way to access the sewer system that wouldn't lead them into torrents of rank sewer water. Of course, they could always head all the way

back up to the old Shinra building and take a dive down the “snake tunnel”, as they had come to call it, but that would just be more precious time wasted.

Everyone was cold, tired, and grumpy, including Cloud. Cid was throwing fits left and right because he couldn't smoke in the rain. Barret was actually behaving himself, not wanting to do anything that would piss off Vincent, who he believed was still peeved at him. Tifa was trying to be encouraging as usual, but Cloud could see in her eyes that she was extremely dubious of their plan. Cait Sith was asking questions from everyone, trying to catch up on everything he had missed. Elena was making it no secret that she was scared to go back into the sewers. And Rude and Vincent were, well...Rude and Vincent. Cold, aloof, and nearly imperturbable, as usual.

They were also short two fighters.

After a brief debate, it had been decided that Reno and Red would remain behind at the bar.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

*“I’m not gonna be much help to you guys ANYWAYS,” Reno said bitterly, wringing rainwater out of his ponytail. “Chances are that effing snake is still in the sewers, right? I’m fucking scared of snakes, in case you guys didn’t notice that fact yesterday. If it shows up again, I’m going to be more of a hurt than a help. I’d probably be better off...staying behind.”*

*“But Reno!” Elena protested, absently tugging on the hem of her hastily thrown on suit. “We need you with us! You’re the leader of the Turks!”*

*Reno gave her a hard, angry glare and sat down in a stool, heedless of his waterlogged suit and pants. “Damn straight I’m the leader. And as such, you should have faith in my decision. Go on without me. That’s an order.”*

*Elena looked like she wanted to argue some more, but she caught her lip between her teeth and held back her words. She knew the truth in what Reno was saying. He didn’t even have his nightstick any longer. True, he was a fair shot with a gun, but the nightstick was still his weapon of choice; his skills with it were unmatched, and with it, he could fight close range as well as long range.*

*“Elena, Rude,” Reno said flatly when neither of them replied to his order. “Am I understood? You’re under Cloud’s leadership now. Is that clear?”*

*“Yessir!” Rude said immediately, standing ramrod straight and raising four fingers to his forehead, locked firmly in a crisp salute.*

*“Yessir!” Elena mimed, wondering how long it had been since she had saluted someone like this.*

*Reno sighed, the hardness in his face melting away into a melancholy mask of tragedy.*

*“Good. Now put your damn hands down and slouch a little bit, for crying out loud.”*

*“I’d probably be better off remaining here as well,” Red said suddenly, voice calm.*

*Cloud looked up in surprise from where he was inserting materia into the Ultima Weapon. “Red?” he asked incredulously.*

*“The sewers are probably flooded,” Red said, striving to be logical in order to cover up his frustration at his own helplessness. “The rising water will greatly hinder my mobility, being that I haven’t the height advantage that you all possess. I’d have to be swimming everywhere. I would only slow you down.”*

*Cloud’s jaw clenched, but he only nodded mutely and went about snapping his Crystal Bangle onto his wrist.*

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

“So?” Cait suddenly spoke up, unfazed the raindrops running down his fur and down the sides of his moogle. “What are we gonna do, Cloud?”

Cloud scratched the back of his head, glaring down the manhole into the watery darkness. “I don’t know,” he said helplessly. “Does anyone have any other ideas?”

Suddenly, Vincent brushed past him, hesitated a split second at the edge of the manhole, and then jumped down it.

“Vincent!” Tifa gasped, shoving a dumbfounded Cid aside and falling to her knees on the pavement, peering down into the sewers. Cloud followed in suit after recovering his wits.

Cid crowded up next to him, yelling, “What the hell, Vince?!! You trying to kill yourself or something?!”

Crimson eyes stared up at them calmly, literally glowing in the darkness. Rain plummeted through the open manhole and struck Vincent’s pale skin, but he didn’t seem to notice. The water was barely up past his ankles.

“It’s not that deep,” he said calmly.

“Yes, yes, yes, we can SEE that!!” Cid exclaimed, raking his fingers through his blond hair and nearly knocking his goggles off of his head. “Thank you for DEMONSTRATING that for us!!” He turned to Cloud. “Spike, don’t let him DO shit like that no more!!!”

Cloud blinked rainwater from his eyes. “It’s not like I TOLD him to do it, Cid.”

“Whatever,” Cid grumbled. “I need a smoke. So who’s goin’ down next?!”

“I’ll go,” Rude volunteered, clearly trying to avoid sprouting any more arguments. Cloud moved out of the way to allow the tall Turk to crouch next to the edge of the

manhole, glancing down only briefly before swinging his legs over the edge and free falling to the bottom. He landed with a faint splash that was almost drowned out by the sounds of the pouring rain.

“Are you alright Rude?” Elena asked immediately, rushing up to the edge to make sure her friend had made it down in one piece.

“I’m fine, Elena,” he asked calmly.

“I’m goin’ down next!” Cid exclaimed, one leg already dangling over the edge of the manhole.

Trusting his team to make it down without any mishaps, Cloud turned to where Cait Sith was waiting patiently a little ways away from the others.

“Just how waterproof are you?” he asked worriedly.

Cait spread his gloved paws, looking as helpless as a robotic cat could look. “I’m here in the rain, aren’t I?”

Cloud nodded, still looking dubious as he cast a glance over at where Barret was trying to squeeze through the manhole. “I know, but I’m sure that there are deeper parts of the water down there in the sewers. Can that moogles swim or anything?”

Cait beamed. “It doesn’t need to swim, O’ Fearless Leader! It floats! If worse comes to worst, we can always use this guy for a raft of sorts! No worries here, Cloud!” He flashed the swordsman a thumbs-up sign, with a big goofy grin to compliment it.

Somehow, that didn’t ease Cloud’s worries.

\* \* \* \* \*

BEGIN.

yesssssir

“T-That hissing is r-r-really annoying, ya know???”

name

“W-What?”

name. give name.

“C’mon! You guys kidnapped someone and you don’t even know their name?”

give name now.

“.....Y-Yuffie...Yuffie Pristina Kisaragi...”

father name.

“My father? Um, Lord Godo Kisaragi...shouldn't you guys already know this?”

mother name.

“...my mother? Why do you want to know about my mother?”

mother name.

“Go to hell! I'm not telling you anything about my mother!”

kira ayami kotori.

“W-What???! How...how did you know that?!”

about mother. tell.

“No! Not until you tell me how you knew my mother's name!”

The pain began without warning. Her limbs suddenly spasmed violently, chains jangling with harsh laughter. A scream fought to rip from her throat, but she bit it back with a sheer force of will. Then the pain was gone, leaving her gasping for breath, body trembling with the aftershocks the agony had left behind.

mother. tell.

“Gawd! What the hell do you want to know?! She's DEAD, for crying out loud!!”

know thisss already. tell more.

“There's nothing more to tell!”

there iss.

“What?! What is there left?! She died when I was five years old!!!”

death never the end. what elssse?

“I told you before! There IS nothing!”

As soon as the words left her mouth, the pain began again, filling her limbs with searing agony like no other. It froze the scream that was struggling to emerge from her mouth, pinning it in her chest where it burned her heart.

ALRIGHT, STOP.

The pain ceased.

DON'T DRAIN HER TOO SOON. SHE'LL STILL NEED TO BE STRONG ENOUGH TO SURVIVE THE MIND PROBE IF SHE REFUSES TO TALK.

undersstood.

\* \* \* \* \*

Reno sighed deeply as he watched the raindrops chasing one another down the window, splitting and merging and barreling into other droplets in a frenzy. Stupid raindrops. He had seen enough goddamn water to last him a lifetime. His suit jacket was hanging over one of the bar's chairs to air dry, but the dress shirt and slacks he was wearing were still a little on the damp side. Normally, even a petty thing such as remaining clad in damp clothes would have put him in a grouchy mood, but it wasn't bothering him this time. Maybe because the bar was virtually empty, and being grouchy was only fun when he had someone to listen to him bitch about every little thing.

"I wonder how the others are doing," Reno commented out loud.

Red didn't even stir from where he was resting on top of the one of the tables (a big no-no).

"I hope the snake didn't eat 'em," Reno continued, tugging thoughtfully on his gloves as he wondered if he would get any reaction out of his companion.

Of course, he didn't. One of Red's pierced ears twitched, but that was it.

"I hate snakes," Reno said loudly, making it obvious that he was trying to get Red's attention.

A growl emerged from the lion-like creature's throat. "And I hate people who are loud just for the sake of being loud," Red grumbled.

"Geez, you must hate half of your friends, then," Reno shot back, slumping in his uncomfortable chair and propping up his feet on a nearby table (another big no-no).

One golden eye flicked coolly in his direction. "Reno, this conversation is utterly pointless," Red said flatly.

Reno scowled. "This conversation is NOT pointless. No conversation is pointless. I'm trying to be NICE over here, and you're biting my head off. And I'm bored; there's nothing to do here, and you're no fun to fight with."

"Go splash in some puddles outside," Red suggested, actually sounding half-serious.

"Haha, very funny," Reno said sarcastically. "You're such a wit. Besides, there are no puddles outside, just one big goddamn LAKE." He scowled at the rain running down the window. "The others better get back before water starts flooding the bar."

"That's probably what you and I should be fighting to prevent," Red commented, lifting his head from his paws and gazing absently at the front door to the bar, as if



expecting the entire thing to cave in and water to come rushing into the room.

Reno snorted, not at all thrilled with the idea of doing manual labor. “What can we do? Stand on the porch and try and push the water away when it comes onto the decking?”

“No,” Red replied calmly as he gracefully bounded off the table and onto the floor. “But we could start lining the edge of the decking with things to prevent or at least slow down the water’s progress.” He glanced at Reno. “Actually, you’ll probably have to do most of the work since my hands are somewhat lacking in the dexterity area.”

Reno’s aquamarine eyes narrowed. “No matter how bored I am, I’m not in the mood to work right now. Why don’t you—”

Red suddenly stiffened, his muscles going rigid and his ears pivoting to point towards the door. “Shhh!” he hissed at Reno. “Did you hear something?”

Reno hadn’t, but he immediately swung his feet off the table and stood up, hand flying to his hip before he realized that he had no weapons. His beloved nightstick was floating around in the sewers somewhere, and his gun was hidden upstairs in his bedroom.

“What is it?” he whispered to Red, tensing his muscles and wondering if his hand-to-hand combat skills were as rusty as he was imagining.

Red one good eye darted around the bar. “I heard something, but it was gone after a second. Some sort of thumping noise.”

Reno’s eyes narrowed as he stepped further away from his window, remembered from Turk training that windows were the most common entry place for surprise attacks. “This bar is on stilts, right?”

Red nodded. “Yes.”

“Well, there’s all kinds of debris floating around in the water, right?” Reno continued, feeling rather proud of his logic. “Maybe something just hit one of the stilts and bounced off?”

Red relaxed a little, but Reno could tell that the AVALANCHE member wasn’t fully convinced. “That’s seems to be the most logical assumption. But we have to keep in mind that, as far as we know, this bar is one of the only buildings that isn’t underwater in Kalm. Other citizens might be coming here to seek shelter, and if they believe this place is abandoned, they might just break in like your common thief.”

Reno snorted and plopped back down in his chair. “I’d like to seem them try. I’ll toss ‘em back out into the rain. Or on second thought, I’d probably let them in. At least another person might prevent me from DYING of boredom in here.”

Red rolled his eye. “If you’re so bored, Reno, why don’t you watch TV or something?”

Reno immediately snapped to attention. “TV? Where’s the TV? I didn’t even know there WAS a TV in this bar!”

“It’s in the living room,” Red replied calmly.

“There’s a living room in his place?!” Reno echoed incredulously.

“Reno, for a Turk, you aren’t very well aware of your surroundings,” Red scolded. “Look behind the bar area. What do you see?”

Reno bristled slightly at his companion’s tone, but he looked anyways. “I see a refrigerator. And a stove. And a sink. And some shot glasses. And some cupboards. And a pantry.”

“That’s not a pantry,” Red interrupted.

For a moment, Reno just blinked at him dumbly before his face lit up with realization. “A hidden door!” he exclaimed, leaping up from his seat. “That sneaky bastard Cloud HID the damn living room back there! C’mon, Red, let’s you and me raid the kitchen and watch TV! It’ll be great!”

Red looked dubious. *Well...it’s not like I have anything better to do. It’s not like I’m going to get any rest with Reno running around the house. Wonder why he insists on me coming with him? He must be lonely...*

“C’mon, mutt!” Reno urged, marching determinedly back behind the bar.

“Joy,” Red grumbled, following the Turk against his better judgment. He had the feeling he was in for a very long day.

\* \* \* \* \*

*This is going to be a long day* Cloud thought grumpily as he tried very hard not to concentrate on the nasty water all around him. Sure, the water may have been ankle-deep to start off with, but once they had taken off into the darkness of the Midgar sewer system, the water had very quickly increased its depth and was now clawing at Cloud’s waist, greatly hindering his maneuvering capabilities. Not everyone had the enormous height advantage that SOME PEOPLE were fortunate enough to possess. And “some people” did not include Cloud Strife.

After much bickering and stumbling over each other in the near-darkness (they were all out of flashlights), the present members of AVALANCHE and the Turks had fallen into a sort of formation. Cloud was leading the pack with Vincent since the gunslinger was the only one who seemed to have the faintest idea as to where he was going, and Cloud needed to be close to action in case it came time to make a split-second decision.

Close behind them was a trio of Rude, Elena, and Tifa, all three of them barreling forward determinedly. Elena, surprisingly enough, kept most of “gross, that’s nasty!” comments to herself. Maybe it was due to the fact that she had already been in the sewers yesterday, but Cloud had a sneaking suspicion that it had something to do with a tall, bald-headed Turk that was walking next to her without complaint. And finally, in the WAY back was the noisy, constantly bickering trio of Cid, Barret, and Cait. They insisted they were “covering everyone’s asses” but what it sounded like they were doing was more along the lines of fighting over Cait’s much-prized moogle. Cait hadn’t been lying when he had told Cloud that the thing could float, and the robotic cat was having an easier time navigating the murky waters than his human companions.

Resisting the urge to sigh, Cloud cast a furtive glance at the shadowy form of Vincent walking next to him. The man’s crimson eyes shone bright as fire in the darkness, narrowed with determination. Cloud didn’t think he had ever seen Vincent looking so intent before. It was odd having the man beside him, taking the lead. Usually, when AVALANCHE moved in a large group like this, Vincent was always playing drogue in the back, constantly on the lookout for dangers that might have eluded the others.

*All this determination to find Yuffie?* Cloud thought to himself as he sidestepped some of the trash that was floating on the surface of the water. *It’s strange. Vincent seems so much younger now. Maybe it’s because he doesn’t have that cape covering half of his face? You know, if this was anyone else looking so intent on finding a girl, I would think...but I can’t think THAT. This isn’t just anyone. This is VINCENT VALENTINE. He Who Feels Nothing And Cares For Nothing.*

“How much longer do you think we have?” Cloud asked Vincent, voice pitched at a level that only Vincent’s abnormally sharp ears would be able to pick up.

“Longer for what?” Vincent replied distractedly, eyes methodically roving the darkness.

“Longer until we go wherever you’re leading us,” Cloud said, looking at the taller man carefully.

“I wish I could tell you, Cloud,” Vincent answered. “But I honestly don’t know. I’ll know when we get there, though.”

Cloud’s eyes lingered on Vincent’s shadowy profile for a second longer before turning his gaze forwards again. “You know, Vincent,” he said offhandedly. “I can’t help but wonder at HOW you seem to know exactly where we’re going.”

“What you should really be concerned with is what will happen if I DON’T know where we’re going,” Vincent said coolly.

Cloud’s jaw clenched. It was times like this that Vincent’s experience overshadowed

Cloud's leadership abilities. "I was just curious is all," Cloud replied, trying not to sound like a pouting child. "Is Chaos telling you which direction to go in?"

"You mean is the demon speaking to me?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"Chaos is a demon, Cloud. It speaks in a language that cannot be understood by any human."

"But you can understand it?" Cloud asked shrewdly.

"I'm not human, but I'd like to think that I'm not so far gone that I am capable of understanding the language of a demon. That would imply that I have a darkness inside me that is equal to theirs."

Trying to ignore the chill that ran down the length of his spine, Cloud said, "I guess what I should have asked was if Chaos was in any way, shape, form, communicating with you and directing you down the right path."

"Yes, it is," Vincent replied simply.

Cloud sighed and shoved away a shrapnel of metal that was intent on skewering him in the belly. "You're a man of few words, Vincent."

"I send those words back at you, Cloud," Vincent said smoothly, sounding slightly amused in spite of himself.

A grin found its way to Cloud's lips. *Already his speech is becoming slightly less formal. Must be Yuffie's influence. Soon he'll start saying "Gawd!" and "Grossness!" God forbid.*

"Hey, everyone?" Cloud called loudly, noticing a change in the objects that were floating on the surface of the water.

"The HELL do you want?!" Cid snapped.

Ignoring the pilot's grumpiness, Cloud replied calmly, "Watch out for debris on the water. A section of the sewers must have collapsed somewhere around here. There are all kinds of metal shrapnel and plaster floating around. Make sure you don't get skewered by one of them."

"Hear that?" Cid demanded of Cait. "I might get stabbed by a piece of metal, ya damn cat! Gimme a ride on that hunk of junk!"

"No way!" Cait replied stubbornly from where he was seated high and dry on the massive stomach of his moogle. "This here is my moogle, Cid! I need it to fight, for crying out loud!"

“You don’t fight on the water!” Cid insisted, tugging on one of the moogle’s fangs. “What are you gonna do if something tries to eat us? Beat it to death with your megaphone! That thing’s useless in the water!”

“If it’s so useless, then why do you keep asking me to use it?” Cait demanded smugly.

Cid didn’t say anything. He only scowled deeply and stormed away from Cait, making a point of splashing sewer water all over the robotic cat as he went.

\* \* \* \* \*

ALRIGHT. BEGIN AGAIN.

yesss.

“Aw...shit...”

mother. tell.

“Up yours!”

tell now.

“Screw you!”

The pain came again, more intense than before. Fortunately, it was only a quick burst that assaulted every nerve in her body before it was gone, leaving her trembling against her will, her breath coming in ragged gasps from her dry, chapped lips.

mother taught you thingsss.

“W-What?”

you learn thingssss she taught.

“I...I know nothing...”

lying.

“No! I don’t know anything! And even if I did know something, you really think I would tell you?!”

we ussse mind probe.

“Well, you know what? You can TAKE your goddamn mind probe and shove it up your ass! Or asses. There’s more than one of you guys, right?”

tell now. what mother taught.

“...”

talk.

“...”

The pain came again, encompassing and searing her delicate nerve endings, but this time, she kept her mouth firmly closed, teeth digging into her lower lips until blood welled up in the punctured flesh. She would not give them the satisfaction of hearing her scream. She would not talk. She wouldn't make a sound.

ssssing ssssong.

“...”

ssssing ssssong mother ssssang.

“...”

ALRIGHT. THAT'S ENOUGH OF THIS METHOD. SHE'LL NEVER TALK. PREPARE TO USE THE MIND PROBE.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent suddenly came to an abrupt halt, his eyes widening.

Cloud cast a worried glance in his direction. “You okay?” he asked.

The other man didn't reply. He closed his eyes tightly, the fiery orbs swallowed by darkness. Cloud's night vision was good enough that he could see Vincent raising an unsteady hand to his head, pale fingers sinking into the ebony strands. They dug into his scalp as if in pain, and a nearly inaudible gasp escaped his lips.

Raising a hand to signal a temporary halt, Cloud asked Vincent quietly, “Is something wrong?”

Instead of answering, Vincent's body suddenly leaned violently to one side, and Cloud barely had time to open his arms and catch the taller man as he tumbled towards him.

“Vincent!” Tifa cried, starting to splash towards them, Rude and Elena following close behind her.

Still supporting Vincent's weight, Cloud made a sharp gesture with his hand, telling them to stay back. Vincent was still conscious, and Cloud was sure that the man wouldn't appreciate everyone and their mother running and flocking around him during one of his rare bouts of weakness.

“We have to hurry,” Vincent suddenly whispered, using Cloud's shoulder for support as he straightened himself back up again.

“Are you alright?” Cloud asked for what seemed like the third time. He couldn’t disguise the worry in his voice.

“I will be if we hurry,” Vincent snapped, quickly disentangling himself from Cloud’s helping hands and plowing through the water with renewed vigor. “Yuffie doesn’t have much time.”

*Shit...how the HELL does he keep finding out these things? I know Chaos is “communicating” with him, but still, this is intense...*

“Alright!” Cloud called to the others, voice echoing in the sewers. “Let’s move out! We’re getting closer!”

Everyone obeyed, but Cloud could practically hear the questions that were hovering on their tongues, begging to be spoken. He turned away before he was tempted to reply to those soundless demands. How could he even begin to answer their questions when he had so many of his own?

Vincent vaguely heard Cloud rapping out orders to the others, but he allowed the swordsman’s words—though not meant for him—to go in one ear and out the other. His only concern was honing in the mysterious force that was calling to him in the distance, drawing and reeling him in. He was strangely pleased that Cloud was putting so much faith in him, but what he didn’t want the younger man to know was that Vincent was relying almost completely on Chaos to guide him. Of course, the demon wasn’t SPEAKING to him, but it was, in its own way, telling Vincent which way to go. Whenever he tried to take a wrong turn in the winding sewer system, he would feel an inexplicable pain lance through a part of his body, usually his side. Maybe it was the light slap from a clawed hand, but who knew? All Vincent knew was that it was Chaos’ way of telling him when he was going in the wrong direction.

*Why does Chaos seem as desperate to find Yuffie as I am? Knowing that recovering her from the enemies’ hands is something that IT wants should probably suggest that it would be better to do just the opposite...and leave her to die. But...I can’t do it...I just can’t...*

Shaking his head to expel these thoughts from his mind, Vincent focused on nothing but the fiendish resistance the water kept placing on his legs, trying to shove him backwards. He fought this natural force with every fiber of strength within him, determined not to let anything keep him from achieving his mission. The steady pulsing of Chaos’ “voice” in his mind told him that he was headed in the right direction.

Something in the back of his mind told him that he was maybe moving too fast for the others to keep up. Cloud, Tifa, and Rude were having no problems, Vincent could tell. Elena was having trouble keeping up due only to the fact that her legs were shorter, but Vincent could sense her determination in a strong wave that beat against his back. Barret, Vincent knew, was probably having little difficulty moving through the water on

account of his prodigious height and raw strength. There were only two reasons for him to be lagging behind in the back. One was to put as much distance between himself and Vincent as possible, thinking that the gunslinger was still angry with him. The other was surely to keep Cid and Cait company. Given his age, Cid had an almost youthful vigor to him, but one cigarette too many was enough to destroy the strength that age couldn't eliminate. Vincent was sure that—though Cid would never admit it—the pilot had trouble breathing sometimes due to lungs that were probably already black with tar.

As Yuffie would say: *Grossness*.

Trying to push painful memories of the young ninja out of his mind, Vincent let his eyes rove through the darkness of the sewers. He noticed that the sound of rushing water was getting louder...and then he realized that they had a problem.

Cloud was so focused on keeping up with Vincent's taxing pace that he almost didn't realize that the man had stopped until he practically plowed into his back.

"What's wrong?" Cloud demanded, stepping around so he could stand beside the man, not able to see anything other than Vincent's glowing eyes and crimson headband in the darkness.

"Watch your step," Vincent warned, and Cloud was wondering if he had meant those words in a figurative sense when the older man suddenly reached out and placed his hands palm down into the water in front of him, as if expecting the surface to be solid. Thinking Vincent had seriously lost his marbles this time, Cloud was surprised when the water only rose up to Vincent's elbows.

*There's a solid surface underneath the water there* Cloud realized as Vincent swung himself up to the higher ground. The water was only up to his knees.

Mimicking the man's actions, Cloud sank his gloved hands into the water and felt them come into contact with what had to be cement. Sliding his hands down the hard surface, he found that the new level appeared to span the entire width of the tunnel, like a big stepping block.

"Everyone be careful!" Cloud warned as he levered himself onto the new level, now staring down at the shadowy forms of his friends in the darkness. "There's higher ground over here but watch out that you don't slip when climbing up."

He received only a few grumbles in response, mainly from the back ranks. He tried to think of something encouraging to say, but he gave up within the first seconds. He wasn't exactly in a cheery mood.

Resisting the urge to sigh tiredly, Cloud turned around, realized that Vincent hadn't moved from his spot, unusual for someone who seemed to be such in a hurry a few



minutes ago. Then, Cloud saw the reason for Vincent's hesitation.

"Oh crap..." he growled, seeing the veritable WATERFALL that they now had to face. The water trickling past Cloud's legs didn't have much power to it, but from the sound of it, the water going down the cement slope in front of him was moving at quite a different speed. A much faster speed. Beyond the end of the slope was the continuation of the river of sewer water they had just waded through, only from what Cloud could see, the new water looked slightly cleaner.

"What now?" he asked Vincent.

Vincent suddenly crouched slightly and put one booted foot into the rushing water on the slope, testing the strength and depth of the current.

"Well?" Cloud demanded when the man didn't say anything.

"It's not incredibly deep," he replied. "And the current isn't terribly fast."

"But that slope is pretty steep," Cloud argued, knowing he was just taking a shot in the dark. He really couldn't see anything to make him arrive at such a conclusion, only the fact that the "river" seemed to pick up FAR below them.

"It's not as steep as it looks," Vincent countered, putting his other foot on the slope in an amazing display of balance. He now had the current beating against his calves. "I'll go down first. If I make it, you all can follow."

"Sure," Cloud replied, sounding anything but enthusiastic.

"Vince!" Cid suddenly cried, having climbed onto the higher ground in time to see Vincent walking carefully down what appeared to be the beginnings of a waterfall. "What the hell are you tryin' to do, kill yourself?!"

"You can't even see 'em," Barret muttered from his place next to the pilot.

"I'm sure Vincent needs to use his full concentration," Rude said flatly. "It would probably be best if both of you be quiet."

"Yeah," Elena quipped, leaning around Cloud to scowl at Cid and Barret. "You two shut up!"

Cid squinted in Elena's direction, his normally keen eyesight failing him in the darkness. "Woman, you're—"

Cloud cut him off with a sharp movement of his hand, gesturing for silence.

Together, the seven of them watched nervously as Vincent continued to maneuver his way down the slope. At first, he didn't seem to have much trouble, going down the slope slowly and carefully despite the water beating against his legs and trying to topple him

over. But the farther down he got, the stronger the current became, pounding ruthlessly against the man's legs. It was probably Vincent's inhuman strength or his desperation to find Yuffie that gave him the willpower to go on. There were several instances where Vincent was forced to lean backwards and crabwalk his way down, but all his persistence and tenacity paid off, for he made it to the bottom without any serious injury. He crouched agilely on the end of the slope, ignoring the water pounding against his legs, trying to shove him off. Cloud couldn't tell what he was doing, but he seemed to be scanning the depths of the water for any hidden dangers. Apparently seeing none, Vincent hopped nimbly off the slope and into the water.

And promptly sank, the water rising all the way up to his shoulders before it stopped its fiendish ascent.

*Oh crap...* Cloud thought, his heart plummeting to the bottoms of his boots.

"It's deep!" Vincent called up to the others, his hair and the trailing ends of his bandana floating in the water behind him.

Cloud scratched his head. "Just great. Okay, anyone under six feet tall is going to have a hell of a time navigating. Who here is actually six feet tall or over?"

Silently, Barret and Rude raised their hands, both of them looking a little ill as they watched Vincent tottering around in the water below.

*Great, just two. Alright... that means Cid, Cait, Tifa, and Elena are going to need to find other means of getting around. And me, well, I'll worry about myself later...*

Thinking fast, Cloud turned to the others. "Cait, off the moogle."

Cait's mouth fell open, and he clutched at one of the moogle's ears possessively. "Aw, c'mon, Cloud! What are you going to do with him?"

Cloud's gaze hardened. He was in no mood for belligerence at the moment. "I'm going to give him to Cid. Cait, you get onto Barret's shoulder. You'll be safer up there than you would be on the moogle anyways. Cid, the mog's all yours, I guess. Take good care of it, alright?"

"Roger that," Cid enthused, shooting Cait a smug glare as the robotic cat petted his moogle somberly.

"C'mon, stupid cat," Barret grumped, snatching Cait off the moogle with his human hand.

"Okay, everyone, down the slope. Try not to run into each other, alright? And Cid, watch the moogle! Watch the moogle, I said!"

Going down the slope was living hell. Cloud would have rather had each of them go

down one or two at a time, just to avoid any mishaps, but time was growing short, and it already looked as if Vincent was ready to take off without them. Barret and Rude made it to the bottom first, and Cloud immediately ordered Barret—with Cait Sith perched on his shoulder—to go ahead with Vincent. True, Barret was only taller than Vincent by a few inches, but if those few inches meant that, in the face of danger, Barret would get his gun-arm up faster than Vincent could draw his gun, then such a minor difference was rather important. And Cait Sith...well, if all else failed, Barret could always use him as a projectile...

Second to the bottom was a rather clumsy Cid, who lost his footing three-fourths of the way down the slope and ending up tumbling the rest of the way, Cait's moogles rolling after him. Neither Cid nor the moogles was damaged permanently, but Cid let out the longest stream of cuss words Cloud had yet to hear come from his mouth before the pilot clambered up on the moogles' belly and started following Barret, Vincent and Cait. Making rather practical use of the Venus Gospel, Cid used the spear as a sort of oar to make maneuvering the moogles raft easier.

Cloud purposely lagged behind the others, making sure they had all made it to the bottom safely before crawling up to the edge himself. A quick glance around showed that most everyone was following Vincent's lead. Rude, who had stayed behind at the bottom of the slope, was in the process of lifting Tifa onto his back. This made Cloud frown slightly, but he knew that Tifa would probably be safer with Rude than with him.

That only left...

"Ready, Elena?" Cloud asked calmly, fighting to keep his balance as water pounded against his legs and back.

The short woman turned toward him in surprise. "W-What?" she stammered.

"You're going to have to ride on my back," Cloud responded, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. She didn't look particularly pleased about the situation, and he couldn't really blame her. It wasn't like he was a happy camper, either.

"I don't need to ride on your back!" Elena protested indignantly, her gaze, for some reason, straying to where Rude was moving out with Tifa firmly adhered to his back, her long brown hair trailing behind her on the surface of the water.

"Elena..." Cloud said warningly.

"I can swim!" she said hotly, flipping her short blonde hair back from her face.

"I'm sure you can," Cloud replied as calmly as he could manage. "But it will be faster this way. Come on."

A scowl darkened Elena's face. "Cloud, I SAID that..."

Cloud cut her off with a fierce glare, Mako blue eyes flashing in the darkness. “Look Elena, I’m the leader of AVALANCHE and you’re a member of the Turks, right? Now get over it. Do you want to find Reeve or not?”

*If he’s even still alive...*

That did it. If there was something Elena took seriously, it was her duties as a Turk, one of which was to guard the President, with her life if necessary. For a moment, her eyes once again shot to the tall figure of Rude, but then her face hardened with determination and she carefully climbed up onto Cloud’s back, wrapping her arms around his neck in death grip.

However, it was only when Cloud stepped into the water with her on his back that she realized something.

“Cloud!! You’re not even that tall!!! Ohmigod!! I’d better not drown, Cloud Strife, or I swear, I’ll come back to haunt you!!”

“Shut up, Elena,” Cloud tried to say, but only ended up with a mouthful of sewer water. He hated being short.

\* \* \* \* \*

Yuffie wasn’t even ashamed to admit it anymore. She was scared. The aftershocks from the pain were still coursing through her limbs like unwanted phantoms, but such things were insignificant when she thought about just what this “mind probe” was. The light above her was still obscuring her vision; she couldn’t even open her eyes all way without being blinded. Yet, she could hear the things called Hissers moving around in the darkness, and every once in a while, she thought that she caught a glimpse of them—little brown creatures with what a looked to be thousands of arms that were in constantly motion, writhing, twitching, hissing.

READY?

yesss.

“.....”

She waited for it. Waited for the mind-searing agony to tear through her entire body. But all she felt was a sudden, sharp pain lance through her skull, as if she had been pierced with an invisible needle. Then there was nothing. She was about to abandon her code of silence and laugh in their faces when the world around her suddenly vanished, and she fell into infinity.

All around there was blinding white light, wrapping her plummeting form in a whirlwind of intensity. She might have tried to scream, but no sound emerged from her

mouth. All she knew was the mindless terror that engulfed her soul, akin to the fear she felt in the deep-sea complex. That horribly familiar scent assaulted her nostrils, and a loud throbbing sound filled the air, like the ceaseless pounding of some monster's heart.

Quite suddenly, Vincent's words—seemingly so far in the past—returned to haunt her.

*"I think there might be something alive down here. Something big."*

And now—in the worst possible moment—she realized that she knew what was making that horrible beating sound.

*No! It can't be... it's still alive... all these thousands of years...*

YOU KNOW!!! TELL USSS NOW!!!!

"No! Never! I'd rather die before betraying my family!"

SSSECRET...TELL NOW!!

Blinding pain speared her head, and she felt memories from her past surfacing of their own accord, ripped from where she had them cherished in her heart, locked away for safekeeping. Fa-Li had lied when she had told Yuffie that she wouldn't be raped. This was rape, plain and simple. Her mind was being violated, torn apart, all its secrets spilling out in small, sporadic waves, but spilling they were, slowly and surely. Yuffie suddenly felt dirty, tainted; never before had she been violated in such a fashion. And what disgusted her more was that she felt utterly and completely helpless as she sensed memories being extracted from her mind by force, sucked away as if by a hungry leech.

Most were memories of her late mother. Kira Ayami Kotori. Usually referred to merely as Ayami. She saw her mother's beautiful face leaning down to kiss her goodnight, the light scent of her perfume so wonderfully familiar and comforting. Then that loving, heartfelt memory was rudely brushed aside as it gave way to the time Yuffie had watched her mother practicing her martial arts, loose robes billowing around her slender form, dark brown hair flying behind her like a battle banner. Ayami had been such a strong woman—powerful and loving all at the same time.

*Mama...I'm so sorry...mama...*

Yuffie knew what the Hissers were searching for. Her mother's song. The one she had taught Yuffie. Ayami had always said that it was a secret song, one that Yuffie couldn't go around Wutai singing at the top of her lungs, as the little girl was prone to do at times. Yuffie had grown quite a bit from that little innocent girl of so many years ago, and she no longer insisted on making the whole world listen to her off-key singing, but...if memory served her correctly, she had been singing in the shower the night she and Vincent and stayed in the hotel. Had Vincent heard her song?

VALENTINE?? VALENTINE KNOWSSS??

“No! Vincent doesn’t know anything! You just leave him alone!”

VALENTINE...

“Goddamn you! I said—”

The pressure in her head abruptly increased again as the Hissers’ mind probe began ripping into another part of her memories. These were recent, jumbled, and fresh—the memories that Yuffie had put aside for sorting and figuring out later. They were all of Vincent. Vincent looking down at her as they rode the jet ski, his cape covering half of his face, crimson eyes intent as they gazed at her. Vincent in the hotel, holding her gently against him, his scent surrounding her, chasing away the horrible nightmares. Vincent’s face so close to hers as they sat underneath the overhang. Vincent coldly ignoring her as he climbed up on the crates, leaving her in the rain.

Despite the predicament she was in, Yuffie found herself vainly reaching out for this last image of Vincent, watching to touch him, his hair, his shoulder, anything. She wanted to follow him up those damn crates. She wanted to yank on his ponytail until he stopped and waited for her. She didn’t want him to leave her alone.

*Vincent...*

Something deep inside her seemed to shatter, and quite suddenly, she was in the sewers. The air smelled of rank sewage and decay. Moss and algae clung to the stone walls, having made their homes long before anyone had dared arrive to disturb their sanctuary. Heaps of trash and debris were floating around in the murky water, colliding and bouncing off of each other, begrudgingly changing their courses.

But Yuffie really didn’t care about all the glorious crap she was seeing.

She only cared about one thing. Or, more accurately, eight things.

Cloud and the others were in the water, plowing through the nasty liquid with looks of determination on their faces despite the fact that the water was, for the most part, hovering around all of their shoulders, trying its hardest to take them under.

And, in the front and leading the pack, was Vincent Valentine.

Yuffie was ashamed to feel her heart swell with joy at the sight of him, the ends of his black hair and crimson headband trailing in the water behind him. How terrible of her, to ever have doubted her friends!

*They’re coming to save me!*

Then, suddenly, the vision shattered like a dropped glass, but Yuffie didn’t complain.

She knew whatever she had just seen, the Hissers had seen as well. The tumultuous whirlwind in her mind was silent for the first time, distant, contemplating. Apparently, the arrival of AVALANCHE had thrown a nice, big wrench in their plans.

And, of course, Yuffie leapt at the chance to gloat about it.

“Did you guys see that? Huh? Huh?”

Silence.

“They’re coming to save me! Don’t I just have the bestest friends in the whole wide world?”

Silence.

“Yeah, they all looked pretty pissed off. If I were you guys, I would watch my ass. They’re about to find your oh-so-hidden faction down here in this shithole...”

Silence.

“That’s right, tremble and be afraid. Now you know how it feels...”

And the silence just droned on and on.

~owari chapter 25

Author's Note:

I know it took me forever and a freaking day, but, hey, I have 2 excuses!

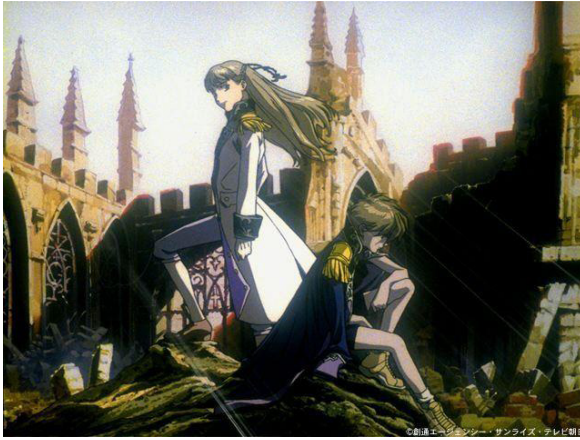
1) I started school again

2) I dropped boiling hot wax on my left hand, encasing two of my fingers and burning the skin off of one of them.

Needless to say, typing was out of the question for me for a while. -\_- But I'm all better right now!

Just for reading this way-too-long chapter, here's a couple of treats, I guess you could call them that...

This is the pic that inspired Ch. 23: Reno's story:



[Image from the opening of Gundam Wing. —Editor]

^\_^ Just imagine the girl as Tifa and the guy as Reno.

Remember Montana? The male bounty hunter Fa-Li collided with in the last chapter? Well, here's Sanosuke from Rurouni Kenshin, the model I based Montana after:





Final Fantasy VII  
*Sink to the Bottom With You*  
—Volume 1—



## FANART GALLERY



*Sink to the Bottom With You* was popular enough to get a fair bit of fanart in its day, which Catalina hosted on her AngelFire page in a dedicated gallery. To preserve that part of the *Sink* experience, those pieces have also been featured here. As you might imagine, tracking down fanartists from over 20 years ago isn't exactly easy, so most of these are included without express permission from the original artists. I really tried my best, but ancient, long-defunct hotmail accounts and usernames that aren't exactly "unique" do not exactly make for ease of findability. Just please understand that at the end of the day what I'm most concerned with is the preservation of the fanfic and its associated materials. Permission is nice, but ultimately secondary. I'm not going to let something vanish into the ether just because I couldn't get in touch with people who probably haven't thought about it in 20 years. That said, I did get in contact with a few of them, and links to their modern accounts will be provided where possible.

—Odysseus



## Catalina's Art

Art by: Catalina '02



Art by: Catalina



**"Might as Well..." (v1 and v2)**

Catalina's Art



Vincent and Yuffie

“Restoration of Youth”

Catalina's Art

*The Pain  
of  
Love*



"...and my life is nothing  
but a scratch  
in the Planet's timeline.  
Petty and insignificant,  
just as it was  
meant to be."

Art by: Catalina

"The Pain of Love"

# Chuwei

Art used with permission! Find Chuwei here: <https://twitter.com/chuchuroon>



**“FFVII: Yuffie Kisaragi”**

# Denna Lockhart

<http://envy.nu/lockhart>

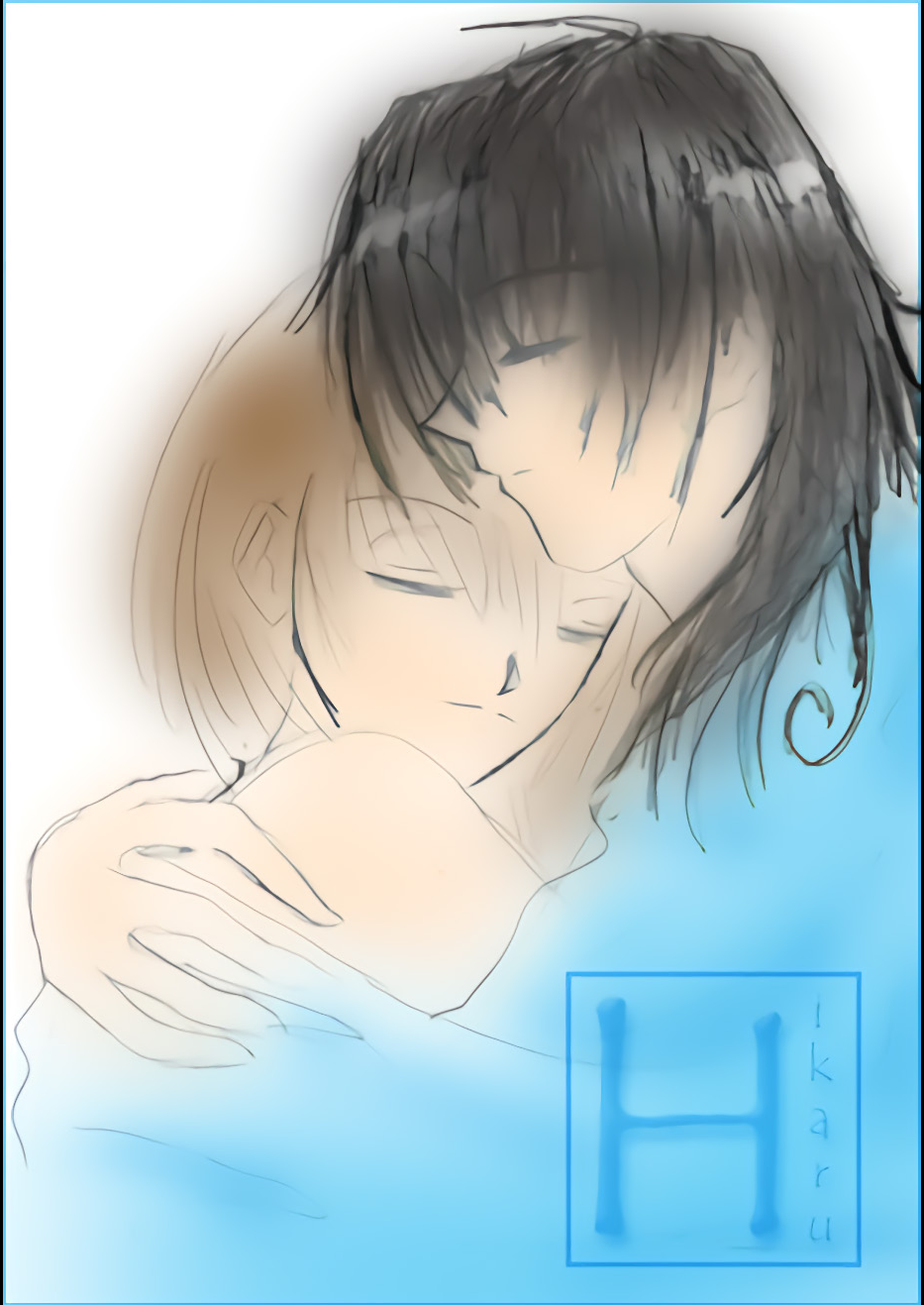


**“Sing a Song of Ages”**

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# Hikaru

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**“Vincent and Yuffie Embracing”**

Kat



“Fateful Embrace”



# laverinth

---



**“VinChoco”**

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# Onah

Yuffie & Vincent



“Vincent and Yuffie sitting next to each other”

## Onah

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**“Yuffie running into Vincent’s arms”**

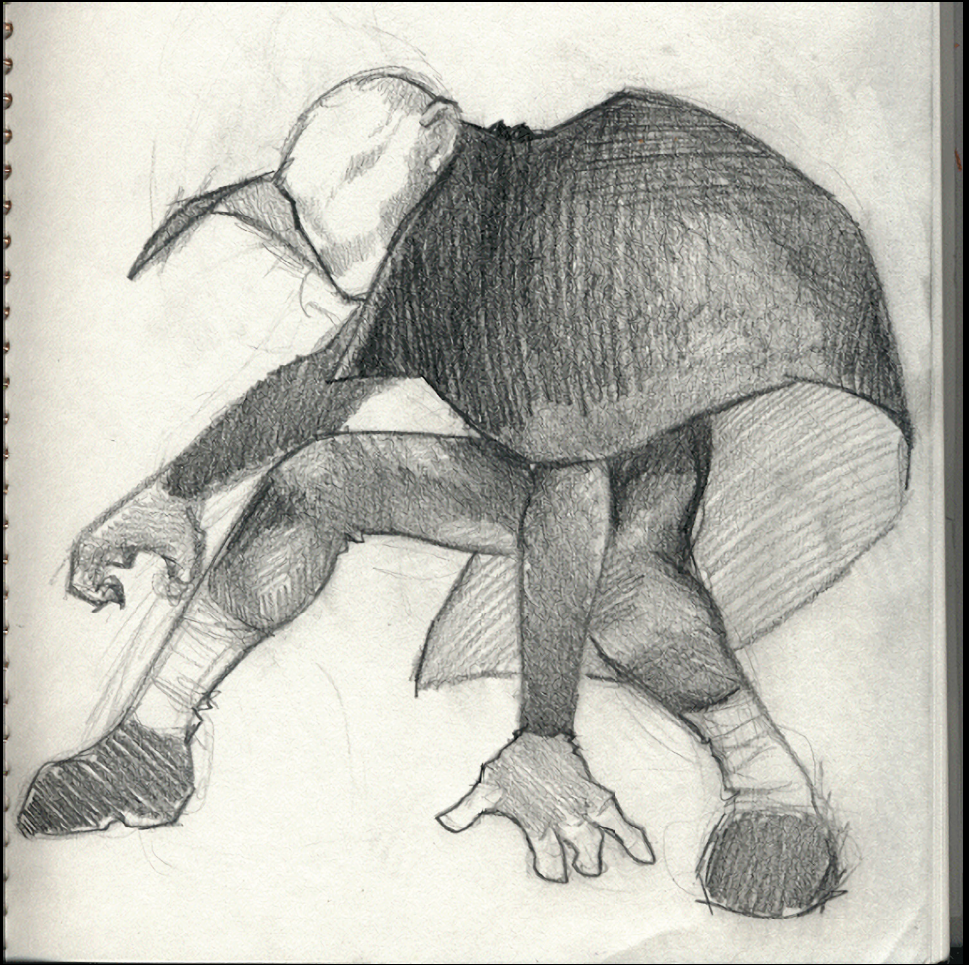
# Rukis Croax

Art used with permission! Find Rukis here: <https://www.furaffinity.net/user/rukis>



**“Cloud looking fierce”**

## Rukis Croax



“Rough sketch of Faceless Man”

## Rukis Croax

---



**“Another Faceless Man”**

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## Rukis Croax

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**“Reno pissed off”**

Rukis Croax

Sink To the Bottom With You  
Final Fantasy VII



“Yuffie and Vincent riding a chocobo”



## Rukis Croax



**“Yuffie sitting in Vincent’s lap”**

# Shireenko

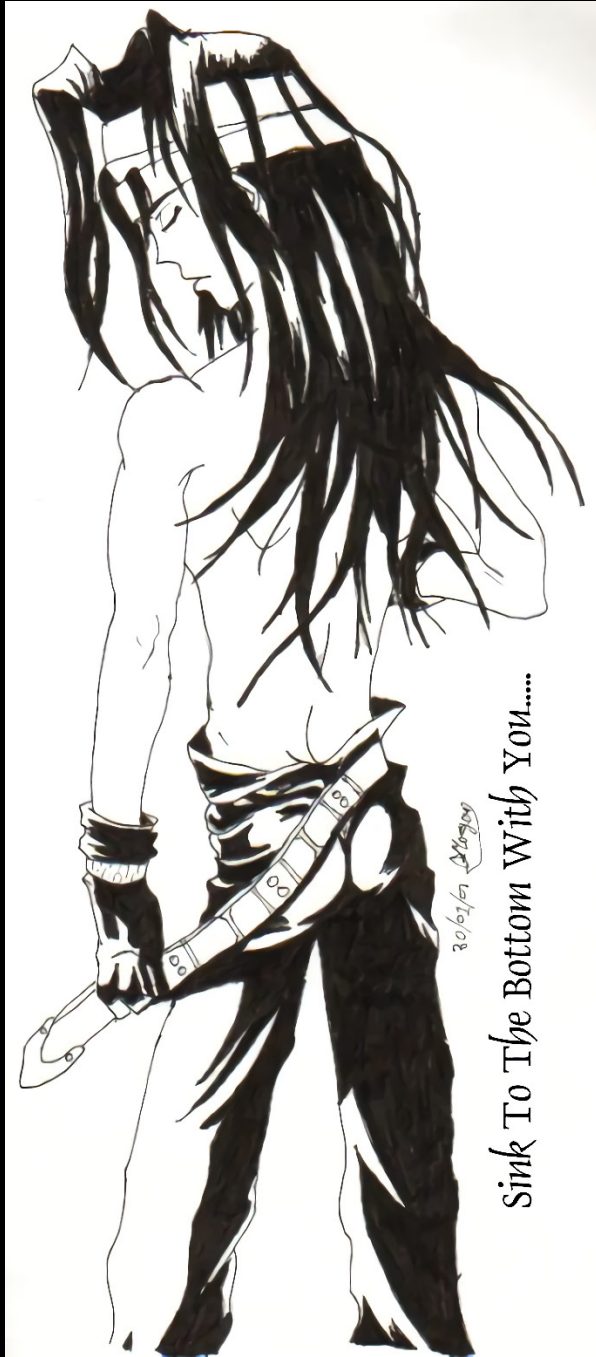
*Sink to the Bottom With You....*



*by Shireenko*

**“Long-haired Yuffie”**

# Shireenko



Sink To The Bottom With You.....

“Vincent undressing (NOT HENTAI!! ^\_^)”

# Shireenko



*Sink To The Bottom With You.....*

“Vincent undressing (colored)”

## Trick Sparrow

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"I was a nice guy. I really was."

*Sink to the Bottom With You,*

ch. 23



**“I was a nice guy”**

---

## Trick Sparrow

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*Sink to the Bottom with You...*



**“Vincent and Yuffie on the Jet Ski”**

---

Final Fantasy VII  
*Sink to the Bottom With You*  
—Volume 1—

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## LINKS

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### PRIMARY SOURCES

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<https://www.angelfire.com/goth/catalina/index2.html>

**Fanfiction.net Version:**

<https://www.fanfiction.net/s/89067/1/Sink-to-the-Bottom-With-You>

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*Sink to the Bottom With You  
will be continued in Volume 2!*



(Catalina stole this image from a Doujin Called *Labyrinth of Stardust*)



In a world filled with bounty hunters, dangerous secrets, and unspoken emotions, Vincent, Yuffie, and the rest of AVALANCHE and the Turks must fight to save the life of the Planet one more time, against an enemy no one would have ever expected existed...

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