

Final Fantasy VII

# *Sink to the Bottom With You*

—Volume 2—



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

—Final Fantasy VII—  
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With You*

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**Catalina V.**

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*With additional writing by Odysseus*

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**SINK TO THE BOTTOM WITH YOU**

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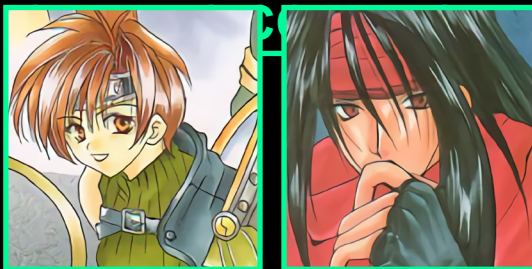
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Foreword .....	4
Playlist .....	5
<b><u>Catalina's Original Writing</u></b>	
Chapter 26: The Prisoner's Release .....	6
Chapter 27: The Ones Left Behind .....	32
Chapter 28: Safe Haven Junon City .....	50
Chapter 29: Refugees of Turmoil .....	68
Chapter 30: Old Wounds .....	87
Chapter 31: The Point of No Return .....	100
Chapter 32: Scare Tactics .....	126
Chapter 33: A Moment to Deliberate .....	157
Chapter 34: Trial by Fire .....	186
Chapter 35: The Calm .....	219
Chapter 36: Rocket Town Interlude .....	238
Chapter 37: Parched Eyes .....	253
Chapter 38: Sojourn in Wutai I .....	265
Chapter 39: Sojourn in Wutai II .....	281
Chapter 40: Battle .....	296
How the Story Ends (End of Catalina's Writing) .....	314
<b><u>Odysseus' Continuation</u></b>	
Chapter 41: The Flame of Rebirth .....	318
Chapter 42: Putting Together the Pieces .....	334
Chapter 43: The Prisoner's Recollection .....	353
Chapter 44: Titus Arc I - Origins .....	364
Fanart Gallery #2 .....	387

# Final Fantasy VII

## *Sink to the Bottom With You*

### —Volume 2—

## FOREWORD



It's me again, ya boi, Ody. Despite my hopes, the production of the first volume didn't bring Catalina out from the void, so you're stuck with me again.

Since the first book released, there's been a lot going on in the world of Final Fantasy VII. We finally got another few looks at FFXVII Rebirth, the long awaited sequel to FFXVII Remake, which is promising to be an even more incredible game than Remake was. FFXVII Ever Crisis, FFXVII's new gacha hell mobile spin-off title, also launched earlier this month at the time of writing (September 2023.) Despite my misgivings with said format, I've literally got it running auto-battles to grind while I'm writing this. Point being, FFXVII is still as prevalent as it ever was. If she's still out there somewhere, I have to wonder what Catalina must think about what's become of her favorite little PS1 RPG that she wrote two novels worth of fanfic about 23 years earlier.

Well, as time marches on and FFXVII becomes ever more of a multimedia juggernaut of a franchise, I think now's as good a time as any to once again take a look back at how it got that way. The back end of *Sink* was still mostly written before the Compilation of FFXVII existed, with only the last handful of chapter releasing after 2005 when Advent Children redefined FFXVII for the world, so it's still very much an extension of the original game right up until its very end. Many people would probably say that in the face of the canon content that would come later, old sequel stories like *Sink* are irrelevant these days, mere curiosities at best, pointless drivel at worst, but that's not how I see it. While obviously they do not hold the same significance in the larger landscape of FFXVII that official works do, that doesn't mean they're not important. They're reflective of the passion and love for the game that thousands and thousands of people had, even before it became what it is now.

Kazushige Nojima, lead writer for the FFXVII series, said in an interview in the Ultimania for FFXVII Remake that he "realized that every person who's played the original game has built their own different version of *Final Fantasy VII*'s world in their head, and that's something I wanted to honor as well" in regards to why the development team decided to take FFXVII Remake in the unexpected direction that they did. While I doubt he was talking about ancient sequel fanfiction specifically with that comment, it does show that even he knows there's a certain value to how other people perceived the game and its characters and world. So while the tale of AVALANCHE going up against a strange underground cult alongside the most OC-ass OC to ever OC doesn't really have much bearing to anything outside of itself, that doesn't mean it's insignificant, in its own way.

tl;dr: Old fanfiction is COOL and BASED and you should read it.

This is a weird sentiment to have inside the front of the second book, admittedly, but as FFXVII expands ever further from its roots, it's just something I was thinking about.

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**PLAYLIST**

[https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLmRqCtSNxZfhESIA6\\_nV1bfhw9jIuzRh](https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLmRqCtSNxZfhESIA6_nV1bfhw9jIuzRh)



# Chapter Twenty-Six

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## *The Prisoner's Release*

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*"It's all been shot to hell. Things can't get any worse." —Titus*

---

**T**he Planet had existed since the beginning of Time. A living breathing, sentient creature in its own unique way, it had seen the passage of many a race over its long lifetime. It had a consciousness of its own. Pain it knew as intimately as happiness, just as any human did. However, even after the fall of Sephiroth and the destruction of all the Mako reactors, the pain still refused to cease. When the Planet cried, it was a heartfelt shriek of agony, not happiness. The Planet used to sing when it felt joy or contentment. It used to sing just for the sake of singing, because singing was beautiful.

It had been a long time since the Planet last sang.

Ageless and eternal as it was, the Planet had seen the subsequent birth and fall of tribe after tribe, race after race. When the Cetra inhabited the earth, the Planet shared in their contentment and peace. And when the humans arrived and chased the Cetra off their homeland, the Planet didn't know whether to weep at the loss of one race or rejoice at the birth of a new one. But weep it did, because these humans were a bellicose type. So many souls the Lifestream embraced when the humans waged terrible wars against one another, the blood from so many dead warriors soaking into the soil. And in the depths of the Planet, judgment was passed on these lost souls. The Planet had to punish those humans that had forgotten the earthen womb that had given them birth. It was a dirty, foul job, but it was the Planet's duty to maintain dominion over its incorrigible children.

But there were some creatures that the Planet had no control over.

Gods and goddesses were born, worshipped by the human tribes alongside the Planet itself. Water God Leviathan. Shiva the Ice Angel. The Lost Knights of the Round. They survived into modern days, but many had fallen from their original glory. Countless deities encased in summon materia, doomed to be called at the whim of any half-witted human. What a travesty, to put such beings in cages of magic, to be at the disposal of human beings.

But far more dangerous were the Beasts who were not caged.

Coming into existence when the Planet did, these creatures had lived on into the new age when humans had no respect for life, no reverence for the gods of ancient times. The last beings who would have worshipped them wholeheartedly had long since passed, and these great creatures of lost ages were left without true respect, without true admiration.

This made them angry.

So very angry...

\* \* \* \*

Cloud didn't know how he did it, but he somehow managed to move back up to the front ranks alongside Vincent, bypassing Barret and Cait completely. Elena had been behaving rather well despite the fact that she had made it very clear that she wasn't happy at all to be riding on Cloud's back. In fact, she had sort of become his eyes, since more often than not, Cloud found himself blinded by sewer water and his own waterlogged bangs. He soon mastered the art of walking on his toes, something that wasn't exceedingly difficult in the water. It added a few inches to his height but took a toll on his balance. Several times he had to listen to Elena's whining when he tripped and dunked them both under the sewer water.

The other thing that tired him out was the fact that Vincent seemed to have increased his pace. Not at all discouraged by the water clawing at his shoulders, Vincent continued to press forward with incredible speed, his hair and bandana trailing behind him in the water meekly, unable to keep up with their owner's pace. Cloud wanted to ask the man how much farther it was, or how much longer they were going to have to walk, or how he *knew* that Yuffie was in greater danger than she was before, or just *how* Chaos was communicating with him without speaking. There were so many questions—so many things he didn't understand. He hated it when one of the greatest mysteries in his life was one of his friends...

"Vincent!" he suddenly heard Rude call. "Can you predict how much farther?"

"Not much," Vincent clipped without turning around. Cloud was surprised he had even bothered to reply.

"Why're you asking?" Cid demanded of the normally quiet Turk.

"It's late afternoon already," Rude replied matter-of-factly. "If it took us this long to get down here, it will take us just as long to get back, maybe even longer, since we may be heavier one, possibly two, people."

"It's only afternoon?" Cid echoed incredulously. "Damn...I thought we had been down here at least for a day by now..."

"Being underground distorts human perception of time," Rude said.

"Well, ain't that just laddy-doo and peachy-poo?" Cid said sarcastically as he dipped the Venus Gospel into the water again to keep himself floating along. "Next time you



wanna talk, tell us some good news.”

Barret turned around to stare at Cid. “You didn’t know that being underground messes with yer head?” he asked smugly. “You’re even stupider than I thought.”

Cid scowled deeply. “@#\$\$% you! You’re not gonna tell me that you knew about it!”

“I live in a coal-mining town, dumbass.”

Cloud rolled his eyes as the two started going at it again. In a few minutes, he knew that Cait and Elena would probably jump in and starting arguing as well, but he had learned long ago that such trifles were what his teammates sometimes did to keep themselves sane. Whatever floated their boats. They could argue themselves silly while he concentrated on keeping up with Vincent’s taxing pace.

It turned out that he didn’t have to strain himself for much longer; Vincent only led them for a few more minutes before he suddenly came to an abrupt stop. Cloud glanced at him in puzzlement, no longer fighting to keep his head above the water. The ground underneath him had risen slightly, thank the gods.

“What’s wrong?” Tifa called from the back.

“Dead end,” Vincent said flatly, staring at the unbroken, dark wall in front of them. Cloud followed his gaze, frowning deeply.

*This can’t be right.*

“You’ve got to be kidding me!!” Cait lamented, slapping a gloved paw to his furry forehead melodramatically and pretending to faint off of Barret’s shoulder.

“We didn’t come all this way for nuthin’!” Barret exclaimed angrily, talking to no one in particular.

“You’re right,” Cloud said suddenly, and something in his voice made everyone else fall silent. “We *didn’t* come all this way for nothing.” He turned to Vincent, and Elena had to tighten her grip to avoid sliding off his back.

The gunslinger was staring hard at the wall, crimson eyes narrowed and flashing with something that could almost be called anger. Or indignation. Or frustration. Or maybe even fear. What was Vincent afraid of?

“Yuffie’s somewhere beyond this wall, isn’t she?” Cloud asked evenly.

Vincent shot him a dark glare out of the corner of his eye, as if he loathed even being asked such a question. Cloud would have flinched underneath that gaze if he hadn’t been accustomed to Vincent’s mood swings.

"Yes," Vincent said at last. "I'm certain she's past this wall. Where, I cannot say, but I know she's there."

"And Reeve?" Elena suddenly asked. Cloud winced at how hopeful her voice sounded.

"I don't know," Vincent said simply.

"Either way," Cloud stated firmly. "We're going in."

"Right," Cait said dubiously. "And, um, just how do you propose we *get* in?"

"It's not a matter of 'in'," Vincent spoke up. "It's a matter of 'under'."

Cid caught on immediately. "Oh HELL no! There's no way in HELL that I'm gonna—"

"I'm going under," Vincent announced. "If I don't come back, then I'm either dead or captured."

He looked at Cloud, and the AVALANCHE leader gave him a slight, respectful nod, some of his saturated bangs falling into his eyes. Elena lifted them out of his face in time for him to see Vincent take a deep breath and dive underneath the surface of the water, his overly large shirt ballooning behind him as he disappeared out of sight. A few bubbles surfaced following his submergence, and then there was nothing else.

Even the resident loudmouths didn't dare speak as they all waited to see whether or not Vincent would resurface. Cloud prayed he would, and that the man would bring good news with him.

*Yeah...good news that—Hey! Guess what, guys? We can go into the super-secret subterranean headquarters of the preternatural bad guys and run the high chances of being devoured by some monstrous anaconda. Good news, indeed.*

But no matter how insensible it might have been, Cloud hoped that Vincent found an entrance somehow. He had a feeling that if they didn't manage to find Yuffie and Reeve on this trip, they would probably never would.

After what seemed like an eternity of waiting not very patiently, Vincent's head finally broke the surface again. The gunslinger sucked huge gulps of air into his oxygen-deprived lungs, showing long strands of raven hair out of his face as he did so. Everyone leaned forward, a mixture of wariness and grim expectance flickering in their eyes. Vincent didn't say anything, though. He merely stared meaningfully at Cloud, some strange and alien emotion shifting in his eyes, here and then gone. A fleeting thing not used to making its home in those crimson depths.

Cloud's jaw clenched, and he nodded stiffly. "Right."

"Right what?" Elena demanded from her place on Cloud's back. She was still holding his bangs out of his eyes.

"The entrance is at the very bottom of the wall," Vincent spoke up, pointing towards the precise spot with his claw. "It's a large hole that continues down and forward. It should be able to fit two people at a time comfortably. From what I can tell it's a straight shot, so we don't have to worry about getting lost."

Cloud nodded, but his heart was already starting to pound in his chest. "Just make sure you keep someone in front and beside you at all times."

"Heyheyhey," Cid said warningly. "Just how LONG is this tunnel? Old men like me can't hold their breath for very long, you know."

"You could if you'd lay off the cigarettes," Elena snapped. Cloud could feel her heartbeat racing against his back, and the hands that were holding his bangs were trembling slightly. Fear had apparently made her snappish.

Cid's true-blue eyes narrowed menacingly, anxiety not bringing out the best in the pilot. "Don't you start with me, woman," he growled. "I ain't no good to any of ya'll if I'm dead."

"Vincent?" Cloud asked.

"I'm not sure how long the tunnel is," the man answered calmly. "But we're close to something, very close."

"Well, shit!" Cid suddenly exclaimed, snapping his goggles down over his eyes. "If we're so *goddamn* close, then count me d'fuck in!"

Cloud couldn't decide whether he was being sarcastic or not. You never could tell with Cid.

"What about Cait's moogle?" Tifa suddenly asked, casting a glance at the large pink makeshift raft Cid was still plopped on.

"No prob!" Cait said confidently, hopping to his feet on Barrer's shoulder, much to the big man's consternation. "Just tell ol' Cid over there to give him back, and I can get him through!"

Cloud frowned. "Are you sure?"

Cait smiled proudly and adjusted the little crown he had on his head. "Of course I'm sure, O' Fearless Leader! I just need to be there to steer him through, and we'll make it

just fine.”

Cloud took a deep breath, trying to calm his nerves. “Alright. Vincent, you lead the way. Barret and Cid, you follow him and don’t lose track of him. Then Rude and Tifa. Then Elena and me. Cait, you bring up the rear. Let’s go.”

\* \* \* \* \*

At first, the tremors were so faint that Fa-Li didn’t even notice them. One minute, she was following Titus down a winding tunnel and wondering why the Master had summoned Jezebel and Montana, and the next she was plowing nose-first into the back of Titus’ leather jacket. With a short yelp, she stumbled backwards, her heels fighting for purchase on the rocky floor. Well-worn as it was, the craggy ground could still be rather treacherous at times.

“Titus!” she demanded of her companion’s shock-still figure. “Don’t DO that! The last thing we need is for me to—”

The green-eyed man suddenly whirled around and clamped one of his gloved hands over her mouth, cutting off her words. “Shhh!” he hissed, voice tense.

All her protests dying in her throat, Fa-Li became absolutely still. Their affair a year ago had taught her to trust Titus’ instincts before her own. Her dark brown eyes darted around the tunnel they were in, instinctively searching for hidden dangers. Nothing. The tunnel was empty except for the two of them.

Bewildered, she turned her gaze back to Titus, studying his face. Apparently, he was sensing something she wasn’t, not that there was anything new about that. He still had his index finger raised in the “shhhh” motion. His white-blond hair shimmered in the darkness like a wayward beacon, and his body was very still, only his green eyes moving as they roved around the entire tunnel—the floor, the walls, everywhere. Thinking she must have missed something, Fa-Li scanned the tunnel again, but all she could detect was a peculiar nervous crackling in the air, like caged electricity.

His hand falling away from her mouth, Titus slowly removed the glove of his right hand, his long fingers looking pale and fragile once stripped of the jet black gloves. The black-violet orb—darker than any kind of materia—glittered in the darkness, looking bloated and monstrous on the back of his hand. Carefully, Titus reached out and placed his hand on the rock wall, fingers unsettling some grit and sending it drifting to the floor. His emerald green eyes slipped closed, and he became stiller than the dead. Fa-Li wasn’t even sure he was breathing.

Clenching and unclenching her sweaty hands, she was about to ask Titus what was wrong when the orb imbedded on the back of his hand suddenly started to pulse with a

black-purple light, illuminating the farthest reaches of the tunnel and chilling the depths of Fa-Li's soul. There was an unspeakable darkness in that light, and it wasn't the normal kind of blazing/blaring/shining light. No, this light was *pulsing*. Like a heartbeat.

"Titus?" Fa-Li asked, not giving herself the opportunity to be ashamed of the waver in her voice. "What is that? What's going on?"

Titus' green eyes were open and veritably glowing in the foul light pulsing from the orb. "It's the Burrower," he said quietly. "It's awake, and it's angry."

Fa-Li tasted her pulse in the back of her throat. Fear—great and terrible fear—was suddenly all she knew.

Then their world started to fall apart.

\* \* \* \* \*

With one final stroke of his arm, Vincent's head broke the surface of the water. He sucked in a breath of the strange-smelling air and nearly inhaled a clump of his hair in the process. Struggling to draw air into his aching lungs and shove his hair away from his face at the same time, he was only able to catch a brief glimpse of a dimly-lit, echoing cavern all around him before he sensed an ominous force moving beneath him in the water. He water-rolled to the side just as the waterlogged forms of Cid and Barret broke the surface, fighting to pull air into their oxygen-deprived lungs. Cid was an amusing shade of blue, and Barret was hacking like he had a frog stuck in his throat. A split second later, Rude and Elena broke the surface, followed by Cloud and the bobbing form of Cait Sith and his moogles.

As a chorus of coughs and strangling noises filled the air, Vincent suddenly saw something long and red rise out of water and latch onto his arm. His hand was going for the Outsider before he realized that his mysterious attacker was wearing a glove that bore an uncanny resemblance to the Premium Heart...

Tifa Lockhart suddenly exploded out of the water, clinging to Vincent like her life depended on it. Her burgundy eyes were wide and red-rimmed as she stared at Vincent for a split second before she coughed violently, spitting out the same water that the others were.

"Tifa, I could have shot you," Vincent said levelly, allowing her to hang onto his arm while she struggled not to choke on the water she was regurgitating.

A couple of good, hearty coughs later, the young woman had her voice back and was

staring wide-eyed up at Vincent through a soaking wall of brown bangs. "I swallowed... sewer water!" she gasped, shaking his arm for emphasis.

"I see that," he replied calmly.

A sudden tickling ran down his spine, and he turned away from her to scan their surroundings with keen crimson eyes. They had surfaced in a water-filled cavern with a low, rocky ceiling that gave Vincent a vague feeling of claustrophobia. Deep but clean water filled every nook and cranny of the cavern except for the area on the right side, where the water gave way to dark rocks leading into a dimly lit tunnel.

*That's the way...* Vincent suddenly thought, just before noticing something.

The air was faintly green, and *that* smell hung in the air. The same one in the deep-sea complex. The same one he had scented on Cloud's clothes after the swordsman had battled with the giant snake. The green light that Chaos seemed to fear. And sure enough, when he looked deep within himself with eyes that weren't really there, he felt it—a faint trembling that he knew instinctively to be the demon. It was agitated.

*What do you fear, demon?* he wanted to ask it, but he knew that he would receive no answer. He only hoped that Chaos wouldn't try to force the transformation on him this time around. That was last thing he needed to deal with when Yuffie—

"Let's go," he announced flatly, wrapping his arm around Tifa and starting to paddle them both towards the rocky shore.

"But," Cid wheezed, weakly treading water. "I'm...still...catching...my breath!" Vincent swam right past him with Tifa still slung under his arm, ignoring her vehement protests that she could swim on her own. He knew she was lying; he could feel the fatigue in her limbs.

"That's what you get for smoking all those cigarettes!" Elena told Cid sternly, but despite her attitude, she had Cid by the arm and was tugging him towards the shore. Cloud and the others followed, all in varying conditions but all determined not to make this rescue mission fail.

Navigating the rocks on the shore proved trickier than Vincent had originally thought. They were slippery with moss, water, and some sticky substance that was eerily warm to the touch. No one wanted to be the first to make contact with the goo, but when Vincent put his hand and claw palms down in the gunk and started clambering up onto the rocks, everyone apparently deemed it safe and began their own ascent.

As it was, those present were in a state of semi-disarray—some in the water, some on the rocks, and some climbing onto the rocks—when the first tremors began.

Vincent was the first to feel them, but not in a physical sense. Balancing precariously on one of the slippery rocks, panic that wasn't his own suddenly hit him like a fist in the gut. The breath was stolen from his lungs, and he felt his body falling to the ground, knees striking the rock with enough painful force to keep him conscious. He vaguely heard Tifa and Cid calling to him, asking if he was alright, but he hadn't the strength to formulate a reply. Deep within himself, Vincent felt Chaos shifting violently. A dark tingling sensation spread down his back, signaling the beginnings of the transformation.

*No! Not now!* Vincent shook his head, fighting to maintain control over the demon. Not an easy thing by any standards. His lungs refused to function, and he felt darkness creeping in from the edges of his vision, drowning out the worried voices of his friends.

Tifa: "Vincent! Are you alright?!"

Cid: "Shit, he's all up in that goo! Get him away from that gross-ass shit!"

Rude: "I think the ground is shaking."

Cloud: "Vincent, talk to us!"

"Something," Vincent suddenly gasped, voice tearing its way painfully out of his tight throat. He swallowed hard. "There's something alive down here."

Someone grabbed at his shoulders, and he smelled the sharp tang of metal and salt that he had come to associate with Cloud. Warmth surrounded him, and he dimly realized that Cloud must be trying to carry him off the rocks, but was finding footing dangerously unstable in the slick, clear substance covering the stone floor. Vincent tried to speak again, to warn them about the tremors, but his voice refused to work. The ground started to shake violently when Cloud was in the middle of climbing down a particularly large boulder. Vincent felt the swordsman lose his balance and slide down the side of the boulder, unintentionally releasing his grip on Vincent in the process. Several alarmed cries rang through the cavern, accompanied by loud splashes as some of the others fell back into the water. Vincent and Cloud's fall wasn't that long, but still, the stone floor wasn't exactly the softest cushion. Vincent hit back first, the rocks slamming into one of his shoulder blades with jarring force. The back of his head struck the ground a second later, but surprisingly enough, it seemed to clear his head instead of knocking him unconscious.

His eyes snapped back into focus just in time to see a rock disengage from the ceiling and start to plummet towards him. Reflexes kicked in, and Vincent rolled left. The rock missed him by less than an inch, shattering into dozens of pieces on impact. He wrestled to his feet, barely managing to find footing on the wildly thrashing ground. He stumbled left and would have fallen again if Cloud hadn't caught his arm and steadied them both.

"You alright?!" he demanded of Vincent, voice loud so he could be heard over the

roar of the falling rocks and the cries of his comrades.

Vincent stared dumbly at him for a second before recovering his wits. “The tunnel!” he yelled, jerking his head in the direction of the yawning opening. “We have to make it to the tunnel!”

His words were rather needless, as most of the others had already figured out that the shelter of the tunnel was safer than gyrating wildly in the cavern and waiting to be squashed by a rock. Barret and Cait Sith were making a beeline for the tunnel, followed closely by Cid. The two humans had their arms covering their heads to prevent injury from one of the plummeting rocks. Cait Sith wasn't bothering with such precautions, and pieces of rocks kept striking him and the moogles, though they didn't seem to have lasting effects. One of the perks of being made of metal and stuffed with fluff. Quickly, Vincent glanced back towards the water and saw Rude in the process of pulling Elena out of the subterranean lake. Tifa came to his aid, all three of them covered in water, rock dust, and goo.

Cloud gripped his shoulder and gave him a shove in the direction of the tunnel. “You get over to the tunnel! I'll go help them!”

Anyone with stronger reservations about leaving friends alone in danger would have stubbornly refused to go, but Vincent easily saw the sense in Cloud's logic. *Some*—preferably most—of them had to survive. They would be no use to either Yuffie or Reeve if they were dead.

So, Vincent took off running towards the tunnel the best he could, flinging his arms up to cover his head. He didn't know what would happen if he was struck in the head by a rock. He might die, he might not. His abnormalities protected him against injuries, and many things that would have killed a normal human being barely fazed him, but Chaos was the main cause of Vincent's preternatural abilities, and with the demon acting so erratic as of late...he didn't want to take his chances.

Even with the ground shifting violently underneath his feet and a multitude of rocks crashing all around him, Vincent managed to make it to safety without any major mishaps. One rock struck his metal arm with a loud clang, the force of the impact sending him to one knee for an instant before he recovered his balance.

As soon as he managed to lurch into the slightly quivering tunnel, Vincent sagged against the trembling rock wall, bracing himself with both hands and trying to catch his breath. Beside him, he could hear Cid, Barret, and Cait calling out to the others, urging them to hurry. Despite his worry, Vincent forced himself to breathe slowly and deeply, his eyes slipping closed. He could feel Chaos within him, only the demon was doing nothing but emitting odd *crackling* energy, like a wolf preparing to launch itself at the throat of its



victim. Was Chaos afraid of the earthquake? No, that wasn't it. It almost seemed as if the demon was in a standoff, but with what? Vincent knew the odd smell and the eerie green light had something do with it, but...

He was so confused. He hated being confused.

A strange, cool feeling washed over him, stilling the pounding of his heart and making the sweat and water on his skin chill, like silent tears in the winter robbed of all their heat. He felt like he was floating in cool darkness in which nothing existed but the pure essence of the mind, infinite and boundless. No body needed. Such a thing was unnecessary for...

Rock tunnel.

Hidden door.

Hallway with cells.

Door, like on a submarine.

Another hallway.

Hallway.

Hallway.

Hallway.

Endless hallway.

And the torture chamber. And Yuffie.

"Vincent!" a voice suddenly cried, right in his ear.

Alarmed at the sudden intrusion, Vincent's eyes snapped open, and his hand was flying towards the Outsider before he knew what he was doing.

Barret held up his arms and took a step back. "Whoa, foo! Don't shoot!"

Vincent let his arm fall from where it had been hovering over the butt of the gun. "What do you need?" he asked calmly.

Barret looked at him incredulously before shaking his head, his dark skin an odd color in the greenish light of the tunnel. "You're always so goddamn calm."

"The ground isn't shaking anymore," Vincent observed, peering around and seeing that Cloud and others had made it through just fine. Elena had a shallow cut on her forehead, but it was nothing serious.

"Well, you're a master of stating the obvious," Cait Sith stammered, not trying to be sarcastic. He was just making nervous chatter. Everyone was covered with water, goo, and dirt from the falling rocks, which had blended into an interesting muddy concoction that dirtied skin and clothes. Anxiety and fear stank up the air alongside the odd scent from the deep-sea complex.

"What's this green light?" Elena suddenly demanded, hugging herself as if cold. "And what's that smell? I don't like it."

"It makes me afraid," Rude deadpanned, sounding more indifferent than fearful.

"It's the same light and smell that was in the deep-sea complex Yuffie and I escaped from," Vincent explained, his level voice drawing everyone's attention. "They seem to be here to evoke unwanted fear in travelers. Now that you know their purpose, fight them."

Everyone stared at him until Cid muttered, "Yeah right." He was tapping the Venus Gospel restlessly against his thigh, keen blue eyes roving back and forth from the water-filled cavern to the dimly lit tunnel that awaited them.

### ...FAST...

Vincent gasped, leaping away from the wall, hand snaking under the hem of his overly large shirt and closing around the comforting weight of the Outsider, which was in its hip holster.

"Are you alright?" Cloud asked sharply, his own gloved hand hovering over the hilt of the Ultima Weapon.

"We have to hurry," Vincent rapped out tersely, moving down the tunnel.

"You really *do* know where Yuffie is, don't you?" Tifa asked softly.

Vincent stopped and turned to stare her right in the eyes. "Yes, I do."

His friends gazed at him solemnly, dozens of emotions flitting across their faces before finally settling on one: trust. They believed him, and they believed *in* him.

God help them all.

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Cid demanded, sounding gung-ho despite the fear in his eyes. The green light was obviously taking its toll on him.

"Someone should remain behind to guard our escape route," Rude suddenly suggested, casting a glance over at the ravaged cavern. "There may be aftershocks. We don't want our only way out of here to be cut off."

Cloud frowned, obviously not too keen on the idea of splitting up. “You’re right, I guess. Anybody want to volunteer?”

Cait Sith raised his hand. “Me! I’ll stay!”

A dubious look crossed Cloud’s face. “You can stay, but someone else needs to stay as well. If something other than aftershocks decides to put in an appearance, I’m afraid you’re only so intimidating. No offense.”

“None taken!” Cait replied cheerfully.

Cloud glanced at around at his comrades, waiting for someone to speak up. When no one did, he turned to where Elena and Rude stood solemnly next to each other.

“I know you don’t like to be separated, but can one of you stay?” he asked calmly.

A scowl darkened Elena’s face. “Why us?” she demanded. “You’re always splitting us up! Why don’t you let Tifa or Barret stay behind?”

“Yuffie is one of their closest friends,” Cloud explained before anyone else could reply. “They want to be there when we rescue her.”

Elena looked like she wanted to say something, but all the fight suddenly drained out of her. Shoulders sagging, she heaved a weary sigh, looking pitiful in her mud-covered suit. “I’ll stay,” she grumbled, trudging over to stand next to Cait. The robotic cat patted her shoulder sympathetically.

“Thank you, Elena,” Cloud said sincerely.

She wouldn’t look at any of them. “Yeah, yeah,” she said begrudgingly, waving her hand in a dismissive gesture. “Just go on. If the sky starts falling again, me and the cat will go and try to catch all the goddamn rocks or something.”

With those words of reluctant closure, everyone turned back to where Vincent was waiting calmly, using a blank expression to hide his impatience. He didn’t even wait for a nod from Cloud or any indication that the swordsman was relinquishing control over to him; instead, he just whirled and strode down the rock tunnel, one hand hovering near the Outsider in case they met any opposition. This was a shot in the dark, and Vincent had no idea what might be waiting for him around the next corner. Normally, he would never have risked his life on such a measly lead, but he had never felt this *desperate* before.

Crimson eyes darting around the tunnel, he searched relentlessly for the hidden door he had seen in his mind. The smell in the air was making him a little light-headed; it seemed to be more potent down here than it had been in the deep-sea complex. But it wasn’t really that aggravating compared to Chaos, who was still emitting that crackling

energy and just generally being a bothersome nuisance. The disturbing sensation was more than a little distracting, especially when Vincent needed to concentrate now more than ever, but he also noticed that when he focused on Chaos' unseen energy, it was almost as if he could feel the hidden door *pulling* him. However, it was a lot like creeping closer to a patch of quicksand; if he wasn't careful, he would get pulled under, and Chaos would take control of his body.

"Talk to us, Vincent," Cloud suddenly said tightly. His fear was a sharp, hard-edged smell in the air, and once again, Vincent knew the green light was to blame. Cloud didn't spook easily.

"I'm looking for a hidden door," Vincent said curtly, reaching out with his claw and trailing it over the rock wall, the sensitized metal picking up a faint trembling within the earthen surroundings. Seemed like they hadn't seen the last of the earthquake yet.

"What does this door look like?" Barret demanded.

"Don't know," Vincent said, moving down the tunnel with the others trailing behind him. "I'll know it when I get close to it."

*Chaos, tell me where it is* he called to the demon. Of course, it didn't reply, the blasted creature. It probably couldn't even understand him.

"I don't want to spend all goddamn day looking for a friggin' door," Cid grumbled, sounding jittery.

"We're not looking for a door," Tifa said nervously. "We're looking for Yuffie and Reeve."

*Yuffie* Vincent thought, still running his claw over the wall. What if he didn't get to her in time? He suddenly realized that he might not be able to tolerate his own presence any longer if he found her dead...or didn't find her at all. Just picturing her youthful face with its stormy gray eyes still untouched by the greater sins of man made a strange ache blossom in his chest. It seemed like ages since he had seen her last. A wave of sudden dizziness washed over him, and it was suddenly as if he could hear her voice, smell her scent. He felt a strange presence in the air.

And just like that, he knew where the door was.

Pushing away from the wall, he strode across to the opposite side of the tunnel, forcing Tifa and Rude to move aside hastily as he ran his hands over the rock wall. He could feel it. The door was here, right in front of him. The tunnel trembled slightly, bits and pieces of stones falling around them. A couple of rocks the size of Ping-Pong balls struck Vincent's back, but he paid them no heed, for the dislodging of the rocks had

allowed him to see a flash of metal hidden deep in the wall. It was the edge of the door.

Hooking his fingers—both fleshly and metallic—into the small area, he pulled with all his might and felt the section of the wall give a little.

“Help me pull,” he urged no one in particular. Tifa and Rude immediately went over to him, placing their hands in alignment with his and pulling when he did. The rock wall budged a little more.

In the end, it took the combined strength of Vincent, Rude, Tifa and Cloud relentlessly pulling on the section of wall and Cid using the unbreakable spearhead of the Venus Gospel as a lever of sorts for them to coax the concealing rock wall away from the metal door beyond it. Barret, with a gun for one arm, was of little use and could do nothing but shift his weight anxiously from foot to foot. Short-lived tremors shook the tunnel twice during the agonizingly slow process, but each time, the wall seemed to move just a little more.

The hidden door was grossly simplistic after all the strenuous labor they had undergone just to reveal it. Made of plain gray metal untouched by rust or any other sign of age, it had one shiny handle on it, which Vincent touched tentatively, making sure it wasn't magicked. When he picked up no sense of otherworldliness from the handle, he grabbed it and pushed the door open, the others crowding in behind him, their hands ready to pull out their weapons.

But there was no need for weapons. The door swung open to reveal a long, metal corridor. A metal corridor lined with silent cells on either side, lit with small but intense lights imbedded in the ceiling. The smell of fear and blood hung in the air, like old death with a bad aftertaste, but the odd, fear-inducing smell wasn't present in the corridor. Neither was the green light. The absence of those two factors made the corridor a marginally more pleasant place to be than the tunnel.

“This is the way,” Vincent said by way of explanation as he stepped into the tunnel, his borrowed boots clanging against the metal floor. He felt the others entering behind him, the fear-sweat that had clung to them in the tunnel beginning to dissipate.

“Alright,” he heard Cloud say. “You just concentrate finding the way to Yuffie. We'll cover your back, Vincent.”

“Appreciate it,” Vincent said softly, but he still had to resist the urge to unholster the Outsider and carry it around with him. There was no use drawing a gun if you don't intend to fire it, he told himself.

Nothing stirred in the cells to either side of them as Vincent led the way down the corridor, his eyes locked on the door at the end. A door with a circular handle, like one

might find on a submarine. He was definitely on the right track. The *pulling* feeling was stronger, almost as if Yuffie herself was calling to him. Vincent could faintly hear the others conversing softly behind him, but all his attention was riveted on the door. When he got close enough, he simply ran the last ten feet to the door, filled with a sense of urgency. He wrapped both of his hands around the aged metal of the handle, flakes of rust falling to the metal floor. He twisted it experimentally, pleased to find that it wasn't that hard to turn. He could probably get it open all on his own.

Cid and Barret came up behind him, looking over his shoulders curiously. Even as he turned the handle, Vincent could sense that Cloud, Tifa and Rude were further down the corridor, talking softly amongst themselves as they peered into the cells lining the corridor.

*They must be looking for Reeve...*

As Vincent gave the handle another creaking turn, he wondered if he should tell them that Reeve wasn't in this prison corridor. Reeve wasn't anywhere in the immediate vicinity, or Chaos would have alerted him to the man's presence. But Reeve wasn't dead either, or Chaos would have told him that as well. Neither of those pieces of information was very comforting, so Vincent didn't say anything. It was always better to keep quiet, anyways.

The door suddenly shifted under his hands, swinging open with a faint creaking sound. There was another tunnel beyond the open threshold. He could feel something calling him in the distance. Yes, this was the way.

Vincent was about to step through the door when he suddenly heard Tifa cry out in alarm. The Outsider was in his hand before he whirled around. Beside him, Cid and Barret also took battle-ready stances.

Quite a bit of the way down the corridor, Cloud, Tifa, and Rude stood bunched together. The Ultima Weapon gleamed bright and brilliant in Cloud's gloved hands; his hard, Mako blue eyes stared out from either side of the unnatural blade as he handled it with an ease usually exclusive to larger men. Tifa and Rude flanked him on both sides, their fists up and ready.

In front of them stood a young man.

He was leaning on one of the cell doors, his position allowing both trios to clearly see his profile. Short and pale with forgettable features, he wore a plain brown robe that covered almost every inch of his body and dragged on the floor. The hood bunched up behind his head, making him look even smaller than he already was. He didn't move, just stood there, separating Cloud's group from Vincent's.

"Who are you?!" Barret demanded, his voice booming and echoing in the corridor.

The man smiled with his eyes still closed. It wasn't a nice smile. He didn't seem at all bothered by the fact that five angry members of AVALANCHE and one not-too-pleased Turk were surrounding him.

"Get out of our way," Cloud ordered flatly. "Or we're going to have to go through you."

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," the man said in a soft, breathy voice. "This faction is falling apart. The only thing that awaits you further into the earth is a certain doom." All these morbid words were said in a cheerful tone, as if this was the most glorious day of the man's life.

"We don't care," Cloud said harshly. "Let us pass."

The man smiled wider and suddenly opened his eyes, revealing innocent, empty wells of pale blue. "I can't let you do that," he told Cloud lightly.

The swordsman's jaw clenched, and without taking his eyes off the strange man, he called to Vincent, "You guys go find Yuffie. We'll take care of this guy."

Vincent hesitated, his grip tightening on the Outsider. He shouldn't leave the three of them alone. He and Barret were the only long-range fighters at the current moment. They had a Long Range materia, but it was, unfortunately, sheathed in Cait's Fire Armlet. Of course, they could always use magic, but it was imprudent to attack their opponent without first knowing his strengths and weaknesses. And despite his benign appearance, Vincent could sense a deep well of power in the man. He was afraid that if he left with Cid and Barret, Cloud and the others would find themselves in over their heads.

The AVALANCHE leader apparently sensed Vincent's hesitation and didn't like it. "Vincent, just go!" he snapped. "We'll be fine."

The strange man suddenly turned those soulless blue eyes to gaze at where Cid, Barret, and Vincent were clustered around the end of the corridor, the tunnel stretching out behind them. "Yes," he said pleasantly. "I believe you'd better go after your friend, Vincent Valentine. Do you feel her pulling to you in the distance?"

Vincent stiffened.

"You know what that is?" the young man continued, still smiling. "She's just become expendable. And she's calling to you because she's scared. Our little world is falling apart. We can't have any witnesses hanging around, can we? Better hurry now."

Vincent glared at the man, his blood-red eyes locking onto the sanguine face. Those eyes could tell a lie and never flinch, but Vincent could *feel* the truth in the man's words.

Chaos shifted inside him, and the man's eyes suddenly widened slightly, as if in surprise.

However, Vincent had no intention of hanging around to see what had surprised the man. "Let's go," he ordered Cid and Barret, turning on heel and running out of the corridor, into the tunnel beyond. The two AVALANCHE members reluctantly followed, with frustrated, regretful glances back at their three comrades.

"We gotta hurry back," Cid urged as he ran after Vincent. "They're gonna need our help!"

"I know," Vincent said calmly, but his thoughts were elsewhere. The pulling feeling was stronger, more urgent, drawing him like a moth to a flame. Was Yuffie in danger again? The strange man had suggested that they were getting rid of all the evidence that this little "faction"—as he had called it—ever existed. And that, of course, meant killing off all the prisoners as well. And what of Reeve? Was it already too late for him? Vincent prayed that that wasn't the case.

The tunnels surrounding them became just one mindless blur without true shape or definition as Vincent ran down them. The green light and odd smell had reappeared at some time or the other, but Vincent did his best to ignore them both. Now there was also a faint beating sound in the air, like the pulse of a giant's heart. In its own way, it was more unnerving than the light and the smell, and when Vincent tried to concentrate on the "pulling" feeling, the echoing pounding only got louder. He gritted his teeth in frustration but kept on moving. He knew he was the only one hearing the beating sound, or Cid and Barret would have said something by now. It was no use mentioning it to them and making them worry about something that wasn't affecting them.

Several times during the course of their run, tremors shook the tunnel, sending small rocks raining down them. Each time the tremors were longer and more severe, and the last one flung them against the walls of tunnel. Time was running out, and all three of them knew it. If they didn't hurry, the walls and ceiling would collapse and crush the life out of them.

After what seemed like an eternity, the invisible energy that had strung Vincent along all this time suddenly drew taut, like a cord ready to snap, full of urgency and tension. Vincent stumbled to a stop, barely winded whereas Cid and Barret gasped for breath, unable to form words. Looking around furiously, Vincent saw that they had ended up in a tunnel that was an intriguing mixture of rock and metal, natural and unnatural all at once. Yuffie was very close by. Very close.

Cid suddenly tapped Vincent on the leg with the Venus Gospel, forcing the gunslinger to turn around. The pilot's chest was heaving, sweat glistening on his brow and running down his face. His blue eyes looked almost feverish, but he still managed to gesture further



down the tunnel with the end of his spear.

“Door!” he gasped.

Frowning, Vincent whirled around, searching the metal and rock walls for anything out of the ordinary. He started to think the green light was making Cid see things when he suddenly spotted a handle protruding from amongst the rocks. Had Cid been standing a few more inches to the left, he would have missed it as well.

Nodding his thanks to the weary pilot, Vincent covered the distance to the door in two steps, grabbing onto the latch recklessly, not even checking for magic this time. He felt nothing from the metal handle, but when he pulled it down and tried to push or pull, the door wouldn't budge.

“Locked?” Barret asked, sounding only slightly out-of-breath this time around.

Vincent nodded grimly and quickly pressed the barrel of the Outsider against the handle. Barret and Cid backed up automatically, turning their faces away when Vincent did. The red-eyed man pulled the trigger, and the handle went flying off the door with a defeated whistling sound. Vincent kicked in the door just as another tremor shook the tunnel, sending all three of them tumbling artlessly into the room beyond.

“Shit! Yuffie!” Cid cried as soon as he regained his balance.

Vincent would have echoed his cry if he had been able to find his voice. A million emotions suddenly burst from their cages and rushed through his heart—relief, fear, surprise, maybe even happiness. But the emotion running rampant through his mind was fear.

They were in a torture chamber. There was no mistaking that fact. No obvious torture devices were lying around in the darkness, but the stench of terror and death in the air was something exclusive only to places where pain was inflicted on hapless victims. A light so intense it burned the eyes was rooted somewhere in the ceiling above, so that it blared down the center of the room, illuminating the shackled figure of Yuffie Kisaragi. She was still dressed in the tank top and shorts Tifa had lent her the day before, only now they looked a bit more ravaged, torn in some places. Long chains held her arms out to the sides and slightly above her head; her feet were shackled to the platform below her. She still had Vincent's bandana tied around her left shoulder, and the crimson brightness of fabric stood out against her pale skin. Her body was limp, sagging in the metal bindings like some forlorn rag doll. Her head was lowered, and she wasn't moving.

Barret immediately started forward, but Vincent threw out his claw, stopping the big man in his tracks. But no number of threats could stop Barret from protesting with worried harshness.

"What the hell you doin'?!" he whispered-hissed at Vincent. "We gotta go to her!"

"Just hold on a second," Vincent ordered quietly, eyes darting around the room suspiciously. "There have to be some sort of inhabitants down here, but we haven't seen any so far. This room is...too quiet. I don't think they'd leave a prisoner unguarded in such a time of crisis."

Cid shifted slightly. "So, you think something hiding in here?" he asked.

Vincent nodded. "I don't see anything, but that doesn't mean nothing is here."

Barret frowned deeply. "Well, we can't just stand here all day long."

"I know," Vincent deadpanned. He wanted nothing more than to run to up to Yuffie's unconscious figure and see if she was alright, but...something was wrong. The grotesque spotlight shining down on Yuffie was too bright. The shadows in the room were too thick, too dark, and Vincent suddenly received the impression that if he reached into that darkness, he would meet a solid wall rather than liquid black. It was more than a bit unnerving.

"Alright," Vincent said at last, unable to hold back any longer. "Let's go, but watch your back."

"Always," Cid said firmly, the spearhead of the Venus Gospel glittering in semi-darkness near the door.

Outsider in his hand, Vincent moved quickly towards the platform Yuffie stood on. His eyes darted around the room, not trusting the deceptive shadows. The darkness was stifling, and he felt like it was closing around them, suffocating them. He quickened his pace, ignoring the itchy feeling between his shoulder blades that told him he was being watched by unseen eyes.

A wall of dark brown hair hid Yuffie's face from view until Vincent stood directly under her, looking up at her delicately closed eyelids and slightly parted lips. He could see the faint rise and fall of her chest as she breathed and was thankful that she had the life in her to even draw a breath. He was so glad to have found her at last, so glad in fact that the extent of emotion he felt was humiliating.

"Yuffie," he whispered softly. He wanted to reach out and touch her bare leg, feel her skin underneath his fingertips, just to make sure she was real, but instead, he vaulted easily onto the platform, letting the horribly intense light wash over him, pierce him.

"Hurry it up, Vince," Cid urged, eyes roving the darkness methodically, searching for threats.

Vincent nodded, squinting underneath the harsh lighting. The dipping collar of Yuffie's tank top had begun to slip dangerously low, exposing the tops of her breasts, and he adjusted it out of a sense of propriety, knowing that if Yuffie had been awake to see him doing that, she probably would have popped him one. Reaching out, he gently tucked a portion of her hair behind one of her ears, his fingers grazing her warm, almost feverish skin. She was clearly alive, but that didn't mean she was out of danger yet. It didn't appear as if she had sustained any physical damage—at least none that he could see—but he had suspected from the beginning that the torture was going to be done through her mind. Cupping the side of her face with his palm, Vincent examined the shackles that bound her limbs. The ones locked onto her wrists were attached to a ridiculously long chain, the end of it latched onto the edge of high walkway that encircled the top portion of room.

*Where they can oversee the torture process* Vincent thought angrily.

Looping his left arm around Yuffie's waist and holding her against him gently, he pointed the Outsider down at the length of chain binding her feet to the platform. Closing his eyes and shielding the side of Yuffie's face with his own, he pulled the trigger, and the chain snapped cleanly in half. Of course, there was still the job of getting the cuff itself off of Yuffie's ankle, but they could worry about that later. Vincent had a stretch a little in order to get a clear shot at the other chain. He could fire a gun with his claw, but his aim wasn't very accurate, a very bad thing at a time like this when precision was of the essence.

He was just about to pull the trigger when a hissing sound suddenly crept through the room, unnaturally loud in the silence. Cid let out of a cry of surprise, and a split second later, something shifted in the shadows to the left of the platform. Vincent immediately readjusted his aim as a creature emerged from the darkness and into the circle of light. It couldn't have been more than two feet tall, and it looked like nothing more than a shapeless mass of brown, glistening flesh. It had two short, stubby legs that forced it to waddle clumsily, and two limbs protruded from its ventral side that might have been arms, only these arms had dozens of other phalanges that were in constant motion, writhing back and forth as if alive. The thing hissed like a basket full of vipers.

Vincent shot it, and the bullet blew the creature back into the darkness, still hissing. He hadn't killed it. He didn't know if he had even *wounded* it.

The hissing sound suddenly grew louder and, whirling around, the gunslinger saw that dozens of the little brown creatures were emerging from the shadows and moving towards the intruders, forcing Cid and Barret to back up until they were pressed against Yuffie's torture platform. Vincent's eyes narrowed. Had these creatures been hiding in the shadows the entire time? Why hadn't he been able to detect them?

"Shit!" Cid cried, swinging his spear in the direction of the approaching micro-army

of hissing creatures. "Hurry it up, Vincent!"

Trying to ignore the things congregating behind the platform, Vincent quickly shot off Yuffie's other ankle shackle and aimed upwards at the chain holding up her right arm. He pulled the trigger, and the links snapped, Yuffie's arm flopping bonelessly down to her side while the remaining chain length jangled unpleasantly. By that time, some of the Hissers were nearing the platform, and he had to fire into the writhing mass of them while still holding Yuffie's unconscious body against his to keep her from swinging off the platform.

Behind him, he suddenly heard Cid let out a loud cry of pain. Twisting his head around, he saw the pilot crouched on the floor, bracing his weight with the Venus Gospel and clutching his other hand to his head. There was a look of intense agony on his face.

"What's wrong with him?" Vincent demanded, voice coming out much calmer than he felt.

"Hell if I know!" Barret exclaimed, eyes darting back and forth from the approaching creatures to his fallen comrade. "Cid, get yer ass up!" He swung the Missing Score over and fired at a couple of Hissers that were getting dangerously close to the pilot.

"Get out," Cid suddenly snarled, clawing at his head with his one free hand, fingers raking through the short blonde hair. "Getoutgetoutgetoutgetout!" He lurched to his feet drunkenly, clutching the Venus Gospel in his unsteady hands. A cold feeling washed over Vincent.

"Look out, Barret!" he cried, wrapping his arms around Yuffie and throwing his weight against her, moving them both out of the way just as Cid swung his spear in a wide, blind arc, aiming for something he couldn't see. Barret let out a loud curse, and Vincent heard the spearhead of the Venus Gospel hit something metallic, mostly likely the big man's gun-arm. The air screamed as the spear swung in Vincent's direction, and he felt the razor-sharp tip of it slice through the back of his shirt, leaving a gaping hole in the black fabric.

Spinning by Yuffie's one remaining shackle and nearly swinging off the platform, Vincent managed to whirl them both around, fighting to keep his balance while raising the Outsider at the same time. He didn't want to shoot his friend, but if he had to choose between wounding one comrade and saving the lives of two others, then Cid was going to have to take the bullet. But as soon as he sighted down the barrel of the gun, he saw that Cid was once again on the ground, this time clutching both of his hands to his head. The Venus Gospel lay forgotten at his side.

Raising his one free arm into the air, Vincent yelled, "Fire 3!"

The Fire materia sheathed in the Outsider blazed with furious green light, and flames suddenly exploded amongst the Hissers, driving most of them back from Cid. However, the hissing sound only got louder, and Cid cried out in pain again.

“Barret!” Vincent called. “Fire at those creatures! I’m certain they’re the ones that are hurting him!”

Barret didn’t need to be told twice. He immediately opened fire, plowing down several of the Hissers. Hoping that Barret would manage to hit the one that was attacking Cid, Vincent pivoted and shot off Yuffie’s remaining shackle. The young woman sagged against him, free at last. Gathering her up in his arms, Vincent held her close and was just about to hop down to ground level when the earth around them suddenly began to shake violently, flinging him off the platform and to the harsh rock floor. Vincent twisted so that his back ended up absorbing most of the impact; Yuffie was safe within the circle of his arms. He half-expected the Hissers to swarm all over him like a pack of hungry hyenas, but to his surprise, the brown creatures skittered back into the shadows, their hisses slowly dying off. Instinctively, he curled himself around Yuffie, burying his face in her hair in an attempt to shield her from any debris that might be falling from the ceiling. Half the upper-level catwalk suddenly collapsed with the squeal of grinding metal and plummeting rock. Vincent could only pray that their exit wouldn’t be cut off.

The tremors suddenly died down to a mild shaking, and he jumped to his feet in an instant, supporting Yuffie’s weight easily. Barret was standing as well, but he had a small stream of blood running down the dark skin of one of his arms, where a particularly sharp rock had struck him. Cid also climbed shakily to his feet, still holding a trembling hand to his head.

“You alright, old man?” Barret asked him gruffly.

“No!” Cid snapped angrily, sounding severely shaken. “Let’s just get the @\$% outta here!”

\* \* \* \* \*

Fa-Li had to run to keep up with Titus’ long, determined strides. She had never seen her ex-lover in this condition before, and it made her nervous...even scared her a bit. She was used to Titus being stern and stoic, only showing emotions in random bursts that usually caught her by surprise and left her behind in the dust when they vanished as quickly as they had come. There and then gone, just like that! Sure, Titus was the brooding type, but never like this! This was beyond brooding; the look on Titus’ face was severely unstable, maybe even little psychotic. Not a comforting thought.

“Where are we going, Titus?” she asked fearfully as another tremor shook the ground,

nearly spilling her onto the rock floor.

"Titus!" she cried when he didn't answer her. The insane urge to scamper up and grab onto his hand suddenly struck her, and she would have followed through with it if she hadn't been so sure Titus would shake her off.

Instead, Fa-Li satisfied herself with grabbing onto the sleeve of his jacket, tugging hard. "Titus! We need to get out of here! This isn't the way out!"

Titus angrily jerked his arm from her grasp, unfazed as the tunnel quivered, spilling rocks onto his broad shoulders and tense back. He seemed impervious, invincible—a man who was so far gone that he could no longer feel pain. That was bad. In all the time she had known him, Fa-Li had never truly seen Titus in complete/total/point-of-no-return pissed-off mode, and she had a feeling that she was seeing a vague glimmer of just how completely unstable Titus could get. It wasn't pretty.

Still, she believed it was her duty to keep her stubborn asshole of an ex in line, so she ran and flung her arms around his waist, trying to get him to come to a stop and listen to her. Naturally, he didn't stop, and she ended up being pulled along for the ride, her heeled boots dragging on the rocky floor.

"Titus!" she snarled, tightening her grip and noting the tense muscles of his belly clenching underneath her arms. "This is the way to the prison cells!"

"I know," he said tightly, and his anger was an almost tangible thing in the air.

"If you know then why do you insist on—" Fa-Li's voice trailed off when Titus' destination suddenly came into view. Her arms slipped from around his waist as he strode up to the plain metal door, his hand reaching for the circular handle.

"Titus!" she gasped. "You can't! This is—"

Flinging the door open in one swift, angry motion, Titus suddenly spun and gripped her shoulders hard enough to bruise, the look in his green eyes stopping the words in her throat.

"Don't follow me," he said coldly before whirling away and disappearing through the door and the green mists within.

And for once, Fa-Li did as she was told, easing her frazzled nerves by pacing back and forth in front of the gaping door, arms covering her head to avoid being brained by falling rocks. The ground was still trembling. Oh yeah, the Burrower was one PO'd bastard right now. But why? *Why??!!*

Titus reappeared in the doorway, the limp form of President Reeve of Neo-Shinra

flung over one shoulder. The man looked lifeless. Without looking at her, Titus kept on striding down the tunnel, heading deeper into the earth. Fa-Li, of course, followed him, talking nervously.

“What are you doing, Titus? You know, you don’t have permission to touch the prisoners anymore. Oh! Are you going to sacrifice him to the Hungry One? It just might calm his fury! Is that what you’re going to do, Titus? Huh?”

“No,” Titus suddenly snapped, voice low and cold. “This man will not be a sacrifice. He’s not even dead, when he very well should be.”

Shocked, Fa-Li stared at the dark head of President Reeve. His hair had tumbled all around his face, and his body looked weak and drained, but when she studied him more closely, she noticed his fingers were twitching ever so slightly, a small semblance of life still remaining. Her hand reached out, as if to touch that black hair, and sure enough, she felt the heat from his fever, pulsing deep within his skull. He *was* alive. Insane, maybe. But alive, surely. She had seen other prisoners perish under less harsh conditions than this.

Another tremor shook the tunnel, but this time Fa-Li paid it no heed. “How can he still be alive?” she wondered softly.

“His will to live is considerable,” Titus said flatly as he carried the President’s weight like it was nothing. “But in the end, it won’t be enough to save him.”

“What are you going to do with him?”

“Dump him into the Lifestream.”

Fa-Li’s eyes widened slightly. “But...why? He’ll get Mako-poisoning, you know. The Lifestream is never quiet.”

Titus casually batted away a plummeting rock that was on a collision course with his head. “I think Mako poisoning is a more merciful fate than what awaits him otherwise. His usefulness has already passed, and the *Master* will want to get rid of all prisoners quickly. Especially now that he, in all his ‘infinite’ wisdom, has *apparently* done something to enrage the Burrower. It’s all been shot to hell. Things can’t get any worse. The Master has...desecrated what little remained of our religion.” By the time he was finished, Titus was trembling with barely checked fury.

“Do you still think of him as your Master, Titus?” Fa-Li asked quietly, walking slightly behind him, not able to summon the courage to travel at his side, especially when he was...like this.

Titus didn’t reply to her question, and they continued walking deeper down into the

tunnel, deeper into the earth, down to a place somewhere between heaven and hell.

## ~owari chapter 26

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Author's Note:

Well, there it is, minna-san! Long enough for ya? ^\_^ Oh yeah, and I have a little announcement to make! If you want to know what's going on with "Sink" and all my other fiction as well as my site, I now have a mailing list! Hurray for me! If you want to join go to:

[http://groups.yahoo.com/group/catalina\\_updates/join](http://groups.yahoo.com/group/catalina_updates/join)

If that link doesn't work, then e-mail me, and I'll try to send you an invite. Just be warned that I'm still trying to figure out the bugs of this entire thing! O\_O And a big THANKS to all those people who sent me e-mail urging me (in so many nice words) to get my lazy butt in gear!

Next...

Sink to the Bottom With You

Chapter 27

The Ones Left Behind



# Chapter Twenty-Seven

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## *The Ones Left Behind*

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*“Well, there goes the neighborhood.” —Reno Akuma Mitsuru*

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Montana had never liked riding in trains. He always thought they were mindless, soulless hunks of metal, boring as hell because they could never go where they wanted to, never could veer off of their tracks, off their courses. He saw no point in such an existence, not even when he was a child. When all the other little tikes in the countryside flocked to see a train pass through on a routine trade route, Montana never went with them. He never had a toy train or played “choo-choo” like the others did. They all thought he was weird so they isolated him, never knowing that the little boy who didn’t like trains would grow up into quite the bounty hunter. Never knowing that one day that little boy would come back all big and strong. Montana had put a bullet in every last one of their surprised faces and only regretted not having the guts to do it when he was five years old.

And now here he was, riding the only operational train in the city of Midgar, the one that traveled through Sector Five. He was not a happy camper, but he knew that it would do him no good to complain to his companion.

Jezebel sat calmly in the seat across from him, hands folded in her lap with her legs crossed in a most feminine fashion. Montana almost laughed at that. Jezebel was many things, but lady-like wasn’t one of them. The positioning of her limbs was, of course, meant to deceive any of the train operators who might have peeked into the car that only held one tall, lanky man and a slender, relatively pretty woman. Nobody trusted anyone else these days. Smart people.

“You know,” Montana said conversationally, slouching down in his seat so that his long legs were nearly stretched across half the floor. “It’s going to be one wet walk on the way to Kalm.”

“A little rain never hurt anyone,” Jezebel told him flatly, studying the tips of her boots. “Besides, you’re going to be the only one going to Kalm.”

Montana wasn’t surprised, but he raised an eyebrow anyways, just because he wanted to. “You don’t say? Me alone against two AVALANCHE members? Aren’t you worried that I might die?”

“One AVALANCHE member,” Jezebel corrected. “The other is a Turk named Reno Akuma Mitsuru. Get it straight, or you will make yourself look even stupider than you already are.”

“Thanks for the vote of confidence,” Montana said dryly as he lifted one of his bare feet and studied the dirt and other nameless grime that had collected on the sole of it. “It’s good to know that you think so highly of me.”

Jezebel ignored his sarcasm. “Do you have your back-up on standby?”

Montana was already used to Jezebel’s condescending attitude, but he was still offended that she would think him so idiotic that he would forget to summon his “back-up”. “Of *course* I have it,” he snapped, a flicker of anger showing in his dead green eyes. “You really do think I’m stupid, don’t you?”

“Stupider than I am.”

“What’s that supposed to mean? *You* think you’re stupid?”

Empty brown eyes stared at him. “I had my moments of youthful idiocy, but that was a long time ago.”

Montana frowned. It wasn’t like Jezebel to reveal so much about her past. In all the years he had worked alongside her, she had never breathed a word to him about whatever dark secrets lie buried within her. The one thing he could assume was that she had lived in the slums for a long period of time, long enough to acquire a fairly heavy accent that she either couldn’t or didn’t want to get rid of.

“Well, someone’s talkative today,” Montana said with a grin.

“I am unstable,” Jezebel corrected. “Just like our underground lair, which is in the process of collapsing as we speak.”

“Sucks to be them.”

Jezebel just stared at him, as if she couldn’t decide whether to be angry or apathetic. “The Master believes the Hungry One is enraged because he smells a traitor amongst his worshippers.”

“You mean Titus?” Montana asked immediately. The scar on his left cheek began to itch, like there were ants crawling up and down the red, angry tissue.

“And many others,” Jezebel added, folding her arms across her ample chest. “The Master was wrong to bring Titus back into the faction, even for so brief a period. The worshippers never forget their High Priest, no matter where he goes. Ajax is a poor substitute for Titus, no matter how powerful the little bugger may be.”

Montana’s jaw clenched. “You’re going to kill Titus, aren’t you?” he asked in a tight, angry voice.

“Those are my orders,” Jezebel said coldly, her accent sharpening along with her voice. “And I’m to kill the woman as well, and all others that may have thrown in with Titus. The Master has predicted that all survivors will use the Junon exit to escape from underground. I am to intercept and kill both Titus and the woman called Fa-Li.”

Montana leaned forward, his scar burning something awful. “Kill the woman, but leave Titus for me!”

Jezebel’s full, sensuous lips curled into a dark smile. “Trying to take my kill from me, Montana? Go for it. See if you can. But first you need to take care of your business in Kalm, then you can follow me to Junon.”

Montana gritted his teeth, but he nodded. “I understand.”

\*\*\*\*\*

“ey, Wed? Ou aunt wum bif herky?”

“No, Reno,” Red replied calmly, trying to focus his attention on the flickering television screen. “I don’t want any beef jerky, but thank you for asking.”

“Oor elcum. Shuit oorhelf.” With that said, Reno ripped off another piece of jerky with his teeth, chomping noisily and happily on it.

It took a second for Red’s normally sharp mind to translate from Reno-babble into normal, everyday English: You’re welcome. Suit yourself.

With an internal sigh that didn’t disturb his calm exterior, Red tried his best to drown out the sounds of Reno slobbering and tearing gleefully on his third or fourth piece of beef jerky as the Turk’s right hand sank into the bag of chips with a crinkling noise that seemed needlessly loud. Everything about Reno, Red decided, was needlessly loud. From the bright red hair that virtually blazed with the very essence of the color to the sloppy style of dress that screamed rebellion and nonconformity.

Loud. Needlessly so.

However, Red admitted to himself, Reno just wouldn’t be Reno without that screeching loudness. Red knew that he was going to meet people from all walks of life during his long, long, long lifetime on the Planet, if Fate didn’t sever him from his path unexpectedly. He knew that he would just have to accept Reno and all of Reno’s flaws, or he would never be able to deal with it when people ten times as bad as Reno came along.

From his seat on the couch, Reno let out an earth-shaking burp, and Red decided there would never be a person ten times as bad as Reno. This was as bad as it could

possibly get.

Thoughts put aside, Red tried in vain to return his attention to flickering television screen and was just starting to come to a conclusion that there was NO plotline in the program they were watching when Reno suddenly flipped the channel. A large purple dinosaur with a green belly was dancing and singing on the television screen. Rather frightening thing, actually.

“What are you doing?” Red grumbled. “I was watching the previous show.”

“That one was boring,” Reno said cheerfully. “Don’t you think this one is much more entertaining?”

Red wrinkled his nose. “I don’t like large purple dinosaurs serenading me and telling me they love me.”

“Barney has lots of love to give,” Reno said, and Red couldn’t tell whether he was joking or not. “If Barney don’t love you, then no one will.”

“Turn the channel back.”

“No.”

“Turn it back.”

“Make me.”

Red started to get to his feet, stretching his muscles like a cat that had just awakened. “Well,” he said calmly. “I suppose I’ll just go take a nap upstairs.”

“Fine!” Reno exclaimed in frustration, begrudgingly switching the channel back. “There ya go, dumb mutt.”

“Many thanks,” Red replied as he resettled himself on the hardwood floor, eyes once again flicking to the television screen, where a posse of young girls in sailor outfits were running around aimlessly on the screen. No plot in sight so far, but it was the lesser of two evils.<sup>1</sup>

Five seconds into the program, Reno suddenly announced, “I’m bored.”

“Go eat something,” Red suggested. Normally, he wouldn’t encourage Reno to devour someone else’s food, but he had a feeling that a bored Reno was not going to be good thing.

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<sup>1</sup> Just a note: I love Sailor Moon. ^\_^ Can’t say the same for Barney, though. Sorry to all you Barney fans out there. —*Catalina*

“I’m not hungry anymore,” Reno snapped. “I just finished cleaning out the pantry anyways. Goddamn it! It’s almost ten o’clock. Where the HELL are those guys?”

The abrupt change of subject left Red’s mind reeling, but he managed to reply, “Don’t worry about them, Reno. They’ll make it back okay.”

*I hope so...*

“So you say, but I know you’re worried sick, too.”

“So what if I am? Someone has to pretend to be the calm one here.”

Reno snorted. “For your information, I’m perfectly calm right now.”

The lights suddenly flickered, then went out completely, plunging the room into darkness and silence.

“Okay, maybe not so calm,” Reno amended, his voice drifting out of the blackness.

Red lifted himself easily to his feet, ears flicking back and forth as he tried to detect any usual sounds. He had nearly perfect night vision, but ever since he lost one of his eyes, he learned to use his other senses more often. However, he could detect nothing out of the ordinary in the house. The only sound was the rain pattering against the sides of the bar and thunder rumbling in the distance. He could smell junk food, rain, and a deep musk that had to be Reno’s personal scent, but other than that, nothing.

“What is it?” Reno asked, rising from his seat on the couch and stumbling over to Red.

“Probably just a power outage,” Red replied calmly. “It’s to be expected in a thunderstorm like this one. I am just surprised it didn’t happen sooner.”

“No power?” Reno demanded. “Well, there goes the neighborhood.”

Red shook his head. “All we need to do is go and activate the back-up generator. The switch is on the main circuit breaker.”

“Great,” Reno grumbled.

Red looked up at the Turk. Aquamarine eyes glowed faintly in the darkness with a radiance that could only be attributed with exposure to Mako. Rude and Elena’s eyes didn’t glow like that, and Red made a note to ask Reno about it later. But more interesting was the fact that the Turk seemed to actually be focusing on Red, even in the unbroken darkness.

“How good is your night vision?” he asked Reno.

The redhead shrugged his narrow shoulders. “If it’s warm or it moves, then I’ll know it’s there.”

*He senses things rather than sees them. Good in some cases, bad in others, but I guess it’ll do.*

“Can I trust you to follow me without stepping on me or running into things?” Red asked.

One corner of Reno’s mouth curled into a smile. “Aye, aye, Captain. Lead the way.”

Not bothering to point out that “Captain” was Cid’s title, Red turned and padded out of the living room. Reno followed him without any mishaps. In the main room of the bar, the two of them slunk out from behind the bar counter. Red cast an apprehensive glance into the main bar area, but there was nothing to be suspicious about. No faces peering in from the windows. The front door was closed. None of the chairs had been messed with. He would have liked to sniff around the place, but he thought that if he stopped suddenly, Reno would end up stepping all over him.

Bypassing the stairs quietly, Red led the way into the hallway running alongside the stairwell. The storage rooms and the garage were in this back area of the bar. Though Red had only visited Cloud and Tifa a couple of times during the past year, he had pretty much committed the layout of the bar to memory, and within a few moments, he and Reno were heading through a door and into a dark, windowless room that smelled strongly of electricity and rainwater. Dangerous mixture.

Red glanced around the room in search of the breaker box until he realized that Reno was still hovering in the doorway, aquamarine eyes darting around nervously.

“What is it?” Reno asked.

Reno wrinkled his nose distastefully. “It smells like snakes in here.”

*That* piqued Red’s interest. “Really? I don’t smell snakes, but...” He sniffed the air “...there is an odd scent in the room. I think your fear is making you smell things.”

Reno suddenly wrapped his arms around himself, as if he was cold. He didn’t even snap at Red for saying that he was afraid. “I’m not talking about any old *snakes*. I mean *the* snake. That giant motherf\*\*\*er we fought in Midgar.”

The minute Reno’s words hit home, Red knew that he was telling the truth. The room *did* smell like that snake, but it was a slightly different scent, and that was why he had failed to recognize it immediately. Red’s golden eye narrowed, and he turned his head around quickly, scanning the room.

Then he saw the breaker box. Or what was left of the breaker box. The entire thing had been ripped out of the wall, exposing tons of wires that had been sliced through and through. Well, no backup power for them. Red's hackles rose, and he was just about to turn and report his findings to Reno when he noticed something else.

Cloud and Tifa had a trapdoor built in this room so that the bar's occupants could escape in case there was some sort of emergency. They would end up under the bar, and from there it was a small thing to simply walk amongst the stilts and end up beside the building. What Red saw was the trapdoor gaping open, a swollen tide of rainwater lapping hungrily at the edges, seeking entrance into the room. That was why the smell of water had been so strong.

All his senses were on high alert as he padded his way back to Reno, sending out a brief thanks that the Turk couldn't see what was in the room. "What is it?" Reno asked sharply. Apparently, he had sensed that something was wrong.

"I think there's an intruder in the house," Red answered matter-of-factly. "They cut the power and probably the phone lines as well."

Reno's eyes widened. "But how the HELL did they get into the bar in the first place?"

"Through the trapdoor leading into this room. I didn't think anyone was crazy enough to swim underneath the bar just to get to the door."

Reno scowled, glancing nervously over his shoulders. "Great. So we're dealing with a psycho here? I don't even have any weapons on me!"

Red stared up at him incredulously. "You're kidding me."

The look on Reno's face darkened even more. "I'm not kidding! My nightstick's in the sewers, and my gun is upstairs in my room!"

"You know," Red snarled as he brushed past the Turk's legs. "I know you've been under a lot of stress lately, Reno, but I would think that the leader of the Turks would be a lot more responsible. Let's go up and get your gun."

Amazingly enough, Reno didn't say a word, but Red could feel the Turk's anger in a simmering wave behind him as the two walked carefully into the main room of the bar once again. Red was aware of the fact that the intruder might have just come through the trapdoor, severed the power, and then exited back through the trapdoor. He certainly wasn't seeing or smelling anything out of the ordinary, but he knew better than rush to conclusions. After all, he had failed to detect the scent of the Running Man when he had gone to investigate Midgar. If all these strangers were coming from the same group, it was logical to assume that one of their distinguishing characteristics may be lack of scent.

He didn't strive to find consolation in his assumptions, though, and Red made sure the main room of the bar was clear of intruders before turning to lead the way up the stairs. Reno followed him, the scent of his anger, fear, and frustration a unique blend that hung in the air like a jungle musk, thick and heavy. Though Reno might not be able to admit that he was afraid, his body was doing the job for him. If Red had been hunting a prey with that scent surrounding it, he would have known instantly it was going to be an easy kill. He just hoped the intruders wouldn't look at Reno in the same predatory fashion.

The two climbed the dark stairs in silence, Red maneuvering effortlessly through the inky black, Reno gripping the handrail with sweaty palms as he tried not to stumble. When they finally reached the top of the stairs and strode into the long, upstairs hallway, Red barely took two steps before he froze dead in his tracks, fur standing on end. His lip curled in a snarl as adrenaline coursed through his body.

Standing in the middle of the hallway, about ten feet away from them, was a figure shrouded in shadows. It was dressed in what appeared to be a black jumpsuit, baggy and seamless. It was holding a submachine gun in one of its fleshly pink hands. And it had no face.

"Faceless Man," Red growled, his gravelly voice loud in the stillness of the hallway.

Behind him, Reno froze. "Faceless Man? Where?" he hissed.

*He can't see it.* Red realized. *It's not moving, and it's not warm.*

"It's ten feet down the hallway from us," Red rapped out, keeping his eye on their motionless opponent. "It's not moving, but it's standing between us and your room."

"In other words, me and my weapons," Reno uttered harshly, the scent of his rage starting to fill the hallway. "Well, what the hell do we do now?"

Red glared at the unmoving figure of the Faceless Man. It looked like a mannequin that had crash-landed in the middle of the hallway, but judging from Vincent and Yuffie's horrific tales, the fleshly creature brandished a danger factor more akin to a sleeping lion. There was enough room on either side of the thing to slink past it by hugging the wall, but Red knew that they ran the risk of being grabbed if the creature were to suddenly animate itself. And according to Vincent and Yuffie, these things possessed unreal strength and incredible endurance. But they were at a standstill until one side decided to act. It didn't look like the Faceless Man was planning on moving anytime soon. Of course, it could just be playing dead and waiting for them to come into grabbing reach. But for some reason, Red didn't think so. He sensed a horrible *stillness* within the creature, the absence of life and awareness, like a machine that had been shut down. Or something that had been dead for a long, long time.



“I don’t think it’ll grab us if we try and walk by it,” Red ventured, “but I also don’t think this creature possesses the sort of wits needed to cut electrical wires...”

“What the hell are you trying to say?” Reno demanded, sounding suitably annoyed.

“I think its master must be close by,” Red said in a low voice.

“And just waiting to send this thing after us,” Reno finished with a bitter flourish. “Just f\*\*\*ing great, but I NEED my gun.”

Red was about to reply when he suddenly felt a strange energy surge through the air, blazing past him and making his fur stand on end. A strange scent suddenly assaulted his nostrils, unlike anything he had ever smelled before. It seared his nasal cavity, and for an instant, he could taste it in the back of his throat. He dimly heard Reno coughing behind him and knew that the human Turk had picked up on the strange energy as well.

A figure in white suddenly emerged from the room at the end of the hall, hands shoved deep in the pockets of his baggy white pants. His buttonless jacket was open in the front, flaring at his sides as he moved. He was bare-footed and made almost no sound at all as he walked. A pair of dark green eyes was set deep in his face, glittering as lightening illuminated the thick blackness of the hallway. He moved easily—like a predator—until he was standing about five feet behind the Faceless Man.

Silence hung thickly in the air for a moment until Red demanded, “Are you the one that took Reeve and Yuffie?” Behind him, Reno inhaled sharply.

The man smiled, looking amused. He had a scar on his left cheek. “Nope, you got the wrong guy. I’m more of an assassin than a bounty hunter, I suppose. When I get sent out, it’s usually to kill someone.”

Silence, except for the soundless singing of the tension between the two groups.

“I think you know what happens next,” the green-eyed man said in a good-natured tone as he leaned casually against the wall.

“Go to hell,” Reno suddenly hissed.

The man lifted an eyebrow. “You know, pal, you gotta big mouth. I can taste your fear in the back of my throat. It stinks up the air.”

“Shut up!” Reno yelled at him.

“This is boring,” the stranger lamented with a sigh. “It’s going to be too easy to kill you guys.” He pushed away from the wall, absently running a hand through his spiky brown hair. “That’s why I’m leaving my little friend to do it. I have more pressing matters

to take care of.”

With one last smile, the man turned and started to saunter back down the dark hallway, like he hadn't a care in the world. His indifference infuriated Red, and for a second, the lion-like best nearly gave into impulse and went springing after the tall man. In fact, the only thing that stopped him was a sudden birth of motion as the Faceless Man started to stir. Red sensed a dark awareness burst into its mind, dead and alive at the same time, and he forgot all about watching the retreating back of the green-eyed man.

Limbs now fully animated, the Faceless Man started to raise its machine gun, cradling in it both hands. That was all Red needed to see. He had no intention of exchanging bullets and blows in such a narrow, cramped space. His limbs tensed as he started to pivot around.

“Shit!” Reno suddenly cried. Even though he was nearly blind in the darkness, the Turk had apparently sensed the Faceless Man's movement as well.

Then the two of them were running full speed towards the stairwell, Red doing his best not to get tangled up in Reno's legs. They barely made it to safety in time; a stream of bullets ripped through the wall just as they were turning the corner. The air screamed as a couple of ricochets whizzed past Red's ears.

Though luck had blessed them with a narrow escape, the fickle creature decided that it did not wish to support them any longer. In front of him, Red saw Reno suddenly lose his balance, boots fighting for purchase on the shadowy stairs before he began to tumble artlessly down the staircase, curling instinctively into a ball with his arms up trying to shield his head. Red couldn't help but feel sympathy for Reno as he heard that human body with its tender skin and fragile bones slamming up against the wall and the edges of each stair. But not once did Reno cry out, and Red's respect for the Turk climbed slightly. The AVALANCHE member ran down the stairs without any major mishaps, as he had four legs and therefore more leverage than the unfortunate Reno.

“Shit, that hurt like a bitch,” Reno groaned from where he was lying in a crumpled heap at the bottom of the stairs. His face contorted in pain as he tried to get his bruised and battered limbs to move him into a sitting position. Red bounded up next to him and was about to suggest that they move to a safer location when he suddenly sensed movement on the top of the stairs and heard the sound of a trigger being squeezed.

“Move, Reno!” he cried, darting off the side and into the main room of the bar, weaving into the maze of tables and chairs.

Reno didn't ask questions. Though he still wasn't sure he had all of his wits about him (his head was hurting something awful), he rolled blindly to the right—left?—just as he

heard the sound of bullets being fired from a machine gun. Slivers of torn wood erupted from the floor and hit his legs before he managed to roll out of their reach. He only stopped rolling across the floor when he felt his bruised back collide with cold metal. The refrigerator. He had rolled behind the bar.

Instinct kicked in, and Reno tried to wrestle to his feet, only to fall flat on his ass twice in a row due to the fact that the bar was dancing in circles around his head. Finally, he gritted his teeth and took a hold of the refrigerator's handle, using that as a crutch while he hauled himself to his feet. Nausea washed over him in a short, powerful wave, but the sounds of gunfire surprisingly close by brought his attention back to the situation at hand.

Ignoring his bruised legs, he looked towards the main bar area and saw that the Faceless Man was firing on Red with its machine gun. Chairs and tables were obliterated into a thousand wooden shards by the steady stream of bullets, but Red appeared unharmed so far. He kept using tables for cover as he came closer and closer to the Faceless Man. When the lion-like beast arrived within a certain range, the Faceless Man gave up firing and simply lifted the gun above its head, bringing it smashing down on the table Red was hiding under. The piece of furniture split in two, but Red managed to get out in time, narrowly avoiding being impaled by a jagged edge of wood.

Clenching his fists in rage, Reno stumbled out from behind the bar. He didn't have any weapons, but he had learned long ago that anger, when used correctly, could be the deadliest weapon of all. And he was plenty pissed off at the moment. In its pursuit of Red, the Faceless Man had knocked down a couple of chairs. Reno grabbed the closest one off the floor and flung it at the back of the creature with all his might.

Without even turning around, the Faceless Man sidestepped the flying chair and brought the butt of the machine gun down on the next table, forcing Red out of his new hiding place. Letting out a scream of frustration, Reno grabbed another fallen chair and ran up behind the Faceless Man, raising the chair above his head and bringing it down as hard as he could.

It was a powerful blow that would have knocked a regular human unconscious, if not killed them. But the Faceless Man was far too fast to fall for such tricks. Reno only saw a shadowy pink and black blur as the creature whirled and knocked the chair out of his hands, leaving his fingers tingling painfully afterwards. Then the thing slammed its shoulder into Reno's chest.

It felt like he'd been hit with a battering ram. The breath left his lungs in a great whoosh, and the force of the creature's blow sent him flying backwards, where he slammed into the stools surrounding the bar area, like the pieces of furniture were bowling pins and he was Reno the Human Bowling Ball.

“Reno!” he dimly heard Red cry. “Are you alright, Reno?!”

The Turk managed to peel himself off of the floor in time to groan, “Yeah, I think so.” At least, that was what he thought he said. His ears were ringing too loudly for him to be completely sure.

“You can’t fight it like you are now!” Red called to him, changing tactics and leaping from tabletop to tabletop with the Faceless Man in hot pursuit. The thing smashed its gun through the wooden furniture as it went along. There wasn’t going to be shit left over when it was done.

Reno lurched to his feet, feeling helpless as he watched Red facing down the creature all by himself. “Well, what the hell do you want me to do?!” he demanded in frustration. “I can’t go after my gun! That guy’s probably still up there, despite what he said!”

In an act of amazing dexterity, Red suddenly pivoted and lunged straight at the Faceless Man, claws raking across its nonexistent face and leaving streams of dark blood flowing down its flesh. He leapt off before the creature could bring its gun to bear on him, calling out to Reno.

“Go to Vincent’s room! It’s right across from the stairwell!”

*Less chances of getting caught* Reno realized.

His eyes only lingered for a moment longer on the warring figures of Red and the Faceless Man before he took off towards the stairs in a mad dash, plunging into the pitch-black stairwell. He didn’t know if adrenaline had sharpened his senses or if he had committed the stairs to memory, but he managed to make it to the top without stumbling even once. But Reno didn’t take time to pat himself on the back. One running stride saw him right in front of Vincent’s bedroom door, which he barreled through so quickly that the doorknob knocked a huge chunk out of the wall.

Reno hesitated in the doorway, his heart pounding in his chest and his breath whooshing painfully in and out of his lungs. Vincent’s room was arranged just like the other guest rooms, but for a moment, Reno imagined that it was colder, darker than any other room in the bar, as if the gunslinger had left a residue of his presence behind him like the lingering musk of cologne.

Shaking his head to clear his thoughts, Reno searched feverishly for a weapon of some kind and was rewarded when a sudden flash of lightening illuminated the ominous form of the Death Penalty leaning against the wall. Vincent had wisely chosen to take the small but powerful Outsider with him into battle instead of the large but more powerful Death Penalty, though Reno knew how much it had probably cost Valentine to leave his most powerful weapon behind like a piece of unwanted garbage. Good, trusty guns were hard

to come by.

Racing over to the rifle, Reno wrapped his hands around the smooth metal and tried to lift it from the floor, a surprised grunt issuing from his mouth when the gun tried to drag him back down to the floor with it. The thing was freaking *heavy*!!

*How the HELL does Valentine manage to fire this son of a bitch one-handed?! Guess it pays to be a freak...*

But as freaky as Vincent may have been, Reno had to tip his hat to the guy. This gun wasn't made to be used by just anyone. Even if he could manage to lift and fire the gun, he would be lucky if he managed to hit *anything*. He would be even luckier if he didn't shoot his own foot off.

"F\*\*\* it," he swore, letting the Death Penalty fall to the floor again.

Fighting to ignore the sounds of battle raging downstairs in the bar, Reno ran around the room yanking open drawers and spilling their contents onto the floor. Not that there was much of anything in the first place, being that Vincent had lost most of his clothes to Mother Nature when he and Yuffie's chocobos had been trapped out in the rain with their packs still on the birds' backs.

"Come ON!!" he screamed in frustration, shoving his hair out of his eyes. "There has to be a goddamn gun around here somewhere!"

Reno dropped onto his stomach next to the bed and yanked the end of the trailing bedspread up off the floor. Then he grinned. Pay dirt, baby. There were at least six guns - all different shapes and sizes - hidden underneath the bed, glittering with fiendish anticipation whenever lightening flashed outside the window. The gun closest to him was some kind of shotgun with a sawed-off barrel. Reno didn't want to take it. Shotguns were great when you didn't care what mess you made, but he didn't want to risk being too messy when Red was down there as well. As a general rule, it wasn't good when you went around blowing away allies as well as enemies.

"What a dignified position that is," an amused voice suddenly commented.

Reno jerked in surprise and tried to pull out from under the bed, slamming the back of his head against the framework in the process. He let out a choice phrase and, without looking, grabbed the closest and smallest gun within reach, raising and pointing it towards the door at the same time his head cleared the top of the bed.

The green-eyed man was leaning in the doorway of Vincent's room, just as casual as you please, an amused smile on his face as he gazed at Reno's choice of weapons. The Turk resisted the urge to scream in frustration. Not only had the bad guy caught him with

his head under the bed and his ass up in the air, but Reno had also managed to pick the wimpiest, puniest gun of the bunch. The thing was white-blue, barely bigger than the palm of his hand. It looked like a goddamn water gun. It didn't even have any slots for materia.

*What a piece of crap! Elena's nephew has a Super Soaker bigger than this thing!*

"Silver Rifle," the man suddenly stated, cocking his head to the side as he stared at the gun. "From the Temple of the Ancients, right?"

"You bet your ass it is," Reno snapped with as much confidence as he could muster. He had no idea where the hell the gun was from. He didn't even know if it was loaded.

"You have no idea where the hell that gun is from, do you?" the man asked with a smile, flashing white teeth in the shadows.

Reno rose slowly to his feet, puny-ass gun in his hand (using two hands for such a wimpy gun was just stupid) as he approached the man, his aim never wavering.

"Get out of the way or I blow your head off," Reno threatened coldly, stopping just out of arms reach.

Humor shone in the man's deep green eyes, and Reno suddenly realized that the eyes had a glow to them that he hadn't noticed before. It wasn't Mako luminescence, but it was something similar. Maybe it was due to the eyes being such a dark green that didn't make them bright like his, Cloud's, or Vincent's...

A crash erupted from downstairs, followed by a massive surge of elemental energy and a cold, icy wind.

"Looks like your furry friend is summoning Shiva," the man commented. "She won't be able to help, though. Nothing less than Knights of the Round can kill one of those creatures."

"We'll just have to see about that," Reno deadpanned. "Move or I shoot. I'm not gonna tell you again."

The green-eyed man flashed another one of those maddeningly casual smiles. "I know you're the kind of guy that doesn't bluff, Reno."

The Turk frowned. "Hey, if you know my name, you might as well tell me yours."

The man had the grace to look confused for a moment before he shrugged and said, "Name's Montana."

Reno smiled. "Nice to meet ya, Montana."

He fired the gun, leaping forward at the same time. As he had expected, Montana dodged the bullet, but he was still quick enough to grab Reno around the waist when the Turk was still airborne. However, Reno had been expecting that as well. Grabbing the arm that was flung across his waist, he used it as leverage to fling his body weight forward. Surprised and off-balance, Montana's grip fell away as Reno tumbled over the restraining arm and hit the floor headfirst, with barely enough time to shield his face. Reno turned the fall into a roll, and for the second time in five minutes, he was tumbling down the stairs.

Reno had always known he was a magnet for pain, but this was getting ridiculous.

This time around he was fortunate enough to end up on his butt instead of in a crumpled pile at the bottom of the stairs. He had somehow managed to hold onto the Silver Rifle during his fall. In that one moment that he sat there waiting for the room to stop spinning, he felt an approaching heat from behind him and instinctively rolled to the side, further into the bar area. A stream of white-hot fire came bursting out of the stairwell, consuming the wooden stairs with hungry flames and lighting up the bar area as bright as day.

*Whoa* Reno thought as he wrestled to his feet. *Guess that Montana guy wasn't happy I got away!*

Squinting against the brightness of the flames, he could see nothing of his attacker. Well, it didn't look like Reno was going to be parading upstairs for the rest of the night. It also didn't seem like Montana was going to be coming downstairs, either. Double-edged sword. Yippy.

Considering the Montana threat neutralized, Reno whirled to see that the bar had been converted into a war zone. Bullet holes riddled the walls and even the ceiling of bar. A section of one wall had been blown away, icicles clinging to the sides of the jagged hole and already withering away under the steady onslaught of rain pouring into the bar proper. Red XIII was standing amongst shattered tables and melting patches of ice, panting heavily with one of his forelegs drawn up tight against his body. There was a shallow cut running along his right flank, clotting the fur around it with blood. About five feet away from him, the Faceless Man (sans machine gun) was struggling to get its feet free of the ice that had frozen them to the floor. Its pink skin and dark clothes glistened in the firelight.

If Reno had been more honorable, he would have had qualms about shooting a semi-helpless opponent in cold blood, but the Turk believed firmly that you should kick people while they were down if it would prevent them from getting back up. He coldly raised the Silver Rifle and sighted along the barrel, making sure his aim was perfect before he pulled

the trigger. The bullet was on a collision course with the Faceless Man's head, but just as Reno was about to cry victory, the creature jerked its body to the side, its feet coming free of the ice. The bullet whizzed past its head harmlessly.

"Close range!" Red suddenly gasped. "Fight it...at...close range!"

"You've got to be kidding me!" Reno exclaimed as the Faceless Man began to advance towards him, completely oblivious to the wounded Red practically lying at its feet. Reno realized that Vincent and Yuffie had been right; these things were smart and stupid at the same time. If its orders were to kill them, it should have taken out the helpless Red before turning its attention to the armed Reno. Its intelligence seemed to be minimal; it attacked what it perceived to be the greatest threat at the moment. And at the moment, Reno was the lucky guy.

He fired off two more shots at the thing as it approached, but it managed to evade them both with lightening-fast movements. Reno gritted his teeth in frustration. He knew the Silver Rifle probably didn't have an infinite supply of ammo; he couldn't keep wasting bullets like this.

*Damn...looks like I'm gonna have to come up with a plan.*

However, the Faceless Man put Reno's scheming on hold when it seized the opportunity and raced forward faster than Reno thought possible for a creature that had no eyes. Before he could pull the trigger, the thing had wrapped both hands around his throat and lifted him off the floor, feet dangling. The creature began to squeeze ruthlessly, aiming to strangle the life out of him. Reno clawed at the thing's rubbery hands, making choking noises as he fought vainly to draw air into his lungs. Already his head was starting to feel light, the room darker and warmer. He dimly heard Red yelling something about claws, but the words made no sense to him. All he could see was darkness eating away at the corners of his vision. All he knew was that pink fleshy head with only indentations for eyes, nose, and mouth staring up at him as its hands choked the life out of the puny little human.

*He's gonna kill me!* Reno thought dumbly. *What a bastard he is. Someone should kick him or something.*

Reno's foot suddenly shot up on its own accord, slamming into the Faceless Man's chin with more strength than Reno thought he had left in his body. The creature's head snapped backwards like the head of rag doll, and when it came flopping back, the Silver Rifle sent a metal slug right through the middle of its forehead.

The next thing Reno knew, he was lying on the floor of the bar, staring up at the bullet-riddled ceiling with the Silver Rifle still clutched tightly in his nerveless fingers.



His head was hurting something awful, and every breath he drew into his lungs was pure, beautiful torture. There was something warm, wet, and thick pooling around his arm, and it took him a moment to realize that it was the Faceless Man's blood.

Wrinkling his nose in disgust, Reno forced himself to sit upright and scoot away from the widening pool of blood. His hand had been lying right in the puddle and was now covered with dripping redness, which he promptly wiped on his shirt, leaving a bloody handprint on the white material.

Red limped up to him, fur dyed an even more vibrant red in the hellish light given off by the fires. He sat down next to Reno but didn't say anything. The two sat in silence for what seemed like a long time with the dead body of the Faceless Man inches from them and the Final Heaven bar burning around their ears. Melting ice on the floor mingled with the Faceless Man's blood, making the substance thin and watery. A crashing noise suddenly rang out to their left, but neither of them bothered to look.

"There go the stairs," Red commented quietly.

Reno just nodded, and the silence continued for a few moments before he suddenly announced hoarsely, "You know, I think I owe Vincent and Yuffie an apology."

Red looked at him. "Why is that?"

The Turk gestured to the dead body of the Faceless Man with the hand that was still clutching the Silver Rifle. "I didn't believe that those things even existed, and one nearly killed me."

"Nearly," Red emphasized. "We're not dead yet."

"Right," Reno said in his new raspy voice. He knew what was coming next.

"We need to get out of here," Red announced sadly as he looked around the bar. "This place is finished. Poor Tifa."

Reno rolled his aquamarine eyes. "Poor Tifa? Poor us. We've got to find a way to get to Midgar with all these floodwaters. We also need to find a way to get back upstairs to get everyone's crap out of the bedrooms."

"Any ideas?" Red asked.

Reno shrugged his narrow shoulders. "Well, we still have the Tiny Bronco, the helicopter, and the Highwind parked out back. The ground's higher there so the flood hasn't reached them yet. I think we should use the Highwind."

Red stared at him, golden eye positively glowing in the firelight. "Reno, you can't fly

the Highwind in a thunderstorm.”

“Bet your furry ass I can,” Reno snapped. “I’ve flown helicopters before. How difficult can it be? Besides, the Highwind is safer than both the Tiny Bronco and the chopper.”

*It’s also a bigger target for lightening* he added silently.

Red sighed. “Very well. You go ready the Highwind. I’ll go around the back of the bar and climb through one of the bedroom windows so I can get everyone’s things.”

Reno looked at him skeptically. “With that leg?”

Red slowly lowered his foreleg to the floor, testing it before drawing it back against his body. “I used a Cure 3 on it; it should be fine in a little while.”

“Fine. I guess we’d better hop to it then.”

Red nodded and limped off, heading towards the massive hole in the side of the bar. Reno sat on his bum for a little while longer, staring at the war zone that he used to call the Final Heaven bar.

*There goes the neighborhood indeed* he thought grimly.

~owari chapter 27

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Next Chapter...

Sink to the Bottom With You Ch. 28

“Safe Haven Junon City”

# Chapter Twenty-Eight

## Safe Haven Junon City

*“I didn’t see a thing until you unintentionally...exposed yourself.” —Vincent Valentine*

FOR KYRA, WHO WON THE 2222 COUNTER-FIC PRIZE! ^\_^ CONGRATULATIONS! —*Catalina*

\*\*\*\*\*

The sky above them was yawning and black, filled with churning storm clouds and flashing lightening, but at least it was there. Cloud never realized how much he had taken a typical, stormy sky for granted until, walking around in the dark sewers, it had seemed that he would never see one again. It was a beautiful sight to him, if anything could be considered beautiful at a time like this. Cloud was beyond tired, beyond exhausted, beyond fatigued. His body had stopped hurting a long time ago, and his legs were trudging along on autopilot, one foot in front of the other mindlessly. He was afraid that if he stopped walking, he would never be able to start up again. Freezing rain chilled him to the bone, and he would have hugged himself for warmth if he hadn’t known that it would be futile.



The others were no better off. Everyone knew the trashed landscape of Sector Five like the backs of their hands, but with their weary limbs and downtrodden hearts, they were having trouble navigating. Rude was trudging along with Elena riding on his back. The female Turk had injured her ankle trying to escape back through the underwater cavern. Heels were not meant for rock hopping. Cid was barely managing to stay on his feet, even using the Venus Gospel as a cane of sorts to help him along. Several times Tifa or Barret had offered to aid the pilot, but each time they had been gruffly turned away. For some odd reason, Cid didn’t want anyone touching him. At first, Cait didn’t seem to be having any problems, but then the left side of his moogles suddenly went dead, and he informed Cloud that a rock had busted one of his motor circuits. Now the robotic cat was forced to hobble along just like the rest of them. Out of the entire damn group, Cloud would have said that Vincent was having the least trouble, even with Yuffie in his arms, but the swordsman had seen the red-eyed man stumble and fall to his knees once or twice. It both relieved and scared him to know that Vincent wasn’t as impervious to physical and

**Doujin panel text:** “No... that’s alright. I’ve got some things I want to look into.”

mental ailments as everyone seemed to think.

Nearly tripping over a piece of scrap metal lying in his path, Cloud forced himself to plod forward, the exit of Sector Five coming into view. He almost called back to his teammates to report his findings, but he knew there would be no use in doing such a thing. They wouldn't hear him anyways.

At the snail's pace they were moving at, it took an eternity for the group to finally make it to the outskirts of Midgar, now covered with mud as well as sewer grime. It took Cloud a couple of minutes to order his feet to stop. They didn't seem to be interested in doing anything he wanted them to do, but once he finally got his message across, the numb limbs finally halted their mindless motion and just stood there in the dark mud.

There was nothing but water as far as he could see. Just water and more water, maybe broken by the tops of what was once rolling hills but now looked like miniature islands in an endless sea. The highway was gone. The buggy was gone. The mud surrounding Midgar melded into the flooded land twenty feet from where they were standing.

He vaguely heard some of the others give loud cries of frustration behind him. He heard the sound of still more of them collapsing wearily into the mud. But Cloud felt nothing. He just kept staring out over the water, wondering dumbly where all the land had gone.

*It was swallowed* came his soundless answer. *Swallowed by the ocean. She's taking back what is rightfully hers.*

"Right," Cloud muttered to himself. Of course, he might have simply thought the word. He couldn't tell; he didn't even really care any longer.

He turned his face up the night sky, letting the needle-sharp raindrops lacerate his numb skin. He felt so cold, so unstable. There was a vague trembling in the core of his being that he couldn't contain, and he knew it wasn't from the cold. But not once did he stop to ponder the strange sensation. He just stood there and let the rain soak and chill him to the bone.

When the Highwind came, he didn't even see it at first.

He thought it was another star, this one moving and swirling in some kind of mysterious dance. It never occurred to him that stars didn't move, didn't dance. Then he heard the sound of the engines, sensed a mighty wind causing turbulence in the dark water. The searchlight suddenly exploded around him, and without thinking, he lifted his arms to shield his sensitive eyes from the blinding light. His spiky hair was whipped into a frenzy by the drafts created by the airship. The cockpit windows flashed as lightening illuminated the night.

Yet his jaded mind still refused to believe it until something brown whooshed past his body, swinging back and forth.

*A rope ladder?* he wondered dumbly.

Automatically, his eyes trailed up the length of the ladder, and it was only then that he saw and recognized the impressive airship known as the Highwind and the quadruped known as Red XIII, who was waiting for them on the deck, his fiery fur a beacon in the darkness.

Cloud smiled.

\* \* \* \* \*

Flying the Highwind wasn't quite as hard as Reno had thought it would be, especially considering that he had no previous experience flying the bucket of bolts. Once he got it started up and discovered the wonderful thing called the "autopilot", it was fairly smooth sailing. The only thing he had to worry about was flying too high and getting struck by lightning. It had taken a couple of close encounters to convince him to take the thing off autopilot and fly it manually, which was what he was concentrating on doing when he suddenly heard someone walk—no, limp—into the cockpit.

"Who's there?" he demanded, feeling stupid talking to air, but he wasn't quite confident enough to take his eyes off the control panel.

"Me," said a voice so weary that it took Reno a couple of seconds to realize it was Cloud's.

"Get up here where I can see you," the Turk ordered, trying to keep his voice as nonauthoritative as possible. The last thing he needed was for the leader of AVALANCHE to get standoffish when Reno was too busy worrying about crashing the Highwind into a mountain range.

Boots scraped across the metal floor, and a second later, Cloud appeared to Reno's left. The Turk chanced a glance at the swordsman, his eyes widening slightly as he took in the lacerated skin, the dried blood, the damp, torn uniform.

"You look like shit and a half," he declared.

Mako blue eyes glared at him tiredly as their owner leaned heavily against the control panel. "Good to see that you're as eloquent as always."

"Hands off the control panel," Reno snapped.

"It's either the panel or your shoulder."

Reno let him lean on the control panel. The two stood in silence for a few minutes with nothing but the whirl of the Highwind and the sound of the lashing rain all around them. Reno alternated between studying the control panel and nervously watching the ever-present mountain ranges through the massive cockpit windows. He had been having a semi-difficult time before, but now that Cloud was leaning on the panel only inches away from Reno's left elbow, the Turk was having trouble concentrating. He kept glancing at the swordsman, expecting him to say something degrading about Reno's less-than-perfect flying job or to ask him what the hell happened to the Final Heaven bar. Cloud did none of these things, though; he seemed to be focusing most of his efforts on staying on his own two feet.

"You know, Strife," Reno said coolly. "If you want to faint, go ahead and do it. Normally I'd laugh at you for being a weakling, but I think I'll make an exception just this one time."

Cloud suddenly sat down on the floor. Hard. Reno jumped in surprise, and the Highwind jumped with him.

"Goddamn, Cloud!" he exclaimed. "You trying to make me crash or something?" He readjusted his sweaty grip on the steering mechanism.<sup>2</sup>

"Sorry," Cloud said wearily as he leaned his back against the side of the control panel, slouching against the cool metal.

"No you're not," Reno accused half-heartedly. "Where's Cid when we need him?"

"Down in the cargo hold."

Reno frowned without taking his eyes off of the cockpit windows. "What the hell is he doing down there? He should be up here piloting this damn thing."

Cloud shook his head, and a couple of locks of blonde hair fell into his face. He didn't bother to brush them away. "Something happened to Cid. He's not at his best right now."

"None of us are," Reno said dryly.

"I know," Cloud said thickly, as if it were costing him much strength just to talk. "Red told me about the Faceless Man and the bar."

"Glad the furball took the initiative," Reno commented.

"Did you have anything to add?" Cloud asked.

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<sup>2</sup> Hey, I honestly didn't know what to call it! What would you steer the Highwind with? A steering wheel? No. A joystick? No. O\_O —*Catalina*

Reno briefly thought about telling the AVALANCHE leader that their mysterious attacker's name was Montana but, looking down at Cloud's mass of tangled blonde spikes and torn uniform, he decided that such things could wait until later.

"No. Nothing to add."

Cloud didn't reply this time, and Reno let the silence spread its wings long enough for him to steer the Highwind past a dangerously tall mountain peak, the glistening craggy surface of the geological giant passing a little too close to the side of the ship for comfort, but at least they didn't crash. Reno was just thankful that the blasted Highwind had headlights of sorts so he wouldn't be—literally—flying blind.

"So," he suddenly spoke up, voice loud in the quiet. "You guys...found Yuffie?"

The blond spikes lying against the side of the control panel shifted slightly. "Yeah. Vincent has her right now. Hasn't let go of her for a single second since we first found her."

Reno hesitated. "And Reeve?"

There was a long pause, and then Cloud said quietly, "We didn't find him."

Reno's throat tightened with a strange mix of anger and anguish. "Did you even *look* for him?"

Cloud shifted, and suddenly Reno found two Mako blue eyes staring up at him. "I'm not going to lie to you, Reno," Cloud said evenly. "We didn't have time to look for him. The entire lair was falling down around our ears. We had to get out or we would have all been killed."

Reno believed him, but still insisted, "Whatever. Next time you guys want to go on a so-called 'rescue mission', my ass is going along to make sure we get *everyone* out alive."

The blonde suddenly slid away from the control panel to lie on his side on the floor. "You're more than welcome to come, Reno," he said tiredly. "Going down there, I kept thinking how hard it was going to be to keep track of so many people at once, but when we were down there running around blind like chocobos with our heads cut off, I realized that we needed *all* of our forces."

Something occurred to Reno. "Speaking of chocobos, Red let the ones in the stables out of their pens. Here's to hoping the bird-brains will come back."

"They'll come back. They always do. Chocobos can actually swim fairly well."

"Lucky for them," Reno said dryly, trying to not look at the pale figure lying on the metal floor of the Highwind. For some reason, seeing Cloud sprawled there so...lifelessly

bothered the crap out of him. Weakness wasn't something he wanted to see in a man who he had to call "leader."

"For god's sake, Strife, get your ass up," Reno snapped, forcing himself to keep his eyes riveted on the cockpit windows.

"Don't know if I can," Cloud muttered.

Reno's aquamarine eyes narrowed, and though he wasn't looking in the Cloud's direction, there was no mistaking whom his words were for. "Well, you better get up because let me tell you something: those people down there in the cargo hold—your friends—they're just waiting for you to keel over and give up because then that'll give them permission to knuckle under, too."

Cloud laughed, but there was no humor in the sound. "They know they don't need my permission to show weakness, Reno. It's not like I'm the backbone of AVALANCHE. I may unite them under myself like a leader is supposed to do, but they support each other, and they support me as well. Besides...why do you think I waited until I was up here to fall to the floor?"

That almost made Reno tear his gaze away from the cockpit windows. "What? You thought collapsing in front of me would be better than collapsing in front of everyone else?"

"You don't like me anyways," Cloud said with a shrug.

Reno frowned. "I like you just fine, Strife."

*Can't believe I just said that.*

"That's nice," Cloud said levelly.

"You don't really care either way, do you?"

"Not in particular, just like you really don't care whether or not I like you."

"That's different. I'm used to not being liked."

"Sad."

Reno scowled and said sarcastically, "Yeah, that's really sad, isn't it? Too bad I couldn't give less of a damn."

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Cloud watching him thoughtfully. "You know, I take back what I said a few seconds ago. I think you do care what people think of you in some distant, repressed sort of way."



Reno's face darkened. "You're full of shit. Don't you dare tell me what I'm thinking when you don't know what you're thinking, because if you're thinking that I'm thinking about *caring* what other people think of me, then you're thinking down the wrong lines there, buddy."

Cloud blinked. "You lost me back on the 'shit' part."

Reno suddenly laughed. "I lost myself back on the 'shit' part, too." He glanced down the control panel, all the laughter vanishing from his face as he beheld the electronic map in front of him. "I think I'm lost, Mr. Leader."

Cloud rolled onto his stomach and rested his head on his folded arms. "So, turn the autopilot on," he muttered.

"I did," Reno insisted. "But it started flying us too high, and we almost got struck by lightning. Twice."

"So adjust the altitude controls," Cloud suggested.

"Where are those?" Reno responded grumpily. He didn't like asking for help, especially when he couldn't decide whether said person was a friend or an enemy.

"Somewhere on the control panel," Cloud said, quite unhelpfully.

Reno rolled his aquamarine eyes. "Thanks a lot. You're about as helpful as a thorn in the side."

"I want to go back down into the cargo hold with the others," Cloud suddenly said, thinking out loud.

Reno made a face and steered the Highwind carefully over another mountain range. Or was it the same one? "What are you telling me for?" he demanded of Cloud. "Just get up off the floor and march your happy ass back down the stairs."

"Don't think I can walk on my own," Cloud said after a brief pause.

Reno felt a mischievous grin spreading across his face. "You want to me to yell for one of the others?"

"No," Cloud said sullenly.

"Okay," the Turk said cheerfully. "Have fun crawling back down the stairs, then."

Cloud glared at him. "Reno..." he growled.

"Shut your flapper. I'm trying to not crash here, you know."

“Reno,” Cloud snarled, managing to sound tired and angry at the same time.

“Look, Strife, like I told you before, unless you want to end up splattered across—”

“Oh, goddammit! Reno, can you *please* set the ship on autopilot and help me hobble down the goddamn stairs?!”

“Oh??? You wanted *help* from *me*! Well, why didn’t you say so?”

Cloud groaned and banged his forehead against the metal floor.

\* \* \* \* \*

Vincent pressed his naked palm against Yuffie’s forehead, cool skin to feverish flesh. A frown creased his brow, his crimson eyes narrowing ever so slightly. It had been quite a while since they had escaped from the underground lair, and Yuffie still had yet to awaken. Her fever was still present, the fiery demon, and it didn’t seem like it was going to be departing from its victim anytime soon.

Carefully, he sank the bare fingers of his ungloved hand into the tangled brown hair, feeling the illness throbbing along the scalp. Yuffie had no other noticeable injuries save for the fever. There was a line of oval-shaped bruises on her upper arms, most likely from being manhandled at one time or the other. A knot graced the side of her head, hidden underneath her hair, probably a result of being knocked unconscious by her kidnappers, whoever *they* were.

Vincent huddled further into the corner he was sitting in, resettling Yuffie’s limbs in his lap and tucking her head underneath his chin, just to feel her breath flit across the skin of his neck. He was glad to have her back, and the intensity of his own emotions was starting to frighten him a bit. He shouldn’t be *this* relieved. He couldn’t afford to be...

Holding her closer against him, Vincent laid his cheek against her too-warm hair and surveyed the rest of the cargo hold, where the others sat in silence in various corners of the room. Tifa was lying down on one of the crates, her tangled brown hair dangling off the edge and almost brushing the back of Red XIII, who was lying on the floor beside her crate. Barret was slumped against one of the walls, arms folded and chin resting on this chest, seemingly asleep. Rude and Elena were sitting against the wall opposite Vincent, tucked in between two crates like a pair of overgrown children trying to hide from the monster that they just discovered lived in their closet. Cid was huddled in the farthest corner of the room, a brooding look on his weathered face and the Venus Gospel clutched tightly in his gloved hands. He hadn’t spoken a word since they had escaped the underground lair, and the aura he was emitting silently forbade anyone to approach him. Vincent was fairly certain the pilot’s predicament had something to do with their encounter with the Hissers, but so long as he didn’t know what was bothering Cid, there

was nothing he could do for his friend.

The sound of boots on metal drew Vincent's attention to the top of the stairs that led into the cargo hold. Reno and Cloud appeared above the cargo hold, the swordsman's arm flung around his companion's shoulders. At first it seemed as if Reno was only supporting a minimal amount of Cloud's weight, but Vincent could tell from the strain he saw in both men that Reno was practically carrying the other man as they hobbled carefully down the metal stairs, two souls weary from battle. Cloud's uniform was ripped and torn, and there was a cut on his face that was probably going to leave a scar. Reno had dried blood smeared on his white dress shirt, and there was a ring of bruises on his slender neck that probably wouldn't disappear for days.

Reno's condition apparently hadn't affected his sense of humor, though. The minute he and Cloud reached the cargo hold, he deposited the swordsman on a nearby crate and smiled.

"Well, how's everyone doing this fine and lovely evening?"

Silence, except for the humming of the Highwind's engines.

Vincent saw worry flash briefly in Reno's aquamarine eyes, but the Turk quickly covered it up with a scowl. "Well, don't everyone answer at once."

"We're heading for Junon," Cloud announced. "We should be there within half an hour."

"Why so long?" Barret asked gruffly, rousing himself from his pseudo-nap.

"We have to fly slower because of the storm," Reno replied. "There's a couple of nifty instruments in the autopilot that can react automatically if we come across a mountain range, but they need time to calculate a reaction. At least it'll stop us from crashing and burning."

"What will we do once we get to Junon?" Tifa asked, sitting up on her crate. "Lower Junon has probably been evacuated due to flooding. We would have to stay in a hotel in Upper Junon. We have enough money, and it would be the only place big enough to fit all of us."

"But we also have assassins after us," Red spoke up. "Innocent bystanders might be caught in the crossfire if we take up residence in a public establishment."

"I know a place where we can go," Rude suddenly said, and everyone—even Cid—turned their gaze to where the tall man was sandwiched in between two crates, back against one and feet against the other.

“I have a friend in Junon named Kyra,” the Turk continued.

“No, no, NO!!” Reno exclaimed, shaking his head violently, ponytail lashing the air behind him.

“She and Reno don’t get along very well,” Rude explained calmly, “but I’ve known her for a long time, and I assure you that’s she’s completely trustworthy. She owns a restaurant in Upper Junon. The entire top floor is a living quarters, and she told me that if I ever needed help or shelter, to contact her.”

Reno looked less than pleased. “She *also* told you that if you brought me along, she would make me sleep in the dumpster outside the restaurant.”

Rude just stared at him. “I believe I can convince her to make an exception this one time.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Cloud said approvingly. “Does anyone have any objections?”

Vincent wasn’t too thrilled about shacking up in a stranger’s house, but he knew it was the best they were going to get at the moment. Yuffie might need medical attention soon, and she wasn’t going to find it as long as he was being picky about the housing situation. He also had a feeling that he would be able to trust Rude’s judgment as far as friends went; the Turk seemed like the kind that chose his companions carefully. And from the looks on everyone else’s faces, they all seemed to accept Rude’s suggestion as their next course of action. The only one who made a remotely sour face at the idea was Elena, but whatever her protests might have been, she didn’t voice them.

The others continued speaking amongst themselves, but Vincent was only half-listening. He looked down at Yuffie, at her pale face, slack lips, delicate eyelids with their dark lashes, and he silently willed the Highwind to get them to Junon as soon as possible.

\* \* \* \* \*

She was warm all over, but it was a bad sort of warm. The warmth of fire that was burning too close to weak, fragile skin. The warm of a soul-eating fever caused by a disease that would devour her from the inside out. The warmth of the flames of Hell. That was the heat that was racing across her skin, pulsing in her head, running its dark course along her nerve endings. And then there was the madness, like a yawning whirlpool beneath her, a hungry Charybdis inhaling the meal it consumed thrice a day. Only this ravenous madness would not spew her back out; once she was sucked in, that was it.

Was this what had happened to Reeve? Did he feel this fever? Did this madness swallow him up? Did he hear these voices like she was hearing? The voices that blurred, echoed and shattered within the recesses of her mind?

~"How much longer? We need to get her...get her to a doctor...doctor as quickly possible."~

~"...be too much longer. But do you really think...really think a doctor will be able to help her...help her?"~

Floating...floating...in the sea of voices. For an instant, she thought she might have heard her friends, but she knew it was just her memories. She imagined she smelled Vincent's scent, felt the closeness of damp clothes, a warm hand pressed against her face, but it couldn't have been real, could it? There were so many sensations in this place that she couldn't find the sense of mind to hang onto just one of them.

~"Better not crash this ship or...ship or I'm gonna beat his ass!"~

~"Geez, have a little faith in him, why don't you...why don't you?"~

Yuffie was five years old, and she was sleepy. She didn't know why Mama had woken her up so early. Normally, she only got up when Seki and Hikaru came and asked her go outside and play. But here was her mother, standing above her in her battle clothes, shuriken strapped onto her back and sword resting against her narrow hip. And though they weren't visible, Yuffie knew that there was an array of throwing knives hidden underneath the traditional Wutainese female ninja uniform.

Where was Mama going? Was there a battle? Yuffie was worried now. Confused and worried. Ayami leaned down and kissed her forehead, the ribbons woven in her dark hair brushing the little girl's robust face softly, tickling. She smiled down at her daughter, and Yuffie smiled back. Then her mother whispered softly to her, telling her secrets, secrets about her song, secrets about hidden meanings in the tales that old fisherman sang drunkenly in the local bars—more than what they seemed. *Heed their seemingly foolish words she said. Listen and learn from them.* Yuffie nodded enthusiastically and said she would, even though she had no idea what Mama was talking about. Her mother's brown eyes were right in front of her, so warm and lovely. Yuffie fell into them, into their tender light, surrounded by the scent of her mother's perfume. She fell into a deep sleep, and when she woke up, her mother was gone.

And Kira Ayami Kotori never returned.

~"What's wrong...wrong with your pretty little girlfriend, stranger?"~

~"She needs a doctor...doctor right now."~

~"Well, good evening to you, too."~

~"...my manners, Ms. Kyra...Kyra..."~

Yuffie and Aeris were running through the green mists together, hand in hand. The young ninja was lagging behind; she didn't want to be around the mists, around the green light, around that horrible smell. But Aeris seemed unafraid. Her long hair was wound into its usual twist, so wonderfully familiar, and it bounced around the back of her pink dress as she ran. She had left her red jacket somewhere, and her shoulders were pale and ghostly in the greenish darkness. Yuffie was holding her soft, cool hand in a sweaty grip, wanting to hang on and let go at the same time.

*It's down here* Aeris was saying as she continued tugging Yuffie along. *It's down here in the heart of the Planet. We must kill it.*

But Yuffie didn't want to see it. Didn't want to see the Beast, the monster that lived in the heart of the Planet. Didn't want to be swallowed by its mighty heartbeat, the same one that was echoing off the walls as they ran. She was scared, and Aeris must have sensed that fear because she suddenly turned her head and smiled gently at her friend, soft pink lips curling beautifully. And her eyes were green, green like the mists, green like Titus' eyes.

~"...take first shift...shift."~

~"Are you sure...you sure?"~

~"Positive."~

Vincent and...Tifa? Were they here in this realm of chaotic memories? Were they lost amongst the madness like her? Please let the answer be 'no.'

~"Hey, woman! Wash my shirt, why don't you?"~

~"Watch it, Reno. The dumpster's nice and cozy this time of year."~

~"Oooh, feisty!"~

Reno?! No, it couldn't be. He, Red, and Elena got eaten by stupid Titus' *stupid* Evict...didn't they? Titus had said...Titus...Titus...

### **TAKE ME TO TITUS.**

~"...fever...coming down..."~

Titus was standing in front of her, looking like he had been through hell and back a dozen times. His leather jacket and dark jeans were covered with rock dust, staining parts of the fabric a strange shade of brownish-white. The same substance was clinging to his white-blond hair in powdery sections. His eyes were steady, though, fearless and unwavering as he strode through a tunnel in some dark place. There was a shadowy,

feminine figure behind him, but it was indistinct, shifty, insignificant. Yuffie was only watching Titus. Watching that determined, stubborn set to his full mouth. Watching the pride in his elegant features. Watching the deep purple orbs on the back of his hands flashing in the darkness. Watching those green eyes, green like the mists, green like Aeris' eyes.

He was heading to Junon. He was trying to escape this last time when he knew that, in the end, escape was futile. They would hunt him down. They would kill him. He would never be free. He needed to get rid of Fa-Li while there was still a slim chance that—

Yuffie didn't know how it happened, but Titus somehow *saw* her. Those horribly familiar eyes suddenly shifted and focused on the exact spot where she was hovering. It almost made her want to look down and see if she was really there. It certainly didn't *feel* like she was there—physically, at least. But Titus apparently knew of her presence, and it didn't please him one bit.

An invisible *something* suddenly lashed out from him, struck her squarely, and then Yuffie was falling again. But this time, instead of falling into madness, she fell into herself. Into a cage of aches and pains. Into her body.

Of course, it took her a couple of seconds to realize that she once again *had* a body. A body with toes and fingers and legs and arms. A body that was aching like someone had beaten her from head to toe with a sledgehammer.

*Man, this sucks. I need to quit waking up like this* she thought grumpily.

She opened her eyes as slowly as possible, expecting a sudden invasion of light to blind her. There was only a blurry world around her, a myriad of colors all swimming together like happy fish in a pond. She was able to discern certain shapes, like the light fixture embedded in the ceiling, shining with dim light. Slowly, the plain wooden walls swam out of the sea of blurriness. She became aware of the fact that there was a blanket covering her body, a pillow settled beneath her head, and staring at down at her was a man.

And what a handsome man he was. Long dark hair cascaded around his face, brushing his pale skin. There were a couple of nasty-looking bruises marring the masculine perfection of his features, and the faintly luminescent red eyes were a bit disconcerting, but other than that...

*Whoa! Hold on a second! I know this guy! He's...*

"Vinnie!" Yuffie cried, her voice emerging weakly from her throat. At the same time his name left her lips, she abruptly sat up in bed for some absurd reason unbeknownst even to her. The result was rather painful. Her forehead ended up colliding right smack

with Vincent's, with enough force to send both of them reeling from the blow, clutching at their smarting foreheads. Yuffie even received the distinct honor of hearing Vincent Valentine say:

“Ouch.”

Yuffie gritted her teeth and tried her hardest not to feel like a big fat klutz. “Geez Vinnie!” she exclaimed. “You sure have a hard head!”

Vincent just looked at her, and she was amazed to see his face infused with not just one emotion, but several. Indignation, disbelief, awe, and strangely enough, something that looked suspiciously like happiness.

*Naw...my vision must still be blurry or something* Yuffie quickly amended silently. No way Vincent could be happy to see *her*.

Blinking her eyes to keep the world from spinning crazily, Yuffie was about to make another witty comment to make up for her lack of grace when she suddenly saw Vincent's eyes flick to her chest before he cleared his throat and looked away pointedly.

Yuffie frowned at the man sitting on the edge of her bed before glancing down at herself.

“Ahh!” she shrieked, grabbing the edge of the blanket and covering herself quickly. “You pervert! What the hell did you do with my clothes?!”

*Had to be the black bra. Damn it! First I bash him in the forehead, and now he sees me in my black bra! This isn't happening. This isn't happening!*

Vincent crossed his arms over his chest and made a point of studying the floor. “I didn't do anything with your clothes,” he said calmly. “They were wet from the rain, so Tifa undressed you and covered you with a blanket. I didn't see a thing until you unintentionally...exposed yourself.”

“Damn straight it was unintentional!” Yuffie exclaimed hotly. Her face was burning up; she couldn't *believe* she had just “exposed” herself in front of Vincent. How goddamn freaking embarrassing! And the silence that was falling between them was making it even worse, so Yuffie decided to sacrifice even MORE of her dignity to fill it.

“Whose clothes are you wearing *now?*” she asked, noting that Vincent had changed into a long-sleeved white shirt and a pair of blue jeans. Average clothes for a SO not average man.

Vincent glanced down at the garments, as if they were alien objects not attached to his person. “The jeans are Rude's. The shirt is Cloud's.”



“No wonder,” Yuffie continued, still clutching the blankets to her chest. “The shirt is too small and the jeans are WAY too big.”

Vincent looked at her from the corner of his eye, ebony strands of hair making the crimson depths of his eye even more noticeable. “Why are you harping on my clothes again, Yuffie?”

“To distract myself from the fact that I’m not wearing any!” Yuffie snapped.

The corners of Vincent’s mouth tightened in what might have been a smile. “Don’t worry, Yuffie. Would you like me to call Tifa and ask her to bring you some?”

Yuffie blinked her gray eyes, some of the fire in their depths dimming slightly. “Tifa? She’s here? Is everyone here? Where are we anyways?”

“In a restaurant in Junon.”

“Junon?! What happened to the Final Heaven bar?”

“It burned and then flooded,” Vincent stated bluntly. “But that’s not my story to tell. Right now, we’re staying with one of Rude’s old friends named Kyra.”

“Oh, I see,” Yuffie replied, looking around the room, which was actually rather pretty now that she paid more attention to it instead of her state of undress and the man sitting casually on her bed. The walls were wooden like those of the Final Heaven bar, and it gave Yuffie a comforting sense of familiarity. The bed she occupied was actually one of two that took up the space against one wall. To her right was a nightstand with a nice, simple lamp perched on it. Further beyond that was another bed, various weapons, including—Yuffie was delighted to see—her beloved Conformer, the materia glittering its rightful slots. The shuriken’s companions were a rather colorful assortment of guns, gloves, spears, and even a pair of nunchaku.

*Geez, put a sick lady in the freaking armory, why don't they?* she thought sourly.

She felt a strange weight against her face and looked back to find Vincent looking at her. Making a face at him, she pulled her blanket up higher. Damn thing seemed intent on slipping all the way down. “What are you looking at?” she demanded.

For a moment, Vincent didn’t say anything. The intensity in those crimson eyes made the blood come rushing back to her face, her blush returning with a vengeance. Her eyes widened slightly, and she would have squirmed if Vincent hadn’t practically been sitting on her blanket-covered legs. Here it was again, this warm, throbbing feeling in her chest, the weakness in her limbs, the acute awareness that everything she was—women, ninja—was lain bare for all to see. It made her feel naked even though the feeling wasn’t

necessarily a bad one. What boggled her was that *Vincent* was the one making her feel it.

Something glimmered in those scarlet eyes, and Vincent suddenly stunned the life out of her by turning his face away and laughing. Beautiful, full-throated laughter that she couldn't believe was coming from the likes of Vincent Valentine. Presently, the darkness that Vincent usually radiated was absent, and he seemed more like the man Yuffie knew he was, rather than the monster he thought himself to be. His shoulders shook slightly as he laughed, his dark hair shimmering under the lights, and Yuffie wanted to reach out and sink her fingers into that thick hair, just to reassure herself that he was real. And to think that if she had died down there in that place of green mists and unearthly torturers, she might never have seen him again.

The door suddenly creaked open, and Yuffie jumped slightly, jolted from her thoughts of unfamiliar emotions.

Tifa strode into the room, asking, "My god, Vincent, what in the world is so—" Her eyes fell on Yuffie, and they got so big they nearly bugged out of her head.

Yuffie smile at her friend. "Hey, Tifa!" she said cheerfully and was surprised to find that her good mood was genuine.

*Wow. If Vinnie's laughter affects everyone like this, then he should do it more often. Wonder what he found so funny anyways?*

Then the young woman suddenly found herself wrapped in a crushing embrace by one Tifa Lockhart, who was unintentionally choking the life out of her good friend. Yuffie's sore body protested the painful hug while she scrambled to keep a grip on her blanket. Tifa was one mighty strong woman.

"I'm so glad you're safe! I'm so glad you're safe!" Tifa kept saying over and over again.

"Me, too," Yuffie choked out, her arms pinned between herself and her friend.

Tifa suddenly pulled back, but kept her grip on Yuffie's bare shoulders, squeezing gently as if to make sure that the girl before her was real. The martial artist's burgundy eyes were shimmering, but her smile was just as bright as ever.

Yuffie laughed. "Oh no, Tifa, don't you *dare* start crying!"

The woman smiled and released her friend's shoulders, folding her callused hands in her lap. "Of course not, but I'm just so happy you're okay, Yuffie!"

Yuffie cast a glance at Vincent, who had stopped laughing and was watching the joyful reunion with a neutral face. "I'd be even happier if I had some clothes."

Tifa patted her hand reassuringly. “Don’t worry. I told Kyra to—”

As if on cue, a feminine figure came through the doorway with a bundle of clothes in her arms. Yuffie blinked in surprise at the unfamiliar person. The new woman was in her late teens or early twenties, barely taller than Yuffie herself, but far more striking. With auburn hair and eyes a startling shade of amber, the woman gave off a bold, independent air like most other females gave off perfume.

Kyra walked to the foot of the bed and smiled at Yuffie. “It’s good to see you’re awake. A while ago, your boyfriend here was thinking about calling a doctor.”

Yuffie looked at Vincent and turned beet red. “Boyfriend?! Vinnie is NOT my boyfriend!”

The mischievous glint in Kyra’s eyes said that she didn’t quite believe Yuffie. “Whatever you say, honey. Here, I brought you some clothes. They’re mine so they might be a just a little bit big on you, but beggars can’t be choosers, right?” She winked, taking the bite about what could have been a harsh statement.

Yuffie smiled at the woman and was about to reply when she was distracted by the light glinting off Kyra’s auburn hair, turning some strands red like fire. Red...sewers... the Evict!

“Tifa!” Yuffie suddenly cried, grabbing her friend’s arms in a vise-like grip, her blanket slipping all the way down to her waist. Vincent dutifully looked away, and Kyra let out a small sound of surprise.

Wide burgundy eyes willed her to calm down. “What is it, Yuffie?” Tifa asked, clasping her friend’s hand.

Yuffie was suddenly having trouble breathing. She saw that horrible Faceless Man/Woman clawing at her from behind its cell, still coherent enough to moan piteously, still coherent enough to weep salty tears. She saw Titus pulling mercilessly on the thing’s arms, heard him talking about the Evicts—creatures that would eat anything they could get their claws on. And she imagined Reno, Red, and Elena alone in the sewers with such a thing. Somewhere in the midst of the chaos brought on by her fever, she had thought she heard Reno’s voice, but still...

“Red!” she cried, staring into Tifa’s startled eyes. “Where are Red, Reno, and Elena?!”

Tifa squeezed her hand. “They’re safe, Yuffie,” she said soothingly. “Would you like us to get them?” She looked at Kyra.

“Uh-huh!” Kyra exclaimed, shaking her head. “Reno’s in the shower, and there’s no way I’m going to get him!”

“Just take our word for it, Yuffie,” Vincent spoke up, voice low and calm, but something in it made Yuffie focus all her attention on him, forgetting that Tifa was holding onto her hand. “Everyone is fine.”

“And Reeve?” Yuffie heard herself ask. For some reason, she couldn’t get her eyes to focus properly. The room started to swim.

Vincent’s red eyes bore into her. “We didn’t find him,” he said quietly.

“Oh,” Yuffie wanted to say, but her mouth no longer wanted to work. What was happening to her? Was the madness coming back? No, no, that wasn’t it. Something... there was something...

Tunnel.

Abandoned building.

Escape. Escape to...

“Junon,” she suddenly whispered. “Titus is coming...”

“What’s wrong with her?” Tifa’s voice asked, the first edge of panic starting to make its appearance.

Vincent’s voice came, flat and soothing in its own way. “She might be having some kind of relapse. Overexertion, maybe.”

Darkness started creeping in on the sides of her vision, seeking to drown her already blurry world. She felt no fear, though, no panic whatsoever. She was going to go to sleep in a little while, but first she needed to tell them...

“Titus,” she murmured, not knowing if her voice was loud enough.

One of the blurs shifted, and the scent of Vincent suddenly surrounded her. “What is it, Yuffie?” he whispered, voice so soft and intimate that it would have made her blush if she wasn’t about to pass out.

*Titus...he doesn't know the name...yet...*

“Running Man,” she muttered, forcing the words past her throat. “Coming...15th street...downtown...”

The blackness devoured her vision then, but not before she felt a hand brush her face, warm and callused. She smiled to herself because now she knew that when the madness had been at its worst, Vincent had been the one holding her the entire way through.

~owari chapter 28

# Chapter Twenty-Nine

## *Refugees of Turmoil*

*“AVALANCHE has come for our heads.” —Titus*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What brown things?" Cloud demanded.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"The goddamn spear didn't do it," Cid suddenly seethed, blue eyes finally looked at

everyone with angry fire. “I did that damage. I cut the back of Vince’s shirt, too. If he hadn’t moved, I...would have stuck him in the side.”

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

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

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

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

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

“Or run you through with a sword,” Cloud said angrily. “We’re here to protect you, not kill you.”

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

“Let’s talk about how many assassins are out to kill us,” Red suggested.

Elena and the others looked at him sharply...before they realized he was being serious. There was no laughter whatsoever in that glittering golden eye. “Well,” Cloud said slowly. “Since the Running Man abducted both Reeve and Yuffie, we’re going to assume he’s our enemy so that’s one assassin so far. Two is that Ajax guy.” Seeing the blank looks from Barret, Red, and Elena, he hastened to explain, “Ajax was some creepy smiley guy down in the lair. He summoned a Faceless Man and would have attacked us if the big earthquakes hadn’t started.”

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

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

Elena bristled and was about to snap at the man for insulting her leader when Rude spoke up, “That’s not the point. The point is that the one named Montana is running loose somewhere above ground. Ajax is mostly likely still under the earth; he didn’t strike



me as the type who gets out much. The Running Man is for sure at our destination, according to Yuffie. Montana is still a dangerous unknown, though.”

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

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

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

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

\* \* \* \* \*

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

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

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

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

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

“I don’t think so!” Fa-Li exclaimed. “You’re not leaving me behind.”

“Oh yeah?” Titus said before he could stop himself.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

senses both natural and unnatural.

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

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

\* \* \* \* \*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

And as they began moving is a loose group towards the dilapidated entrance of the building, Elena had to admit that she thought they were close to something as well. The building—with its shattered windows and chunks of missing walls—seemed to look

down at them smugly, as if it had secrets that it had guarded carefully for a very long time. It stood there stubbornly, daring the intruders to discover that which had remained hidden for years and years.

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

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

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

"Who's there?" Elena whispered.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where were they?" Cloud asked.

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

"Are there any stairs?"

"I'm assuming there are."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Thanks for telling me," Cid said sarcastically.

"Hey, Red?" Elena spoke up meekly.

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

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

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

Elena made a face. "Why?"

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

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

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

He acknowledged her oddly formal statement with a single nod. He might have started to say something, but a loud crackling sound suddenly split the air. For a moment,

Elena thought it might have been thunder, but once she heard the loud shouts that followed, she knew the cacophonous sound a few moments ago had to be...

“Gunfire!” Cid rapped out. “Sounds like Barret.”

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

“They’re on the floor above,” Red said tersely. Cid was already running towards the stairs.

“Wait, Cid!” Tifa cried. “Don’t go up the stairs! You’ll just be cannon fodder!”

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

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

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

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

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

“You know it’s not that, Elena,” Red deadpanned.

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

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

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

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

“Even though there’s five of them and only one of him,” Elena added darkly. What

kind of fighter was the Running Man that made him capable of holding up under such odds?

“Let’s find another way up,” Tifa suddenly suggested. “We can get the drop on the enemy, maybe.”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Elena turned to look at Tifa and was stunned to see that the woman had lifted her arms straight above her head, trembling with the effort to contain the raging Fire energy



in the rapidly growing sphere, which was almost big around as Cait's moogles now.

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

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

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

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

*Damn, just my rotten luck.*

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

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

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

*Don't know how much longer Tifa can hold out...*

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

Red-hot rage scorched Elena's heart and consumed her senses. How dare this woman

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

With that, the woman reached behind her back and, to Elena's utter shock, pulled out a slim metal rod a little less than a foot long. For a moment, Elena almost laughed at the prospect of the woman attacking her with what looked like a fairy's magic wand, but then the woman's slender fingers danced over the handle of the rod, and about another foot of metal shot out of nowhere, turning the harmless looking piece of dull gold into an electric nightstick of menacing length.<sup>3</sup> Though it was standard size for most nightsticks—three segments, two of which were retractable—what really made the cold sweat break out on Elena's forehead was that the end of the nightstick that discharged electricity didn't look like anything Elena had ever seen before.

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

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3 Now everyone knows what weapon Fa-Li uses. ^^ —*Catalina*

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

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

She was wrong.

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

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

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

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

But at the moment she was smug and safe with her nightstick held expertly in one

hand. The filtered light from Tifa's great ball of fire illuminated strands of her hair and danced on the shiny leather of her bodysuit, looking like someone had poured molten lava on the curve of her shoulders.

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

*That's it! The fireball!*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

A flaming storm of fire suddenly roared past her prostrate figure, and Elena shut her eyes tightly against the blinding light. The skin on the back of her hands screamed in pain, as if a colony of fire ants had been released onto her body and was in the process of devouring her flesh. Someone behind her was screaming, and the sounds of twisting metal and falling debris rose to join the all-too-human cries of pain.

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

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

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

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

"Is she dead?" Elena asked softly.

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

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

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

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

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

“Will do!” Tifa called. “Be careful!”

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

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

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

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

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

*Cid...thank God!*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Elena whispered, “Is this...the Running Man?”

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

Elena’s grip on her gun tightened. “How did you...I mean how...?”

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

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

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

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

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

Rude put a large hand to his head. “Ouch.”

-owari ch. 29

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Author’s note:

The only thing worse than battle scenes are battle chapters. -\_- There was supposed to be more to this chapter, but it was already getting too long so I had to stick it in the next one. Until then, minna-san! ^\_^

Next...

“Sink to the Bottom With You Ch. 30”

Old Wounds

# Chapter Thirty

## Old Wounds

*“But I’d be much obliged if you’d take your sense of humor elsewhere.” —Vincent Valentine*

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*Come into these arms again  
And lay your body down  
For ‘tis the rhythm of this trembling heart  
Is beating like a drum.  
It beats for you, it bleeds for you  
It knows not how it sounds.  
For it is the drum of drums  
It is the song of songs.*

*“Love Song For a Vampire”  
—Annie Lennox—*

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Vincent sat in a chair beside Yuffie’s bed, cleaning the Outsider absently with a rag Kyra had given him and trying not to look at the clock that hung on the wall just above the bed’s headboard. His friends had been gone a long time, and in spite of himself, he was starting to worry a bit. He knew all of them were dead tired and running low on stamina. Even Cloud had been unconsciously dragging his feet as they piled into the van and drove off.

Sighing internally, Vincent lifted the end of his borrowed shirt and replaced the handgun back in its holster, folding the rag and setting it on the lampstand next to the bed. His arm felt strangely heavy, and he knew it was a telltale sign of fatigue that he hadn’t felt in years. How long had it been since he had last slept? If memory served him correctly, it had been with Yuffie in the hotel three days ago, unless he counted the fitful, nightmare-ridden periods of unconsciousness over the last three days. Normally, Vincent could go quite a while without sleep, but their recent endeavors had been rather...taxing to say the least.

Unfortunately, now that he had actually acknowledged the fact that he was tired, sleep kept trying to make his eyelids heavier than normal. He contemplated getting up and walking around, but he knew that if he started, he would just end up pacing back and forth, worrying about Cloud and others and glancing at the small figure buried underneath the covers in the bed.

Vincent was glad to see that Yuffie was finally getting better. Holding her feverish body in his arms all the way to Junon had shaken him more than he was willing to admit,



and even when she woke up, he could tell that the fever had not quite run its course yet. In fact, her overexcitement when she realized her state of undress had probably caused her to have a relapse quicker than normal. What caused her strange “illness” in the first place was still in question, and Vincent wasn’t entirely sure that he wanted to know the answer. The Hissers had done something severely traumatic that had disturbed even a tough man like Cid Highwind. Had they done the same thing to Yuffie? Or worse?

Carefully, he reached out and grazed Yuffie’s cheek with his fingertips, unable to wonder if his happiness at seeing her alive and well had been premature. Accident victims sometimes didn’t realize they had life threatening injuries until several days after the accident had occurred. He was afraid that Yuffie might have not physical, but mental or emotional damage, and unless they knew what had happened down there in that place between heaven and hell, no one would be able to help her.

Vincent withdrew his hand sharply. *You’re worrying too much* he told himself cruelly, as if trying to frighten away the timid emotions that had been to tentatively rear their heads, cautious creatures peering out to see if the cold, brutal winter was over and wondering if spring had finally arrived.

Folding his arms across his chest, he sank back into the chair, the wood digging into his spine as his eyes drifted almost unwillingly to where Yuffie was slumbering in relative peace. He couldn’t recall the last time he had ever just sat and watched someone sleep. He never did so because he felt like an intruder when he watched someone in their moment of rest, when they were at their most helpless. Strangely enough, sleep didn’t make Yuffie look any more youthful than she already appeared. If anything, she looked a bit older, a bit more mature than she did when she was awake. Just went to show that there was a woman hiding underneath the ninja’s naiveté.

The door to the bedroom suddenly creaked open, and Reno poked his head in, glancing at Vincent with undisguised wariness in his aquamarine eyes, as if he weren’t sure if he was welcome in the room or not. Vincent met his gaze indifferently, eyes and face betraying nothing. Reno shrugged and entered the room, shutting the door quietly behind him before sprawling his long frame into the chair on the other side of Yuffie’s bed.

There was a brief moment of silence, and then Reno asked, “How long has it been now?”

“Two hours and forty-five minutes,” Vincent replied.

Reno looked at him in surprise. “So you’ve been counting, too, eh?”

“Yes,” the other man said calmly. “Where is Cait Sith?”

An annoyed look crossed Reno’s face. “Downstairs chatting it up with Kyra. She’d

rather talk to the robotic cat than to me.”

“She seems to honestly dislike you.”

“I KNOW that. Thank you for reminding me.”

Vincent didn't even bother replying. Sarcasm was, in his opinion, only to be answered if one had sarcasm to give in return. And Vincent was one man who was pretty much sarcasm-less so he let the silence fall like a thick blanket of snow, broken only by the thudding of raindrops against the restaurant's walls. Faintly, he could hear the voices of Kyra and Cait downstairs, and it provided him with a small bit of comfort to know that at least they were safe.

“Where did I go wrong?” Reno suddenly asked quietly.

Vincent looked up in surprise to find an odd, pensive look on the Turk's face, aquamarine eyes misted as they stared up at the ceiling. “What do you mean?”

“C'mon, Valentine,” Reno urged with a touch of impatience in his voice. “You used to be Turk, didn't you?”

Vincent just stared at him, not liking where the conversation was heading. His dark past had never been one of his favorite topics of discussion.

“Then, tell me,” Reno continued. “What's wrong with me? Why aren't my unstintingly loyal Turks following my orders? Why do they keep leaving me behind? Why am I losing control of them?” There was barely restrained frustration in his tone, a strange inflexion that for some reason made it seem as if Reno was bordering on panic.

Vincent lifted an eyebrow. “You're asking me?”

Reno's eyes were intense, the dark scars on his cheekbones standing out on his pale face. “What do you think of me, Valentine? Am I a leader? Why do Rude and Elena keep acting on their own?”

“These questions will get you nowhere Reno. I'm not the person to ask.”

“I think you're JUST the person to ask. You follow Cloud. Why?”

“You're upset at being left behind, Reno. Take it up with Rude and Elena when they return.”

Reno leaned forward determinedly in his chair, damp ponytail falling over his shoulder. “If you were still a Turk and I was your leader, would you follow me?”

Vincent resisted the urge to sigh. Reno was nothing if not persistent. “I can't answer

that question, Reno, due to the fact that I'm nearly three times your age—”

*three times Yuffie's age for that matter*

“—and I see you as youthfully impertinent. You're from an entirely different generation than I am.”

Reno opened his mouth.

“And to answer your question,” Vincent cut in. “Yes, I would follow you, but only because I had to. It's what Turks do: never question orders.”

“Exactly! So what the hell do Rude and Elena think they're doing now?”

Vincent folded his arms across his chest. “Do you really want the answer?”

“I wouldn't have come in here if I wasn't prepared.”

“It's simple. They're torn between two leaders: you and Cloud.” Vincent stared Reno in the eye. “But this you already know, right?”

Reno nodded. “Yeah, but Cloud told me that his only purpose is to bring AVALANCHE together. You think for yourselves.”

“Of course we do. He's not our master, just our leader. We trust him to make good decisions. We trust him to think things through completely before acting. We trust him with our lives.” He gave the Turk a deep look. “And since you're prepared for anything, I have to say, I have no qualms in telling you that Cloud's leadership abilities clearly overshadow yours.”

Reno's face darkened.

“You know what I say is true. Even the ever-headstrong Elena is starting to take orders from him more easily.”

“Are you saying Rude and Elena don't trust me?” Reno snapped. “Are you saying they'd rather follow Cloud than follow me?”

Vincent shook his head, some of his midnight black hair falling over his eyes. “No, they would follow you into hell itself, not because you're their leader, but because you're their friend.”

The surprise on Reno's face was evident. The angry light in his eyes died abruptly.

“Surely you consider them your friends as well?” Vincent asked shrewdly.

Reno was taken aback. “Of course I do. They're the only friends I have.”

“They’ll follow you, Reno. They’ll die for you. And right now, part of what they’re doing is trying to protect you. You’ve been in emotional distress recently, and they’re trying to keep you from having a breakdown.”

“By leaving me out of the action?”

“Yes.”

Reno slumped in his chair, looking overwhelmed. “Well, shit, this is all too damn much for me. Anything else you want to add before my brain overloads?”

“Do you have any more bothersome questions?”

Reno’s face was serious. “Yeah, I do, actually. What do you think of the Turks now, Vincent?”

Crimson eyes stared the man right in the face. “The Turks are a dead organization, Reno. They fell alongside Shinra. All you carry now is their name. Under Reeve, the Turks have an entirely different purpose, and that purpose is no longer a foul, amoral one.”

Reno was staring at him as if he had sprouted another head. “Geez, Valentine, you sure can talk a lot when you want to. Is your mouth sore? Do you need a glass of water?”

“No,” Vincent said calmly. “But I’d be much obliged if you’d take your sense of humor elsewhere.”

Reno laughed, not in the least bit offended as he rose from his chair and stretched languidly. “Fine, fine.” He glanced down at where Yuffie was sleeping. “Is she gonna be okay?”

Vincent nodded. “It seems like it.”

“Well, isn’t that good to hear,” Reno commented, sauntering towards the door. “If you need me, my lazy ass will be asleep down the hall. And try and get some rest, Valentine. You’re looking a little pale.” He laughed at his own joke and slipped out of the room, leaving Vincent frowning at the closed door.

*Quite a character, that one* he thought.

A sigh escaped his lips as he finally gave into his fatigue and slouched in the chair. It seemed logical that, after three days, he should be getting some sleep, but he wouldn’t forgive himself if something happened to Yuffie or one of his friends when he was immersed in his world of perpetual nightmares. Despite his resolve not to fall asleep, Vincent found himself dozing slightly in the uncomfortable chair, hovering in a world somewhere between reality and dream.

When he managed to rouse himself, Yuffie was wide awake and staring at him with dark, haunted eyes.

*Her illness is gone* he thought with absolute conviction as he straightened in his chair. True, the brightness of the fever had dissipated from the stormy depths of her eyes, but it seemed to have taken something with it. The prominent flash and shine that he had come to associate with Yuffie was dimmed slightly, and he knew it had something to do with the memories of her kidnapping and the events that occurred beneath the earth. In those gray eyes, he saw the dark remnants of unimaginable horrors.

“You’re awake,” he said softly, leaning forward slightly to peer down at her face, which was the only thing poking out of the blankets.

She merely nodded, eyes a bit wide.

“Are you feeling alright?” Vincent asked.

“I’m...okay, I guess,” she said quietly. “Did I...have a relapse or something?”

“Yes, you did,” Vincent answered, rising from his chair and turning to retrieve the forgotten clothes Kyra had offered before Yuffie fainted. The look in her eyes was irking him. He’d seen rape victims with those kinds of eyes.

*Did they...to Yuffie? I’ll kill them if they did. I’ll do more than kill them.*

He picked up the clothes with his right arm, not trusting himself not to shred the garments with his claw in his sudden anger. When he thought of anyone touching Yuffie, defiling her, he felt a deep rage, viscous and boiling, in his soul. That was bad. Rage fed the demons, just as surely as sorrow and bitterness and self-loathing did. He didn’t need to be kindling the flames of damnation with any new emotions.

There was a brief rustling behind him as Yuffie rose to a sitting position, clutching the blankets protectively to her chest. Vincent turned to see her touching her own forehead with her palm. “I don’t think I have a fever anymore,” she said, and he heard that beloved cheerful tone trying to come back into her voice.

“You don’t,” Vincent said matter-of-factly. “Whatever illness you had is gone now.”

“I feel...dirty,” Yuffie suddenly confessed, staring hard at her sheet-covered lap. She had her hands fisting in the blankets so tightly her knuckles were white. “I feel unclean, like I want to take a shower, but I know a shower won’t help.”

The torn look in her eyes caused a deep pain to blossom in his chest. “I don’t know exactly what happened down there, Yuffie, but I know...I must have been terrible.”

A bitter, hard-edged laugh suddenly erupted from her mouth. “Terrible?” she repeated. “TERRIBLE?! ‘Terrible’ doesn’t even BEGIN to describe it! It was...I HATED it down there...” Her voice trailed off, and she turned away from him, shoulders shaking.

Vincent just stood there, feeling helpless. He had never been good at comforting people, and despite what Tifa had said the other day about Yuffie finding comfort in his mere presence, a part of him still didn’t believe it. If his presence was so bloody soothing, then why was Yuffie sitting not five feet away from him, holding a blanket up to her chest to cover her nakedness and tottering on the edge of a breakdown? Some comfort.

“Gawd!” she suddenly cried, flopping back onto her pillow and covering her head with the sheet, drawing the cloth smooth and taut. “I’m about to cry,” she said, voice muffled. “I HATE when I cry! I’m such a damn baby...”

A strange sound somewhere between a sob and a laugh came from underneath the blanket, followed by dozens of others until Vincent truly wasn’t sure if she was laughing giddily or sobbing hysterically underneath the cover of the sheets. His hand tightened on the clothes, holding them tighter against his chest as he stared down at the bed and girl beneath the covers who was trying not to allow her sanity to shatter into a million pieces.

Vincent wanted to leave; he couldn’t bear to see her like this, not when he was powerless to help her. Was he supposed to tell her everything was going to be okay? No, that would be a lie, and a big one, at that.

Vincent had always hated it when people cried, especially females. With other males, he knew he didn’t have to offer much comfort; the masculine defense mechanism would not allow them to accept comfort from another man, with the only exception being close friends. But women were a different story. Vincent had always tried to comfort Lucrecia when she wept...but that had been a long time ago. When he was only five years old, and his sisters were weeping—some hysterically, some quietly—over the brutal slaughter of their mother, he had patted their long dark hair with his tiny hands, wanting to protect them...but that had been a long time ago as well.

And in the end, he couldn’t protect anything. Lucrecia perished at the hands of a madman after bearing his devil-child. Vincent’s sisters died trying to protect him, not the other way around. He had long ago accepted the fact that he had no comfort, no protection, no love, to offer anyone or anything.

Or did he?

*Yuffie...*

Setting the bundle of clothes quietly on the lampstand, Vincent eased his weight onto the side of the bed, watching Yuffie’s blanket-covered figure for any signs of discomfort.

Her sobs/laughter had subsided sometime during his dark musings, and the only sound coming from underneath the covers was a soft weeping.

Vincent carefully reached over and wrapped his human fingers around the edge of the sheet, gently pulling it back to reveal Yuffie's face. She offered him no resistance, letting the sheet slide from her fingers. He had expected her eyes to be closed, her face turned into the pillows, but instead those endless gray eyes were wide open, shimmering with tears that painted silver tracks down her face. Droplets glittered on the ends of her eyelashes, staining them a perfect shade of black.

"Yuffie," he whispered, unable to say anything else. He only knew that he hated to see her cry.

"I feel horrible!" she suddenly exclaimed, the words rushing from her mouth so quickly she nearly tumbled over them.

"Why?"

She was struggling to breathe; her sobs were suddenly choking her. "Because... because...for a long time...I didn't think you all were coming for me!" She stared him in the face, eyes overflowing with an endless stream of tears. "I thought you all were going to leave me down there! I was horrible, doubting you all! I doubted my friends. I'm so sorry, Vincent!"

Vincent shook his head. "Yuffie, it's not your fault. You're alive, and that's all that matters."

She swallowed visibly, making a valiant attempt to control her approaching hysteria. "My mind feels raw," she suddenly whispered feverishly, eyes wide. "I feel so dirty." Her voice broke on the last word.

Vincent reached out and cradled her cheek, wiping away her tears with his callused fingers. Her eyes got just a touch wider, and she became still as he stroked her face softly. He suddenly felt as if he could fall into the shimmering, tear-stained depths of those heart-wrenching eyes. The sensation was so tangible that his stomach lurched slightly, as if he were really plummeting into those stormy gray orbs.

"Vinnie!" Yuffie suddenly said. The word came out more forcefully than he had expected, causing him to jump slightly. Her hands suddenly were fisted in the front of his shirt, tugging him towards her. Vincent's heart skipped a beat when he thought that she was trying to pull him on top of her, but then her hands started scrabbling at his shoulders, and he realized she was only trying to hug him.

That—now that he could do.

Vincent leaned down and carefully slid his arms around Yuffie, making sure to keep the razor-sharp digits of his claw away from her tender skin. He drew her against him, and she slid her trembling arms around his neck, gripping with strength he hadn't thought a girl of her small frame could possess. Check pressed against her damp, feverish one, he held her tightly, but not without a certain gentleness. He was afraid she was going to break in his arms, but he also knew that she would not like him treating her like a baby. She certainly wasn't a child any longer.

Yuffie's back shook with silent sobs, and Vincent drew her into a half-sitting position so he could better wrap his arms around her, his human hand resting on her back. The blanket had fallen off long ago, and she was clad only in the black undergarment that she had been so hasty to cover up the first time she had awakened. Consequently, he had no choice but to rest his ungloved hand on the bare skin of her back. Her skin was tender and warm, almost feverish from her lying on her back for such a long period of time. He looked at his own hand juxtaposed next to the flesh, noticing that the cloth of his borrowed shirt and the skin of his hand were almost the same ghostly white color. The light golden tan of her skin only made his hand look even paler.

It was silly thing, but he just kept staring down at his hand against her gently heaving back, long fingers splayed across her soft skin. Something was happening inside of him. There was an ache in his chest that he didn't care to decipher. There was no time for such things now...

*Maybe not ever. I can't let this happen. She's just a young girl still.*

Eventually, Yuffie's tears ran dry, and she was quiet in his arms, head resting on his shoulder with her fingers buried in his long dark hair. She clung to him for a few seconds more, then slowly pulled back, wiping her face as she did so.

"Sorry, Vinnie," she muttered ashamedly, sounding more like the Yuffie he knew. "Don't make fun of me because I'm a crybaby."

Vincent sat back, folding his arms across his chest because he no longer knew what to do with them. "You've just been through a terrible ordeal, Yuffie," he said in what he hoped was a semi-soothing tone. "No one is going to fault you for crying."

She gave him a watery smile. "Thanks, Vinnie."

He nodded mutely, one corner of his mouth curling slightly. However, now that his emotions had been reigned in, he was now unhealthily aware of the fact that the sheets were all bunched around Yuffie's waist, and she was...showing a lot of skin.

She apparently noticed it at the same time he did, for she snatched the blankets and held them in front of her like a shield. "Oops," she said sheepishly. "Didn't mean to flash you."



Vincent almost said “That’s okay” but stopped himself just in time, knowing that particular phrasing would have sounded awkward. Instead, he just shrugged and stood, picking the bundle of clothes off the lampstand and handing them to Yuffie, who accepted them with one arm plastered to her chest to keep her sheet from falling.

“Thank you for rescuing me, Vinnie,” she suddenly said hurriedly, a minor eruption of words that had been pent up for a while.

Vincent shook his head. “No need to thank me, Yuffie,” he said softly. “It was...”

*Something I had to do? No...that's not it. I didn't do just because I had to. I wanted to save her. I wanted to see her safe again.*

He glanced down to see Yuffie staring up at him questioningly.

“Nothing,” he finished lamely, pushing his hair back from his face with his human hand.

She frowned at him. “No fair, Vinnie. You can’t give me popcorn without the butter.”

Vincent blinked, stumped by the odd phrasing until he managed to grasp the meaning. Then he looked down at the girl seated in her bed, and an affectionate smile came to his lips. It was a mere shadow of the full-fledged laughter that had come from his mouth a few hours before, but it was enough to bring an answering smile to Yuffie’s face. The glow was starting to return to her eyes. She would heal. He was glad.

“I’m going downstairs with the others,” Vincent said. “You get dressed and join us as soon as you feel well enough.”

“Others?” Yuffie asked as Vincent moved away from her bed. “Is everyone still here?”

Vincent turned back, shaking his head. “Only Reno, Cait Sith, and Kyra remain. The others went after the Running Man.” He glanced at the clock above her head. “That was almost three hours ago.”

Yuffie’s eyes widened, face beautifully expressive as it was before her abduction. “Gawd. Vinnie, that’s a long time for them to be gone!”

He could only nod grimly. “I know, but—”

Vincent never got to finish his sentence because the thundering of footsteps could suddenly be heard coming up the stairs, heading in the direction of the bedroom. His hand instinctively flew to the butt of the Outsider, and he was turning towards the door just as Kyra came charging through, nearly spilling herself onto the floor in her haste. Her amber eyes were wide, her auburn hair tumbling around her pale face as she struggled for breath.

She pointed down the hall with a shaky arm, words divided by loud gasps. “Your friends (gasp) downstairs (gasp) they have (gasp) the Running Man!”

~\*~\*~\*~\*

They put the Running Man in the restaurant’s damp, leaky cellar. For some reason that Cloud didn’t want to know, Kyra had a pair of handcuffs in the cellar, and these were used to chain the unconscious man’s wrists to one of the pipe’s jutting out of the back wall of the cellar. The dark haired woman that Elena and Tifa had captured was tied to a chair using yards upon yards of rope, knotted haphazardly here and there. When Yuffie woke up, they were going to have to ask her to tie the woman up professional style.

The whole operation seemed savage and evil somehow, chaining prisoners in dark cellars and such, and though Cloud had a feeling he was going to get his method of handling the situation thrown back in his face later on, he could see no other way to ensure the safety of his teammates. He had seen firsthand how inhumanly crafty and quick the Running Man was in open battle. The man had held his own against four highly trained human opponents and one quadruped with a beast’s cunning and above-average intelligence.

In the end of the battle, they had merely overwhelmed the Running Man with their sheer numbers, cornering him and then striking. Cloud wasn’t eager to see how any of them would hold out in a one-on-one battle. As far as he knew, the Running Man hadn’t even been armed when he fought against them in the abandoned building.

Even now, unconscious and slumped against the wall, the Running Man still looked dangerous. Though he was quite a bit younger than Cloud had imagined, there was certain arrangement of his facial features that screamed for others to be wary of him. A permanent coldness, maybe. Either way, Cloud knew they wouldn’t be able to take the Running Man lightly.

Cloud leaned his weary body against the wall behind him, the Ultima Weapon in his hands, glowing faintly in the darkness. A small light bulb dangling from the ceiling illuminated the faces of his friends gathered in various corners of the room. No one had wanted to wait upstairs. *Everyone* wanted to look into the eyes Reeve’s kidnapper when he woke up, a general mindset Cloud wasn’t at all pleased with.

They were all tired, weary, angry, on the edge and ready to snap. Cloud wasn’t even sure if he trusted himself to question the Running Man without hurting him, much less any of the others. Cid was crouched in one corner of the cellar (defying Cloud’s suggestion that he go wait upstairs with Kyra and Cait), brimming with instability and the trembling effort of holding it in. There was a haunted darkness in the man’s blue eyes that made Cloud uncomfortable, but he was sure Cid was aware of the darkness’ presence as well,

and he was doing his best to reign it in.

But in the event that he couldn't, Cloud had made sure Barret and Red XIII were both within grabbing distance of the man. Though it was obvious Red had to keep his one eye on them both. Admittedly, Barret would stop Cid from doing something stupid, but he wouldn't be in the state of mind to stop himself from doing something of equal stupidity. The man already looked like he was ready to explode with anger, and the Running Man wasn't even awake yet.

Rude had gone upstairs to get Reno, something Cloud was REALLY not looking forward to. It was kind of like setting a bull loose in a China shop. Cloud might be able to talk his friends down from an irrational rage, but Reno was always a dangerous, unknown factor. No one knew what could set him off.

Tired though they were, Tifa and Elena each stood to one side of the bound woman, who was, unfortunately, awake and talking.

"This absolutely senseless," she snapped, and Cloud winced at her nasal, accented voice. "Why do these broads need to stand guard? It's not like I'm GOING anywhere." She jerked on her ropes pointedly.

"I'm not a broad," Tifa growled.

"Me either," Elena echoed angrily. "So you'd best just shut your mouth, bitch."

*God, not them too.*

"Cut it out, Elena," Cloud ordered sharply.

Elena cut it out, but Cloud knew her obedience wasn't going to last long. As soon as Reno waltzed into the cellar, he had no problem guessing whose orders she would be following.

The door at the top of the cellar creaked open, and Cloud held his breath when he saw a tall, lanky figure silhouetted against the dim light. It was only when the door shut behind the figure and darkness once again claimed the room that he was able to see the luminescent crimson eyes in all their horrible glory.

"How's Yuffie?" Tifa asked immediately.

"She's fine," Vincent said calmly as he descended the stairs without a sound. "She's getting dressed right now, and then she's coming down."

Tifa frowned. "Do you think that's a good idea?"

The two continued to converse, but Cloud tuned them out. His allies could handle

and support each other (hopefully), and that meant he had to worry about their enemies. Since the Running Man was still slumped lifelessly against the wall, Cloud was left to study the mysterious woman in the leather bodysuit. She was watching Vincent very closely, eyes tracking his movements like a rabbit listening to the sounds of the predator lurking in the night. The woman was afraid of Vincent—that much was clear. The red eyes and pale skin had probably done it; this kind of reaction was typical of those meeting Vincent for the first time.

Then the woman suddenly stiffened, back going ramrod straight in her chair. Her dark eyes widened until they appeared grotesquely large in a face that had suddenly been sucked of all its color. What the hell was wrong with her now?

The door at the top of the cellar flew open as if hit by a strong wind, and Reno stormed into the dark room, talking angrily as Rude followed at his back like a sentinel.

“—don’t think I ain’t angry with you because I sure as hell am,” Reno was saying as he descended the stairs, aquamarine eyes roving the room.

The woman let out a short, strangled noise, and Reno stopped short of her chair, staring down at her. The horrified woman stared back, as if enraptured by the man that stood barely five feet away from her. A stifling silence clamped down on the room; Cloud was surprised he couldn’t hear his heartbeat echoing in the yawning void of sound. He had never heard a silence so complete and terrible as this one.

Then Reno spoke in a horrified, strangled voice. “Alette?!”

~owari ch. 30

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Author’s note:

Thanks to Charles Xavier for recommending the song at the beginning.

I am Evil embodied, I know, to leave you hanging like that. Sorry! Until next time...

—Catalina, who was running on the last fumes of Inspiration towards the end of the chapter...

Next...

Sink to the Bottom With You Ch. 31

The Point of No Return

By the way, did EVERYONE know Fa-Li was really Alette? I tried to be sneaky, but mesa thinks I failed miserably. O\_O

# Chapter Thirty-One

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## *The Point of No Return*

*“Are you in love with her?” —Elena*

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*Put me in the hospital for nerves and then*

*They had to commit me*

*You told them all I was crazy*

*They cut off my legs*

*Now I’m an amputee, God damn you*

*“Flagpole Sitta”*

*—Harvey Danger—*

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“Reeenoo!” Tifa yelled, cupping her gloved hands around her mouth to help project the desperate sound of her voice into the rainy night. There was no reply to her cry, just like there had been none to all the dozens before it. Nothing but the cold, unforgiving skies and the thundering rain all around her, pounding ruthlessly down on the pavement, on her.

“Anything?” Elena asked, rushing up to her side, blond hair and navy blue suit a sopping mass clinging to her petite frame.

Tifa shook her head. “Nothing, but I want to look further down the street.”

Elena nodded, and the two women fell in side by side, their mostly night-blind eyes searching through the darkness for a hint of red hair, the flash of a white shirt, the glow of a pair of aquamarine eyes. Anything. But all that deigned to appear before them was seemingly endless amounts of pavement glistening with rain and dark alleyways gaping like open mouths. Upper Junon was a big, complex area, and Reno had run off somewhere into the thick of it after the horrible revelation back in the cellar of Kyras’s restaurant.

\* \* \* \* \*

Then Reno spoke in a horrified, strangled voice. “Alette?!”

The woman didn’t respond, but recognition flashed in her dark, terrified eyes, just as tangible as if she had answered him out loud.

*Alette?* Tifa wondered in horror. *No... his ex-wife... the one who killed Mika...*

Reno's next moves were so fast that only Vincent and Red, with their unnatural reflexes, were quick enough to intervene.

As Reno leapt forward with murder in his flashing eyes, Vincent lunged and grabbed the man's shoulders, trying to wrestle him to the ground. Red XIII shot across the room, purposefully tangling himself in Reno's legs so that all three of them—Reno, Red, and Vincent—hit the ground with painful thuds, turning into one massive, struggling heap.

Reno was screaming, the most horrible sound Tifa had ever heard in her entire life. She hadn't even known human beings were capable of making such a heart-wrenching noise—part wail, part shriek, part yell. So many emotions wound up into that scream that she felt something in her heart wanted to collapse under the sheer force of it. The Turk was fighting with all his might to be free of Vincent and Red's grasps, his arms and legs flailing violently. There was a flash of blood red that might have been Reno's hair, Red's fur, or Vincent's eyes, but other than that, her three friends were just a writhing mass of human and inhuman limbs.

The gravity of the situation just wasn't quite clicking in Tifa's mind. Her limbs were frozen where she stood, and from the looks on everyone else's faces, they were stunned as well. For a moment, she looked wildly around the room, mind taking brief still shots of her friends. Barret and Cid were still plastered against the far wall, their weapons drawn even though they clearly had no idea what to do with them. Elena's eyes were wide with shock as she stared down at Reno's thrashing figure. Cloud looked dumbfounded. The Running Man's eyes were open, so very green and familiar. Rude was absolutely still, mouth hanging open slightly. The woman known as Alette was struggling wildly against her ropes, screaming in pure terror.

Not that she didn't have a right to be afraid. Tifa knew that if Reno somehow got loose, blood would be shed, and it wouldn't be his. Reno would kill her with his bare hands if he had to, and bound to her chair, Alette was a helpless victim...

*...but she killed her own daughter! Doesn't such a monster deserve to die? Doesn't Reno deserve his vengeance?*

*...are you going to watch your friend slaughter someone in cold blood right in front of you? Spilling her blood will not heal him.*

*...she killed a two-year-old baby girl!*

*...two years old...twenty years old...human life is human life. All is precious.*

Alette deserved to die, but Tifa couldn't let Reno kill her.

But...she still couldn't move. She tried—oh god, did she ever try—but her feet just

wouldn't obey. All she could do was stare helplessly at the thrashing figures of Vincent, Reno, and Red on the hard, pitiless floor of the cellar. It was taking both of them to restrain the Turk. Two fighters with unnatural strength to hold down one human man. It was only then that Tifa realized that much of Reno's strength was rooted in his never-ending well of bitterness and rage.

Reno managed to extricate one arm, and Tifa saw that seemingly disembodied limb lash upwards and catch Vincent underneath the chin. The gunman's head jerked backwards, and Tifa imagined she could hear his teeth clacking together. Naturally, it wasn't enough to force Vincent to relax his hold, but Reno suddenly angled his long fingers into a pseudo-blade and slammed them into Vincent's neck with enough rage-driven power to make the man fall away from him, struggling for breath. A blow such as that would have crushed a normal human's windpipe, Tifa knew, but Vincent was only gasping for breath—preternatural abilities at their advantageous best.

With Vincent's gone, Reno's thrashing became more vigorous, and he let out a loud cry as he managed to free one of his feet. Another guttural scream ripped from his throat as he delivered a hard kick into Red's side, sending the lion-like beast skidding away with an angry snarl.

Reno struggled to his feet, face a mask of pure fury. Tifa kept telling her feet to move, to get between Reno and Alette somehow, but her body was something out of her control now. She was frozen.

And so, she braced herself, ready to witness the sight of Reno attacking a defenseless victim. But Reno didn't move a step closer towards his ex-wife. He tottered around drunkenly for a second, flashing eyes flitting blindly around the room. His face was a ghastly shade of white, as if some demon had leeches the blood from his body, and he was hovering on the brink of death, blind in his rage. The darkness of the twin scars on his cheekbones and the bloody redness of his hair stood out in bright contrast to the ghostly pallor of his skin.

By chance, Reno's eyes flicked in Tifa's direction, and for a few breathless seconds, their gazes locked and held. A vise closed around her heart when she saw that wound torn and bleeding, gushing. She saw the well of bitterness deep within him, spewing forth dark memories like a geyser, as mindless and out of control as a runaway train, never coming back from the point of no return.

Then his eyes were gone, and he was pounding up the stairs and out of the cellar, leaving only silence and the pitiful weeping of Alette. Tifa slowly became aware of herself again, as if for that horrible moment, she had been estranged from her body, living only for that gloriously unstable man that had just torn out of the cellar as if the devil himself

were close on his heels.

A glass shattered upstairs in the restaurant area, and with it the last remnants of the frozen spell Reno's pulsing, bleeding soul cast over the room.

"Reno! Come back!" Tifa cried, racing up the stairs, Rude and Elena close at her heels.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Reeenooo!" Elena called, her voice satisfyingly loud. One positive thing Tifa could say about Elena was that the small woman had one mighty bellow.

But even the loudness of the Turk's voice wasn't enough to overcome the endless roar of the rain. Tifa, for one, was so sick of rain and being wet that she didn't think she would mind if she never took another shower again in her entire life.

"God, where could he be?!" Elena said worriedly, panic starting to creep into her voice. "It feels like we've searched the entire goddamn city!"

Tifa shared the Turk's sentiment, but still she said, "We can't just give up. Cloud and Rude are out there looking as well. Between the four of us, we should be able to find him."

*Please be okay, Reno. Don't do anything stupid.*

As she and Elena continued down the street, eyes desperately searching the darkness for any sign of their missing friend, Tifa couldn't help but worry if the appearance of Alette had finally driven Reno off the deep end. She had looked into those crazed, pained eyes and saw the man she had come to know as Reno of the Turks slowly deteriorating, being devoured by bitterness and a rage so deep that it was a pit without a bottom. Tifa was afraid Reno would take out the sudden surge of violence in his soul on the first thing that crossed his path, and if there was no one, he would turn on himself. She heard the waters flooding Lower Junon were deep. Several people had drowned already, their bodies lost somewhere in that massive watery grave.

*No! she told herself harshly. Reno would never take his own life! What kind of friend are you—thinking like that? Think positive, Tifa! Reno is going to be fine. Reno is going to be fine...*

And Tifa realized for the first time that she would miss Reno dearly if he died. He was her friend now, and she had to help him.

However, after ten more minutes of fruitless searching, she and Elena were still no closer to finding Reno than they were when they left the restaurant. All they knew was that he was somewhere out in the complex labyrinth of Upper Junon, and naturally, such



meager knowledge amounted to nothing.

Tifa and Elena had already checked all the bars and shops. No Reno. Cloud and Rude were to check the alleyways and get as far as they could to Lower Junon to make sure Reno wasn't thinking of taking a fateful plunge into the floodwaters. Tifa didn't know if they had found anything. Her PHS and Elena's cell phone didn't work in the rain; they had left both communication devices back at the restaurant.

A feeling of isolation washed over Tifa as she sloshed through another puddle, water splashing her already drenched legs. The lighted restaurant filled with her friends (and two of her enemies) seemed so far away. Kalm and the scorched remains of her bar seemed even farther. All she knew was this dark, rain-soaked backstreet, as if it were her entire world and everything else had been just a dream.

"Tifa?" Elena suddenly asked, and something in her voice made all of the other woman's attention come to focus on her.

"Hm?"

The Turk's eyes were wide and dark. "Do you know who that woman back at the restaurant is?"

Tifa blinked in surprise. She had been so caught up in her search for Reno that she had completely forgotten that Alette was back at the bar, a living relic from Reno's dark past. A murderer who had killed her daughter, but...

*'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!'*

"I know who she is," Tifa said quietly, voice barely audible over the rain. "But it's not my story to tell."

Elena looked her dubiously, mistrust clearly evident in her dark eyes.

"I'm telling the truth," Tifa insisted, unable to keep a defensive tone out of her voice. She had always hated it when people looked at her like that. "Please believe me, Elena. We can't let Reno near to that woman, or he'll kill her."

The woman blinked. "You're serious, aren't you?" she asked softly.

Tifa nodded.

Elena sighed sadly as they continued to walk through the rain. "He didn't have any weapons, I don't think. His nightstick was lost in the sewers, and I don't know if he

managed to retrieve his gun before the bar went down in flames.”

“I saw Vincent’s Silver Rifle tucked in the waistband of his pants,” Tifa countered quietly.

Elena’s worried expression intensified so much that Tifa wished she could retract her words. “Oh no! I was really hoping he wouldn’t have a gun with him.”

Tifa didn’t say anything in reply, but she agreed wholeheartedly. A mentally unstable, possibly rage-stricken Reno with a loaded gun was not a thing they wanted running rampant without anything to rein it in.

*All the more reason why we have to find him quickly* she urged herself, finding that if she was stern, it would give her time to worry too much.

It seemed as if they had been searching for hours when they finally came to a dead end, though ‘dead’ could hardly describe the scene that lay before the two women. Upper Junon abruptly fell away, and the ocean stretched out in all directions, dark and terrible in her beauty, but not dead. No, the ocean was constantly teeming with life; Tifa was certain there were dozens of unknown monsters living in her depths. Normally, she loved looking upon the crystalline blue waters of the ocean, the gentle waves sparkling with reflected sunlight. It was one of the reasons she had wanted to set up her bar in Kalm.

But never in her life had she seen an ocean like this, so dark and forbidding, with tall, hungry waves that leapt and contorted in the air, like they wanted to eat the world. Falling raindrops punctured their watery kindred, making the waves look like they had some horrid disease as they lashed upward, scrabbling for the chance to drown Upper Junon just as they had devoured Lower Junon.

The sight took Tifa’s breath away, but in a wild, terrified sort of way.

“Ugly,” Elena muttered, wrapping her arms around herself as if cold.

Tifa looked down at the dark waters still a distance below her. Had Reno...?

“Tifa! Elena!” a deep voice suddenly called.

Both women turned in surprise to find Rude walking towards them down the deserted street, strides long and unhurried. His deep-set green eyes glittered as he got closer, their gleam undimmed by the raindrops rolling down his face.

“Rude!” Elena exclaimed, rushing up to him, Tifa close at her heels.

“We found him,” Rude announced calmly.

“You did?!” Tifa exclaimed breathlessly. Her heart was beating in her throat. “Where

is he?”

“Follow me,” he said in an unwavering tone, but Tifa spotted a mixture of relief and worry that flitted across his green eyes before he turned around and began to walk down the street, back the way he came.

Elena moved up beside Rude, but Tifa lagged a couple of steps behind. She hadn't liked the look in Rude's eyes. The relief was something nice to see, but the worry...if they had found Reno, and he was alright, then why worry any longer?

*Duh a voice mocked. Because he's NOT alright, and probably never will be again.*

*No...don't let it be that way. Reno's going to be just fine!*

Or so she told herself, but there just wasn't enough conviction behind the words. She knew Reno wasn't alright because he had never really been alright to begin with. Not with that terrible wound festering inside him like a slow poison, eating away at his life. She could only pray that it hadn't devoured him already.

Rude strode to the end of the street and up to the very edge of the street until it looked like he was going to walk right off and plummet into the dark waters below. Elena and Tifa hesitantly came up on either side of him, silently willing their shoes not to slide on the wet pavement. One slip here meant an almost certain death in the churning waters fifty feet below them.

“Down there,” Rude said, pointing straight down with one gloved hand.

Tifa steeled her and leaned slightly over the edge, hoping her well-honed balance wouldn't betray her now. Right below them, where she had expected to see nothing but roaring, world-devouring ocean water, she instead saw a large metal platform that hung out over the waters, like a balcony without a railing. A wet and glistening ladder at her feet lead down to the platform.

“I don't see him,” Elena announced tensely.

“I know,” Rude replied, pulling back from the edge. “There a large opening in the wall directly beneath us that leads into an old tunnel that used to provide quick passage for sea-faring crafts.”

“Sea-faring crafts?” Elena asked curiously.

“Back when Junon was first built, they were focused on testing different kinds of aquatic military craft. From a testing facility directly underneath Junon, the crafts would be jettisoned out of the tunnel and onto the ocean's surface. The tunnel has been out of use for a long time, and all passageways to the abandoned testing facility have been

sealed off so it's now the equivalent of a very large, very long hole in the wall." He paused. "Cloud said Reno was down in the back of the tunnel."

That got Tifa's attention. "Cloud's down there with him?"

Rude glanced at her for a moment, then looked away. "No. Cloud has gone back to the restaurant to inform the others that Reno is alright."

Tifa frowned. She had wanted Cloud to be here, even if it was just for moral support. Reno didn't appear to like Cloud very much, but Tifa knew that somewhere in the back of his mind, Reno respected the leader of AVALANCHE maybe more than anyone else, save for Reeve. Though given the Turk's current state of mind, she was uncertain as to how he would react to an authority figure. Maybe that was the reason Cloud had gone back...

"Well, what are we waiting for?" Elena asked impatiently, moving towards the ladder. "Let's go get him."

Rude laid a large hand on her shoulder, stopping her in her tracks. The blonde woman stared up at him, perplexed. "What is it, Rude? We need to go get him."

Rude looked off across the tormented ocean. "I think Tifa should go down there alone," he said flatly.

"What?" Elena and Tifa asked simultaneously.

*Why me alone?*

Tifa suddenly found herself the focus of a pair of bright green eyes, their brilliance natural, not Mako-derived. "You have to help him, Tifa," Rude said quietly.

"But..." Tifa began in a troubled voice.

"Why just her?" Elena demanded, echoing Tifa's thoughts exactly. "We can help him, too, Rude!"

But it was as if Elena hadn't even spoken. Rude's eyes burned into her burgundy ones. "Please, Tifa."

Tifa's hands clenched into fists at her sides, but not in anger. She felt a heavy burden descend on her shoulders, just as it had the day she had gone out to listen to Reno's story on the beach at Kalm. It was funny how she believed in herself until other people started to do the same thing. She was good at taking responsibility until others began to rely on her as well. It was simple when it was just her life at stake, but when other human beings put their lives in her hands...sometimes it was all too much.

She hated that part of herself. So indecisive. And it wasn't just Reno who was

depending her, she decided, as she looked into Rude's eyes, the calm green shade resembling placid emeralds with a core of chaos within their crystalline cages. And then there was Elena's wide, worried eyes peering around Rude's shoulder at her, slightly angry, slightly desperate. They were relying on her, too. Relying on her to help Reno. Too succeed where they had failed...

Tifa nodded, ignoring her waterlogged bangs as they snaked into her eyes. "Alright, I'll go."

She turned towards the ladder, prepared to begin her precarious descent, when Rude suddenly grabbed her hand. She looked at him in surprise.

"Take care of him, Tifa," he said softly.

She smiled wanly. "I will, Rude. Don't worry."

He squeezed her hand, and a strange light entered his eyes. "Take care of yourself as well."

An uncertain pucker formed between her graceful eyebrows, but before she could become further confused, Rude released her hand and stepped back next to Elena, hands clasped in front of him, all business once more.

Tifa nodded at them once more, then turned and started to descend the ladder alone.

\* \* \* \* \*

Rude watched emotionlessly as the top of Tifa's head sank out of view. He resisted the urge to step up to the edge and watch her climb down to the platform safely. Such a thing would have been unnecessary, he knew; Tifa was more than capable of taking care of herself. She didn't need anyone to follow her around like an aimless shadow, doting on her every move as if she were some divine being to be cherished and protected lest she break. No, Tifa Lockhart would not appreciate that in the slightest.

Hazy green eyes stared at the top of the ladder until the visage began dancing in and out of focus tauntingly. Then Rude turned away.

"Let's go," he said firmly, beginning the lonely walk back down the wide street that had once provided a resting place for the Junon canon, the former party ground for President Rufus' Shinra welcoming parade. A street full of memories, that's what it was. That was what all of Junon was for him—a cauldron filled to the brim with a terrible concoction of memories better left forgotten.

"Wait up, Rude!" Elena cried, hurrying to his side. "You're walking too fast!"

Rude didn't reply, but he slowed his pace enough for the shorter Turk to catch up. He had to remember that not every one of his friends was six feet or higher. It took two of Elena's strides to match one of his.

Lightening silently knifed through the sky overhead, throwing Rude and Elena's shadows on the pavement before them. Rain pounded his broad shoulders, but Rude paid it no heed. The ill-fated droplets would soon lose themselves in the fabric of his suit or the puddles underfoot, vanishing into the maw of a being greater than themselves. That was just how the world worked, how it always had been.

"I hope you know where we're going," Elena said irritably as she trudged alongside him.

"We're going back to Kyra's restaurant," Rude answered calmly, unperturbed by her bad mood.

Elena gave a very unfeminine snort and crossed her arms across her chest. "I'm so sick of all this goddamn rain!" she declared. "I'm sick of being wet and exhausted and worried and frustrated and...what the hell am I talking to YOU about this for? It's not like you CARE or anything..."

Rude frowned almost imperceptibly. "If that's what you want to believe..."

There was a brief hesitation, and then Elena replied in a voice so quiet that her words were nearly drowned out by the rain. "Sorry, Rude. I didn't mean to snap at you. I just want this all to be over."

"As we all do," Rude deadpanned.

Silence once again became their companion as the two Turks walked along the deserted street, the ocean stretching endlessly to their right and the dark, gloomy apartment buildings of downtown Junon rising to their left. Urban jungle and abysmal ocean. In other words, the proverbial rock and hard place, and this long, wide street was the place that existed in limbo between the two wastelands. This street where the rain seemed to pound harder, the droplets cry even more sadly than normal.

Or maybe Rude's melancholy state of mind was because of Reno's condition? He knew his best friend was being tormented by something, and there was nothing under the stars Rude could do to help. For some reason, what was going on in Reno's soul was far beyond Rude's healing capacity—what little he had possessed in the first place. He had never been adept at comforting others, but back in the cellar of the restaurant, he had wished for nothing more than to be someone else, someone who could heal, someone who had the ability to help others. What he had seen flashing in Reno's eyes was...something that was beyond him, a pain he couldn't ease.

Reno was dying inside, and there was nothing he could do.

*Helpless again. In Junon, too. Seems like this city always strips me of all my strength.*

“Are you in love with her?” Elena suddenly asked, out of nowhere.

Rude’s steps faltered, and it was all he could do not to jump in surprise. “What do you mean?” he asked, incredulous that such calm words were falling from his lips.

He didn’t look at Elena, but he could practically feel her scowling. “You KNOW who I mean. Tifa Lockhart!”

Rude didn’t answer her, only kept his gaze straight forward, staring at the end of the street. He didn’t trust himself to look anywhere else.

Elena flung her hands up in frustration, voice rising shrilly into the rain night. “I CAN’T believe this! What IS it about that woman?! What does every single man see in her?! I swear if hear one more person—”

Turning away abruptly, Rude strode to the edge of the street, back ramrod straight as he stared off at the churning ocean. His hands were clenched tightly into fists at his sides, fingers straining with the effort to contain his emotions. He felt his own instability, rising in his soul like a demon from the pits of hell.

He was tired, worried, war-torn, and maybe even a little scared. Reeve was still missing, and the Running Man—the one who might or might not hold all the answers they’d been looking for—was locked in the cellar of Kyra’s restaurant, waiting to be interrogated. Only they couldn’t interrogate him until they found Reno, who had gone off the deep end because of some mysterious woman whose name Rude didn’t know, whose face Rude didn’t recognize. He felt like he hadn’t slept in years; his body was aching, weary to the bone, and his heart, which he usually commended for its fortitude, was on the verge of shattering along with his body. The last thing he needed right now was for Elena to confront him about his mixed-up feelings for Tifa.

And why did it have to be Elena, of all people? Rude was sure he would have fared better if Tifa herself had come up to him demanding answers to questions better left unasked. For some reason, he didn’t want to talk with Elena about his feelings for another woman. It bothered him.

Elena came up beside him meekly, hands wrung together in front of her. Rude didn’t look at her.

“R-Rude?” she began so quietly that the ocean’s roar nearly swallowed her voice. “I’m so sorry, Rude. I didn’t mean to hurt your feelings. Please...don’t think badly of me.” She

sounded like she was about to cry, and that alarmed Rude more than anything. He hated when people cried.

He wanted to devise some answer to quell the onslaught of her questions and impending confessions, but Rude had never been good with words. None came to him, and he just stood in the rain, gazing off over the tumultuous ocean at a sunless horizon that seemed to have no end.

“Rude?” Elena whispered softly, pleadingly. He could feel her eyes on the side of his face.

“Don’t worry about it, Elena,” he said levelly. “I’m not angry with you.”

Still, her discomfort did not cease; in fact, Rude perceived a rising tension in her like a tidal wave, ready to crash onto the formerly immovable shore. He suddenly knew that she wanted desperately to tell him something, and he wasn’t sure he was ready to hear it, whatever it was.

“Rude,” she began, voice strong yet trembling. “You know, there’s other...people out there besides Tifa. People who...people who care a lot about you...”

His eyes widened slightly. *No...she can't be...*

She tentatively touched his arm, and he imagined he could feel the warmth of her small hand even through his thick, soaking wet sleeve. “Rude, I—” she started to say.

Rude turned and gently pressed his fingers against her lips, praying that his fingers weren’t as weak and shaking as he felt inside. “Elena, don’t—” he said softly.

She stared up at him with hurt blazing in her chocolate brown eyes. The darkness of his fingers and gloves looked like a parasite latched onto her soft, pale skin. One of her hands came up to lightly grip his wrist, fingers shuddering with both cold and emotion.

“I’m trying to tell you something important, Rude,” she whispered beseechingly, lips moving against his fingers. The wounded look in her eyes was making a tightness blossom in his chest.

The tall Turk suddenly reached out and wrapped his arms around her, drawing her against him in a firm embrace. He felt her muscles lock in surprise, then relax until she rested within the circle of his arms, head against his chest. Rude held her close, finding that he actually wanted to touch her, touch another person. It had been a long time since he either held or been held by anyone. And to think that in the beginning, if not for Tseng’s presence... he and Elena might have been...

He forced his emotions back, burying them deep within the calculating coldness that



had kept him alive and safe for years, shielding him from the guilt, the horror, the hell that came with being a Turk, an assassin, a being without morals. For far too long, he had lived a life devoid of deeper feeling, and the recent occurrences were happening too quickly for him to keep up with what people were now expecting of him. To love, to care, to fear... when had these things become so alien to him?

*But, maybe, just maybe, in...*

"Time," Rude said, resting his chin on the top of Elena's head. "Just give me time, Elena. I can't...deal with anything right now. Can you just give me a little time?"

*Please...*

He felt her nod, face moving against his chest. "Yes," she whispered. "I can."

\*\*\*\*\*

Dark and echoing was the tunnel. Every breath, every footfall seemed unnaturally loud, screaming and resounding off the circular walls before the darkness gobbled it up. And what a hungry thing was the inky black that Tifa had plunged straight into, leaving the slippery platform and the lacerating rain behind in a world that she felt she was no longer a part of.

For in this tunnel was an entirely different time period, an era ridden with wars of the soul. The only thing that existed in this frightening realm of limbo was the past, and Tifa knew that it was up to her to hang onto the present and to see into the future. Because Reno couldn't do that, not in the condition he was in now, and ironically, it was only the past and future that could offer to him any hope of salvation.

Tifa swallowed hard, concentrating only on pulling air in and out of her lungs. A stale, metallic odor hung in the tunnel, like the stench of old blood. The tunnel was wide and seemed to loom around her on all sides. There was very little light, but streetlamps from the outside world managed to extend their artificial rays of illumination into the mouth of the tunnel; thus, Tifa's path was clear enough before her so she wasn't running blind into the depths of Junon.

Her hands were damp with rain and sweat, and she absently rubbed her palms against the fabric of her skirt before remembering that her gloves were in the way. She had worn her Premium Heart so often in the past few days that it felt as if she had been born with it on her hand. It had been a year since she had lived a life of constant battle, and she was disappointed at how poorly her heart and body were adjusting to the abrupt change.

*Don't think about that* she told herself sternly. *Focus. If you start thinking about how tired you are, you'll never make it to the end.*

Yet, somewhere in the back of her mind, she wondered if there ever WAS going to be an end to all this.

She cut her thoughts short, though, for she was suddenly able to discern a shape at the end of the tunnel. White shirt in the blackness, maybe a brief glint of red hair darkened by the dampness of rain. As she drew closer, heart thundering, a pair of bitter aquamarine eyes snapped open, pinning her with their glare. Yes, this truly was limbo, and those horrible, haunted eyes were a pure testament of that. She saw no sense of reality in those pale orbs; they were merely two drowning pools of the darkest emotions ever conceived by man.

“Reno...” she whispered, walking to where he was lying against the wall, his pale, scarred cheek pressed against the cold metal. Everything about him seemed dead, drained of any semblance of vivacity, something that was incredibly unnerving to see in Reno, one who was always moving. The only thing that seemed even remotely alive were his eyes, pale Mako eyes that followed her every movement as she folded her legs beneath her and knelt in front of him, long brown hair pooling on the floor beside her.

Reno’s gaze locked onto her face, painfully direct, and Tifa found that she had to look away to avoid being impaled by the figurative daggers that lurked in those glowing depths. She clasped her hands nervously in her lap and looked at Reno’s pale hand resting limply on his own thigh, fingers curled slightly. His long legs extended bonelessly towards the center of the tunnel, one of them trapped beneath its counterpart in a position that must have been uncomfortable to be in for any given amount of time.

*How long as he been down here? Tifa wondered silently. Reno...what’s going through your head? What are you thinking? Do I even WANT to know what you’re thinking?*

But instead of asking one of the many questions she had for Reno, she instead said nothing at all—merely sat there in the cold silence, the metal of the tunnel cold beneath her bare knees and the limp form of her friend inches away from her. Inches, of course, that may as well have been miles. Suddenly, Tifa felt very alone.

“My mother,” she whispered, “was very important to me.”

There was no reply so she continued hesitantly, “She died when I was a young girl, but I still hold her very dear to me, just like all my other memories from back when I lived in Nibelheim.” She paused. “All my experiences have made me who I am today, made me stronger...even the bad ones...”

“Your mother,” Reno said in a low, raspy voice that Tifa barely recognized as his. “Didn’t kill your only reason for living, I’m sure. You can never understand what I feel. Go away.”

Tifa shook her head and met his bitter eyes. “No, Reno, I’m not leaving unless you come with me.”

There was silence as he seemed to consider this, only Tifa had a suspicion that he wasn’t thinking about anything except murder. Never before had she been in the presence of another person yet felt so *severed* from them. It was disconcerting, as if Reno weren’t really there.

“How long did you train with your martial arts master?” he suddenly asked in that quiet, slow voice.

Tifa blinked in surprise. “I trained with Zangan for seven years, why?”

A wicked glint entered his eyes. “I’ll bet you know how to kill a man with your bare hands, right? Snap his neck? Crush his windpipe? A thousand painful ways to die—I’ll bet that was the pinnacle of your training.”

Tifa didn’t reply, her fists tightening in her lap. The final technique she learned was the Final Heaven, and against weaker opponents, it DID mean instant death. But that wasn’t why she started to learn martial arts in the first place. Just where was Reno going with this?

“Kill me,” he suddenly said sharply.

Tifa nearly choked on her own breath.

His eyes bore into her, hidden daggers lacerating her mental armor. “Either you kill me, or I’ll go back to there and kill that bitch with my bare hands.”

Tifa’s jaw clenched as she braced herself. “I can’t let you kill her, Reno.”

The rage came a second later. Reno’s eyes flashed, and those intangible daggers lashed out at her. “Are you siding with her?” Reno seethed, voice twisted with fury. “You ARE siding with her, aren’t you?! How DARE you?!”

“Just listen to me, Reno,” Tifa insisted, trying to keep the panic out of her voice. She felt him slipping.

“No!” he snapped. “I’m through listening to you! I’m through listening to everyone!”

“Reno!”

“Kill me,” he hissed.

“No.”

“Kill me now!”

“No!”

His irises suddenly faded to a shade so pale that they almost looked like iridescent pearls. “I’ll make you kill me,” he threatened, but he didn’t move.

Tifa wanted to shut her eyes against the sudden moisture that was stinging them, but the trained fighter in her wouldn’t let her look away from a man who had just approached her with violence. “Please let me help you, Reno,” she whispered.

“And what the hell can you do for me?” he asked harshly. “You lost your chance to take my life in exchange for hers. I have to kill her now.”

“No,” Tifa insisted, shaking her head furiously. “You don’t have to kill anyone. Bloodshed isn’t the answer.”

“This isn’t about bloodshed,” Reno said flatly. “This is about letting my daughter’s soul rest in peace.”

Tifa steeled herself and said, “Reno, I’m sure Mika wouldn’t want you to kill her mother. No child...would want her mother to die.”

~”I wanna see Mama...”~

~”Is Mama there...beyond the mountain?”~

Reno laughed, a sharp, bitter sound that resounded off the walls of the tunnel until it seemed as if they were drowning in that dark laughter. “I was GLAD when my mother died, the worthless bitch. I was free after that, free to do whatever the hell I wanted with my rotten life.”

Tifa winced at his harsh words. “Reno, please. You can’t kill Alette. Could you really do it? Could you kill your wife?”

“You bet I could,” Reno spat angrily, eyes glittering in the darkness with primitive, animal-like intelligence.

Frustration rose in Tifa. She wasn’t getting through to him! All her words were slamming against the indestructible idea that he HAD to kill Alette no matter what. For now, Tifa could only pray that Reno wasn’t so far gone that her words wouldn’t be able to reach him at all.

“Reno,” she tried again. “You’ve lived your entire life remembering the promise to destroy her if you ever saw her again. I think that’s all you’ve really been living for, isn’t it? All the drinking, all the women—they didn’t matter in the end, did they? You were just trying to forget your daughter and your wife. But now, if all you’ve existed for is those two

people, then if you kill Alette, you'll have nothing left. You'd die with her."

An auburn eyebrow lifted derisively. "And? You say that like it's a bad thing."

His words wounded her deeply for some reason. She looked to his eyes and saw no respect for anything; the Planet, human life...it all didn't matter to him. And she remembered his words on the beach: "...and my life is nothing but a scratch in the Planet's timeline. Petty and insignificant, just as it was meant to be."

How...how could Reno even begin to appreciate the lives of others when he didn't even value his own?

And suddenly, Tifa was infuriated beyond all reason. "You're such a coward," she told Reno, voice unforgiving. "You're a selfish bastard who only thinks of his own peace of mind."

"Shut up," Reno growled, eyes starting to bleed back to the pearly color.

"It's true!" Tifa snapped, hands fisted her lap, trembling with the effort not to send them lashing through the air. "All you can think about is killing Alette so that you can finally rest in peace, isn't it? Selfish to the end! Don't you ever stop to think about the people that would be sad if you died?! The people who would cry for you? Rude and Elena are SUFFERING right now because YOU won't let them help you! Sending me down here alone was the hardest thing they'd ever done! They care for you so much, Reno! Your death would tear them apart! Don't you understand?!" Angry tears were running down her cheeks.

Reno's eyes blazed, and he started to look away, but Tifa grabbed him by the front of the shirt and hauled him closer. Her sudden motion upset his balance, and he nearly fell against her, one cold, clammy hand braced against her bare thigh. His ponytail spilled over his shoulder like a sudden outflow of dark blood, and through the portals of his tormented eyes, she could see that the wound inside him was bleeding again, pumping acidic blood through the network of his soul.

"Would you do it to them?" Tifa demanded, her angry eyes never leaving his. "Would you make your friends cry all because of some silly notion of vengeance? They NEED you, Reno! Reeve needs you to go look for him! Are you just going to abandon him as well?! You're such a selfish coward, Reno!"

"LEAVE ME ALONE!!" Reno yelled, weakly trying to pull away from her grasp, but it was as if his limbs were no longer at his disposal. "You can't even begin to imagine how I feel! You don't know what it's like to live your every waking moment thinking about... seeing the same face...I can't just forget my daughter like that! I can't let her death go unpunished, and I don't give a fuck what happens to me!"

“Goddammit, Reno!” Tifa shook him hard, her vision becoming increasingly blurry the more agitated she became. “Your daughter doesn’t want you to kill the woman who gave birth to her! Do you think I wanted my mother to die?!” Her voice cracked. “NO, I didn’t want her to die!!”

“Why are you protecting her?!” Reno shouted. “Alette’s not worth protecting! You don’t understand ANYTHING!! I can’t fail my daughter! I just...can’t...”

He stopped and swallowed hard, muscles of his throat working in the darkness. He was trembling within her grasp, and Tifa was caught between wanting to hold him until he stopped quivering and shaking him until he regained his wits.

Reno lowered his head, eyes falling into shadow. When he spoke next, his voice was flat, dead. “Tseng died because his faithful Turks weren’t there to back him up. Mika was killed because I wasn’t there to protect her. Reeve is dead because I was too late to help him.”

Tifa’s hold on his shirt tightened. “Stop that, Reno,” she ordered. “Reeve’s not dead!”

Reno let out a bitter laugh and pinned her with a cruel glare. “Do you HONESTLY think that he’s alive? If he was anywhere, then he was down there in wherever the hell you guys were, and that place collapsed into nothing, didn’t it?”

“But it’s possible that he’s still alive,” Tifa insisted, striving to be sensible. “And the one man that can tell us where Reeve might be is the Running Man, and we have him in that cellar—”

“—with that bitch,” Reno tacked on viciously.

Tifa ignored his words. “We need you right now, Reno,” she told him urgently. “Cloud is strong, but he can’t do this alone. And your Turks need you as well.”

Reno’s eyes darkened, and she felt his cold fingers digging into the flesh of her thigh. “Shut up!” he snapped. “Don’t even TRY using Rude and Elena against me! Nothing is going to change the fact that Alette has to die! Why do you insist on taking away my one chance to redeem myself, to make up for letting my daughter die?!”

Tifa fully expected her own temper to flare up at his redundant words, but instead all she found in her heart was an aching gentleness. “Because, Reno, if you kill Alette, then you’ll die as well, and I don’t want that for you. I don’t want you to die, Reno.”

He looked away sharply. “Shut up,” he hissed. “You lie.”

She put one gloved hand against his scarred cheek and tried to turn his face back towards her. “Look at me, and you’ll know I’m not lying,” she said softly.

Reno fought for a moment, trying not to allow her to turn his face towards her. In the end, though, those pained aquamarine eyes locked onto her burgundy ones, and Tifa saw the true extent of his pain. The bitterness was deep, just as every bit unfathomable as his love for his deceased daughter. Mika was at the core of his pain; haunting memories of her face drove him to drink, to darkness. But on the other hand, without her, Reno never would have known what love was...

...unless...unless maybe...

There was something else flickering deep in the depths of those eyes, something that was beyond the rage, beyond the suffering, beyond the bitterness. Something buried so deeply that she was sure Reno didn't even know it was there. Only someone with unclouded eyes could even catch a glimpse of it, and Tifa was desperately striving to make sense of what she was seeing.

But then Reno's eyes slid slowly closed, eyelashes looking far too dark for man of such pale, ghostly skin. A shudder ran through his entire body, and suddenly Tifa found herself cradling his head in the crook of her elbow, the redness of his hair bright against the flesh of her arm. He was trembling something awful, and she instinctively wrapped her arms around him the best she could. One of her hands rested on his back while she absently traced the line of one dark scar with her opposite thumb.

"Reno?" she whispered questioningly. "Are you alright?"

"No," he said quietly.

Tifa rubbed his back gently, trying to soothe him in a motherly fashion. She stared off into the darkness of the tunnel and listened to the cruel rain that seemed so far away. It really did feel like she was in another world, but it was, for better or worse, a world in which her presence was now only a mere handicap.

Her vision danced before her, and she realized more tears were threatening to roll down her cheeks. "Reno," she said softly. "I...don't think I can help you anymore."

Silence. He didn't even stir from within the circle of her arms, but she knew he had heard her.

Her grip on him tightened, a slight desperation written in her movements. "I'm sorry," she mouthed to the darkness. "I'm so sorry."

*This is the right thing to do* she told herself fiercely. *I can't fight this battle for him.*

Swallowing hard, she forced words past her constricting throat, "I'm still...here... though. If you ever need me...I'll be right here." She closed her eyes against her tears.

“Please don’t die, Reno. I’ll be sad if you do.”

He shifted slightly. “Everything dies, Tifa.”

She didn’t know what to say to that. Death was a certitude, something guaranteed to every human upon birth. His words were undeniably true, and there was nothing she could do about it but pray that her caring for him would be enough to keep him living, even if it was only for a short time.

So there she remained with him until the first traces of light began to burn away the darkness in the tunnel. Gray, dim light that only touched them because the gloomy storm clouds permitted it to do so, but it was light nonetheless. Tifa had been staring in the darkness for a long time, it seemed, holding Reno. His cheek was pillowed against her arm, his body still and silent, like calm water before a hurricane.

She absently played with his hair, noting that the blood red strands had begun to dry. “Let’s go back to the others, Reno,” she said softly.

There was a brief hesitation, but then he nodded. “Yes.”

\* \* \* \* \*

“You guys will be okay?” Cloud asked, trying to keep the bone-crushing weariness from showing in his voice. The figures standing before him blurred, and he had to narrow his blue eyes to get them back into their rightful places.

“Sure thang,” Barret assured him, leaning his broad back against the wall next to the cellar door. “Our little friends down there ain’t goin’ nowhere.”

Cloud nodded and glanced at the man positioned other side of the door. “You okay, Cid?”

The man took a long, slow drag of his cigarette, avoiding Cloud’s eyes as he said, “Fine. You go rest up, kid.”

If Cloud hadn’t been so exhausted, he would have been more skeptical of Cid’s mental and emotional condition, but with things as they were now—and his body as worn out as it was—he didn’t have any strength left for arguing. However, he did exchange a meaningful look with Barret that silently said, Take care of Cid.

The big man nodded. “We gonna be fine, Spike. Now go on and get outta here.”

Cloud turned away and muttered something about Vincent coming to relieve them later on, but his words sounded jumbled and incoherent even to him. His boots scraped weakly across the floor as he practically dragged himself down the hall. He



couldn't remember the last time he had been THIS tired. Searching for Yuffie, braving the earthquakes in the subterranean complex, fighting their way back to the surface, going after the Running Man, and then chasing after Reno—all these physically taxing events had taken their final toll on his normally resilient body. Proof that even somebody like him who was more or less the equivalent of a SOLDIER, all shot up with Mako and Jenova cells, had their limits, and Cloud was at his wits' end.

*Wonder how long I have before my legs give out* he pondered dimly. *Gotta make it up the stairs... up the stairs...*

To get to the stairs, however, he first had to trudge through the main area of the restaurant, where a very irate Kyra was sweeping up shards from the glasses Reno had knocked over in his haste to flee the restaurant. Cloud lifted a hand to her in both greeting and parting, not sticking around to engage in conversation. His feet were working fairly well on autopilot, and he didn't want to disrupt their rhythm for fear he would never get them moving again.

Cloud actually managed to make it up the stairs and halfway down one of the second floor hallways before he realized that he had completely forgotten which room Kyra had told him to stay in. Was it the one next to the living room? Or the one off of the hallway that led to the bathroom? Was it the one off the hallway that led to the stairs that led to the kitchen that led to the bathtub...?

*Oh well... here seems like a good place...*

The wall caught him as he fell against it, splintery fingertips accidentally lacerating his skin as he slid to the floor, legs finally betraying him as he had known they eventually would. But Cloud didn't care. It felt so good not to be moving for once. No more worries. Just...sleep.

He closed his eyes and let himself sink into warm darkness without shape or form, just a beautifully empty void in which there existed no world filled with strife or suffering. Just darkness, and Cloud loved it.

Soon, he found himself immersed in a startlingly realistic dream. Tifa Lockhart crouched before him; dark brown hair dyed jet black by rain. Or was in from a shower? No, her clothes were wet, and Cloud was pretty sure she hadn't hopped in the shower with all her armor on.

She gazed at him with a look of heartbreaking concern on her lovely face, dark eyebrows creased with worry. Cloud thought he saw a white, blue, and red figure moving somewhere down the hall, but he ignored it when Tifa's lips suddenly began to move gracefully, forming soundless words.

Cloud smiled sleepily, amused at the whole situation. He really loved having Tifa around, even if she did silly things like flap her lips pointlessly at empty air. Muttering something about turning up the volume on the TV, he once again slipped into darkness, only to go pinwheeling into yet another dream of the woman he loved.

This time Tifa had one of his arms flung around her shoulders and was half-carrying/half-dragging him to a bed with a comforter made of all colors of the rainbow. Cloud thought that was funny, too, and he grinned again as she lowered him to the mattress, brushing some of his hair away from his face. The surface of the Rainbow Bed dipped as she sat next to him, and he could see her soft, loving smile in the darkness, feel the warmth of her body close to his.

Man, he wished he could sleep forever.

\* \* \* \* \*

Reno leaned bonelessly against his closed door, waiting for his eyes to become accustomed to the darkness of his room. He could hear Tifa talking to the unconscious Cloud out in the hallway, trying to rouse the AVALANCHE leader from his exhausted state. Reno knew she probably wouldn't have much success. When a person was as burnt out as he guessed Cloud was, the body would refuse to awaken until its neglected energy stores were replenished.

Speaking of depleted energy stores, though, Reno thought his had probably self-destructed long ago because as he glanced around his bedroom, he honestly didn't think he was capable of moving a single muscle. All the better, he supposed, because what he wanted to do was lie down, and it appeared that all the suitable resting places in his room had been the victims of a hostile takeover.

Elena was curled into a fetal position on his bed, snoring softly in the darkness, the unladylike noises issuing from behind the wall of flaxen locks that had fallen over her face like a golden curtain. Something shifted near the window, and Reno eyes drifted lethargically away from Elena's sleeping form to see a lanky figure unfurling itself from a chair.

"Rude," he muttered. "Didn't see ya."

Rude stared at him. "If I were an assassin..."

"I would have been dead," Reno finished artlessly. "Yeah, yeah, I know the drill."

Silence fell between them as the red-haired Turk pushed himself away from the door, trudging past Rude and over to the window, where he pulled back the drawn curtains to permit gray, morbid light to seep into the unbroken darkness of the room. Though Kyra

had erected her restaurant in a decent area of Upper Junon that was usually bustling with activity, no one wanted to brave the stinging raindrops in order to visit their favorite stores or eating places. The glistening streets were as dark and deserted as the skies overhead.

Reno placed one of his pale hands against the glass and watched condensation form around his fingers, misty droplets gathering on the icy glass like miniature tears. *How long as it been?* he wondered. *This search for Reeve? Can't have been more than five days even though it feels like a fucking eternity. And now there's...there's...*

Reno's soul felt raw, like some sadistic bastard had tied it to the back of a truck with a rope and drug it around the war-torn streets of Midgar a few hundred times before shoving it back into his body. Nothing seemed real anymore. Not the rain. Not Elena's snoring. Not even the Running Man seemed to matter any longer. The only things Reno knew were the faint, hazy recollection of his daughter's face, smiling as she waved to him one last time...and that bitch down there in the cellar, dressed in that slutty bodysuit.

*Once a whore, always a whore* Reno thought bitterly, a small bit of sourness breaking through the cold that had settled over his soul. But he knew that frigid shield of primal ice was better than the fire, the burning rage. At least the cold was manageable; it was bearable whereas the fire poisoned him, seared away his sanity and shoved in his place a being who thirsted only for death and blood.

"Reno?" Rude suddenly asked, causing the other Turk to jump slightly. He had almost forgotten his friend was still standing there at his side.

Reno stared at him, aquamarine eyes unnaturally pale in the gray light. "Yeah?"

Rude's voice was carefully neutral. "Are you alright?"

A sarcastic, scathing reply came to Reno's lips, but he forced it back down when he beheld the deep-rooted worry in Rude's green eyes. Though the taller Turk gave no outward appearance of discomfort, the dark circles around his eyes and the tattered state of his usually immaculate blue suit belied the calmness he attempted to exude. It seemed Rude was burning out as well.

Instead of replying to his friend's question, Reno turned back to the window. "How long have you and Laney been up here?" he asked as casually as possible, trying to force his voice to slip back into some semblance of normality.

"For about an hour," Rude answered, eyes on the side of his friend's face. "We were both going to wait up for you, but Elena was so exhausted that I discreetly cast a Sleep spell on her."

Reno made a "hmp" sound in the back of his throat, a sorry substitute for a laugh.

“She’ll be pissed when she wakes up.”

Rude just shrugged, still watching Reno intently, as if expecting the other man to explode in violence or tears at any minute. Reno was bitterly surprised at just how accurate that expectation actually was.

Sighing deeply, Reno leaned forward and pressed his forehead against the cold glass so that it rested next to his hand. The water droplets chasing one another down the glass on the outside blurred slightly as he watched them follow their aimless course.

“Tifa can’t help me anymore,” Reno suddenly said, the words tumbling from his lips in a soft rush, craftily evading his already weakened restraints on his actions.

Rude didn’t answer, only resealed himself in his chair with a soft rustling of clothes.

Licking his suddenly dry lips, Reno continued, “Cloud collapsed in the hallway outside. She went to help him to his room.”

Silence and then, “Cloud pushes himself too hard.”

Pale aquamarine eyes flicked to the shadowy figure seated in the chair. “So does Tifa. It took a lot out of her to admit that she could no longer help me.”

*Now all she can do is watch me burn out. Watch from the sidelines, just like everyone else.*

“I know what you’re wondering, Reno,” Rude said quietly.

The red-haired man closed his eyes and sighed, breath forming a misty cloud on the window’s glass. “Then,” he said wearily. “Tell me the answer, if you can.”

There was only a brief hesitation before Rude said in his low, level voice, “You say she’s with Cloud right now, helping him and caring for him. In everyone’s eyes, you were his only competition for her attention and possibly her heart. And now since she cannot help you any longer, she’s with Cloud. If I really do love her the way she needs to be loved, I should be more upset. Since I’m not...” His voice trailed off.

“Then you don’t love her in that way,” Reno finished.

“I guess not,” Rude said, but Reno caught the small fluctuation in his friend’s voice. Whether it was a sudden realization or an unspoken doubt, Reno didn’t know and was too tired to give it a second thought. He really wanted his mind to be free of all thoughts, of all worries, of all semblances of pain, but just as he was too tired to ponder some things, by the same hand he was too tired to fend off thoughts of other things.

Visages of Mika came and went as they pleased, elusive as ghosts in the dark, and since thoughts of Alette brought a sweeping firestorm of rage, Reno decided it was safer

to reflect on Tifa Lockhart. She had done a lot for him, actually, more than he had ever expected her to do for a wastrel like him. Though some part of him wished he could claim her as his own and have her take care of him for the rest of his life, Reno knew that a delusion like that was hardly even a fantasy. True, it would have been nice to have her there to hold him whenever he needed it, but her heart obviously lay elsewhere, and it wasn't with him.

Still, Reno had bared his soul to her, something he had never done before with anyone else. He cared about her, maybe even loved her a little.

He was going to miss her.

*Crap...I forgot to thank her for everything she's done.*

Reno thumped his forehead against the glass. "Dammit," he cursed softly. What he was damning, he didn't know. He figured it was a toss-up between himself and life in general.

Pulling back from the cold glass that was filled with visages of gray skies and plummeting raindrops, he rubbed his face fiercely with his icy fingers, but even those sensations seemed so far away. He splayed his fingers across his eyes and turned to the side so he could stare at Rude, who was watching him with an outer appearance of calm. However, Reno could feel his friend's worry even though the emotion didn't readily show itself in his weary green eyes.

"You look bad, Rude," he said jokingly.

"You look worse," the tall Turk replied quietly.

A wan smile came to Reno's thin lips. "I'll just bet I do."

"You should get some rest," Rude suggested.

Reno was too tired to argue. Besides, he suddenly became very aware of the fatigue he felt in his body and mind. "Yeah," he muttered, turning towards the bed where Elena still slumbered peacefully, curled into a ball on one end of the comforter. He looked back at his friend. "And you, Rude? Don't you need to sleep?"

"I'm fine where I am," Rude replied, settling himself in his chair, long legs extended on the carpet beneath him.

"You don't look comfortable to me," Reno commented, slowly easing himself onto the edge of the mattress so as not to wake Elena with the sudden shift in weight.

Rude closed his eyes and smiled slightly. "Don't worry about me, Reno."

“Yeah, yeah,” Reno muttered as he removed his boots, feeling like a child being scolded. He laid his head on the pillow, drawing his aching legs onto the bed with him. After a brief hesitation, he scooted backwards until he felt his back come into contact with Elena, his cool skin becoming warm with her body’s heat. Reno wasn’t really all that cold; he just wanted to know that she was there behind him.

He listened to the rain pelting the walls of the restaurant before whispering, “Hey, Rude?”

“Hm?” came the faint answer.

Reno gripped a fistful of the comforter in one of his hands, fascinated with how his knuckles bulged beneath his pale, nearly translucent skin.

*Like I’m disappearing or something.*

“Nothing,” he said, voice barely audible. “Just...thanks for waiting up for me.”

Quiet laughter issued from Rude’s shadowy form. “Just go to sleep, Reno.”

As soon as the word “sleep” found its way to Reno’s ears, his body began an automatic shutdown while his mind was still aware. It was an odd sensation, actually, to feel his muscles slowly relax one by one, to feel Somnus begin to embrace him, making his eyelids flutter shut as his companion Morpheus, god of dreams, thankfully robbed Reno of all lingering thoughts of the past. For once, the Turk was given the mercy of mythological guardians keeping faces from both the present and beyond the grave from haunting his dreams.

The last things Reno saw before his eyes slid shut were his own hand lying pale and drained on the brightly colored comforter and the rain falling like tears outside the window.

-owari ch. 31

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Author’s note:

Sorry it took so long. I’ve been really busy as of late. -\_- This chapter was very Turk-centric because practically everyone was way overdue for some character development. And yes, I do know that I’ve neglected some characters for a while because I’ve stupidly taken on the task of developing ten characters at once, establishing several different pairings other than the main one of Vincent/Yuffie AND keeping a plot going at the same time. It’s hard work, you know. Sorry if I sound grumpy. I have a big fat headache right now. X\_X But on the brighter side, I ordered a Rurouni Kenshin soundtrack off of Ebay, and it finally came in today! I’m listening to it right now. ^\_^

# Chapter Thirty-Two

## *Scare Tactics*

*“If I told him not to go down to the cellar,  
you know where he would tell me to shove it.” —Cloud Strife*

THIS CHAPTER IS DEDICATED TO INDARKNESS, WINNER OF THE 7777 COUNTER-FIC PRIZE, WHOSE ONLY REQUEST WAS FOR ME TO WORK MORE OF “SINK”! DOMO ARIGATOU! ^^ —*Catalina*

\*\*\*\*\*

“You have failed,” she said icily.

Montana couldn’t resist scowling at her back even though he knew it was not his place to be angry. “I know,” he mumbled.

Jezebel made no reply to his begrudging admission, but Montana really hadn’t expected one. Though a sensuous woman when it suited her fancy, Jezebel was all business when it came to fulfilling the Master’s commands. Montana had been her “partner” for years and knew that her condescending attitude was perfectly normal, but...still...he hated it when she actually had a REAL reason for talking down to him.

He had failed. Miserably.

Heedless of the rain rolling down his face, Montana allowed his green eyes to remain riveted on Jezebel’s back though he kept a careful watch of her feet and hands. Sometimes she liked to teach him “lessons” when he did something she found displeasing. Montana was sure Jezebel’s hand-to-hand fighting abilities were not superior to his, but the woman was full of nasty surprises. At least she didn’t have her scythe with her...

“Why are you lingering back there?” she suddenly demanded, half-turning so that he could see her profile, which was nearly hidden underneath the strands of saturated brown hair that clung to the sides of her face. “Come here and stand next to me.”

Montana snorted, making it clear he didn’t trust the woman’s intentions, but he began walking warily towards her, bare feet sinking into puddles that had gathered on the cement of the rooftop, little pools of quivering raindrops huddling together as if cold. He stopped slightly behind Jezebel, careful to keep a certain distance away from her.

“I won’t beat your pathetic ass this time,” she said without turning around. “But we are in a near-crisis situation here, Montana. Failure simply isn’t an option.”

Shoving his hands in the pockets of his baggy white pants, the man muttered, “Yeah, yeah, I know. I took it for granted that the Myrmidon would be able to eliminate the two at the bar. My fault. Totally my fault.”

“Glad to hear you still have your wits about you,” Jezebel deadpanned. “Now come HERE.”

Though he bristled at the direct order, Montana sauntered up beside her like a dog that had just been admonished for stealing a biscuit. From their vantage point on top of a tall hotel building, he and Jezebel had a clear view of the street below them, wide and glistening with rain. He had found Jezebel in the restaurant district, standing alone on top of this building. What for, he didn’t know, but he had a feeling he was about to find out.

“Look over there,” Jezebel ordered, pointing to the brightly lit building across the street, oblivious to the rivulets of rain streaming down her muscular arm.

Frowning, Montana looked where her finger indicated and found a simple two-story wooden building with the words “Moonbeam Café” emblazoned above the doorway in large block letters. Below it, in smaller script, read, “Restaurant and bar.”

“It’s a restaurant,” Montana said carefully. If Jezebel had hoped to make him feel inferior and stupid by asking him a trick question, she was certainly succeeding.

Jezebel glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, her condescending tone suddenly escalating to an even higher degree than normal. “Don’t tell me you don’t sense who is in there?”

A sour expression came to the man’s face. “I don’t want to play these games with you,” he grumbled irritably, then decided to take a shot in the dark. “Is AVALANCHE in there?”

“Yes. As well as Titus.”

“What?!” Montana practically yelled, whirling on his companion with a look of unadulterated shock on his handsome face. “You’re kidding me? He’s thrown in with AVALANCHE?!”

“No, idiot,” Jezebel snapped, shoving some of her waterlogged hair away from her eyes as she explained, “As you know, my mission was to come here to Junon and destroy Titus as soon as he surfaced. Unfortunately, though, AVALANCHE beat me to the punch and somehow managed to kidnap both him and his infamous little whore before I could even get close to them.”

Montana’s hands clenched into fists as he glared at the restaurant with renewed vigor.



“So Titus is in there...as a prisoner?”

“That certainly seems to be the case, but as ironic as this situation may be, it greatly hinders our plans. Our mission is to take out Titus and all those loyal to him, but so long as he’s safe within the womb of AVALANCHE, we can’t touch him.”

“But aren’t we supposed to wipe out AVALANCHE as well?”

“In the end, I suppose. But that is not our primary objective. Besides, remember the Master gave strict orders that Yuffie Kisaragi is not to be harmed.”

Montana bared his teeth in what might have been a smile, but it came out more like a wicked snarl. “Just one little brat. The rest of them are cannon fodder. We should just barge in there and destroy Titus while all of them are still unaware of our presence here!”

Icy brown eyes suddenly locked onto his face. “Your lust for revenge clouds your mind, Montana. You’ve said many moronic things in the past, but calling AVALANCHE ‘cannon fodder’ has to one of your more dim-witted comments. AVALANCHE and the Turks may be many things, but ‘cannon fodder’ is most certainly not one of them.”

“Hey!” Montana protested angrily. “I was just—”

“Shut up!” Jezebel snapped. “Since you don’t have your head screwed on straight, I’M in charge of this mission since I know that if I surrender control over to YOUR hands, you’ll probably fuck everything up! Timing is vital right now, Montana. Our underground lair has collapsed, and the Master is in the process of relocating the faction via the subterranean tunnels. AVALANCHE not only infiltrated our lair, but they rescued Yuffie Kisaragi in the process, and the President of Neo-Shinra has gone missing from his prison cell. In case you haven’t noticed, our world is falling apart around our ears.”

“I KNOW all that!” Montana exclaimed, green eyes flashing with indignation. “I KNOW timing is vital, and I KNOW what’s happening with the faction!”

“Then quit acting so stupid,” Jezebel seethed in a frighteningly cold voice. “AVALANCHE will not be releasing Titus until they receive answers to all the questions I’m certain they have.”

“Titus won’t talk,” Montana said immediately.

“His bitch might, though,” Jezebel countered, her gaze drifting back towards the bar. “Though I’m fairly certain AVALANCHE won’t torture him, remember that Titus has no affiliation with our faction any longer. Spilling all our secrets probably won’t faze him in the slightest.”

“That’s why we need to silence him before he does!”

Jezebel scowled. “You’re not thinking again! With a group this large, the two of us, despite our strength, are at a tactical disadvantage. What we need to do is whittle away at their numbers. If we destroy the weaker ones first, the morale of the remaining others will drop, making them easy targets.”

Montana frowned at his companion and then in the direction of the restaurant across the street, an establishment filled to the brim with his enemies. Since they were all unawares, Montana believed it would be *tactically* prudent to attack while the element of surprise was still theirs for the taking. But...

“You make it all sound so simple and easy,” he grumbled to his partner, crouching agilely on the rooftop. He always felt like too big of a target when he was standing on a high place.

Jezebel remained on her feet, infernally unafraid and confident. “It *is* simple,” she sniffed disdainfully. “However, this isn’t going to be easy...not one bit...”

\* \* \* \* \*

Titus grimaced as he shifted position, the cold cement floor of the cellar scraping underneath the soles of his boots. His arms cramped terribly, just as they had been for the past five hours. It seemed that every time he was able to ease the ache out of one muscle, another would contract and freeze, putting him in a world of discomfort. Of course, Titus had been chained, bound, and tortured in the past; this was small beans compared to some of his more... “exotic” experiences.

Stretching his long legs out in front of him, his eyes roved around the cellar for the millionth time, taking in the dusty shelves built into the walls, the large crates filled with who-knew-what, and the wooden stairs leading up to the door he knew was locked and deadbolted from the other side. To top it all off, he could sense that the door was guarded by two AVALANCHE members. Which ones he didn’t know, but he could feel their calculating minds like thick-plated steel flattened against the cellar door—a metaphysical barrier.

He and Fa-Li wouldn’t be escaping anytime soon.

Titus’ eyes drifted from his dark surroundings to the woman bound to the chair in the center of the room. Since her back was to him, he could see nothing of her face. However, the image of a wilted flower came to mind as he traced the curve of her shoulders, which sagged in defeat, and her long dark hair, tangled and dirty as it hung down her back and around her head like the hands of an ancient crone, gnarled and knobby.

Right after the tragic blowout with that red-haired Turk, Fa-Li had wept softly, half out of terror and half out of something else that Titus didn’t want to even bother

attempting to discern. He could understand the terror part, though; never before in his life had he seen such a maniacal gleam of animosity as the one he had beheld in the Turk's eyes. Keep a beast locked up in a cage for a long time, and it becomes wild with the need for escape. Human emotions were much the same way, and Titus could feel the Turk festering with such hostility and rage that was ready to overflow at any second.

*The proverbial walking time bomb. There's one in every group.*

Titus wished he could distance his own emotions from the situation, but he found it virtually impossible when Fa-Li filled the room with the bittersweet musk of her secret internal agony. During the course of their relationship, Titus had never seen or heard her cry. But even though she shed no tears for *him*, she certainly wasted no time dissolving into hysterics over that redheaded Turk. Her sobs had begun the moment AVALANCHE had left the cellar to pursue their spastic colleague.

Titus was surprised how much that bothered him.

He had to admit, however, that the woman bound to the chair five feet away from the tips of his boots barely resembled the promiscuous creature with whom he had had a torrid love affair for two years. Her personality had done a complete one-eighty within the past few days, and Titus knew that the individual who was his only companion in this dark, dank cellar had to be the woman who had hidden behind Fa-Li's expertly constructed mask for years and years. Gone was the woman who lived only for sensual pleasures, and in her place was this weary, melancholy creature that wept for a past that Titus knew not an inkling of.

A painful cramp suddenly spread up the entire length of his back, and Titus sharply twisted his body in an effort to ease the aggravating discomfort. The metal of his handcuffs clanged against the pipe he was chained to, and Fa-Li stirred.

"Titus?" she asked in a low, timid voice.

The man grit his teeth to suppress the urge to tell her to shut up. He was in no mood to talk to her at the moment.

A short sigh escaped her lips, a lonely sound in the silent cellar. "It's fine if you don't want to talk to me ever again. I don't really care." A brief pause, and then her voice came in a hushed, fearful whisper, "That man is going to kill me, Titus."

He could hear the tears in her voice, but he still gave no reply.

"I never thought I'd see him again after all these years," she continued, nasally voice trembling and echoing against his wall of stillness. "It's been such a long time. I knew he had joined the Turks and everything, but..."

“Your obsession with Turks,” Titus stated flatly. “Aside from seduction, the Turks were the only other things you had knowledge of. Now I know why...”

*All those years...*

Fa-Li’s shoulders trembled as a shudder ran through her body. “You’re so cruel to me, Titus. You have no heart whatsoever.”

*...all her men...*

Titus replied disinterestedly, “Believe what you wish, but you’ll get no pity from me.”

*...she was searching for him...*

“I never expected any pity from *you*, Titus,” she told him harshly, not bothering to disguise the way her tears warped her voice. “You who’s so cold and callous and distant! You were never like any of the other men...”

*...searching for a man with his face...*

“Then why did you even become my lover?” Titus asked with forced offhandedness. “I’m nothing at all like that *man*.”

*...a man who was just like him...*

“His name is Reno,” Fa-Li snapped coldly, a bit of steel sharpening her voice. “Reno Akuma Mitsuru.”

*...the only one that ever meant anything to her...*

“You followed me around because you knew I would be close to the Turks,” Titus said in a voice that seemed soft and harsh at the same time. “And all the while, you knew that if we were discovered, you would come face to face with the person who wants you dead more than anyone else on the face of the Planet. Masochism at its best. You’re a real stickler for suffering, you know?”

“I know!” Fa-Li whisper-screamed, jerking against her ropes in obvious irritation. “I love suffering! Is that what you want to hear, Titus?! I loved watching Reno from afar... and thinking about him every goddamn day of my miserable life! I love being so afraid of him that I wish I could just DIE right now rather than face him again! And I love being locked up in this hellhole with a bastard like you!! There, I admitted it! Are you HAPPY now...Ti...tus?”

As Fa-Li proceeded to dissolve into weeping again, Titus glared at the back of her chair, at the ropes binding her, at the trembling of her slender shoulders. His eyes narrowed, and a cold feeling settled in the pit of his stomach.

“You really are a masochist,” he told her flatly. “You’re still in love with him, aren’t you?”

“Yes!” she declared tearfully, voice raw with emotion. “God...I am, aren’t I? I can’t stand that he hates me. I...I...he’s still so beautiful.....wonder where he got those scars from? He didn’t have them before...”

Titus did not deign to reply, and the silence fell thickly between them. He felt Fa-Li pulling away from the conversation, away from the little slice of time called Here and Now, as she rapidly descended into a well of memories that housed a pain she seemed to revel in. The only other person Titus knew that adored the intensity of pain was Ajax, and the current High Priest was...twisted, to say the least. Not exactly a compliment to be dumped on the same boat with him, as far as Titus was concerned.

Closing his eyes, the man leaned back until he felt the pipe’s metallic coolness against the small of his back and the rough texture of the wall against his skull. The darkness behind his eyelids was clean and unbroken, unlike the world around him, which was tainted and falling apart more and more with each passing second. AVALANCHE. The impending collapse of the faction. His humiliating capture. And, of course, there was Fa-Li...but there was always Fa-Li.

*Or should I say...Alette?* Titus thought with no small amount of bitterness. *Everything’s being shot to hell, and I find out that the one person I thought I knew inside and out is a complete stranger. But then again...how many people know about me? No one. Not a conscious decision of mine, though. That’s simply the way it has to be.*

Titus resisted the urge to sigh. Loneliness crashed down on him as it did from time to time, but he felt it even more acutely locked down here in a dark cellar with only a single light bulb waiting placidly to pierce the blackness and a disheartened Fa-Li as his sole companion. He could feel the buzzing energy of the two sentries at the door—whoever they were—and up above in the restaurant itself, he felt a mass of gently seething, contorting power that had to be the remaining members of AVALANCHE...all together in one room.

Eyes still closed, Titus allowed a grim smile to come to his lips. AVALANCHE was plotting something...

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After fifteen minutes of arguing, Yuffie came to the conclusion that Cloud Strife was not one of her favorite people.

Sure, it had been great when she first waltzed down the stairs clad in a pair of denim shorts and an oversized sweater than kept falling off her shoulders. Her friends were

ecstatic. Yuffie received smiles from just about everyone and a massive, bone-crushing bear hug from Barret that left her feeling like a tube of oversqueezed toothpaste afterwards. But she loved every minute of it. She loved her friends. She loved the rain. She loved her narrow-ass shoulders and tiny feet. All was great. All was good.

Until Cloud decided he wanted to be an assmunch.

“I said ‘no,’ Yuffie,” he repeated for what had to be the millionth time in a row.

Yuffie barely repressed the urge to scream and snarled through clenched teeth, “I KNOW that! I heard you the first time!”

Mako blue eyes glared at her from underneath thick strands of blonde hair. “Then why do you keep asking me?”

“Because you’re being stupid!” Yuffie blurted, unable to restrain her angry words.

“Yuffie,” Red XIII calmly spoke up from his position sprawled on top of one of the tables (with Kyra’s permission, of course). “I’m sure Cloud believes it’s imprudent for you to go alone to speak with your kidnappers. You’ve just recently recovered from your... illness, and facing the Running Man this soon might be too big of a shock for you.”

“His name is TITUS, okay?” Yuffie snapped, her quick tongue leaping at the slightest chance to argue. “And you don’t understand, I HAVE to talk to him!”

Cloud glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. “When did you get on a first name basis with our enemy, Yuffie?” His voice was cold as ice.

Yuffie’s eyes flared at what he was implying. Angrily, she sprung up from her chair, small hands clenched into fists. “Are you suggesting I’m a traitor?!” she yelled at her leader from across the table. “You haven’t even heard all of what happened down there, and already you’re jumping to conclusions!”

“Are you saying that the Running Man ISN’T our enemy after all?” Cloud challenged, staring hard at her. “I find that difficult to believe.”

A scream of pure frustration bubbled up in Yuffie’s throat, but she stubbornly swallowed it, only to have it scald her stomach like acid. “You still think I’m just a stupid little brat, don’t you?!” she demanded, eyes riveted on Cloud though her desperate question didn’t just apply to him. “Why can’t you believe me?!”

“Yuffie,” Cloud sighed, all the anger draining from his eyes, the two-dimensional emotion unable to withstand the pent-up force of Yuffie’s very real pain.

To her embarrassment, the young ninja found herself on the verge of tears. Dammit!

In her opinion, nothing ruined a perfectly good ranting session like a bout of untimely tears streaming from her angry eyes. But she couldn't help herself! She needed to talk to Titus, and she just wasn't getting through to anyone!

"Please, Cloud, just trust me!" she exclaimed, some of her hostility leaking away now that it didn't have Cloud's mutual anger to thrive on. "Please, let me talk to Titus!"

The AVALANCHE leader shook his spiky head stubbornly. "No, Yuffie. I can't let you do that."

A fine but intense trembling began in her body, originating in the pit of her stomach and spreading outwards to all her limbs with the vigor of a wild forest fire. The room wavered around her, lost in the force of her frustration, and she felt her muscles tense with anger. She was going to scream now. Boy, was she EVER going to scream!

Cold, metallic fingers suddenly fastened around her arm, their owner careful not to pierce clothing or flesh with the sharp digits. Biting back her scream, Yuffie whirled to see Vincent staring up at her with cool eyes, their crimson irises accented by the blood-red bandana that peeked through the darkness of his hair, the ends of it trailing down his back. His claw lightly gripped her arm just above the elbow, the tarnished gold inhumanly steady against the angry quakes coursing through her limbs.

Fully expecting Vincent to scold her like a little child, Yuffie had a harsh reply armed and ready to lash out at him. Only, Vincent didn't reprimand her. There wasn't any "Sit down, Yuffie" or "Behave, Yuffie." All he did was stare up at her with those frighteningly calm eyes of his, and for the first time, Yuffie noticed that he had flecks of some darker color forming a flowery shape around his pupil, like abstract designs dancing an endless waltz upon a crimson lake.

Abruptly, she felt her anger flow away from her like rain down a pane of glass. The sensation left her body feeling drained and unstable, and she plopped down in her uncomfortable wooden chair with a sigh. She stared morosely at the surface of the wooden table before she realized that everyone in the room was gazing at her like she had grown a second head. Flushing, she slumped in her seat and glared at the room's occupants.

*Gawd. They just don't understand! How can I convince them to let me talk to Titus?*

For some reason unbeknownst to her, Yuffie felt a driving need to speak with her former kidnapper. Sure, he had left her to be tortured by those nasty Hissers, and Yuffie would never forgive him for that, but Titus had also been the one who told her to keep all her hidden knowledge away from the grasp of the Hissers, something that Yuffie liked to think she had succeeded at. All that kidnapper-sadistic-bastard stuff put aside, Titus didn't seem that THAT bad of a guy. He sure as hell didn't seem to like the "Master"—

something that earned him a brownie point in Yuffie's book. And second...well...

*Nope. Titus only has one brownie point...but I still need to talk to him!*

"Let's look at this from a logical perspective," Vincent suddenly spoke up, and Yuffie glanced at him in surprise. Mr. My-Mouth-Has-Been-Figuratively-Stapled-Shut was actually going to say something for a change?

"Just what chances of success do you think you'll have interrogating the Running Man?" Vincent asked Cloud, voice deep and calm.

Cloud lifted an eyebrow and scratched his head, the leather of his glove glaringly dark against his golden spikes. "Honestly? Slim to none."

"Then I don't see why there is any objection to Yuffie talking to the Running Man," Vincent stated bluntly. "Apparently some type of 'bond' was forged between them during Yuffie's time down there. Out of everyone here, I think he would be more likely to talk to her."

"Still don't like it," Barret grumbled, folding his arms across his massive chest. "Jes ain't good to be around those kinds of people for so long."

Yuffie blinked, still trying to register the fact that Vincent had actually stood up for her. What was next? The Apocalypse? "What do you mean by that, Barret? It's not like dumb ol' Titus is going to try and KIDNAP me again."

"Yuffie," Cloud spoke up, eyes serious. "The main reason we're not letting you talk to the Running Man alone is because every enemy we encountered from his faction seems to be skilled in some type of mind control. Those brown creatures Barret described did SOMETHING to Cid that caused him to become mentally unbalanced. Ajax and Montana are both able to summon creatures without spoken words. I've fought against the Running Man in battle, Yuffie. He was a tough opponent to beat even though the odds were in our favor. Who knows what else he's capable of?"

"You think Yuffie's under some type of mind control?" Tifa asked worriedly from her place at the bar. Behind her, Kyra was cleaning glasses and trying to appear as if she wasn't listening carefully to everything that transpired in the room.

"Mind control!" Yuffie exclaimed incredulously before Cloud could reply. "That's a bunch of BS, Cloud, and you KNOW it! Do I LOOK like I'm under mind control?"

"It could be passive mind control," Rude suggested. He was seated on one of the bar stools next to Tifa.

Yuffie spun and wagged a finger at the Turk. "Be quiet, Rudey-poo! You're just making



that up!”

“Back off, brat,” Reno snapped, coming to his friend’s defense.

Yuffie had to twist around in her chair yet again to get a clear view of the dark corner Reno was lurking in, slouched in one lonely chair with half of his face shrouded in shadows. The ninja had a nice, witty comeback ready and waiting, but for some reason, she was reluctant to snap at Reno. Vincent had filled her in on what little he knew about Reno’s emotional condition, showing her the bruise on his neck to prove just how unhinged the Turk really was. Looking at those aquamarine eyes glittering at her from the shadows, Yuffie didn’t detect any sign of madness, but still...she wasn’t too keen on the idea of Reno blowing up in her face so she opted to keep her mouth shut and instead turned her attention back to Cloud.

“Pleeease, let me talk to Titus,” she begged, putting careful emphasis on the first syllable and trying to appear as innocent as possible. The “Angel Yuffie” face always worked on strangers, but there was always the chance that Cloud would prove to be impervious to her charms.

The swordsman’s resolute expression wavered slightly.

*It’s working!*

“Please, Cloud,” she whispered imploringly, clasping her hands together in front of her face—the visage of purity.

The blonde’s stoic countenance broke completely as he threw his gloved hands up in the air in exasperation. “Dammit, Yuffie!” he cursed her with a strange breed of weary affection.

“Please!” she exclaimed, just for overkill’s sake.

Cloud’s eyebrows snapped together in a half-hearted attempt to redeem himself by acting stern. “Fine! You can talk to the Running Man, but we’re all going to be down there with you, watching his every move.”

Yuffie hesitated for a split second. She wasn’t sure Titus would talk to her in the presence of the others, but it was worth a try...

“Alright!” she declared. “You got yourself a deal, Mr. Strife!”

Cloud just glared at her with a sour expression on his handsome face.

A stray thought interrupted Yuffie’s session of cheeky grinning. “Wait a minute! You’ve got to shake on it!”

Practically scrambling out of her chair, Yuffie lurched forward so that her stomach was pressed flush against the plastic tabletop as she strained to reach Cloud with her not-so-long arms.

“Yuffie!” Barret roared. “Girl, get offa the table! You gonna get in trouble!”

“People eat on that, Yuffie,” Red added.

The young woman cheerfully ignored them and stuck her hand in Cloud’s face. “Shake,” she ordered.

In spite of Barret’s outcry, Cloud didn’t seem at all bothered by the fact that Yuffie was sprawled across the entire length of the table, waving her hand under his nose.

“You could have just got up and walked around,” he told her, a smile curving his lips as he shook the young ninja’s hand. His grip swallowed her fingers.

“That would have been boring, though,” Yuffie told him with a grin, squeezing his hand as tight as she could and trying not to cry uncle when Cloud squeezed back. The swordsman had always been fun person to play “Mercy” with.

Cloud’s blue eyes laughed silently at her with a brotherly friendliness that Yuffie had unfortunately been deprived of during her entire youth. No brothers, no sisters, not very many friends. Just Yuffie, her endless adventures, and her materia. How lonely she had been. Yuffie never understood the full extent of her peculiar solitude until she lay there on the table staring into Cloud’s Mako-bright eyes and wondering how she had ever been happy without friends like these.

She reached out and gave Cloud’s spikes a playful tousle before sliding back into her seat, nearly kicking Vincent in the face on her way back. “So? Are we ready to go down there?” she asked.

Barret held up one big hand. “Wait a minute. What are we gonna do about the old man?”

Everyone glanced around awkwardly, an action that was needless since Cid was guarding the cellar door with Elena and Cait Sith. There was no way the pilot would be able to hear their conversation.

A grim expression came to Cloud’s face as he said, “I know he’s...unbalanced right now, but so far we have no grounds for making him stay away from the Running Man.” A mirthless smile curved his lips. “If I told him not to go down to the cellar, you know where he would tell me to shove it. We’ll just have to keep an eye on him and watch for any erratic behavior.”

“Sounds like we’re talking about some kind of loon here,” Reno commented dryly. “What are you gonna do next? Put him in a straitjacket?”

Cloud’s eyes barely flicked in Reno’s direction. “No,” was all he said. No one else added any other comments; they were too busy concentrating on not letting their gazes drift to the redheaded Turk.

“Don’t forget that—” Cloud started to say.

“Hey!” Reno snapped, suddenly unfolding himself from his chair in a motion so quick that it appeared he had simply snapped his body forward.

Cloud frowned at the Turk, or rather, at the wall just behind the Turk. “What is it?”

Reno stalked up to the table, all lanky limbs and flashing eyes. “It’s common courtesy to look someone in the eye when you’re talking to them,” he growled, crowding in between Vincent and Barret and forcefully slamming his palms flat down on the table.

“What are you talking about, Reno?” Cloud asked tiredly.

“I’m talking about how everyone is avoiding me like I’m the bubonic f\*\*\*ing plague!” he snapped, words dripping with bitterness.

Neither Barret nor Yuffie had a smart alec remark to make about that one. Yuffie, for one, didn’t want Reno turning his anger in her direction. Cloud was leader; he could take care of whatever “concerns” Reno wanted to voice. Besides...what the Turk said was true. Everyone HAD been avoiding him, Yuffie included, even though she hadn’t been there when he “snapped.” She heard it had been terrible, though. For her, the bruise on Vincent’s pale throat was all the “terrible” she needed to see.

Cloud raised his eyes and locked gazes with Reno’s angry, bitter one. “Would you rather us swamp you with our heartfelt concerns so you can rudely turn our kindness away?” he asked flatly.

Reno straightened, eyes widening almost imperceptibly.

“It’s the kind of thing you would do, Reno,” Cloud continued. “You don’t like people near you when you’re feeling...vulnerable.”

A spark of annoyance slunk back into Reno’s eyes, but it was a mere shadow of the fury that had dwelt there seconds before. “I’m not vulnerable,” he growled half-heartedly.

“Fine,” Cloud said levelly. “You’re not vulnerable.”

Reno gave an exasperated sigh and flung his pale hands up in the hair. “Whatever! I just want everyone to know that I’m not going to need a goddamn straitjacket either.”

Cloud nodded. “That’s good to hear.”

“DAMN good to hear,” Yuffie echoed before she could stop herself. She clamped her hands over her mouth in embarrassment. Geez! Reno just had a nervous breakdown, and here she was harassing him about being a fruit loop!

To her surprise, though, the Turk only laughed and tugged her hair gently. “Don’t worry about it, brat.”

Yuffie decided she wanted to be bold and craned her neck backwards so she could stare up at Reno. “I’ll let the ‘brat’ go this time, but only ‘cause you went bonkers,” she teased.

A grin split Reno’s upside-down face, and he pinched her cheek. Hard. “Fine by me.” He turned his attention back to the others, laughter draining from his face. “Can we get this over with?”

Cloud nodded and rose from his chair, face dead serious. “Remember, Reeve is our priority. We NEED to find out what happened to him. All other things have to take a backseat for now.”

No one answered. The sound of chairs scraping against the green carpeting filled the room as Yuffie and the others began to file out of the restaurant area. Yuffie clenched and unclenched her hands unconsciously, realizing that she was nervous.

*I finally get to talk to Titus. Gawd...what the hell am I going to say to him? Oh well...I’ll figure it out later...*

Yuffie waved to Kyra as she left the main room. The auburn-haired woman waved back, pristine towel trailing in the air. She had been polishing the same glass for half an hour now. Apparently, AVALANCHE’s conversations were more stimulating than those of your average customer.

Then Yuffie found herself surrounded by darkness and silence as she began the trek down to the cellar. Cautiously, she glanced around her to see that all her friends slipping on their “game faces,” all emotion draining from their eyes. Rude had his sunglasses back on, and Yuffie imagined that Red’s one golden eye had a colder, more bestial gleam to it. Even Tifa’s normally open expression looked empty. How depressing.

*Can’t go showing emotions to the enemy, I guess. I don’t think it matters for me, though. Titus has already seen me at my crybaby worst.*

A familiar scent drifted to her nose like the lingering musk of cologne after its owner had long departed. Yuffie turned to find Vincent walking a couple of steps behind her. His

face was set in unyielding lines, and strands of ebony hair fell across his forehead, making his crimson eyes flare as bright as fire against the dark strands. No change of expression needed there. Vincent was still Vincent, regardless of the situation. There was a strange comfort in that.

Yuffie fell back to walk beside him. “Hey, Vinnie,” she whispered, figuring if she was going to break the unspoken vow of silence, she might as well do it quietly. She didn’t know why she was bothering to talk to Vincent anyways; it wasn’t like he was such a sparkling conversationalist.

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. “Are you alright, Yuffie?”

She blinked. “Of course,” she said, puzzled. “I’m just fine and dandy. Why?”

The corners of Vincent’s mouth twitched in what was probably a frown. “The Running Man is very dangerous, Yuffie.”

Yuffie sighed as she maneuvered out of the way to avoid a collision with a small table adorned with a vase and one lonely white flower. The motion put her arm right up against Vincent’s, her shoulder brushing the warm solidity of his bicep.

“I KNOW he’s dangerous, Vinnie,” she grumped. “He DID kidnap me, you know.”

“But then you went and made friends with him,” Vincent pointed out, voice flat and emotionless.

Yuffie scowled. “Titus is not my friend! And if you think he’s so dangerous, why did you tell Cloud that it was okay for me to talk to him in the first place?”

Vincent just snorted and stared straight ahead. Yuffie was amused; she had never heard Vincent snort before. He did it with slightly more grace than others, but it still sounded goofy coming from such a “dark” and “mysterious” man. Mystery men were not meant to snort like pigs.

So tickled was Yuffie that she grinned cheekily and nudged Vincent with her elbow. “Aww! You’re jealous, aren’t you, Vinnie?” she taunted good-naturedly.

Vincent’s eyes widened with indignation.

Yuffie fluffed up her shoulder-length brown hair, preening melodramatically. “Yes, I know everyone wants a foxy lady like me, but you’re going to have to wait in line just like everyone else!”

“Ain’t nothing foxy about your skinny ass,” Reno muttered from behind her.

Yuffie whirled and pinned the Turk with dark glare, all psyched to chew him out

when Vincent suddenly took hold of her arm.

“We’re here,” he informed her, gaze riveted straight ahead. “If you’re interested in going to see your friend, you’d best get up front with Cloud.”

“Titus is not my friend,” Yuffie repeated grumpily, moving forward as Vincent’s warm fingers slid away from her arm. Actually, she would have much rather hung out in the back with Mr. Stony Silence Valentine and Royal Pain in the Arse Reno, but she figured if she was going to get any chance of talking to Titus before someone else butted in, she had to be on top of things.

Slinking past Barret and Tifa and hopping clear over Red (much to the lion-like beast’s displeasure), Yuffie made her way to the front to see Cloud conversing with Cid, Elena, and Cait.

The young swordsman had a half-worried/half-stern expression on his face as he addressed Cid. “Are you sure you’re alright?”

Cid’s blue eyes flashed darkly, and he was just about to reply when Elena and Cait interrupted him, chorusing, “He’s f\*\*\*ing fine so leave him the f\*\*\* alone.”

Cloud blinked, looking stunned. Cid just snorted and puffed resentfully on his cigarette.

“Cait and I asked him the same thing, too. That was the answer he gave us,” Elena explained dryly, absently fidgeting with her blond hair, tucking it behind her ears and then untucking it the next second. Her brown eyes were wider than normal, darting around constantly as if seeing so many people gathered in one hallway unnerved her. She more closely resembled a nervous rabbit than the tough Turk she often tried to be.

*Great Yuffie thought, wiping her sweaty palms on her shorts. Is everyone gonna have an anxiety attack down there? Titus is going to think we’re a bunch of weenies.*

“Hey, Yuffie,” Cait chimed, sitting casually on his moogles and tossing his megaphone from paw to paw. “What are you doing up here with us losers?” He grinned impishly. “Shouldn’t you be back there chilling with Viiiiiiiiicent?”

Yuffie’s eyes bulged at the little bugger’s audacity. “Shut up! You’re just jealous because I find Vinnie better company than YOU!”

Cloud held up a gloved hand, expression sterner than Yuffie had ever seen. She immediately shut her mouth, back instinctively snapping ramrod straight like a soldier at attention. Geez, Cloud was really serious about this interrogation thing...

“Barret and Cait,” the AVALANCHE leader ordered, “you two will stand guard at

the base of the cellar stairs in case one of the prisoners tries to escape. Vincent, Tifa, Red, you flank the woman and make sure that she doesn't work her way free of her ropes. The rest of you, stick close to me. Especially you, Yuffie."

The young ninja blinked in surprise. "Huh?"

"Don't leave my side," Cloud repeated firmly.

Bewildered, Yuffie stared into Cloud's Mako blue eyes. What was this all of a sudden? Just because she had been captured once didn't mean she was a weakling. Or...was it because Cloud really thought Titus was THAT dangerous?

"Sure, Cloud," Yuffie said quietly. "I understand."

Cloud nodded stiffly, strands of blond hair fluttering near the corners of his eyes. In one deft motion, he reached out and shoved open the cellar door.

Darkness yawned before them, and Yuffie swallowed convulsively, not trusting the sight of that abysmal blackness even though she knew the only things lurking down there were Titus, Fa-Li, and a bunch of old crates. Cloud went down first, followed by Cid. Cait Sith hopped to one side of the doorway and gestured for Yuffie to proceed, giving her a cheery thumbs-up sign. She didn't bother to return the kindly effort, bracing herself as she stepped into the darkness.

The smell of old mildew and gunpowder assaulted her nostrils, a mixture that left her senses tingling with the impression of impending danger. She suddenly wished she had brought the Conformer with her.

*Stop it, Yuffie!* she scolded herself. *Don't be a pansy! It's just Titus and Fa-Li...you don't have to be nervous about seeing them again. What am I going to say to Titus anyways? Should I get mad at him for kidnapping me and making me suffer?*

The stair underneath her sneaker creaked suddenly, and Yuffie started, instinctively groping for a railing that wasn't there. Her balance threatened to betray her, but a gloved hand suddenly settled on her shoulder, holding her steady until she regained equilibrium.

"You okay?" Tifa asked softly.

Yuffie bobbed her head quickly, feeling a mixture of embarrassment and relief wash over her. "I'm fine. I just can't see the stairs. I've never been down here before."

Tifa's other hand came to gently clasp Yuffie's remaining shoulder. "You'll be fine," she said comfortingly. "There aren't too many left."

"Leviathan be praised," Yuffie muttered, cautiously lowering her foot to the next step.

She could sense Cloud and Cid moving around in the darkness close by, and she gratefully hung onto the comfort of Tifa's presence at her back until she felt her sneakers come into contact with the wonderfully solid concrete floor of the cellar.

Just as she was about to let out a sigh of relief, a single light suddenly snapped on, burning away the darkness so quickly that Yuffie had to blink rapidly to chase away the multi-colored spots that now danced playfully in her vision.

Fa-Li sat bound in the center of the cellar, a lone light bulb suspended by a ratty string swinging gently in the stale air over her dark head. Yuffie's eyes widened slightly as they took in the layers and layers of rope that encompassed the woman's petite frame, making it look like some unseen beast was in the process of devouring her. Her dark eyes were averted, head lowered so that her tangled hair hid her face from view. She was trembling and muttering a Wutainese prayer under her breath.

Yuffie opened her mouth to ask what was wrong, but a flash of white against the far wall suddenly captured her attention. Titus was either chained or handcuffed to some sort of pipe that ran parallel to the floor, his white-blond hair shimmering like moonlight in the dark of the night. His eyes were closed as if asleep.

"He is SO not asleep," Yuffie growled to herself, clenching her hands into fists as she stormed past Cloud, heading right for Titus.

"Yu—" Cloud warned, reaching out with the intention of grabbing the girl by the shoulder.

"Crummy bastard," Yuffie muttered angrily, and Cloud retracted his hand, not sure whether or not Yuffie had been referring to him.

Yuffie marched and stood in front of Titus, her fists trembling with sudden anger. Regardless of all other factors (including her and Vincent's mutual stubbornness) Yuffie blamed Titus for her capture and subsequent torture at the hands of the Hissers. How dare he just run off and leave her there with the Cold One and his mindless hissing bastards? Titus was one of the only people who knew what the hell was going on down there, and he hadn't let her in on the secret until he was already making his great escape. Lucky bastard. Yuffie needed to release her anger on someone, and Titus seemed a better candidate than most.

"Get up, Titus!" she yelled. "I KNOW you're awake, you slimy bastard!"

She heard muttering behind her, but who it was or what they were grumbling out, she didn't care. All her attention was riveted on Titus.

"Look at me, damn you!" she ordered, gray eyes flashing with unchecked anger. No



need to hold back the intense, dark emotions that raged within her. Not for Titus.

To her surprise, the man's eyes slowly slid open, the infinite emerald depths literally glowing in the darkness with a gleam that was totally unlike Mako, unlike anything ever known to man. A collective gasp rose from behind Yuffie as at last everyone clearly beheld a pair of eyes that had once belonged to someone loved and cherished by many of those present.

Unfazed by Titus' cold gaze, Yuffie bent at the waist, bringing herself eye-level with the Running Man, but still out of range in case Titus decided to kick her in the face. "Yeah, bet you thought you'd never see me again, huh?" she mocked, graceful eyebrows drawn low over simmering orbs of stormy flames. "You're such as asshole! Why the HELL did you leave me down there with those....THINGS?!! Do you know what they did? Well, duh, of COURSE you know what they did! Mr. High Priest!"

Soaring on the tide of angry impulse, Yuffie kicked Titus in the shin. Not hard enough to break anything, but with enough force to make him flinch and draw his leg away from her reach. "There!" she told him, still glaring. "I hope you have a nasty bruise in the morning, crum bum."

Titus just stared up at her, green eyes flickering with something halfway between anger and laughter. Knowing Titus, it was probably a little bit of both. The guy had a damn WIERD sense of humor.

Yuffie was contemplating whether or not stomping on the man's toes would be overkill when Vincent's low, deep voice drifted from behind her, "Yuffie, I believe it would be prudent if you would kindly stop abusing the prisoners."

Not bothering to glance at Vincent, Yuffie snorted, placing her hands on her narrow hips. The sides of her oversized sweater ballooned and swallowed her hands up to the wrists. She stared down into Titus' mesmerizing eyes, at how his pupils shone astoundingly dark against the emerald seas. His handsome face was a beautiful blank that betrayed nothing of what went on inside his head. Some of his white-blond hair had fallen over one eye, adding a taste of wildness to his normally unflappable composure.

"Fine," Yuffie said with a begrudging sigh. "I'm finished." She turned to see that everyone had somehow managed to maneuver to their appropriate positions. Vincent, Tifa, and Red surrounded Fa-Li like watchful sentries while Barret and Cait flanked the bottom of the stairs. The three Turks had chosen to hover in the far left corner of the room, a triad of blue suits and carefully blank expressions. To Yuffie's right was Cloud, and further beyond him, an angry-looking Cid.

"Well?" she prodded when no one moved or spoke. "Aren't you going to interrogate

him?”

“He looks like Aeris,” Tifa said quietly.

“He looks like Sephiroth,” Cloud countered, voice cold as he stared deeply at Titus, who only gazed at the AVALANCHE leader impassively.

An awkward silence fell after that statement; no one really wished to recall the events that befell them a year ago. In the end, all their pain and strife had been more than worthwhile, but no one could deny that their hard-won victory had been sealed in blood not their own. Sacrifices were so bittersweet, and just one glance into the Running Man’s emerald eyes had reminded them of everything they had gained...and lost.

“Let’s start with an easy question,” Cloud finally said, all his attention focused on the man who sat handcuffed to the pipe at his back. “Yuffie says your name is Titus. Is that your real name?”

Titus made no reply, just continued looking steadily up at Cloud, his persistent gaze never wavering. After a few breathless moments, Cloud sharply averted his eyes, much to Yuffie’s surprise. He seemed to have trouble meeting Titus’ stare. That was bad. How was Cloud going to get any information out of Titus when intimidation lay thick in the air like the heavy reek of decay? And Titus sure as hell wasn’t the one being intimidated, that was for sure.

Though she felt she might be overstepping her boundaries, Yuffie decided to jump in. “Titus,” she said, trying to conjure up her most reasonable tone. “Where’s Reeve? I know you know where he is. I heard you say so in the torture chamber.”

Titus’ green eyes flicked in her direction, and Yuffie met them without flinching. He still said nothing, but one of his pale eyebrows quirked slightly.

Yuffie frowned down at him. “Okay, if you want to play the silent game, fine by me! I can keep up a one-sided conversation better than anyone! And don’t act like you don’t know what I’m talking about, Titus, because I know you know where Reeve is...” Something suddenly occurred to her, and she turned her gaze to where the Turks remained veiled in shadows in their lonely corner. “Hey, Rude, this IS the guy you saw in Hojo’s lab, right?”

Though Yuffie couldn’t see Rude’s eyes behind the dark lenses of his sunglasses, she sensed the intensity of his stare hone in on Titus. “Yes,” he replied without hesitation. “This is the one.”

“Okay,” Yuffie said uncertainly, not knowing what to do now that she had received the confirmation.

*Man...we really suck at interrogating people.*

"I'll bet you're laughing at us right now, Titus," Yuffie grumbled. "Well? Are you chuckling inside?"

Silence, but Yuffie thought she saw a flicker of laughter in Titus' eyes. He WAS chuckling. Goody for him.

"Well, I'm glad you find me so damn amusing! Now...how about telling us where Reeve is?"

Titus just sat there, as unresponsive as a rock.

Yuffie rubbed the back of her neck. All this tactical questioning sure took a lot out of her. She knew there was nothing she could say that would pierce all Titus' thick armor; he would never talk if he didn't want to. After all, the guy was a freaking master torturer, for crying out loud! Her questions and bantering must be only minor annoyances at best. However, what she REALLY wanted to do was talk to Titus about what had gone on during her torture—something that she blatantly refused to speak of in front of the others. It was far too personal and...humiliating. Yet, somehow, somehow, she knew Titus would understand.

*Please talk to me, Titus* she begged silently, staring him in the eye. *Please...*

But he only gazed at her blankly. There was no sign that he had heard her. Of course he hadn't; it was impossible for humans to speak mind to mind. She was just being silly.

"Mr. Titus?" Tifa suddenly spoke up, taking a cautious step towards the Running Man. Titus' eyes locked ruthlessly onto her, and Yuffie saw Tifa almost waver under that heartbreakingly familiar emerald gaze. Memories of Aeris hung thickly in the air.

Burgundy eyes steady and resolute once more, Tifa drew a deep breath before continuing. "Mr. Titus, I know you probably don't really care about our feelings. You captured two of us, and then we turned around and captured you and your...friend." She faltered a bit trying to find the right title for Fa-Li. "I know two wrongs don't make a right, but for what it's worth, no one here is interested in harming you. All we want to do is find our friend again. I'm begging you, Titus or whatever your name is, *please* tell us where Reeve is! Or at least if he's even alive!"

Real tears glittered in Tifa's eyes like liquid diamonds, and Yuffie felt her own throat tighten at the woman's heartfelt desperation. She was suddenly aware of her own deep-rooted worry for Reeve, and she had to scramble to fend off the flailing grasp of sudden panic.

“Please!” Tifa begged again, voice sounding unnaturally loud and echoing in the cellar.

Anyone’s cold-hearted resolve would have withered in the face of such an outflow of raw emotion like the one that marred Tifa’s pretty face, but Titus didn’t so much as bat an eyelash. Just kept right on staring, unmoved by Tifa’s anxious entreaty.

Anger resurfaced in Yuffie’s heart again, setting her blood boiling. Her eyes darkened as she pinned Titus with a glare hot enough to melt skin from bones. “Answer her, Titus!” she demanded. “Damn you, don’t you care about all the pain you’re causing?!”

Naturally, she received no response, just the same empty emerald stare. Goddamn it all to hell if Titus wasn’t as good, if not better, at hiding his emotions than Vincent was.

Fists trembling with rage, Yuffie decided to grab at one last straw. She whirled around, ignoring her hair as it spun with her and planted stinging slaps on the sides of her face.

“Fa-Li!” she cried, addressed the back of the woman’s bowed head. “Please tell us where Reeve is!”

Uneasy silence.

“Please, Fa-Li, please!” Yuffie begged, humiliated to hear her voice cracking. Frustration and tears always did that to her.

There was a brief hesitation that seemed to span an eternity, but then the woman’s head shifted slightly, dark, tangled locks scrambling for new positions as she began to lift her head.

Her nasally voice came, thick with a pain that no one in the room could comprehend. “President Reeve...of...Neo...Shinra?” she asked slowly.

Yuffie’s heart leapt into her throat, beating with a mixture of hope and trepidation. “Yes,” she murmured. “That’s him...”

As if she were moving underwater, Fa-Li turned with agonizing slowness so that Yuffie could barely discern her lovely profile hidden behind the thick mass of her brown hair. The silence in the room was so heavy with dark, quaking anticipation that Yuffie half-expected to suddenly hear someone’s heartbeat echoing in the abysmal void of sound.

“President Reeve...” Fa-Li whispered, voice detached and dream-like. “I’m afraid... he...he...”

“Fa-Li!” Titus’ harsh voice suddenly lashed brutally through the air of the cellar. A whimper escaped Fa-Li’s lips, and she shrank in on herself again, bowing her head and

trembling like a scared rabbit.

“Dammit!” Elena cursed vehemently, voice evincing nothing but pure frustration.

“Fa-Li,” Yuffie whispered. “Please!”

The woman only trembled harder, and Yuffie suddenly knew that her silence was permanent this time. And apparently, Reno realized this is well.

“This is going nowhere,” he seethed, pushing himself away from the wall, body moving in slow jerky movements as he approached Titus. Beside her, Yuffie felt Cloud stiffening, and even Rude and Elena looked ambivalent, as if they couldn’t decide whether to follow Reno or try to hold him back. In the end, they just stood there.

Yuffie took one look at Reno’s cold, forbidding expression, at the mad, desperate glint in his aquamarine eyes, and she knew they were in trouble. Instability was the last thing they needed right now, and Reno was brimming with it.

“Tell me where Reeve is, NOW,” Reno demanded of Titus, voice low and deadly. “Everyone else in this room may have qualms about killing you, but let me tell you right now that I’m not so squeamish. Blowing your brains out doesn’t faze me in the slightest.”

If she hadn’t had an unbalanced, angry Reno less than two feet away from her, Yuffie would have sighed and shook her head in chastisement. She was sure that Reno wasn’t making an idle threat, and under normal circumstances—with a normal prisoner—his standard “Turk interrogation” tactics might have worked, but Titus was far, FAR from normal. Yuffie was certain that he had seen scarier things in his lifetime than pissed-off spitfires like Reno.

“Back off, Reno,” Cloud ordered.

Reno whirled on him. “Why should I?!” he roared, fury written in every rigid line of his body. “This is my President we’re talking about here! He’s my responsibility!”

“Reeve is our friend, too,” Cloud insisted.

“Well, what the f\*\*\* are you doing, then?! You’re so damn scared to get your hands dirty that you can’t even get information out of this guy! Hell, you can’t even look him in the f\*\*\*ing eye, much less make him tell you where Reeve is!”

The look in Cloud’s eyes hardened. “Reno, if you’re going to be counterproductive, then get the hell out of here,” he ordered flatly, but everyone heard the subtle menace in his voice.

“F\*\*\* you,” the Turk spat viciously. “It’s no use trying to explain something that a

do-gooder like you will never understand.”

Then, to everyone’s surprise, the redhead turned on heel and strode out of the cellar, movements stiff and angry, like a corked bottle of emotion just awaiting the prime opportunity to explode. Barret and Cait watched him warily as he thundered up the stairs and out the door, slamming it so hard that Yuffie thought she heard some of the wood crack.

Though Reno’s departure sucked some of the crackling tension out of the air, the majority of it still lingered like the remains of some foul odor. Yuffie felt everyone’s edginess, their frustration, their helplessness.

*Crap* she thought shakily as she used the sleeve of her sweater to mop cold sweat off her forehead. *One of us is going to snap soon.*

Someone suddenly brushed past her, and Yuffie started slightly, only to see Vincent Valentine moving to stand in front of Titus, who watched the ominous man with wary, shifty eyes. It was as much emotion as Yuffie had seen Titus show so far. Slowly, completely oblivious to everyone’s eyes on him, Vincent lowered himself into a crouch so that he was at eye level with the Running Man. Titus drew his legs close to his body, something that looked suspiciously like fear passing over his eyes for a single fleeting movement.

“Vincent?” Cloud asked quietly. “What are you doing?”

“Reno was right,” Vincent deadpanned, voice flat and cold. “No one but an individual who is highly trained in the darker forms of information retrieval can understand just how far desperation can push a person.”

Cloud’s eyes narrowed slightly. “And you understand?”

“I was a Turk, Cloud. A monster wearing human skin. Though I must admit that personal motives are far more nerve-wrecking than direct orders from the President.”

Yuffie saw Cloud’s eyes dart between Vincent and Titus, who were engaged in a deep staring contest that left everyone else—including Yuffie—feeling estranged and severed, as if they were merely looking at the two men from some intangible distance.

“What do you propose we do, Vincent?” Cloud asked warily, as if afraid of Vincent’s reply.

Without disengaging his crimson stare from Titus’ emerald one, Vincent answered, “Violence will not work on him, I know that much.” His eyes narrowed, two small slivers of bloody redness in his pale face. “Am I right, Mr. Titus?”

Silence, then came Titus’ raspy voice, “Correct.”

Yuffie's eyes widened. *He's talking!*

"And let me guess," Vincent continued calmly. "Mind games don't work with you either."

"They do not."

"Why do you speak to me and not to Cloud or Yuffie?"

A sly, secretive smile curled one corner of Titus' mouth. "I speak when I wish, to whom I wish. It is an unalienable human right, is it not?"

"You are no human," Vincent stated bluntly.

Titus' eyes flashed with some foreign emotion, then resettled into a strange, angry glitter, like a bird ruffling its feathers. "And neither are you, Vincent Valentine," he said callously.

Yuffie saw Vincent's shoulders stiffen. "Master of mind games," he uttered. "No wonder they don't work on you; you know them all."

Titus stared at Vincent. "Out of everyone in this room, you and her are the only ones who meet my eyes without flinching."

It took Yuffie a few seconds to realize that the "her" Titus spoke of was none other than herself.

"They are only eyes," Vincent deadpanned.

"True, but do they not remind you of someone? The one called 'Aeris?'" Titus cocked his head to the side, longer locks of white-blond hair grazing the collar of his leather jacket. "Or what about Sephiroth? Did both of those people mean so little to you?"

This time it was Vincent who refused to reply.

Titus' eyelids suddenly closed so that only half of each eye was visible, the natural gleam in them becoming even more intense, if such a thing was possible. "Or maybe you don't think of either of them?" he murmured, more to himself than Vincent. Yuffie felt a power building in the room. "Maybe someone connected to one of them...the one called Aeris?...no...there was no one...Sephiroth?.....yes...the mother..." Titus' eyes widened. "I see a woman...Lucre—"

Vincent suddenly lunged forward, claw outstretched. Titus reflexively jerked backwards, trying to bring his knees up to shield his face, but no matter how quick he was, Vincent was a step quicker. Not even flinching as Titus' updrawn knees dug into his stomach, he grabbed the man by the neck, razor sharp tips of his claw pressed against the

pale skin, on the verge of puncturing it. Titus went deathly still, like a deer caught in a pair of headlights.

“Vincent, what are you doing?” Tifa gasped.

“He’s a mind reader,” Vincent spat, uttering the final two words as if they were something foul and abominable that he couldn’t stand having in his mouth. Yuffie had never seen him so angry.

Titus had the audacity to smile. “Only if your defenses are so weak that I can worm my way inside your head. Your fault, not mine.”

Something dangerous flickered in Vincent’s eyes, and Yuffie saw his claw tighten almost imperceptibly around Titus’ pale throat.

*Oh crap...oh crap...*

“Vincent, step away from him, please,” Cloud requested quietly.

But Vincent still remained, staring into Titus’ emerald eyes with cold rage frozen on his face. With his dark hair falling into his crimson eyes, the usually composed man closely resembled a wild beast that had been unwisely released from its cage. Yuffie wasn’t even sure he had heard Cloud until his grip on Titus’ neck began to loosen, metallic finger by metallic finger. Slowly, he stood and stepped back from the Running Man, who watched his every movement with undisguised wariness.

“Geez, Titus. You’re just pushing everyone’s buttons today,” Yuffie sighed as Vincent moved to stand a good, safe distance away from the Running Man. Though to whom the “safe” referred, Yuffie was no longer clear on.

However, one thing she was clear on was that when you began wondering if you should start protecting your enemies from your friends during a harmless “interrogation,” it was time to beat a hasty retreat before someone’s hands got dirty. Yuffie was just about to voice her oh-so-agreeable suggestion when she saw something metallic and shiny snake past Cloud and press itself up against Titus’ throat.

“Cid!” Elena exclaimed sharply.

*I knew this was gonna happen!* Yuffie thought wildly as she realized that pretty shimmering thing hovering near Titus’ exposed neck was none other than the spearhead of the Venus Gospel. *The shit’s about to hit the fan...*

Amazingly enough, Titus’ eyes still bore that infinite sense of cool detachment even with the business end of one of the most dangerous weapons on the Planet practically rammed up his nose. Clear emerald orbs flicked in Cid’s direction, sizing up the pilot.



Cid gripped the shaft of the Venus Gospel with unnaturally steady hands, keeping the wickedly sharp edge pressed firmly against Titus' throat, tottering on the verge of breaking the skin. His tanned, weathered face was blank and emotionless, but the glint in his dark blue eyes sent a chill down Yuffie's spine.

*Cid... what HAPPENED to you?*

"Those brown hissing things," the pilot growled, all his attention focused on Titus, as if the others were merely insignificant phantoms from another place and time. "What the hell were they?"

Titus lifted an eyebrow. "They were torturers," he said levelly.

"Torturers my ass!" Cid hissed, but everyone heard the uncharacteristic tremble in his rough voice. "They were... something else." His gloved hands tightened around the spear. "Tell me what the hell they were! Was what they said true?!"

*Yuffie frowned. What they said...?*

Realization washed over Titus' face in a wicked tidal wave, and he grinned slyly up at Cid, emerald eyes suddenly flashing brightly. "Tell me, Cid Highwind. What is your greatest fear?" he whispered intimately, mockingly.

Those words severed the thin string of sanity that had kept Cid from falling off the deep end. A guttural cry ripped from the pilot's throat, and suddenly the spearhead sharply danced away from the pale column of Titus' throat... only to come arching back down in a blinding jab, shiny metal hungering for blood to stain its glimmering surface.

Out of the corner of her eyes, a stunned Yuffie could see both Red and Vincent moving in a blinding blur of motion, on a beeline for Cid and the lethal spear. Cloud beat them to the punch. Lunging forward, the swordsman hit the shaft of the spear with a forceful backhand slap, making the near-fatal jab go wild. The glittering point of the spear ended up lodged in a brick less than one inch away from Titus' neck. The clang of metal on the wall's rough surface seemed to echo perpetually in the farthest corners of the cellar, the sound bouncing back and forth in an act of cruel mockery.

Silence hung heavily in the cellar except for Cid and Cloud's shallow breathing. Yuffie was barely aware of Vincent hovering behind her or the tense, poised form of Red XIII directly to her right. Her mind was still trying to grasp the fact that Cid had nearly killed Titus. If Cloud hadn't been within grabbing distance... there went Reeve's location, there went all the answers to Yuffie's endless stream of secret questions, there went everything... what was Cid thinking? What had the Hissers done to make him this way?

"Oh, Cid," Tifa murmured, and Yuffie heard something she never thought she'd hear

in the other woman's voice. Hidden underneath the sympathy, underneath the worry, was the faint glimmer of plaintive horror.

*Things are getting ugly* Yuffie thought despairingly. *We're falling apart. I don't even know who the fuckin' bad guys are anymore!*

"Out," Cloud suddenly ordered in a low, cold voice, gripping the shaft of the Venus Gospel so tightly the leather of his well-worn clothes creaked and creased around the junctures of his knuckles. Behind him, Cid still clung numbly to the spear, face slack and eyes wide. His pupils were tiny pinpoints in a sea of endless blue. He looked blind.

"GET OUT NOW!!!!!" Cloud roared, infuriated when everyone just stood rooted in their places. "Everyone, get out of here! Rude! Elena! Out! Barret and Cait! Go on! Red! Let's go!" Cloud wrenched the spear out of Cid's limp grasp and placed one firm hand on the pilot's broad shoulder, pushing him ahead as they made their way toward the cellar stairs with the others. Yuffie thought she saw Cid make a half-hearted attempt to extricate himself from Cloud's grasp, but the swordsman's hand only reinforced its hold, squeezing Cid's shoulder tight enough to bruise.

"Shit," Cid was saying as he ascended the stairs with Cloud at his back like an irate parole officer. "Shitshitshitshitshitshit."

As soon as the Rude and Elena went past her, Fa-Li lifted her head and tried weakly to turn her upper body around. "Titus?" she whispered. "Are you alright? Titus? Titus?"

Yuffie felt a gloved hand land on her shoulder. Startled, she looked up to find Vincent's crimson eyes peering down at her, strands of jet-black hair brushing the curves of his pale cheekbones. She realized that she had been staring dumbly after the others with her mouth hanging open.

"Let's go," Vincent said calmly, fingers tightening briefly. She could feel the warmth of his skin even through the thick fabric of the sweater, through the resilient leather of his glove. Fancy that.

She nodded, pushing her hair back as the motion flung it into her face. "Okay," she muttered.

Vincent started moving away, and Yuffie was just about to follow him when she heard Titus' voice behind her. "Yuffie."

Whirling so fast his hair whipped in a wild arc, Vincent fixed the Running Man with a dark, intense stare. Yuffie turned and pinned Titus with a glare of her own.

"What is it now?" she grumped. "Haven't you caused enough trouble for one day?"

Titus didn't reply, only extended his right leg towards her, sole of his combat boot scraping across the cold concrete with series of grinding noises that made Yuffie want to grit her teeth. He stared up at her pointedly, green eyes wide and striking in the darkness, glittering up at her from behind strands of soft-looking white-blond hair. In the back of her mind, Yuffie wondered if it hurt to be so beautiful.

"What's wrong?" she asked, bewildered as to what POSSIBLE significance Titus' stinky old shoe could have. "If your shoelace is untied, I sure as hell am not tying it for you! You can just trip next time you get up...if you ever do manage to get up, that is."

Vincent took a step forward, placing the heel of his boot over Titus' toes.

"Vinnie, that's mean!" Yuffie exclaimed half-heartedly. If anyone should be able to stomp on Titus' feet, it should be her...

"Roll up his pant leg," Vincent ordered flatly.

Yuffie stared at him, then at Titus, thinking they had both lost their marbles. Then she shrugged. "Fine, whatever." She started to step forward and kneel down, but Vincent stopped her.

"Go around to my left side," he said. "You don't want him to kick you with his other leg."

"Right, right," Yuffie grumbled, marching around to Vincent's left side and crouching next to Titus' leg. Flushing slightly and thanking the great Da Chao that Titus was currently playing the staring game with Vincent instead of eyeballing her, Yuffie took hold of the bottom of his jean leg and carefully rolled it upwards, exposing more of his combat boot.

*Geez, how high do these things go?* she thought, trying not to think of how weird she must look, groping Titus' leg.

Her fingers brushed something cold and metallic. Frowning, she jerked the denim material upwards.

"My materia!!!" she exclaimed happily, as her Crystal Bangle was revealed in its glorious entirety. Titus had the damn thing strapped to his upper calf!

"Lightening! Knights of the Round! Whoo-hoo!" Yuffie exalted, unable to help herself. "Cloud won't kick my ass after all!" She looked up to find Titus gazing at her, something like a smile tugging at the corners of his thin mouth. She grinned at him. "'Safe place' my ass!<sup>4</sup> You were carrying it the entire time, you crummy ol' bastard you!"

<sup>4</sup> Remember waaaaay back in Ch. 22 when Yuffie asked where her materia was, and Titus replied, "In a safe place"? Nope? Didn't think so... —*Catalina*

Titus smiled at her. His expression looked less severe when he smiled.

“Grab your armor and let’s go, Yuffie,” Vincent spoke up.

“Sure thing,” she quipped, unclasping the bangle from Titus’ calf and letting his pant leg fall back into its rightful place. She smoothed the material down until it was pretty much wrinkle-free, then hoisted herself to her feet using Titus’ knee as leverage. Vincent removed the heel of his boot from Titus’ toes and proceeded towards the stairs, trusting Yuffie to follow.

With one last glance back at Titus, the young ninja trailed behind her tall companion. When Vincent leaned over Fa-Li to turn off the single light bulb, the Wutainese woman shivered and leaned away, as if he would infect her with some alien disease should he come too close. Yuffie patted the woman on the head reassuringly as she passed her, but averted her face before Fa-Li’s dark, haunted eyes could make contact with hers. No need to be on even friendlier terms with their alleged prisoners than she already was.

At the top of the stairs, Yuffie turned and stared back down into the darkness, hands clutching her Crystal Bangle to her chest. Her weak, human eyes could see nothing in the inky black. Nothing but the luminescence of Titus’ green eyes glittering up at her from the darkest corner of the cellar.

“Thank you,” she whispered to him, grip tightening on the piece of armor in her hands.

Titus’ eyes bobbed once. A nod.

Yuffie nodded back and turned away, shutting the door behind her and once again leaving the darkness to devour the cellar whole.

~owari Ch. 32



Author's note:

I know. Long chapter. Long teeeeeedious chapter. Long and tedious to read. Long and tedious to write. I can sympathize with you, honestly. O\_O Writing this chapter made me realize that battles aren't so bad by comparison. I hate interrogation scenes. Thanks to anyone who read this all the way through! And a special thanks to all those who sent me e-mails encouraging me to hurry up! ^\_^ Hopefully, the next chapter will be out sooner than this one!

Next Chapter:

A Moment to Deliberate

Cid battles himself. Montana stops in for tea and crumpets. Cloud and Reno have a heart to heart. Rude and Kyra have a heart to heart. Yuffie and Vincent have a heart to heart. Barret has a heart to heart with Vincent's coffee cup. Titus ponders how to scratch his nose with his hands tied behind his back.

In other words, boocoos of the character development. Oh, and I was just kidding about half of the stuff in that summary. O\_O Of course, you have to guess about what I was REALLY serious about! ^\_^

*~Catalina*

# Chapter Thirty-Three

## *A Moment to Deliberate*

*“It’s called ‘getting comfortable.’” —Reno Mitsuru*

---

*Crawling in my skin  
 These wounds they will not heal  
 Fear is how I fall  
 Confusing what is real  
 There’s something inside me that pulls beneath the surface  
 Consuming  
 Confusing  
 This lack of self-control I fear is never ending  
 Controlling  
 I can’t seem  
 To find myself again  
 My walls are closing in*

*”Crawling”  
 —Linkin Park—<sup>5</sup>*

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“It’s hot,” Cid complained to no one in particular. Barret and Vincent were crashed out on the floor of the upstairs living room, seemingly dead the world. Cid thought it was awful weird to have a living room upstairs instead of downstairs, but he figured if you ran a huge fuck-off restaurant, you’d want the living room to be upstairs where no one would mess with it. Made sense in the end. Most things did, when you thought about them long enough.

Taking another languid drag of his cigarette, Cid expelled the smoke in the general direction of the ceiling, though he knew the small particles of whatever cigarette smoke

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<sup>5</sup> IT WAS EARLY 2002, OKAY? SHE DIDN’T KNOW HOW EMBARESSING THIS SONG WOULD BECOME LATER OR HOW FUNNY IT IS THAT SHE UNIRONICALLY QUOTED IT IN HER FIC. LEAVE HER ALONE. —*Editor*

was made of would never rise high enough to touch the wooden beams. The living room was dark, and the burning end of Cid's cigarette was the only source of the light save for the sporadic flashes of lightening that deigned to illuminate the inky room.

*Really should get some shut-eye* Cid berated himself, absently tapping some ash onto the hardwood floor.

Sleep, however, seemed virtually impossible given the magnitude of Barret's earthquake-caliber snores. Though Cid never claimed to be a quiet sleeper himself, he had to admit that the big man's snores were annoyingly impressive. He had no earthly idea how Vincent had managed to get to sleep when he was lying barely five feet away from the source of the snoring. Guy probably had an on/off switch or something. Cid sure wished he had one.

Grumbling unintelligible phrases to the hot darkness, he squirmed on the couch, trying to find a position in which his ass didn't end up sinking in between the cushions. Cid would have much rather crashed on the floor than the couch. It seemed that whenever he slept on a couch, he could never escape the lingering remnants of his own body heat on the material. It was annoying, to the say the least. Especially when the room had morphed into something resembling a sauna. The last thing he wanted was to be smothered by his own body heat.

Cid wiped the sweat off his forehead, snuffing out his cigarette in an ashtray Kyra had graciously provided him with. The smoke was giving him a headache, something that had never happened before. Cid never thought he'd see the day when smoke from his own cigarettes would cause him discomfort; the end of the world truly was near.

Thunder crashed outside like the boom of a Wutainese gong, and Cid suddenly had a silly image of the Thunder God Ramuh knocking on the window with his mighty thunder staff, asking to be let in because he was tired of being out in the damn rain. Crazy. Cid had the Ramuh summon materia sheathed in the Venus Gospel; the once-mighty Thunder God wasn't going anywhere.

Maybe it was a mixture of the rain pattering against the window and Barret's constant snoring, but within a few minutes, the ceiling began to dance and blur before Cid's hazy blue eyes. The shadows in the room grew thicker, more peaceful, like fluffy nighttime clouds. The Sandman was a-comin'. Cid was both scared and relieved.

*Please just let me sleep this one damn time* he prayed to whatever deity would listen. His eyes started to drift shut. *I'm so damn tired...*

Then the hissing began, blaring through Cid's head with the urgency of a siren in the night. Blood splattered his vision. A pair of glasses fell to the ground and shattered, glass

flying everywhere until warm crimson soaked every shard.

*~So much blood...has to be dead...~*

“Fuck!” Cid cursed, bolting upright so quickly that the room spun wildly around him. Gritting his teeth with rage and fear, he snatched the nearest object—a pillow—and flung it at the wall with a vengeance. The soft object struck the wall with a soft poofing sound before plummeting meekly to land in a nearby chair.

Cid covered his face with his hands, palms sliding roughly over days of unshaved stubble. His breathing was slightly ragged, and he wished he could plunge his fingers into his brain to wipe away those horrible images that arrived to haunt him every time he came close to sleeping. And that incessant hissing...

He was going insane.

Shakily, he swung his weary legs off the couch, wanting to feel the solidity of the carpet underneath the soles of his feet. The well-trodden fibers felt vaguely unsubstantial, much like the undulation of the waves, which appeared solid but would swallow you up in an instant. Cid would have much rather preferred the cold tangibility of wood or concrete beneath his feet, but the carpet would have to do for now.

He needed a cigarette to soothe his frazzled nerves, but the effort to grab the pack of smokes from the lampstand and fumble for his lighter simply wasn't present in his weary, trembling limbs. On the floor in front of him, Barret and Vincent slept on, blissfully oblivious to his emotional turmoil. He was thankful he hadn't awakened them with his vehement cry of frustration.

The roaring silence closed in around him like the embrace of ghosts in the darkness, trying to leech from his ears the endless hissing that haunted his every waking moment, that mocked him as surely as the rumbling thunder outside the window ridiculed him with its mighty laughter. Rain beat relentlessly on the glass, and a sudden flash of lightening threw his hunched-over shadow against the far wall, a clone constructed purely of darkness. Then the lightening was gone, taking Cid's shadow twin with it.

The pilot sagged back onto the couch, curling into a half-fetal position that he was sure looked vulnerable as hell and wasn't sure if he really cared at the moment. No one was awake to see him but the darkness and shadows. Though two of his closest friends were no more than five feet away from him, he felt estranged from their world of idyllic unconscious. For him, inner peace was a foreign concept, sleep an unattainable dream.

Dimly, Cid wondered how much more self-torture he could take before he snapped even worse than Reno had. He loathed to call it “self-torture,” though, simply because he honestly wasn't into causing himself pain. But as far as he could tell, there was nothing



other than his own unstable mind to blame for his plight.

Of course, he could always blame those “Hissers” for what had befallen him. Even days after their unseen assault, Cid could still remember the lacerating pain in his head, the terrifying sensation of being...filled, like too much clutter shoved into his head at one time. But worse than the pressure pounding through his skull was the sense of defilement as the demons tried to draw out of him more than he could give, drinking up thoughts and memories like leeches. Sucking away his strength, his being, his sanity, and leaving behind their venomous poison, a seed planted to fester until it obliterated everything that made him who he was.

Then came the terror. Then came the blood. The pair of glasses covered in dripping redness. Then came death.

In the air before him, Cid suddenly glimpsed Titus’ green eyes snapping open and that dark, raspy voice whispering. *~What do you fear, Cid Highwind?~*

Gasping more out of surprise than fear, Cid scrambled to the other end of the couch to escape the glare of the disembodied eyes, but they were no longer there. Only darkness dwelt in the place where Titus’ eyes had hovered seconds earlier.

“Shit,” Cid cursed with feeling, wiping the cold sweat from his high forehead. His hands were trembling. “I’m f\*\*\*ed up.”

The brief burst of adrenaline the visage had caused dissipated, leaving his limbs feeling weak and drained, as if some vampire had fed on him during those periods of dark reflection where he hovered between reality and dream, unable to discern which was the actual realm he belonged to. Cid laid his stubbled cheek against the back of the couch, material rough against his skin. What was happening to him? He was losing his marbles was what. Okay, so there was the problem. Now, what the hell was he going to do about it? He had thought Titus would know something about it, but now he would be lucky if Cloud even let him within twenty feet of the Running Man after the unexpected stunt Cid had pulled in the cellar.

*I didn't even think about it. Those eyes just...begged for me to kill him.....*

*~"Tell me, Cid Highwind. What is your greatest fear?"~*

Why, the death of a loved one, of course.

Naturally.

Gripping the arm of the couch for support, Cid rose unsteadily to his feet, staring down at the floor and trying to discern the locations of his two friends in the thick

darkness. He had no trouble finding Barret. The big man was sprawled on his back, loud snores issuing from his half-open mouth. Cid carefully stepped over him. Vincent was a bit harder to locate, as the man seemed to wear shadows and darkness like second skin. In the end, the only thing that betrayed the gunslinger's location was white shirt he had borrowed from Cloud, and Cid easily avoided stomping all over the slender man.

Sighing, Cid paused a moment to scratch the back of his head before proceeding down the hall towards Cloud's room.

\*\* \*\* \* \*\* \*\*

High Priest Ajax sat on the throne; a small dragon draped languidly around his narrow shoulders. Visages of open-mouthed, screaming faces carved out of obsidian adorned the gleaming surface of dark throne. Some prodigy of dark artistry had lovingly shaped every last detail of each terrified face, down to the crooked teeth on one face there or the tears of horror running down that face over there. Ajax himself didn't seem at all bothered by the ghastly piece of architecture; a smile played on his thin lips as he absently stroked the dark purple scales of the dragon. He wore nondescript black garments: loose pants and an open jacket that exposed his pale, thin chest. Either intentionally or on accident, the dragon raked its silver claws over the High Priest's bare chest. The smooth skin gave way under those razor-sharp nails, and blood ran in thin rivulets down to Ajax's stomach.

"Doesn't that hurt?" Cloud asked him.

Ajax's smile widened. "I like pain," he said simply, his slender, pale fingers caressing the neck of the dragon. The small, winged creature suddenly lifted its reptilian head to stare at Cloud, who was surprised to find its eyes shone a startling shade of aquamarine.

Cloud blinked, his mind slowly throwing off the cloak of sleep that had brought him such a distasteful nightmare. Reno was staring down at him, his aquamarine eyes identical to those of Ajax's dragon.

Cloud frowned at the Turk. "What are you doing here?" he tried to ask, but the only thing that emerged from his lips was an intelligible groan. "Urrrrrrrgh."

Reno lifted an auburn eyebrow, flicking his fiery ponytail back over his shoulder. "Speak English, Strife. I didn't understand a single word you just said."

Growling, Cloud rolled onto his left side, putting his back to the Turk with the hopes that if he ignored him, he would magically disappear. No such luck. Within a few seconds, he felt another body plop down onto the area he had just abandoned, and Cloud nearly rolled backwards into the depression Reno's body created in the mattress.

"Why don't you go sleep in your own bed?" Cloud snapped grumpily, rearranging his

limbs to compensate for Reno's added weight.

"Elena kicks and snores," Reno grumbled back, jerking half of the pillow out from under Cloud's head. "And Rude's hogging the only comfortable chair in the room."

"What time is it?" Cloud slurred, kicking Reno with the heel of his foot.

Reno kicked him back. "Me and Yuffie just got off of guard duty. Your shift doesn't start for fifteen minutes."

*Hurray. Fifteen more minutes of nightmares...*

And, he realized within the next second, fifteen minutes of Reno's constant squirming. Though he was fairly certain the Turk wasn't going to stab him in the back or shoot him in his sleep, Cloud was still uncomfortable about sharing a bed with *anyone*, especially an individual he had considered an enemy until a few days ago. Even now, the prospect of Reno truly being a friend was still up in the air...but Cloud was too tired to care. Sleep pressed heavily on his eyelids, and he readily gave into Somnus' touch, feeling the warm darkness of dreamless oblivion rising to embrace him.

Reno's elbow dug into his side, and Cloud jerked awake, beside himself with annoyance.

"Dammit, Reno!" he snarled, lifting himself up onto one elbow and looking over his shoulder to glare at the Turk. "Do you always wiggle this much in your sleep?"

"It's called 'getting comfortable,'" Reno corrected, voice muffled by the pillow.

Cloud sighed and sat up, wearily swinging his feet to the floor. "I really wish you would have chosen another place to get comfortable," he grouched, rubbing his face with his dry, chapped hands as he waited for the room to stop spinning.

"Your lazy ass needed to get up anyways," Reno muttered, snatching the entire pillow and hugging it to himself like a teddy bear.

Taking one last glance at the Turk, Cloud shook his head and rose to his feet, rubbing the small of his back to ease the knots of tension that seemed to be having a pow-wow at the base of his spine. He was only twenty-two years old, and here he was clutching at his achin' back like a man three times that age. Sighing again, he rotated his neck a couple of times, listening to the vertebrae crackle sleepily, just as displeased at being awakened from their slumber as Cloud was. He padded over to the window in only his socks, his customary pair of dark purple pants, and his untucked sleeveless shirt. Reaching up with one bare hand, he pulled back the curtain that he had lowered the previous night to blot out the flashes of fiery lightening that had insisted on disturbing his rest.

Outside, the world hovered precariously between night and day. Dark gray clouds still covered the sky like a thick winter cloak, but the rain had died down to a gentle drizzle. Shadowy streets and buildings rose to greet Cloud's eyes, each of them just as morbid and gloomy as the sky overhead. That was Junon for you: a city woven entirely of shadows with a small sprinkling of yellow lamplights to illuminate the darkness. If he concentrated hard enough, Cloud imagined that he could hear the ocean roaring in the distance, laughing and gloating at his monstrous tides, swollen with rainwater and awaiting the impending downpours with dark anticipation.

Cloud rubbed the back of his neck, still trying to shake off the lingering remnants of the Sandman's sleeping dust. The room seemed too quiet without the sounds of rain and thunder. Sad thing, but he had sort of gotten used to the world being in a perpetual state of thunderstorms.

"I choked down there," Cloud said quietly, still staring out at the depressing scenery.

"You sure did," Reno seconded. Apparently, he hadn't been even close to sleeping.

"I just couldn't look him in the eye," Cloud continued. "One minute he reminded me of Aeris, the next of Sephiroth. I never thought I'd meet a person who would make me think of two entirely different people at the same time. It was just too disconcerting for me."

He heard the rustling of bedclothes as Reno shifted position, rolling onto his back. "I'll level with you, Strife. At least you could stay down there. I had to leave."

Cloud frowned. "I ordered you to leave. It was no decision of yours."

Reno laughed bitterly. "You think I left just because you ordered me to?"

"No. I guess not."

"I left because I had to get the hell out of there before I lost it again. Just...being in the same room with her was making me crazy. If I hadn't left, I would have done something...bad."

Cloud turned, placing his elbows on the windowsill behind him and staring at the man who had taken over his bed. Reno was gazing up at the ceiling, arms folded underneath his head, flame red ponytail trailing on the bed next to him, where it blended in rather aesthetically with the brightly colored comforter.

"Can you tell me who that woman is?" Cloud asked unobtrusively. "If you want to, that is..."

"I don't want to," Reno said immediately. One of his hands suddenly dipped into the

pocket of his dark blue dress pants and, to Cloud's surprise, pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a small lighter.

"When did you start smoking again?" the blonde demanded.

Reno waited until he had filled his lungs with a healthy dosage of cancerous tar before responding, "I've been smoking since I was ten years old."

"Not lately, you haven't."

Reno glared at him. "I'm falling apart here, Strife. I need them to calm me down, okay? Humor a basket case, will ya?"

"Consider yourself humored," Cloud said with a shrug, pushing himself away from the window and proceeding over to the corner where he had thrown his boots the night before. Stooping down, he snatched them off the floor with one hand and crossed the room yet again to seat himself on the end of the bed, narrowly avoiding squashing Reno's feet.

"Hey, Strife?" the Turk suddenly asked, bed springs creaking as he rose into a sitting position.

Cloud was busy trying to wriggle his right foot into its matching boot. "What is it?"

"I gotta favor to ask of you."

"I dunno, Reno. It had better not be anything outrageous," Cloud warned.

"It's not," Reno replied, voice suddenly gone quiet. "It's just...if something happens to me, or I do something dumb, promise me you'll take care of Rude and Elena."

Cloud's hands froze at where they had been tucking the hem of his pants into his boot. He turned around and stared at the redheaded Turk, who only gazed back at him, face devoid of all emotion. "You can't be serious," Cloud said incredulously. "What are you thinking, Reno?"

The man rubbed his eyes with his free hand. "Don't make this harder than it already is, Cloud. I'm serious here."

"I know. That's what scares me."

Reno took a hasty drag of his cigarette, an annoyed expression marring the horrible stillness that had pervaded his face seconds before. "Look, I'm trying to do the responsible thing here. If something happens to me, I want to make sure my friends are taken care of."

Cloud suddenly turned back around and resumed putting his boots on. "Reno, you're

many things, but stupid isn't one of them. I thought you had more control over yourself than this," he said flatly.

"NORMALLY, I do," Reno declared hotly. "But the circumstances are different right now! I need someone who can be a leader for Rude and Elena if I can't do it. So, I was THINKING that YOU, Mr. Do-Gooder, would be up to par, but if you're gonna be an asshole about it, then just forget it!"

"You have my word."

That stopped Reno's angry tirade. "What?"

Cloud closed his blue eyes, massaging his temples with the tips of his fingers. "I promise you that no matter what happens, I'll take care of Rude and Elena for you."

"... Thanks."

"But one condition," Cloud added.

Mistrust flickered in Reno's eyes for a second, but then he shrugged. "Fair enough. Name it."

Cloud turned to stare at Reno, eyes somber. "Hang in there for as long as you can, Reno. Believe it not, your loss would be a great blow to all of us, not just Rude and Elena."

Reno snorted derisively, as if he didn't quite believe Cloud's seemingly sincere words, but he muttered, "Yeah, yeah, I understand. I promise that I'll try and be tough."

Cloud nodded. "Alright then. But one other thing?"

Reno lifted an eyebrow, expelling smoke through his nose at the same time.

"I think Vincent might want his gun back eventually."

"Huh?" Reno echoed, bewildered. He glanced down and saw the lower half of his white dress shirt gaping open over his waistband, exposing the white-blue metal of the Silver Rifle. "Hey, this thing saved my ass back in Kalm. You think Valentine will let me borrow it for a while? I lost my nightstick in a pile of shit, and I'm sorry to say that my trusty 9mm isn't as portable as this pansy-ass gun here."

Cloud shrugged. "I don't think Vincent will mind." Then he suddenly remembered something. "Oh yeah. I think I may have a weapon for you." He rose to his feet still clad in only one boot and walked with an uneven gait over to the bureau of drawers, reaching behind the piece of furniture to pull out a slim, golden rod.

"Tifa and Elena said that—what was her name again?—Fa-Li was using this as a

weapon when they captured her,” he explained, holding it out for Reno to take. “I’m not sure if you want to use it or not.”

*Since it belonged to HER...* he added silently.

Transferring his cigarette to the other hand, Reno stared at the weapon in Cloud’s hand, eyeing it as if the metal rod were a poisonous viper that wouldn’t hesitate to bite him if he wasn’t careful. Cloud watched a thousand indiscernible emotions float on the cold surface of those aquamarine eyes, there one moment and gone the next.

“So she was using this?” Reno muttered, finally reaching out to take the nightstick gingerly from Cloud’s grasp. “I’m the one that taught her how to use these things.”

“Really?” Cloud echoed, not really knowing what else to say.

Reno’s long, pale fingers danced over the bottom of the weapon, and Cloud jumped instinctively as two more segments seemed to appear out of nowhere, adding about a foot of perilous metal and escalating the intimidation factor the weapon brandished.

The skin on the bridge of Reno’s short nose crinkled in distaste as the glared at the nightstick. “This is more like a goddamn cattle prod,” he uttered, twirling the thing nimbly between his fingers. Cloud couldn’t help but be impressed; he probably would have dropped the thing and shocked the hell out of his foot by now.

With another brush of his fingers, Reno retracted the nightstick’s extra segments and looked up at Cloud. “I’ll use it,” he said firmly. “But I’m still keeping Valentine’s gun just in case. If I managed to drag that heavy-ass Death Penalty out to the Highwind, he can let me borrow his bloody water gun.”

“As long as Vincent says it okay,” Cloud said, plopping down on the edge of the bed and dragging his remaining boot closer to his new position. Reno lay back on the bed again, still examining the nightstick.

Just as Cloud was about to slide his foot into the worn leather footwear, Cid appeared in the open doorway of the bedroom, looking more disheveled than normal.

“Cid,” Cloud stated, setting his boot back down on the floor. “What’s wrong?”

The pilot wandered into the room, scratching the back of his neck, a habitual gesture that silently declared that he was in a state of anxiety. “Gotta talk to ya, kid,” he said gruffly.

Cloud nodded, wondering what he could do to put the pilot at ease. “Sure thing.”

Cid glared pointedly at Reno, dark blue eyes relaying a silent, forceful message.

Unfortunately, his efforts were wasted on the redheaded Turk, who only stared back at him before relenting slightly and rolling onto his side, back to Cid and Cloud. “Just pretend I’m not here,” he muttered, grabbing the pillow and cuddling it again.

Cid looked like he wanted to argue a bit more, but he sighed and instead turned his attention back to Cloud. “Kid, I’m gonna go ahead and tell ya this straight up, right to the point.”

All Cloud could do was nod.

Cid drew in a deep breath, and on the wings of his exhalation said, “I’m going back to Rocket Town.”

Cloud’s eyes widened. “What?”

Reno rolled over. “What?!”

Cid didn’t meet either of their surprised gazes, instead opting to trace an imaginary design on the carpet with the toe of his sock. “I can leave ya’ll the Highwind if you want, but...I just gotta go back. I’m no good to everyone staying here like I am.”

“Is that the only reason you’re going?” Cloud asked quietly, raising one of his hands to stop Reno from making an angry exclamation.

Meeting Cloud’s eyes for only a brief second before rubbing his face with his hands, Cid mumbled against the palms of his hands, “I wanna see my wife again.”

Cloud folded his bare arms across his chest and raised his eyes to the ceiling, as if his Mako-enhanced vision could see beyond the structure of wood and brick and pierce the heavens above. Behind him, he could feel Reno’s trembling restraint as he tried not to let loose a string of heated words. Surprisingly, Cloud could understand the Turk’s indignation. Reno and Cid were both in states of emotional trauma, and if Reno was going to stick around, the Turk sure as hell expected Cid to tough it out as well. But Cloud knew Cid, and was well aware that whatever had happened to him had to be very severe—severe enough to cause the pilot’s will of iron to shatter...

Lowering his gaze, Cloud found Cid staring at him with those new haunted eyes that he had borne in varying degrees ever since they had emerged from the cellar. But underneath the surface coat of dark weariness, he saw trust gleaming steadily in the azure depths. Though the pilot had come claiming that he was going to leave, the unspoken bond between the two friends dictated that the final decision rested in the leader’s hands. If Cloud said, “No, Cid, you’re staying here because we need you,” then Cid would remain, and if Cloud said, “Yes, Cid, you can go ahead and leave,” then Cid would go. Simple, but those were merely the two extremities. Dozens of compromises painted in varying shades



of gray dwelt in between the two absolutes.

Cloud nodded. "Fine, you can go, but we're coming with you."

"You are?" Cid echoed in surprise.

"We are?!" Reno exclaimed.

The swordsman wished there were some way he could glue the Turk's mouth shut for a few precious seconds. "Cid, it's not like we have any pressing matters here in Junon. Unless we result to more drastic measures, Titus won't talk until he feels like it. But I'm convinced he or Fa-Li will eventually come clean."

Cid stared deeply at Cloud, as if trying to see into his leader's head. "You're really gonna pack up and move everyone to Rocket Town just because I'm goin' crazy and need to run home?"

Cloud nodded seriously. "Unless you don't want us to go with you. We will, after all, be taking our prisoners with us. I can understand if you don't want Shera or Rocket Town in danger."

Shaking his head, Cid replied, "Don't worry about that. Here Kyra and Junon are in danger. No matter where we drag those two, danger will always be somethin' we gotta worry about." He sighed, broad shoulders sagging with unadulterated relief. "Thanks, kid, thanks so much for all this."

Cloud acknowledged his friend's heartfelt gratitude with a smile, knowing that the pilot wasn't one for dramatic displays of emotion. "It's no problem, Cid. I'd hate to lose you this late in the race. We should be ready to leave in a few hours."

"Right," Cid said with a firm nod, turning to leave. He stopped in the doorway, one hand resting on the frame. "Thanks again, Cloud. Just...thanks."

The AVALANCHE leader just grinned and shook his head. "Go on, Cid."

The pilot gave him a lopsided smile and waved once before exiting the room, calling over his shoulder as he went. "I'm goin' for a walk, then I'll pack my shit up."

"Will do," Cloud called back.

*That means I should get my crap together, too. Not that I have too much of it, though. And how the hell are we going to escort Titus and Fa-Li down to the landing strip without them escaping? I'll probably keep Vincent and Red close to Titus. Barret and Tifa can probably take care of—*

"Strife!" Reno suddenly exclaimed.

Cloud blinked, coming out of his pensive mode. He had almost forgotten the Turk was still lounging on his bed like he owned the place. “What is it?”

Reno puffed angrily on his cigarette and growled, “You mean I gotta pack ALL my shit up and be ready to go in a few hours?”

Cloud rolled his eyes. “It’s not like you have so much shit to pack up in the first place, Reno.”

The Turk blew a cloud of resentful smoke in his companion’s direction. “Hey, I still gotta wait in line to take a freakin’ shower. And then it’s my sacred mission to make sure Elena gets all her crap together. Do you have any IDEA how LONG she can take to put her goddamn make-up on? I swear that woman would forget her head if it wasn’t attached to her shoulders. And then—”

Forget glue. Staples were sounding good right about now.

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“Careful,” Kyra warned. “It’s hot.”

“I know, I know,” Yuffie replied, blowing on the liquid to cool it. Her exhalation was a bit too forceful, however, and some droplets of coffee splattered across the counter. “Oops.”

“Oops’ is right,” Kyra said with a tolerant smile, taking out a towel and wiping the bar counter. “Don’t worry, hon, I’ve seen much bigger spills.”

“Really? Like what?” Yuffie asked, grazing her lips over the surface of the coffee to test how hot it was. “A bunch of people spilling their coffees at once?”

“Small beans, that,” Kyra replied, pushing some of her auburn hair back from her eyes. “Some guys squabbled in here a couple of years back. One pulled a gun on the other one. I was mopping and scrubbing bloodstains for two hours after that.”

Yuffie’s gray eyes widened. “Oh my god! Did anyone die?”

“Unfortunately, no.”

“Reno gets into a lot of bar fights,” Yuffie added, dipping her finger into her coffee to ascertain its temperature. Her other method wasn’t working very well.

Kyra stared at her. “Whose blood do you think I was mopping up?”

Realization dawned on Yuffie. “RENO got into a fight in here?”

“Reno gets into fights everywhere. Seems like every time he comes here, something

gets broken or he leaves some mess behind for me to clean up. Now I've forbade him to set one foot into my restaurant unless Rude's with him."

Yuffie grinned. "Sucks to be Reno." She sipped her coffee. Not too hot. First instead of third-degree burns. What an improvement.

Shifting on the bar stool, Yuffie glanced around the empty restaurant while tasting her coffee gingerly. She and Kyra were alone in the hush of the early dawn. Normally, Yuffie found silence oppressive and uncomfortable, but here with friends to talk with and warm coffee trickling down her throat, the absence of "noise pollution" seemed rather... cozy. The perfect way to spend a rainy day, as far as she was concerned. Maybe if she tried real hard, she could ignore the fact that Titus and Fa-Li were still down in the cellar or "dungeon," as Yuffie had come to call it. She wondered if the two of them were hungry, but quickly banished the thought. She knew it was her companions' general opinion that she was way too attached to Titus and Fa-Li as it was; what would they say if Yuffie insisted on catering to their prisoners' needs?

"No offense, but is the restaurant always this empty?" Yuffie asked the young woman on the other side of the bar.

Kyra sighed and leaned her elbows on the counter, resting her chin on her hands. "No. I usually have regulars who come in every day, but with all this rain, no one even wants to venture outside. Business has been so slow that I even told the waiters and waitresses not to come in unless I call for them."

"I see," Yuffie said, then abruptly fell silent as she heard the heavy fall of footsteps on the stairs.

Cid Highwind emerged from the stairwell, looking bedraggled and tired. Dark bags hung under his midnight blue eyes, looking like smudges of black fingerpaint against the tanned skin. He had his blue flight jacket clutched absently in one hand, oblivious to the lonely sleeve that trailed on the carpeted floor as he trudged towards the bar.

"Hey Cid!" Yuffie greeted as cheerfully as she could manage. She briefly tossed around the idea of cracking some joke about how he went bonkers, but one look at the haunted look in his eyes told her that Cid might not appreciate her humor.

He wearily waved at her. "You gotta back door here?" he asked Kyra. "I wanna go for a walk or something, but not on the main roads."

"Sure," Kyra nodded, pointing to a doorway on the other side of the bar, the one that led to the bathrooms. "Right over there. It's the door next to the men's room. But...do you want an umbrella, if you're going out in the rain?"

Cid paused, as if the idea hadn't even occurred to him. "I guess so," he said with a shrug.

Kyra exited the bar area to open a door designed to blend in with the texture of the wall. After a few moments of fumbling around, she turned around brandishing a pinkish-purple umbrella with little ruffle-like extensions embellishing the rim. Yuffie hid a smile in her coffee cup as Cid made a sour face.

"Sorry I don't have anything more 'manly' for you," Kyra said with a grin, placing the girlish umbrella in Cid's outstretched hand.

The pilot eyed it with obvious distaste, but said, "Oh, hell. If it'll keep me dry... thanks."

"No problem," Kyra responded, heading back towards the bar area. Cid began to plod in the direction of the doorway Kyra had indicated earlier, boots scraping on the floor, purple umbrella looking far too lively against the melancholy aura that surrounded him.

"Bye, Cid," Yuffie called quietly.

Without turning around, he lifted a lead-heavy hand in a gesture of parting before his figure disappeared into the shadows, umbrella and all. Yuffie heaved a great sigh.

"Is he going to be alright?" Kyra asked in a low voice, amber eyes lingering on the doorway Cid had gone through.

"I hope so," Yuffie said softly. "He still won't tell us what happened to him. So far, only he and Titus seem to know anything about it."

Bewilderment clouded Kyra's eyes for a second. "Titus? Oh. Your prisoner, right? You know, it's sad that a man that good-looking is one of the bad guys." She sighed gloomily, expression glum. "There aren't many gorgeous men left who aren't rotten to the core. And by Shiva, that Titus has to be one of the best-looking men I've ever seen."

"I would have to agree with you," Yuffie seconded.

*Speaking of good-looking men though...*

"Can I have another cup of coffee?" she asked.

Kyra glanced at Yuffie's half-full mug. "But you haven't even finished yours yet."

Yuffie shook her head, tucking her hair behind her ears as a few strands flopped into her eyes. Now she was starting to remember why she had kept it short her entire adolescent life. "It's not for me. It's for Vinnie."

A slow smile lit Kyra's face. "Vinnie?"

Yuffie stared at the woman, unable to think of a reason for her sudden grin. "Yeah, you know, Vincent? The freaky red-eyed one that looks like a vampire? I was thinking that he might be awake already. Maybe he wants coffee."

Kyra was still grinning as she pulled a mug out from beneath the counter. "Oh! THAT Vincent. Your special friend."

Yuffie flushed and glared the amused woman with a dark glare. "VINNIE is so NOT my special friend! He's just...Vinnie."

"I'm sure he is," Kyra said soothingly as she filled the mug with steaming coffee and set it before Yuffie. "I hope he just likes plain black coffee."

"He'd better," Yuffie muttered as she climbed off the stool, balancing one mug in each hand. "Because I'm not giving him any of mine! Thanks, Kyra."

"Of course," the auburn-haired woman said, still smiling mysteriously as Yuffie concentrated on ascending the stairs without accidentally dumping scalding hot liquid all over herself. She shook her head.

*I don't care what Yuffie says. She's got in bad for that "Vinnie".*

Now that her source of companionship (and amusement) had departed, she examined the spotless countertops with a sigh. It was slow days like this that she actually wished for dirty dishes or something to keep her occupied. She hated having nothing to do. All she had to look forward to was when the next "guard shift" would end, and the two sentries designated to keep watch over the cellar door would come into the main room for coffee and a something to eat. Until then...it was just Kyra and silence.

She picked up her ever-present hand towel and started to fold and refold it absently. Maybe she should rearrange the tables just for the hell of it...

The front door of the restaurant suddenly swung open, the unlikely harmony of rain and thunder outside suddenly roaring through the room like a night bird flying. Startled, Kyra looked up, eyes widening when she saw what the tempest had blown into her restaurant.

If there were a competition for stunning male beauty, she figured it would be a toss-up between Titus of the dungeon and this new stranger. He had apparently been trekking around in the pouring rain for some time for his white garments were plastered wetly to his muscular body, clinging like a second skin. Raindrops glistened on his bare chest and belly, which were left exposed by the open, buttonless jacket that covered the rest of

his torso. Dark brown spikes stuck up in wild disarray from his head, but Kyra got the impression that he had meant for them to be that way. Ordered chaos. Even the rain had failed to flatten most of the rebellious strands of hair to his skull. A pair of dark forest green eyes sparkled amiably at her, and she was surprised at her ability to discern their color even from across the room.

“Hey there, Miss,” he greeted, voice deep with softer undertones that gave it a very melodious sound. He could have been a damn good singer with that voice.

Kyra realized that she had been staring and quickly tried to compensate for her rudeness. “I’m sorry! You startled me. Please come in!”

A smile curled the man’s lips. “Are you sure you want me to? I’m gonna get your floor all wet.”

Kyra waved her hand dismissively, averting her face at the same time. His beauty of his eyes was making her dizzy. “Don’t worry about it. It’s just water; it’ll dry.”

“Thanks for your kindness,” the man said, gracefully shutting door behind him with one foot. He wore no shoes. What the heck was he doing parading around the streets bare-footed?

The man walked across the restaurant with unnatural grace, feet making no sound at all on the well-worn carpet. His eerie green eyes remained steadily riveted on the auburn-haired woman, a secretive smile still playing on his lips. A scar marred the left side of his face, but instead of detracting from his good looks, it only gave his face an extra boost of character that many men could use, in Kyra’s opinion.

“What can I get for you today?” she asked as he seated himself easily on the bar stool directly in front of her.

The man casually leaned his elbows on the countertop, the cuffs of his sopping wet jacket peeling back to reveal wrists that looked strangely delicate next to his large, strong-looking hands. “Just coffee,” he answered.

That made Kyra grin. “Just coffee, stranger? Nothing harder?”

His mysterious smile widened. “Only coffee. Alcohol is bad for you.”

“Amen to that,” Kyra said, pouring more coffee into a clean mug. At this rate, she would need to make another pot fairly soon. “You take anything in your coffee?”

“No, just plain black,” the man answered.

Kyra shrugged and set the mug before him. “There you go.”

The man gave her another one of those charming smiles. “Thanks, Miss.”

“No problem. I’m glad you came in today. Business has been really slow, to say the very least.”

“Rain doesn’t bother me at all,” the man said, sipping his drink while his dark green eyes roved around the restaurant, studying everything intently.

*Apparently not* Kyra thought dryly, eyeing his soggy clothes. Small pools of water had already formed where his elbows pressed against the countertop, and she heard a suspicious dripping noise on the other side of the bar. Looked like she was going to have to bust out the mop again, but, hey, she HAD been looking for something to do. Besides, it wasn’t like she could refuse the man entrance just because he was a little on the damp side.

Studying the man before her, Kyra realized that he was younger than she had first assumed. No telltale signs of age marked his face, and the wild hair only strengthened the impression of youthful vitality. Some strands fell prey to gravity and hung against his cheekbones while in the back, the hair was long enough to curl slightly at the nape of his neck. The lashes around his green eyes were thick and lush; his skin had a healthy tan to it. All in all, a stunningly attractive young man. Yet...Kyra sensed there was something... off about him.

“If you don’t mind my asking,” she spoke up. “Are you new to Junon?”

The man stared at her with a strange sort of detached intensity, as if he could turn up the heat of his stare in a single instant if he so wished. “Why do you think I’m not from around here?” he queried. Kyra hated people who answered questions with more questions.

“I don’t know. I think I would have remembered a face like yours.”

His eyes narrowed, and she realized he must think she spoke of his scar rather than his attractive features. “I’m just passing through,” he replied, taking another drink of his coffee.

“Passing through? Where are you from, then?”

Full lips curved into another mysterious smile. “From a land far, far away.”

Kyra frowned, not knowing quite what to make of this stranger. *I don’t think it would be rude if I asked his name, though...*

“By the way...” she started to say, but the man’s eyes suddenly distracted her.

They seemed a lot closer than they had been a second ago; deep and drowning green

pools hovered inches from her face. Now that she was staring right into them, she noticed that the man had black flecks scattered throughout the forest green iris. That was odd. Kyra had seen black eyes flecked with green before, and green eyes flecked with darker green, but never deep green shot through with obsidian black. They were beautiful eyes, beautiful as tigers were beautiful—eyes she could just fall into...

The man suddenly waved strong, callused fingers in front of her face. "Hey!"

Kyra blinked, awakening from her stupor with a start. "Hm? I'm sorry...I must have zoned out."

That smirk was back, lightly teasing her from over the rim of the coffee cup. "You were staring at me," he said bluntly.

A blush darkened the woman's pale cheeks. "Was I? Sorry about that. I...had a question for you, but...I seem to have forgotten it..."

*What was I going to ask him?*

The man shrugged his broad shoulders. "If you forgot it so quickly, it must have not been that important."

"No," Kyra said uncertainly. "I guess not..."

"Nice place you have here," the man commented, looking around the restaurant again. "You the owner?"

The change of subject was so abrupt that it took Kyra a few precious seconds to regain her mental footing. "Oh, yeah, I'm the owner. Who else would be crazy enough to come to work on a day like this?"

"It looks a lot bigger on the outside." The stranger looked at her out of the corner of one eye. "I'll bet the cellars run deep in this place."

Kyra frowned. "You're a bit odd, if you don't mind my saying so."

To her surprise, the man laughed, a sound that was strangely playful. "I don't mind at all. I've been called a lot worse than 'odd' in my lifetime."

An auburn eyebrow quirked slightly. "You don't say?"

The mysterious stranger winked at her, sexy as hell. "I do say." Throwing back his head, he downed the rest of his coffee in one gulp, setting the mug on the countertop and sliding nimbly off the barstool. "Well, Miss, it's been fun, but I'd best be on my way."

"You're going out into the rain again?"



The man reached into the saturated pockets of his white pants and produced the appropriate amount of gil, tossing the coins onto the counter with soft jingling sounds. “A little rain never hurt anyone,” he said, gracing her with one last smile before turning to walk away.

Rude entered the restaurant area just in time to see a man in white walking across the room towards the entrance. The tall Turk paused in the threshold, body going completely still. The graceful movements of the stranger’s limbs rang a familiar cord of danger in Rude’s mind. His bare feet made not a sound on the carpet, and the mere motion of walking was so graceful it seemed he flowed from one step to the other. Even the swing of his broad shoulders underneath that soaking wet jacket appeared perfectly in sync with the rest of his body. A perfect order. Either that or bottled chaos just waiting to explode into violence.

Leaving the doorway, Rude strode over to the bar area where Kyra was watching the stranger with semi-appreciative eyes. The man opened the door and vanished into the rain without so much as a glance behind him.

Together, Rude and Kyra waited until the silence had settled into a more comfortable lull. “Gangster,” they declared at the same time.

“Though I’ve never seen a gangster half as graceful or gorgeous,” Kyra added wistfully.

Rude took a seat at the bar, leaning his elbows on the counter. “I’m fairly certain that grace comes from practicing some form of martial arts.”

“And his heart-stoppingly beautiful appearance?” Kyra said with a grin.

Rude shrugged, looking disinterested. “Good genetics, I’m guessing.”

“DAMN good genetics,” Kyra seconded, laughing. “What can I get for you, Rude?”

“Beet.”

A smile lit the woman’s face. “That’s my Rude alright. Good thing, too, because I was running low on coffee.”

Rude removed his sunglasses and rubbed his tired eyes as she set the dark green bottle in front of him. “That man didn’t drink any booze?”

Kyra shook her head. “No, just coffee.”

“Odd.” Rude opened the bottle and took a swig, relishing the cold, bitter liquid as it coursed down his throat, the foul taste of it wonderfully familiar. For him, booze always tasted better in Junon. It wasn’t because the brands were different or the bartenders

any more skilled; the flavor of the alcohol simply seemed to suit his palate better in this desolate city where he had spent his miserable childhood. Quite an ironic thing, if he thought about it long enough. The memories of his hometown were bitter, but the alcohol was good. Praise Shiva for the small things.

Rude lowered his bottle to find Kyra staring at him with a contemplative expression on her pretty face. He lifted an eyebrow. “What’s wrong?”

Kyra blinked, but the thoughtful gleam refused to abandon the golden depths of her eyes. “Nothing. It’s just good to see you again, Rude. You should come down to Junon more often.”

Rude smiled at her. “I know, but...”

“You don’t want to,” Kyra finished when his voice trailed off. “Why not?”

“Bad memories,” Rude said quietly, taking another drink in an attempt to extricate himself from the grip of her steady gaze.

“We all have bad memories of Junon, Rude,” Kyra said sternly. “You’re not the only one, you know. Out of the old gang, you and I are probably the best off right now.”

Rude began to peel the label off his beer bottle, an old habit that he found exceedingly hard to break. Bartenders usually hated him for leaving messes on their countertops. “I found your armory,” he said flatly.

“Collection, not armory,” Kyra corrected sharply. “I don’t traffic weapons anymore.”

“What’s the price on the Remington?” Rude asked, as if he hadn’t heard her previous statement.

Kyra lifted a suspicious eyebrow. “Oh? Since when does the infamous Rude of the Turks use a shotgun in battle?”

“First time for everything.”

“But never for that. You’re too dedicated to your little martial arts/boxing thing. Maybe you could take on that man with the good genetics.”

Rude frowned, remembering the man’s unnatural grace, like danger in a bottle. “No, I would rather not, actually.”

Kyra shrugged, either not noting his preoccupation or simply declining to acknowledge it. “Either way, I think martial arts is a more honorable way to go than firearms.”

Rude pulled back the lapel of his suit jacket to expose his standard issue 9mm secured

in his shoulder holster. “Honorable, yes, but safer, no.”

Kyra was still a bit standoffish. “That, of course, is a matter of opinion.”

Rude let his jacket fall back into place. “Trafficking firearms is a dirty business, Kyra.”

Anger flashed in the woman’s eyes. “Hey, I don’t need you babysitting me, Rude! This restaurant may have been built with ‘dirty money,’ but I run a respectable business now.”

Rude’s bright green eyes met hers, full of sincere concern. “Then why all the firearms?”

The woman sighed, unable to stay angry when faced with those eyes. “Sometimes... some of the old gang comes around, needing...’help.’ Call it selfish, but I have no intention of going back to the slums and getting tangled up in all their messy drug deals. So I give them the only help I have left to offer, aside from my continuing friendship.” Her voice was sad. “Some of our friends weren’t as lucky as us, Rude.”

The tall Turk reached out and patted the back of her small hand. “I know. How is everyone doing? I saw Jamil the last time I came to Junon, but what about the others? Has anyone else managed to get out of the slums?”

A bit of light returned to Kyra’s face. “Cedric did.”

Rude looked up in surprise. “Cedric Takai?”

Kyra smiled at his shock. “Sure did. You never would have thought, right? He was so quiet and everything. He’s still paying off a few old debts, but he’s gonna get out, I can tell. He works for the silversmith a couple of blocks over. Makes a sweet set of throwing knives.”

The normally stoic man made no effort to stop the smile that came to his face. “That’s damn good to hear. About him getting out, I mean.”

Kyra nodded. “Damn straight it is. And you?”

“Me?”

“How’s your new ‘gang’?” Kyra asked, making quotation marks with her fingers. “Have you found new bar buddies up there in Midgar?”

Rude shook his head. “Just Reno and sometimes Reeve. Elena will go with us to bars if we ask her, but she doesn’t drink much.”

“She’s a good woman,” Kyra said quietly, watching as Rude studied his beer bottle, wiping droplets of condensation off the green glass before they could roll down and get the counter wet.

“You know, that Elena really likes you, Rude,” Kyra told him softly, knowing her tall friend had a tendency to balk and clam up when hit with too much emotionally shocking information at once. He was never one for discussing feelings.

Rude continued to poke at the bottle, noting how the drops of liquid slowly dripping down of the sides of the bottle resembled the raindrops outside. “Really?” he muttered. “I never noticed.”

“...You did, too, Rude.”

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*China all the way to New York  
I can feel the distance getting close  
You're right next to me  
But I need an airplane  
I can feel the DISTANCE as you breathe  
Sometimes I think you want me to touch you  
How can I when you build a great WALL around you  
In your eyes I saw a future together  
You just look away in the distance*

*“China”*

—Tori Amos—

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Vincent lay awake in the darkness, listening to the light sound of the rain drizzling against the window. Beside him, Barret snored in the blissful embrace of complete and total sleep. Without even opening his eyes, Vincent knew that Cid had long since abandoned his makeshift bed on the couch. He felt none of the teeming, crackling aura that he had come to associate with the emotionally disturbed Cid. Somewhere down the hall, he could hear Cloud and Reno’s raised voices as they bickered about some trivial matter.

All was well.

Rolling onto his side, Vincent brought his knees up in a half-fetal position, pondering whether or not he should try and get a bit more rest. Albeit the floor wasn’t the most optimal place of rest, but when compared to the soft cushiony embrace of a silk-lined coffin set amidst the silence of a catacomb, Vincent preferred the thin, scratchy carpet and the discordant symphony of Barret’s thunderous snores. He sighed and adjusted the lumpy pillow that provided his head with only minimal comfort. Both he and Barret had forfeited more luxurious pillows, instead allowing Cid to use the best one out of the three cushions Kyra had offered them. Vincent figured if the pilot couldn’t have his sanity, he

might as well have a comfortable pillow.

Quiet footsteps treading softly over the floorboards suddenly snapped Vincent out of his period of lazy reflection. His red eyes opened wide, piercing the blackness with flawless ease as his claw began to edge closer to where the Outsider was tucked underneath his pillow.

His precautionary measures proved groundless, however, when Yuffie Kisaragi suddenly poked her head around the corner, squinting in the darkness as she tried to pinpoint the locations of the living room's occupants.

Her eyes fell on Vincent, her pupils oversized orbs of darkness amidst seas of stormy gray. "Oh, you're awake, Vinnie," she stated, stepping around the corner and into the living room area. She had two mugs in her hands.

Vincent propped himself up on one elbow, pushing his hair away from his face. "Is something wrong, Yuffie?"

The young ninja shook her head and plopped gracefully down on the floor in front of him, folding her slender legs underneath her with the ease of long practice. "Nothing's wrong. I just thought, you know, you might want coffee or something since your shift is coming up." She laughed softly, gray eyes glittering with mirth even in the darkness. "Me and Reno were practically falling asleep on our feet during our shift. Some guards we made." She held out one of the mugs to him. "Here you go. I hope you like it plain and nasty."

Vincent sat up, silently touched by her kindness but bewildered as to why she chose to direct such effort towards him. "That's fine. Thank you, Yuffie," he said politely, taking the mug from her fingers.

"You're welcome," Yuffie said cheerily, speaking in a semi-low tone so as not to wake Barret with their conversation. Vincent leaned his back against the leg of a nearby chair, drawing his knees up to his chest in a position that would have looked more vulnerable if seen on another man. His pale skin, midnight black hair, and ruby red eyes dimmed any impression of vulnerability he might have exuded.

"Cid went for a walk," Yuffie announced, probably just for conversation's sake.

"I know," Vincent replied, holding his coffee mug close to his face just to feel the comforting warmth of the steam against his skin.

"I hope he's going to be okay," Yuffie continued, sipping her coffee and watching him intently.

Vincent said, "All we can hope for right now is that his sanity doesn't deteriorate to a point where it obliterates his personality."

A sour expression came to Yuffie's face. "Geez, you're so morbid, Vinnie."

Vincent only shrugged, broad shoulders straining against the cloth of his borrowed shirt. It was then that he realized his cape and other gothic-ish garments had been missing for days. He had hardly noticed the absence of the clothes he used to be so attached to.

Yuffie shifted position, uncoiling her legs and sitting on her backside. The movement put her closer to Vincent, close enough that he could feel the gentle warmth emanating from her body. It made him want to move away and edge closer at the same time. Ambivalence. Vincent hated being ambivalent; it was a state of mind that would more than likely get him killed one day, but that was the dominant effect Yuffie seemed to have on his mentality. She made him hesitate, question things, doubt the dark convictions that he had abided by for years...

Turning his head, he studied the girl seated barely two feet away from him. She was staring blankly into her coffee cup, eyes distant and pensive. Such a state had become rather common for Yuffie as of late, which Vincent was unhappy to see. It was quite obvious something lurked in the depths of her mind, an irking thought that turned her mouth down at the corners and dimmed the light in her eyes.

"What are you thinking, Yuffie?" Vincent asked shrewdly, surprising himself. He usually didn't make such inquiries, but it bothered him to see her expression so dark and closed-off.

She looked up calmly, as if she had been aware of his attentiveness all along. "I really need to talk to Titus alone," she whispered, eyes large and strangely endearing. But what Vincent saw shifting underneath the stormy seas wasn't so appealing. Vincent, along with his four older sisters, had run from assassins when he was just a boy. He had been an agent of comfortable rank during his time with the Turks. And finally, he had served as a guinea pig for Hojo.

Vincent Valentine knew fear when he saw it. He knew the taste of it, the smell of it, and that was the emotion prevalent in the depths of Yuffie's eyes. She was sincerely desperate to talk with the man formally known as the Running Man. But why?

Vincent found the untouched contents of his coffee cup a more interesting study, thankful for the shadows that hid his deep frown. "Why are you telling me this, Yuffie? If you wish to speak with Titus, then you should discuss it with Cloud."

Yuffie hesitated, then said, "Vincent, could you...ask Cloud for me? I mean, put in good word or something?"

Questioning garnet eyes flicked in her direction, and Yuffie hastened to explain. “Cloud respects you a hell of a lot more than he does me. I know that if I tried to get him to let me talk to Titus by myself, he wouldn’t listen to a word I said. But he’d listen to you, Vincent.”

“And why is that?”

Yuffie watched his dark profile fixedly. “Because he likes you. Cloud has a lot of respect for you, Vincent. He values your opinion a lot more than he values mine...or anyone else’s for that matter.”

“A pity in that,” Vincent commented.

Yuffie frowned. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Cloud pegs me for the most sound of mind amongst us. That’s utterly false, not to mention frightening.”

His self-deprecating words brought a scowl to Yuffie’s face. “You’re so frustrating, Vincent. After all this time, it’s like you still can’t accept that we’re your friends.”

A hushed rustling of garments dispersed through the intimate darkness as Vincent shifted to face her, eyes red as fresh blood. “I don’t see how that’s possible. Anyone who finds comfort in my presence has to be lacking intelligence-wise.”

Yuffie dropped her gaze, but not before he saw the flash of hurt that flickered across her face. “Oh,” she muttered. “I see.”

Uncomfortable silence filled the air in between them, as abysmal as the unseen rift that separated their two mentalities. Vincent watched the undulating motion of the coffee in his mug, its glittering surface illuminated as lightening flashed outside the window, followed by the distant call of yet more approaching thunder. He was sorry he had hurt Yuffie’s feelings, but...he just didn’t understand the girl.

When he first had the pleasure of making her thieving acquaintance a year ago, Yuffie had appeared a rather simple girl, cheerful and mischievous. Yet, even then, Vincent had perceived the faint darkness of maturity shifting underneath her laughing eyes. But such was typical of adolescent girls on the verge of emerging into womanhood, so he had paid no heed to the realm of infinite possibilities that danced within those eyes.

But somehow within the past few days the gentle stirrings within those eyes had turned into tidal waves, drowning out the girl in Yuffie and allowing the hidden, shadow-wrapped woman within to emerge at choice moments. Despite her many adventures, there was much of life Yuffie had yet to experience, and Vincent suddenly felt horribly

angry that Yuffie was being coerced to bloom amidst adversity, amidst darkness, amidst thunderstorms and lightning. It seemed a heinous crime to force upon a human being.

A small hand suddenly reached out, gently covering the claw that gripped the coffee mug so tightly it most likely the kitchenware would have shattered in a few seconds. Her fingers were warm. Vincent's eyes widened, but he didn't dare turn to look at the young woman next to him.

"We're your friends, Vincent," Yuffie said firmly. "We like you...I like you."

Vincent's heart clenched painfully. "That is..."

'Unfortunate,' he started to say, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. His frightening relief, his muted elation, was simply too strong to allow such words.

Yuffie's fingers lightly gripped his wrist, fingertips grazing the sensitized metal like the touch of a phantom. Vincent heard her swallow. "Um...when I realized that you and the others were coming to save me, I was...really happy, Vincent. I was glad...that you were there."

Vincent said nothing, watching her short, blunt fingernails tap the metal of his claw nervously. Her fingers looked so pale against the tarnished gold.

She continued, "Sometimes—this may sound silly—but, I just want to...touch you, Vincent. Like...hug you or something...only I don't...because I know...that you don't like to be touched..."

"You're right," Vincent said hollowly. "Being touched by others sometimes...displeases me."

Her hand tightened around his metallic wrist as he felt her lean her forehead against his shoulder, hair tickling his arm even through the material of his shirt. Vincent didn't stiffen; he felt as if all the energy had been drained from his limbs in order to keep up with the echoing pounding of his immortal heart.

"Do you like us, Vincent?" Yuffie suddenly asked. "Are you our friend as well?"

The man felt his head nod. "Yes, I'm your friend."

"And...you like us?"

"Yes...I like you...all." As he said it, he realized it was true. He liked being with Yuffie, with AVALANCHE, and that was why he wanted to leave. He liked everyone far more than was healthy. Some of them more than others.

Yuffie drew back abruptly, as if realizing the intimacy of their position. Good little



girls didn't cuddle up to men twice their age in the embrace of darkness, where no one could monitor their actions. She did, however, place a small hand on Vincent's shoulder, her fingers unavoidably tangling with wayward locks of his dark hair.

Though Vincent didn't look at her, he could hear the smile in her voice and knew that it was for him, and it was genuine. "No matter what you say, Vincent, I don't think you're a monster."

Vincent looked at her shining eyes in surprise. The words were reminiscent of those she spoke at the hotel, when they had shared a bed for one night.

Yuffie smiled at him, patting his shoulder and absently brushing some of his hair back from his face before rising to her feet. "Better drink your coffee before it gets cold," she warned him good-naturedly, waving once before striding out of the living room and disappearing into the lightening shadows of the hall.

Dawn was near, or as much of dawn as the overcast skies would permit.

Alone again, Vincent stared at the reflective surface of his still untouched coffee, trying with all his might to combat the maelstrom of emotions that raged within him. Yuffie was fortunate that optimism was a basic trait of her personality; she could always wrap that around herself like a cloak, a corner of her own soul in which she could rest from the darker, more taxing emotions that plagued her. Vincent wasn't so lucky. All he seemed to know was torment and more torment.

Sighing internally, Vincent gazed out the window at the gray skies. The rain had slowed down to a lulling drizzle, but the silence now seemed thicker, more choking, especially since Barret had finally stopped snoring.

"How long have you been awake?" Vincent asked.

The muscular bulk lying on the floor shifted like a bear awakening from a fitful slumber. Barret sat up and leaned his broad back against the couch Cid had abandoned. "Long enough," the big man answered gruffly, brown eyes uncomfortably keen. "Jus' what do you think you're doin'?"

Vincent tore his eyes away from the window and resumed studying his coffee cup. "I'm doing nothing. At least, nothing that I can control."

Barret scratched his bearded face with his normal hand, still staring at Vincent. "You know she only seventeen, don't ya?"

"I am well aware of that fact. Trust me, Barret, if I knew what was going on, I would tell you."

“Oh?” Barret sounded suspicious. “Would you? I don’t think ya would.”

Vincent shrugged. “Think what you wish.”

“You’re confused,” Barret stated, sounding surprised even at his own words. “Man, Vincent, you sure is messed up in the head.”

“I think I’ll have to agree with you on that account.”

“Weeelll,” Barret drawled, folding his arms across his chest. “Since you both seemed all mixed up, I guess I’ll leave you and Yuffie to your own thangs, but you hurt the brat, and I’ll cap your ass so fast you won’t know what the hell hit ya.”

Vincent smiled slightly. “Of course.” He and Barret didn’t see eye to eye on many things, but he knew when the ex-leader of AVALANCHE made an idle, jesting threat. Barret would never dream of shooting Vincent. One, they were friends. Two, Vincent would shoot back.

The two men sat in comfortable silence in the wee hours of the morning until the sound of a door opening down the hall disrupted the quietude. A pair of footsteps came padding down the hall, and a moment later, Cloud appeared, still clad in only one boot. The other was clutched in his now-gloved hand.

Cloud blinked in surprise at finding two pairs of alert eyes staring up at him. “Good, you’re both awake. Start getting your stuff together. We’re—”

“—MOVING OUT!!” Reno cried, rushing by just in time to steal Cloud’s thunder before striding down the hall towards his room, laughing at his own wiliness as he went.

~owari ch. 33

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Author’s note:

Okay, an odd place to end a chapter, I know, but if I didn’t stop myself, I would have just kept going... and going...and going. I really liked writing this chapter. Can you tell I like character development more than plot development? ^^ Now to tackle the next chapter, which is a battle ::sighs::

Moira, so...how did I do? ^\_~

Next Chapter:

Trial by Fire

# Chapter Thirty-Four

## *Trial by Fire*

*“You can have the sword when you pry it from my cold, dead fingers.” —Cloud Strife*



CEDRIC TAKAI IS PROPERTY OF NOVOK, WINNER OF THE 3333 COUNTER-FIC PRIZE! CONGRATULATIONS! ^\_^

A/N: I know it's been forever since I updated so I'll go ahead and give you a little recap of past events from recent chapters:

AVALANCHE and Turks are currently hiding out in Junon with one of Rude's old friends, Kyra. They've managed to capture Titus and Fa-Li and imprison both of them down in the basement of Kyra's restaurant. Cloud and the others tried to extract information from Titus, but their efforts yielded no results. As far as their search for Reeve goes, they are now at a total standstill until Titus decides to talk. In the meantime, Cid has been mentally traumatized by his mind-rape by the Hissers. He decides that he's no use to the team in such an unbalanced state, and informs Cloud that he's headed back to Rocket Town. Cloud understands, and says that rest of the team will go with Cid. So everyone prepares to "move out," but they have no clue that out in Junon, the Master's bounty hunters, Jezebel and Montana, have their eyes set on killing Titus and Fa-Li. These two will stop at nothing to complete their mission and have no qualms about cutting down those that stand in their way...

And another note: Most readers didn't realize that the man who visited Kyra's restaurant (the hottie with the bare feet and soaking wet clothes ^\_^) was none other than Montana, the male bounty hunter who holds a personal grudge against Titus. Montana

is also the one who burned down the Final Heaven bar in an attempt to kill the wily Reno. Well...I think that's pretty much all you need to know. Hope you enjoy this chapter, even though it is another oh-so-loathed battle scene. :P

\* \* \* \* \*

"You're leaving?" Kyra exclaimed, looking dismayed. "But how can you just come and go so soon?"

Cloud shrugged his broad shoulders. "It's time for us to move on. But thank you for giving us shelter, Kyra. Us and our prisoners."

Kyra waved her hand dismissively, as if such things were normal occurrences in her life. "Don't worry about it. I got to see my friend Rude again, so it was all worth it."

Cloud grinned slightly, readjusting his Crystal Bangle as it started to slide down his arm. "I'm glad you think so, but we'll probably end up being a danger to you if we remain here any longer."

Sighing, the auburn-haired woman folded her arms across her chest and leaned against the side of the counter, staring at Cloud with her amber eyes. "I grew up in the Junon slums, Cloud. It's not like danger is anything new to me."

Cloud was just opening his mouth to respond to her statement when Barret suddenly trudged down the stairs, dragging his pack behind him like a child with its prized blankie.

"We ready to leave yet?" the big man asked, dropping his bag on the floor next to Cloud's. Both nylon packs looked limp and underfed; though Reno and Red had tried their best to save as many possessions as possible from the untimely fire that devoured the Final Heaven bar, there had naturally been limitations on how much one man and one quadruped could carry. As a result, everyone basically only had a few changes of clothes to get by on until they managed to go shopping (fat chance).

"Almost," Cloud responded to Barret's question, hopping easily onto a barstool and glancing around the room.

Aside from Barret, Kyra, and himself, the only other comrades present in the room were Red, Cait, Vincent and Yuffie. Their punctuality was due to the fact that not a single one of them had anything to pack. Kyra had lent Yuffie a few garments to put in a small knapsack, which was currently serving as an impromptu pillow for the young ninja as she sagged on the table in apparent exhaustion even though Cloud had seen her up and chirping not even an hour ago. Vincent sat in the chair beside her, looking calm and unflappable, as per usual. Red lounged on floor near Vincent's feet, seemingly sleep

except for the gentle swishing of his tail. Cait had decided it was his sacred mission to keep Yuffie awake by thwapping her on the head with his megaphone whenever her breathing started to get deep and even. Twice Yuffie's patented Fist O'Rage had punched him off his moogles, and still he kept coming back for more.

"The hell is everyone?" Barret demanded grumpily as he sat down heavily in the chair across from Vincent. The piece of furniture squealed in protest.

Cloud shrugged. "If you tell over ten exhausted people that they have to have their asses ready in a couple of hours or they get left behind to walk all the way to Rocket Town, there's usually more fighting than there is packing."

"There's a line for the shower," Yuffie mumbled, eyes still closed. "I had to fight Reno for first dibs. I won, too!"

"How did you manage that?" Kyra asked with a smile.

A devious grin split Yuffie's face, even more disconcerting since her eyes were closed. "I gave him a shot in the pills."

Barret winced, shifting in his seat. Cloud resisted the urge to cross his legs. Everyone else was unfazed.

"What a dishonorable method of combat," Red muttered.

"Oh, stifle it, Red," Yuffie snapped.

Everyone managed to maintain amusing small talk as they waited for the rest of the crew to plod down the stairs one by weary one. First Cid, an ever-present cigarette between his lips. Then came Tifa, followed by Rude, Elena, and at long last, Reno, his hair still soaking wet from his hasty shower.

"I can't believe you guys are leaving," Kyra moaned, putting her hands on her slender hips. "It's going to be so damn DULL here without you."

Tifa smiled at the woman. "Don't worry. We'll come by and visit when this is all over."

"As long as we get free food!" Cait added, before giving Yuffie another bonk on the head with his megaphone.

Kyra still looked upset. "But just how do you guys propose to get down to the runway? It's not a short drive, mind you, and you have...let's see...one, two, three, four... THIRTEEN people to transport including your prisoners! I hope you're not planning on walking. I have an idea." She said this massive tumult of words in one single breath. Cloud

was suitably impressed.

“What idea?” he asked dubiously.

“You can take my van,” the woman suggested. “If, of course, you don’t mind rubbing shoulders with your prisoners. I’d be happy to drive you down there.”

“You have a restaurant to run,” Rude interrupted.

Kyra looked at him incredulously. “Gimme a break, Rude. No one’s coming in during this weather, and I want to see that you all make it out of here safely.”

Cloud shook his spiky head. “No, we can’t endanger you like that. We have two dangerous bounty hunters as prisoners, and there are other assassins after us as well.”

Glowering at the swordsman, Kyra opened her mouth to argue when Rude suddenly cut in quietly, “Kyra, you just escaped from a life of shoot-outs and murder. Wouldn’t it be counterproductive to willingly jump back in?”

Kyra glared at her friend with anger still simmering in her amber eyes, but Cloud could tell Rude’s soft-spoken words of logic had defeated her vehement persistence. “Fine!” she snapped. “But if I can’t drive you, someone else I trust is going to. I’m calling my friend Cedric. HE’LL drive your stubborn asses to the runway.”

\*\* \*\*

Kyra’s friend, Cedric Takai, turned out to be much younger than Tifa had expected. He entered the restaurant and threw back the hood of his black rain slicker, revealing a head of short, unruly brown hair and a youthful face. But though he didn’t appear much older than Yuffie, his green eyes bore that soul-searching shrewdness similar to the gleam in both Kyra and Rude’s eyes. A quiet, unthreatening air swathed his figure, but Tifa was fairly certain that he could turn dangerous in an instant if the need presented itself. Quiet without being shy. Unthreatening without being meek. It took a person with a lot of inner strength to develop such qualities.

Rude immediately strode over and shook the young man’s hand, not all fazed by the dampness of the newcomer’s slender fingers. “Cedric, it’s good to see you again,” he said, and Tifa was surprised at the deep sincerity in the normally stoic Turk’s voice.

Cedric nodded. “I could say the same for you, Rude. It’s been years since I’ve seen you last.”

“You’ve gotten taller,” Rude commented.

“Growth spurt,” Cedric said by way of explanation, a faint smile on his lips. He

peered around Rude at the bar area. "How are you, Kyra?"

The woman smiled. "Just fine, hon. Thanks for coming down on such short notice."

The green-eyed man shrugged. "Not much business in this rain anyways. The boss didn't have a problem with letting me come down. I hear I'll be drivin' the bus."

Kyra sighed tolerantly. "VAN, not a bus."

A small smile came to Cedric's lips, but he didn't say anything. Tifa had a feeling it was a running joke between the two.

"Cedric, this is Reno, commander of the Turks," Rude announced formally, stepping back and gesturing towards Reno with one hand.

If Reno was surprised at the sudden introduction, he didn't show it. He had been in the middle of slipping on his suit jacket when Rude first spoke, but when Cedric's calm gaze turned his way, he finished putting his arm through the remaining sleeve and strode forward to shake the young man's hand. Reno, surprisingly enough, had no witty comment to offer as a first impression. The two men merely nodded to each other.

Rude continued, "And this is Cloud Strife, leader of AVALANCHE."

Cloud had to slide off his stool and cross the entire room to shake Cedric's hand. He nodded to the young man and said, "Thank you for coming down."

Cedric stared at him. "No problem."

Cloud lifted an eyebrow. "What is it?"

Frowning, Cedric replied unobtrusively, "There was so much hype over AVALANCHE a year ago. Everyone made such a big deal about you, and no offense, but I was expecting someone a little taller."

Snickers spread throughout the room. Cloud only shrugged casually, scratching the back of his head and unconsciously standing a little straighter.

Reno laughed. "No dice, Strife. Even that Chia pet hair of yours can't help you now."

"I don't know," Barret said jokingly. "I ain't seen no Chia pet grow THAT big."

"Everyone's a critic," Cloud sighed dismally.

More laughter erupted, and though Tifa felt bad finding humor at Cloud's expense, she needed to laugh wholeheartedly for once. No more forced smiles or hollow laughter. Often, in dire times such as these, she found it necessary to remind herself that in the end, her friends were still...her friends.

*Chia pet hair and all* she thought fondly, staring at Cloud's comically sour face. She smiled, sharing a personal joke with herself.

Cedric looked apologetic. "I'm sorry, Mr. Strife. I didn't mean to insult you."

Cloud waved a gloved hand dismissively. "Don't worry about it. I've always been short. You get used to being the butt of jokes after a while." He glanced around the room. "Well, I guess we'd better get going. Not much use delaying it any longer."

Cloud sent Reno, Elena, and Cedric out to pack up the van. Tifa experienced a brief moment of dread when she thought that Reno might put up a fight, but to everyone's surprise, he obeyed without a word. It was strange, but Reno and Cloud seemed to be getting along a little better as of late. Now, wasn't *that* uplifting!

Getting everyone's things packed up was the easy thing. However, packing up their two prisoners was a different story. Cedric drove the van out to the front of the restaurant, and Tifa and the rest had to act as an armed guard to escort Titus and Fa-Li out of the basement and to the van. Their progress went smoothly; neither of the prisoners put up a fight. But Tifa noticed that Fa-Li's eyes kept darting nervously around, probably searching for her ex-husband and fearing the prospect of facing him again. Fortunately, Reno was mysteriously absent when they ushered the two prisoners into the back of the van, and he magically reappeared once everyone else was filing in. Fa-Li ended up pressed against one end of the van with Reno on the other. With the long seat and a bunch of people between the two ex-lovers, Tifa's nerves were placated.

They had to wait a few more minutes while Rude said his good-bye to Kyra. The tall Turk hugged the woman and kissed her cheek (much to Elena's consternation), climbed into the front seat of the van beside Cedric, and then they were finally off. Kyra stood in the restaurant's entrance, waving good-bye until the van disappeared into the pouring rain.

Tifa sat quietly in between Elena and Reno, her hands folded in her lap and her mind trying its best to ignore the discomforts of riding in the back of the van with eleven other people. The heat from so many combined bodies was stifling, and she found herself taking deep, measured breaths to avoid feeling like she was about to suffocate. She, Elena, and Reno had been the three lucky humans (Red XIII didn't count) to be given the opportunity to sit on the floor of the van, their backs resting against the van's rear double doors. Every time Cedric drove over a pothole, Tifa could feel the doors rattling dangerously behind her. She swallowed hard. It would definitely put a damper on their trip if the doors flew open, and she went flying back onto the street behind her.

The van hit an overzealous speed bump, and the doors creaked so loudly that Tifa and Elena both leaned forward fearfully. Reno stayed reclining against the doors, seemingly



unconcerned.

“Stupid doors are gonna fly open and spill us out onto the pavement,” Elena muttered, breaking the weary silence that had settled over the group.

Tifa agreed wholeheartedly, but Reno spoke up, “Quit complaining, Laney. I’d rather be running around in the rain than dying of suffocation back here.” The redhead dug into his pocket, pulling out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. Tifa looked at the ominous objects and began to feel faint just *thinking* of what inhaling second hand smoke would be like in such a confined space.

“Turk!” Barret yelled. “You light one of those up, and I’m gonna ram that lighter up yer ass!”

Reno sneered at him. “You’re all the way across the goddamn van. I’d like you see you get your big, bulky butt over here.”

Barret’s brown eyes bulged with anger. “You little shit!” He leapt to his feet and promptly smacked his head on the top of the van. Cursing, he plopped back down onto the seat, and Vincent let out muffled grunt.

“Oops, sorry, Vince. Was that yer hand?”

“Yes,” Vincent replied, flexing his fingers.

Reno put a cigarette in his mouth and flicked his lighter.

Cid glowered menacingly at the Turk. “Don’t even think about it. If I can’t light up, then neither can you!”

Reno rolled his aquamarine eyes in exasperation, but he didn’t make a move to light the cigarette. “Once again, I would like to bring to your attention the fact that you’re way the f\*\*\* over there, and I’m way the f\*\*\* over here. In other words, your threats don’t mean jack shit to me.”

“Reno, Cid, cool it,” Cloud snapped.

Cid scowled. Reno flicked his lighter obnoxiously, this time prompting an annoyed outburst from half the van’s occupants. Yuffie got so overexcited that she accidentally kicked Red in the ribcage, which spurred another angry argument. Cait jumped in, and soon everyone was bitching at each other without end.

Tifa sighed and looked at Elena, who in turn stared back at her. The two women were the only ones not yelling, with the exception of Vincent, who was trying to keep a very pissed-off Yuffie from leaping to the other side of the van to strangle Cait.

“So what do you think is worse,” Elena asked Tifa sourly. “This, or riding in the buggy?”

“I think they’re both different rungs of Hell,” the brunette grumbled, raising her knees up to her chest and folding her arms across them. She groaned and closed her eyes, remaining in the same position until the van finally rumbled to a halt. Immediately, all the noise in the back died down, as if someone had flicked a switch. The following silence was deafening after so much angry chatter.

The doors at Tifa’s back suddenly flew open, and Elena would have tumbled right onto the wet pavement if Rude hadn’t caught her.

“You alright?” he asked the female Turk, who only stared up at him with wide brown eyes, her mind apparently not registering how close she had come to munching the asphalt.

“Man, Rude,” Reno chided. “Warn us before you do that. I almost fell out.”

“*You* almost fell out?” Elena exclaimed as Rude helped her out of the van.

Tifa tugged nervously on the hem of her miniskirt, wondering if there was any way she would be able to whirl and slide out of the van without flashing someone. After a moment’s hesitation, she decided that there wasn’t, and she would just have to make the action as quick and least humiliating as possible.

Taking a deep breath, she spun on her backside and hopped out of the van in one swift motion. She was actually starting to think that the worst anyone had seen was a long line of thigh when she caught Reno grinning at her.

“I flashed?” she asked warily.

“You flashed,” he confirmed.

A tinge of red colored her cheeks, and she yanked her skirt down some more. “Because someone packed me nothing but minis and tank tops when they left the bar,” she grumbled.

“Hey, the bar was on fire,” Reno protested. “It wasn’t like I had a lot of time to deliberate. You’re lucky I packed your panties.”

“Thanks,” Tifa mumbled. She never thought she’d see the day when she’d stand underneath a stormy sky, getting pounded by the pouring rain and discussing underwear with Reno.

Someone jostled her back, and she turned to find Cloud close behind her. “We’re going to unload the prisoners,” he whispered, cutting his eyes briefly towards Reno.

Of course, the Turk didn't miss the exchange. "You got something to say to me, Strife?" he demanded.

"We're going to escort the prisoners to the elevator," Cloud said in a regular tone of voice. "Why don't you and Tifa go check and make sure it's functioning properly?"

Reno glared at him. "All you had to do was ask. No need for the 'whisper, whisper, nudge, nudge' crap."

That said, he stalked off, and Tifa had to run a few steps to put herself beside him. She knew Cloud had wanted her to take Reno off so he didn't have to be exposed to Fa-Li's presence any more than was necessary. He was treating Reno like a walking time bomb, and Tifa thought there was good reason for his actions, but she also believed that Reno had a bit more control over himself than everyone was assuming.

Tifa looked dubiously at the elevator as they made their way towards it. "Is this thing going to hold thirteen people?"

Reno shoved his hands in the pockets of his dark blue slacks. "If it doesn't, then we're screwed."

"Great," Tifa said, stepping tentatively onto the metal surface. She thought she heard it creak beneath her, and it took some effort not to wince.

Reno took a flying leap onto the elevator, and the whole thing shook. Tifa let out a startled yip and clung to the railing, squeezing the metal bar tightly and praying the thing didn't break and spill her into the ocean below.

Noting her discomfort, Reno put an arm around her shoulders and smiled soothingly. "Don't worry, honey. This thing is meant to send loads of heavy machinery up to the runway. It's not going to break just because my skinny ass was stomping on it."

*But what about when everyone else piles on?* Tifa thought to herself, but decided not to voice her morbid prediction of how many violent deaths awaited them if the elevator suddenly gave out.

It took a while for everyone to squeeze onto the elevator, and during the entire time, Tifa maintained her deathgrip on the railing, chanting the words, "It's not going to break. It's not going to break" over and over in her head. She had never had a fear of heights, but now it seemed that such a phobia was beginning to take root in her mind. And once she found herself crushed in between Reno and Vincent, she decided claustrophobia would probably be coming along from the ride.

After what seemed to be an eternity, Rude called, "Everybody on?"

A chorus of grumbled “yes”s issued from the dissatisfied bunch, but Tifa focused all her efforts on drawing a breath. Vincent’s hair was nice to look at, but she had to keep her head lolled back in order to avoid dragging some of the ebony strands up her nose.

“All necessary body limbs on board the elevator?” Cait quipped, then let out a cry of surprise as someone—presumably Yuffie—gave his moogles a good, stiff kick.

There was the sound of a switch being thrown, and then the elevator gave a violent shudder, like a frightened child awakening from a horrendous nightmare. Tifa felt the elevator’s gears grinding and squealing, straining underneath the weight of so many people. For a single, heartless moment, she was completely convinced that the entire thing wasn’t going to hold, but then, slowly but surely, the elevator began to ascend towards the runway, inch by reluctant inch.

“This thing looked a lot bigger when there weren’t so many damned people on it,” Reno muttered from behind her. They were pressed so close together his breath fluttered a few select strands of her hair.

Tifa didn’t reply, but she agreed wholeheartedly.

“Cloud, I really hope that’s your sword poking me and not something else,” Yuffie suddenly said.

“Idiot, Spike ain’t even NEAR you!” Barret snapped.

“Well, I can’t see! Here I am pressed against the railing, Vinnie’s standing on my foot, and I’m practically sitting on a goddamn moogles!”

“Don’t damn my moogles!”

“Someone’s breath smells.”

“No, I think someone cut the cheese again.”

“Dammit, Titus, move over! You’re invading my personal space!”

“.....”

“Elena, get off my tail.”

“Oops! Sorry, Red!”

“Are we there yet?”

“Shut up!” Reno roared, and Tifa cringed away from him, leaning her upper torso over the railing. She was pleasantly surprised to find the air was more plentiful and much cooler away from all the cramped bodies, and she would have spent a few more moments

savoring the crispness of it when Reno suddenly jerked her back towards them.

“Whoa, sister,” he warned. “Don’t dangle over the railing like that unless you want to be sliced in half when this thing finally gets up to that damn runway.”

“But I can’t breathe,” she murmured.

“Just hold on, Tifa,” Vincent urged calmly. “We’re almost there.”

Vincent spoke truly, for as soon as the words were out of his mouth, the elevator suddenly shuddered to a gentle stop. Tifa and Reno were both positioned so that they had an unobstructed view of the runway, and it was with great relief that Tifa greeted the sight of the Highwind hovering obediently in the rain-filled air, braving the barrage of raindrops and the incessant roar of thunder above it.

But unfortunately, the Highwind wasn’t the only thing waiting for them on the runway.

At the base of the airship stood two figures, one male and one female. Both of their appearances were striking enough that even from this distance, Tifa had no trouble discerning the majority of their features. The man was tall with long, well-muscled limbs hidden in loose, billowing white garments that gave the initial impression of an angelic entity, but the gleam in his dark green eyes and the angry scar that ran down his left cheek—there was nothing angelic about those. He stood with his hands shoved in his pockets and a smirk on his handsome face. Glancing downwards, Tifa saw that oddly enough, the man’s feet were bare, and she immediately pinned him as a martial artist. Some of the more seasoned fighters preferred having their limbs free and unfettered during battle, and apparently this man was one of them. Tifa made a mental note to watch him closely.

His female companion was all sensuous curves accented by clinging black pants, a pale blue tank top, and knee-high brown leather boots. She would have been absolutely breathtaking had it not been for the severe, cruel expression that even her full lips and flowing brown hair couldn’t compensate for. Her only other flaw might have been that her arms seemed overly muscular when compared with the rest of her solid, but still feminine, figure, but once Tifa saw the weapon the woman carried, she knew that all those muscles were absolutely necessary. The woman had a huge scythe braced against her trapezius, balancing it with those corded arms in the same fashion that Cid sometimes held his spear outside of battle. It was one of the largest weapons Tifa had ever seen. The blade alone appeared over three feet long and looked wickedly sharp, though how sharp Tifa wasn’t eager to find out.

“Off the elevator,” Cloud suddenly uttered, hand gripping the hilt of the Ultima

Weapon, but not pulling it from its sheathe just yet. “Fan out across the runway, but stay away from the edges.”

The two figures made no move to attack as Tifa and the others flooded off the crammed elevator, spreading out across the end of the runway. The area was easily fifty feet wide—more than enough space to accommodate eleven fighters and two prisoners—but still Tifa’s heart thudded loudly in her chest no matter how she urged it to be still. She tried to calm herself, to allow her mind to slip into cold battle mode, but it just wasn’t happening.

Tifa found herself on the left side of the runway, close to Rude, Titus, and Yuffie. In the back of her mind, she vaguely registered the fact that Titus had come off the elevator as well, standing amongst them even though he had no means of attacking or defending himself. Tifa wasn’t sure how she felt about that. Humanized villains only made for more emotional conflicts, as she had learned in the past.

The scythe-bearing woman stepped forward, a gust of wind sending her long brown hair fluttering about her slender figure. “Members of AVALANCHE and the Turks,” she greeted in a voice that bore the heavy accent of the Midgar slums. “I am Jezebel, and my partner and I have come for Titus and Fa-Li. You are not our targets so why don’t you just step aside?”

Cloud rebelliously stepped forward, eyes cold. “I think you’re the ones that need to step aside. You’re standing between us and our Airship.”

Jezebel smiled unkindly. “And you are standing between us and our targets. I will not lie to you, Cloud Strife. Eventually, we will kill you, but for today we will let you and your friends go free out of the kindness our hearts.”

Cid snorted. He had the Venus Gospel in his hands but hadn’t raised it yet. “I can see in your eyes that there ain’t nothin’ kind ‘bout you. I’d rather throw this shit down now instead of later.”

“You said it, foo!” Barret seconded.

The look in Jezebel’s deep brown eyes was scornful. “I’ve heard many things about AVALANCHE, but no one ever said that they were fools as well.”

“You’re blocking our escape route,” Cloud snapped. “I think you need to reevaluate who are the foolish ones in his situation.” With one graceful motion, he pulled the Ultima Weapon free of its sheathe, its faintly luminescent white metal shimmering with anticipation.

Jezebel’s eyes followed the movement of the blade. “So this is the Ultima Weapon,”

she commented. “High Priest Ajax is extremely interested in this sword. He told me to try and bring it back to him if at all possible.”

Cloud lifted the sword in front of him as his feet slid into the customary battle stance. “You can have the sword when you pry it from my cold, dead fingers.”

Jezebel laughed, a deceptively sweet sound. “Oh, I like you. No wonder you’re the one they call leader.”

“Get out of our way,” Cloud deadpanned. Behind him, Cid and Barret readied their weapons, positioning themselves to defend the helpless Fa-Li if worse came to worst.

Jezebel saw this and frowned. “Why do you defend your prisoners?”

“Because they can’t defend themselves,” Cloud replied.

Again, the woman laughed, but it was bitter this time. “By Shiva, you ARE fool. At least ONE of your prisoners is perfectly capable of defending himself even if he had all his limbs bound and broken. Isn’t that right, Titus?”

“That is true,” Titus replied calmly.

Out of the corner of her eye, Tifa glanced at him dubiously. Mythril-reinforced handcuffs bound his hands, they had stripped him of all his armor (one measly Bolt Armlet), and he had no weapons on his person. Sure, he still had his feet, but unless he knew a martial arts style that focused on powerful footwork, Tifa seriously doubted the bounty hunter’s ability to hold his own when it came to an actual battle.

“I’m going to give you one last chance,” Jezebel said, voice hardening. “Hand over Titus and Fa-Li, or we’re going to have to get serious here.”

“Then hurry up!” Reno suddenly snapped, striding forward to stand next to Cloud, a familiar nightstick of tarnished gold clutched in his gloved hand. “We’ve been serious all along, sister.”

The two leaders had spoken. That was everyone else’s cue to ready themselves for battle. Taking a deep breath, Tifa raised her fists and fell into a battle-ready stance. All around her, weapons were coming out, fists coming up. Titus tensed, sliding his feet wider apart and hunkering lower to the ground in some kind of defensive position.

Jezebel sighed, though what flashed through her cold brown eyes wasn’t disappointment, but a wintry eagerness, a dark lust for battle. A small smile came to her lips as she curled her gloved fingers around the shaft of the scythe, lifting it off her shoulders as if it weighed nothing. Everyone stiffened, the scent of dread thickening in the battle-charged air. Tifa had never seen anyone use a scythe as a battle weapon, and this

unknown factor gave birth to a thick and choking uncertainty. But Jezebel didn't move to attack, only stood there with her scythe raised above her head, a smile on her full lips.

The man behind her, silent until now, suddenly smirked and launched himself straight into the air. The minute his bare feet left the ground, Tifa knew they were in trouble. She had seen many graceful martial artists in the past, but this man made all the others seem like lumbering elephants in comparison. His white garments billowed about his lean form as he twisted once in the air, and, still grinning, lashed the suddenly heavy air with one bare foot. Sparks blossomed in the wake of his foot like a swarm of fireflies, and then a massive storm of white-hot fire sailed in their direction, flames roaring with sinister hunger. Heat blasted Tifa's body, beating against her skin like a dozen fire ants set loose on her flesh.

She had time for only one thought. *To call fire without materia...that's impossible!*

"Move!" Cloud cried.

At the sound of his voice, Tifa flung her body to the left, away from the approaching flames. She vaguely saw Titus tackling Yuffie and shielding the girl's body with his own as they rolled across the rough concrete. Heedless of the stinging scrapes she received on her arms and legs, Tifa kept rolling away from the blistering heat until she struck something warm and solid: Rude.

Lurching to her knees as fast as her spinning vision would permit, Tifa saw that she, Rude, Titus, and Yuffie were separated from the rest of their friends by a wall of fire that seemed to sprout straight from the concrete itself, burning ceaselessly. Another impossible feat. That man—that martial artist—could call fire without a magic incantation OR the aid of materia. And the fire he called could burn in places where no fire would ever be able to burn...

*No...it can't be!*

Tifa felt her heart beating out of control as she watched the flames dancing and contorting of their own accord. "Rude," she whispered. "That fighting style—is that...?"

"I hope not, Tifa," the Turk whispered back. "For all our sakes."

*Rude sees it too...*

Yuffie's voice suddenly came from somewhere off to Tifa's left, high and shrill. "Get offa me, Titus! You're squashing the Conformer!"

Quickly, Tifa leapt to her feet, raising her fists once again, for all the good they would do against the incredible power she had just witnessed. Rude remained crouched on the



ground, his gun clutched in one large hand.

The man who wielded the fire walked casually towards them, a smile playing on his lips, hands shoved in the pockets of his baggy white pants. The wind tore at his spiky brown hair, sending some of the longer strands flying into his eyes, deep green wells in which flames danced eternally. He looked very pleased with himself. Jezebel was nowhere to be seen.

Tifa stood her ground, though something deep inside her wanted to run. The unnatural wall of fire flanked her right side, and beyond it, she could only assume that her remaining friends were battling Jezebel, judging from the sounds that fought to be heard over the roar of the flames. Rude knelt slightly behind her, gun held at the ready. Further beyond him were Titus and Yuffie, sprawled dangerously close to the edge of the runway. Titus crouched on all fours over Yuffie in a position that looked vaguely obscene, but he had all of her body completely shielded. However, the awkward stance also hindered the movement of Yuffie's limbs, much to the ninja's consternation.

"Titus! Move!" she cried, eyes on the approaching man. "We're gonna get burnt to a crisp!"

The dark-haired man smiled. "Don't worry about it, Yuffie Kisaragi. Titus knows that as long as he sticks close to you, I can't fry him. You're still such a sly bastard, Titus."

Titus didn't reply, only stared fearlessly at the man.

The man stopped about ten feet away from their group, a darkly fond look crossing his face as he looked at Titus. "It's been a year, Titus. One entire year. Man, how time flies."

"I see your scar has healed nicely," Titus deadpanned.

Anger flashed briefly across the man's face before it was quickly contained. "You know," he said casually, "this wasn't our original plan. No, Jezebel wanted us to whittle away at your numbers and destroy your morale before moving in for the kill. I WAS going to take out that pretty, red-haired lady at the restaurant, but someone had to show up and ruin my fun."

He looked pointedly at Rude, who only stared back at the man impassively, face inanimate and eyes hidden behind his dark sunglasses. But Tifa detected a fine trembling in his shoulders and knew that he was furious—furious that the enemy had lurked right under their own roof, and he had failed to realize it. Tifa understood completely; she would have been absolutely livid if she were in Rude's position.

"C'mon, Titus," the man urged in a light, jesting tone, as if the two were old friends

instead of what looked to be sworn enemies. “Why don’t you and I go at it one more time? I’ve been waiting a long time for this day.” He took a menacing step forward, a smile still on his face though his eyes held a dark cruelty, a deep-rooted sadism akin to what Tifa had seen in Jezebel’s eyes. And the focus of that hungry darkness was the immobilized, handcuffed form of Titus who, despite what the man said, looked as if he were trying to protect Yuffie rather than save his own skin.

*I can’t let this happen* Tifa thought. *He’s our prisoner. If he weren’t in handcuffs right now, he might be able to defend himself, but...*

Scrambling past Rude, Tifa stepped in front of the prone forms of Titus and Yuffie, blocking them from view. “Don’t come any closer,” she said coldly. “Titus is under my protection.”

The dark-haired man stopped, staring at her as if she had just appeared out of nowhere. “You?” he asked incredulously.

Steeling herself, Tifa stated, “If you are a true martial artist, you will honor my claim. To get to him, you’ll have to go through ME first!”

“Tifa, no!” Yuffie whispered fiercely.

The man looked annoyed, but a certain gleam flickered in his eyes, as if she were a dog who had done a remotely interesting trick. “You’ve got to be kidding me,” he growled. “State your name and style.”

She balled her hands into fists. “Tifa Serenity Lockhart of the Zangan Ryu.”

“ZANGAN Ryu?” the man echoed with a condescending sneer. “Don’t make me laugh. How can a silly woman who practices an outdated family style expect to beat me?”

The mockery in his voice made Tifa’s blood boil, but she willed herself to remain calm. “You didn’t give me your name. As your challenger, it is my right to know who I face.”

The man’s green eyes narrowed, suddenly brimming with a dark fire that gave them a faint glow akin to Mako luminescence. Tifa held her breath, muscles rigid and face emotionless. Honesty was highly valued between martial artists of any style, and if this man refused to give her his name, the transgression would be unforgivable.

However, after what seemed like an eternity, the man answered in a low voice, “Hiei Montana<sup>6</sup> of the Shido no Hi Ryu.”

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<sup>6</sup> I know, given my recent Yu Yu Hakusho obsession, you probably think that I got this name from Hiei, but actually I got it from Mt. Hiei in Japan. I thought what name would sound good with “Montana” and I ended up with Montana...mont...mountain... Mt. Hiei!” ^\_^

Tifa's heart skipped a beat as she heard those four dreaded Wutainese words drop from his lips. *Just like I thought. He uses the Dawn's Fire Style. Good God, I thought everyone who knew this style was dead.*

"Dawn's Fire!" she heard Yuffie gasp.

"Tifa!" Rude exclaimed.

She ignored them both. "Very well, Hiei Montana, if you wish to fight someone, then you shall fight another martial artist. You shall fight ME!"

"I don't have time for this," Montana said with a weary sigh. "I'm impressed that you all seem to be familiar with my fighting style, but a battle with you would be nothing but slaughter."

"If you take me or my fighting style lightly, you're going to regret it," Tifa seethed, raising her fists in front of her face, the razor-sharp metal of the Premium Heart a shimmering design against the deep red and black of her glove.

Montana stared at her. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Deadly," Tifa said flatly, and she meant it.

The dark flames within Montana's deep green eyes leapt and contorted, and suddenly Tifa felt another wave of blistering heat strike her. Only this new assailant didn't come in the form of a roaring firestorm. Instead, it lashed and buffeted her like a hot, scalding wind, invisible to the eye but undeniable in its presence. It burned her lungs like poisonous smoke, crackled against her skin like wildfire. The air suddenly smelled of sulfur and brimstone.

The air in front of her shimmered as if in the grips of a massive swelling of heat, but she still heard Montana's words, thick and pulsing with power. "My power is a blessing from Fire God Ifrit himself. You in your wildest dreams could never conceive of defeating me."

"Doesn't matter," Tifa gasped, fighting to keep her voice steady. "Titus is under my protection, and you're not getting to him unless you go through me first!"

Montana sighed, and his power swooped back into him. "So be it. I swear by my honor that Titus will remain unharmed until you are defeated."

"And the others as well."

Montana smiled slyly. "They weren't part of the deal, but I'd be willing to throw them in for a small price."

“Name it,” she said immediately.

His smile widened into a satisfied grin. “Your life. I fight for keeps, Tifa Lockhart. I do not just defeat my opponents; I kill them. Give me your life, and I’ll spare theirs.”

“Fine,” she said.

“No, Tifa!” Yuffie cried again.

“Don’t do this,” Rude uttered. Only Titus remained silent.

Their words fell on deaf ears. At that moment, all Tifa knew was Montana. Her brown eyes roved over his slender, well-muscled limbs, watching for any indication that he was about to attack. All of Tifa’s past opponents had usually borne some telltale indication that betrayed their intentions a split second before they executed the action itself. Tifa clearly remembered Zangan training her for hours on end, trying to break her from the habit of shifting her weight to her right foot before attacking, as it signified the beginning of her attack and was painfully obvious to a skilled opponent with well-trained eyes.

In the end, Tifa had managed to shake herself of the nasty habit, and she still prided herself for accomplishing such a task. She thought herself a more than decent fighter, but... but if she was so powerful, then why was her heart racing as she stared into Montana’s green eyes? Why did sweat pour down her face in rivulets, eagerly taking the place of the rain that had stopped without Tifa realizing it? Montana stood before her, hands casually shoved in his pockets and a devil-may-care smile playing on his lips. No raised fists, no battle stance, no sign whatsoever that he was (as far as Tifa knew) the heir of the Shido no Hi Ryu, a martial arts style that had supposedly been dead for centuries.

Then, without warning, Montana suddenly leapt into motion, dancing—there was no other word for the massive upheaval of graceful motion that animated his limbs—to his left, towards the flames that still burned defiantly on the concrete. Tifa automatically started moving in the opposite direction, trying to keep a safe distance between the two of them, but then she stopped dead in her tracks, realizing that he was trying to set her up with her back to the edge of the runway so that one well-placed attack would send her flying into the ocean below. According to the stories she had heard about the heirs of the Shido no Hi Ryu, Tifa had no doubt such an attack would have been easy for Montana.

*He’ll try and close the distance between us she thought to herself. I have to attack first!*

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Rude making a run for the Highwind. Yuffie, at Titus’ insistence, followed only a few steps behind, and Tifa felt a great rush of relief that at least they were going to be alright. On the other side of the flames, she knew that Jezebel had probably engaged her other friends in combat, and she could only send out a brief prayer that their battle prowess wouldn’t fail them.

Tifa launched herself forward, booted feet flying across the concrete. Montana came to a halt, and Tifa threw a powerful punch with her right hand, aimed on shattering every bone in his face. The man dodged it with lazy ease, spinning so that Tifa went flying right past him, suffering more from wounded pride than anything else. She felt his bare foot connect with her back, making several of her vertebrae crackle in disharmony. The force of the blow lifted her into the air for a few seconds before she came to a stumbling halt, her lower back a mass of writhing agony. The blow Montana gave her didn't just hurt, it *burned*, as if someone had shoved a torch against her bare skin.

The familiar sensation of ants crawling over her body returned, and Tifa lurched to her feet and ran for all she was worth, going straight and then diving to the right just as another wave of unnatural fire crashed down behind her, hungry tendrils of flame reaching for her legs. Tifa rolled and was on her feet in an instant, heedless of the bleeding scrapes now adorning her knees.

She whirled around, already lifting her hands in preparation of another attack. Montana suddenly came leaping over his own flame wall, all billowing white clothes and powerful muscles. By the time his feet contacted the ground, Tifa was on him, concentrating all her power into one kick. Faster than lightening, faster than anything Tifa had ever known, Montana batted her leg aside with his own foot and punched her in the stomach.

All the air left Tifa's lungs in a great burning whoosh, and she felt her body swing forward, her cheek brushing the sleeve of Montana's white jacket. The scent of him, youthful and masculine, reached her nose, and it was only then, with her body completely wrapped around Montana's fist, that she felt the true extent of his power. It coursed through his veins like liquid fire, originating from an unnatural yet holy essence sheathed deep in his body. It was ghastly. It was great. And it was very much inhuman.

*Fire God...Ifrit.*

A spark suddenly ignited itself where Montana's fist was pressed against Tifa's bare stomach, and the woman suddenly realized why Montana left his feet, hands, and chest bare, and why the jacket could be easily removed in the heat of battle. Montana's power wasn't just inside him, it was on him, and all around him. It sang in his blood, and zinged its way across his very flesh. Therefore, the more contact his bare skin made with his opponent, the better.

The smell of burning flesh assaulted Tifa's nostrils a second before she felt the Holy Fire of Ifrit blossom right on her stomach. For a second, she felt like Montana's punch had injured more than just her body; she felt as if he had made contact with her spirit, and was in the process of forcing it from her body with a wave of rolling fire. Blinding pain seared

her mind, and then she felt herself streaming through the air like a rag doll, sparks dancing like energetic fireflies to mark her flight. She caught a glimpse of Montana through the swarm of fire, and she saw the smug grin on his handsome face, his fist still hanging in the air, frozen in the position that had been her undoing.

Darkness swallowed her vision a second before she felt the jarring impact of her body slamming into the concrete. The added pain was too much for her wounded spirit to handle, and she fell unconscious even as her body continued rolling across the pavement.

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Montana F Jezebel  
Titus I Cloud Cid  
Yuffie R Elena Barret Fa-Li  
Rude Tifa E Reno Cait Red Vincent<sup>7</sup>

Cloud narrowly dodged another swipe from Jezebel's scythe, reluctantly maneuvering himself closer to the flame wall that separated him from Tifa and the others. Jezebel hadn't said a word since she had begun her attack, and her cold brown eyes gave Cloud no indication of what her intentions were. The swordsman assumed that she and her partner's primary goal was to capture Titus and Fa-Li, but it sure didn't look like she was trying to get to Fa-Li, who was at the moment, fairly safe behind a human barrier made of Cid Highwind, Barret Wallace, and Vincent Valentine.

Thankfully, neither Cloud nor any of his friends bore any major injuries though Cloud and Reno both had bruises from their failed tactic of dodging underneath Jezebel's scythe and moving to attack her. Both times, the woman had easily repelled the two men with powerful kicks and punches, knocking them back from her while never releasing her grip on her weapon.

Cloud had to admit that the woman's fighting abilities were more than commendable. Though Cloud's group had over half of the runway to move around on, Jezebel had managed to drive them all back against the edges without allowing a single fighter to sneak behind her for a surprise attack. What made her so dangerous was her great scythe, which had a five-foot reach, give or take a few inches. Whenever Jezebel sent the scythe swinging at one person, everyone nearby was in jeopardy as well.

In other words, though the odds were drastically tipped in AVALANCHE's favor, Jezebel had them running around blindly, trying to figure out ways to get around her

<sup>7</sup> This seems to be a diagram Catalina made to keep track of who was on which side of Montana's fire wall (see the capitalized middle letters which spell "fire." It may have been left in on accident since it isn't in the fanfiction.net upload. —*Editor*

scythe and attack her without getting pummeled in the process.

And AVALANCHE was doing a crap job of it, if Cloud did say so himself.

*I can't have Vincent or Barret open fire with us all bunched up like this Cloud thought furiously. Besides, the bullets might go through the firewall and hit Tifa or one of the others. And I need to get Cait out of here; that moogles is way too big of a target...*

“Cloud!” someone cried, right before the blonde felt the presence of something descending on him from above. He instinctively raised his sword and felt metal clash against metal. An ominous force pressed down on him, seeking to drive him to the concrete, but Cloud instead gritted his teeth and threw Jezebel’s scythe off to the side, where the tip of it crashed into the runway, sending a spiderweb of cracks slinking throughout the concrete.

Elena seized the opportunity and pulled a golden orb from inside her jacket. “Take that!” she cried, and sent the orb flying towards Jezebel, who was trying to wrench the end of her scythe out of the concrete.

The gold orb struck the woman’s shoulder dead on, and the Fire magic compressed into the sphere sprung loose, crackling over Jezebel’s skin with all the alacrity of a forest fire in the middle of a dry summer.

“Everyone, run for the Highwind!” Cloud ordered, not bothering to hide his intentions from Jezebel, who was just standing shock still and patiently letting the flames dance all over her skin and clothes.

Across the runway, he saw Cid and Barret hesitate, gripping their weapons uncertainly.

“Go!” Cloud roared. “Get the hell out of here!”

Cid’s shoulders sagged in defeat. “Fine, kid. Come on, woman.” He grabbed Fa-Li and slung her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

“Hey! Put me down!” the Wutainese woman exclaimed, but she made no great efforts to extricate herself from Cid’s grip. Barret and Vincent followed the pilot as he raced for the Highwind, and Red and Cait mimicked their actions. Reno began moving in the same direction, but at that moment, the flames surrounding Jezebel’s body died out, revealing her face and clothes to be absolutely unmarked by Elena’s attack.

“You’ll have to do better than that if you want to beat me,” Jezebel told Elena smugly, her brown eyes glittering dangerously as she pulled her scythe out of the concrete.

Elena swallowed hard and drew her gun from inside her jacket, raising it and aiming down the barrel at Jezebel. The bounty hunter smirked and launched herself straight into the air, causing the bullet to sail harmlessly below her. Flexing the muscles in her powerful

arms, she raised the scythe above her head, scissoring her legs to gain momentum. Reno and Cloud both scrambled to get out of the scythe's range, but Elena stood frozen five feet from the edge of the runway, her eyes filled with the dark knowledge that she was Jezebel's primary target.

At the last moment, she snapped out of her stupor and tried to doge Jezebel's plummeting scythe, but it was too late. The Turk screamed as the scythe's blade opened a wide, deep gash in her left arm, blood spilling onto the concrete beneath her like crimson tears. The blow knocked her to the ground, where she lay with one arm dangling off the edge of the runway, a hundred feet above the churning ocean. Her brown eyes fluttered as she fought for consciousness. She was a sitting duck just waiting to be skewered.

Cloud immediately started moving across the runway, using every bit of fancy footwork he knew to maneuver his way behind Jezebel's back. Of course, his movements didn't escape the woman's detection, and her attention immediately shifted from Elena's prone form to the newest threat at her back. She tucked her scythe in between her arm and her right flank in order to shorten the shaft's length and swung it in a horizontal arc, twisting her body in order to increase the power of her attack.

But Cloud had predicted her reaction, and he quickly ducked underneath the scythe's blade while bringing the Ultima Weapon up to prevent the weapon from finishing its swoop. Sparks flew from the clashing metals, and Cloud felt his boots slide a little ways across the wet pavement, but his ultimate goal was accomplished as Jezebel's scythe stopped its forward motion.

Before his opponent could react, Cloud unexpectedly let the Ultima Weapon clatter to the floor and transferred his grip to the shaft of Jezebel's scythe, tucking the weapon underneath his arm and holding on tightly. Albeit it wasn't the best tactic to use if Cloud was interested in keeping all of his limbs attached, but his primary objective for this fight wasn't self-preservation.

"Reno!" he cried, as he and Jezebel began a perilous tug-o-war over the scythe. He felt the blade grinding into his shoulder armor, but he stubbornly planted his feet and held onto the scythe for all he was worth.

Reno suddenly materialized to Jezebel's right, his nightstick spitting angry sparks and murder gleaming in his aquamarine eyes. The instant Jezebel caught sight of the Turk, she dropped her end of the scythe and pivoted to avoid getting a faceful of electricity. All the nightstick managed to burn were the ends of her brown hair, and the woman instantly took advantage of the situation. She grabbed Reno by the throat, easily lifting him into the air even though he outweighed her by fifty pounds.

Cloud was already rushing towards the duo with his Ultima Weapon in his hand (he



didn't even remember discarding his end of the scythe) when he heard a cold voice come from behind Jezebel.

"Drop him or I drop you," Elena said flatly, brown eyes hard and emotionless beyond the barrel of her handgun.

For a split second, Jezebel's eyes flicked to the side, trying to catch a glimpse of the Turk with her peripheral vision. Elena and Reno saw the opening and immediately filled it with violence. Reno fired a burst of electricity right into the woman's face, and Elena shot her in the back of the knee.

As Jezebel crumbled to the concrete without so much an exclamation of pain, the blast from Reno's own weapon sent him flying backwards, where he hit the ground in a coughing, hacking heap before lurching drunkenly to his feet. Elena rushed around Jezebel's fallen form and joined her male comrade, her left arm hanging useless at her side and leaving a trail of blood in her wake.

Secretly thankful that both of them were alive, Cloud turned around to head for the Highwind and was instead greeted by the horrific sight of Tifa flying through the air, trailing blood red sparks like a train of crimson stars. Her body struck the ground, bounced once, and then continued rolling across the pavement, her arms and legs getting scraped and bloody. After what seemed like an eternity, she came to a stop, brown hair a tangled mass beneath her and limbs completely devoid of motion. She looked dead.

Cloud was already running across the concrete, legs eating the distance between himself and Tifa's lifeless body. He heard Elena and Reno behind him, but they didn't matter. All that mattered was getting to Tifa in time, praying that she was alive, and hoping there would be a way to save her from the brink of death.

His progress was cut short when Jezebel's nameless partner suddenly stepped right in Cloud's path, hands shoved in the pockets of his loose white pants and a serious expression on his face.

Cloud skidded to a halt. "Get out of my way!"

"You don't have to worry about her," the man deadpanned. "She's still alive."

*Tifa...alive...*

Something had wound itself tight inside Cloud's chest, but it eased slightly as the man's words struck home. "But she's still injured," the swordsman snapped, raising the Ultima Weapon menacingly. "And if you don't move out of the way, I'll just have to go through you." Reno and Elena came up beside him, weapons held ready.

The tall man rolled his green eyes. “Just go around me. It’s not like I’m going to attack you.” The disgust in his voice was thick enough to choke on.

Cloud’s blue eyes narrowed. “And why is that?”

“Tifa’s life is yours,” the man said flatly. “As per say our agreement.”

Cloud felt a chill go through his body. *- Tifa’s life is yours -*

“I didn’t hear about any ‘agreement,’” he snapped, surprised to find that he felt left out, as if Tifa and this man had forged some intimate bond that he had only been informed about ex post facto.

“Of course you didn’t,” the man snorted. “It was a promise between martial artists. Nothing to do with you at all.”

“So you’re just gonna let us walk right past you?” Reno asked dubiously, and Cloud winced at how hoarse and strangled the Turk’s voice sounded.

The man’s green eyes slid to Reno. “I’m honor-bound. It’s not like I have a choice in this matter. And it’s nice to see you again, Reno Akuma Mitsuru.”

Reno grinned mirthlessly. “Same to you, Montana. And it must really suck to be honor-bound and all that crap. It must *really* suck.” With that, he ran right past Montana with a wary Elena following at his heels. Montana stood still and let them go, arms tense with the effort not to run after and kill them on the spot.

Though he wanted nothing more than to be at Tifa’s side as quickly as possible, Cloud gave Montana a wide berth, his eyes never leaving the man’s dark green ones. He noticed that Montana’s eyes shone with a luminance akin to Mako, but not quite. There was something “off” about the glow, but Cloud couldn’t put his finger on it.

“That attack was supposed to kill Tifa, wasn’t it?” Cloud whispered. “But she survived instead, and now you can’t touch us until she’s dead.”

Montana’s eyes were harsh, but a frightening, eager smile spread across his mouth. “You tell Tifa to hurry up and get better before our next battle because I assure you, I will kill her next time around.”

“Will do,” Cloud said flatly, and ran to where Reno and Elena were already at the fallen Tifa’s side.

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“Yuffie, we really should be getting inside the Highwind,” Vincent urged. “You’ll want to be indoors when Cid takes off.”

“No,” the girl insisted from where she crouched on the deck, her arms wrapped around her knees to ward off the beginnings of nausea that were already forming in the pit of her stomach. “I’m waiting for Tifa to come up here. She didn’t have to fight that Montana guy, but she did! So that me and Titus and Rude could go free!”

Vincent resisted the urge to sigh and gave up trying to get Yuffie to enter the Highwind. He could tell from the sounds down below that the battle was not going in AVALANCHE’s favor. The scent of blood mercilessly rode the thick air, a strong wind carrying both the sounds and smells to Vincent, assaulting his senses with them while tearing at his unbound hair. Beneath his feet, the Highwind hummed anxiously, its multiple engines fired up and ready to make their great escape as soon as all its passengers were safely on board.

Leaving Yuffie crouched stubbornly on the metal deck, he went to the railing and peered over the edge. The sounds of the battle had tapered off, and if it turned out that AVALANCHE had indeed lost the battle with Jezebel and Montana, Vincent would have to be the unlucky one to run inside and inform Cid that they were going to be short several passengers indefinitely.

But instead of a runway littered with the bodies of his friends, Vincent instead saw a crippled Elena climbing weakly up the rope ladder, using only her right arm and her feet to propel her along. Her left arm dangled uselessly at her side, dripping blood onto the concrete far below them.

Behind the female Turk came Reno, who seemed to be having no major trouble scaling the ladder, save for his bouts of worried impatience, as he had to wait for Elena to proceed. And still below Reno was Cloud with an unconscious Tifa draped over his shoulders. Though at any other time, Vincent knew Cloud would have had no trouble carrying Tifa’s weight, he could see now that the swordsman was laboring, gripping the rope ladder lightly with his gloved hands and making sure he had secure footholds before going up another step.

Even through the haze of her obvious pain, Elena somehow sensed Vincent’s presence and looked upwards, her dull brown eyes meeting Vincent’s crimson orbs. “Help me,” she whispered. “I can’t...feel my arm.”

*She’s losing consciousness he realized. That can’t happen. If she stops, the others have nowhere else to go.*

The dark gunslinger leaned his entire weight forward onto the railing and dangled his arm down towards Elena, the metal bar digging into his lower chest. The railing had been built high to keep overexcited sightseers from tumbling off the deck, but now that extra safety precaution was acting as a double-edged sword. It gave Vincent something to brace

himself with, but it also cut precious inches off his reaching distance.

“Elena,” he said as calmly as possible. “I need you to climb a few more steps.”

“No,” the Turk muttered, her body trembling from head to toe. “No more steps.”

“You can do it, Elena,” Vincent urged. “Just a few more and I can pull you up without a problem.”

Elena shook her head again, and Reno put a hand on her backside and shoved. “Go, Laney. You can do it. I know you can. Because you’re a Turk, and you’re strong. Okay, Elena?”

“Don’t...grab my...ass,” Elena mumbled, and lurched upwards another step, swinging the whole ladder with her jerky, desperate motion. Vincent knew she only had enough energy left for a few more upward staggers like those.

With Reno supporting her from behind and—surprisingly enough—yelling encouraging words, Elena managed to make it up those last few steps. True to his word, Vincent reached down and snagged her forearm, holding onto her tightly and lifting her away from the ladder with little effort. Yuffie came up to help, and together the two of them hauled Elena onto the Highwind’s rain-slicked deck, heedful of Reno’s warnings to be careful with the female Turk.

As Vincent laid her gingerly on the deck, she whispered, “Watch for Montana.”

“I will,” Vincent assured her. He was going to assume Montana was the male bounty hunter.

Elena seemed content with this, and her agony-filled brown eyes finally slipped closed. Vincent turned away from her inanimate face just in time to see Reno clamber over the railing, nearly falling as the soles of his dress shoes slid on the deck.

“Is she alright?” he demanded hoarsely, and Vincent realized the ring of bruises adorning his pale throat had to be responsible for the vocal distortion. That would be twice in the past few days that enemies had tried to throttle the redheaded Turk.<sup>8</sup>

“She’ll be fine,” Vincent said. “But we need to get her inside. Cid’s ready to take off.”

Reno cast an ambivalent glance over his shoulder, but his indecisiveness didn’t last long. “I’ll take her inside,” he volunteered, dropping to his knees beside Elena’s body. His aquamarine eyes were wide and more worried than Vincent had ever thought possible. “But you’ve got to help Tifa and Cloud up safely, Valentine. Tifa’s hurt, bad.”

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8 The Faceless Man back at the Final Heaven bar nearly choked Reno into unconsciousness. —*Catalina*

Vincent nodded. "I understand."

Leaving Reno to tend to his fallen comrade, Vincent joined Yuffie at where she was pressed against the railing, fingers dancing worriedly over the wet metal bar, her face creased in anxiety. A few feet below her, Cloud Strife clung to the rope ladder, his hands holding onto the rungs in a strong, immovable death grip. He kept his forehead pressed against the ladder as if he hadn't the strength to move his neck. But then again, he couldn't move his head very far back, for he had one hundred seventeen pounds of Tifa Lockhart draped across his shoulders like a morbid ornament, her arms and legs dangling into open space.

"We're here, Cloud," Vincent called. "What do you want us to do?"

Cloud's voice emerged amazingly calm. "I'm going to climb up these steps, and you guys are going to pull her off my shoulders as soon as I get in close enough, okay?"

"We're ready!" Yuffie affirmed, leaning herself so far over the railing that the soles of her shoes lifted off the decking. Vincent knew the young ninja had excellent balance, but his nerves still jangled unpleasantly at the thought of her pitching over the side and plummeting towards the concrete.

In a feat of amazing strength, Cloud lurched up a couple of more steps, maneuvering close enough that Vincent could reach down and snag the strap of Tifa's suspenders with his claw. Apologizing silently, he dipped his right arm down and fisted his hand in her tattered tank top, pulling her upwards. The white material ripped a little, but held stubbornly.

Yuffie quickly came to his aid by grabbing the woman's legs, and together, they carefully hauled Tifa over the railing and laid her on the decking like Elena before her. Tifa's head lolled to the side, and with her limbs sprawled bonelessly, Vincent could see that scrapes and bruises covered nearly every inch of her exposed skin. But that wasn't the worst of her injuries.

"Vincent, her stomach!" Yuffie gasped.

"I know," he replied calmly, clinically eyeing the massive burn. "But that's not what we have to worry about. The burn will heal, but her energy is very low, almost as if she's near death."

"The Holy Fire of Ifrit burns away the spirit as well as the body," Yuffie whispered, sounding as if she were quoting from a textbook. Vincent looked at her questioningly while behind him, Cloud flipped himself artlessly over the railing, landing in a hapless, painful heap on the decking, where he lay gasping for breath.

Vincent touched his leader's shoulder. "Are you alright?"

Cloud's Mako blue eyes met his for a second, but that brief time was all Vincent needed to know that the AVALANCHE leader was not alright, and he wouldn't be until they were far away from Junon and the two hunters they had just fought.

"Yuffie!" Cloud exclaimed, forcing himself into a sitting position. "Run and tell Cid to get us the hell out of here!"

"Right!" Yuffie said, and was off like a shot, slipping and sliding across the slick deck and tumbling through the door leading into the interior of the Highwind.

"Vincent," Cloud said in a low voice as he scooted closer to Tifa's prone form. "Go look over the railing and tell me what you see."

An ebony eyebrow lifted at the peculiar request; Cloud usually wasn't so cagey about things, but Vincent obeyed without a word, striding over to the railing and peering down at the expanse of runway just below them.

The woman named Jezebel lay in a crumpled, bloody heap near the elevator, her great scythe lying calmly next to her body like a docile pet waiting with absolute assurance for its owner to awaken.

The bounty hunter Montana stood on the wet concrete, the rain-scented wind tearing at his loose, white clothes. Though the man's features would have been blurry and indistinct to a human's naked eye, Vincent was very far from human. He had no problem making out the satisfied smirk on the man's lips or the smug gleam in those fathomless green eyes. The man raised a long-fingered hand and waved at Vincent, mocking him.

But Vincent didn't bother to wave back, for he was suddenly distracted by the fact that the supposedly dead Jezebel had begun to rise to her feet.

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Yuffie tore up the stairs two at a time, the wet soles of her tennis shoes occasionally flying out from underneath her and spilling her painfully across the metal steps. But each time she went sprawling, she doggedly bounced back to her feet and continued on her hasty way.

"Cid! Cid!" she cried as she half-stumbled/half-ran into the Highwind's control room. "Cloud says get us the hell outta here!"

Cid turned from where he had been anxiously pacing in front of the control panel. "Everyone's on?" he demanded, puffing furiously on his cigarette.

“Yes!” Yuffie exclaimed in exasperation, jumping up and down in one place. “Hurry! Hurry!”

*I hope Vinnie and the others are inside already* she prayed silently.

“Alright! We’re getting the f\*\*\* outta here!” Cid said, turning back to the controls. “Hold onto your panties!”

The Highwind suddenly lurched beneath Yuffie’s feet, and her stomach decided to take a vacation from her midsection and scurry into her throat. She fell into a crouching position, arms wrapped around her belly and a hand clamped over her mouth lest her breakfast decided it wanted to pop out and say hello to the Highwind’s metal floor.

“Dammit, foo, keep this thing steady, will ya!” Barret snapped, holding onto some of the nearby gadgetry. Beside him, Rude also clung for dear life, but in a much calmer fashion.

“Shut yer flapper,” Cid said tersely, as the Highwind’s direction of motion suddenly switched from “upward and shaky” to “forward and REALLY shaky.” Yuffie’s stomach started doing cartwheels, and nausea completely swamped her senses.

Then, quite suddenly, the Highwind came to a jerking halt, and Yuffie felt herself sliding across the metal floor, only coming to a halt when she plowed into Cait’s moogle.

“Whoa! Are you alright?” the robotic cat demanded worriedly, peering down at the young ninja, his whiskers twitching. “You look kinda green.”

“No shit, Sherlock!” Yuffie tried to say, but all that came out was a nauseated, “Uuurgh!”

Reno suddenly barreled into the control room, bloodstains all over his white shirt. “What the hell is happening? Did we hit something?”

“Shut up!” Cid roared, gloved hands flying over the control panel. He jerked the joystick downwards, and the floor beneath them vibrated with the power of the Highwind’s multiple engines. Power that was taking them nowhere fast.

Cid kicked the side of the control panel. “The f\*\*\* is wrong with this thing?! If I didn’t know better, I would swear we were caught in a tractor beam!”

Cait hopped over to the control room’s equipment console. “I’ve got nothing else on radar!” he announced, voice high with worry.

The Highwind suddenly jerked violently to the left, as if some ancient giant had taken hold of the airship and was playfully shaking it around like some sort of insignificant toy.

“Cid!”

“It ain’t me! I’m not doin’ anything!”

Yuffie’s vision began to spin and darken. *I’m gonna barf! No...I’m gonna faint...yeah.....*

Cool fingers clad in fragrant leather brushed her sweaty forehead, and Yuffie abruptly felt her nausea recede like a nightwalking critter scurrying away from the dawn. The darkness left the corners of her vision, and she found Aeris’ green eyes in Titus’ face staring down at her calmly even as instability raged on every side of her in the form of trembling floors and fearful shouts.

“This is Jezebel’s power,” Titus said, the tips of his fingertips still lingering on her forehead.

Yuffie blinked. “Jezebel?”

“Hey, you’re supposed to be in the cargo hold!” Reno hollered at Titus right before the Highwind tilted almost completely onto its left side.

Amazingly enough, Titus managed to keep his balance, and his grip on Yuffie’s arm kept her from sliding across the floor and into the wall. The Highwind abruptly righted itself, and Titus relaxed his hold, leaving Yuffie on the floor as he quickly made his way over to the cockpit’s large viewing windows.

“Hey!” Reno called. “Someone grab him!”

“No!” Yuffie cried, hauling herself to her feet and tottering after Titus. “Leave him alone!”

The Highwind was being shaken as haphazardly as a dog’s chew toy, but by the grace of Water God Leviathan, Yuffie managed to lurch over to where Titus clung to the railing. She wrapped her fingers tightly around the metal rod and pulled herself against it, making sure her footing was secure before looking up at Titus.

“What are you going to do?” she asked breathlessly.

Titus tossed his head to get some of his platinum blonde hair out of his eyes. “Jezebel’s magic is powerful,” he said flatly. “But I can break it.”

“So, hurry up and do it!” Yuffie cried, watching as Titus wrapped both his legs around the railing, using the strong muscles of his thighs to cling to it while he raised his gloved hands and clasped them together, handcuffs still binding his wrists. The dark purple half-spheres embedded in the backs of his hands flashed in the light, and Yuffie felt Titus’ power, otherworldly and dark, begin rising inside of him. Purple, black, and blue chased



one another across the glimmering surface of the strange orbs as the hidden world inside them began to churn. Yuffie suddenly received the impression that if she could plunge into that confined realm, she would find herself assaulted by purple rain that fell from an eternally black sky, and the mists that tried to devour her would be blue and black instead of green...

The Highwind suddenly flipped upside down, and Yuffie found herself dangling from the railing by her hands, as if it were part of the monkey bars she and her friends used to play on when they were younger. Outside on the runway, she caught a horrific glimpse of Jezebel, whose beautiful face had been reduced to a shapeless mass of red blood and burnt skin. Yet more blood pooled beneath one of her legs, but frightfully enough, the woman didn't give any impression that she was crippled. She had her muscular arms raised in the air, palms open towards the airship that had become her personal toy.

The hushed murmuring of voices reached Yuffie's ears, so very different from the surprised screams of her friends all around. Stunned, Yuffie turned to her head to see if Titus was making the noises...and instead she saw Aeris kneeling on the crystalline altar in the Forgotten Capital, light brown hair woven in a thick twist behind her head and amazing green eyes closed in peaceful concentration as she prayed to the Planet, prayed for Holy to come and save humanity from the Dark...

Yuffie's heart caught in her throat, but when she blinked, there was only Titus beside her, hanging upside down from the railing with his hands clasped together in front of his heart.

*-SHATTER-* a voice whispered, and something buried deep within Yuffie's psyche felt the exact moment when Titus' power pierced Jezebel's spell and shredded it with frightening ease.

The Highwind suddenly seemed to sag as if a great burden had been removed from its shoulders, and the airship shot forward at a frightening speed, the mass balance system returning the ship to equilibrium at the same time. The end result of the simultaneous actions sent Yuffie flying to the floor, where her head slammed into the unforgiving metal. She barely had time to think "ouch" before blackness rolled over her in a massive, world-devouring wave.

She awoke to find Red sniffing her face like the dog she often teased him as being. His whiskers brushed her cheek, and she resisted the urge to giggle like she used to when her mother instigated tickle fights during Yuffie's childhood.

"Down, doggie," Yuffie joked, before following her words with a fit of coughing. Her head throbbed like someone was slamming a sledgehammer against her temples, and far above her, the ceiling of the Highwind swam in the sudden haze of pain.

*Could be worse she thought giddily. I could be lying on the ceiling and staring up at the floor. Or I could be smeared across the windows. Or I could be...*

“My head hurts,” she groaned, twitching each of her limbs to see if anything was broken. Nothing seemed to be. Goody. Now all she needed was a Hi-Potion to cure this lulu of a headache.

“Not surprising,” Red XIII replied, sitting next to Yuffie’s sprawled body. “Your head struck the floor with a fair amount of force.”

“And why didn’t any of you half-witted goobers try and save me?” Yuffie grumped, trying to decide if it was absolutely *imperative* that she sit up. Naw.

“A thousand pardons,” Red said dryly. “We were too busy sliding across the floor and breaking various bones in our body.”

“Can it, Red. None of your legs are broken.”

“No, but Rude broke his arm. Barret has a bloody nose, and Cid has a concussion. Elena and Tifa are both severely injured. Cloud is unconscious, and Vincent broke a crate in the cargo hold when he tumbled off the staircase. Amazingly enough, he only emerged with a few splinters in his arm.”

Yuffie nearly laughed at the image of Vincent pinwheeling off the stairs and landing smack-dab on a crate. “Um, wow, is everyone...okay? Where’s Titus?”

“Back in the cargo hold, handcuffed to a pipe with his lady friend. He’s the only one who was unharmed by this entire fiasco.”

Yuffie sighed, staring up at the ceiling. “Yep, that sounds like Titus alright. He’s Mr. Invincible, that he is.”

Red was watching her carefully. “Rude said that Titus shattered the spell Jezebel was using to snare us.”

Yuffie closed her eyes briefly, trying to chase away the image of Aeris praying superimposed over Titus’ face. “Yeah, he did.”

“I wonder how he did it,” Red said meaningfully.

Snorting, Yuffie struggled to sit up. “Don’t look at me. Titus is a freakazoid. If you want to know about the mysteries of the universe, ask him. And hold still.” She looped an arm around Red’s neck, fisting her hand in his fiery mane as she tensed her stomach muscles and hauled herself into a sitting position, doggedly focusing on the laces of her tennis shoes until the room stopped spinning. She looked around to find that the control

room of the Highwind was completely abandoned save for Red, herself, and Cait, who was hovering over the equipment console.

“Well, look who’s up!” he exclaimed once he found Yuffie’s gray eyes resting on him. “How are you feeling, sunshine?”

“Like squatty poo-poo doo-doo,” Yuffie replied. “And yourself?”

Cait gave himself a once-over and readjusted the crown settled between his pointy ears. “I got a bit...roughed up, but other than that, I’m fine and dandy.”

“Good to hear. Are we headed to Rocket Town?” All Yuffie could see outside of the viewing windows were mountains and endless gray skies. They could have been flying in circles around Midgar for all she knew.

Red nodded. “Yes.”

“But we have no pilot! We’ll get struck by lightning or something!”

Red rolled his eye. “No... we still have one pilot left.”

Yuffie’s gray eyes were wary. “And who would that be?”

“That would be me,” Reno announced, clomping up the stairs and giving Yuffie a toothy grin.

*Oh crap...*

The young ninja was starting to think that she should have stayed unconscious.

-owari Ch. 34

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Author’s note:

Jesus, Christ, that was a long, fuck-off chapter. X\_X I’m tired now. —*Catalina*

# Chapter Thirty-Five

## *The Calm*

*“But it’s all okay now, as long as I’m here with you.”—Cid Highwind*

Summary of recent events: After being mind-raped by unnatural creatures called Hissers, Cid keeps having images of a pair of glasses shattering on a floor drenched in blood. Finally, he announces to Cloud that he’s going to leave Junon, AVALANCHE’s current safe haven, and head towards Rocket Town to see his wife, Shera. Cloud states that the rest of AVALANCHE will follow.

However, as they’re making their way to the Highwind, AVALANCHE finds two of the Master’s bounty hunters, Jezebel and Montana, waiting for them. In an attempt to keep Montana from harming the others, Tifa binds herself to other martial artist, promising her life to him if he’ll leave the others alone. In return, Montana must kill Tifa before he can pursue the rest of AVALANCHE. But Montana’s power was more than Tifa bargained for, and she barely manages to survive a deadly fire-blow inflicted by the bounty hunter.

While Montana fights Tifa, Jezebel gets her face blown off by Reno’s nightstick. However, the woman does not go down easily, and as AVALANCHE attempts to escape in the Highwind, Jezebel suddenly trapped the airship with her power. Titus, backed by Yuffie’s faith in him, manages to shatter the spell using a prayer that oddly enough, reminds Yuffie of Aeris. Now, AVALANCHE heads to Rocket Town...

**WARNING: Ok, this a crap chapter. It’s a filler chapter, which means no plot, minimal character development, no action of any sort. If you’re disappointed, fine. Don’t tell me about it cuz I warned you! :P<sup>9</sup>**

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Shera hummed quietly to herself as she stood at the kitchen sink, washing the dishes that had accumulated from her daytime meals. Rain struck the windowpanes with soft patters before rolling forlornly down the glassy surface. Shera found the sound of rain very soothing in its reliable consistency, even when it fell in sporadic bursts that were anything BUT consistent. Rain always had a calming effect on her, even in the stressful of days as a Shinra engineer when she had loads of paperwork to complete and machinery layouts to look over. Rain would arrive at some time or another, and she always left her cramped Shinra office to watch it fall, letting the sight of the little droplets ease the tension from her frazzled nerves.

9 This chapter has several scenes I quite like, including what I’d call the start of some significant development for Tifa. Catalina’s being too hard on herself. —*Editor*

However, now even the rain and her own humming, a sound that reminded her of her childhood, could not alleviate her worries. The rain became an orchestra pit full of sound and fury, her humming an annoying tickle in her throat. Shera turned the last of her off-tune hums into a preoccupied sigh as she let the dirty water drain out of the sink and wiped her hands on a dishtowel.

Her eyes unwittingly drifted to where the kitchen phone lay still and quiet on its hook. She had received calls from her best friend and sister within the past hour, and although she loved them both and enjoyed talking to them, she really wished her husband would call. He had phoned her from Junon, but the connection had been so terrible that they hadn't been able to talk for long. But even through the incessant crackling of the static, Shera had had no trouble discerning that Cid wasn't himself.

And now she was worried. So very worried.

She hadn't received any messages from him within the last 24 hours, and her concern for her husband grew by the second. The news had said that Kalm and Lower Junon were among those cities completely underwater by now, and Shera knew that if the rain continued with the same relentless fervor, it would only be a matter of time before Upper Junon began to suffer as well. Rocket Town had been fortunate not to get excessive amounts of rain; they had quite a few heavy downpours, but nothing like the flooding that had drowned Kalm.

*The house is so quiet without Cid around* Shera thought to herself. *Right about now, he'd probably be going stir-crazy, pacing through the house, slamming doors, and cursing the rain. Gods, I'm so silly. I miss him already.*

A murmuring of what sounded like voices outside made Shera jump and glance towards the front door. Since the crime rate in Rocket Town was limited to a couple petty robbers and some local shoplifters, Shera rarely ever locked their doors, but...

*Better to be safe than sorry* Shera told herself. She turned and removed her apron, laying the patterned cloth next to the sink.

When she turned around, she saw Cid Highwind standing in the open doorway, soaked to the bone. Shera's brown eyes widened until they appeared abnormally large behind her glasses. She had to blink a couple of times to fully comprehend what she was seeing.

"C-Cid?" she stammered.

He stared like he had never seen her before, his blue eyes wide underneath the shock of blonde hair the rain had drug over his face. His goggles hung askew on his high forehead, and his clothes were waterlogged and disheveled. A puddle of rainwater was

slowing forming underneath Cid as the couple stood gaping at one another.

“Are you alright?” Shera asked worriedly, not liking the look in her husband’s normally keen eyes. He bore the haunted countenance of one who had been through hell and back, and had just maybe left vital pieces of himself behind.

“I’m...fine,” the pilot mumbled, sloshing his way further into the kitchen, leaving the door wide open behind him.

Shera’s brow creased in distress. “Are you sure?” she asked tentatively, though there was really no need for her query. One look into those troubled blue eyes told her that her husband was most definitely *not* alright.

His gaze remained intensely locked on her face, as if memorizing every feature. He muttered something.

She took a step towards him. “What? I couldn’t hear you.”

He moved forward until there was barely a breath between them, eyes still boring into hers. “Now,” he whispered. “Now, I’m gonna be okay.”

Instead of quelling her worry, Shera only felt her concern grow more acute. “I don’t understand, Cid,” she whispered back. “What happened?”

“Something bad. But it’s all okay now, as long as I’m here with you.”

Reaching out, he wrapped her in a soft embrace, hugging her gently to him as if afraid she’d shatter in his arms. Wetness from his saturated jacket transferred its affection to her blouse and slacks, but Shera didn’t care. She held her husband tightly, laying her smooth cheek against his stubbled one. He trembled slightly from either cold or emotion, maybe a little of both. Shera felt tears sting her eyes as she imagined what sort of internal torment could best the indomitable will of Cid Highwind.

“I love you, Shera,” he whispered into her hair.

She shut her eyes and tightened her grip on her husband. “I love you, too.”

The sound of someone clearing their throat made Shera jump slightly. She opened her eyes, and, over the rise of Cid’s shoulder, she could see Cloud Strife standing the doorway, spiky hairstyle looking wilted and thoroughly wet, an uncertain smile on his face.

“Is it alright to come in?” he asked, and behind him, Shera glimpsed what appeared to be an entire crowd of people. All awaiting permission to enter her home.

*Oh my. How many are there? Do I have enough food to feed them all? Are there enough blankets and floorspace and...*

She patted her husband gently on the back. “Honey, Cloud and his...friends are here.”

“I know,” he replied in his usual gruff fashion, squeezing her tightly before releasing her and turning to face the door. One arm stayed draped around her shoulders, a damp but familiar weight that Shera took great comfort in.

“Get in here, kid,” he urged Cloud. “No use standin’ out there in the damn rain.”

Cloud nodded and moved quickly into the room, trailing more puddles of water in with him. Shera might have taken a brief moment to be vaguely upset about the condition of her floor, if she had not glimpsed Reno of the Turks striding in right behind Cloud. Employees of the old Shinra Company had visited Rocket Town many times before, each time bringing nothing but pain, anger, and sometimes bloodshed. The Turks she was particularly leery of, and with good reason, too.

Though, right now, she had to admit that Reno didn’t look particularly threatening. His signature blue jacket was missing, revealing a white dress shirt soaked through and through with rain. A ring of dark bruises encircled his pale throat, and his features were arranged into a countenance that leaned more towards “tired and weary” than “murderous and menacing.”

His aquamarine eyes met hers, and Shera gave him a faint smile. He acknowledged her gesture of greeting with a curt nod as he crossed the threshold, and Shera saw for the first time that Reno’s left hand was wrapped around the chain of a pair of handcuffs.

The unlucky recipient of those handcuffs’ binding embrace was a slender man dressed entirely in black. Black leather jacket over black turtleneck. Black jeans tucked into black combat boots. All the darkness contrasted sharply with skin the color of a pristine lab coat and hair a shade of blonde so pale it almost appeared white. Wet strands hung into his eyes, which, as he shifted his attention to her, were a deep emerald green that struck a familiar chord in her memory. He was eerily beautiful.

Shera swallowed hard. What was going on? She knew AVALANCHE and the Turks were desperately trying to locate the missing Reeve, but was this...a prisoner?

“Where do you want this guy?” Reno asked Cid, and from the way he uttered the words ‘this guy,’ Shera could tell Reno didn’t much like the green-eyed man.

Cid frowned and scratched his head thoughtfully with his free hand. “Eh...there’s a radiator in the living room. Cuff him to that.”

Shera glanced questioningly at strange, leather-clad man. He stared intensely back at her for a second before his gaze shifted to Cid. “Your greatest fear,” he stated.

Cid's true blue eyes didn't waver as he tightened his grip on Shera's shoulders. "Yeah, my greatest fear."

An odd smile curved the man's mouth, and Shera once again found herself the focus of those unnerving eyes. "Have you broken your glasses lately?" he asked.

Shera blinked, instinctively raising one hand to adjust the objects in question. "No, not lately."

"You cut yourself?"

"N-No."

"Blood on the floor?"

"No."

"Okay, enough of your shit," Reno announced, dragging the strange man off in the direction of the living room.

Shera's eyes nervously tracked their progression before returning her attention to the suddenly overcrowded kitchen. There seemed to be bodies packed into every available crevice, and as Shera watched, the large form of Barret Wallace shuffled carefully through the doorway, carrying somebody in his strong arms. That somebody was wrapped in what was probably Reno's blue jacket, but a long fall of chocolate brown hair dangled nearly the floor, those dark tresses clearly proclaiming their owner's identity.

"Tifa!" Shera gasped. "What happened to her?"

"She's badly injured," Cloud said. "Do you have a place where we can put her?"

"The guest bedroom," Shera replied instantly, grimly noting the scraped and bloody condition of Tifa's legs. "There are antiseptics and medicines in the hallway bathroom."

Cloud thanked her, and gestured for Barret to follow him. The big man obeyed him without a word, looking just as battle-weary as the others.

"Cid, what's going on?" she asked worriedly, looking up into her husband's face. "What happened to Tifa? And what about that man with the green eyes? What was—"

He silenced her with a gloved finger over her lips. "I'll tell ya later," he said.

Shera looked at him dubiously.

That earned her a smile. "I promise, woman." He kissed her gently. "Can you go help with Tifa? I'll take care of the rest of these knuckleheads."



Part of her wanted to insist, but all she did was smile gently and nod. If Cid said everything would be alright, she trusted him.

\*\* \*\* \* \*\* \* \*\* \*

Montana sprawled languidly in the creaky wooden chair and watched Jezebel rebuild her face, piece by painstaking piece. He'd been her partner (or the closest thing Jezebel could *have* to a partner) for a little more than three years now, and he had only seen her perform such a recovery feat once before. He found the whole process vaguely disgusting, watching the muscles of her face twisting and pulsating as they regenerated and reshaped themselves. After the red and pink muscles were done, her pale skin reappeared in patches, thin and flimsy as tissue paper, but still present in deference to Jezebel's inhuman regenerative abilities.

"I think I'm gonna barf," Montana grumbled, resting his cheek against his closed fist as he braced his elbow on the chair's arm. "I've seen you do this before, but I don't remember it being *this* grotesque."

*-Grotesque?-* Jezebel's harsh laughter rang in his mind. *-Picking up new vocabulary, I see.-*

"Always," Montana said through gritted teeth. "By the way, do me a favor and rebuild your mouth and throat so you can stop speaking through telepathy. It creeps the shit out of me."

As if the raw, meaty mass of Jezebel's face wasn't disgusting enough, she had the audacity to spread her lipless mouth in a grin that exposed all of her newly rebuilt teeth, shining and white against the burnt flesh and exposed muscles.

Montana made a revolted sound and turned his dark green eyes up towards the single light bulb swinging from its chain on the ceiling. But his acute hearing could still pick up the fleshy sounds of Jezebel's facial reconstruction, and thus, he was actually relieved when he felt a spark of dark, familiar energy flare in the shadows of the room.

"Mr. High Priest," Montana said in a sing-song voice, still staring up at the light bulb. "You're late. I expected you much earlier."

High Priest Ajax (or rather, High Priest Ajax's spiritual projection, for Montana knew that by sacred duty, High Priests were never allowed to leave the subterranean tunnels) stepped out of the shadows and stood in the light offered by the lonely bulb, a smile on his face, as per usual. "As you know, Montana, things are still a bit hectic within the faction. As such, I was not informed of Jezebel's and your failure to recapture Titus and dispose of AVALANCHE until a little while ago."

Montana didn't answer, biting back his anger as he thought of the woman Tifa Lockhart and how she had managed to survive his attack. Obstinate bitch.

Ajax's hologram looked about the room with mock-curiosity. "What is this place?"

*-Safe house-* Jezebel's mental voice replied.

Montana snorted. "Safe *shit*hole is more like it. Serves me right for letting a woman without a face guide me to shelter."

Ajax's soulless blue eyes drifted towards where Jezebel sat against the wall opposite Montana, her back ramrod straight and her hands folded neatly in her lap, as if she were lazing about idly instead of concentrating on growing herself a new pair of eyes, among other things.

"Jezebel," Ajax said cheerfully. "You're not looking too good."

*-Of course I'm not. I need absolute concentration, High Priest, so if you do not have any pressing business, then I'm politely asking that you leave us.-*

"I'll be happy to oblige you...as soon as I deliver additional orders from the Master."

Montana heaved a weary sigh and ran his fingers through his mass of messy brown hair. "Figures he'd give us more shit to deal with."

Ajax ignored this in the same sanguine fashion which he ignored all things he didn't wish to hear. Ever the belligerent one, Montana lazily lifted one of his bare feet and thrust it through Ajax's projection, swiping his leg around so that it looked like he was kicking right through the High Priest's chest. Ajax watched with a happy, empty expression on his face, unfazed as Montana wiggled his toes right under his short nose.

"Well," the martial artist grumped. "Aren't you going to tell us our orders?" He stuck his foot through Ajax's face.

"I was hoping you'd ask," the High Priest replied undauntedly. "In addition to leaving Yuffie Kisaragi unharmed, the Master also demands that Cloud Strife and his sword, the Ultima Weapon, not be tarnished in any way, shape, or form."

Montana bolted upright in his chair, feet falling back to the dirty cement floor. "He wants us to leave Cloud Strife ALIVE?! Those sound like the kind of orders YOU'D give, you masochistic bastard. You're freakin' insane!"

Ajax just smiled.

Jezebel spoke up in a displeased tone. *-High Priest, Strife is their leader. If we can't eliminate him in SOME way, our chances of beating AVALANCHE are greatly reduced. He*

*keeps the entire team tied together. -*

The blue-eyed man shrugged his narrow shoulders. "So capture him, but allow me to remind you that AVALANCHE is not comprised of weaklings. If Strife falls or is captured, there are several who will rise up to take his place. Reno of the Turks is one. Cid Highwind is another."

*- Your point being? -*

"Whether or not you capture him is entirely up to you. The Master only demands that Cloud Strife and Yuffie Kisaragi are left alive and well, and Titus is brought back to the faction."

"I thought he wanted us to dispose of Titus?" Montana grumbled.

"Change of plans," Ajax explained.

"There's ALWAYS a change of plans," the martial artist snapped. "Titus is gonna be a pain in the ass if we leave him alive."

"Well, you two will just have to deal with that, now, won't you? Good luck. I hope you don't die." With a final smile, the projection of the High Priest winked out of view, leaving nothing in its wake but shadows and dust. The dark-edged presence that the High Priest always carried with him dispersed like dust in the wind.

Montana glared at the place Ajax's projection had occupied. "Man, I really can't stand that little shit. Even Titus was more decorous than he is."

Jezebel hesitated before saying quietly, *- You'd best hurry and kill that Lockhart woman, Montana. -*

The man's green eyes widened fractionally, and a smug grin came to his lips. "What's this? Is the great Jezebel actually admitting that she's going to have trouble carrying out the Master's bidding all on her own?"

Jezebel's gloved hands tightened in her lap, and when she spoke next, her mind voice was cold, like icy fingers prodding at Montana's brain. *- We have to leave Strife, Kisaragi, and Titus alive. That's just asking for trouble. If we were at LEAST able to kill Strife, there would be a brief moment of pandemonium before a new leader rose to take his place. Now, we won't even have that advantage. And if things like THIS- she gestured to the ruin that had once been her face - happen every time I fight AVALANCHE, then yes, Montana, as much as I loathe to admit it, I'm going to need your help. -*

Montana was too stunned to reply. Jezebel actually admitting that she needed his help was just...scary.

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Tifa fell to the ground with another bruise on her leg and a busted lip as an added bonus. Her hair had long since extricated itself from its restraining hair tie, and now it tumbled forward, the strands clinging to her sweat-soaked arms and shoulders. She spat blood into the unforgiving dirt and blinked back tears of frustration. She was never going to get it right! Why did she even *need* to work on such a tactic?

Zangan's firm but gentle voice drifted from above as his large shadow fell over her crumpled figure. "Get up, Tifa. You need to learn this."

To her humiliation, Tifa found herself ready to cry. "No," she said through a tight throat. "No more."

"Yes, more," Zangan said, voice sounding strange and echoing in the well of her memories. "If I don't break you of this habit now, it will end up killing you later on. Now, get up! Or are you giving up already?"

Tifa shut her eyes tightly, small, silvery teardrops welling at the corners of her eyes and rolling down her face. "No," she whispered to the backs of her eyelids. "I can't give up..."

"Damn right you can't," a young, masculine voice mocked her.

Gasping, Tifa whirled around, her burgundy eyes widening when she saw not her beloved instructor but Hiei Montana looming over her, hands in the pockets of his baggy white pants and an infuriating smirk on his handsome face. Behind him, the horrific visage of Nibelheim being consumed by hungry flames blazed on the fabric of the dream, every bit as real as it had been that terrible day during her adolescence. Heat buffeted her skin like the rough caress of an overeager Zephyr, and smoke mercilessly seared the tender lining of her throat. Directly in front of her, the flames that had destroyed her hometown danced in the depths of Montana's dark green eyes, mocking her as they undulated in their world-devouring waltz.

Montana smiled, his teeth yellow and red in the firelight. "Go ahead and surrender yourself to me. Give up so I can claim the lives of your friends."

"Never!" Tifa screamed at him.

The young man cocked his head to the side, spiky brown hair ruffled by an unseen breeze. "Out, out, brief candle," he quoted in a strangely intimate voice, one strong, murderous hand extricating itself from his pocket and reaching towards her with callused fingers. Tifa scrambled away from that touch, knowing that he meant to snuff her out, extinguish her life like—

“Tifa...”

—the brief candle he—

“Wake up, Tifa!”

—believed her to be. Full—

Small, strong hands clasped her shoulders.

—of sound and fury—

“Tifa!”

—signifying—

Yuffie’s voice rang from the air above her. “Tifa, please, answer me!”

“...nothing,” the woman whispered, shocked at the sound of her own voice issuing from her parched throat.

Though the darkness behind her closed eyelids remained whole, she sensed someone moving above her, felt a wave of gentle human warmth pulsing nearby. “Tifa, are you alright?” Yuffie asked worriedly, tentatively squeezing her friend’s bare shoulders.

“I’m fine,” Tifa tried to say, but all that came out was a dry wheeze. Her throat felt scorched and raw, just like the rest of her. She tried to summon strength to open her eyes, but her entreaties went unanswered. She was weak, slack-limbed, frail, and she hated it. A cough fought its way out of her chest and though she tried to contain it, a painful hacking fit soon wracked her battered body, making her mostly bare flesh brush against the sheets that covered her. Agony exploded on her stomach, and recent memories of her defeat by Montana came fast and furious, just like their nightmarish predecessor.

Tifa suddenly felt a slender arm slide behind her to cradle her head, lifting her a little ways off the bed. Something blissfully cool came into the contact with her lips.

“It’s water,” Yuffie said. “Drink, please.”

It took an outrageous amount of effort just for Tifa to open her mouth and force her uncooperative throat to permit some of the cool liquid to course down its length. Much ended up dribbling down her chin and cheeks, which Yuffie quickly mopped up. Tifa cracked her eyes open a bit, and the world around her came to life in a blur of colors thrown together haphazardly. Pain lanced through her head at the intrusion, but she doggedly ignored it and instead focused her efforts on deciphering the Yuffie-shaped blur that hovered over her.

The young woman's face swam into view as she was taking the glass away from Tifa's lips. "Are you okay?" she asked, brow creased with worry. "Can you see me?"

"Yes," Tifa whispered, trying to smile for her friend, but her lips remained motionless.

"We were really worried about you!" Yuffie confessed, tucking some of her dark brown hair behind her ear, the sleeves of her oversized white sweater nearly swallowing her small hands. "We used a Cure on all your scrapes, but that burn..."

Tifa felt her hands tighten to fists in the sheets. "It's not going away?" she asked, feeling the first tickle of fear in her chest. She had just woken up. This was too much for her to handle so soon.

She looked around the room as far as her stiff neck would permit, taking in the cheerful designs on the wallpaper and the home-sewn quilt that covered her body.

Yuffie followed her gaze. "We're at Cid and Shera's house in Rocket Town," she told Tifa, dipping her finger into the glass of water and dabbing some on the older woman's cracked lips.

Tifa looked at her friend with questioning eyes.

For a second, Yuffie just stared down at her blankly, then smiled wanly as she recognized the query burning in her friend's mind. "Everyone's fine, Tifa. We're all as safe and sound as we ever were. Cid's doing a lot better, too."

Tifa closed her eyes briefly in relief, sending a silent prayer of thanks to the Planet for protecting her comrades. Until now, she had never realized just how frightened she had been. When she had fallen unconscious after Montana's devastating fire attack, she hadn't know whether she would live or die. Right now, she was the only obstacle standing between her friends and the disparity of Montana's unnatural power. If she died...

She didn't even want to think about that. It was too unbearable.

Swallowing painfully, she made an attempt at speech. "The burn..." she rasped. "I want to...see it."

The corners of Yuffie's small mouth turned down in a frown. "Tifa, I don't think you want to do that."

"I do," Tifa insisted, looking at the younger woman with faintly desperate eyes. "Please, Yuffie. I need to...see what he did...to know this is real."

Yuffie fidgeted and replied uncertainly, "I don't know. I'm afraid to move you. Maybe I should call Cloud."

Tifa shifted, gritting her teeth against the dull aches that plagued her body. “I can sit up.”

“Wait!” Yuffie moved frantically to support her friend, placing an arm around Tifa’s shoulders to bear the burden of the woman’s weight. The sheet covering Tifa threatened to slide off, and for the first time, she noticed something.

“Where are my clothes?” she asked, voice emerging a bit stronger.

“We had to take them off,” Yuffie explained. “They were all ripped up, anyways. And don’t worry; we kicked all the guys out, so they didn’t get a free peek.”

Tifa smiled weakly. “Thanks.”

Taking a deep breath, she slowly released her grip on the sheet that hid her wound from view. The fabric crept slowly downwards, hesitating briefly on the swell of her breasts before sliding down her body, exposing her stomach.

For a second, Tifa didn’t recognize the mass of charred, peeling flesh that had overtaken the area her stomach had once inhabited. What had formerly been smooth, unbroken flesh was now a gross combination of burns that ranged from reddened skin that hurt no worse than sunburn to raw, glistening tissue left exposed by the traitorous, blackened flesh that surrounded it. There was no blood, but the sight of that burn on *her* body made her feel dizzy.

“Montana’s fire cauterized the wound,” Yuffie was saying. “That’s why there wasn’t much blood.”

“Will it heal?” Tifa asked in a high, thin voice that she scarcely recognized as her own.

“Yes,” Yuffie said quickly.

“Don’t lie.”

She felt her friend shift uncomfortably behind her. “I’m not lying, Tifa. The wound will probably heal, but what we’re really worried about is the damage done to your spirit.”

Tifa frowned, not comprehending. “My spirit?”

“The Holy Fire of Ifrit injures both body and soul,” Yuffie replied quietly. “That’s why you feel so weak right now, and that’s why Montana’s power is so deadly. Bodily injuries can be mended with time and care, but spiritual injuries that damage your very aura...”

“Are more dangerous,” Tifa finished, voice slightly above a whisper.

Yuffie nodded, loose strands of her hair brushing Tifa’s shoulder. “Yes.”

A frowned marred Tifa's pretty face as she cast her eyes to the ceiling before carefully bringing the sheet up to cover her wound again. Her mind felt so heavy, so raw, as if she were bleeding from the inside out. Montana injured her body, tainted her spirit, haunted her dreams...and all that was fine. Sufficient strength and willpower on her part would dispel any opponent, just like Zangan had taught her. But Montana had also threatened her friends, and that was not fine.

Yuffie hesitantly lowered Tifa back down onto the bed before worriedly peering down into her friend's pensive face. "You okay, Tif?" she asked.

The woman looked at her with overbright eyes, a faint but firm smile curving her dry lips. "Don't worry, Yuffie," she said. "You can have faith in me. I can protect you all. I won't let Montana touch a single one of you."

Yuffie swallowed hard against a throat that felt painfully tight, and telltale signs of tears swam in her gray eyes. "Okay, Tifa," she said with a forced smile as she patted her friend's hand. "But right now, you concentrate on getting better, okay? We've all been so worried about you."

Tifa's burgundy eyes shone with gratitude. "I know, Yuffie. Thank you for watching over me."

The young ninja felt her own optimism returning as she saw evidence of her friend's growing strength. "No problem!" she enthused, hopping to her feet. "You took care of me while I was incapacitated in Junon, and now I can watch over you. But right now, there's a certain Cloud Strife asleep outside the door, waiting for you to wake up. Is it alright if I send him in?"

Tifa brought the sheets closer to her neck. "Yes, but warn him that I look like something the dog dragged in."

Yuffie smiled. "I don't think he'll care."

And Cloud most certainly did not care. His sleeping position slumped against the wall couldn't have provided him with a very refreshing rest, but he nearly fell over his own two feet when Yuffie roused him to announce that Tifa was awake and talking. Yuffie watched him with wistful eyes as he entered Tifa's room with a bright smile already plastered on his face, belying the dark circles underneath his eyes.

Sighing, Yuffie slowly began walking down the hall towards the kitchen, thinking that she could offer to help Shera do...something. She needed to keep herself busy, or she'd start thinking about stupid things like how she wanted to have someone who would look at her the way Cloud looked at Tifa. Someone who would think her beautiful in spite of her skinny legs, her small breasts, her loud mouth, her mischievous mind. Would



her husband be like that? Though marriage was still a long way off for her, but she liked to think that out there, maybe not too far away, there was someone who would hold her, kiss her, hug her, love her...

“Ah!” Yuffie whacked herself on the forehead to derail her uncharacteristic thoughts. What was the matter with her? She was too young to think about getting married and spending the rest of her life with someone, being a wife and having kids or whatnot. She didn’t think herself the motherly type anyways. With her rotten luck, all her offspring would be good-for-nothing little twerps like...

“Hey, brat!”

“Like you!” Yuffie growled, whirling around angrily at the sound of an obnoxious voice behind her.

Reno blinked in bewilderment. “Huh? What’s your problem? And why aren’t you watching over Tifa?”

Yuffie indignantly placed her hands on her hips. “Don’t you dare patronize me! And I’ll have you know that Tifa’s awake.”

Reno’s eyes widened. “Is she alright?”

“Yep, she’s fine. But Cloud’s in there right now so don’t bother them.”

“Right, whatever,” Reno replied, turning on heel and beginning to stride back down the hall to Tifa’s room.

Yuffie wanted to stamp her foot in frustration, but she contained the urge, barely. “Reno!” she whisper-screamed. “Get back here! Doesn’t the word ‘privacy’ mean anything to you?”

“No,” the redhead called back. “Oh, and can you go help Valentine bring up the blankets and sleeping bags from the basement? I was supposed to do it, but now I’m busy. Thanks!” He flashed a mocking grin and continued on his merry way.

If there had been a heavy object near at hand, Yuffie would have cheerfully clobbered the Turk with it. But she figured violence would disturb Tifa’s rest, not that she was going to be able to get much anyways, with the way people kept bustling about. They’d just fought a grueling battle not even a day ago! Wasn’t everyone supposed to be *tired* or something?

*Apparently not* she answered herself, folding her arms across her chest and growling when they got tangled in the folds of her oversized sweater. She missed her old clothes. A lot. This borrowing thing just wasn’t working out for her.

"I guess it's off to the basement for me," she grumbled to no one in particular.

A nondescript wooden door marked the entrance to Cid and Shera's basement/storage area/storm cellar. The best of all three worlds, Yuffie supposed. And it would be better if Cid wasn't such an avid collector of random crap. A glimpse into the pilot's garage suggested that the basement was going to be equally cluttered. Not something to look forward to.

Since the door was already slightly ajar, it only took a minute amount of coaxing on Yuffie's part to open the door all the way. A rectangle of yellow light spilled from the hallway into the darkness of the basement. Unlike Kyr's basement in Junon, Cid's basement had a dirt floor and smelled like grease and machinery.

Leaving the door wide open behind her, Yuffie carefully descended the short flight of stairs and squinted into the darkness. "Vinnie?" she called.

"Right here," a deep voice answered from surprisingly nearby.

Yuffie nearly jumped out of her sneakers. "Geez, Vinnie do you hav—"

She cut her exclamation short when he realized she was speaking not to Vincent Valentine, but a wall of blankets and sleeping bags that seemed, for all purposes, to be hovering in midair with Vincent's jean-clad legs poking out the bottom.

The absurdity of the image made her grin. "You behind there, Vinnie?" she joked.

The stack of sleeping backs sashayed to the side, revealing Vincent's perpetually serious face, scarlet eyes staring calmly from behind strands of sloe-colored hair. The gunslinger still wore the same garments Cloud had lent him back in Junon, the pristine whiteness of the long-sleeved shirt nearly matching the pallor of the man's porcelain skin, which was visible through a few tears that adorned the cloth here and there. A hair tie maintained a shaky hold on the end of his loosely tied ponytail, allowing shorter strands of silken but tangled-looking hair to slide onto Vincent's shoulders and brush the sides of his face.

"What?" the man asked, and Yuffie realized that she'd been frowning thoughtfully.

She shook her head. "Nothing. It's just that you always look the same, no matter what happens. Red eyes all calm. Hair falling everywhere."

"Where's Reno?" Vincent asked abruptly.

Trying to feel offended at the rather brusque change of subject, Yuffie replied resentfully, "Being a lazy bum."

Vincent lifted a dark eyebrow and shifted the load of blankets in his arms to a slightly

more comfortable position. "Are you going to help me with these, then?"

"Yes!" Yuffie exclaimed. "Geez, don't get grumpy at me. It's not I came down here just to yak your ear off."

A slight frown suggested that Vincent believed otherwise, but Yuffie pointedly ignored it. The man set his burden down on the dirt floor, upsetting some of the sleeping bags and blankets that were balanced precariously on top of the load. Yuffie moved to brace them before they could fall onto the nasty ground and get even grungier than they already looked. She started making herself a pile to carry up the stairs, watching Vincent out of the corner of her eye as he worked across from her. The top button of his shirt was undone, and as he leaned over, she could catch glimpses of a strong collarbone and the smooth lines of his pale chest.

She hurriedly diverted her eyes, glad Vincent couldn't see the blush that heated her face like the glaring noonday sun. She could never recall being more aware of Vincent as a man than she was now. Must be something in the air...

"Hey, Vinnie?" she asked after a few moments of silence save for the rustling of sleeping bags.

"Yes, Yuffie?" he replied, trying to stack a blanket onto his pile and frowning as it threatened to plummet back to the ground.

Yuffie absently wrung her hands in a threadbare cotton blanket. "Do you think we're going to find Reeve? I mean, honestly, do you think so?"

"Well, I guess that all depends on you," Vincent stated candidly, without a single glance in her direction. He could have been talking about the price of tea in Wutai for all the emotion his voice betrayed.

Yuffie froze. "What?"

Vincent's blood-colored eyes suddenly pinned her with a hard stare. "You and Titus, actually."

"What's that supposed to mean?" the young woman demanded, her temper starting to flare at his enigmatic statements.

"You seem to have made rather good friends with your former kidnapper. And apparently you trusted him enough to put all our lives in his hands when the Highwind was being attacked."

Yuffie couldn't think of anything to say to that. She did trust Titus in a way that she couldn't explain to anyone else. He'd kidnapped her, left her to be tortured, maybe even

killed Reeve. Why the hell would she be stupid enough to put her trust in such a person? Then again, intelligence had never been one of her strong points.

Something dark and keen glittered in the depths of Vincent's eyes, a single fleeting brush of malevolence in crimson seas that never showed the slightest hint of waves. "Why do you have so much faith in him, Yuffie?"

"I...don't know," she muttered truthfully. She suddenly felt that she couldn't lie to Vincent even if she wanted to. That kind of pissed her off. It had taken her years to perfect the art of lying to a fine degree, all to be torn down by one man.

"I think you're hiding something," Vincent said.

Yuffie glared at him, the hurtful accusation making her voice harsh. "Who, me?"

"Yes, you."

"Well, I have no idea what you're talking about, Vincent!" she snapped, snatching an armful of sleepwear from her stack. The other blankets immediately keeled over out of upset balance, dirtying themselves on the floor.

Huffily, Yuffie lurched over them, nearly falling in the process, and was about to make a grand, angry exit when Vincent suddenly grabbed her arm, fingers finding no obstacle in the billowing folds of her sweater.

"This secret of yours had better not harm AVALANCHE in any way, Yuffie," he said flatly.

Her heart was suddenly in her throat, Vincent's hand burning hot even though a layer of heavy cloth separated their skin. "Are you THREATENING me?" she demanded, barely managing to keep the squeak out of her voice.

He frowned and released her arm. "...Hardly."

"Hardly??" she echoed, upset. "Vincent, I would never hurt AVALANCHE. You know that!"

Scarlet eyes narrowed fractionally before once again averting themselves to attend to the task of arranging the blankets in a stable position. "I know. But still, I worry."

"About *what*?" Yuffie asked, feeling distressed by Vincent's lack of faith in her. "About me betraying you guys? I mean, sure I stole you guy's materia a year ago and left you stranded in Thunder Valley with all those nasty lightning birds and poisonous bugs, but it wasn't like I *wanted* to! It was all—"

"For the good of Wutai," Vincent finished. "I heard this story, Yuffie, remember?"

Right before you dropped that cage on Barret and me.”

“Cloud was SO the one that pulled the lever!”

Vincent looked at her, dark eyebrow quirked so that it nearly disappeared underneath the crimson line of his remaining bandana. “Right,” was all he said before lifting the entire pile of sleeping bags and blankets into his arms.

The gunslinger moved to ascend the stairs, but Yuffie stepped in his way. “Please tell me you trust me, Vincent,” she suddenly blurted, her brow unwittingly creased in distress.

He eyed her a long moment before maneuvering around her body. “I don’t like you hiding things from me, Yuffie,” he said, boots echoing hollowly as he went up the stairs.

She must have stared into the musty darkness of the cellar for a good thirty seconds, contemplating the weight of Vincent’s words. Had he really said, “lying to *me*”? Not lying to Cloud, or to Tifa, or to AVALANCHE in general, but to *him* in particular.

*Implying that he and I share a special relationship?* she wondered, gathering the blankets close to her chest as if the dusty cloth would muffle the sound of her heartbeat throbbing in her ears. *Is he aware of me like I am of him? Like...no, what am I thinking! He’s just tired so he’s saying weird things. He probably hasn’t slept in a while. Yeah! Silly me...*

Shaking her head in wistful amusement at her own youthful idiocy, Yuffie hurriedly scaled the stairs with her mini-pile of blankets. She’d probably have to make a gazillion trips back and forth from the cellar. Joy.

The air in the hallway was like a fresh breath of spring after the yucky smell of the cellar, and Yuffie breathed it in greedily. Then, she stopped. Looked up and down the hall. Nobody. Was she alone?

No, that was just her being silly again! She could hear the TV blaring in the living room. The smell of cooking food wafted from the direction of the kitchen, making her stomach rumble hungrily. A loud snore erupted from a guest bedroom a little ways down the hall. No way was she alone.

Then she found the source of her unrest. In front of her, a set of cheery curtains half-masked a window unstreaked by rain. Outside, she saw the dark sky rolling endlessly on, but for once, the air was utterly devoid of raindrops. No pitter-pattering on the roof, either.

She took that as a bad sign.

*Calm* Yuffie thought grimly. *It’s way too calm.*

Author's note:

I know everyone wanted Vincent/Yuffie stuff, and I know this was more angst and tension than the people wanted, but I figured a confrontation was inevitable, seeing that Vincent knows more about what Yuffie's going through than any other member of AVALANCHE. Not to mention that Titus is still pretty high up on Vincent's doo-doo list. ^\_^

\*the only thing they like more than seeing a hero succeed, is to see him fail...\*

\*can't nobody hold me down. so fuck off.\*

# Chapter Thirty-Six

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## *Rocket Town Interlude*

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*“I am not overly fond of having other men scrutinize me while I bathe.” —Titus*

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Tifa tried not to flinch as Titus ran careful fingers over the hellish burn gracing her stomach. Since her tank tops had a bad tendency of rubbing against the burn, she had instead opted to borrow an oversized shirt from Cloud. Now, she had said shirt hiked up scandalously high, much to her embarrassment. Her cheeks burned slightly, as she was certain that everything from her navel to the bottoms of her breasts was exposed to a pretty much complete stranger. Normally, she would never have given anyone a “free peek” (as Reno called it), but the burn on her stomach was...something else.

They had tried Cure spell after Cure spell until Tifa felt like running around Rocket Town a few hundred times to shake off the excess healing energy. Salves, magic, one of Shera’s “home remedies,” an evil-looking concoction of herbal paste Yuffie had whipped up, warmth, cold.

Nothing seemed to work. Even after everyone’s efforts, Tifa still felt as if some vampire had sucked the life-blood from her body. She supposed the constant weakness was due to her depleted supply of spirit energy, but still, she found it quite ridiculous when she had to exert an outrageous amount of strength just to get up to go the bathroom. Lately, though, she had gotten to feeling a little better. Her bones and muscles still hummed with the remnants of great pain, and her legs wobbled a bit when she tried to walk, but Tifa had felt well enough to pose to her friends the idea of having Titus look at her battle wound.

As expected, the normal amount of frowns and periods of deep contemplation ensued, especially on the parts of Cloud and Reno, both of whom seemed to have a strong dislike for the Running Man. She was forced to listen to the typical “you can’t trust him, he’s the enemy” talk. Yuffie, on the other hand, had vouched for Titus’ reliability and urged the others to let him take a look at Tifa’s burn. In the end, a combined trio of the heartfelt Yuffie, the ever-logical Red XIII, and the normally silent Rude, had managed to convince Cloud and Reno to back down.

No one else had complained, which Tifa found odd, but she supposed their little tussle with Jezebel and Montana had lifted Titus onto higher ground in the eyes of AVALANCHE. Tifa had engaged herself in a running deathmatch with a martial arts master to save Titus’ life, and in turn, their supposed “enemy” had returned the favor by breaking Jezebel’s perilous hold over the Highwind. It was no big secret that if not for Titus’ intervention, they would have most likely been dead by now.

Which brought Tifa to the present moment, kneeling in front of Titus and biting back pain and embarrassment as his fingers prodded gently at her burnt flesh. Red XIII crouched in the corner with his one good eye fixed on the duo, searching for any indication of foul play on Titus' part. An equally vigilant Rude hovered in the doorway. He had dutifully looked away when Tifa lifted her shirt, but he still loomed over them with his intimidating presence.

"Ouch," Tifa murmured when Titus poked a particularly harmful spot. He still had handcuffs around his wrists.

His green eyes cut upwards, and Tifa met them instinctively. "So," she said. "What's the verdict?"

"The burn is superficial," Titus replied. "But since it was inflicted by the Holy Fire of Ifrit, it can't be cured by materia or human remedies. Your body will heal it in time."

"How long will this healing take?"

"That depends on the condition of your mind and spirit," Titus said matter-of-factly, leaning closer to examine a fluid-filled blister on Tifa's skin. "Cetra curative magic would be the only outside force that could heal this burn in such a short period of time."

Tifa frowned. "But I thought the knowledge of the Ancients was contained within the materia?"

Titus nodded, some of his white-blond hair flopping into his eyes. "It is."

"But if that's true, then shouldn't we be able to use a Full Cure and heal the burn?"

Titus finished probing the wound and sat back against the wall. Tifa lowered her shirt gratefully and sat on her heels so that she was at eye level with the green-eyed man. The burn on her stomach protested her movements, but she ignored its cries with practiced ease.

"Though the restorative magic contained in the Restore, Heal, and Full Cure materias *did* come from the Cetra's knowledge," Titus explained, "the magic can never heal that burn so long as the materia is wielded by humans. If the magic channels through an impure vessel, it becomes useless on a wound inflicted by Holy power."

"Impure vessels," Tifa murmured to herself, burgundy eyes misted with dark contemplation. Titus didn't say anything, instead opting to leave the woman to her own thoughts until she suddenly stirred and looked him in the face again.

"What do you know about Montana?" she asked in a soft, hushed voice, as if even speaking the name would suddenly bring the Shido no Hi Ryu master down on them



in all his flaming glory, spitting fire from his eyes and hands in blind fury. The image of Montana standing in front of the backdrop of her burning hometown still blazed in her mind with painful clarity, and Tifa resisted the urge to shudder.

Titus looked at her like he knew exactly what she was envisioning. “Do you fear Montana?”

“Of course. I’d be foolish not to.”

He nodded. “I’ll admit that Montana is to be feared, to a certain extent. His powers are formidable, and his command of them is masterful for one so young, but most of the time he acts with the recklessness of a spoiled child.”

“Is he part of this...faction that Yuffie talks about?”

Titus frowned, and for a moment Tifa feared he was going to clam up again. Already he had spoken more than she thought he would.

But he continued. “Yes, and no. Montana is a bounty hunter for the faction, but that’s all he is. Nothing else binds him to the faction but his own personal choice to remain in the Master’s service. It makes Montana unique amongst all the other loyal followers. He’s somewhat of a wild card, you might say.”

“I’m...not quite sure I understand,” Tifa said hesitantly. “Why is Montana not bound to the faction?”

“Montana’s soul already belongs to one god,” Titus replied darkly. “He cannot pledge his allegiance to another.”

His words sent a chill down Tifa’s spine. “I know Montana serves Fire God Ifrit, but what’s this other god you speak of?”

“No one you need to know of,” Titus responded smoothly, idly running a gloved finger along the chain of his handcuffs. The others had reluctantly freed him from the radiator in order to give him full use of his hands, but it would take more than one life-saving feat on Titus’ part to prove he was loyal enough to have his hands permanently unfettered.

Questions still burned inside Tifa, demanding voice. “But do you mean that you were bound to the faction as well? Yuffie called you ‘Mr. High Priest’ back in Junon. But then Jezebel called Ajax the High Priest. And why would you kidnap Reeve?”

“I thought you wanted to hear about Montana,” Titus said neutrally, eyes tracing the motion of his finger on the gleaming metal chain. Left. Right. Left.

Tifa hands clenched in the loose pair of gym shorts she wore. "I did, but..."

"Then ask me about him," Titus interrupted flatly. "I will answer you nothing else."

She refrained from protesting his stubbornness. "Fine. Have you ever fought Montana before?"

"Yes, a year ago. That scar on his face is from a wound I inflicted on him."

"And...how did you beat him?" She felt almost guilty for asking the question, like she was demanding the answers for a test.

Titus lifted his cuffed hands, experimentally flexing his fingers as if testing the strength in them. The leather gloves creaked as the flesh underneath moved, and the strange orbs embedded in the backs of his hands flashed underneath the lights. "I was always several levels above Montana in terms of power, experience, and skill. He will never beat me."

He sounded so sure of himself. Not proud, just certain. "How does one go about becoming a Shido no Hi Ryu master?"

He lowered his hands and shrugged. "You'd probably be better off asking that question of a historian that specializes in Wutainese history. I do know that you have to endure an arduous training underneath a present Master. I then assume that somehow the student presents their 'perfected' soul to the Fire God, and if they are deemed worthy, Ifrit gives his blessing and instills his essence into them, thus rewarding them with Master status." His eyes locked onto hers. "Are you thinking of learning the Shido no Hi Ryu?"

Tifa frowned. "Well, the thought did cross my mind, but that's hardly possible, isn't it? If my history and timeline are accurate, there hasn't been a Dawn's Fire Master in such a long time that everyone believed the style had died out. Montana is the first Master in a long time, and it's not exactly like I could train under him."

Titus' voice was sharp, almost reprimanding. "And you think learning Montana's style will automatically put you on his level?"

Tifa looked at him in surprise. Apathy, she had expected. Disapproval, she had not.

Titus plunged on relentlessly, "You could spend your entire life learning the Shido no Hi Ryu and perfect every move there is to know, but every time you challenged Montana to a fight, you would lose. The flaw isn't in the fighting style, but in the one who executes it."

She blinked. "Me?"

"Yes. You are the only one responsible for your defeat."

Tifa could feel the truth in his words. She had lost to Montana not because his style was superior to hers, or because he was the more experienced fighter, but because she was flawed somehow. Montana wasn't.

"All his life, Montana has known nothing but the heat of battle," Titus said. "He conceived a hatred for life at a very young age, but later overcame it. Most human beings are blinded by love, fear, or hatred. If Montana feels such an emotion, he regulates it to the degree that it does not affect his fighting. The only petty emotion Montana is guilty of is the desire for revenge, as his pursuit of me clearly shows. But unless you can find a way to exploit that emotion in him..."

His voice trailed off, and Tifa did not prod him to continue. She had heard all she needed, and Titus knew it.

Behind her, Red XIII snorted and rose to his feet, the beads in his mane clicking together to join the muted clack of his claws on the hardwood floor as he walked over to stand in front of Titus. "Mr. Titus, why do you share information with Tifa now? Why not back in Junon when we first posed these questions to you?"

Titus glanced at Red disdainfully. "I hardly thought the behavior and questioning methods you all used in Junon deserved any cooperation on my part."

Tifa rose to her feet so abruptly that Red instinctively moved aside to avoid being stepped on. He glanced up to see her pretty face set in hard, determined lines as she glared down at Titus, almost as if the man had slighted her in some fashion. "I *will* beat Montana," she announced emphatically, and stalked out of the room. Rude pressed himself against the doorway to allow her past him, and though his eyes were hidden behind the dark lenses of his sunglasses, Red could sense the Turk's attention follow the brown-haired woman as she disappeared into the kitchen.

Red gave Titus a hard look. "How do you expect Tifa to fight if you cripple her confidence?"

"I didn't cripple her confidence," Titus countered. "She's flawed, and now she knows it."

"A pretty phrase for something that yields the same result," Rude said flatly. "And if I didn't know you were only trying to help Tifa, I would be particularly displeased with you right now."

Titus' eyes were decidedly aloof as he gave Rude a sideways glance, but he didn't reply to the Turk's comment.

Red allowed an uneasy silence to persist before he recalled a particular subject he needed to address. "Are you in need of a bath?" he asked Titus. "Your female friend has

already taken hers.”

“If I do say I want a bath, someone will have to keep an eye on me, won’t they?”

“Unfortunately, yes.”

“Then I will forgo one. I am not overly fond of having other men scrutinize me while I bathe.”

“Very well, then,” Red replied disinterestedly. He didn’t know for long Titus had gone without bathing, and Red had traveled often enough with his human companions to know that they tended to amass a considerable stench of they did not wash their bodies fairly regularly. But Titus did not smell at all. Sure, he carried the scents of leather, rain, and mud on his body, but as for any type of personal, distinctive scent, he had none. In fact, if not for the slow, steady beat of Titus’ heart, or the sound of his breath passing in and out of his lungs, Red could have closed his eye, and Titus would have vanished completely from his senses.

It was not a comforting thought.

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*Mirrors on the ceiling  
Pink champagne on ice  
And she said  
We are all just prisoners here  
Of our own device  
And in the master’s chambers  
They gathered for the feast  
They stab it with their steely knives  
But they just can’t kill the beast*

*“Hotel California”  
—The Eagles—*

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For some, bathing was a way of cleansing the spirit. Washing away worries and problems along with dirt and grime. So long as the steady stream of water beat down on the shoulders, the bather was granted a temporary respite from the toils of life.

Vincent admitted that he found that concept rather attractive, but also supremely idiotic. For him, bathing was a priority, and sometimes not a very important one.

However, he now found himself wishing he could believe the uplifting words of those who idealized the act of bathing. Unfortunately, though, the water sluicing along

the curve of his back and down the length of his legs was just water, and always would be. Pity in that.

Placing one hand against the wall in front of him, he lowered his head to permit the water expelled from the shower head to pummel the back of his head, the warm liquid coursing down between his shoulder blades. It took a second or two for the soothing dampness to thread its way through the thick tresses, but within a minute, nearly all of his waist-length, raven-black hair was saturated, water streaming steadily from the ends of the strands.

Vincent watched the water swirl down the drain with tired, misted crimson eyes. His bones and muscles ached from the recent hardships, but that was nothing new to him. Now, the weariness that seemed to drug his brain, that was a true rarity. Come to think of it, he actually felt a little...ill.

*Idiot* he chided himself. *You cannot get sick. Tired is what you are. You need sleep.*

The spray of shower water had long since numbed the back of his scalp, and Vincent numbly raised his head and began the mechanical process of washing his hair and body with the nearby soaps. In a muted fashion, he noted that the movement of his limbs was sluggish, as if it took his body a few moments to respond after his brain had issued an order. His own body was rebelling against him. Go figure.

Obligatory cleanliness finally achieved, instead of relinquishing the shower to the next person in line, Vincent instead stood underneath the needle-sharp spray of water, listening to its cadence of whispers fill the narrow shower stall. He could almost hear a voice...

*~ "Please tell me you trust me, Vincent." ~*

Yuffie again. Vincent was starting to think he'd never be able to escape her face, her voice. If he left AVALANCHE after they found Reeve—which he still fully intended to do—would he be able to forget her? Surely he would. The life of a wanderer was filled with many distractions, and Vincent was adept at repressing emotions better left untouched.

Steam from the hot water had filled the confined space, and when Vincent inhaled the moist vapors, he had the sudden impression that he had taken in more water than air, like he was breathing underwater. Drowning.

His skin suddenly turned cold, and the water became blisteringly hot against his chilled flesh. The world spun, and he instinctively lowered himself to the floor of the shower stall to avoid falling over. That was the last coherent decision his listless brain could make before chills and fever began to ride him again, just like they had the night after Yuffie's kidnapping.

Darkness swallowed his mind, ripping his breath from his lungs. His consciousness unraveled at the ends before re-weaving itself into something demonic and malicious. Chaos' laughter rang through the hell like a cacophony of imps in their fiery pit, and it took every ounce of Vincent's will not to shudder violently at the sound. The word rippled around him in shades of dark crimson, as if he were immersed in an ocean of blood.

### **BLEED FOR ME**

came the order from the dark.

"No!" Vincent rebelled with everything he was worth. He could only manage that one word, that one thought.

Chaos' will bore down on him, pushing Vincent across the scarlet waters, filling his nostrils with the reek of death, disease, and suffering. Figures writhed underneath the surface of the waters, an army of corpses trapped underneath the glistening surface, clawing for freedom with mangled hands and bloody fingers. Their mouths hung open in silent wails, but they had no voice. No, the only sound that rang through the stillness of the hell inside Vincent's mind was the weeping of a woman, no, several women. His heart froze in his chest as he realized he knew the owners of those cries. He had listened to them night after night...

### **SISTERS CRY FOR YOU. ANSWER THEM.**

Vincent clamped down on his own mind, trying to seal his memories away from the demon, but it was like fumbling for a key with slick, clumsy fingers. "Stay out of my mind, demon! I have no quarrel with you!"

### **SHOW YOU THE PIT.**

"The what?"

### **THE PIT.**

Vincent had no idea what Chaos meant by 'the pit,' but he knew it could be nothing good. And it was nothing he was in any state of mind to see. "Leave me in peace, Chaos. I have no desire to see your pit."

The demon's fiery rage suddenly burned Vincent's mind like scalding water on tender, unprotected flesh. He braced himself against it best he could, but the fury slammed against him, drowned him in images as anger made the demon forget how to properly communicate with its host. Yuffie. She was everywhere. Her face, her eyes, her voice. Chaos had guided Vincent to her! And what thanks did the demon get in return? Chaos would punish Vincent for such an unjust exchange!!

“I made no deal with you, demon! Return to the dark!” Vincent allowed every incantation he had ever learned as child to bubble up in his soul, flinging them desperately at the darkness with hopes to drive it back. Chaos found that highly amusing. Didn't Vincent know that if Chaos fell into Darkness, Vincent would follow? Humans. So silly.

### **DREAM FOR ME. PIT AND SISTERS. AND OF GIRL.**

Vincent started to say ‘no,’ but Chaos abruptly relinquished its hold on the man, leaving Vincent naked and shuddering on the floor of the shower, water streaming over him. Someone was pounding on the door.

“Vincent! Did you fall in or what? Other people are waiting, too!” It was Cid.

Bracing his claw on the edge of the tub, heedless of the small scratches the sharp digits left on the tile, Vincent shakily rose to his feet and shut off the water. Silence now, save for the lonely dripping of water from the showerhead and from Vincent's body. Darkness gnawed at the edges of his vision as his mind swirled with fever. He turned his head to the left, and it took his vision a few seconds to follow. Damn.

Vincent wasn't sure if he'd be able to walk. He could call for Cid to come in and help him... But, no. He would not draw others into this.

Vincent managed to pull aside the shower curtain and climb unsteadily out of the tub without slipping and killing himself. He was struggling to get his jeans to slide over his wet skin when Cid resumed his insistent demands that Vincent hurry his ass up. Studiously ignoring the man, Vincent had to pause twice in dressing as nausea and unconscious threatened to overtake him. Each time the sensations faded, but left a little more darkness in his vision. The world was beginning to look a little blurry, Vincent noted in a detached fashion.

Leaving his jeans zipped but not buttoned, Vincent grabbed the same filthy white shirt he'd been wearing for the past couple of days and wrenched the bathroom door open. Cool air buffeted his overheating skin, and his vision cleared long enough to glimpse Cid's annoyed expression frozen on his face like still-life painting, his hand raised, caught in the motion of knocking on the door. If Vincent looked as terrible as he felt, he could fully understand Cid's reaction.

Vincent stumbled past him as quickly as possible. Cid might have called after him, but the gunman could not be sure. Sounds were slowly diminishing, being faint and insignificant.

*Not here* he ordered his feverish mind. *You can't collapse here. That room. Go there. Go!*

The door to the room was open, darkness still and silent within. Vincent gripped

the threshold with human hand and half-tripped half-flung himself into the room. The air was cool here, and quiet. Placating. There were blurry forms stacked everywhere, clothes spilling out of various openings. Luggage. AVALANCHE had used this room as a makeshift storage closet, but by nightfall, some of them would most likely be sleeping in here.

He slid down the wall, letting the texture of the well-worn wallpaper grind against his back. His wet hair clung to his skin like chilled fingers tracing patterns on his back. Vincent's eyelids were trying to shut on their own accord.

*Hopefully* he thought. *Hopefully...this will have...passed...before anyone...sees...*

He felt his body sway to the side, but he was unconscious before he hit the floor.

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Rude sighed and reached underneath the bottoms of his sunglasses to rub his burning eyes. As if everyone wasn't tired, injured, or in bad spirits, Reno had chosen the most impeccable time to vanish. No one had seen him for an hour, and though Rude knew how easy it was to sneak away from a large crowd, it bothered him that everyone allowed things like disappearing teammates to go unnoticed. With such lax observation skills, it was no small wonder that Yuffie and Reeve had both been kidnapped.

The tall Turk strode purposefully into the living room. No Reno here either. But Red XIII was asleep on the couch, and someone had reattached Titus' handcuffs to the radiator. The man also looked to be asleep with his chin resting on his chest, but Rude wouldn't have bet a valuable item on it.

After giving the Running Man a stern look, Rude's pale green eyes swept the room to where Cloud leaned against the windowsill, looking out at the town. His back was to the living room, but Rude was fairly certain the man had sensed his entrance.

Rude walked over to the AVALANCHE leader, making sure he stayed within the range of Cloud's peripheral vision in the rare case the man did not know he was in the room. Pitching his voice low so as not to wake the room's other two occupants, Rude asked, "Cloud, have you seen Reno?"

Cloud's spiky head nodded. "Yeah, he went into the town about an hour ago. Said he was going for a walk. You need him for something?"

Rude was infinitely relieved that at least the leader of their ragtag team was keeping tabs on everyone. "No. Just wanted to know where he was."



Cloud didn't reply, and Rude decided to take the silence as a dismissal when the blonde suddenly spoke, "She's been out there for a while now."

Rude frowned at the cryptic phrase and stepped closer to the window, standing next to Cloud. The difference in their heights was quite obvious now, and a bit of a surprise to Rude. Cloud often had a way of carrying himself that made others forget his small size.

Through the window's glass, Rude could see Tifa Lockhart seated on the top step of Cid's porch, facing out towards the town with her legs folded underneath her and her hands resting in her lap. He didn't have to see her face to know her eyes were probably closed. They were not needed for what she was trying to see.

"Meditating," Rude commented, not quite able to prevent himself from admiring how her chocolate brown hair pooled on the wooden decking behind her.

"Yeah," Cloud said, abruptly turning around and giving his back to the window. He leaned on the edge of the windowsill and folded his arms across his chest. "I want to talk to her, but I don't think anything I say will matter."

"Why not?" *Why is he telling me this?*

"I'm not a martial artist."

"I didn't think you would need to be one," Rude replied levelly. *Just being you would be enough for her.*

Cloud sighed. "I'm like you, Rude. I learned almost all my principles from Shinra Inc. My friend Zack<sup>10</sup> tried to teach me some of his own morals, but he died so suddenly..." Pain flashed briefly across Mako blue eyes before it was contained. "Tifa learned her fighting style from an honorable teacher. Try as I might, some part of me just can't understand what she's going through right now. Whatever it is, though, I think it goes beyond just meeting an opponent stronger than herself."

"Titus said the flaw lies within her," Rude said, resisting the urge to glance over his shoulder at the man he spoke of.

The corners of Cloud's mouth turned down in a contemplative frown.

"She wagered her own life for our safety," Rude murmured, more to himself than to Cloud. The words sounded so noble, even falling from his mouth, in the deep voice that had kept repressed as he executed countless individuals who rarely deserved such a cruel fate at the hand of such a cruel man.

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<sup>10</sup> Unlike the previous instance, this was "Zax" in both the AngelFire and Fanfiction.net upload. I have updated it for consistency. —*Editor*

“She’s a good person,” Cloud said, voice soft, the words needless. Rude knew just what kind of person Tifa Lockhart was. The kind that he could not have. The kind that would not be happy with him. No, Tifa’s happiness stood not a foot away from his side, pained and brooding over her plight while she sat out there underneath a sunless sky, trying to look for a way to rid herself of her flaws, to become a better person than she already was.

Rude wanted to say something about how he admired her, not just for her beauty or for her battle prowess, but for her heart. But the words died in his throat. He could not speak of such things. Not of her. And not to Cloud, who felt so much more for her than Rude ever would.

At some moment in time, Cloud said that he was going for a walk, and that he would keep an eye out for Reno to make sure the Turk wasn’t causing havoc of any sort. Rude heard him, but didn’t reply. He stared for so long at Tifa’s seated figure that his eyes burned from staying open too long. This would be the closest he would ever be to Tifa, and he wanted to remember her as she was, seated there in her oversized white shirt and gym shorts, meditating on her flawed soul.

Rude was tired of trying. So tired.

He suddenly became aware of the fatigue in his limbs, and just how exhausted he was. He would see if he could help Shera with anything, and then he would retire somewhere to rest.

Rude turned his back to the window and strode away. Outside, the skies shifted restlessly, and the raindrops once again began to fall.

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Yuffie had never wanted a pair of pajamas so badly in her life. Pajamas would mean her activities were over and done with for the day. No more, “Yuffie, what are you just sitting around for? Do this” or “Yuffie, can you go get this from this place?” or “Go tell so and so to blah blah blah.” She liked doing things for people, but this was getting ridiculous. No, scratch that. She liked the warm, fuzzy feeling she got from making people happy, and if she could just cut out the manual labor part, it would be a good deal.

Barret had almost sent her on a third run to the grocery store for food supplies when the sudden return of the rain had foiled his scheme to turn her into a mindless slave good for nothing but running errands. Before the fatherly man could find yet another task for her, Yuffie had hightailed it out of the kitchen. Now, she had every intention of finding clothes that didn’t smell like butt, putting them on, and seeking some place to sleep.

She turned into the room where they had chucked all their luggage and nearly tripped

over Vincent Valentine's bare feet.

Of course, she didn't know it was Vincent at first. All she saw was a pair of pale feet and legs clad in damp denim before she realized "Hey, I just might fall over this weirdo's feet!" Her reflexes kicked in just in time to keep her from munching the floor, but the awkward maneuver sent her into a half-spin, and she had to sit down hard on someone's duffel bag to avoid losing her balance completely. The bag made a loud "poof!" noise as she squashed its contents. Oops. She hoped there was nothing breakable in there.

She was in the right mind to screech at whichever idiot had been dumb enough to fall asleep in such a ridiculous position when she recognized the ghostly pallor of the "idiot's" skin and the fall of ebony tresses that pooled on the floor all around their owner, curling around each other like slumbering serpents.

The yell that had been building in Yuffie's chest emerged as a pitiful squeak. *It's Vincent!*

She took a second to take in Vincent's state of dress. Or rather, undress, as the man only wore a pair of denim jeans—that weren't even freakin' **BUTTONED**, for crying out loud—which, upon closer inspection, had damp spots on them as if he had hastily pulled them on while his skin was still wet. He lay on his side with his back pressed against the wall, hair obscuring his face. He had the same ratty white shirt he'd been wearing for the past couple of days clutched tightly in his metallic claw.

Yuffie frowned. Normally, she'd be embarrassed about seeing, erm, so much of Vincent, but instead she found herself bothered. Why would he fall asleep in here? Did he hate being around other people **THAT** much? Well, come to think of it, she had seen Vincent do weirder things, like morph into boogey-monsters and whatnot. But still...why here, in a dark room with no blanket, no pillow, his jeans not buttoned, his shoes gone, his shirt still in his hand...

Slowly, Yuffie rose off her makeshift seat, leaving a deep indentation in the duffel bag from her backside's untimely impact with it. She cautiously crouched a few inches away from Vincent's sprawled form. Yes, that was a good word for his position. Sprawled. And Vincent never sprawled on things. He never allowed himself such freedom. Always contained and reserved, was Vincent Valentine.

*Should I try and wake him?* she wondered, drumming her fingers on her knees. Her last attempt at waking him hadn't worked so well. He had ended up lashing out at her from the abyss of sleep and scaring the crap out of her and then she had babbled her head off and then they had spent the night together and oh geez that sounded so bad even in her own head and she was babbling to *herself* now, which was really sad.

*I should at least move some of his hair before he ends up sucking it up nose or something* she argued with herself, trying to ignore how that pale, pale skin and dark hair begged to be touched. Shadows shifted on the muscled lines of Vincent's stomach as he breathed. *What's the worst he could do?* she thought. *Wake up and yell at me? Or hit me? And that would hurt, especially if he does it with his claw. Ok, touching Vinnie while he's sleeping: bad idea. But...what did I come in here for again?*

"Pajamas," she announced aloud. Vincent didn't even stir at the sound of her voice. He was really out cold.

Resolved to achieve her initial goal, Yuffie hopped quietly to her feet and marched across the room where her borrowed bag lay lonely and friendless underneath the window. She examined its contents, squinting to see in the darkness. No pajamas. Damn. Oh, but there was a really big shirt and sweat pants that looked to be a good fit. Score!

*Wonder if Vinnie is cold? And he needs a new shirt. That one is dirty and full of holes already. And it probably smells bad, too. Vincent is weird enough as it is. No need for him to be stinky, too.*

She looked to her right and saw Cloud's duffel bag sitting most invitingly on the carpet, easily discernible from the others by the pretty glittery stickers Yuffie had considerably placed on the dark material in a bout of boredom. *Well, I'm sure Cloud won't mind* she decided, shamelessly opening the bag and digging through it.

She returned to Vincent's side a few minutes later with a plain black shirt and dark jeans with annoying suspenders dangling off of them. She wasn't sure Vincent would go for the pants, but it was better than the near-rags he currently had on. She folded the garments with the same care that she folded her mother's old kimonos, and laid the pile of clothing near Vincent's lax fingers.

Carefully not letting her eyes drift to the man, lest she be once again tempted to touch him, she whispered, "Sorry, I couldn't find a blanket. And I can't use the bedspread because everyone else's crap is on it."

She thought about saying something more, but then she realized she was alone in a dark room, talking to a sleeping man who would remember nothing of what she said. Before she could get all sad over it, Yuffie gathered her nightclothes to her chest and left the room, giving Vincent's feet a wide berth. She hated that Vincent could make her chest tight when he wasn't even DOING anything besides lying there like a lump on a log.

She passed by the window again on her way to wait in line for the bathroom. The calm outside had once again been replaced by heavy air and tumultuous skies. Rain-streaked glass. The ocean stretching infinitely in so many directions, like Yuffie's mother's

futon, which had seemed so large and roomy to Yuffie's tiny five-year-old body. She felt as if she could lay there for hours, soothed just as much by the calm blues and grays of the cloth as she was by the sounds of her mother bustling around the room, humming to herself as she once again readied herself for another day.

A deep frown marred Yuffie's features, the expression mimicked by her dark grey eyes. Thinking of her mother made her think of Wutai. Her homeland. So close yet so far. Closer than it was far, actually.

An outrageous idea sparked in her mind, only to be frantically doused. She couldn't do that! Not now! What if her friends needed her?

But...it wouldn't take long. She would just go for a little while. Skulk around Turtle's Paradise and listen to the drunken sailors. Gather some of her own clothes. Touch her mother's kimonos again. She wouldn't be gone long. Maybe not even a day. No one would even notice her absence.

She hastily turned away from the window and tried to occupy her mind thinking of how she could argue her way to the front of the bathroom line, but she was painfully aware of the window at her back, the thunder rumbling in the distance like the gravelly cry of her Fatherland beckoning to her, calling her home...

-tbc

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Author's note:

Yes, Yuffie is having a love affair with that window.

Next chapter is a Reno chapter. Yay!

# Chapter Thirty-Seven

## *Parched Eyes*

*“No need to gut-punch me so early in the goddamn conversation.” —Reno*

*Too much time has passed  
to lament that we were once in love.  
The wind keeps blowing  
as I still can't heal the rift in my heart.  
Looking with one eye on the future  
while keeping the other on the past...  
If only I could sleep peacefully once more  
in the cradle of your love...  
Someone, cry for me with parched eyes.*

*“Real Folk Blues”  
—Ending theme of Cowboy Bebop—<sup>11</sup>*

a/n: Well, here is the next chapter. It's a short one, but the next chapter is looking to be a doozy so things will probably even out.

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Reno stood outside in the cool, damp night, drizzle lightly pelting the shoulders of his dark blue suit as he contemplated the roughly carved wooden letters hanging from a post outside the door. The Barnyard was supposedly one of the best bars in town, despite its simplistic appearance. Reno thought that all bars were the same. They all served alcohol, and they all had drunk, depressed people passed out in various shady corners. No difference at all.

Shifting his weight from foot to foot, Reno sighed and drew his jacket closer around himself, hunkering into its waterlogged layers and wishing he could light up a cigarette. After a day of being cooped up in Cid and Sherā's house with nothing to do but mill about aimlessly and take trips to the garage and bathroom just to avoid getting shanghaied into manual labor, Reno had gone stir-crazy and, in desperate need for a change of scenery, had decided to poke around the sleepy town.

And, of course, Reno found a bar. He always managed to locate them no matter what shadowy corner they were tucked away in, like a dirty secret meant to be hidden from prying eyes.

Reno's eyes once again traced the letters proclaiming the name “Barnyard.” For some

11 Performed by The Seatbelts, with vocals by Mai Yamane. —*Editor*

reason, it felt wrong for him to drown his sorrows in alcohol when somewhere out there, his President was maybe dead or dying. Then, he realized that Reeve wouldn't want him to be miserable...because Reeve was just an annoyingly good, noble person like that. He didn't care only about himself. He cared about Midgar and the well-being of its people. He was the President that greedy Alexander Shinra could never be and that diseased Midgar had desperately needed since the beginning of its social decay.

And now Reeve was gone, and Reno was starting to think they would never find him. What would happen to Neo-Shinra? They had left its operations temporarily in the hands of Reeve's few but very able-minded assistants, but they didn't have Reeve's do-gooder heart. Eventually, even they would be overwhelmed by the stress of a resurrecting a city that was already firmly ensconced in a grave with cemetery dirt scattered over it.

But who else would be competent enough to take Reeve's place? Reno knew he couldn't, and neither could Rude or Elena. Turks were meant to hunker in the shadows, not stand boldly in the spotlight, where bloodstains were easier to see.

As if Reno's mood already wasn't foul enough, the dark skies above suddenly let out a horrendous belch, and the misty drizzle evolved into a steady downpour. Cursing under his breath, the redhead strode the last few steps up to the Barnyard's door, pushing his way through the old-style saloon doors, letting them swing shut behind him with an ear-grinding squeak.

A fine mist of second-hand smoke immediately flitted over to greet him, and Reno almost smiled. Bars. So dependable. He loved them. A few patrons glanced over at him, saw he wasn't female, and lost interest. Being the youngest, handsomest male customer at the moment merited him long, lingering looks from the few women in the bar, but for once, Reno was in no mood for their attentions.

He made his way purposely over to the bar, seating himself between two bulky, glum-looking men. The bartender was a faceless creature with a gruff voice and stained apron as Reno asked for a beer. Truthfully, he wanted something stronger, but beer was cheap and lasted longer than the potent shots of hardcore liquor that he normally ordered when he intended to get smashed.

But he didn't want to drink to the point where he was puking his guts out in an alley somewhere. He just wanted to forget.

The beer seemed to materialize in front of him, and Reno wrapped his chapped hands around the bottle, the cold glass numbing his damp flesh. His knuckles shifted underneath his skin like the hideous shadow of the Midgar Zolom slithering below the surface of its marshy swamp.

*Damn* he mused. *Looks like the hand of an effing skeleton. Don't think skeletons get hangnails, though.*

A deep swing of his beer yielded a bitter taste but no burn. Damn. He wanted a burn, coursing down his throat like a stream of acid, scalding his insides, fogging his brain. Sure, the beer would make him forget, but it would take a while.

He wished he'd ordered something stronger.

But shit, it was so hard to think. He could barely *function*, for Shiva's sake, much less *think*. That was what goddamn Strife was for. Let the leader make all the decisions. At this point, Reno was only good for two things: fighting, and nursing his old wounds. He was dead tired of the first, and he was starting to think his heart could not handle any more of the second.

He'd been unable to avoid seeing Alette during the past couple of days. Cid's house was only so big. Reduced the number of places one could hide from an ex-wife who had murdered one's only daughter.

Reno brought the dark glass of the beer bottle to his lips and tilted his head backwards, swallowing steadily until he had completely drained the bottle. And oh, it burned. At last. His head lolled forward, and he settled his empty bottle on the bar counter with a resolute clink. The grain of the wooden bar in front of him danced and swirled like a kaleidoscope of browns and yellows. That was nice. Dance for me, baby.

A pressure trembled loudly between his ears, and Reno realized the bar wasn't swimming for him. No, it was his eyes that were swimming with... He hurriedly pressed his arm to his eyes, the cold, wet material of his suit jacket meeting the drops of hot, salty liquid that fought to liberate themselves from the cage of his trembling eyelashes.

Too many times had Reno sent prayers to the heavens, to the Planet, only to have them ignored and flung back at him to lie barren and unfulfilled at his feet. But now, he wanted to pray. But to whom? To a Planet the human race had defiled with their greed? To heavens that didn't give a flying shit about a no-good-for-nothing like him? To gods or goddesses who had long ago fallen from their thrones?

No one cared. No one would listen. He could find a random woman, go home with her, release his bodily passions in her bed, but he knew his eyes would be closed during the entire encounter, and the woman beneath him would be wearing someone else's face.

His heart seemed to quake his chest just like the fucking shameful tears dancing their pitiful waltz in his parched eyes, and he hunched his shoulders in a vain attempt to contain the horrible, burning ache that wanted to devour him alive. *Somebody, anybody, help me...*



The sound of metal chinking against metal reached his ears, but it never occurred to him that the sound was a Crystal Bangle striking the end of a metal gauntlet until he sensed the bartender shuffle over to attend to someone who was evidently seated right next to him. A familiar voice ordered a Blood Rain on the rocks, and Reno slowly lowered his arm from his eyes, glaring at the motionless bar in front of him. No more swimming. Good. He could at least maintain some of his dignity.

His hand once again curled itself around his now-empty beer bottle, more for the comfort of the gesture than anything else. "I think you took someone's seat, Strife," he told his new bar companion.

Cloud Strife shrugged, rain dripping from his saturated blonde hair onto the armor fastened on his left shoulder. "The man who was sitting here left just as I was coming in."

"Hn," Reno contributed as the bartender arrived with Cloud's drink. Red salt specially imported from Bone Village marched around the rim of the short, squat glass, the crimson granules complimenting the bright, virulent red-orange of the liquid itself. It looked too cheerful a drink to be called "Blood Rain," but Reno knew from experience that it was as potent as Hell's Fire. Gave a nice burn, too.

Cloud lifted the index finger of his left hand, bringing the bartender to a halt. "Another for him as well," he said levelly. The bartender didn't ask who 'him' was, only moved off to mix another of the drink.

"Those things are expensive," Reno told his beer bottle. "You're gonna run yourself up a high bill."

Another shrug that Reno barely detected out of the corner of his eye. "I've got money," Cloud replied.

Reno was not one to refuse free drinks, even if the source of the charity was the leader of AVALANCHE. Oh hell. This was a bar. People weren't supposed to care about names, or pasts, or sins unresolved. You were just here to drink, and that was all. Have fun if it suited the mood, but you never worried about names or titles unless you wanted a fight to break out sooner or later.

The second Blood Rain arrived next to Reno's forsaken beer, and the redhead was just about to transfer his affections to the glass when a hand clad in a thick leather glove held a napkin in front of him.

Reno lifted his eyes to meet Cloud's Mako blue ones. "The hell? I got something on my face?"

"Yeah," the blonde replied, voice careful.

Reno grabbed the napkin and briskly wiped his mouth.

“No,” Cloud said quietly. “Your eyes.”

Reno froze, hand still clutching the napkin to his face. He waited, expecting anger, or shame, or sadness that Cloud Strife had seen him with tears lingering in his eyes. But nothing came to him, nothing but the thought that he really wanted to drink that Blood Rain. A swift swipe across his eyes, and Reno did not check to see if there was any dampness on the napkin. He merely let the paper square flutter to the bar and picked up his glass. A bitterly seductive brush over his tongue, and then the alcohol hit his throat...

*Yeah, that was a burn.*

Cloud didn't say anything else to him, and together they sat in their identical barstools, hunched over their twin Blood Rains. Reno didn't know what Cloud was thinking about, but the Turk was running. Running from a little girl in a pink dress, playing with her blocks on a sunny morning. And running from his wife, from the woman that had single-handedly ruined his life, and was in the process of tearing apart his new one.

But emotions with nowhere to run had to find some outlet, and they happened upon his voice, spilling from his lips in a voice devoid of the slur of inebriation. “I never knew how much I still hated her until I saw her again that cellar. I can't stand the sight of her.”

Cloud stirred slightly, voice just as clear and considerably franker. “You still love her.”

Reno snorted. “Shit, Strife, be a little more considerate, will ya? No need to gut-punch me so early in the goddamn conversation.”

“But it's true, isn't it? The fact that you still have feelings for her is half the reason you're so infuriated with the situation. I think...that you hate yourself as much as you hate her. Maybe more.”

Burning again, but not from the alcohol. “You'd best stop while you're ahead, Cloud.”

Cloud stopped, but after a few seconds, Reno found that *he* couldn't. “We had a family together, you know.”

“I know.”

“We had baby girl named Mika. I loved that little girl.”

No response, just wide-open silence, ready to receive his words.

“Alette killed her. She killed my reason for living. From then on, I was just an empty husk tottering through my miserable excuse for a life. So I hate her, and what I hate even more is the fact that I still love her after everything she did.”

Cloud didn't say anything.

Reno took another sip from his glass. "You were right, Strife. Aren't you happy about that?"

"No."

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*How long must I live on before I'm healed?*

*The real folk blues I only want*

*to know true happiness.*

*All that glitters*

*isn't gold.*

*The real folk blues I only want*

*to know true sadness.*

*A life drenched in a river of mud*

*isn't so bad*

*As long as it ends after the first time.*

*"Real Folk Blues"*

*—Ending theme of Cowboy Bebop—*

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Vincent's sisters were crying in the darkness, and he could not find them.

Towering trees rose up on all sides, reminiscent of the forests of his homeland, but no, these trees were terribly wrong. Too tall, too menacing. They blotted out the moonlight, robbed him of any sense of direction. All Vincent could hear was the plaintive weeping and the roar of his own blood in his ears. He wanted to cry with frustration, but boys did not cry. He had to be strong and take care of his sisters, just like Mother said.

But where was Mother? He could not find her, either!

"Mother!" he cried into the forest, his voice like it was many years ago. High, shrill, that of a five year old boy who could not find his family.

A path opened before him, the trees arcing away, their great trunks bending at nearly impossibly angles. Light. He saw light! Vincent forced his bare, tired feet to move faster, treading across the ruthless ground with the ease of a grubby child who had spent many a day outdoors.

Vincent reached the end of his path, arms flung forward to embrace the light. He stumbled, and fell into a small clearing. The dark soil beneath him rolled and bubbled as

if something ghastly lived underneath it, and the ground rose and fell with its monstrous breaths. The gigantic trees stopped short of the clearing, not wanting to take root in such foul soil. Overhead the red sky churned and thrashed angrily, clouds rolling and battling one another for domination of the realm below them. Some wanted to rule the world. Others wanted to eat it.

A woman sat on a desolate tree stump in the middle of the clearing, her dark hair unbound and tangled down her slender back, her threadbare dress barely clinging to her long, elegant frame.

“Vermillion!” Vincent cried, rushing across the evil soil to meet his sister. She rose, limbs moving with the same unconscious grace she had always possessed.

Vincent wanted to hug her, but he didn’t. Vermillion didn’t like her little brother very much. Sometimes Vincent thought she hated him. But he didn’t want to think about that now. It would make him cry, and he didn’t want to cry in front of Vermillion.

He stopped in front of his sister, breathing hard. The air stunk of something foul. “Vermillion! Where is Mother?”

She stared down at him, face blank. Her eyes were the exact color of the crimson skies above.

Vincent shifted anxiously. The soil was burning his feet, like he was standing on hot metal, or acid. “Where did Vanessa and Valkyrie go? Venicia?”

“They have long since passed,” Vermillion said, her low, husky voice just as Vincent remembered.

The little boy frowned. He did not understand many things that Vermillion said, but he didn’t want to seem stupid. It would just make her dislike him more. While he mulled over what to say to her next, the pain in his feet spiked upwards sharply, to the point where he could no longer ignore it.

“Vermillion,” he whimpered, tugging on the sleeve of her dress. “Please pick me up! The ground is burning my feet!”

His sister ignored him, craning her neck backwards. “Look, Vincent, the sky is bleeding.”

Now that she mentioned it, Vincent *could* smell blood in the air, but he didn’t want to see the bleeding sky! He wanted to see his Mother!

He fisted his small hands in the folds of Vermillion’s raggedy dress. “Vermillion! My feet burn!!”

The ground began to shake and roll beneath them in a startling accurate mimicry of the sky. Vincent felt a shameful scream building in his throat, but Vermillion wrapped her arms around him, tucking his face into the fabric of her dress, right underneath her small breasts. “We’re going to run, Vincent.”

He shook his head wildly as he clung to his sister. “I can’t run! My feet hurt! Vermillion, I can’t run! Please don’t hate me!”

“Silly, I could never hate you,” a voice chided, and Vincent froze, recognizing the high-pitched, musical cadence of it, nothing at all like his sister’s.

The scent of Yuffie surrounded him, soothing his exhausted nerves and terrified heartbeat. The world quieted, and even his feet stopped burning. Yuffie was quite a bit smaller than his willowy sister, and Vincent’s head fit perfectly underneath her chin as she patted his short, dark hair with one hand. He hugged her as tightly as the meager strength in his small arms would permit, pressing his face against the weave of her dark green tank top.

“Don’t leave me, please,” he begged, unable to keep the tears out of his voice.

She laughed. “Of course not. We will go to Wutai together!”

Wutai?

Vincent awoke to find himself clutching not Yuffie, but the ratty, stained white shirt he’d been wearing for the past couple of days. He blinked into the darkness as his mind swam up from the tides of sleep, shaking off the white foam of dream. Shadowy forms of hastily packed bags and suitcases bloomed from the blurry darkness. Oh yes, he remembered now. He’d passed out.

Red XIII lay on the bed amongst the array of half-unzipped duffel bags and wayward garments that had wormed their way out of the nylon cages. He made no menacing movements as Vincent struggled into a sitting position, but something flickering in the depths of the beast’s one good eye immediately put the gunslinger on guard.

“Did you need something?” Vincent asked calmly, leaning his back against the wall behind him. His limbs ached terribly.

“This situation seems familiar,” Red commented.

“How so?”

“You inexplicably passed out on the floor, practically dead. I was napping in the living room when a surge of strange energy roused me from my slumber. Following the origin of the power led me to you. I tried to wake you, Vincent, but I couldn’t. Only the sound of

your breath and the beating of your heart let me know that you were still alive.”

Vincent didn't reply.

“For how long have you been passing out like this, Vincent?” Red demanded.

“Since Kalm, the night after Yuffie was kidnapped.”

The lion-like beast's tail swished in growing agitation, the glowing tip the brightest object in the dark room. “I know Cloud asked you once, but I will ask you again: are you losing control of Chaos?”

“My disputes with my internal demons are none of your concern,” Vincent said flatly.

Red sighed, the air whistling through his sharp teeth as he rose to all fours and dropped onto the floor with a soft rustling of furred limbs and the muted jingle of the rings in his pierced ears. He sat down inches away from Vincent's outstretched legs.

“This is serious,” he stated. “I know you are a secretive man, Vincent, and under normal circumstances, I would respect your privacy, but the last thing AVALANCHE needs right now is for its members to be hoarding information that would be better off shared with the rest of us.”

“If I believe my fainting episodes will cause harm to AVALANCHE, rest assured I will take necessary action to protect my comrades.”

“Which will involve what? Leaving us?” Red retorted.

His words were a little too close to the truth for comfort. But what bothered him more was that Red knew him well enough that he could predict almost precisely how Vincent would react to a situation.

“Red, I cannot explain to you something I scarcely understand myself. These fainting episodes are merely Chaos' way of trying to tell me something, I believe. Nothing that you or the others should be worried about.”

Red looked at him narrowly before shrugging. “I trust you, Vincent, but I do not trust that demon, and when I walked into this room, I smelled almost nothing but Chaos' scent. It was most unnerving.”

“Chaos is an unnerving creature,” Vincent replied, noticing for the first time that there was a black shirt and a pair of pants folding neatly on a floor a little ways away from him. He looked at Red questioningly, but the beast shook his head.

“I did not lay them out. Judging from the scents clinging to the garments, they are Cloud's clothes, and Yuffie laid them out for you.”

“Yuffie,” Vincent mused, before realizing that the girl must have happened upon him while he was...incapacitated. “Where is she?”

“Asleep in Tifa’s room. Cloud and Reno are out somewhere in the town. I believe Rude and a couple of the others will be going out shortly as well, and you, of course, are invited to go with them.” He rose to his feet and padded towards the door. “I leave you to get dressed.”

Vincent watched as Red slunk out of the door, listening to the sounds of his claws hitting the floor as he made his way presumably back to the living area. He understood his friend’s suspicion, but Vincent had spoken the absolute truth when he said that he hardly understood Chaos’ strange actions. The demon wished to show him something, he knew that much. Vincent had a feeling that no matter how hard he fought, he would eventually succumb to the creature’s advances and be forced to accept the knowledge he was being offered. Chaos would have it no other way, and even Vincent’s unshakable stubbornness could not compare to the patience of an ages-old demon.

Sighing, he discarded the white shirt that had served him fairly well for the past few days and gingerly picked up the garments Yuffie had laid out for him. A black cotton shirt. Durable slacks complete with suspenders. Vincent doubted he would find any need for the latter aspect of the pants, as he didn’t have Cloud’s small waist and relatively narrow shoulders, but he knew from years of experience that even something as petty as suspenders could prove an indispensable resource in a desperate situation.

Considerate of Yuffie to think of him. If only she knew how sorely misplaced her affections were.

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Dr. Campbell hurried down the streets of Mideel as fast as the darkness and his still-asleep legs would permit, his emergency bag held tight in his elderly hands and his pristine coat already settled on his shoulders. The close, muggy air of Mideel made for an extremely warm night, and Campbell had to stop for a second to readjust his glasses as they started to slide down the sweat on his nose. But a second was all he took before moving again, panting slightly as the newly rebuilt hospital came into view, bathed in the light that the Lifestream sitting in the center of the town radiated. It was never truly night, here in Mideel.

He was hurrying to the front of the hospital when the door suddenly flew open, spilling artificial light into the not-quite-dark night.

Campbell blinked to clear his vision, and the stout figure of his head nurse, Elise, came rushing towards him, her dark hair unbound and hanging into her face.

“Doctor!” she exclaimed, clapping her hands together and interlacing her fingers, as if in some semblance of adulation. “Thank GOODNESS you’ve finally arrived!”

Campbell smiled congenially, sensing that the woman was extremely anxious. “Yes, and thank goodness I got here in one piece. The climb from the center of the town gets longer and longer every day, it seems.”

Her nerves not eased in the slightest, Elise took him by the arm and started tugging him towards the door, nearly dragging him. “I know I shouldn’t have disturbed you at such an ungodly hour, Doctor,” she said breathlessly as she ushered him into the brightly lit interior of the hospital. “But you see, Jed brought this man in here, and...and...I just don’t know what to do for him! I don’t even know if...”

Her voice trailed off as they entered the mysterious patient’s room. Living and growing up in a small town like Mideel, where the economy was self-sufficient and no contact with the outside world was really needed even though it was welcome, Campbell didn’t see the kinds of things that big city doctors saw. No gunshot wounds. No axes lodged in various parts of patients’ anatomies. He was lucky (or rather, unlucky) if he saw a cut that needed stitches.

That’s why when he saw the figure lying on the only bed in the room, he didn’t pick up the nurse’s reason for alarm right away. The figure on the bed was moving, its head lolling from side to side and its legs twitching, but it didn’t seem to be in any pain. It was a man, dark-haired and barefooted, wearing a shirt that was a very familiar color of fluorescent blue-green and a pair of dark blue slacks that sported tears in a couple of places. The funny thing was, he could have sworn that he had seen this man somewhere before.

Then a figure sitting in a chair beside the bed suddenly leapt up, startling the doctor. He had been so engrossed by the patient’s outlandish appearance that he had completely missed the rail-thin figure of Jed, one of the local citizens, perched beside the hospital bed.

“I don’t know what’s wrong with him, doc,” Jed said immediately, sounding apologetic for some odd reason. His blue eyes and weathered face were sad, as if he had done something wrong.

“You’re the one that brought him in, then?” Campbell asked gently, trying to put the jittery man at ease.

Jed nodded so hard that Campbell half-expected to hear his teeth clack together. “Yessir! I was just down there, you know, by the Lifestream Lake an’ all. I like to go down there at night an’ all cause it so pretty and everything. And there he was, doc, just floating there like he was dead or something! Had to reach in to get ‘em.”

Jed suddenly held out his left arm, and Campbell saw that the sleeve of the man’s



cream-colored flannel shirt was stained the same color as the patient's. Fluorescent green. Lifestream green.

"Hm," Campbell made a soft, considering sound as he approached the patient on the bed, dropping his bag gently to the floor as he went. "You found this man in the Lifestream?"

Jed gave one of those jerky nods again, looking at the doctor nervously as the elderly man bent over to examine the figure on the bed.

*Gods...where have I SEEN this man before?* he thought as his eyes took in the unnaturally pale pallor of the man's skin, the way his limbs would twitch at random intervals. His mouth was open, his lips moving but no sound coming out.

The patient's face suddenly lolled in Campbell's direction.

"Gods," the doctor commented softly, adjusting his glasses. "Some bright eyes he has there..."

The patient's unseeing eyes still bore flecks of what might have been brown at one point, but were now a shimmering golden color, their luminescence exploding under the lights of the room. Most of the people in Mideel now had rather bright eyes as a result of high exposure to the Lifestream, but none of them were like THIS.

Then Campbell suddenly realized. The twitching of the limbs. The dilated and unfocused eyes. The ceaseless moving of the lips. The shirt stained with the liquid of the Lifestream. And the glowing eyes. The glowing Mako eyes. The only time he had seen eyes as bright as this was on another man about a year ago. That blond swordsman who had washed up on their shores...

Heart thumping painfully in his chest, Campbell looked at the dark hair and beard of the patient, and he suddenly realized just where he had seen this man before. On television. With the rest of AVALANCHE.

It was Reeve of Neo-Shinra.

"Doctor?" Elise asked cautiously from the doorway. "I'm not sure, but this looks somewhat similar to that case a year ago. You know, with that young pokey-haired man carrying that huge sword?"

The doctor straightened, folding his arms across his chest. "This case isn't just similar, Elise," he said quietly. "It IS the same case. Mako poisoning. Only this case is MUCH more advanced." He looked sadly at the mute, twitching figure on the bed.

"This man doesn't have very long. Please, Elise, find me some way to contact Cloud Strife."

-TBC

# Chapter Thirty-Eight

## *Sojourn in Wutai I*<sup>12</sup>

*“...and it is not just because I watched you nearly fall headfirst into my fishpond.” —Lord Godo*

Yuffie quietly shut the back door behind her, holding her breath and waiting fearfully. Her stomach had wound itself into knots, and her heart seemed to pound annoyingly loud in her chest. So loud, in fact, that she was surprised it hadn't woken up all of Rocket Town yet.

Once she was satisfied that her nocturnal meandering had gone unnoticed, she slowly released her breath and wiped the perspiration off her forehead. Damp night air pressed against her skin like a thick musk, still heavy with moisture from the rain that had blessedly halted for a few precious moments. Yuffie had no doubt the erratic downpours would resume soon, and thus, she had to hurry.

Wrapping her borrowed cloak tighter around her body, she tiptoed through the slick grass of Cid's backyard, trying to make her footfalls as silent as possible. Years of thievery had taught her that patience, perseverance, and quiet feet always triumphed in the end. Yuffie was all for the “quiet feet” bit, but she always preferred a more straightforward approach over the sneaky, roundabout methods most freakishly successful thieves swore by.

Time was teaching Yuffie many things.

Waiting for everyone to return home from their beer-guzzling adventures had tried the very limits of her patience. Yuffie didn't feel comfortable skulking around Cid's house like a traitor with a dirty secret when her friends were still out and about. It seemed Cloud and Reno would never return from their venture to the local bar until she heard Elena yelling at the drunken duo in the living room. Something about kangaroos and Reno running into a telephone pole. And Rude's particularly nasty case of gas.

Yuffie didn't even want to ASK about that one.

But she'd waited on the floor of Tifa's room, covered from neck to toe in a sleeping bag so no one would see that she hadn't bothered to change into her nightclothes. She knew that Tifa was a light sleeper, but the older woman had thankfully remained unconscious while Yuffie tiptoed out of the room and to the back door. It seemed Cloud, Reno, and the other bar-hoppers had passed out in the living room before making it to their bedrooms,

<sup>12</sup> Chapter Thirty-Eight was called “Prison of Flesh and Bone” in Catalina's pre-listing for it. —Editor

and Red the resident bloodhound had fortunately opted to sleep out on the porch rather than indoors.

All things considered, Yuffie had a lucky break, and by Leviathan, she was NOT going to waste it!

Praying that none of her friends had decided to take a late-night walk (hey, thirteen people were damn hard to keep track of!), Yuffie made her way across the Highwinds' backyard, which looked a lot bigger without the Tiny Bronco to occupy most of the space. The poor broken plane was probably doing some deep-sea solo surfing by now. Eh, it was hunk of junk anyways. Not that she was going to tell that to Cid or anything.

She nimbly leapt the fence and dared one last glance back at the house. No suspicious lights or shadows had appeared in the past thirty seconds. So far, so good. A loud burst of thunder roared directly above her, and Yuffie nearly peed her pants. She suddenly felt as if the skies had thrown a spotlight on her figure, and the clouds were crying, "Here she is! She's over here!"

*Shutupshutupshutup*, Yuffie chanted in her head as she made a mad dash for the chocobo barn Cid had built a little ways behind his house. *Dammit, I'm gonna get caught! Stupid-ass thunder gave away my position and oh gawd, how am I going to get out of this one? I'm so screwed! Whose bright idea was this in the first place and holy shit, it was mine because I'm an idiot!*

Yuffie's frantic thoughts didn't let up until she practically slammed face first into the doors of the chocobo barn. Her trembling fingers fumbled their way into the small crack between the doors, finding enough leverage to push one to the side. Yuffie eased her slender body into the small gap, and then it was just her panting in the still darkness of barn, surrounded by the smell of greenery and chocobo poop. And ah, how lovely it was!

Sleepy warks issued from the darkness, and Yuffie answered in a squeaky voice she barely recognized as her own, "It's me, choco-butts! Your old friend Yuffie!"

More warks and cheeps. The sound of claws moving over hay and wood. Yuffie was able to pick out two different curious cheeps from the good-mannered golds and one very annoyed squawk that *had* to be Triton—the bluest, meanest, rottenest chocobo Yuffie had ever had the displeasure of being dumped on her ass by. Only Tifa and Cid could ride the nasty birdbrain with any amount of success, but that was fine because Yuffie had NO intention of taking Triton out for a stroll.

"I'm coming, birdies," Yuffie said in a sing-song voice that was meant as more of a comfort for herself than the chocobos. She tried to calm to the pounding of her heart as she fumbled along the wall for the light switch that Mr. Fix-It Cid had cleverly installed

in the barn. No flashlights or lanterns needed, no siree. One flick of her fingers, and the entire barn filled with lovely, electric illumination that did wonders for Yuffie's frazzled nerves.

Unfortunately, the light's intrusion elicited another indignant squawk from Triton, and Yuffie hurriedly shut the small gap she had made in the barn doors, lest the light and the chocobo's incessant whining wake the others.

She marched over to Triton's stall and glared at the blue chocobo, who glared right back at her. "Dammit, if I were Cid, I would have cooked you up and served you as dinner a long time ago!" she whisper-screamed at the bird. "What is it with you blues? If I were Butterfly, I'd be ashamed to claim you as my son!"

The mention of Yuffie's much-missed chocobo cooled her temper a little. Cid's stable had eight different stalls, one for each of AVALANCHE's chocobos. It was kind of depressing to see only three of those stalls occupied by the large birds. However, Yuffie was only worried a little about the chocobos they had left at Kalm. The birdbrains loved to swim, and she knew without a doubt that no matter what grudge Butterfly held against her master, if Yuffie went to Kalm and called her chocobo's name, then by golly, Butterfly would come running if she were in earshot. Chocobo Billy still raved to customers about how "them old folks in AVALANCHE" had bred some of the most loyal chocobos he'd ever seen.

Five minutes later, Yuffie crept back out of the barn holding the reins of Zoe, the more mannerly of the two gold chocobos. And the quieter. The elegant bird obediently held still while Yuffie mounted her, shifting on the saddle until she was remotely comfortable. Another glance towards the house that lay ominously quiet against the cloudy night sky, and Yuffie was off with only a minute flick of the reins.

Between Zoe and her twin brother Quinn (also a gold), Zoe was the faster bird, and tonight Yuffie had chosen speed over endurance. Zoe had won them countless races at Gold Saucer, and her much-valued speed did not waver as she brought her rider to the sandy shores outside Rocket Town in a little less than five minutes.

However, Yuffie reined the chocobo in, briefly daunted by the visage of the great ocean stretching like a plain of endless dark before her. Lightning blazed in the dark sky while its reflection simultaneously writhed on the watery surface, as if both ocean and sky conspired to confuse onlookers as to which way was up and which was down. A salty wind tore at Yuffie's cloak and sent locks of chocolate brown hair flying into her eyes, which she pushed away in great agitation.

It was impossible to see edge of the Wutai land mass in the darkness, but Yuffie knew it was out there. All she needed to do was guide Zoe onto the black waters and steer her

in a northwestern direction. But...what if, in the darkness, Yuffie got turned around and the two of them were lost at sea? She had never ridden a chocobo on the ocean during a thunderstorm. What if the waves suddenly got turbulent and the two of them were swallowed by the hungry currents?

Yuffie tightened her grip on Zoe's reins until she felt the leather bite painfully into her palms. She was being stupid again. There was no way she could miss Wutai, it was the biggest chunk of land for miles! And if she DID get lost, well, gold chocobos were known to guide lost riders home by following their own innate sense of direction, and Zoe's instincts had yet to fail them. As for Yuffie's bothersome seasickness, if she could ride a jet ski and not toss her cookies, then this should be no problem.

*But that was different, she argued with herself. That time I had Vincent with me. And now, it's just me and the ocean, and she's always hated me.*

Zoe warked softly, craning her head to the side to peer worriedly at her rider. Yuffie affectionately patted the crown of golden feathers adorning the bird's head. "It's just you and me, girl. I think we're gonna be just fine, but if worse comes to worst, I'll sink to the bottom with you."

The chocobo cooed encouragingly despite her rider's morbid words. Yuffie took a deep breath and flicked the reins. A few swift steps, a single moment of sickening disorientation as the ground gave way to water, and she was riding the ocean.

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Titus knew the instant the talons of Yuffie's Kisaragi's golden chocobo touched the ocean's surface. He could feel them like small pinpricks along the flesh of his back, needling the skin. The sensations were not as strong as they might have been before the Planet had become ill, but Titus had worshipped age-old gods for longer than Yuffie had been alive. One does not easily forget what it is like to slumber safely in the womb of the Mother of all Life, surrounded by her children, where her watery flesh was your own flesh. It was a total bombardment of sensations that often drove worshippers mad, but not Titus. He had seen and felt far worse things than ships sailing across his chest, or a hurricane whipping the strands of his white-blond hair into a frenzy. Simple things. Such comforting things.

But Titus had not synchronized with the Mother in a long time, and her turbulent waters were not very hospitable at the moment. He soon slipped out of her arms and back to his prison of flesh and bone, mind slowing swimming up from the depths of the trance he had put himself in. His emerald eyes glowed softly as he opened them to find himself once again in the real world: handcuffed to the radiator of Cid Highwind's house, limbs horribly cramped, the air around him permeated by soft darkness.

He let the breath sigh out of his lungs one last time and expanded his awareness to include the entire house, grazing unseen fingers over each of its occupants. Asleep, most of them. Dreaming, some. The only ones that lie awake in the witching hour were the baldheaded Turk called Rude, who shifted restlessly in the armchair he was slouched in, and Shera Highwind, kept from sleep by her husband's snores. But she was not annoyed by this. Such a serene mind, that Shera. Titus briefly contemplated settling his power against her aura, rolling himself in it and absorbing some of her utter placidity. He quickly decided against it, though. Some humans could feel his bodiless presence, and he didn't want to risk exposure if Shera Highwind was one of them. One complaint of strange things amiss, and he knew AVALANCHE would immediately point fingers in his direction.

The other creature that merited some attention from Titus was the one called Red XIII, who never truly slept, it seemed. He dozed often, such as he was doing now on the porch of the house, but that was all Titus discerned before retracting the probing fingers of his power. That one was slightly more sensitive to things of the metaphysical breed, and Titus had known very early on that he had to be wary of the Guardian of Cosmo Canyon.

Titus withdrew into himself as a headache began to form at his temples. He smiled without mirth. His skills were rusty with disuse if he was feeling pain this early on. He opened his eyes once again to the dark living room, raising his hands to rub his aching wrists as best he could with the handcuffs in the way. Such silly things, really. He could shatter them in an instant if he wanted. He had already wormed his way out of them twice today to get circulation running back into his hands, and AVALANCHE had been none the wiser.

He suddenly sensed a pair of eyes on him, and he looked up to find Vincent Valentine standing not five feet away from him, hovering in the doorless threshold that separated the living room and the kitchen.

Titus stared openly, hoping his shock didn't show on his face. *He must have been standing there for a while, or I would have heard him approach. Which means he was right on top of me this entire time, and I didn't even sense a glimmer of his mind.*

After the first time Titus had picked up images leaking from Vincent's mind in Junon, the man had been sealed up tighter than an airless vault. He was like a walking void of emptiness. Not even that, actually. He was simply...invisible to Titus' mind. Disturbing. Most disturbing.

Titus hadn't truly feared a man or woman in a long time, but he was starting to think Vincent Valentine might be worth a little fear.

There was something horribly wrong with the man, that was certain. From what Titus knew of his past, Valentine's body had been...tampered with by a man of evil scientific

genius. But there was something else about the dark gunslinger that went beyond having an odd body composition. Something twisted and familiar.

Titus schooled his face into its familiar mask of disinterest as he met Valentine's gaze levelly. "If you're looking for Yuffie," he whispered, knowing that no matter how soft his voice was, the other man would hear it. "She is crossing the ocean to Wutai as we speak."

"I know," Vincent said, voice just as quiet, just as emotionless.

"If you plan to go after her, take a cloak from the hall closet. Another downpour will be arriving in around ten minutes."

Vincent didn't ask why Titus was telling him such things, or how the strange man knew such outlandish information. He merely turned on heel and strode away. A few moments later, Titus heard the hall closet door creak open. A quick rustle of the garments within, another creak as the door was closed, and then the finality of the backdoor disturbing the air currents as it opened and closed almost silently on well-oiled hinges.

"Godspeed, Valentine," Titus murmured.

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Yuffie made it to Wutai safe and sound. No monster-sized waves rose from the ocean's watery depths to devour her. She didn't get struck by lightning or abducted by aliens. Oh, and she didn't vomit or get seasick. That was a definite plus. Sure, it started raining not long after she and Zoe started crossing the ocean, but that was no biggie. She'd been putting up with rain for what seemed like forever; what was a little more?

Once she got back on dry land, she instantly felt better. The monsters of Thunder Valley didn't feel like coming out to play in such abominable weather, not that they would have posed much of a threat to Yuffie and the power of her super mighty Oritsuru in the event that they managed to catch up to a rider on a gold chocobo.

Needless to say, her journey through the rocky terrain at the southernmost tip of the Wutai continent was uneventful save for the clumps of mud now clinging to her and Zoe's legs. Mud was generally not a fun thing, but as soon as the distant visage of her home city appeared in the distance, Yuffie forgot all her physical discomforts. She was home at last!

She left Zoe underneath a rocky overhang with a sincere apology, a bagful of greens, and the promise that she wouldn't have to wait long in the rain. Then, the young woman wrapped herself in the thick folds of her cloak and made her way into Wutai.

In the rain, the nightlife of Wutai was a shadow of its usual teeming self. Tourists still flocked to the city in droves, wanting to be immersed in a living, breathing relic of

history where it seemed every building, statue, and street had a story behind it. Now, most of those eager tourists were probably holed up in their hotel rooms. Only the most die-hard bar-hoppers dared to walk the muddy streets, some tottering drunkenly from side to side before falling ass-first in the mud while still others clung giddily to their rain-soaked companions, laughing loud enough to wake the dead.

Yuffie's dark gray eyes picked out one of these inebriated bands, and followed them.

*- Go to the bars where the drifters frequent. The nomadic sailors that chase the ocean's tides and only make contact with land a few times a year. They sing the Mother's songs in drunken cheer and then are gone, for She would have it no other way. -*

Yuffie wasn't so much hearing voices as feeling a wordless tugging in her mind, and she tried to put its soundless whispers into something audible that she could hear, or think. It was like some latent sense had awakened in her, and she was powerless before its insistence. It was strange, for it almost felt as if the words were spoken in her mother's voice, though Yuffie was fairly certain her mother had never told her to go to a *bar*.

She kept to the shadows, hunkering in the folds of her cloak, face and body invisible within its embrace. For some reason, she didn't want anybody to know she was here. Friends and tourists alike always wanted to swamp around and ask questions of Lady Yuffie of Wutai, and usually the young ninja wallowed in the attention like a pig wallowing in...well, mud, but not tonight. She had more pressing business.

The laughing trio of men steered clear of the overcrowded Turtle's Paradise and instead made their way to one of the less-frequented bars, the Golden Samurai. Yuffie thought it was an appropriate name for the bar, though someone without some knowledge of Wutainese history might not understand the allusion. To make a long story short, the bar was named for one of Wutai's legendary warriors, and said legendary warrior had loved the intoxicating amber of imported Scotch almost as much as his Fatherland. Hence, the Golden Samurai.

The jolly guys entered the bar and immediately became lost in the throng of drunken patrons, but that was fine. Yuffie didn't need them any longer.

*- The smaller bars will hold the wiser men, as they harbor the unconscious fear that the tender ears of the mainstream crowd will be haunted forever by the words they sing so unwittingly. But you can bear them, can't you? -*

"I can," Yuffie whispered to no one in particular as she pushed aside the mat that hung over the door. Light, sound, and smoke immediately washed over her like a giant beast closing its maw with her inside. The pulse of life and the smell of alcohol filled the air like a slightly odoriferous perfume that was tantalizing in small amounts, but



overwhelming if indulged too readily. The room was practically packed wall to wall with laughing people, and Yuffie knew why.

The sailors could not sail their ships in such weather, and so they docked in Wutai. But the seagoers became restless on land, and so they had to find oblivion in the drink if they could not get it from the ocean and her limitless waters. Saltwater junkies, her father had once called them.

None of the patrons paid any heed to the small, sopping wet figure that gracefully maneuvered amongst their laughing throng to take a seat at the only empty table in the room. Yuffie settled in her corner, wrapped in hazy shadows and the saturated cloth of her cloak. A frazzled waitress passed by and placed a tankard of ale and a glass in front of Yuffie, not bothering to ask if she wanted the alcohol or not. No one came here for any other purpose than to drink and carry on.

*-Mind clear. Eyes unclouded. Ears and mind open. And listen. Just listen.-*

And Yuffie did. Water dripping from the hood of her cloak, she listened.

The room swelled with noise as if someone had just yanked cotton out of her ears, allowing the world to materialize in a great outburst of sound and fury. The sailors were singing. Singing so many songs.

*And in that bog there was a tree  
A rare tree and rattlin' tree  
The tree in the bog  
And the bog down in the valley-o!<sup>13</sup>*

No, that was not the one. It was not even Wutainese in origin. But then again, the song she sought so desperately to hear had most surely originated long before Yuffie's ancestors had established the country she now loved so dearly. Another group of sailors burst into song, regaling in unharmonious tones the adventures of one of Wutai's mythical heroes. No, that was not the one, either.

*Someone HAS to be singing it!* she thought in frustration.

*-It is always sung, always there, hidden, just waiting for a pair of desperate, attentive ears.-*

Yuffie took deep calming breaths and watched condensation roll down the sides of the untouched tankard in front of her. Slowly, she felt the knot of exasperation in her chest

<sup>13</sup> The song about the rattlin' bog is not mine. It's a song we sang in elementary school music class. I don't know who wrote it<sup>14</sup>, or I'd credit them. —*Catalina*

<sup>14</sup> "The Rattlin' Bog" is an Irish folk song, passed down orally for generations. As such, there's no singular person to credit, though The earliest recorded version appears to be "March to the Battlefield" in "Riley's Flute Melodies vol. 4" published by Edward Riley in 1826. (info stolen from Wikipedia) —*Editor*

unwind itself, and a great warmth diffused through her limbs, soothing her, almost lulling her into a trance-like state. The noises in the room danced in and out of her attention, like curious children peering into a room after hearing odd noises.

And then, she heard it, a clear aria that soared above all the others like the rainbow-plumed Phoenix gliding over a desolate battlefield, reviving the dead with its fiery touch. A woman was singing it. Fancy that. Female sailors were a true rarity.

Resisting the urge to turn and see from whose mouth the song emerged, Yuffie let the lady sailor's dulcet tones wash over her, drowning her in the embrace of a song her mother had taught her years ago, a song in language that Yuffie could not speak but understood completely. The alien syllables struck her ears and confused the hell out of her mind, but there was no need for worry. She knew what the words meant.

*The ravenous Beast*

*The great Hunger*

*The Planet-Eater*

*At the heart of the world it lies*

*Alone in madness, divorced from its Other*

*The minions gather and sing, mindless and scorned*

*Into the darkness they all descend*

*But now the time to rise is near!*

*Sweet creature of black and white, cry no longer*

*Valiant prince, ascend your throne*

*Unwilling acolyte, care for your reluctant god*

*Lady of cruelest destiny, you must descend*

*Into the dark, into the emerald wreaths of phantasmal toil*

*Past the wall of corpses that guards its domain*

*Into the abysmal lake of the begrudgingly blessed*

*Defeat the minions and feed the beast*

*A heart of beautiful, foulest gold*

Over. It was over. The song slowly faded to join the other noises pulsing in the air like the steady thump, thump, thump of a monstrous heart. There were beads of sweat on Yuffie's upper lip, and she realized with a start that her breaths exited in and out of her lungs in thin, reedy pants. Damn, now that couldn't be good. She took a deep breath and promptly hacked as second-hand smoke drifting from the table of laughing teenagers nearby swooped maliciously into her lungs. Bleh.

Yuffie rose shakily to her feet and dropped a few pieces of gil next to the full tankard of ale. She beat a hasty exit from the bar, still feeling lightheaded and just plain weirded-

out. The first thing she'd done when she set foot in her homeland was follow a bunch of losers to a bar. She knew it was good to act on pure instinct, and now she had the words of her Mother's old song pulsing gently in her head, but still...bars were nasty! Good thing she had her cloak to veil her identity. If her father found out where she'd gone, the old coot would get his panties in a twist, and what a fiasco that would be!

She high-tailed it out of the loud, smoky bar and back into the annoyingly persistent rain. Mud squelched underneath her shoes as she rounded the corner of the bar and stepped onto the main road, the goal of reaching home and indulging in some dry clothes and a nice, hot soak in the tub clearly ensconced in her mind. Finally, she could get some clothes that actually fit her! Oh, and maybe she would say 'hi' to her dad, too.

Unfortunately, her plans were foiled when she felt an odd presence at her back, a great shadow looming over her like a thunderstorm on the nighttime horizon, soundless yet full of light and conflict. She immediately sent her left elbow flying backwards in the stranger's general direction, but her otherwise superbly efficient attack was hindered by the heavy folds of her wet, cloak. Cold, hard fingers wrapped her elbow in a vice-like grip, and she barely registered a pale arm snaking lightning-fast around her slender body to grip her right wrist as she struggled to free her Oritsuru were she had fastened it to her belt.

"Lemme go, rat bastard!" she shrieked at the top of her lungs, hoping someone would hear her over the rain. If she could delay her attacker long enough then...

"That's a bit of a rude greeting, wouldn't you agree?" a familiar voice asked wryly.

She nearly choked. "Gawd! Stupid Vinnie! I swear if I had 10 gil for every time you've snuck up on me, I wouldn't have to steal materia anymore!"

"You shouldn't steal things anyhow," Vincent scolded, releasing his grip on her arms.

Yuffie turned with every intention of giving her patronizing companion a piece of her mind when she realized that, holy crud, Vincent Valentine was standing in front her. Where he wasn't supposed to be. He was supposed to be back in Rocket Town blissfully a-snooze in his bed, oblivious to her nocturnal meanderings.

"What are you doing in Wutai, Yuffie?" he asked, crimson eyes just barely visible underneath the hood of his black cloak. Strands of wet hair clung to the sides of his pale face, one strand almost touching the corner of his mouth. That irked Yuffie a little. She hated when her hair got into her eyes or mouth, which was normally why she opted to keep it short. Until she had actually started to care that having longer hair might actually be prettier on her.

"Oh me?" she asked in her best innocent tone. "Can't a girl pay a spur-of-the-moment visit to her hometown?"

“In the middle of the night during a thunderstorm?”

“It was spur-of-the-moment, I told you!” she countered heatedly. “And it wasn’t thundering when I left!”

“Why didn’t you tell anyone where you were going?” he demanded.

Yuffie was starting to get annoyed. “You losers were drunk off your asses! Even if I had told Cloud where I was going, he probably wouldn’t have remembered anyway! And he probably would have barfed on my sneakers, to top it all off.”

Even through the shadows inside Vincent’s hood, she could see his dark eyebrows draw menacingly low over his eyes. Damn, that strand of hair next to his mouth was really bothering her! “You’re lying to me, Yuffie. Again.”

The muted anger in that last word made her flush with shame. “Am not,” she feebly defended her integrity.

“Are to,” Vincent deadpanned.

Yuffie through her hands up in frustration, heedless of the flurry of raindrops that struck her exposed clothes as her cloak was untimely flung open by the gesture. “Whatever, Vinnie! I just wanted to come home, okay? I need underwear and clothes and I want to see my mother’s kimonos again!”

Vincent cast his eyes to the side, and if Yuffie didn’t know better, she would have said he looked apologetic. Ha! Served him right for giving her crap.

“And just what are YOU doing here?” she demanded. “You’d better not be stalking me!”

“You’ve been kidnapped once, Yuffie. I wasn’t going to let it happen again.”

She sighed. Stupid Vincent always found a way to douse her anger. “Titus is the one who kidnapped me last time, and he’s kind of incapacitated at the moment.”

“But don’t forget about Jezebel and Montana,” Vincent insisted, his voice hardening. Oh great, she could smell a lecture coming on.

“I know, I know, I’m dumb, okay?” Yuffie grumbled, drawing her cloak tighter around her body. “Can we walk and talk at the same time? I’m soaking wet and freezing.”

Without waiting for a reply, she turned and began striding purposefully down the road, Vincent wordlessly falling into step beside her. Mud clung to her shoes, hell-bent on miming the impression that she had cement blocks on her feet, but the sight of the pagoda rising in the distance spurred her on. A little mud never hurt anyone!

Though Yuffie had suggested walking and talking, Vincent no longer seemed interested in doing the latter. Fine by her, but she had to admit that it was nice to have him beside her, moving like a dark shadow through the sheets of endless rain, boots leaving swollen imprints in the mud alongside her much daintier ones. For someone who claimed he had a dark, disruptive presence, Yuffie found Vincent's effect on her quite calming. She hated long, awkward silences, but he was one of the only people she'd met in her entire lifetime that she felt comfortable being quiet around.

By the time they reached her father's home, Yuffie no longer had sneakers. She had huge blocks of mud encasing her feet. Good thing they weren't her shoes. She'd have to send the boots back to Kyra with a heartfelt letter of apology. Quickly racing up the steps and into the sanctuary of the overhanging roof, Yuffie kicked her shoes off and left them in the rain.

Vincent clomped up after her, equally muddy boots making hollow, thudding noises on the wooden stairs. "I will wait out here."

"No way!" Yuffie exclaimed. "Come inside."

"I will track mud and water in the house."

"So leave your boots out here so the rain can wash the mud off," Yuffie reasoned. "And water can be easily mopped up."

Vincent frowned, and that little piece of hair stuck to the corner of his mouth frowned with him. "Very well."

He started to kneel to unlace his boots, but not before Yuffie's finger had shot out and gently pushed that lock of wet hair away from his mouth. His eyebrows lifted in question, crimson eyes widening fractionally as he stared up at her.

Yuffie felt her face growing hot, and she damned her quick, impulsive, thieving hands a thousand times over. "It was bothering me! Because your skin is so pale and your hair is so dark and it looked like you were about to start nibbling on it!"

Vincent just continued looking at her oddly, and she made a show of tapping her foot impatiently, still trying valiantly to cover up her embarrassment. Pale fingers made quickly work of the laces of his boots, and soon the dark shoes joined hers at the edge of the porch, the rain immediately sloughing off the outer layers of loose mud. Good to know the damn droplets were good for something other than ruining Yuffie's mood and clothes.

Yuffie dug into her ever-present items satchel and procured a set of keys, fingers immediately feeling out the shape of the correct one and inserting it into the lock on the front door. A satisfying click, and she was carefully opening the door to greet her

dark home. Her eyes instinctively scanned the foyer for movement, but all she saw were the scurrying, brightly-colored forms of the goldfish in the humongous fish pond that dominated the entryway.

She quickly ushered Vincent inside, closing the door quietly behind him, lest the noise wake her father. Lord Godo was usually a deep sleeper, but lately she'd heard him making rounds of the house at unusual hours of the night, an annoying habit that only surfaced when he felt troubled by something. Now Yuffie knew where she got most of her weirdness from.

"Give me your cloak," she whispered to Vincent. "These things don't do jack crap for us. I'll find some rain slickers or something."

The dark-haired man undid the clasp of his cloak and extricated himself from the thick layers, depositing the water-heavy garment in Yuffie's waiting arms. She felt the warm, fuzzy edge of pleasure press against her heart when she saw he was wearing the clothes she had laid out for him, the black shirt contrasting sharply with the tarnished gold of his claw and the pale skin left bare on his other arm. The suspenders of the pants dangled against his legs like dark twines of rope.

"Like the way you did the suspenders, Vinnie," she commented with a smile. "Very fashionable."

Vincent made a noncommittal noise and pushed his hair back from his eyes, which were scanning the shadows of the foyer in slow, methodical motions.

"I'll be back," Yuffie told him. "Make friends with the goldfish or something, and if you hear my dad coming, try and hide. I think he might get the wrong idea if he knew I brought a man home at this time of night."

Vincent gave her a sharp glance, but the young woman was already scurrying away down the hall, stocking feet swift and balanced despite the weight of the two waterlogged cloaks in her arms. He watched the way her hair, the brown color rich with the dampness of the thick tresses, swayed against the tops of her narrow shoulders until she turned the corner and disappeared from sight.

Crimson eyes stared for a second more before shuttering closed, their owner issuing a confused shake of his dark head, hair an annoyingly heavy mass on his shoulders and back. What was he doing? He was already past insisting that his and Yuffie's relationship was normal, or even healthy for that matter. He was old enough to be her grandfather, with a soul besotted with more sins than there were stars and hands stained with the blood countless victims whose names he had long forgotten. Or had never been told in the first place. Turks weren't supposed to ask questions, after all.

Vincent was sorely tempted to leave. To flee into the long-armed embrace of the night and leave such needling intricacies in the timeless vault of this heart, where he locked all things too precious for him to touch. But at the same time, he knew turning his back and hoping the feelings would go away would not help him. Their complicated relationship was not going to simply unravel its twisted loops into an ordered, contained thing that he could easily understand. At this point, the best thing would be to simply try and sort things out later.

He pushed images of Yuffie from his mind and surveyed his surroundings. He had been in Godo's house a couple of times prior to this, when he, Cloud, and Barret had gone on a mad chase to retrieve their materia from Yuffie's thieving clutches. Little had changed, at least in the foyer area. The wooden floor was still clean and spotless save for the wet footprints Yuffie had left while walking around. Vincent's feet left much larger imprints as he moved quietly up to the man-made pond filled with natural aquatic greenery and pure, clear water that shone like an accretion of a diamonds in the small spotlight that kept a constant vigil in the corner of the ceiling, its powerful beam angled downwards to illuminate the pond.

The gracefully flailing figures of the goldfish were vessels of color and motion against the dark brown rocks. Spotted black. Pure orange. Vibrant yellow. And just about every combination of the three, complete with bellies shiny with silver-white scales. He'd never seen so many different varieties. Hell, the goldfish could have all been different species, for all he knew of the water-dwelling creatures.

The rim of the pond hummed lightly underneath his hands as Vincent knelt and leaned against it. Automatic water-filtering system, no doubt. A subtle reminder that the pond was man-made. His shadow danced lazily on the surface of the water and he leaned over the tank, errant strands of ebony hair snaking out of the wet mass on his shoulders to nearly touch the translucent liquid. Yuffie had told him to make friends with the goldfish, after all.

He watched one of the creatures, a stocky black thing with eyes bulging like tumors from the front of its body, swim in and out of his shadow, as if inexplicably drawn back into the darkness like a moth to a flame. It passed into the light, and he saw a patch of color along its left flank, close to its tail. It was probably orange, but for a second, the color seemed as red as fresh...

...blood. Blood everywhere. The aged soil boiled with it, like a churning bog that had moss thinly veiling the surface of monster-infested water. Only in this case, there was no water beneath the surface, only the thick, wet embrace of blood, still hot, still fresh. How bittersweet it was on the tongue. How coppery and satisfying, especially in large amounts such as the scarlet spoils reaped by the warring forces of human and Cetra so many years

ago.

Nausea raped his senses, and Vincent would have flung himself away from the disgusting sight below him if he wasn't certain moving would only cause him to fall beneath the soil's surface and into the scalding, crimson embrace of what lay below. His soul screamed against the voice in his head, hollering nonsensical words and guttural cries.

### **MONSTER. LOST POWER OF SPEECH?**

"Demon!" was the first word Vincent's mind could conjure. The most apt word in this situation.

### **SHOW YOU NOW.**

If such a thing were possible, Chaos' will was even stronger this time, bearing down on him like a relentless barrage of blows from Cloud's Omnislash. He could practically hear the demon, smell it, feel those leathery wings trying to wrap him in a deadly embrace. Vincent could not vanquish the creature, and as he began to fear that his coexistence with Chaos was turning from mutualistic to parasitic, all he could do was stand his ground and fight to maintain his sense of Self.

A clawed hand suddenly wrapped firmly around his arm, and the very idea of that thing touching him was more than Vincent could take. He didn't care if he fell into a sea of blood and drowned in its scarlet depths so long as he was free of Chaos' reign.

He let out a rebellious cry and wrenched his arm free, the suddenly soft digits relinquishing their grip without a fight. Human soft, not the leathery texture of a demon. The nightmare realm abruptly dissolved, and Vincent saw a flash of Lord Godo's surprised face as he stumbled away from the man, a slippery patch of water on the floor sending him careening into a nearby wall.

Cool wood met the damp material of his shirt, sending a jarring wave down the entire length of his metal arm. He leaned heavily against the wall to avoid sliding to the floor in a boneless heap. His throat and nose strained to deliver oxygen to his lungs, to cleanse them of the horrible scent of blood and Chaos. His red eyes focused blearily on Godo, dressed only in a yukata and an overcoat embroidered with battling beasts of legend. One of them looked suspiciously like Water God Leviathan. Yet another bore an uncanny resemblance to Chaos' demonic visage.

*I'm losing my mind.*

"Are you alright, Valentine?" the Lord of Wutai demanded, gaze dark and searching. Or maybe it was merely a trick of the shadows, a play of light on a face becoming heavily creased with age. How Vincent should have been, if Hojo's wickedly ingenious experimentations hadn't left him permanently estranged from the touch of Time.

*Valentine. He recognized me.* Vincent was deeply relieved by that. He was sure he made a perfectly disturbing sight to find in one's foyer in the middle of the night.

"Forgive me, Lord Godo," he murmured. "I have not been feeling well as of late."



*Please don't let me collapse this time.*

The man frowned. "Obviously. You're as white as a sheet."

Vincent almost smiled. "This is my normal skin tone, I'm afraid."

Godo lifted an eyebrow. "Indeed. You know, Valentine, you seem different from the last time I saw you, and it is not just because I watched you nearly fall headfirst into my fishpond."

The gunslinger hadn't the slightest clue how to respond to that, or if the Wutainese sovereign even expected a reply. The man's almond-shaped eyes dropped slowly to where the pond's spotlight danced on the water on the floor. Godo's gaze traveled to the left, following the liquid trail Yuffie's feet had made down the hall.

"Well, I see my charming daughter has returned without as much as a 'hello' to her old dad," he said huffily, but with a faint trace of weary affection. "What am I to do with that girl?" His eyes turned back to Vincent. "I'm assuming she brought you with her."

"She did," Vincent replied, experimentally pushing away from the wall. He wobbled a bit, but it seemed his strength and equilibrium were returning to him.

Godo's eyes narrowed, giving Vincent a soul-searching stare so prolonged that the AVALANCHE member was about to offer to wait outside when Yuffie's father suddenly nodded like he had just realized something. Or had confirmed his suspicions about something.

"Come with me, Valentine," he said, tone that of a man who was not keen on disobedience. He turned and vanished into the shadows of the right-side hall without another word, trusting that Vincent would follow.

And after a moment of hesitation, Vincent did.

-tbc

# Chapter Thirty-Nine

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## *Sojourn in Wutai II*

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*“What? You never ate dog or cat food when you were little?” —Yuffie Kisaragi*

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Yuffie bustled about the room in nothing but her undergarments, a silent admittance to the stuffiness of her poor, estranged room. Normally, she liked being as far away from the main parts of the house (and her father) as humanly possible, but in the height of summer’s mugginess, she often wished she were a little chummier with her remaining parental unit.

Her original knapsack, a conveniently portable little thing, had gone up in flames along with the Final Heaven bar. Stupid Reno hadn’t had the wits to check the laundry room where her and Vincent’s soaked and soiled clothes had been piled, ready for washing. Fortunately, being the kind and generous person she was, Yuffie forgave the Turk’s lack of foresight on the grounds that he and Red were in a life-threatening situation at the time. No one was perfect, after all.

However, Reno’s imperfection had indirectly resulted in her having to dig her old, tattered puke-green duffel bag from the dredges of her closet where she often banished hapless clothing articles she didn’t want to lay eyes on again. The relic from a time period when Yuffie was too young to care about toting around such a hideous piece of luggage sat open on her bed, permeating the immediate airspace with its odor of dust and age.

The bag’s begrudging owner was elbow deep in her bureau of drawers, digging out spare orbs of Mastered materia from where she’d craftily hidden them in the folds of old, ugly sweaters she never wore. Though carrying so much materia often had adverse effects on a person’s ability to take high amounts of damage, Yuffie would rather be safe than sorry, especially where her friends were concerned. She had noticed that some of the slots on the Turks’ weapons were empty, a potentially hazardous situation her materia-hoarding abilities could easily rectify.

Yuffie wobbled her way over to the bed and dumped the glittering orbs of red, yellow, and green into her duffel bag before stepping back and examining its contents. Her tendency to pack light still served her well, as the lack of superfluous garments could certainly attest to. Despite her shortcomings, Yuffie never doubted her own ability to travel light.

Satisfied, Yuffie deftly zipped up the bag and slung it over her shoulder, the strap biting in her bare skin.

It was then that she realized that between packing a minimal amount of clothes and gathering enough materia to level a large city, she was still only a bra and pair of underwear away from running around in the buff. All that, and she had forgotten to get dressed!

“Gah! Stupid me!” she berated herself, flushing at the thought of going out to greet Vincent dressed, or rather, underdressed, as she was. Dropping the duffel onto the floor, she quickly dug a pair of shorts and a T-shirt out of her drawers and donned the garments in a jiffy. White slouch socks and a comfy pair of sneakers later, and she was ready to go.

Except for one thing. One place she had to visit before she met up with Vincent.

Yuffie quietly closed her bedroom door behind her and crept down the hall, but instead of going straight to the main area of the house, she turned down a hall that led to a place only the maids had no qualms about visiting.

Her mother’s room.

\*

Vincent had tried to protest kneeling on a futon with his clothes in the soggy state that they were, but Godo would hear none of it. “Really, Valentine,” he had said, “I’m the Lord of Wutai. I have more futons than I could possibly need, but if it will put you at ease, that futon is one of the older, uglier ones. If it gets mildew, I’ll have an excuse to throw it away. You’ll be doing me a favor.”

Quelling arguments through candid logic seemed to run in the Kisaragi family.

Vincent knelt on the old, ugly, mildew-inclined futon, sipping Wutainese green tea that was just as bitter on the tongue as it had been when the Turks used to make “diplomatic” visits during the war. Back then, Turks had doubled as diplomats and assassins. Polite mannerisms, a prim and proper appearance, smooth-talking skills, and a quick trigger finger were the four basic components required of a good Turk. Though Vincent had lacked in the smooth-talking area, his skill with a gun and cold, unflinching eyes had more than compensated in the eyes of Shinra.

It felt odd to sit in the futon across from the Wutainese leader, a place normally reserved for the Turk who took care of the talking and bargaining. Vincent had never been the diplomat. He was the one that sat behind the Turk leader, assessing everything with a calculating eye, observing others, spotting weaknesses and devising possible ways to exploit them. Until Wutai, the Turks had a long line of successful “diplomatic-execution” missions that usually resulted in the double triumph of striking profitable bargains and high-ranking enemy officials mysteriously disappearing either during, after, or before the Turks’ visit to the target city.

But Wutai broke the Turks' status as diplomats. Stealth ninjas. An impressive army. A shrewd leader.

In the end, only Vincent and two other Turks escaped Wutai with their lives. Their target, an advisor very close to the current Wutainese Lord, was dead, but on the wings of his death, the Turks were exposed as assassins. Fortunately, Shinra didn't have a problem with that. In fact, the portly tyrant laughed heartily as he claimed that now his ruthlessly efficient Turks could be who they were meant to be. Assassins and bodyguards. Lapdogs.

Godo stared at his visitor over the rim of his teacup, and Vincent idly wondered if the man recognized him. If his timeline was correct, Godo could not have been more than a child during Vincent's short-lived visit in Wutai. The man hadn't shown any indication of recognizing Vincent during AVALANCHE's previous visits to Wutai, but the gunslinger's features were no longer shrouded by the folds of his cape. Maybe now, with his body and mind seasoned with the deadly spice of age, Godo would heed whispers of childhood memories that told him that there was an eerie familiarity to this outlandish man his daughter had brought home in the middle of the night.

"Can you not grip things with your left hand?" the Wutainese man suddenly asked, breaking the half-uneasy silence.

The abrupt and odd question made Vincent quirk a dark eyebrow. "I can, but I do not wish to scratch your teacup."

Godo nodded as if he had expected such a reply. "You are a considerate man, Valentine, if not a bit on the eccentric side."

The red-eyed man didn't know whether to take the words as a compliment or an insult. Like father, like daughter. Though Vincent would never in a thousand years tell Yuffie just how much like her father she was.

"My daughter runs with such an interesting bunch of people these days," the man said contemplatively, glancing idly over at an intricate painting of a flower-laden vine twining about itself, done entirely in platinum gold. It covered the entire left wall of the room, the dark paneling making the wall look like a chasm of pure darkness, guarded only by the gold and silver creepers.

"Some still think of AVALANCHE as terrorists, you know," Godo said, taking a sip of his tea. "And the Turks..." he turned his gaze back to Vincent, eyes carefully blank. "I know from first-hand experience that they are diplomats as well as liars and assassins. Though I hear the most recent developments have them solely serving as bodyguards."

"The Turks have a long, ugly history, my Lord," Vincent said politely. "One soaked in blood and laced with lies. Of course, one could also say the same for Wutai, a country

riddled with the toils of war and then immersed in vapid commercialism.”

Godo snorted. “You’ve been hanging around my daughter for far too long, Valentine.” All feigned insult faded from his face, leaving him looking older, frailer than before. “And I hope you will continue to stay with her.”

The gunslinger’s gaze hardened, and he set his cup of tea on the tatami mat in front of him. “Why precisely did you bring me here, Lord Godo?”

The dark-haired man set his mug down with a near-silent sigh, rising slowly from his seat as if reluctant to abandon the softness of the floor cushion. Godo was a tall man, a trait he had not passed onto his diminutive daughter, but though some men wore their height like a shield of power and prestige, Godo resembled a towering mountain weary of trying to touch the heavens and failing each time. Vincent watched in silence as Godo walked over to the wall with the ornamental vines, the hem of his gray yukata moving around his ankles like wisps of smoke. He stopped in front of the wall, trailing his weathered hands along a silvery-gold shoot.

“I’m old, Valentine,” he said suddenly. “I knew I would eventually start to feel the effects of my age. So disheartening in a man as vivacious as I used to be. Of course, my daughter is just as lively as I was in my younger years. Wouldn’t you agree?”

“Yes,” Vincent said politely, and found that he could easily imagine Godo overflowing with life, like Yuffie.

“Your face,” Godo continued. “I know I’ve seen it somewhere before, and it was not a year ago when you came to Wutai in hot pursuit of the materia my daughter stole from you. You wore many coverings about your face then, but tonight, I can see your face clearly in my memories.” His wandering hands stalled on a thorn protruding from the stem of a silver vine. “You wore a blue suit, and you came to bring unrest to my people.”

Vincent didn’t bother denying the accusation. “Yes, I did. Many years ago, I was a thief, and a murderer. A Turk.”

“And now?” Godo asked sharply.

“I am... what I am. When I at last discover it, I shall let you know.”

To his surprise, Godo laughed softly, glancing at Vincent over his shoulder. It wasn’t a particularly friendly look, but it wasn’t openly hostile either. “Then I’m asking you, Vincent Valentine, Turk or not, to please watch over my daughter.”

Vincent was shaking his head without realizing it.

Godo lifted an eyebrow. “So quick to refuse?”

“You cannot ask this of me.” *I don’t want to be responsible for her. For what damages are wrought upon her body, or her heart.*

“I know she is a handful, but I implore you. She will need support now more than ever.”

“Explain,” Vincent said flatly.

Godo turned back to the painting, and Vincent was once again distracted by the designs on his silken coat, gold embroidery dancing on a crimson background. That beast winding its way across the shoulders of the garment really did look like Chaos...

“More than anything,” Godo said, voice heavy with resignation. “I wanted to spare my daughter from suffering the same fate as her mother, but it appears as if I am once again forced to stand helplessly as one of the ladies in my life is drawn towards an inevitable doom.”

Though he had thought himself impervious to such things, Vincent felt a chill dance along his spine. Godo spoke as if Yuffie had been sentenced to death.

“How much do you know about Wutainese lineages, Valentine?” Godo said asked, voice almost conversational.

“Your bloodline is the Kisaragi-Chao line,” Vincent answered automatically. “Direct descendants of Da-Chao himself, and the ruling family of Wutai. You are Lord of Wutai, and Yuffie will be Lady after you.”

“Ah,” Godo sighed melodramatically. “But who will be Lord to my daughter’s Lady? Who will marry such a hard-to-tie-down girl? Oh, I grieve that Yuffie will not bless me with grandchildren before I die.”

“Lord Godo,” Vincent said warningly.

“Yes, yes,” the man said dismissively. “Well, I’m sure you are familiar with Yuffie’s defense tactic called the Clear Tranquil? Natural healing powers are rare, you know. I have none, nor did my father, or his father before him. Ayami, Yuffie’s mother, had it in great abundance. I’m sure you’ve also noticed that Yuffie’s features are not typical of the Wutainese.”

“Was her mother not full-blooded Wutainese?”

Godo’s dark gaze suddenly snapped to Vincent, quick and harsh as a striking viper. “My wife’s blood was even purer than mine, I’ll have you know.”

“I spoke out of ignorance, Lord Godo, not contempt,” Vincent said levelly.

Godo pinched the bridge of his nose. “Yes, yes, I know. Sorry, Valentine. You are not Wutainese. How could you have known that the purest Wutainese lines are those with Cetra blood in them?”

Vincent felt his eyebrows slowly lifting.

“So yes,” Godo said. “Yuffie has the barest traces of Cetra blood flowing through her veins, just enough to give her the power to heal small injuries. She cannot speak with the Planet. Neither could her mother. But you see, the purity of Ayami’s line bound her to a different fate. A fate that lies in the heart of the world, in the Emerald Mists.”

“Emerald Mists?”

“It is what Ayami called them. To assuage my worries, most likely. You see, Ayami died when Yuffie was a child. We even had a ceremony for her at the temple, though Yuffie was probably too young to recall the details. But there was no body. Ayami was horribly mauled by a monster in the woods. That is what we told Yuffie when she begged to see her mother’s face one last time.”

Heaviness hung in the air after the words left Godo’s mouth, and Vincent had the sudden urge to get up and leave, or lash out, anything to prevent the divulgence he knew was going to come.

Godo turned to face Vincent again, expression somber and eyes filled with deep pain. “But it was a lie. I lied to my daughter. I lied to my people. There was no body visible at the death ceremony because there simply was no body to bury. My wife, a skilled warrior maiden, didn’t fall to a monster in the woods. She undertook a journey to the heart of the world, and there she battled with the Hungry One, the creature who wants to devour the world. Down in the center of the Planet, in the stomach of the Hungry One, is the final resting place of my wife and the mother of my only daughter.”

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*How many years has it been?* Yuffie wondered. *Her perfume is still in the air. I can smell it. It makes me think of her.*

“Mama, I came to see you,” she murmured to the darkness. She could barely discern the shape of the dresser where her mother had always brushed her long hair until it shone like sunlit water while Yuffie watched from the warmth of the covers on the futon. Switching on the lights, Yuffie could see that the futon was neatly made, the wood of the bureau shining as if it had just been polished. Even after all this time, she felt that if she laid down on the futon and went to sleep, her mother would be there to cajole her into waking.

But she knew it wouldn't be so. If she went to sleep on the futon, no one would be there to awaken her, except for the maids. Her father never ventured into this part of the house any longer. After his wife had died, Godo had relocated his room to the other side of the estate, far, far away from the room where the presence of his wife was still thick in the air like the smell of her soap after she showered. It must have been painful for him. Death was a common occurrence back in war-ridden times, but the death of the woman he had pledged his life to had undoubtedly wounded Godo far worse than the deaths of the thousands of Wutainese soldiers on the battlefield.

Godo had tried to protect Yuffie back then. She remained within the walls of their estate, in her room located far away from the house proper. There was only one way to get to her room, and a dozen ways to sneak out of it. She'd learned them all during the intrepidity of her early youth; she still knew them like the back of her hand.

Looking back, she realized what danger she'd been in. If Shinra had ever stormed the estate, Godo might have lost both his daughter and his wife. Or, Yuffie might have lost her father as well her mother. She'd never thought about it like that before. Godo was such a stubborn man. For some reason, she always thought he'd live forever.

But one day, her father was going to die. Just like her mother.

*What will I do then? I'll be Lady of Wutai. No more running around on adventures. No more AVALANCHE. No more materia-hunting.*

Even as recent as a year ago, Yuffie hadn't grasped her responsibility as heiress to the sovereign nation of Wutai. It made her sad to think of abandoning her current lifestyle for that of a warrior-queen, dressing in flowing kimonos, speaking diplomatically, attending meetings and listening to the old crotchety elders yap and yap about inane things.

*Though I wouldn't mind the kimonos so much,* she thought to herself as she crossed the room to where her mother's closet lay behind a sliding door decorated with white blooming flowers. *They look pretty, even if the wearer feels like they're going to pass out from asphyxiation. At least I'll look damn good when I suffocate.*

The hinges of the door didn't even creak as she slid it open, the light from the room illuminating the many yards of silk hung neatly in the closet. Yuffie had only worn traditional kimonos once or twice as a child. If someone handed her all the necessary hunks of material now, she would probably just stare at them like a dumbass. Her father always said she was grossly unladylike for preferring to roll around in the dirt with sneakers and shorts instead of learning proper Wutainese manners. Yuffie always had a cheerful insult for him, but now she wished she had at least learned how to properly put on a kimono.

She reached out and touched the sleeve of one, noting how grimy her fingernails



looked next to the pink fabric. Carefully, she took hold of the sleeve and held it out, the material rustling against its neighbors as Yuffie admired the green floral pattern at the end of the long sleeve. She had always been partial to green, and pink wasn't the ugly throwback of red and white that Yuffie had thought it was during her tomboy phase.

Sighing, she let the fabric fall and sat down on the floor, staring up at the kimono-laden bars above her. So many pretty blues, pinks, yellows, all of which had touched her mother's skin at one time or the other. Maybe one day, when Yuffie learned to wear them properly, she would try one on.

"I like your kimonos, Mama," she whispered to the closet. "Will you let me wear one eventually?" She laughed. "Well, I guess I'd have to get a bit taller, but maybe you weren't all that tall. You just seemed so because I was so little."

She poked at her shoelaces, winding the loop of one around her finger, and decided she wanted to keep talking since she felt her mother could somehow hear her. She needed a nonjudgmental ear right now.

"Bad things have been happening, Mama," she said. "Reeve was kidnapped. I was kidnapped. Reno had an emotional breakdown. Tifa is locked in a battle to the death with a Dawn's Fire Master. We all thought that style was dead, right Mama? It's exciting to know that there is still a Master, but too bad he's on the bad guys' side."

She tugged too hard on her shoelace and accidentally drew it out of its knot. As she busied herself retying it, she continued to confess her worries to her mother's kimonos. "Remember that song you used to sing to me? I never knew what it was about, but now...I think I'm starting to realize. That thing is still alive down there, isn't it? And that...that can't be good, right?"

*I have to kill it*, she almost said, but it really wasn't her place to do such things, was it? How could she, a mere mortal, fight a fallen god? Silly her. Better not to think about it, at least not now.

Her finger abandoned her shoelace for the hard wooden sole of the one of the sandals lining the edges of the closet. Her mother's favorite pair, judging from the well-worn straps.

"I like a man," she suddenly blurted. "He's here right now, waiting in the entryway by the goldfish pond. His name is Vincent, and he's a lot older than me and has the whole 'mysterious, dark, and brooding' thing going on. But I still like him. I...really like him a lot. I know that he's done some bad things in the past—he had to have, I mean, he *was* a Turk, after all—but who hasn't these days? I steal stuff all the time. But Vinnie has issues out the wazoo. Some crazy scientist from Shinra experimented on him, and now he turns

into all sorts of boogey-monsters. And he used to love this lady named Lucrecia, but she died, and he blames himself for not helping her. Vincent blames himself for a lot of things that aren't really his fault. If he could get away with it, I think he'd blame himself for Meteor almost hitting the Planet."

She had the sandal in her hands now, gripping it tightly as she thought about the man who had just been a red-eyed weirdo a year ago and was now becoming the biggest part of her life. "But despite all that, I like him. My chest hurts when I think about him leaving us again."

*It makes me want to cry,* she tried to say, but her throat and chest were constricted too tightly to do so.

"Anyways!" she said lightly, placing the abused sandal back in its rightful place. "I just wanted to tell you that. I think I need to get going now. I love you, Mama, and I wish you were here so I could see your face again. I miss you so much."

*I want you to tell me what to do. I want to hear you sing to me again. I want to hear your voice.*

She quickly turned off all the lights and left the room before she could start crying.

\*

"You must tell her," Vincent said.

Godo shook his head. "I cannot. Yuffie would be consumed with the need to avenge her mother's death, and I do not want to quicken her descent into the Emerald Mists."

Those words again. Emerald Mists. The spiral staircase in the deep-sea complex suddenly came to mind, and then the attempt to rescue Yuffie when she was kidnapped. And all the while, that light was there. That foul emerald light that stank of fear.

"These mists you speak of...I believe I've seen them before. Or something like them."

"I know you have. I can tell when a person has been touched by the mists that bring terror to those that bask in them. They have already touched my daughter." Godo suddenly rubbed his temples as if to alleviate a sudden pain. "What am I to do with that girl? As much as we fight, I do not wish to lose my only child."

"It seems you know quite a lot about the things that currently plague us," Vincent said carefully, trying to decide how much information to divulge without bringing Godo into the fray. The last thing he wanted to do was unknowingly draw the assassins' attention to Yuffie's father. He decided to ask about one thing that had been needling him for a while. "What do you know of a man named Titus?"

The confusion in Godo's eyes was evident. "Nothing. I don't know as much as you may think. My wife was the one who knew it all, and for the sake of my own safety, she didn't wish to involve me in that part of her life. She always said there were things beneath the earth that were not meant to come to the surface, but if the day ever came when their world invaded ours, she wanted to know that Yuffie and I were safe."

"Why do you tell me all this, Lord Godo?" Vincent demanded. "Yuffie is the one who needs to know. She believes her mother is buried in the temple grounds. Why do you let her lay flowers and pray over an empty plot every single year?"

Godo's gaze hardened. "Need you remind me of that? I've already told you why I won't tell Yuffie. As for why I'm telling you, I want you to remain by her side. You strike me as very loyal, and very protective. You are water to her fire, and if you decide to tell her what I told you tonight, or if she somehow finds out on her own, you will need to douse the flame of grief and vengeance that will ignite inside her. Yuffie will not let the mystery of her mother's death go uninvestigated."

"Like you did?" Vincent asked coolly.

Anger flashed in Godo's eyes. "I swore an oath to my wife that I would not pursue if she met her death in the Emerald Mists, and that I would neither encourage nor deter Yuffie from falling to the same fate."

"I will make no such oaths to you, my Lord," Vincent said firmly, rising to his feet. "We are all slaves to fate."

To his surprise, Godo smiled. "So you say, but will you really abandon Yuffie to death knowing you could do something to stop it?"

Vincent stared back at him. Fight fate? Preposterous. But even as he contemplated the impossibility of such a feat, individuals came to mind, those who had battled against the own destinies and won. Or had they? Cloud Strife had been a servant of Jenova, a Sephiroth-clone, and he lived on today as his own person, but he still remained plagued by the pieces of himself that had been lost, the memories in his mind over-written by the memories of his best friend. Aeris Gainsborough, the last of the Cetra, had fallen to the sword of a madman while praying for the salvation of the Planet. If she'd known that was her destiny, would she have martyred herself for the sake a sick, decaying world? Knowing Aeris, she might have, but not everyone had a heart like hers. A heart of purest gold.

Quick footsteps came charging down the hallway a second before Yuffie Kisaragi flung open the doors, her dark glare searching for a victim and immediately finding it.

"Crazy old fart!" she exclaimed, pointing a finger at Godo. "You kidnapped Vinnie!"

“But of course,” Godo said, taunting his daughter. “When my only daughter brings home a man, he must first pass *my* inspection before you can even *consider* marrying him!”

Yuffie flushed up to the roots of her hair. “Shut up, Dad! We’re leaving now!” She marched into the room and grabbed Vincent by the wrist, dragging him towards the door.

“Oh, how rude,” Godo sighed. “I don’t even get to have tea with my daughter. Such a cruel girl.”

Yuffie sent a glare in his direction, still tugging on Vincent’s arm while the man walked behind her at an unhurried pace. “No way, José! Cloud will spank us if we don’t make it back to Rocket Town before he gets his drunken ass out of bed.”

“What unorthodox punishment,” Godo commented blandly, adjusting his coat as it started to slip from his broad shoulders. “What are you waiting for? Get out of here, irresponsible girl.”

“What?” Yuffie sputtered angrily at his admonishment. “Don’t patronize me! I swear, you old coot, if I had my Conformer, your ass would be *mine!*”

“Yuffie, he was joking,” Vincent said calmly.

“Yes, yes,” Godo seconded. “Did you puke your sense of humor into the ocean on the way over here? Let me tell you, Valentine, when you go on your honeymoon with Yuffie, make sure not to take her overseas because she’s sure to ruin the mood by throwing up all over the place. Why, I remember one time when she was little—”

“We’re leaving!” Yuffie roared, grabbing both of Vincent’s wrists and yanking him out the doors.

“Farewell,” Godo said levelly, and though Yuffie was too beside herself with annoyance to hear the wistful note in his voice, Vincent easily caught onto it.

He glanced back at the aging man, the whites of his almond-shaped eyes almost luminous in the night-darkened room. “See you later, Valentine,” Godo said enigmatically, half-turning to look at the decorations on the wall again.

The movement once again drew Vincent’s attention to the warring shapes on his coat, and though Yuffie was still tugging on his wrist, he asked, “Lord Godo, what scene is depicted on your coat?”

The man blinked in surprise, holding out his arms so that the full sleeves of the coat fell past his knees, battling beasts locked in fierce combat with one another. “This? It is Wutainese doomsday. I believe everywhere else, they call it Ragnarök. The end of the world. You know something of it?” He turned his shoulders so Vincent could see the

golden designs frozen on the crimson fabric.

It was Chaos. Vincent could see the demon's form as clear as day now, its wings unfurled over the shoulders of the coat, its long claws extended and ensconced in combat with a dragon-like beast. It looked happy, triumphant even.

Vincent turned away. "No, I know nothing of it."

He let Yuffie pull him the rest of the way out of the room. The girl called a rude goodbye to her father, which Godo returned easily. She slammed the doors shut behind them and stalked down the hall, still grumbling. Vincent followed with considerably more composure, his mind still trying to wrap around all that Godo had told him. He tried to imagine Yuffie doomed to death from the day of her birth, by a legacy handed down by her mother, and found that it made him sick. Better to deny her own name and denounce her family than to suffer such a fate, though he highly doubted she would feel the same way. By Wutainese standards, Yuffie was quite an unorthodox woman, but in her own fashion, she was as proud and honorable as the Wutainese soldiers that had valiantly battled Shinra's armies.

"My dad didn't say anything weird to you, did he?" Yuffie demanded, turning to Vincent with a half-worried, half-angry look on her face. "The old man likes to ramble. I think he's getting into his 'listen to me, young whippersnapper' phase."

"He's just lonely," Vincent countered. "Perhaps you should remain and have tea with your father. He's getting old, Yuffie."

The ninja swatted him on the shoulder, though her gray eyes were dark with deep emotion. "Don't remind me. I'll come back and have tea with him after we're done rescuing Reeve. It's not like he's gonna croak before all this is over."

*What if you do? What if you die, and Godo never gets a chance to bid farewell to his only child? Though I wonder if he's already said his goodbyes.*

Vincent felt a deepening cloud of darkness settle over his mind. Did Yuffie even have the slightest clue about her fate? Did she know that Godo believed her mother's bloodline bound her to an irreversible fate? The girl had been rather secretive lately, ever since she had been rescued from her imprisonment underground by Titus' former cult. The heartbeat Vincent heard in the deep-sea complex. The green light. The Hungry One, Godo said, lived in the heart of the Planet. Yuffie's mother tried to kill it, and failed.

*Titus has to be the key. He must know how to put all the pieces of this puzzle together, and he's not saying.* At the moment, Vincent felt a deep, burning rage for the man that kept answers from those that needed to hear them the most.

His fury boiled underneath his skin like liquid fire, and quite suddenly, Vincent realized the emotion wasn't exclusively his own. Deep in his being, Chaos rolled with agitation, and the cedar wood of the floor and walls started to take on the sickly yellow of old bones, dusty and smelling of rotting things. Vincent's breath caught in his throat as once again he heard the crying of his sisters in the distance.

### **ANSWERS? YOU FEAR THE ANSWERS.**

Vincent slammed the heel of his palm hard against his forehead, wishing he could reach into his skull and pull out the demonic voice that plagued him constantly. Pull it out and bash it against the wall until its head caved in and—

Chaos' laughter rumbled through his spirit even as its presence subsided until it was nothing more than a pulse of darkness on the edge of his consciousness, watching and waiting. Always there. When was it going to end?

"Vincent, what's wrong?" Yuffie asked, touching his arm, her callused fingers cool on his overheated flesh. "You're sweating like a pig."

"I'm fine," Vincent lied, pushing his hair back from his face and opening his eyes to find that the hallway had once again returned to normal. They had somehow reached the foyer, with the pond full of goldfish swimming merrily around in their brightly lit waters, oblivious to the evilness of the man that stood not five feet away from their happy little pool.

Instead of arguing or persisting like he had expected, Yuffie just sighed. "Liar. Oh well, I guess I'll just wait for you to tell me what's wrong with you...or until my patience runs out and I get nosy again."

Vincent just stared at her, realizing that there was an unnaturally somber air about the usually vibrant girl. Nostalgia, no doubt. That was an emotion Vincent knew well, but it wasn't his nature to readily extend sympathy so he just remained as he was while Yuffie stooped to gather a pair of black ponchos she had presumably placed on the floor before she went to rescue Vincent from her father's clutches. She tossed one of the rubbery garments to Vincent, who noted that the poncho was uncomfortably shiny, which would make them prime targets for any sniper who wished to take a shot at them, though the chances of that were slim. He heard a hollow noise of dozens of tiny objects sliding against one another, and glanced at the brightly-colored bag Yuffie had in her hand.

"Cat food?" he asked.

She grinned at him. "In case we get hungry on the way back to Rocket Town."

Vincent stared in disbelief. Surely she wasn't...

Yuffie frowned, looking honestly perplexed. “What? You never ate dog or cat food when you were little? Damn, Vinnie, you missed out. Poor deprived child. The Original mix is my personal favorite.”

“...Yuffie?”

“Haha, just kidding!” she exclaimed, swatting him on the shoulder with the bag, leaving the reek of dry kitty chow on his sleeve. “I had you going there, Vinnie! You totally believed my lying ass!”

“Who is the food for?” he asked.

Yuffie rolled her gray eyes as she threw the poncho over her shoulders with a dramatic swirl. “My cats. Duh.”

Vincent put on the rain slicker, wincing internally at the loud, creaking material. Sneaking up on an opponent in this garment would be hopeless. “Surely you don’t mean that house with the grossly large amount of felines?”

She kicked him lightly in the calf with her sneaker. “Don’t call my cats gross, or I’ll tell Mimi to pee on you! She’s the calico with the bladder problem, just so you know.”

Vincent knew the cat. Her bladder problem had manifested quite disgustingly on the tip of Barret’s boot the last time they were in Wutai. Red had nearly gagged on the stench of fresh cat urine when he and Cait arrived to relieve the war-torn trio at the local materia shop.

Yuffie picked up a tattered green duffel bag from the floor and slung it diagonally across her chest, fussing with it until it was situated comfortably underneath her poncho. With the noisy bag of cat food under the other arm, she bore an uncanny resemblance to a pear or some other bottom-heavy object.

She smiled up at him, flipping the hood of the poncho over her head. “Ready, my faithful peon?”

“Who’s a faithful peon?” Vincent deadpanned, pushing his tangled hair behind his neck before pulling up the hood of the shapeless garment.

Yuffie just laughed and opened the door, the sight of a dark and rainy night greeting them with a thunderous roar that seemed to shake the very floors of the Kisaragi estate. She chattered on and on about something or another as Vincent once again placed his feet into boots that were devoid of mud but soaked with rainwater. There was an odd, lifeless quality to her words, as if they were simply noise designed to fill an emptiness that followed her like a plague.

Wordlessly, he followed her back into the rain, letting her lead the way through mud (“Oh, GAWD!” she exclaimed. “More of this goddamn mud!”) and deepening puddles of rain (“Hey, Vinnie, that one looks like a lake!”) towards the direction of Wutai’s entrance. Lights from shops and bars highlighted the rain-slick material plastered to her narrow shoulders, the dark, shapeless garment unable to disguise the slighthness of her frame. Even though the poncho covered most of her legs, the calves he saw below the hem were slender and graceful from a combination of a lifetime of martial arts and the burgeoning grace of a woman’s body. Every once in a while, she would turn to half-glance over her shoulder at him, the curve of her small nose and full lips starkly pale against the darkness of the poncho’s hood.

He tried to imagine watching her back as she strode into a yawning cavern mouth with that horrible green light in the distance, mists of emerald swirling around her legs and that ghostly, echoing heartbeat resounding off the walls around her. He imagined her fear, and her courage as she went to fulfill the dark legacy her mother had left behind. He imagined being unable or too stubborn to follow as her figure grew smaller and smaller until it was eaten by the mists. And in her wake would be nothing but pure darkness that even his unnaturally acute vision couldn’t pierce. A void of nothingness, as if her existence had been wiped clean by a mighty hand.

The image was so clear that for a moment he feared he was seeing the definite future, but Yuffie broke the horrible visage by turning and looking back at him.

“Vinnie, why are you dragging ass back there? Come walk beside me!”

He did.

-tbc



# Chapter Forty

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## *Battle*

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*“I did not come in here to talk about vomiting.” —Red XIII*

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Cloud normally didn't say good morning to the world by making a mad dash for the toilet bowl, but when he woke up with sunlight trying to burn a hole in his eyes, he rolled onto his side to escape the scalding rays and promptly felt the contents of his stomach jump into the back of his throat. He still didn't know how he managed to avoid stepping on the sprawled bodies of his friends and fellow partygoers as he ran for the bathroom to puke his guts out.

Served him right, he supposed, as he stumbled out of the bathroom. What a cruel world it was when a savior of the Planet was punished just for having fun with his friends. He remembered drinking a truly heinous number of Blood Rains with Reno at the bar, Cid and the others arriving to join in, but everything after that was just a blurry haze of faces and jokes about liver damage and flatulence. The only other things that stuck in his mind were kangaroos, a telephone pole, and an angry Tifa.

Though he prayed the angry Tifa was only part of a liquor-y dream he'd had, he knew from the annoyance simmering in her eyes when he tottered into the kitchen that she very clearly disapproved of his irresponsible actions last night. He had half a mind to blame it on Reno, but since his partner-in-crime was seated miserably at the kitchen table, trying to choke down a measly piece of toast while flinching at every noise, Cloud just ducked his head shamefully, scratching at his tousled blond hair.

“Hey, Cloud, you best not have missed the toilet when you barfed your brains out just now,” Cid said, looking annoyingly pain-free as he dug into a plate full of eggs and bacon.

“I didn't miss,” Cloud muttered, looking warily at Tifa as she walked up to him, a tall glass with a familiar concoction in it. Cloud's stomach rolled with a mixture of dread and relief as he recognized her patented hangover remedy.

“I made it extra potent, just for you,” she said dryly, shoving the glass into his bare hand.

“Thank you, Tifa,” he said glumly. For a moment, he just stood there, holding the glass, but she waited in front of him, hands on her hips as she stared at him expectantly. Grimacing, he complied with the silent order and tilted the remedy into his mouth, nearly gagging on the pungent taste—too many Potions and other nameless herbs mixed into a

sludgy paste that should never have come into existence.

He lowered the glass, still cringing, but Tifa's wearily affectionate smile made him feel way better than the hangover remedy. He gave her a weak smile in return and handed her the empty glass, the pounding in his skull already beginning to ebb.

"Hey, Tifa, how about giving me one of those?" Reno complained.

Tifa glanced at Cid. "Should I give him one now?"

"Nah, make him wait longer," Cid said good-naturedly, biting into a piece of greasy sausage. Beside him, Reno watched and started to turn a sickly shade of green.

"Why is Reno being punished?" Cloud asked Tifa quietly.

"Because," Red XIII said as he padded into the kitchen, "he also had a close encounter with the toilet this morning, but unlike you, he missed and made a mess."

"But I cleaned it," Reno insisted, looking away from Cid and his happy munching.

"Didn't do much for the smell," Red said sourly. "But I did not come in here to talk about vomiting. Cloud, Vincent and Yuffie are gone."

Cloud frowned. "Gone as in, 'went to the store' gone, or gone as in 'kidnapped' gone?"

Red scratched idly at one of his ears, and Cloud took the casual gesture as a sign that Red wasn't particularly worried. "I'm not sure. Two of the gold chocobos are missing, and I can only assume that they ventured off somewhere beyond the limits of Rocket Town. I went looking around the town, but I didn't find Vincent and Yuffie at the diner, the weapons shop, or any of the other stores."

Though obviously in the grips of a terrible hangover, Reno still had the strength to grin lecherously. "Did you check the hotel? Maybe they went off to a love nest together."

Cid tapped Reno on the shoulder. "C'mere, let me tell you somethin'."

"Wha—?" was all Reno managed to get out before Cid leaned over and burped loudly in his ear.

"Shit, that's f\*\*\*ing gross!" Reno exclaimed, clutching his nose as he bowed over the table.

"Cid!" Tifa chastised.

"The stench..." Red gasped as he quickly trotted out of the room. Cloud took it as a blessing that he was on the other side of the room and didn't have a particularly acute

sense of smell.

“That’s for barfing all over the bathroom floor,” Cid said smugly, smirking as he rose from the table and made his way over to the sink, depositing his dirty plate among the heaps of dishes already piled there. For a moment, he scratched his short blonde hair, as if contemplating washing them before shrugging and leaving them as they were.

“Where is everyone else?” Cloud asked, glancing at the window, which was dotted only lightly with drizzle. Outside, the morning sky above Rocket Town looked gray and gloomy, but he could still see figures in rain slickers and jackets moving stubbornly about the town.

“Sleeping, showering, running errands,” Tifa replied, bustling around the counter with deft hands, mixing together the ingredients for another of her remedies, presumably for Reno, who was still breathing very deeply into his hands.

“What’s our battle plan?” Cid suddenly asked, a newly lit cigarette already between his lips. “I’m gettin’ antsy, sitting around and doing nothin’ all day.”

Tifa laughed. “Cid, it’s only nine in the morning.”

“Yeah, but that’s already too long,” Cid grumbled.

“Strife,” Titus suddenly called from behind him.

Frowning, Cloud glanced over his shoulder at the man handcuffed to the radiator, hunkered to one side of it like a dark shadow. From this angle, only his legs were visible, and Cloud briefly wondered if he had imagined the summons, but judging from Cid’s dark scowl and Tifa’s worried brow, that wasn’t the case. Wordlessly, he made his way into the living room, eyes idly scanning around for Fa-Li and finding the woman curled next to the fireplace, her left hand bound to the small, ornamental metal bar Cid had built into the wall to hold the poker in place. She had exchanged her leather bodysuit for pale blue sweatpants and matching hooded jacket, the garments obviously loaned to her by a very generous Shera. The pastel color made the woman’s exotically beautiful features look surprisingly soft, but it didn’t dim the wariness in her eyes as she watched Cloud approach.

Titus hadn’t bothered with a new set of clothes. His black pants and jacket were just as dark as ever, his green eyes just as brilliant as they stared up at Cloud from beneath pale, level brows.

“What do you want?” Cloud demanded, fighting very hard not to avert his gaze.

“I just wanted to tell you that the President of Neo-Shinra is a good man, but it seems that despite all efforts to let him go peacefully, mercy was determined not to grant him

reprieve.”

Cloud felt his eyebrows draw together in a tense scowl. “Look, Titus, stop the cryptic stuff. If you have something to tell me, just do it.”

Titus just stared at him as the phone trilled loudly in the kitchen. His green eyes flicked apathetically in that direction, and Cloud felt the first ripples of unease begin to tighten his shoulders. His eyes remained on Titus, but all his attention was on the one-sided conversation Cid was having with the person on the other end of the phone.

“Yeah... Speak up, man, I can’t hear ya with all the static... Yeah... No, this is Cid Highwind... The hell ya need to talk to Cloud for?”

Cloud turned away from Titus and stalked into the kitchen, coming up behind Cid. The man turned and lifted an eyebrow, offering him the receiver. “Some guy asking for ya. Sounds familiar, but there’s a shitload of static.”

Heart thudding in his chest, Cloud put the receiver to his ear, hearing nothing but a low hum of static on the other side. “This is Cloud Strife.”

The static intensified, but through the hair-raising crackling, he heard the words, “... Strife... Campbell in Mideel... hear me?”

“Doctor Campbell?” he repeated. “I can barely hear you.”

“...is here... has... poisoning.”

Cloud clamped his hand over his opposite ear, turning his back on the worried faces of Tifa and the others. “Can you please repeat that?”

“Reeve... Mako...”

Though the connection was still horribly static-filled, even Cloud’s sleep-and-alcohol-muddled brain could piece together what the doctor was trying to tell him: *Reeve is here. He has Mako poisoning.*

Cloud’s skin was cold, but the blood ran hot in his ears, filling his body with a warm surge of growing fury. “I understand, doctor. We’ll be heading down to Mideel as soon as possible.”

“Hurry,” the doctor’s voice came in a crackling rush. “...seeing you.”

Interpreting that as a goodbye, Cloud set the receiver back on the ringer a bit too heavily. Without turning around to face the others, he said, “Ready the Highwind and gather everyone. We’re going to Mideel.”

“Strife,” Reno said sharply, and Cloud didn’t have to ask what the Turk was demanding.

“Reeve is in Mideel,” Cloud said shortly.

“Reeve?” Reno echoed incredulously. “What the hell?”

“I’ll tell you when we’re on the move. Now let’s just hurry and get ready.”

No one moved.

“*Now*,” he snapped, still hunched over the phone cradle, not wanting to show his angry face in front of the others. If Cid and Reno saw, they would grow angry as well, and their rage would spread to the others until it ripped through their whole war-torn band like a wildfire blazing out of control. Besides, he didn’t want them to know about what Titus had told him. If the Turks thought that the Running Man was responsible for hurting their President... Cloud was in no mood to try and keep them from shedding blood unnecessarily.

Fortunately, Tifa, Cid, and Reno all scattered at Cloud’s curt, clipped order. He felt their eyes on him as they left the kitchen, but he didn’t meet their gazes. He knew he owed them a full explanation, but he couldn’t do it with the blood boiling in his veins like this. Mako poisoning. Of all things, why that? And how?

Of course, Cloud knew the how. As soon as Reno and Cid were out of earshot, he stalked over to Titus and stood over him, letting his shadow loom over his seated figure and wishing the darkness would suffocate the life out of him. Titus only looked at him, jewel-like eyes indifferent.

“You put him in the Lifestream, didn’t you?” Cloud hissed.

Silence.

“Why?” Cloud demanded, fighting not to let his voice rise. “Why do that? Why didn’t you just kill him? He has... he has...”

“Mako poisoning,” Titus finished in a low, emotionless voice. “So I heard. That is unfortunate.”

Cloud’s fingers itched to grab hold of Titus’ collar and shake a reaction out of him. Anything would do, any shred of emotion, a hint of regret or remorse for what he’d done to a man who had helped save and rebuild the Planet. He clenched his fists instead, aware of Red watching him from the hallway.

Gritting his teeth, Cloud forced himself to turn his back on Titus and walk away. Tifa came out of the hallway just as he stepped from the living room.

“What are we going to do about Yuffie and Vincent?” she asked quietly, noting the fury in Cloud’s blue eyes.

“I hate to say it, but tough luck,” Cloud said flatly. “We need to get over to Mideel.”

“We can’t just leave them behind,” Tifa protested.

“Shera knows where we’re going. She’ll tell them when they get back, and they’ll just have to find their own way to Mideel.”

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Yuffie made a gagging noise into Zoe’s wet feathers, fighting down the vomit that kept trying to rise into her throat as the waves did their nauseating little dance underneath the chocobo’s clawed feet.

“I’m sick and miserable,” she complained, almost inhaling a feather as she spoke.

“I know,” Vincent said, not sounding sympathetic at all. Of course, if she’d had to steer Vincent’s seasick ass across the churning sea while trying to maintain control of her own chocobo, she wouldn’t be oozing sympathy either.

“I don’t know why I’m getting sick now,” she continued, figuring that as long as she was talking, it would distract her from the sensation of her stomach’s contents rolling like a pig in the mud. “I was fine on the way to Wutai. Don’t know why I feel like... puking... now. Urgh!”

Zoe warked in dismay as Yuffie leaned to the side, holding onto the edge of the saddle for balance as she dry-heaved, coughing up nothing but still feeling like shit after she was done. She’d emptied most of her dinner a few miles off the Wutainese shore when a giant wave had roared up in front of her and Vincent. Instead of bracing for impact like a normal chocobo, Zoe’s higher breeding had somehow told her that it would be a good idea to run *through* the goddamn wave. As soon as she could draw a full breath of air, Yuffie had thrown up. In front of Vincent, too. Fortunately, he hadn’t gone “ew!” or made any snide remarks. That was the good thing about Vincent: you could do some embarrassing things in front of him, and he rarely ever commented on it. All he did was gently take the reins out of her grip and bring his chocobo alongside hers to guide her through the rainy night on the ocean.

Dawn had broken an hour ago, but thanks to the crappy weather and high waves, they were forced to move at a snail’s pace. Yuffie was sure someone had noticed that she and Vincent were missing by now. Hell, she’d be insulted if they hadn’t! Reno was probably making lewd jokes about them running off to engage in naughty activities. Not that Yuffie would ever engage in such debauchery. Of course not. No way.

She groaned as Vincent urged the chocobos into a fast trot to scale a wave before it could rise any higher. Yuffie felt like someone had stuffed her into a dryer and put it on the fastest setting. She squeezed her eyes tightly shut and waited for level ground to return. She'd be happy if she never saw the damn ocean again.

"Vincent," she moaned.

"Yes?"

"How far away are we?"

"It won't be long, Yuffie."

She sighed. "Distract me, Vincent."

"Just concentrate on the rain hitting your clothes," he suggested dryly. "I'm afraid I'm all out of distractions at the moment. Unless you want to drown when a wave hits us."

"Don't be melodramatic," she scolded. "The waves aren't as bad right now, and my need to puke hasn't been consistent. Just talk to me, or something. Tell me a story, one that your mama used to tell you."

"My mother was not one for stories."

"Just talk, Vincent," she said, trying not to sound desperate as her stomach heaved again. "Hey, weren't you going to tell me about the Brother of Battle?"

"You remembered that?" Vincent asked, sounding mildly surprised.

"Yeah, yeah," she said hurriedly, grasping her opening. "Tell me, tell me. I wait with bated breath." *And vomit in the back of my throat.*

After a moment, Vincent said somewhat reluctantly, "Very well. I'm afraid it's not a very long tale. I don't quite remember all the details, either. It's really just a piece of our local folklore. When I was a child, I lived in a village high in the mountains. The soil there was very dark, but there was one large area of land deep in the forests that had red soil. Whenever it would rain, the mud there would stain any passing travelers' feet the deep red-brown of dried blood. My sisters told me that there was once a pair of great warriors amongst our people, back during the time of the Ancients. A brother and a sister renowned for their great skill in protecting the village from evil. The sister was named Battle, and it's said that she died on that patch of naked land in the woods where the soil is red and the trees never grow. She had told her brother that wherever she fell when she died—that was where she wished to remain, rather than become just one corpse amongst many in the village's traditional burial ground. So, there she fell, and there she remained. Her blood seeped into the earth, turning it deep red.

“But Battle’s brother still lived on after her death. Not wanting to be separated from the sister he had loved so dearly, he lived on the land where Battle had fallen. There are a few disturbing versions of the story that say he literally lived off the earth that Battle’s blood had soaked into, growing food in soil soaked with his sister’s blood. Then, he just disappeared. No one knows if he died, or if he somehow passed into a different plain of existence. But his spirit stayed at his sister’s side. Wherever there is bloodshed between fighters, Battle’s warrior spirit is there, and so is her brother. They are never apart, and every cut and bruise that mars the skin of a female warrior is a kiss from the Brother of Battle.”

“Just the women?” Yuffie asked, her nausea briefly lulled by Vincent’s voice.

“So the tale goes,” he replied. “For all I know, it’s just a myth.”

“Myth or not, the Brother of Battle is into the tough love. Someone should let him know that sometimes he’s a bit overzealous with his affection.”

“Perhaps he is just hungry for the presence of a woman.”

Although Vincent said the comment in his usual impassive tone, Yuffie still lifted her face from Zoe’s feathers and glanced at him with mild curiosity, wondering if he was attempting to make a joke or just thinking out loud. His face was almost lost beneath the hood of his rain slicker, his white skin standing in stark contrast to the black material, wayward strands of dark hair clinging to the dampness on his face.

“Well, I can get that, I guess. He has to get his kicks somehow,” she said with a sigh, thinking of the huge shiner she’d had on her cheek when the Faceless Man had slammed his rifle into her face back in the deep-sea complex. Stupid faceless freak.

“So,” she said as casually as possible, “you lived up in the mountains when you were little?”

“Yes,” he said, and she could feel him starting to withdraw, obviously trying to discourage further questions. Fortunately, Yuffie was known to fart in the face of discouragement. Besides, Vincent hadn’t shut down completely like he had during the previous times she’d tried to cajole bits of his past out of him. That had to be something, right?

“How long ago did you live up there?” she insisted.

“Before your father was born,” he replied, crimson eyes turning in her direction, watching intently for something—some hint of revulsion, maybe, or shock, that he was older than her father.



Well, Yuffie was going to disappoint him. She'd always suspected that Vincent was an old fart despite his young appearance, and she grinned even as raindrops rolled down her face. "I guess that explains why you act and sound like an old fuddy duddy sometimes."

Vincent frowned. "I'm realistic. I never considered myself particularly... fuddy duddy-ish."

The words sounded so ridiculous when Vincent said them in his deep, daunting, "woe to me" voice that Yuffie had to laugh. "Ah, Vinnie, you're such a trip! Your sisters must have loved you a lot."

Vincent turned away again, facing forward. "They did. And before you ask, I don't want to talk about them."

"I didn't ask," she grumped.

"But you were going to," he said, and she couldn't argue. But she was really, really damn curious about his past, especially since she knew her old tooter of a father had to have told Vincent some embarrassing stories from *her* childhood when they'd had their little impromptu tea party. It was only fair that Yuffie got to know some things about Vincent! She wondered what it had been like to have siblings. Yuffie always thought of her friends as an extended family, but she had spent a lonely portion of her childhood wondering what her life would have been like if she'd had brothers and sisters related to her by blood. But then she imagined some little bratty brother stealing all of her treasures, or some older, elegant sister chiding Yuffie for her tomboyish nature, and she was grateful that she was an only child.

But, glancing at Vincent, she couldn't help but wonder what his sisters had looked like. Had they been as beautiful as Vincent was handsome, with the same dark hair and long limbs? Had they—

"You're staring at me and asking yourself questions, aren't you?" he suddenly asked, pinning her with an intent look that made her feel like he could stare right into her head.

"No!" she exclaimed hotly. Vincent nodded and looked away, but she saw amusement on his face, silently accusing her of being full of crap. She had the childish urge to stick her tongue out at his profile, but she wisely stifled the impulse.

"Land," Vincent said suddenly, sitting up a little straighter in the saddle. Zoe felt the tug on her reins and drew herself up, feathers shifting out of Yuffie's death grip. Yuffie glanced in the direction of Vincent's gaze and saw that he was right. The vision of the shores of Rocket Town was the damn loveliest thing she'd seen in her life, almost as gorgeous as a whole bagful of materia. Almost.

“Wow, Vinnie, you should tell me stories more often,” she joked, catching Zoe’s reins as Vincent tossed them back to her. “I completely forgot to charm you by puking into the ocean again.”

“Glad I could service you,” he said. “Now, let’s get going.”

“*Service me?*” Yuffie’s mind echoed. *What the hell am I, a buggy?*

Vincent flicked Quinn’s reins before Yuffie could reply, and she had no choice but to urge Zoe into a run. Nausea reared in her stomach, but she fought it down, speeding towards the shore. They didn’t bother to decrease their speed as the talons of the chocobos touched the soggy sand of the shore, spurred by a strange urgency they felt in their very bones. Rocket Town felt oddly empty as they approached the city limits, and Yuffie had the nagging notion that something was wrong. She could only assume Vincent shared her instincts, because when she glanced at him with a worried and uncertain expression, he looked back at her with his mouth in a grim line. Anyone else might have thought that was how he normally looked, but she knew better.

Yuffie leaned forward in the saddle, the last lingering traces of nausea gone as Zoe’s speed increased, Quinn fighting to keep up with her taxing pace. They didn’t even bother to head to the chocobo barn to deposit the weary birds amongst their brethren. They rode right up to the front steps of Cid’s house and hopped off the saddles almost before the chocobos had drawn to a complete halt. Zoe warked in dismay as the sudden shift in Yuffie’s weight made her veer slightly to the side, but the gold quickly corrected her balance. Yuffie raced up the steps with Vincent at her heels, grimly noting the absence of Red XIII on his usual perch on the porch.

She wasn’t surprised when she barged through the front door to find the house empty except for Shera’s lonely figure washing dishes in the kitchen sink, her glasses perched on her nose and her hair in a no-nonsense ponytail. She whirled, a preoccupied expression on her face when she saw Vincent and Yuffie in the doorway.

“They took off to Mideel,” she said quickly, just as Yuffie opened her mouth to demand where the others were. “The doctor down there said that he found Reeve.”

“All the way in Mideel?” Yuffie demanded incredulously, deep worry blooming where relief should have taken root. “The last time someone popped up in Mideel...” *Cloud washed up there with Mako poisoning.*

Her voice trailed off, drowned in her growing horror, but Vincent finished her sentence in a flat tone, “The Lifestream. I suspect Titus’ involvement in this.”

Yuffie almost whirled to snap at him for jumping to conclusions, but she bit her tongue when she realized that he was probably right. Titus’ former favorite hangout was

deep in the earth, very likely close to the Lifestream, and Yuffie wouldn't put it past him to have dumped Reeve in there just to be an ass. Part of her wanted to give him the benefit of the doubt, but a larger part of her wanted to find Titus and kick his ass all the way to the Chocobo Ranch and back. Just in case.

"They took your things with them," Shera said. "I know they didn't want to leave you behind, but..."

"But they did, those jerks!" Yuffie exclaimed, needing an outlet for her anger. She whirled and stalked out the door. "I'm going after them!"

"Thank you, Shera," she heard Vincent say, his polite but strained voice making Yuffie freeze in mid-stomp. Chiding herself for forgetting her manners, she turned again and barged back through the doorway, almost knocking Vincent over. She bowed to Shera and said, "Thanks for everything."

Shera blinked in surprise before nodding. "Please call and let me know how Reeve is."

"We will! I'm sure he's fine!" Yuffie said with conviction she didn't really feel. The gravity of the situation was starting to dawn on her, and she was desperately fighting back images of Reeve in the grips of the same Mako poisoning that had managed to dull even the light in Cloud's bright blue eyes, stealing his sanity, stealing *him*.

She couldn't help herself from thinking darkly, *Reeve's body is weaker than Cloud's, and after being kidnapped and tortured, he'd be weak in the mind as well...*

With one last nod to Shera, she turned and ran back out onto the porch, hopping into Zoe's saddle in such a hurry that the gold chocobo turned her head to see what had her rider so agitated. Vincent had already taken off when Shera rushed out onto the porch, her hands still wet with dishwater.

"Ride fast," she pleaded.

"Don't worry," Yuffie said, trying to force a smile that probably came out looking more like a grimace.

It didn't take her and Zoe long to catch up to Vincent, and before she knew it, they were tearing through the outskirts of Rocket Town, the chocobos' talons sinking into the soft earth. Yuffie stared at the place the Highwind had hovered, her heart twisting painfully in her chest when she saw the empty sky. She was annoyed at being left behind, but she understood Cloud's decision. But still...

"Cloud's an ass for leaving us behind," she snarled.

"If I were him, I would have made the same decision," Vincent said curtly. "We ran

off without telling anyone, and a leader should not let the whims of two subordinates affect the rest of the team.”

Yuffie gritted her teeth, not knowing if it was honesty or simple politeness that made Vincent use “we.” *She* had been the one who’d run off without letting anyone know, and he’d only followed to make sure she didn’t get kidnapped. She wanted to be insulted that he didn’t trust her to take care of herself, but then again, she didn’t have a great track record of avoiding kidnapers. In the end, she kept a lid on her anger, knowing that she was only pissed off at the nagging thought that it was her fault they got left behind. Which was stupid, but...

“I shouldn’t have run off by myself,” she said sullenly, wishing there was a way to kick herself hard in the ass.

“No, you shouldn’t have,” Vincent replied. “But at least we got left behind together, rather than just you being left behind alone.”

Yuffie glared at him out of the corner of her eye, holding tight to Zoe’s reins as the chocobo continued to race along. “Are you just being nice?”

Vincent gave her a droll look. “No, merely being an old fuddy duddy.”

Yuffie almost laughed at that, but she didn’t have any laughter in her at the moment. “I can take care of myself, you know.”

“Yes, you’ve told me that before.”

“Then why don’t you listen?”

“Because I choose not to,” he said simply.

“That answer sucks, Vinnie,” she grumbled.

“Only because you can’t argue with it.”

She couldn’t, although she wanted to continue arguing just for the sake of distracting herself. She had to admit that running through the rain with Vincent was better than running by herself. At least she had someone to grumble at, even if Vincent had become annoyingly adept at returning her banter.

A low rumbling suddenly shook the earth beneath them, too quiet and constant to be thunder. Zoe warked with concern but knew better than to slow her pace, and Yuffie quickly began scanning the area, reaching down to her belt to touch the comforting metal of the Oritsuru and wishing she’d brought her Conformer to Wutai. “What the hell is that?”

Vincent didn't reply, but she saw he had the Death Penalty held at the ready, the hood of the rain slicker pushed back so he wasn't robbed of his peripheral vision. Yuffie started to do the same, but the rumbling suddenly intensified, and she heard the distinct noise of air screaming in protest as something large raced through it. She looked up and had to blink twice before she could believe what she was seeing. For a moment, she thought she had water droplets in her eyes. That would explain the shimmering wave of disturbance blazing through the air far above her, but it was too contained, moving with too much purpose to be a fleck of water marring her vision.

"Is that...?"

"It's hovercraft of some sort," Vincent replied. "It has a cloaking device on it."

Yuffie squinted, and she could see that the cloaking device just applied to the ship, not the people on board. As it shot through the air above them at breakneck speed, she was grateful for the shadow cast by the mountain they were running along, hiding them from view. Especially once she recognized the craft's passengers.

"Oh shit!" she exclaimed, not bothering to lower her voice. The passengers were too high up and too far ahead to hear her now. God damn it! They were going to get to Mideel way ahead of her and Vincent!

"Jezebel and Montana," Vincent said grimly, lowering himself until he was practically lying on Quinn's neck, making himself as small as possible to decrease wind resistance. "I didn't want to run the chocobos this hard, but..."

"They're tough. They can take it," Yuffie said tersely, fighting against rising panic. "How the hell did Jezebel and Montana know to go to Mideel?"

"We aren't sure they're heading there."

"Yes, we are! They're after Titus! Where else would they be going?" she snapped, and she could tell from the look in Vincent's eyes that he agreed with her. She wished he didn't. Tifa wasn't anywhere near healed yet, and Yuffie knew she wouldn't hesitate to get in Montana's way again. Yuffie felt her chest tighten at the thought of not being there to help her friend. Deep down, she knew that she and Vincent wouldn't make much difference in a battle against Jezebel and Montana, but in her mind, being there with AVALANCHE was a huge deal. But, she wasn't there with them because they'd flown off to Mideel because *someone* had done something nasty to Reeve...

*If Titus has something to do with this, she thought to herself, forget kicking his ass all the way to the Chocobo Ranch. I'll strangle him to death with my bare hands.*

“What I want to know is what f\*\*\*ing mother f\*\*\*er decided to build this godforsaken village way the f\*\*\* out here in the middle of the goddamn jungle! Can’t get where we want to go because we can’t land in the trees! Goddamn piece of—”

Like everyone else in the Highwind, Tifa dutifully ignored Cid’s angry ranting about the location of Mideel. He’d been cursing under his breath ever since they’d left Rocket Town, and Tifa couldn’t say she blamed him. The news that Reeve had turned up in Mideel had everyone wound in knots, but it was evident from the dark anger on Cloud’s face that something was terribly wrong. Even though he’d said he’d tell them more once they were on their way, he had done completely the opposite, clamming up and just insisting on getting their as soon as possible whenever someone badgered him to explain further. Reno had eventually thrown up his arms in disgust and stormed out to the deck of the airship to be closer to the ladder when they reached their destination. Cid and Barret obviously wanted to ask more questions, but Cloud’s expression forbade anyone to get near him, which only pissed off Cid. Hence, the constant swearing.

Tifa glanced over at the front of the Highwind where Cloud stood with his arms folded over his chest, glaring out of the cockpit’s windows with such vehemence that it was amazing he hadn’t burned a hole in the glass. She could tell Cloud was trying very hard to keep a lid on his anger, and although she wanted to go over there and talk to him, touch him—anything to bring him back to them—she stayed where she was, gazing out over the ocean and ignoring the worry eating at her.

“Shu’ up!” Barret finally exploded at Cid. “Quit your goddamn bitchin’! Ever think it might be the fault of this ghetto-ass airship that we can’t land in the trees?”

“Go to hell!” Cid snarled back. “Ain’t nothing wrong with my ship! They should just build a landing strip in the—”

Tifa didn’t hear Titus come up behind her, and she didn’t know if it was because of Cid and Barret’s raised voices, or simply because Titus was unnaturally quiet even when wearing heavy combat boots. She jumped a little when she suddenly found him standing beside her at the railing, the cold gray light of the morning making his skin and hair paler than usual. His eyes stood out in stark contrast, green irises alight with the distant reflection of the Lifestream that had ruined Mideel, which could be seen even from the air. Beyond his regal profile, Tifa could see Cloud staring at Titus, his blue eyes warm with rage. Tifa frowned, realizing that whatever had Cloud so angry had something to do with the man beside her...

Titus suddenly turned to look at her, his eyes catching hers, and everything seemed to fall quiet. The sound of Barret and Cid’s escalating argument was muted, distant as a dream, and Tifa forgot all about the meaningful anger in Cloud’s eyes. The air felt soft

and thick, surrounding her like the smell of her mother's soap lingering in the moist air of the bathroom after she showered. Tifa remembered standing in those wreaths of warm fragrance, watching as her mother dried her damp hair. The memory soothed her, but she knew it was so very wrong to feel placated at a time like this.

She opened her mouth to demand that Titus stop whatever spell he was weaving, but a hand seemed to close around her throat, stopping her voice from leaving her lips.

"No time for words," Titus said, his voice only meant for the two of them. She felt it all along her body, in her head. He was everywhere. "If you are to be my defender, I can't very well leave you damaged."

He raised one of his hands, and Tifa saw with a sort of distant shock that his handcuffs dangled from one wrist only. All this time, he'd been able to free himself, and they'd been none the wiser. The orb embedded into the back of his hand flashed with a light of its own, a blue-violet storm building in its depths, swirling like captive smoke beneath the glassy surface. He turned it towards her, and her eyes followed it helplessly, hypnotized by the cloud-like wisps dancing inside of it. Suddenly, she had the impression that there were actual dancers in there, temptresses shrouded in robes that hid their faces as their limbs moved through the air. They danced in a lake of deep purple flames, and Tifa could feel the heat of their fiery stage on her stomach, itching and burning. She wanted to raise her hands to scratch the area, but her limbs were too heavy, too sluggish. Her mind started to slip towards the orb, and she let it. Down she fell, plummeting towards the wreaths of dark fire to join the smoke-dancers...

The Highwind suddenly landed artlessly on the shores of Mideel, and Tifa blinked rapidly, a little disoriented as she automatically gripped the railing. Beside her, Titus did the same, the chain link of his handcuffs clinking against the metal bar. She looked at him warily, for some reason convinced that he had just done something strange, that he had been standing next to her for a reason. If only she could remember...

"Let's go," Cloud said tersely, his voice carrying even in the large room. "Cid, Barret, keep Titus close to you. Make sure he doesn't get away."

"Some of us should remain with the Highwind," Red said reluctantly, deferring to his tactical prudence but obviously not wanting to be the one to stay behind.

Cloud nodded stiffly. "Yeah, someone should, but I'm not going to ask anyone to. We've all been searching for Reeve for so long, and I know..." His voice trailed off, and Tifa saw his jaw bulge as he grit his teeth, closing his eyes as if he didn't want them to see the frustration and anger that was obviously plaguing him.

Finally, he said in a tight voice, "Whoever wants to stay, feel free to."

Red and Cait Sith were the only ones who volunteered, more out of a sense of, “Well, if someone has to do it, I suppose we will,” than any real desire to remain behind. Tifa didn’t blame them. Everyone wanted to see Reeve. Cait looked forlorn as he watched them clamber down the rope ladder, but Tifa trusted both him and Red to protect the ship. Tifa spared an idle thought about what Fa-Li intended to do: remain on the ship and away from Reno, or head into the fray at Titus’ side. She got her answer when she saw the woman descending the rope ladder with amazing agility for someone who couldn’t move her hands. To her surprise, Cloud didn’t protest the woman’s presence, just signaled for Barrett and Cid to watch her as well.

Fortunately, Fa-Li appeared to be very low on Reno’s list of worries at the moment. The redhead had taken off towards the edge of the jungle as soon as his feet hit the sand, and Elena and Rude followed closely behind him, obviously anxious to get to their president as soon as possible. Cloud didn’t bother to rein them in, just rushed across the beach to join them, allowing the Turks to blaze a trail through the damp jungle as they struck out for Mideel.

Under different circumstances, Tifa would have admired the way the lush greenery shimmered with standing raindrops, or stopped to examine the huge pink and yellow flowers that remained open in spite of the recent torrential downpours and depressing lack of sunlight. But now the scenery was just a blur of bright colors all around her, perfumed with the thick aroma of wet, rich soil, which clung to her boots as she fought to keep up with the group’s taxing pace. She kept hoping that Vincent and Yuffie would come bounding out of the jungle on their gold chocobos—Vincent stony-faced and Yuffie snarling at them for leaving them behind—but their surroundings remained woefully silent except for the rustling of monsters in the bushes, apparently too wet and miserable to attack the humans passing like a wildfire through the jungle.

*Or maybe something else is wrong?* Tifa wondered, glancing at the gleaming eyes of a Spiral glaring out at her from the shadow of a tall tree; the creature was obviously hungry but unwilling to move, for some reason.

No more than a minute later, Tifa learned the reason for the creature’s fear. The earth began to rumble beneath them, forcing everyone to come to a halt. Tifa started to glance at the earth beneath her boots, wondering if the Planet was angry at something, but then the trees above her were whipped into a violent frenzy by something hovering above them. Leaves, already burdened by water, rained heavily down on them.

“What the hell!” Reno exclaimed, sounding more annoyed than frightened, his nightstick already out. His crimson ponytail lashed the air behind him like a twisting viper, and Tifa felt her hair doing the same, her bangs blown back from her forehead as she turned her gaze skyward.



“What’s up there?” Cloud demanded, gripping the hilt of the Ultima Weapon.

“Some old friends,” Titus’ voice drifted from behind them.

Tifa and Cloud both whirled to look at him, standing calmly between the battle-ready Barret and the nervous Fa-Li. His eyes met Tifa’s, and she suddenly knew what he was talking about. “You don’t mean...?”

“You know who’s up there,” he said ominously.

The sound of leaves crackling drew her attention back to the treetops, and everyone watched as a peculiar rectangle of wavering air descended into the jungle, vaporizing everything in its downward path. Leaves and wood alike dissolved into nothing but dust, scattering into the wind and stinging Tifa’s eyes as she fought to make sense of what she was seeing. At first, she thought she was looking at some sort of airship with an invisibility cloak, but as it drew closer, she saw it was more the size of a hovercraft, a vessel just big enough to seat two people. From her vantage point, she could see no obvious steering mechanism, but she wasn’t surprised that one wasn’t required, especially given the two passengers on board.

Unconsciously, Tifa lifted her hand and pressed it against the bandages covering her stomach, expecting to feel a burst of pain from the burn on her skin, a little reminder of just who she was dealing with. But to her surprise, she felt nothing. Shock broke through her growing haze of fear, and she scratched at the bandages with a gloved hand, waiting for agony to blind her as her fingers chafed the skin underneath. Nothing. Her first thought was that the adrenaline in her veins had somehow made her numb to pain, but something told her that wasn’t true. With sudden vehemence, she ripped away the bandages, and as the cloth got caught in the lashing wind and floated away from her body in streams, she stared with wide eyes down at her smooth, completely healed stomach.

She whipped around, her eyes seeking out the one person who had had any sort of idea on how to heal the burn. Titus met her gaze levelly, something like a smile playing on his lips, so faint that Tifa could convince herself it wasn’t even there.

“What did you do?” she demanded, the wind ripping away her voice, but she knew he could hear her.

Titus definitely smiled, the expression oddly bitter. Tifa stared at him, remembering his words: *“Cetra curative magic would be the only outside force that could heal this burn in such a short period of time...”*

Her jaw threatened to drop as she stared into his too-familiar green eyes, but a tremor ran through the ground, and she forced herself to turn forward again, dreading what she’d find. She was right to fear. Jezebel and Montana stood on the floor of their hovercraft,

their hair and clothes annoyingly undisturbed by the whirlwind of fury their landing had created. Jezebel's face was fully healed and once again cruelly beautiful, brown eyes staring out at them with intense battle-hunger. Montana was as imposing as ever, tall and wreathed in white garments, his dark green eyes filled with fire and focused right on Tifa.

He didn't need to say anything. His eyes said it all: *I'm going to kill you.*

Tifa swallowed hard and raised her fists.

tbc<sup>15</sup>

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15 The story was never continued. —*Editor*

# —How the Story Ends—

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Hello, it's Odysseus, the editor of this book.

Chapter 40, "Battle", was the final published chapter of *Sink to the Bottom With You*, released on April 19th, 2007. No further chapters were published thereafter, leaving the story on quite a cliffhanger with oh so many threads unresolved. There's no definitive explanation as for why Catalina abandoned the story—as I mentioned in volume 1, she just kind of vanished from the internet in 2008—but I can make a few guesses.

With the first chapter of *Sink* having released on October 9th, 2000, that gives the fic a runtime of just under seven years, from when *Final Fantasy VII* was still relatively fresh, to around when *Crisis Core* was coming out. That's a loooooooooooooong time to be writing a fanfic. Interests and tastes change over time, and so the 16 year old Catalina who started *Sink* in 2000 presumably had different tastes and priorities from the 22 or 23 year old Catalina who penned its final chapter in 2007. I think she probably just lost interest in *FFVII* compared to other things, sped on by the much more hectic and busy life of a young adult. The bulk of *Sink* came out between 2000 and 2002, with the last handful of chapters coming out slowly over the following five years. In the meantime, Catalina began writing fic about the *Death Note* and *Fruits Basket* series under the pen name "Flamika" with great regularity during that same timeframe. I didn't read any of those, but judging from her list of fic on her website, there were a LOT of them. Her interests and passions moved on, and *Sink* was a vestige from her younger years she eventually let go of before being eaten by the wendigo in 2008.

Luckily for us, however, we still have a rough idea of how the rest of the story was intended to play out. A one "Charles Xavier"—yes like the *X-Men* character—who you may recall Catalina mentioning in one of her author comments, was part of a group back in the day who were planning on rewriting *Sink* for... some reason. Nothing ever came of that, but his correspondence with Catalina involved her divulging details about the story that hadn't come up in the fic itself yet, as well as an overview of how the story would end. Charles held on to these emails, and once it was clear Catalina was never coming back to *Sink*, began offering to show curious fans the email. I stumbled upon his offer in the Fanfiction.net reviews for *Sink*, and by some miracle he still had the email over 20 years later and was still active online. I reached out, and got my grubby hands on the email. So fret not dear reader, there's still some closure to be had.

Though written five years before the last chapter was published, it seems Catalina stuck pretty closely to her original plan, as the set-up for many of these revelations was just starting to happen in the last four chapters.

## The Email from Catalina

From: Catalina V.  
 Sent: 29 June 2002 17:19<sup>1</sup>  
 To: charlesxavier85  
 Subject: Re: IMPORTANT!

1. *Is Fa-Li/Alette really Yuffie's mother?*

Nope.

2. *Are we going to see any more new characters? If so, can you give me description of them please?*

Hm, I don't think so, and if new ones do appear, they won't be major ones.

3. *I'd really like to know how the story ends. I've waited far enough I can't wait any longer! I know that you probably have many thoughts on it and can't really get a clear idea. But even so could you still tell me ALL of the possibilities? Please tell me what happens to everyone.*

I'll give it a try, but just know that all these things are subject to major changes:

**Vincent** – He falls ill with a mysterious disease that Chaos induced (remember the "sick" feelings he's gotten in a couple of the past chapters). While in the grips of delirium, he is forced to face up to who he is, and accept Chaos as another part of himself. This becomes crucial in the final battle against the Burrower, a Beast that dwells at the heart of the Planet. Vincent must morph Chaos in order to fight it; there is no other way to go about battling it.

**Yuffie** – After learning that her mother died trying to kill the Burrower, Yuffie realizes that the burden of slaying the Beast now falls upon her shoulders. She leaves her friends behind and journeys alone into the center of the Planet. But along the way, she is approached by none other than Water God Leviathan, who tells her that in order to defeat the Burrower, he will lend her his power. So Leviathan merges his essence with Yuffie's, but the catch here is that in doing this, Leviathan will become to Yuffie as Chaos to Vincent. Yuffie is not fully aware of this, and after the Burrower has been defeated, the full gravity of her decision comes crashing down on her. I'm not sure where this will take her, but I do know that at the end, she is immortal as surely as Vincent is, with a Beast that complements his.

**Tifa** – Tifa gets involved in a fight to the death with Montana, and during the course

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<sup>1</sup> Chapter 33 was the most recent chapter when this was written —Editor

of the fic, they battle several times, each time ending in a stalemate. Their final battles takes place at the heart of the Planet, and Tifa ends up killing Montana, or so she thinks. She feels the pain of his loss like no other, for she has come to see him as a human being instead of just one of the bad guys.

**Cloud** – Cloud ends up duking it out with High Priest Ajax when he and the others go to save Yuffie. I don't know how the battle will play out, but Cloud wins in the end. He's also the one who – with Titus' help – kills the Master of the faction.

**Reno** – Reno does get reunited with his daughter, who was kept alive in one of the faction's many subterranean lairs. I think that's the burning question most readers have for Reno at the moment. When he finds Mika, though, he wonders why the hell Fa-Li/Alette kept her existence a secret even as he accused her of killing Mika. In the end, he has his daughter back, but not his wife.

**Fa-Li/Alette** – Alette never killed Mika in the first place. Back when she still lived with Reno in Midgar, members of the faction found her and gave her the choice of either giving up her daughter to eventually be sacrificed to the Burrower, or to make her entire family into sacrifices. Alette didn't want to surrender her daughter, but she didn't want Reno to die because of her stubbornness, either. So she gave Mika and herself over to the faction so that Reno could live. She battles Jezebel down at the center of the Planet, and both the women are mortally wounded when the tunnel they're battling in suddenly collapses. Alette manages to struggle her way out, driven by the desire to see her daughter and husband one last time. She manages this, and dies happy.

**Titus** – Titus' true nature is revealed when he uses his powers to heal Reeve of Mako poisoning. He's half Cetra and half "Cetra ocuris" or "Dark Cetra." He's the last of both races, and has powers from both of his ancestors' healing magic from the Cetra and death magic from the Dark Cetra. This unique blend of both ancient bloods is why Titus was so valuable to the Master in the first place. When Cloud and the others come down into the faction to save Yuffie once again, Titus joins them and helps Cloud defeat the Master, but ends up dying in the process.

I think that pretty much takes care of the major characters. Reeve washes up in Mideel with a severe case of Mako poisoning, which Titus heals. Cid overcomes being mind-raped by the Hissers. Barret, Red, and Cait are just sort of...there. Rude and Elena form the beginnings of a relationship.

And that's pretty much all I can give you at the moment. Hope it helps, but remember that I'm not writing this fic, you are. Don't forget about your own creativity. Good luck!

-Catalina

And there you have it.

There's still plenty of unresolved plot threads this doesn't cover, like Vincent's sisters, what Titus' goal is, what the Faction's goal is, why they want Cloud and his Ultima Weapon, who the master of the faction is, what the burrower is, how it and the faction relate to the larger setting of *Final Fantasy VII*—i.e. any relation to Shinra? Their secret tunnels around Midgar and Junon imply it at least—and why it's raining so much, among other things, but at least we have the foggiest idea of what would've gone down.

It's really a shame Catalina went cold-turkey on the whole thing. I really do enjoy her writing, and while the plot meandered a ton to the point of never even really establishing what the main conflict actually is or who the bad guys are, I still found the plot interesting and enjoyable. I think Catalina really understood *FFVII's* characters, at least as much as anyone could understand the characters with just the clunky PS1 translation of *FFVII* as their only point of reference. I'm truly sad I'll never get to see their stories wrapped up under her penmanship.

I wish I had more to say, really, but that's all I've got.

Abrupt though it may be, this is...

THE END

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...

...?

# Chapter Forty-One

## *The Flame of Rebirth*

*“You really are one obstinate bitch, Tifa Lockhart.”—Hiei Montana*

*The sound of the wind is whispering in your head*

*Can you feel it coming back?*

*Through the warmth, through the cold, keep running till we're there*

*We're coming home now, we're coming home now*

*“Home”*

*—Dotan—*

“Oh, son of a BITCH!” Reno cursed in utter exasperation. “Don’t you people ever get tired? Need some time off to take a breather? R&R, you know?” He pointed up at Jezebel accusingly with his nightstick. “For chrissakes, woman, I burned your damn face off a few days ago, and now here you are again looking just peachy keen. This is such bull!”

“No rest for the wicked I’m afraid, darling,” Jezebel said in a mocking tone. “We’ve still got business with you lot.”

“It’s always when we move shop somewhere else, too. First the bar, then Junon, now this! Can’t we ever travel in peace for a change? We’ve got more important things to do, you know! How did you even know we were headed here anyway!?! And is that a f\*\*\*ing invisible—”

Before Reno could continue his tirade, Cloud stuck an arm in his face.

“What the hell do you want?” the leader of AVALANCHE demanded.

“Come now, you already know what we’re here for.” Jezebel’s blood-hungry brown eyes drifted from the terrified Fa-Li to the ever-impassive Titus. “Hm, seems our precious little Wutainese flea isn’t here, though. And where might you be hiding her?”

“None of your business.” Cloud said coolly, secretly now feeling grateful for Yuffie and Vincent’s unannounced late-night excursion.

“Hmph, oh well. All in due time I suppose.” She said with an unconcerned shrug. “Oh, but there is *one* other little thing we’re after this time.”

“...And what might that be?” Cloud said cautiously.

The woman's eyes flashed with mischievous intent.

“*You.*”

“Huh?” Cloud balked in confusion as her long feminine finger pointed directly at him.

“Criminy Christmas, are there any’a us you people DON’T wanna kidnap?” Cid barked.

“Oh no, that’s all.” Jezebel mused nonchalantly.

The bounty hunter woman suddenly raised up her arms, and the invisible hovercraft she and Montana stood upon began to vibrate violently. A hatch on the back of it popped open, and a dozen identical scythes floated out, fanning around Jezebel like razor sharp wings, one landing gingerly into her awaiting muscular arms.

“The rest of you are more than welcome to drop dead.”

There was a lull for a fraction of a second as all present—save for the still unfazed Titus—gaped on in abject horror at the absurd sight before them.

“Aw hell.” Barret uttered.

And then all hell broke loose.

Jezebel dived straight for Cloud with the scythe she was holding, the swordsman just barely blocking her with the Ultima Weapon in time to stop the deranged woman from bisecting him, as she sent the other scythes sailing through the air towards the rest of AVALANCHE and the Turks with her magic. “Just try snatching all of *these* away from me why don’t you?” she said smugly, face mere inches from Cloud’s.

“Cloud!” Tifa screamed, forgetting her stare-down with Montana and rushing to her friend’s aide. Before she could reach him, however, the white-clad assassin leapt down from the top of the invisible craft, landing directly in front of Tifa to obstruct her path.

“And where exactly do you think you’re going?” he said, annoyance blazing in his emerald-green eyes.

“Out of my way!” Tifa ordered desperately.

“Oh no no no.” Montana said while wagging his index finger at the panicked woman. “You and I have a deal, an honor-bound contract. I can’t indulge myself in brutalizing all of your friends until you’re dead on the ground, remember? Your business is with *me.*”

With that, he stomped his foot hard towards Tifa, causing a spurt of fire to come



bursting from the ground in her direction. Tifa quickly backflipped away to dodge the attack, but Montana used the diversion to create a wall of flames to separate himself and Tifa from the rest of the battle. Tifa watched on as he slowly turned to face her, a vision of Sephiroth standing in the smoldering remains of her hometown coming to her mind as she saw Montana silhouetted against the blazing inferno. She shuddered involuntarily.

“There, that’s muuuuch better. Just you and me now, all nice and private-like.” He smirked as he brushed his hands together. “You survived by the skin of your teeth last time, but I wouldn’t go counting on being so lucky again. I don’t intend to screw up twice.”

Tifa raised her fists pensively, the glitter of the flames dancing in her burgundy eyes. Montana began walking casually towards her, discarding his jacket and cracking his knuckles, grinning manically all the while.

“I see your stomach’s all healed up! Guess you have Titus to thank for that, huh? Well then, I’ll just have to put my back into it this time. Now then, let’s see what that crusty old ‘Zangan Ryu’ of yours can do, shall we, miss Tifa Serenity Lockhart?”

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*Tifa!* Cloud thought in a panic as he saw the flame wall rise. His mad-woman opponent wouldn’t allow him a moment of concern, however, as she took another lightning-fast swipe at him with the business end of her scythe, which he again narrowly deflected. They had ordered Jezebel to leave AVALANCHE’s leader and his weapon “untarnished”, as high priest Ajax had put it, but she had decided that the faction could live with him missing a limb or three given the unreasonable nature of the request. It was two against *nine*, after all.

All around him, Cloud heard his friends scrambling every which way to avoid sharp, agonizing death. Barret and Elena were trying in vain to shoot down the scythes with their guns while dodging desperately, Cid had Fa-Li slung over one shoulder and was running around like a chocobo with its head cut off while swatting at the scythes with the Venus Gospel. Rude had managed to grab onto the handle of one, but all that resulted in was him spinning in the air wildly. The unfolding chaos was almost as comical as it was terrifying. While Jezebel didn’t have the best of aim while trying to control so many different objects, it was more than enough to shatter the group formation and sink everyone into pandemonium.

*Shit!* Cloud cursed to himself. *This is complete chaos. It was hard enough to get in her range last time, but now that everyone is scattered it’s gonna be next to impossible. We’ve gotta regroup, but how?*

“Hey, Mister too-cool-to-care!” Reno snapped at Titus, who seemed relatively nonplussed by all the disorder surrounding him. “You wanna do that thing again? Y’know, where you make her stupidly over-powered magic stop working?”

“That only worked earlier because she was concentrating on one large object, and we were able to make a quick getaway after her concentration broke.” Titus stated matter-of-factly while side-stepping a scythe. “I could make her drop one of her scythes, but that wouldn’t do much to the other ten, and she’d be able to just pick it up again before I could do another one. The shatter spell takes time to use.”

“Well that’s just great! Fantastic really!” Reno yelled in frustration.

“What’re we gonna do, Spike!?” Barret cried.

Cloud realized he had to create an opening, to get the scythes off everyone long enough for him to think of a plan. Suddenly, an idea came to him.

“Everyone, gather around me!” he order.

“What!? Are you crazy!?” Reno screamed at his absurd command.

“Are you sure, Cloud?” Rude called.

“Just do it!” he ordered.

“I’m trustin’ ya, kid” Cid said, and everyone started running toward Cloud, scythes following close behind. Cloud used a heavy blow to knock Jezebel away from him and began to focus his energy into the Ultima Weapon, which glowed faintly in his hands.

*That’s your grand plan, brilliant leader of AVALANCHE? Get all your allies minced to bits all at once? What the hell are you thinking?* Jezebel scoffed perplexedly, brown eyes narrowing in confusion. *Well, if you want to get your little band of heroes all diced up, that’s fine by me.* With that, she pulled her free hand inward, and all of her scythes began hurtling toward Cloud.

Everyone gathered around Cloud in a tight circle, scythes in hot pursuit. “What the hell do we do now, Strife!? I didn’t sign up for your suicide pact!” Reno demanded. Cloud ignored him and kept focusing on his blade, eyes closed in concentration. The spinning flurry of blades grew closer by the second. “Cloud!” Elena squealed.

A smug smile of victory ran across the assassin’s lips. *Got you, fool.*

Cloud’s eyes shot open, the distinct glow of Mako shining brightly within.

“FINISHING TOUCH!”

Cloud rapidly spun the Ultima Weapon above his head, generating hurricane force winds strong enough to uproot a few of the surrounding trees. His comrades were spared the gale force due to their close proximity to the swordsman, but Jezebel and her scythes weren't so fortunate. The vicious woman bounty hunter and her weapons were blown high into the air, leaving her momentarily dumbfounded.

With the immediate danger thus cleared, Cloud ordered the next move loudly. "She won't be incapacitated for long. Everyone scatter into the jungle! Her scythes shouldn't be able to move so easily among the trees! We'll be able to regroup!"

"Smart thinking, Strife!" Reno shouted with a thumbs up, already sprinting toward the tree line. Everyone else made to follow suit, when Cloud spoke up again. "Hold on a second, Barret."

High above, Jezebel reoriented herself, and saw below as the little ants rushed off toward the jungle. Fury filled her veins as she realized that she had once again underestimated the leader of AVALANCHE. "No you don't, you bastards!" She extended her arms in a wide breadth, her eleven scythes all regrouping in a militaristic line. She arched her remaining scythe back like a batter getting ready to swing, preparing to launch her platoon into another volley, when she noticed a sudden heat building beneath her. She looked down just in time to see—

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Tifa glanced up upon hearing what sounded like a loud explosion, only to see a plume of smoke floating in the air some distance away and a collection of scattered objects falling discordantly to the earth. She didn't have time to wonder what had happened to her friends, though, as another geyser of white-hot flames burned past her face, singeing her chocolate brown hair.

"Eyes on the prize, Lockhart! You're never gonna beat me like that!" Montana said amusedly, leaping from tree to tree in his dogged pursuit of Tifa like a wild monkey. This was all a game to the young Shido no Hi Ryu master, an enjoyable appetizer before he could enjoy the full course that was the rest of AVALANCHE. Tifa's movements were sluggish compared to his, the year of peace after Sephiroth's defeat having left her skills dulled. Beyond that, she simply lacked single minded joy of battle that the manic warrior possessed. She just couldn't keep up.

They raced through the thicket of the jungle, now burning up around them due to Montana's barrage of fire attacks, growing further and further from Tifa's companions. She had managed to keep some distance, but she could tell it was only because Montana had allowed it. He was like a cat toying with a mouse, savoring the hunt before the kill.

*I need to do something! At this rate he's gonna wear me out before I can even mount a counterattack. I can't waste time here; the others need me!*

As yet another pillar of flame came blasting toward her, Tifa quickly leapt toward a tree on her right, spinning around it and using the momentum to launch an arial kick directly at Montana, hoping her snap change in direction would catch him off-guard. However, Montana's cat-like reflexes allowed him to catch her leg before she could make contact.

"Cute trick! Did that old geezer Zangan teach you that one as well?" He let out a hoarse laugh.

"Aaagh!" Tifa made a desperate attempt to kick him with her other leg, but was intercepted without so much as a glance from Montana.

"Phew! Feisty, aren'tcha." He tightened his grip on her legs, her flesh beginning to burn from the white-hot fire that raged within him and without.

"You feel that, Lockhart? That heat is the passion of youth! Of freedom!" He gripped yet tighter, Tifa reeled in agony. "That's the fire of someone who stands on their own two feet, not beholden to troublesome things like 'family' or 'tradition,' but paves their path for themselves! Someone like you, who's tied down by the ways of an out of touch old bastard could never hope to overcome it!"

In a motion so fast any normal person's spine would've snapped from the whiplash alone, Montana swung Tifa by both her legs directly into the nearest tree, cracking it right in half and leaving Tifa in a motionless heap on the ground.

"Aaaa... aaa..." Tifa weakly moaned.

"Well well, you managed to stay conscious this time! If that's not improvement, I don't know what is." Montana said snidely. "But still, seems it's the end of the road," he crouched down beside her, "no friends around, they're probably all getting hacked to mincemeat by Jezebel right about now if I had to guess, so nobody's gonna stop me from finishing the job." Montana raised his arm.

"Aaa... I... I..."

"Goodbye, Tifa Serenity Lockhart of the Zangan Ryu."

Tifa suddenly twirled around.

"Ice 3!!!"

“What’s our next move, Cloud?” Elena asked, trying to catch her breath after having sprinted through the jungle.

“The trees should limit her ability to go throwing those scythes around. They’ll have a harder time moving in here, and she won’t be able to track us as easily. Our best bet is to catch her off guard and take her out while she’s looking for us in the thicket.”

“Guerilla warfare, then?” Rude said, “I must admit, part of me has some misgivings with all of us ganging up on one woman...”

“Not me!” Reno chimed in.

“Yeah, bitch is nuts,” Cid said, taking a drag of his cigarette, “plus I’m tired’a draggin’ this one around,” he gestured to Fa-Li, who was looking just miserable, “so I’d appreciate if we could give this a move on.”

“If you’d just uncuff me, I could...” Fa-Li mumbled out.

“Not a damn chance!” Barret barked, “Not a one of us trusts either of ya, fer all we know you two’re still buddy-buddy with those two freaks! Awful convenient they knew where to find us when we just suddenly moved shop, don’tcha think?”

“Alright, alright, that’s enough for now,” Cloud broke in, “Everyone spread out around the area, we’ll wait for her to come in and amb—”

*CRASH! CRASH!*

A cacophonous sound echoed out from the distance.

“The hell’s that!?” Barret asked.

*CRASH! CRASH!*

“I’m afraid you’ve underestimated the extent of Jezebel’s abilities,” Titus said flatly.

“Huh?” Cloud turned to him sharply.

*CRASH! CRASH!*

The sound was rapidly growing closer.

“SHIT! Everybody hit the deck!!” Reno screamed.

Before anyone had time to think, they all dove to the ground as a lightning-fast row of scythes rocketed overhead just above them, buzzing down the forest like a lawnmower as they went. At the end of a long trail of fallen trees and stumps marched Jezebel, brown hair singed, cloths in tatters, left arm clutching her eye, and legs bloody. Barret’s Big Shot

and falling with a pile of scythes all around her had clearly done a number to Jezebel.

“YOU’RE NOT GETTING AWAY!!!” she shrieked.

With one swift motion of her arm, Jezebel twisted her scythes into a horizontal position and sent them racing back toward the still-grounded combatants. Any thoughts of taking Cloud and Titus in alive were disregarded, she was out for blood.

“Quickly! Everybody scatter to the sides!” Cloud panickily ordered.

Just as Cloud was making for the tree line, a cry rang out.

“Ah, shit! Shit!” it was Reno, on the other end of the clearing from Cloud. One of the trees cut down by Jezebel’s attack had landed on his legs. He was stuck, and a scythe was headed straight for him.

*No, no!* Cloud’s mind raced. *They’re coming too fast, I’m not gonna—*

Something burst out of the other side of the tree line near Reno before Cloud could finish his thought.

“Dammit woman, are you nuts!?” Cid screamed.

Fa-Li, without thinking, dove directly into the path of the scythe, taking the blow for Reno. She crumpled like a ragdoll and fell to the ground with an unceremonious plop, scythe embedded deep through her stomach. Reno could only stare agape in complete confusion and shock, before crying:

“Alette!!”

\*\* \*\* \*

Tifa limped weakly through the jungle. The fire had spread to much of the surrounding area by this point, leaving the air thick with ash and smoke, making it exceptionally hard to breathe. Tifa’s ice attack had managed to take Montana by surprise, giving Tifa a chance to slip away, but she knew he wouldn’t be down for long, and she was in no shape to be going anywhere fast. The damage Montana had done to her legs and back was severe, it was taking everything she could muster just to hobble along. She was at a loss for what to do.

*The flaw isn’t in the fighting style, but in the one who executes it. You are the only one responsible for your defeat.*

Titus’ words rang through her mind.

*Yes, that’s right. I’m just too flawed, aren’t I?* Tifa thought to herself, *All the meditation*

*in the world couldn't help me. The cracks run down to the core. I'm weak. Too weak to help anyone. A year ago, Cloud nearly lost himself because I was too scared to act, to break the fragile stability I'd found. Then, I nearly broke the group apart because I couldn't choose between Cloud and Reno... I wanted to help both of them, but I can't help anyone. And now they're all in danger, and I'm here, and...*

Tifa's legs gave out, and she collapsed on the hot Jungle floor. The heat of the flames danced on her skin like fire ants. She couldn't move.

"End of the road, huh?" Montana said, casually strolling out from the wall of flames, totally unaffected by them. He walked up to Tifa, who was barely clinging to consciousness.

"Where's your pride as a martial artist, girl?" he rolled her over with his bare foot, her arms limply falling to her sides. Montana lifted up her right arm and plucked her ice materia from her Dragon Armlet. "Real warriors don't rely on cheap toys like these. I woulda thought the old man would've taught you better." He crushed the materia between his fingers like a grape.

He grabbed Tifa's collar and raises her to meet his face. "I was hoping you'd be better, Lockhart. Seems like cheap tricks are all you've got. How disappointing. Hopefully your friends put up more of a challenge, I'm so damn bored!" Montana raised his fist in preparation for the final blow. "Now, let's just put you out of your misery already, just looking at you is making me wanna puke."

*I'm going to die. This man is going to kill me, and then kill all of my friends, if they're not dead already. I'm sorry, master... I was too weak, too flawed... I couldn't help anyone.*

The image of a candle came into her mind, a candle melted down to the base, barely any wick left, about to be extinguished by its own liquified wax.

The young girl sniffled.

"I... I can't give up. I know I can't. It's important, but I just can't do it..." she squeaked, throat clenched tight.

Blood trickled down her chin as she sat defeated upon the cold earth. Her busted lip stung, and her bruised legs ached, but what was really hurting was her pride. She had pushed herself so hard to perfect this technique, practiced day after day, following every step her master had laid out for her, but she felt no closer to performing the move than the day she had started. Was she really so incompetent? So pathetic? She just wanted to go home and cry.

"I'm useless... no good for anyone. All I ever do is let the people around me down. I'm not worthy of your training, master."

The girl felt a rough yet gentle hand lightly grasp her on the shoulder. The hand of her martial arts master, Zangan.

“That’s not you, Tifa.”

She gave him a quizzical look.

“Training, building strength, honing technique; it’s not just the body you’re honing, but the mind. The mewling words of defeat I’m hearing right now are not the words of my star pupil, Tifa Lockhart, they are the words of a dying weakness grasping fruitlessly to overcome a new and overwhelming self.”

Of course. These were the core tenets of Zangan-style martial arts. She’d known it all along, but in that moment, she couldn’t bring herself to internalize it.

“I’m sorry, master...”

Zangan rose, and towered over her.

“You are strong, smart, talented and adaptable. This is no grand failure, just a pebble in your way. Remember, you need to know the world with perfect clarity. You are too focused on pleasing me, too afraid of your own failure. These are trivial things. The chaos of life is constant, you cannot let it overwhelm you. You must know it perfectly and move through it with ease. Be unconcerned with what I think, what anyone thinks. You are doing this for your own sake, no one else’s. You must exist for nothing more than the task at hand.”

He was right. For too long she had concerned herself with pleasing others at the expense of herself. She’d had countless hours of practice and discipline beaten into her, every exercise from every book honed to a razor’s edge, every move engraved in the very fibers of her muscles, but her mind was still weak. Her fear of losing Cloud had nearly caused him to lose himself once, and that same need to protect the hearts of others had allowed the plights of Cloud and Reno to pull her own heart asunder.

The day never came back then that she would master the ultimate technique of Zangan Ryu. Her town had met a fiery end before she had the chance. Her master had never forgotten her, however, and left his final book for her to find when the time was right. Five years of horrors following Nibelheim had robbed her of some of her muscles and refined skills, but the tenacity and persistence with which she had survived and thrived all alone in Midgar had hardened in her a fierce resolve. She was ultimately able to perform the greatest move of Zangan Ryu when face to face with the man who took everything from her, but her own hesitance to disrupt that fragile peace she had finally found in the year since the death of Sephiroth had once again clouded her mind with fear and caution. It was time to finally take initiative.



Who was this arrogant man, with his burning fists? Who was he compared to all she had endured? Certainly no Sephiroth. Next to the crushing loneliness she had felt after waking up in Midgar a month after losing her home, next to the heartbreak she had felt after the death of her close friend Aeris, this flaming jackass wasn't anything at all. Cloud and the others were capable, she knew that well. No need to concern herself with them. Her fight was here.

The young Tifa wiped the blood from her chin and rose to her feet. She met her master's gaze with newfound clarity.

"Now then, Tifa, shall we give it another go?"

"Yes, let's."

The nearly extinguished candle erupted into a blazing inferno.

Montana's fist rocketed toward Tifa's head, intending to take it clean off her shoulders, when her gloved hand raced up to catch it faster than he could perceive.

"Huh?"

A swift kick to the chin sent Montana stumbling back.

*What the hell? Wasn't she just about dead? She HIT me!*

Montana wiped the blood from his lip. "You really are one obstinate bitch, Tifa Lockhart."

Flames burst forth from his hands with increased ferocity, all aimed squarely for Tifa's head and chest. With an elegance that ballerinas and ice skaters the world over would envy, she bobbed and weaved between each and every shot as she rushed for him. Montana found himself on the backfoot, only being able to block some of the blows in Tifa's relentless barrage of punches. He called a pillar of flame up from the ground where she stood, but she reeled back just in time and delivered a devastating somersault kick to Montana's head the second it passed. As he tried another blast of fire from his fist at point-blank range, she instantly ducked under it and swept his legs out from under him.

*No way... no FUCKING way! What the hell happened to her!? I can't touch her!*

Flames shot from his back as he launched himself up for bone-shattering rocket punch, but she leaned down to meet him, wrapped her arms around his chest, and used his own momentum against him to slam him back into the ground head-first. Before he could even get back on his feet, she uppercut him square in the jaw, landing him right on his back, at which point she lifted him up over her head, spun him around, and smashed him back into the ground once again.

Montana stared straight up. His vision was blurry at best, and everything was so, so bright.

*Where am I again...? What was I doing? My head is killing me...*

A figure loomed over him, taller than the world. It reared back its fist, which was glowing brightly with built up energy, in preparation for the killing blow. The technique was so familiar...

“Oh...Master Zangan...I messed it up again, didn't I?... I'm sorry...please...I'll do better next time...don't leave me.”

The figure paused, and after a moment, lowered its fist.

The mention of her master's name had snapped Tifa out of her trance, and she looked down at Montana with bewilderment. “Master Zangan?...”

Montana blinked, and came back to reality. A look of horror crossed his face.

“Tch!”

He used his flames to propel himself away from Tifa, and got back to his feet in a hurry.

“Hold on,” Tifa started, reaching out a hand to the man, “you knew my master?”

Montana looked at Tifa, then shot a flame blast straight at the ground, kicking up dirt and smoke. Once settled, Montana was nowhere to be found, leaving Tifa all alone.

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“Alette!? Alette!?” Reno screamed in a panic.

Fa-Li lay on the ground a few feet away from where Reno lay pinned under a fallen tree, a large scythe sticking clear through her abdomen, blood soaking into her borrowed blue hoodie. She wasn't moving.

*She...saved me? Why!? She took away my only reason for living and then she saves my damn life? I've spent the past four years wishing for nothing more than to see her dead on the ground, but...why now...why do I feel...*

“H-hey! Hey! Somebody do something! S-she...” Reno whimpered.

“HA!” cackled Jezebel, “What a fool, giving her life for a lowlife thug. Serves that treacherous bitch right!” Jezebel raised her arms dramatically, bringing the rest of her scythes back to her, lining up for another deadly barrage. The fire from Tifa and Montana's duel had spread to the back of the newly carved clearing. There was nowhere left to run.

“Now for the rest of you rats!” Jezebel practically squealed.

Cloud realized he was dearly out of time and options.

“Barret, Elena! Maintain fire on her to pin her down! Everyone else make a break for it! I’m gonna rush—”

*-DISINTEGRATE-*

All at once, all of Jezebel’s scythes crumbled to dust.

“What?” everyone present asked all at once, out loud or internally.

Titus walked out into the clearing, uncuffed, with the orb embedded in his right glove glowing vividly. An uncharacteristically rage-filled expression covered his face.

“Titus...why you...” Jezebel said through clenched teeth. Titus raised his right arm to her.

*-PULSE-*

An invisible shockwave rippled out across the clearing, blowing Jezebel way back and knocking her out cold.

Everyone stared at him in pure shock and confusion. After a moment, Reno finally managed to sputter out “You! You could’ve done that the whole time!? Why the hell did you wait till now?!”

Titus ignored Reno’s berating and coolly walked over to Fa-Li.

“H-hey! The hell ya think yer doin’? How’d you slip outta yer cuffs?” Barret demanded, gun arm raised toward Titus.

“Barret! Hold on a minute.” Cloud said, watching Titus cautiously.

Titus delicately lifted Fa-Li’s head, and placed his left hand on her gaping wound. The orb in his left glove began to glow softly.”

*-RENEWAL-* He whispered.

Rapidly, with a faint blue-violet glow, Fa-Li’s wound closed up. Her eyes shot open, and she began breathing heavily. She looked around confusedly, first at her wound, then at Titus. After realizing what happened, she gave Titus a playful smile.

“Aw, honey, you really do still care.” She cooed.

“Hardly.” Titus returned flatly, before letting her plop back down on the hard ground.

“Ow! Why you—”

“Alright, just what in the HELL is going on here!?” Cid demanded, losing his patience.

“Your questions can wait. Don’t you have something else you need to be taking care of right now?” He said, looking off toward where he had launched Jezebel.

Off in the distance, Montana could just be made out picking up Jezebel and carrying her off toward where their invisible hovercraft assumedly was.

“Aw, shit!” Barret yelled, before he and Cloud began rushing off toward the badly beaten duo. Fa-Li, meanwhile, ventured a hesitant glance toward Reno, who met her gaze with an unmistakably relieved look on his face before quickly averting his eyes and putting on a sour expression. Fa-Li looked away and sighed pensively.

“Hey, can somebody get this damn tree off of me now?”

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Montana gave his burned, broken, and unconscious “partner” an exasperated yet amused look.

“Heh, guess they were too much for you after all. Sorry I couldn’t help out in the end, Jezy.”

He lifted Jezebel up, shot a glance at the inferno of a forest that had served as he and Tifa’s battleground, then made for the invisible hovercraft.

“What the hell were you thinking ‘master’? This was way too much for just the two of us to handle alone, as much as I hate to admit it.”

As he boarded the hovercraft, he heard a bellow from some distance away. “Hey! Karate pants! Just where do ya think yer goin’, huh!?” Barret yelled, gun arm raised. Cloud was close behind him, hand firmly gripping the handle of his Ultima Weapon.

“Tch, couldn’t even take out one of them Jezy? Ah well, time to go.” With that, he started the invisible hovercraft and flew off. Barret futilely shooting a hail of bullets after him, screaming “Get back here, asshole!”

Cloud put a hand on Barret’s arm, “Give it a rest. That guy was Tifa’s opponent, we need to—”

Just then, Tifa stumbled out of the jungle, beaten, burnt, and covered in ash, collapsing a short distance away.

“Oh my God, Tifa!” Cloud rushed to her side, lifting her up and caressing her face,

“Tifa! Are you okay?”

“\*cough\* S-sorry, Cloud. I couldn’t beat him... I got him pretty good though \*cough\* heh heh...”

Cloud held her close to his chest. “Tifa, I’m sorry, I’m so sorry...”

Tifa smiled at him, then passed out in his arms.

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After a short while, the downpour that had abated up until then resumed, consequently dousing the flames left behind by Montana. The battered gaggle of AVALANCHE and the Turks took shelter under some of the nearby surviving trees to regroup. Cloud hesitantly allowed Titus to examine Tifa after Titus asserted he could treat her wounds from Montana.

“I’ve healed the burns on her legs,” Titus said, “but you’ll need to take her to a doctor to treat the fractures and smoke inhalation.”

Cloud looked at Tifa a long time, then responded “...Thank you.”

Cloud turned his gaze to Titus, meeting his all-too-familiar green eyes with a stern expression. “Titus, I don’t want to hear any more cryptic nonsense out of you. This has all gotten way too serious. It’s twice now that we’ve faced those lunatics, and we’ve walked away licking our wounds each time. We all really could’ve been killed just now, and we still barely know what we’re up against. We need to know what’s going on.”

“Yeah, we were nearly all diced tomatoes back there!” Elena chimed in.

“Can’t say I ‘preciate you holdin’ out on us till the last second there.” Barret added.

“Hmm hmm, well, I am your ‘prisoner’ after all. Aren’t you all the ones obligated to protect me? I only stepped in once it was clear you couldn’t do your jobs.”

“Why you sonovabitch—” Reno started, but Titus raised a hand to him.

“We’ll see about your answers, but aren’t you concerned about your president? He’s just a half-step away now, after all.”

Reno gave a flustered look around before landing on Rude, eyes begging for guidance. Rude simply gave a cool nod in return. Reno gave a deflated shrug. “Fine then, I guess it can wait. Reeve takes priority. But I don’t like you.”

“Guess we aughta head on over to town then, no use twiddlin’ our thumbs here.” Cid said matter-of-factly.

With that, the group made to leave, when—

“Hey! Guys!” Yuffie yelled, sprinting up from the distance with Vincent, Red, and Cait Sith trailing some ways behind. “Is everyone oka—” She took one look at the battered state of her companions and the devastated surroundings before holding her hands up to her face in shock. “Oh my gawd!”

Montana’s fire combined with Jezebel’s scythes had left the once lush patch of jungle as a flattened, desolate wasteland.

“Well hey,” Cait Sith said, “looks like you got your landing strip after all, Cid!”

-tbc

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Heya, it's Ody

As mentioned, Sink cut off at chapter 40, with that email being the closest thing to an official "ending" there is. My brain was just super discontented with leaving things like that, and as an experiment I decided to try my hand at writing another chapter myself. Such a good story deserves a proper ending, I think. I've never written a fanfic before, or anything else really, so I doubt it's as good as Catalina's writing, but I'll try my best. This chapter was mostly just a bunch of battle scenes, so it jumped around a lot and I didn't need to worry about dialogue so much, which probably helped a little.

I included the original email despite the spoilers so people could see exactly what I have to work with and can disregard my stuff and just let it end there if they so choose. I intend to use the email as a guideline for where to take things, as well as comb back through the fic for things that were set up but not paid off, while also mixing in my own ideas where necessary. We'll see how things go from here, I guess.

As for this chapter, I decided Jezebel could control a bunch of objects at once, so she'd have an easier time dealing with so many opponents on her own. I also implied some things about Montana's history here which are my own invention, but I think will work out in the end. I decided Tifa's "flaw" was putting her concerns for others ahead of her own needs, leading to her not giving her all in battle where Montana could. Dunno if that's what Catalina had in mind, but it's something she struggled with in the game itself as well as earlier in the fic, so I felt it fit. I had Fa-Li step in to protect Reno on instinct to start heading towards some reconciliation between them leading up to a future reveal, and had Titus step in to beat Jezebel to continue Catalina's push in the past couple chapters toward revealing his true nature.

# Chapter Forty-Two

## Putting Together the Pieces

*“For how childish you all act, you really are quite perceptive.” —Titus*

Their ride through the tropics had been pensive and quiet. Vincent would've normally expected Yuffie to complain about the sweltering humidity and her sea sickness as they sped across the southern ocean, or at the very least pester him about how much further they had to go, but she'd hardly spoken a word since they had spotted Jezebel and Montana flying toward Mideel. This more serious side of Yuffie, which a year prior had scarcely existed, was now surfacing with frightful regularity. Even when she was acting more like her old self, acting impulsively or offering him cat food to eat, a certain vacant concern was always nestling in the back of her gray eyes. Vincent didn't like it one bit.

*Yuffie... What did they do to you? What happened down there? Why won't you talk to me? I'm...I'm sorry I wasn't there for you.* He thought, watching her shoulder-length hair bob up and down with each trot of her chocobo. He recalled his conversation with Lord Godo the night prior, about Yuffie's mother and the Hungry One, and how resigned Godo was that his daughter was doomed to share that same fate. It was all too cruel. *Why... to such an innocent girl?*

Yuffie, meanwhile, continued to stare dead ahead, off onto the horizon, anxiously waiting for the island of Mideel to come into view. Too many thoughts raced through the poor girl's mind: concern for her friends now that the dastardly duo of bounty hunters had surely caught up with them, concern especially for Tifa who had hardly recovered from her last encounter with Montana and was not yet in any shape for another, worry for Reeve who was in the throes of mako poisoning, and mounting anger at Titus who was almost certainly responsible for that condition. She also thought of her mother's song, and the beast beneath the earth, and what she was supposed to do...

*Aaaagh! Stupid island! Why'd you have to go and be on the other end of the planet like that!? Hurry up and show yourself already! I'm losing my mind here!*

Yet despite her pleas, only the rhythmic dancing of waves on the infinite horizon met her demanding glare, accompanied by nothing save for the pitter patter of the light rain and the exhausted panting of her poor overworked chocobo. Yuffie let out a sigh of exasperation and put a hand on the poor bird's head.

*I'm sorry, Zoe. The troubles of us stupid humans have really got ya to your limit here, huh? I promise once this is all over, I'll make sure that cranky old man Cid flies up north and buys you and Quinn enough Sylkis Greens for a whole year! And some for Butterfly, too. That dumb*

*lucky bird, she's probably swimming around Kalm right now without a care in the world. I guess at least somebody is looking after the scorched, water-logged remains of the bar...poor Tifa.*

A vision of Tifa, covered in ash and wreathed in flames while fighting for dear life suddenly shot through Yuffie's mind.

"Ah!" Yuffie gripped reflexively at the unexpected pain.

Images of her friends running all around in a panic as a dozen scythes chased them from every direction crackled in her brain one after another, blood streaming from nicks and cuts from countless near misses.

"Oough!" Yuffie recoiled as the pain intensified, grasping at her head in anguish, her now death-grip on Zoe's reigns being all that was keeping her from plummeting into the watery depths.

She saw Titus sitting off on the sidelines, totally unharmed, watching the chaos unfold with his usual placid look. He glanced at her briefly before she was whisked away into darkness. She felt herself slipping.

"...uffie! ...ou o...y...!?" She thought she might've heard Vinnie cry something out, but the sound was muffled and distant, like he was a million miles away.

*A million miles away...leaving me all alone...just me and the ocean waves...sinking to the bottom...*

Yuffie emerged from the water, and floated on her back in the middle of a crystal-blue sea, clear skies above and nothing in every direction. The pain in her head had vanished, leaving her with an enveloping sense of calm.

*Hub...did the great materia hunter Yuffie finally bite the big one? Man, that'd suck. Coulda at least gone out doing something cool...like crashing the Highwind into a mountain...* She thought to herself absently.

*-My dear, please listen.-*

The mysterious voice echoed again in Yuffie's mind, sounding so heart achingly familiar.

*Nn? Is somebody there?*

*-Time is growing short. A storm is coming.-*

*"Coming?" I feel like it's been raining for a damn year already.*

*-You've heard the Mother's song once again.*



*Listen closely to her words, they will guide you.~*

*Say... are you...?*

*~The sweet creature of black and white harbors a great sorrow. He must tell his story.*

*The prince, a champion already, must once again rise to face a great crisis.*

*The unwilling acolyte must accept his other half, his reluctant god.~*

*Who are...?*

*~And you, my dear, must go on a great journey.*

*You already know the way.~*

*I do? ... Yes, I think I do.*

*~I will come to you again when the time is right.*

*Until then, my dear.~*

*Hey, hold on!*

*"...fie!"*

*Who are all those other people you mentioned?*

*"...uffie!"*

*Who are YOU, for that matter? Are you—*

*"Yuffie!"*

"Bwah!" Yuffie's eyes shot open with a start. She was slouched over Zoe's long choconeck limply, the bird finally getting a chance to rest its legs as Vincent had dragged them both to a halt. Vincent's vice grip on her left arm was all that prevented her from sliding right off of Zoe and into a watery grave.

"Oh..." Yuffie blinked back into awareness, "Uh, morning, Vinnie!" she said with feigned cheeriness.

"Yuffie, are you alright? What happened?" Vincent pressed on.

"Oh... hehe, well you know... we ended up not sleeping at all last night, and I've been pretty stressed too, so..." she mumbled out in a less than convincing tone. Vincent just looked at her with the most scrupled face in the world.

*Gawd Vinnie, gimme a damn break, would ya? I've got enough to worry about without*

*your accusing stares. I can't get you involved, not with this...*

"Fine," Vincent said curtly, an unfamiliar agitation in his speech, "you don't have to tell me now, but you *will* tell me once things calm down." His voice was stone cold and angry. It hurt Yuffie deep down inside how personally he was taking this, even if she was getting aggravated by his demanding tone.

"Vinnie..." *I don't think I really know what's going on either, and I'm scared...* She couldn't bring herself to finish.

"AVALANCHE is in a state of turmoil, Yuffie. There are so many unknowns, and too many people hoarding necessary information for themselves. We all need to be on the same page if we want to effectively face the threats before us. Secrets..." He couldn't help but wince internally at the hypocrisy of his own lecture, recalling his own awkward encounter with Red XIII the previous night, "...only hurt us in the end. And I..." *am worried about you.* He couldn't finish either.

There was a pregnant pause where the two simply gazed into each other's eyes, blood-red meeting steel-gray. Yuffie could tell that under his annoyance, Vincent was concerned. Not just for AVALANCHE's tumultuous situation, but for her own well-being. *Vinnie... really does care about me.* It dawned on Yuffie with a blush that Vincent was still softly holding her arm. "Vincent, I..."

"Wark! Wark!" All of a sudden, Zoe and Quinn started panickily shuffling around and warking loudly, breaking the moment. "Woah! Woah, ya big chicken nugget! Calm down!" Yuffie said while tugging on Zoe's reigns.

"Yuffie, look!" Vincent yelled, pointing a claw out to the ocean in front of them while trying to regain control of his own bird. A large pillar of black smoke had appeared in the distance, peeking over the horizon line.

"Oh, shoot! Vinnie, is that—?"

"Mideel, almost certainly," he finished for her.

Yuffie recalled her mental image of Tifa fighting all alone, surrounded by a sea of flames.

*Stupid ethereal vision! What lousy timing!* She thought as she kicked Zoe back into high gear.

"C'mon, birdbrains! We gotta move!"

A short while later, Yuffie and Vincent came into view of Mideel. The Highwind sat parked on the coast, and while the fire hadn't yet spread that far, the smoke was not especially far off from the shore. As they drew nearer, Yuffie could just make out the figures of Cait Sith and Red XIII standing outside the airship, looking up at the shadowy plumes overhead.

"You didn't start that when you went to take a leak earlier, didja?" Cait quipped at the nonplussed red beast beside him.

Red, with an impertinent flick of his flame-tipped tail, simply replied "...No, I did not."

"Guys!" a cry rang out from behind the pair, and they turned to see Yuffie and Vincent rapidly approaching on their golden birds. Upon making landfall, Yuffie practically leapt from Zoe's back and, stifling a gag from her motion sickness addled body, sprinted up to the furry pair.

"Well hey! You guys made it!" Cait chirped cheerily.

"Yeah, no thanks to you cretins!" Yuffie snapped back, "Cloud Strife has got some nerve, I tell ya. I'm gonna give him a good one for poor Zoe and Quinn! Hya, hya!" Yuffie did her trademark fist pumps at the air. She then blinked, and smacked both sides of her face with her hands. "No, wait, never mind that! What the heck is going on here!?" She thrust a finger up toward the plume of smoke.

"We don't know," Red replied, "it started about 25 minutes ago and has only grown worse. We were just considering going to investigate when you arrived. Normally, flames should not be able to persist in such damp and humid conditions as these, so something feels off."

"It must be Montana," Vincent said, striding up beside Yuffie, "his Holy flames should burn much hotter and longer than average, so they should have no trouble catching even in the current climate."

"Montana!? That crazy fire kung fu guy who messed up Tifa!?" Cait worriedly exclaimed.

"Yes, and Jezebel as well." The gunman replied, "We saw the both of them flying toward Mideel in some strange invisible hover craft as we were passing through the Nibel Area. I had hoped it was just a coincidence, but..."

Yuffie recalled the visions she had been shown once again, understanding they must have been real and not just delusions of her panicked mind. "Come on!" she commanded, headed straight towards the smoke, "They might need our help! We gotta hurry!" and without waiting for a reply, began marching straight into the thicket.

As they drew nearer to the source of the smoke, the torrent of rain that had spent most of the day as a drizzle returned in full force, summarily drenching the group once again, as well as dowsing the inferno that had taken the jungle. By the time they reached the clearing, only the smoldering blackened husks of trees and foliage remained. After looking around in a panic, not seeing or hearing her companions anywhere, the young ninja finally spotted the group huddled under a patch of trees on the other side of the clearing, near a long stretch of conspicuously finely cut tree stumps. Without a moment's hesitation, she started sprinting straight for the group.

“Hey! Guys!”

\*\* \*\* \*

Mideel had seen better days. It had always been a bit of a ramshackle town, but the after-effects of Ultimate Weapon's rampage and the subsequent earthquake had left the place in utter ruin. The site where the original town had once stood was now a massive mako lake, one of a kind in all the world, scraps of wood being all that had remained of the original construction. In the aftermath of the meteor crisis and subsequent eruption of lifestream to stop it, Reeve, in one of his first moves as president of Neo-Shinra, had allocated emergency funds to all areas affected. It had won him massive public support, as it showed he was looking out for everyone rather than just the interests of Midgar, and of course Mideel had been one such place to receive those funds. A new town had been slowly but surely built up in the area around the perimeter of the lake, and the locals worked tirelessly to get the place back on its feet.

Yuffie stared into the lake as the party spread out around town in search of Dr. Campbell's new office, transfixed by the glow of the mako and absently wondering if having it exposed out in public like this wasn't some kind of safety hazard. *They could at least put up a fence. What if somebody falls in?* she thought.

Yuffie had been mortified by the sight of her companions when they met up again. The motley crew made for quite the picture. Tifa was unconscious in Cloud's arms, cloths singed from the fire and covered in ashes, with minor burns all over her body. Everyone else looked like they'd been put through a paper shredder, the Turks' fine blue suits in tatters, Rude's tie cut in half, and Cid, Barret, and Cloud having quite the collection of nasty cuts. Fa-Li in particular looked like she had been impaled straight through her mid-section judging from the state of her borrowed hoodie, though she seemed perfectly healthy despite that. The only one relatively unscathed was Titus. *Of course*, Yuffie thought. She was ready to demand a lot of explanations from the aloof man, but Cloud informed her that their first priority was recovering Reeve. Red XIII and Cait reluctantly returned to guarding the Highwind in the event Montana and Jezebel returned, and everyone else made their way into town.

“I guess that’s where they found Reeve.”

Yuffie was pulled out of her reverie by the voice of Elena, who had walked up beside her while she was thinking.

“Yeah...guess so.” was all Yuffie could muster.

“We spent all of that time running around Midgar and Junon, ready to rip each other’s throats out any second at some points, just for Reeve to turn up all the way out in this little Podunk corner of the world...” Yuffie could hear the tears starting to well up in the female Turk’s eyes. “Oh Reeve...how in the world did you get here?”

Yuffie couldn’t bring herself to say anything. Not yet, at least. The Turks had probably had it the roughest since Reeve was kidnapped, and Yuffie didn’t want to be the one to give them any more grief. But she knew the truth.

*He was being held in that same dank dungeon I was in, I’m sure of it. Yuffie thought to herself. Titus said to that freaky cult leader that he could do anything he wanted with me and my “friend.” Who else could that mean but Reeve? Which mean Reeve must’ve flowed through the lifestream all the way from Midgar to here...*

Yuffie could barely stomach the thought. She had no firsthand experience with mako poisoning, but Cloud’s recounting of his own experience painted a grizzly enough picture.

*He must’ve been tossed and tumbled around for thousands of miles under the planet’s surface... all the while the voices of the dead slowly seeped into his mind and soul until he didn’t even know who he was anymore. That’s AFTER he had already been subjected to that same horrible mind rape that I was...*

Yuffie was feeling sick just thinking about it.

*And it’s all because of..*

She turned to glare at the leather-clad man, standing off to the side with Barret and Cid keeping watch of him and Fa-Li while the others roamed the town. He briefly made eye-contact with her as she stared daggers into his skull, his expression unreadable, before looking away again.

*Titus...I...I trusted you. I told everyone to give you a chance! Please...please tell me you had a good reason...*

Suddenly, she felt a hand on her shoulder. “Yuffie,” Vincent’s said, “A local spotted Cloud and informed him that Dr. Campbell was waiting for us in his office, which is just up the hill on the other side of the lake. We’re heading over now.”

“Oh, okay,” Yuffie turned to face Vincent. He was not looking at the young ninja, however. Vincent was totally fixated on Titus, flecks of rage shining in his blood red eyes.

\*\* \*\* \*

Dr. Campbell sat behind his desk, fumbling around with various instruments and documents in anxious anticipation. It had been several hours now since he had finally managed to get ahold of Cloud Strife at Cid Highwind’s house, having first tried and failed to contact the Final Heaven bar in Kalm and Barret Wallace’s residence in Corel Village. The signal had been choppy, due in no small part to the truly awful inclement weather as of late, as well as Mideel’s remote location, but he was certain Mr. Strife had gotten the message. Jeb had come in about 45 minutes earlier to inform Campbell of a fire that had seemingly broken out on the west side of the island, but it seemed that nobody had gotten hurt, and the rain had dealt with it fast enough. Campbell was truly grateful for that; he really didn’t need any distractions while Reeve Tuesti of Neo-Shinra was lolling about in a mako-fueled daze in the other room.

Just as Dr. Campbell was getting ready to reorganize his files for the fifth time, Elise, his head nurse, burst in through the door.

“Doctor Campbell! It’s Cloud Strife and his companions! They’ve arrived!” She breathlessly sputtered out.

“Ah, very good, very good. Please see them in, Elise.” He replied, relieved his so desperately needed help had finally arrived.

Moments later, a rag-tag group of no less than eleven people that seemed to have just returned from the pits of hell sauntered into his office.

“By the Gods...” was all Campbell could stammer out after a shocked pause.

“Uh, hey Dr. Campbell...been a while.” Cloud said awkwardly, still carrying the unconscious Tifa in his arms, “It, uh, looks like we could use your help as much as you need ours, ha ha...”

“Elise, please prepare the examination room. It’s going to be a busy day.”

\*\* \*\* \*

It was a small hospital, not prepared for this sort of traffic. Two rooms total, just an office/reception area and a patient care room. There was only a single bed, which Reeve currently occupied, and an examination table. Campbell had Cloud lay Tifa on the table, while Elise gathered up chairs right across from Reeve’s bed for all the injured combatants to sit in. Anyone without injuries would just have to stand. Dr. Campbell examined Tifa while

head nurse Elise tended to the cuts and bruises everyone else had sustained from their previous battle.

“Sir, please! I’m going to need you to stay still! I need to stitch this cut!” Elise pleaded with the fiery-haired Turk.

“C’mon, c’mon! I told you I’m fine! I’ve faced way worse than a couple nicks as a Turk! Lemme look at the President already!” Reno demanded.

“Reno, stop acting like a damn kid!” Elena chided, “You know President Reeve was always concerned with our health, so sit down! We can look at him after.”

“But Laneyyyyyy!”

*Smack.*

“Ow!”

“Please do not injure the other patients, ma’am.”

“...Sorry.”

Rude just sat back and sighed. After all the turmoil they’d been through, he was just glad to see their spirits high now that they’d located Reeve, even if his condition was less than ideal.

“How is she, Doctor?” Rude heard Cloud ask on the other side of the room, voice full of trepidation.

“The burns are mostly superficial. They should heal well enough given time, though there may be scarring. Just tell her to make sure to apply this ointment twice a day until the swelling goes down.” He handed Cloud a small white tube. “Will do,” Cloud replied.

“The medication I’ve applied should deal with any risk of infection,” the doctor continued, “so don’t worry too much about that.” The doctor walk to Tifa’s side and carefully lifted her shirt a small bit. “What I’m more concerned about is this injury here,” he said, pointing to a large bruise on Tifa’s back. “An X-ray would be necessary in order to gauge the full extent of it, but I fear there may have been damage to her spine.”

“I see...” Cloud said, voice disheartened.

“As for her unconsciousness, it seems to just be from a bout of exhaustion rather than any injury to her head. She should wake up again any time.”

Cloud let out a heavy sigh of relief. “Thank you, doctor.”

Barret came over and gave the exhausted swordsman a big pat on the shoulder.

“Heh heh, our Tifa’s a tough one, ain’t she Spike?”

“She is...she really is.” Cloud said fondly, a smile creeping across his face.

“Now you listen here, kid,” Cid broke in, “Once all this nonsense is said ‘n done, you had better do somthin’ real nice for that girl, y’hear?”

Yuffie snuck up and gave Cloud a playful punch to the arm. “Yeah! Maybe something to do with tying knots! A proposition of some kind, you might say.”

Cloud turned bright red, and made a desperate move to shift the topic, “*Cough cough*, alright, alright, erm,” he cleared his throat, “A-anyway, let’s get to the matter at hand here.” He said to Dr. Campbell, and walked over to Reeve.

The president of Neo-Shinra lay in the bed at the corner of the room. A privacy curtain surrounded him, blocking him from view, though his shifting silhouette could be seen through it. Dr. Campbell pulled back the curtain so Cloud could take a close look. There was no mistaking it, this man was none other than Reeve Tuesti himself.

Reno craned his neck over Elise’s shoulder as best he could as she tended to a cut on his chest, and asked “...How does he look, Strife?” with thinly veiled concern in his voice.

Reeve looked around aimlessly, not focusing on anyone or anything in particular, eyes glowing vividly from mako exposure. His arms and legs twitched sporadically without purpose, and he mumbled incoherently to himself. He was somewhere far, far away.

“...He’s just like I was a year ago.” Cloud admitted despondently. “Mako poisoning, no mistaking it.”

“Agh, damn it...” Was all Reno could say.

“He’s been like this ever since a local brought him in last night,” Dr. Campbell said, “I’m afraid there has been no improvement since then. This facility in in no way equipped to handle a case such as this, as you know. I was hoping you all might have some advice given your personal history, Mr. Strife.”

Cloud could feel the expectant eyes of the Turks and his friends bearing down on him. He really didn’t want to be the bearer of bad news, but he was the most experienced in the subject, so the task fell to him. *If only Tifa were awake...*

With a sigh, Cloud began.

“Mako poisoning isn’t like any normal disease, Doctor,” Cloud said, “it doesn’t get better with time. I once heard a theory that a person’s spirit is literally separated from their body when they contract it...” Cloud crossed his arms contemplatively, “When Tifa



and I fell into the lifestream together when this town collapsed a year ago, our spirits became intertwined. She literally put me back together piece by piece, you could say. It was a very strange and fortunate circumstance, to say the least.” Cloud cast his gaze to the Turks. “While I don’t doubt that any one of us would be willing to take a dip in the Mako pond out there with Reeve, I wouldn’t count on things working out so well again. It’s too unpredictable and dangerous.”

*Don’t do anything rash, Reno. I know this is eating you up inside more than anyone.*

A saddened silence fell over the room.

After a moment, Cloud had a small epiphany.

“Say, I’m sure Shinra had more than its fair share of mako poisoning cases, right?” Cloud asked toward the Turks, some faint hope in his voice, “I never personally had to deal with that sort of thing as a regular infantryman, but I’m sure you Turks must know a thing or two about how they dealt with it, right?”

Reno simply maintained his downcast gaze, a grimace forming on his face. Elena looked between her comrades uncertainly, too much of a rookie to have that sort of knowledge herself. Finally, Rude spoke up, impulsively adjusting his sunglasses.

“Only Tseng would’ve known all the details, he was our boss, and as such the one closest to Shinra’s affairs. However, what I *do* know is that every case of mako poisoning in the company I was personally involved with handling ended with the afflicted individual being turned over to Hojo’s R&D department. I can’t say for certain what became of them after that, but I’m sure you can imagine...” The stoic man fell silent once more.

*Of course. That sick bastard Hojo’s just always involved, isn’t he...* Cloud thought bitterly.

Images flicked through his memory; freakish monsters that were once men, black-hooded figures bent to Sephiroth’s beck and call, and the human specimen transport tunnels they had discovered in the sewers. Whatever grisly fate had befallen those poor victims of Shinra’s greed, it was certainly not a pleasant one.

Cloud cupped his face in his hands in exasperation.

*Aaaagh, this is such bullshit! We’ve tried so hard to find Reeve, shed so much sweat and blood, and here he is! Right in front of us! And yet he couldn’t be farther away! This is all because—*

“Fate truly is cruel, isn’t it? Not that I believe in such things.” A cool, raspy voice broke the dismal silence. Cloud lifted his head from his hands, blinding rage filling him rapidly. All eyes focused on the source of the interjection, the platinum blonde man

dressed in all black, who had been quietly observing the scene from the far corner of the room up to that point.

“To think such an altruistic man as the president of Neo-Shinra would end up in such a sorry state. Would that he could’ve just gone peacefully.” The man concluded, seemingly talking to no one in particular.

“Titus, what are you—” the nervous Wutainese woman next to him began to ask, but was quickly cut off.

“What the hell are you saying!?” Reno screamed, shooting up from his chair and knocking the poor nurse stitching up his chest to the floor.

“This is all *your* fault, asshole!” Reno pointed an accusing finger at the aloof man, “*You* fucking kidnapped him! Brought him down to your dank little hole and did gods know what to him! Don’t give us this ‘fate’ bullshit! This was you!”

Titus just gave a disinterested shrug.

A vein bulged from Reno’s forehead, and he turned so beet-red his two Turk compatriots expected blood to start spraying from his still-open wounds at any moment. He made to reach for his nightstick, but before he got the chance to act any further, Cloud strode right up to Titus, grabbed him by the collar, and forcefully shoved him into the wall.

“H-hey!” Fa-Li sputtered.

“N-now boys, no need to fight...” Dr. Campbell squeaked out, clutching his clipboard nervously while Elise backed up behind him. Cloud wasn’t hearing any of it, though. His mako eyes burned bright with anger, and he leaned in real close to Titus’ face.

“Enough of your shit. *You did this!*” Cloud hissed out through clenched teeth, “You threw Reeve into the lifestream! Why!? Why not just kill him!? All you’ve done is prolonged his suffering! Given us false hope only to rip it away! Why, damn you!?”

Cloud began literally shaking with rage.

“I’ve had so much patience with you despite everything you’ve done to us. I gave you the benefit of the doubt because Yuffie kept vouching for you, but I’m through with it! Enough cryptic statements and half-answers, Titus! We found Reeve, now I want to know everything!”

Titus said nothing, simply stared indifferently at the enraged man currently pinning him to a wall.

“Answer me!” Cloud screamed.

There was a tense pause, when Titus finally spoke up.

“Is this how you act under duress, leader of AVALANCHE? You kick and scream and shout like a little baby throwing a tantrum? Are you a child, Cloud Strife? Mad I won’t give you your toy?” Titus chuckled to himself at that. “Now why in the world would I ever answer to someone like that? There’s nothing for me to dignify here.”

“Bastard!” Cloud’s eyes narrowed reflexively, and he made to punch a hole in the wall directly behind Titus’ skull, but before he could...

“Cloud! Stop!” Yuffie raced up to him and hugged him from the side, restraining him.

“Let go, Yuffie!” Cloud ordered as he tried to shake her off.

“Don’t do this! Titus is a huge prick, don’t let him get the better of you like this! He’s not worth it!” she begged.

Cloud struggled a bit longer before relaxing. Once convinced that he would no longer attempt to paint the walls with Titus’ blood, Yuffie tentatively released Cloud from her grip. He gave Titus the dirtiest look Yuffie had ever seen on his face, and then wordlessly stormed off to the other side of the room, Dr. Campbell and Nurse Elise backing up to avoid him as he passed. Yuffie turned to face Titus, who met her saddened gaze without a word.

“I really did trust you, Titus.” She started after a pause. “Even though you kidnapped me and Reeve, even though you did so many cruel things in front of me, even though you left me to get tortured by those horrible hissers and that cold leader of yours, I could never shake the feeling that deep down inside you were a good person under it all. That you were trying to do the right thing, however you could manage...”

“Sounds like a classic case of Stockholm syndrome to me.” Reno scoffed.

“Bet the bastard brainwashed ya or somethin’.” Cid added.

Yuffie turned to yell at them, but before she could manage, Barret did it for her. “Hey, shu’up and let the girl talk would ya? Ya can save your smart-ass remarks for after.” *She’s the only one who has any hope of gettin’ through to this sucka, ya foo’s!* He thought to himself.

“Oh...thanks, Barret.” *Well, that was unexpected.*

She turned back to Titus, and looked him dead in his emerald eyes.

“So...that’s why...I want to know why you did it. Why did you throw Reeve into the

lifestream, Titus? I really want to believe you had a good reason. I don't believe you're just that much of a cruel jerk."

She looked pleadingly into his eyes, but all he returned was an unreadable expression and no words at all.

"Titus... please..." she said despondently, then cast her gaze aside and turned to walk away.

"See, kid. People like this ain't worth your time or trust." Reno said, "Guys like him don't care about anything, they're rotten to the—"

"I didn't have much choice." Titus suddenly interjected. Yuffie twirled around, utterly shocked.

"Titus, you can't—!" Fa-Li began, but was swiftly cut off by Titus' raised hand.

"It was during your friends' rescue operation into our compound. The Master had done something unforgivably foolish, and so the entire place had begun to collapse in on itself as it was rocked by tremors."

*Around when my Ultima Weapon started glowing...* Cloud thought, arms crossed and back turned to the whole affair but still listening intently.

"At that point, there were only two fates for Reeve Tuesti. Escape was no longer an option for him. You all would never have been able to locate where we had him locked up before the cave-in. Despite every torture inflicted upon him, despite how agonizing every moment of continued life must have been, Reeve still clung to the mortal coil long after anyone else would've succumbed. I had to respect his will to live, and so I chose the most merciful option available to me under those limited circumstances."

"And that was dumping him into the lifestream!?" Elena suddenly cut in, voice full of flustered anger. "How in the world is *that* merciful? Just look at him!" She thrust her arms in the direction of Reeve, who babbled at nothing while staring blankly upward. "Seems like a fate worse than death to me!" She screamed, tears streaming down her cheeks.

"Titus...?" Yuffie looked to the man again, hoping that Elena's outburst wouldn't cause him to clam up again.

Titus shut his eyes and gripped the bridge of his nose. "Frankly, I never expected him to still be alive. I imagined a peaceful end for the President of Neo-Shinra, lulled to sleep by the voices of the planet as he merged with them and felt pain no longer. That man's iron will to survive is simply second to none. Even so, this is still a mercy compared to the alternative, I assure you."

“n what might that be?” Barret asked suddenly. “Go on, ya went’n got me all curious now.”

Fa-Li was utterly dumbfounded by what she was watching. Before, Mr. Tight-Lipped-Stick-In-The-Mud had yelled at her for even attempting to imply what had become of the president of Neo-Shinra, but here he was now spilling info like a leaky faucet. *And for THIS little teenybopper?* She thought, staring at the young Wutainese girl before her. *Why does he keep treating her so specially? Still, there’s no way Titus would tell them about THAT, would he? Come on now.*

“He would have been fed to ‘the Hungry One’, is that it?”

Fa-Li nearly choked on her own spit in shock. *Hub!?!?*

It was not Titus who answered, but Vincent Valentine, who up to now had been so deathly quiet she’d forgotten he was even in the room. *How in the world could HE possibly know about that!?!? NOBODY outside of the faction should know about that!* Panic raced through her mind. She nervously looked to Titus, only to find even he seemed utterly taken aback by the unexpected comment, though his lips remained sealed.

“What’s ‘the Hungry One?’” Cloud asked, turning to Vincent.

*The Hungry One... That couldn’t be...?* Yuffie pondered, but *there’s no way Vinnie should know about that!*

Vincent considered his reply carefully. He didn’t want to reveal too much yet for Yuffie’s sake, but he knew he needed to rip this Band-Aid off if ever they were to uncover what threat they truly faced.

“It is...a primordial beast. It is said to live deep within the planet. I have...recently come to possess certain information that has led me to believe that this ‘faction’ we’ve been dealing with is somehow associated with it. The fear-inducing green mists that permeate certain areas of this faction’s underground facilities seem to be an excretion of the beast.”

*“The Hungry One”, “the Great Hunger” ... and those frightful green mists from the Deep-Sea complex... “the emerald wreaths of phantasmal toil”, and that awful booming heartbeat... oh gaud...it really is alive!* She had suspected it during her torture session, but now the pieces were really falling into place. *But...* She subtly turned to face Vincent, who was thankfully fully focused on Titus, concern creeping onto her face. *How do you know about this, Vincent? This is my family’s secret! Nobody but me and—* It suddenly clicked. *Dad! What were you and dad talking about last night?*

Titus grimaced, focusing entirely on penetrating Vincent’s mind but coming up short. *Valentine... your mind is still locked up like a vice. Just where did you come into all*

*that information? Could it have been...?* He turned back to Yuffie. *And how much does SHE know? She is The One Who Knows, after all, but does she really comprehend what that means? Does she know of her role?* Yuffie's mind had also become oddly impenetrable to Titus, though it didn't seem to be a conscious effort on her part unlike Vincent. It was like something was protecting her...

"Well?" Cid demanded. "Is that it? This 'Hungry Whatever'. Was your boss gonna feed ol' Reeve here to some big-ass monster?"

Titus didn't say a word.

"Oh come on, asshole! Don't go getting all tight-lipped now! We were doing so good!" Reno exclaimed.

Nothing.

"C'mon Yuffie, you ask him! Creep seems to like ya." Reno prodded.

*"Hungry One." "Planet Eater." "At the heart of the world it lies" ... and their bases are all Leviathan-knows how deep underground... so it really is true. They must worship that thing... Mama, did you know...?*

"Titus?" Yuffie finally asked, breaking from her reverie.

"I have informed you all why I chose to throw Reeve Tuesti into the lifestream, as you requested. I will not answer anything else." Titus finally replied curtly.

"Oh, yeah, real smooth there hot shot. Not answering usually means 'yes' you know." Reno chided.

Titus remained silent.

"Putting that aside for now," Vincent said, "isn't there anything you can do for Reeve? You did get us into this predicament, and I feel there's plenty you're keeping from us," Vincent said accusingly, "surely you can manage something."

"Only a Cetra could cure mako poisoning." Titus responded.

"Well... *cough* well, it shouldn't be a problem then, right?"

Everyone turned to the new voice in the conversation. Tifa had finally woken up.

"Tifa!" Cloud rushed to her side, grasping her arm and holding it to his chest. "Are you okay?"

"I'm f- *cough* fine, Cloud. Thank you." She smiled warmly at him, then turned her attention back to the leather-clad man. "Well, Titus?"

“What’re you talkin’ ‘bout, Tifa?” Barret probed.

“The *cough* the burn Montana put on my stomach *cough* from our first fight. It was caused by holy fire, which could only be healed quickly *cough* by curative magic applied directly by a Cetra. That’s what you said, right Titus? *Cough cough*.”

Titus maintained his silence, but his face took on an imperceptibly more pensive expression. He’d known he’d screwed up.

“And *cough* and wouldn’t you know it,” Tifa continued, “right before my rematch with Montana,” Tifa lifted her shirt enough to show her belly, which was free of any burn marks, “all better!”

Everyone stared in amazement. They had all remembered how grisly the burn was, but there was no trace of it now.

“*Cough cough* and the burns I got on my legs from Montana’s grip in our second fight...” she painfully kicked up a leg, showing the lack of any noticeable large burn mark, “all gone!”

Indeed, there was no trace left of that particularly brutal injury. Cloud recalled how perplexed he had been when Titus offered to deal with that wound, but not the others.

“So... *cough* wouldn’t that make you...”

Everyone turned their attention back to Titus, and his painfully familiar eyes.

Nobody spoke a word for a long moment, all too shocked by the truth that had been staring them in the face since they first laid eyes on the Running Man. Everything about him had been odd from the get-go. No scent, inhuman agility, strange and unheard of magic... Indeed, Vincent and Red XIII had observed that he was something other than human from early on. But even with Aeris’ eyes, they’d never suspected...

A smile snaked its way across his face. A bitter, frustrated smile.

“Titus...” Fa-Li started hesitantly, “there’s no way that’s true, right...?”

She had known the man beside her for years, both as a figure of spiritual guidance and as a lover. It was no exaggeration to say she’d seen every last inch of his body, heard secrets softly whispered into her ear that nobody was supposed to hear, but this? She was starting to think she didn’t really know him at all.

Of course, he could say the same thing about her.

“HAHAHAHAHA!” Titus suddenly burst out in hysterical laughter that somehow contained not one drop of joy. Fa-Li went dead quiet with the rest of them, sweat forming

on her brow. She'd *never* seen him like this. Not once. It was terrifying.

"AHAHAHAHA! Hehehe, haa..." Titus wiped a mock tear from his cheek. "I must say, I really underestimated you lot!" Titus began strolling over toward the other end of the room. "For how childish you all act, you really are quite perceptive, hehehe! Then again, they say all children are, ne?"

He brushed right past the utterly dumbfounded and terrified Dr. Campbell and Nurse Elise, and marched right up to Reeve's bedside.

"E-excuse me, young man, but you can't..." Dr. Campbell futilely objected.

"Hey! What the hell do you think you're doing!?" Reno snapped, pointing his cattle-prod-esque nightstick straight at the man, "Get away from—!"

Titus wordlessly placed his left hand upon Reeve's chest, and the orb embedded in it began emitting a brilliant blue-violet light, which danced and twirled around the room in a dazzling and hypnotic display. Reeve's eyes shown even more vividly for a time, and as Titus began to raise his hand up from Reeve's chest, a familiar trail of green energy followed along with it. Titus carefully guided the energy with his hand, twisting and turning it out of the window at Reeve's bedside, and down into the wet earth just outside. Then, just as suddenly as it had all started, the incredible light show came to an end. Titus then simply inserted his hands into his jacket pockets and returned to his side of the room without another word.

"W-what the heck did you—" Reno started after a dumbfounded moment, but then,

*"COUGH COUGH COUGH!!"*

All eyes were on Reeve Tuesti, who was suddenly hacking up a storm.

"Mr. President!" Reno, Rude, and Elena all bolted over to his bedside.

*"COUGH COUGH! Ahh... Ahem... Oh... Reno, Rude, Elena... It's good to see you."* The newly conscious president looked around in a daze, catching glimpses of some of his friends between the three astonished Turks hovering over him. His head was still fuzzy, and he couldn't quite remember what was going on.

"Oh...Elena, you're crying." He noticed. She couldn't help it; she was just so relieved he was really okay. "There there, don't worry. Everything's fine...but...what's...going on...? Where are we...?"

Elena clung to Rude, sobbing. Even Reno was getting teary-eyed.

"Mideel, sir. We're in Mideel." Rude finally said, smiling. "We're glad to have you back."

-tbc



Author's note:

Alright, second chapter by me (Ody) down. I don't know how quickly or slowly Catalina might have had these revelations dolled out, but I realized that between Tifa, Vincent, and Yuffie, characters were independently figuring out parts of the puzzle already before Titus had explained anything, so I took advantage of that by having Vincent name-drop the burrower here in an effort to keep Titus talking. I think it all coalesced nicely into the soft reveal of his true nature at the end there anyway (full explanation next time). I also needed to show off Yuffie's growing awareness of the situation prior to the reveal of what happened to her mother. Also I figured giving Reeve his canon last lame was fine since Catalina never gave him one herself.

Lemme tell ya, writing scenes with so many characters in one room sucks. Making sure everyone has a part to play in such scenes is a real challenge.

—Odysseus

# Chapter Forty-Three

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## *The Prisoner's Recollection*

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*"If you're so willing to run your mouth, how's about providing some information!" —Reno Akuma Mitsuru*

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The room was abuzz with excitement. At long last, after so much turmoil and heartache, Reeve Tuesti of Neo-Shinra had finally been rescued and restored to health, much to the relief of his friends and subordinates. While he was disoriented, he was still fully right-of-mind.

"Reeve!" Yuffie rushed over to the man, pushing through the Turks and giving him a big hug, "you had us all worried sick, you bum!" She said, getting teary-eyed. For a while there, she had really started to believe she'd never see her friend again.

"Haha, is that so? Well, I'm sorry Yuffie." He patted her on the head gingerly. For reasons he couldn't quite recall, Reeve was absolutely awash with relief to see the girl safe and sound as well. He had this lingering feeling something terrible had nearly happen to her, though he couldn't quite place it.

"Hey, give him a little breathing room, would ya!" Reno chided Yuffie.

"It's okay, Reno," Reeve said with a laugh. "I seem to have given you all quite the fright! I'm sorry, but, my head is still feeling quite fuzzy at the moment. Why exactly are we in Mideel? What happened?"

The Turks looked at each other with concern. "Well, sir... it's because—" Elena began.

"Sorry, Reeve, but we were actually hoping you could explain the details for us." Cloud interrupted, walking up beside the woman. "We've got a rough idea of what happened, but there's still a lot we don't know, and our 'friend' here has been less than cooperative on that end." He said, gesturing his head to the other side of the room.

"*Friend*"...? Reeve wondered to himself, following Cloud's motion.

"I'm sorry, Cloud, I'm not sure what..." then Reeve spotted him. Leaning cross-armed against the far wall, behind Tifa's examination table and where Barret stood, was a strange man Reeve didn't quite recognize. He was dressed in all black, with platinum-blond hair, pale skin, and striking green eyes—a combination of features disturbingly reminiscent of the late Sephiroth, Reeve thought—and unlike everyone else in the room, he wasn't looking at Reeve, but instead disinterestedly looking at the ground.

“Cloud, who is—” before Reeve could finish, the disinterested man’s gaze finally lazily shifted over to meet Reeve’s own. *His eyes... I’ve seen his eyes before... looking down at me... while I...*

Then, it all hit Reeve like a truck. *My office. Man in the window. Ski mask. Shadowed face. Phone not working. Broken glass. Try to call out. Hit me in the head. Bleeding. Losing consciousness. Green eyes.* Terror quickly grew in Reeve’s heart, his pulse rapidly accelerating. *Bright lights. Hissing. So many questions, but I don’t know the answers. Green Mists. Pain. Fear. Madness. Can’t die, not here! Yuffie, they’ll do this to her too! I’ll kill you! Great stream. Countless voices. Darkness. Someone calling. Then...*

Reeve instinctively backed away from the man, bunching himself in the corner against the wall. “E-everyone! Be careful! He—! He’s the one who abducted me! He’s the Running Man! He—! He—!” Reeve had devolved into a stuttering mess.

*Yuffie! I need to protect Yuffie!* He thought manically.

“Yuffie!” He yelled at the incredibly startled girl, who still leaned on his bedframe. “You need to get away from him! They’re after you too! They’ll—”

“Woah! Woah! Please calm down, Mr. President!” Elena pleaded, grasping Reeve’s hand.

“Everything is okay now, sir. Please relax.” Rude added.

“If that son of a bitch over there wants to try anything, he’s gotta go through us!” Boasted Reno.

Reeve glanced between his subordinates, adrenaline still pumping through his veins. “B-but—”

“The situation’s changed. The bastard is being ‘cooperative’ for the moment.” Cloud said with a hint of irritation.

“Reeve...” Yuffie took his hand into her own, “I know he did awful things to you. I went through it too, so believe me I know. He’s a real stubborn ass, too, but he’s on our side now. You don’t have to worry, I promise.”

Reeve turned again to the man, who once again seemed infinitely more interested in the floor than the pandemonium his mere presence had wrought. Just looking at him made Reeve feel sick to his stomach.

“He’s the one who healed you of your Mako poisoning, Reeve. His name is Titus.” Yuffie softly added.

Reeve looked down at the girl. He still wanted nothing more than to take her and sprint as far away from the Running Man as he could manage, but seeing the girl's faith in the man despite his cruelty made Reeve try to regain his composure.

"Don't worry yourself none, boss. This bastard tries anything and it's his head." Cid said from the other side of the room, next to the doorway.

"Damn straight!" Barret added with an arm pump.

Reeve paused, unable to completely shake his fear, but finally conceded to his friends' assurances. "Alright... I trust you all."

"Thanks, Reeve." Yuffie said with a soft smile.

Cloud's shoulders relaxed; glad Reeve seemed willing to put aside his admittedly very justified fear for the time being. It was going to take a careful balance to keep this uneasy alliance afloat, Cloud knew.

"Reeve," Cloud started again, "I know this might be hard for you, but can you please tell us what happened to you while you were in captivity? We know so little about what we're up against here, any information you might have gleaned would be valuable."

"Strife! The poor guy just regained consciousness! How about you give him a little time to recuperate before you go interrogating him?" Reno annoyedly cut in.

"No, no, Reno. It's okay, I can manage. Thank you for your concern, though." Reeve said, assuring the Turk.

"Okay, if you say so, prez..." Reno backed down limply. *Still not used to having a boss this nice.*

Cloud turned to Dr. Campbell and Nurse Elise, who had become so detached from the ongoing that they seemed as though they might melt into the wall at any moment. "I'm sorry, but could you give us all some privacy?" he asked apologetically, "It would probably be for the best if you didn't get involved, this is all dangerous business."

"A-ah, of course, Mr. Strife, no trouble at all," the doctor said nervously, "come along now, Elise, let's leave them to their discussions then, shall we?"

"Y-yes, of course, Doctor." She stammered out, after which the pair beat a hasty retreat for the exit.

"Mrs. Lockhart, Mr. Tuesti, if your injuries start acting up, we'll just be in the other room." Dr. Campbell said before closing the door.

Thus assured no innocent bystanders would be exposed to whatever cursed info may

arise, Cloud continued. “Alright, go ahead, Reeve.”

“Right, well, I suppose I should start from the beginning,” Reeve took a deep breath, readying himself for reliving those terrible events. “I was in my office, drafting up plans for the conversion of some of the smaller regional mako reactors such as the one on Mount Nibel and the one by North Corel into steam-based electric generators. I needed to contact Mrs. Townshend—the Shinra employee placed in charge of overseeing Nibelheim after it was rebuilt following the Sephiroth Incident—and Barret about some of the logistics involved in sending out workers to begin the conversion process in their respective regions. Lodgings, food, duration of stay, etc. When I tried the phone, however, I realized the line had gone dead. My cell phone wasn’t working either, so I made to go to another part of the building to continue my business. As I got up from my desk, however, I noticed the shadow of a figure being cast on the wall across from me. I whirled around to check the window behind me, and that’s when I saw...”

Reeve shuddered involuntarily; the memory of the dark figure in a ski mask with shadowy eyes looming over him from the window directly behind his desk still sent a chill down his spine. Reeve bit his lip to maintain his composure, and pressed on.

“Er...him.” Reeve ventured another glance at Titus, who though not looking at Reeve, seemed to be attentively listening to the recounting of events despite his disinterested demeanor. “I couldn’t make out his features all that well at the time, as he was wearing a ski mask and heavily backlit by the large spotlights that are attached to Sector 0’s outer ring. I made a break for it, knocking the files and papers from my desk in the process, but before I knew it, I was on the ground with a bleeding, busted lip and surrounded by broken glass. I suppose he must’ve burst through the window and tackled me, but it happened so fast that I hardly noticed. As I tried to get to my feet, something hit me in the back of my head, and I started to black out. The last thing I can recall is hearing Reno pound on my office door and shouting as the Running Man, er, ‘Titus’ stood over me, glaring at me with his vivid green eyes.”

“By the time I busted into your office, you two were already gone. I’m sorry, sir... I should’ve been faster...” Reno said, looking down dejectedly. Reeve put a hand on his shoulder.

“The past is the past, Reno, don’t beat yourself up about it. Whatever may have happened, everyone is still alive, and that’s what matters. You’re always so hard on yourself, you know.”

“Mr. President...” *The old President Shinra would’ve thrown us all in the Gulag if we’d let something like this happen. That obnoxious oaf Heidegger would’ve had our heads on pikes for sure. Reeve... I never should’ve let this happen to a guy as kind-hearted as you. Us Turks*

*don't deserve the consideration you give us after all we've done.*

A contemplative silence fell over the group. After a moment, Cloud moved things along.

"So, what happened once you were down in their hideout?"

"Oh, well, when I awoke, I was in a strange room. I was on a platform, feet shackled to it, and arms locked up into chains that were attached to a platform high above, where a hooded man stood."

"the 'Cold One,'" Yuffie suddenly said.

"You're a little young to be drinking, ain't ya?" Reno quipped back. Yuffie punched him in the arm.

"Shut up ya goof. That's what Titus called their leader, the creep in the hood." Yuffie turned to look at Reeve. "That's the same room they tortured me in before Vinnie and everyone came to save me."

Reeve looked at the girl with pity. She'd said it so matter-of-factly, but he knew firsthand what that "torture" was like. Utter violation. Pain, anguish, your mind bored into with no regard for who you are or how you feel, your most private thoughts and feelings shredded through like old newspaper, all in search of one particular bit of info with no consideration for what surrounds it. It was one of the most humiliating, painful, and dehumanizing experiences he could imagine, enough to drive anyone mad, as he well knew. Now that he looked at her, there did seem to be a certain hollowness to her gray eyes that wasn't there before, a certain darkness hiding behind her youthful, peppy exterior.

*This "Titus" fellow... Reeve thought, I don't care what he's done since then to make amends. Anyone who would allow an innocent girl like this to be subjected to that sort of horror is always going to be a monster deep down. I won't forgive him... I can't.*

"What did they want you to tell them, Reeve?" Cloud asked, noticing the darkening expression of his friend.

"Ah, yes, my apologies," Reeve said, breaking from his dark contemplation, "this 'Cold One,' as Yuffie called him, had these strange brown hissing creatures at his beck and call, they were my interrogators, Titus was nowhere to be seen by the time I awoke."

"Those damn f\*\*\*ing things!" Cid suddenly shouted from the other side of the room, his grip tightening on the Venus Gospel. Everyone turned to stare at him after his outburst.

"Shit, uh, ...sorry." Cid said, embarrassedly leaning deeper into the wall.

“Cid...” Tifa said in a sympathetic tone.

*Cid as well? Reeve thought, concern growing deeper. And Tifa is so burned and bruised... everyone looks worse for wear, really. Gods, what has been going on while I was rotting in that cell...? They've all suffered so much for my sake...*

“Yes, well,” Reeve tried his best to carry on “They asked me many questions, most of which I had a hard time understanding. Things about a creature they called ‘The Burrower.’ They wanted to know what I knew about it, what files Shinra had on it, what its weaknesses were, things like that.”

*The ‘Burrower’... Vincent thought, quietly watching the proceedings play out without comment. That must be the same creature as ‘the Hungry One’ from Lord Godo’s story about Yuffie’s mother. That settles it then, this ‘faction’ truly does have some connection to the beast. That must be why they targeted Yuffie as well. But, how would they have known of her family’s connection to the creature...? Vincent crossed his arms contemplatively. He also noticed Yuffie perk up at the mention of the creature, though he couldn’t read what she was thinking.*

“Of course, I couldn’t answer their questions, as I’d never heard of such a beast,” Reeve continued, “and so those hissing creatures...” Reeve winced painfully at the memory of the awful experience, “they...bore into my mind, combing over my every memory, my every thought, in search of whatever they thought I knew. It was as painful as it was violating. I believe I had fainted during the procedure, as I cannot recall how it ended.”

Yuffie tensed up at Reeve’s recollection of the mind probe. Vincent couldn’t help but notice her shift in demeanor. *Yuffie... they did that to you as well, didn’t they? Unlike Reeve, you may have actually known something, right? Your father didn’t seem to think so, but I wonder... Vincent felt a deep sorrow forming in his heart. Yuffie...please talk to me. I don’t want you to suffer in silence...I don’t want you to be like me.* He suddenly wanted nothing more in the world than to hold her close to himself and never, ever let go. *But I...*

“When next I awoke,” Reeve interrupted Vincent’s thoughts, “I was in the throes of madness and delirium. I had been chained to a wall in a room full of strange green mist, every part of me screaming in agony, and my mind was in pieces.” Reeve grabbed his head and began sweating just at the memory of the hellish experience. “My memory is unfortunately very fuzzy from there. I remember the leader calling me a disappointment and choosing next to target Yuffie after learning she and Vincent had followed the Running Man to one of their bases, and then some time later Titus himself had informed me that Yuffie had been captured... after that, I just remember being swept up in a tide of emotions and voices, impressions and feelings not my own. Someone may have guided me through it, but I can’t recall...and then...” Reeve raised his arms to gesture at his audience,

"I was here with you all."

"So, you really had no idea about what they were after?" Cloud asked.

"No, not one thing. If the President or any of the other execs knew about this 'Burrower,' I was never informed." Reeve replied sullenly, "All too many things within Shinra were on a need-to-know basis. We're still sorting through it all even now..."

A fresh wave of contemplative silence washed over the group as they processed Reeve's story. Fa-Li found herself very grateful that the President of Neo-Shinra hadn't picked up more than he had, as the faction's plans could have been severely compromised if he knew more. *Why did you heal him, Titus? What are you after? And...is what that Lockhart girl said true? Are you really...*

"If you're wondering," Titus suddenly broke his silence, turning the heads of everyone in the room, "when you caught me skulking around the Shinra Building, I was after much the same thing."

Rude took a moment to realize Titus was talking to him.

"What do you mean?" the bald Turk finally replied, cautiously.

"You heard your president. The Cold One was after information regarding the Burrower. He was utterly convinced Shinra must have *some* file on the beast, some secret knowledge they had kept from us, and so he gave me two objectives: Abduct the President of Neo-Shinra for interrogation, and scrounge around the abandoned company headquarters for any relevant files they might have stowed away. Of course, I knew from the start it was all a waste of time that would only bring us trouble, but that old fool isn't easily swayed once he's decided on something, and it was no longer my place to do so."

Jaws were on the floor. This stubborn mute who had made every tiny scrap of information he gave away the equivalent of pulling teeth was suddenly being extremely, unpromptedly forthcoming with information for reasons that were beyond them.

"Titus! Stop!" Fa-Li practically screamed after a confused lull. "What are you doing!? What's gotten into you!? Have you got a screw loose, Honey? Mr. Worldwide's headbutt knock your brain out of place? They can't KNOW these things, dear! You know that! If the faction finds out—"

"*The faction?*" Titus cut in, "Are you *seriously* still clinging on to them? Do you *really* still think you can ever go back to them? Do you think *I* want to go back to them? After they've sent their deadliest assassins after us *twice*? After I denounced the whole religion a year ago? You really are the sheer epitome of a whore, thinking anyone would ever take you back after how disloyal you've been. We're vagrants now, woman. Nowhere left to call



home, and nobody who will look out for us. Get it through your over-sexed brain already, you *stupid sl—*”

“HEY!!”

Attention had been pulled away from the painfully awkward display to Reno, who had instinctually shouted and taken an aggressive step forward before he could even think about what he was doing. Titus and Fa-Li also turned to look at him, not expecting the intrusion.

*Well...shit.* Reno thought. *Now what? I just couldn't stand to see...*

“Ah, uhm, well...” he retracted his foot, and rubbed his head awkwardly, “Uh, if you're so willing to run your *mouth*, how's about providing some *information!*” He stepped forward again, this time also aggressively pointing his finger.

*Yep. Nailed it, Reno.*

“Mr. Titus...” Tifa started, carefully side-stepping Reno's awkward interjection, “you were so unwilling to help us before, no matter how much we asked. Why are you being so open now?”

Titus paused a long moment, thinking hard to himself, before finally saying “I was... observing you all.”

“Observing?” Tifa replied.

“Yes, observing. I've heard plenty about your group, but I wanted to see how you all operate for myself. To decide if it was even worth divulging anything to you.”

“Why? For what purpose?” Cloud asked from across the room.

“To see if you were capable of assisting me.” He said flatly.

Cloud was taken aback by the reply. Had he really heard Titus correctly?

“Assisting you? *Assisting you?*” Cloud said sternly, rage again beginning to boil inside of him. “You kidnap Reeve and Yuffie, let them get tortured, leave Reeve for dead, set a monster loose in the sewers to kill three of us, *fight us* when we find you in that decrepit shack in Junon, and spend the rest of the time being a cryptic, unhelpful piece of shit, and you expect *us* to help *you!*? Are you *insane??*”

“Hey, Cloud!” Yuffie objected. Though she didn't approve of Cloud's tone, she had to admit he had a point. For every beneficial thing he had done for them, he'd done two or three bad things in turn. He even had to basically be peer pressured into healing Reeve, even at this late juncture. The mixed signals from this man were palpable.

"It was never my original intent to work with you all," he said coolly, unfazed by Cloud's verbal lashing, "frankly, I'd have rather none of you had ever gotten involved in the first place. You can thank my ex-'master' for that one. Once it was clearly unavoidable, you became nuisances to my goals, things I had to deal with to save face, nothing more. It was only when you captured Fa-Li and I that I was forced to accept that things had gone so far south that I'd have no choice but to at least *consider* asking for your help if my goals were to ever be achieved."

"An' what 'goals' might those be?" Barret barged in before the bulging vein on Cloud's forehead could pop, "I guess savin' the damn Planet once ain't good enough fer us to live up to yer grand vision, huh? We still jes' cannon fodder to ya?"

"Hmph. Your lives mean nothing to me, be they fully lived or cut short, that much is true." Titus scoffed.

"Tch!" Was about all Barret could get out before Cloud took a few aggressive strides toward Titus, blood boiling.

"Alright asshole, I've had just about eno—" Cloud began.

"However!" Titus spoke over him, putting up a finger and stopping Cloud in his tracks, "The life of the Planet is something I care for a great deal. That much, I believe, we can relate on. That's why I was willing to consider you lot in the first place."

"Titus?" Fa-Li said in confusion.

*That's right, Yuffie thought, even as he left me at the mercy of those awful hisses, he told me if I truly cared for the Planet, I couldn't crack and let my mother's song slip out. He's telling the truth!*

"Huh?" Barret exclaimed in confusion, "Does that mean the Planet's in danger again?"

"How very observant of you." Titus said sarcastically.

"Well then, Mr. *Nobel Savior*, did we live up your grand expectations?" Cid said aggressively.

"Hardly," Titus bitterly replied, "for all your strength and heroics, you all are a bunch of impudent little children. You're poorly organized, impulsive, aggressive, impatient, stubborn, your group is full of thinly veiled hostility for each other, and your interrogation skills are extremely lacking. Frankly, the only three of you I have any respect for are Kisaragi, Valentine, and Lockhart. I wouldn't trust the rest of you to look after a chocobo, much less save the world."

Yuffie couldn't help but think of Butterfly, Lamia, and Stefan, all long abandoned

back in the flooded Kalm.

“If that’s the case,” interjected Tifa, “Why are you telling us these things now?”

“Because, as I said before, despite being children, you’re all still somehow incredibly capable and perceptive,” Titus responded, “I was certain at least *one* of you would have bit it by now, but here you all are! And you’re a half-step away now from putting it all together yourselves, too, even if you don’t know it yet. Between the lot of you, you already hold most of the pieces. There’s no use in obfuscating the truth any longer.”

A certain electricity had sparked in the room. The leather-clad man’s condescending attitude and seeming lack of regret for anything he’d done had Cloud just about ready to explode, and Reno, Barret, and Cid weren’t far behind him. Sensing the mounting tension, one man knew he’d have to set aside his own personal feelings for the sake of the group’s stability. And so he began.

“Mr. Titus, if I may be plain,” Reeve suddenly spoke up, “you’ve done awful things to us. Things that I’ll probably never be able to forgive you for, for they are truly unforgivable. Even now, not a shred of remorse is to be seen from you, and your contempt for most of us is obvious. However, I’m willing to put all that aside for the time being, because if the Planet is truly once again in danger, and you’re being honest with what you say, then it’s no time to squabble amongst ourselves. I believe it is in our mutual best interests to be on the same page, don’t you agree?”

“H-hey, Mr. President, hold on—” Elena stuttered. Reeve had begun to shakily rise from his bed to his feet, and with some difficulty, made his way towards Titus.

Reeve looked the man who had abducted him, tortured him, and left him for dead right in the eye. *What you did to Yuffie... what you did to me... it's all I have not to strangle you right where you stand.* Titus’ eyes flashed with something resembling amusement. Reeve reached out his hands, and grasped Titus’ into his own. With complete earnestness in his voice, the President of Neo-Shinra said “Please, help us, Titus. Tell us everything you know.”

Titus felt the firm yet gentle grip of the man he had ruined clutching his hand. For all he had endured, Reeve Tuesti was still a man of impeccable composure and integrity.

“Hmm hmm hmm. Reeve Tuesti, I must admit, you’re every bit the man I thought you were.” Titus laughed to himself, “Very well then.”

Fa-Li could no longer bring herself to object. As biting as his words were, Titus was right. They had nowhere left to go. It didn’t matter anymore. And, she was beginning to think she needed to hear what he had to say as well.

“To start, just to confirm something you’ve surely all realized by now,” Titus began, moving to the center of the group, “I am indeed a Cetra.”

He gazed over them with Aeris’ eyes.

“However,” he continued, “that is not all I am.”

Everyone gazed back into Aeris’ eyes.

“I’m only half-Cetra. The other half is Cetra Ocuris.”

~tbc

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Author’s note:

Bit of a short one this time. I had originally planned for Titus to launch into his origin story this chapter, but the whole scene with Reeve ran a lot longer than I thought it would, so I figured it'd be better to break it up.

There are a few assumptions made on my part here. We're never actually told what the faction wanted from Reeve, just that he got tortured the same way Yuffie was. Given that the Cold One's only stated objective anywhere in the story is Titus saying that the Cold One intends to kill the Burrower for... some reason (all the way back in chapter 6), I've decided all of the faction's actions are to that end, for as of yet unstated reasons. I'll get into the specifics later, but I've also decided that the faction has connections to Shinra, and that they believed Shinra would have info on the burrower. I also decided that that was the reason Titus was rooting around Hojo's lab when Rude caught him, but rereading Titus' thoughts about it in Chapter 13 again, it also comes across like he was looking for something that would benefit his own goals, since he asks about why he himself thought anything useful would be there. Hard to say.

And speaking of Titus, I also decided it was never part of his original plan to work with Avalanche. I have no idea if that was Catalina's intent, but his actions never really point to it, so I decided this would be a begrudging alliance. I also don't know if Catalina would've ever had him be so willing to info dump as I'm about to make him, but I just want to finally establish what the stakes are already. As he points out in the chapter, they were getting very close to figuring most of it out themselves anyway.

Also, yep, still hard to give everyone a role in these sorts of scenes. I'm glad Red and Cait aren't here. Tifa also canonically was so excited to see Reeve better than she got over her cough because it was annoying to write.

—Odysseus

# Chapter Forty-Four

## Titus Arc I - Origins

*“Those who have prey on those who have not, that’s how this world works!” —Auctioneer*

*(From) time to time, I feel like running away  
Trying to face away from this situation*

*(I) feel so lonely in this world*

*But for me to live, I have to decide my own way*

*Take it easy  
It’s gonna be alright  
Have faith and trust what a person you are  
In times when you feel lost believe (in) yourself  
Overcome all the enemies  
Are you ready? Let’s go!!*

*“Chase the Light!”*

*—Fear, and Loathing in Las Vegas—*

“Cetra Ocuris? What’s that?” Yuffie asked, perplexed.

“Course all of us know who the Cetra were, but I ain’t never heard of no ‘Cetra Ocuris.’” Barret added.

“Sounds made up to me.” Reno said snidely.

Titus pinched the bridge of his nose in annoyance and sighed. He was already beginning to regret this decision. “Cetra Ocuris are what you might call ‘Dark Cetra.’ They were a niche subset of the standard Cetra population with far fewer members, so I wouldn’t expect Shinra to have known of them, let alone a bunch of planetologist eco-terrorists.”

“Okay, ‘Dark Cetra’ is *definitely* made up.” Reno said again. Elena punched him.

“Ow!”

“Aeris was very sure she was the last of her race, so you’ll have to forgive us if we don’t believe you.” Cloud said coldly.

Titus let out an exasperated sigh. “Perhaps it would be best if I just start from the beginning. Bear with me, it’s a long story.”

“First of all, I never knew my parents.” Titus began, “It wasn’t until much later in life I’d come to fully understand the circumstances of my birth and heritage. My earliest memories are of a run-down, rotting old orphanage in the frigid north, the ‘Icicle Area Juvenile Care Facility.’ I had been abandoned on their doorstep like unwanted trash when I was just a few months old. That’s how I got my start in this world, discarded by the very people who had brought me into it. If nothing else, it set a tone.”

“My time at the facility was colored by neglect, rejection, and ostracization. The place was severely understaffed and underfunded, and being a Shinra-owned institution, it was generally understood that all that wretched place really served as was a funnel into the company’s military industrial complex. They took in the disowned and unwanted youths who lived on the dredges of society, ‘took care of them’ until they reached puberty, then sent them off to the front lines in the east to play meat shield for the newly minted SOLDIER troops. The staff knew we had no futures to speak of, that we were all just pigs to the slaughter, so none of them paid any of us much mind beyond their perfunctory duties. A few pretended to care, to make themselves feel less guilty about what they were a part of, but there was no hiding the truth from me.” Titus tapped his forehead.

“No, I suppose there wouldn’t be.” Vincent said, the faintest twinge of bitterness coloring his voice.

Titus gave the gloomy man a sly smile.

“Hmm hmm, yes, even before I knew the Cetra were anything more than a fairytale, I was already quite in-tune with the sorts of abilities such heritage entails. I could hear what they were thinking, clear as if they were speaking to me if I focused hard enough. I knew all about the dismal future that awaited every poor soul processed by that meatgrinder, and how jaded everyone had become to it. We were numbers; count up enough of us and you stayed employed. That’s the kind of place it was.”

“There were similar places all over Midgar,” Tifa commented from her seat on the examination table, “One of our old comrades in AVALANCHE grew up in one of them, an orphanage in the Sector 5 slums, so I’ve heard about how terrible the conditions were...”

“It was every bit as awful as you could imagine, I’m sure.” Titus continued, “The children were more or less left to fend for themselves with little in the way of supervision. I was an outcast among them, my unusual appearance and proclivity for knowing things I shouldn’t and hearing voices other people couldn’t did not exactly endear the other children to me, nor the adults for that matter. Most avoided me outright, others relieved their own insecurities by mocking me or throwing stones, and the would-be leaders among the ruffians saw me as an easy target to prove their strength and superiority against. I walked away with more than my share of bruises, but none of the ‘care givers’ ever seemed

to mind. I could have defended myself, of course; even as a child I had a proficiency for hand-to-hand combat that exceeded the average person's, but it was rare I could muster the desire to fight back. It was during those years I first came to understand how cruel and worthless this world is, and how worthless I was in turn."

The last remark came out with a strong undertone of bitterness that had up to then been absent in Titus' voice, and the self-depreciating nature of the remark caught the man's audience off guard. Yuffie in particular took note of his subtly shifting demeanor as he went on.

*What's going on with him...?*

"Eventually, I'd had enough of that rotten place." Titus carried on, "Runaways were a rarity for the facility, not due to any particularly strict security, but because of the location. The facility was incredibly isolated; vast expanses of snow fields and impassable mountains surrounded it in every direction, and nothing but the bitter cold and vicious monsters were out there to keep you company. The only regular contact with the outside world we had were monthly supply drops Shinra delivered by helicopter, which was also when they'd pick up their fresh recruits. Needless to say, what few brave fools did try to get away were never heard from again. But I couldn't stand it any longer. I didn't care. Freezing to death was preferable to spending one more second around those miserable, hateful creatures. So, in the middle of the night, I quietly slipped out the back door, nothing but a woefully thin jacket and pilfered supplies from the facility's kitchen to help me along my way."

"Y'know, this is all very sad and all, but what exactly does it have to do with anything? I didn't sign up for your life story, my guy." Reno cut in.

"Reno, let the man talk." Reeve said curtly.

"Sorry, boss..." Reno mewed.

Titus just tapped his foot impatiently.

"So, what happened next? Guess you didn't die of hypothermia," Yuffie asked.

"No," Titus continued, "no I did not. Part of me wishes I had, though." Titus replied.

"Man, you're even gloomier than Vinnie..." Yuffie said, faint concern twinging the joke.

"Hmph. Carrying on, I only ended up lasting about two days in the wilderness. I severely underestimated my ability to rough it, admittedly. Fending off monsters and the frostbite beginning to nip at my fingers and toes left me exhausted and in great pain. The

blood had slowly stopped flowing to my limbs, which made moving extremely difficult after a point. I remember collapsing on my back, exhausted and frozen, and just watching the sky dance with marvelous color as I lost consciousness. At the time I was completely content to just slip away into darkness right then and there under the brilliant northern lights. A peaceful end to my unnecessary and unwanted existence. However, it wasn't to be. Just as I was fading out, I heard the sound of an engine approaching."

"While unconscious, I dreamed a strange dream. I could feel an odd rhythmic swelling, pushing and pulling again and again, tugging at my body. I could also feel movements, tiny razors cutting the surface of my skin, and countless small lives inhabiting my insides. There was also a voice, calmer and more soothing than I'd ever heard, the way I imagined a mother might sound when speaking to her child. That's how it felt, really, despite all the strange and occasionally painful sensations; it was like being swaddled in the warmth of a mother's womb. She told me many things, but I was young and inexperienced then, so I had difficulty understanding her. Eventually I felt myself being pulled away, the warmth leaving me despite my struggle to stay. Then, I woke up."

"As my vision came to, I found myself in a dark room, chained to a wall and dressed only in rags. I had regained control of my limbs, but my fingers were still purple and sore. I wasn't alone, there were many others in a similar state all around me; some were still unconscious, some stared blankly into nothing with dead eyes, and some fidgeted at their restraints with barely constrained panic and racing thoughts. They were all young girls and boys, the oldest couldn't have been more than 16. After a bleary moment, I realized I could still feel that push and pull from my dream even after I had awoken, and I could hear the creaking and groaning of the room all around me, as well as see the gentle sway of the chains that bound my wrists. I was in the hull of a ship, and while I had never seen it before, I also knew we were on the open sea. I had been abducted while I was unconscious."

"Traffickers," Tifa interjected, "my papa warned me about them when I was a young girl... they rove small towns and the countryside, abducting people to..."

"Yes," Titus continued before she had to finish the sentence, "as I would later learn, all manner of shady dealings happen in the frigid north, as it is far from the prying eyes of normal society. That's presumably why the facility was in such an isolated location as well. I was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"As I was saying," Titus continued "after regaining my senses, I realized that the swelling wasn't the only thing that hadn't gone away after I awoke. There were dull sensations all over my body, tiny things moving across my flesh, a particularly strong one moving down the center of my chest. I thought there must be insects crawling on me, but there was nothing there when I inspected my skin. That's when I realized that the voice



hadn't gone away either. Though it was faint, I could still just make out a whisper between the crashing of waves on the sides of the ship, quiet but assuredly there. I looked around to locate its source, but none of the other children in the room were speaking. It didn't sound like it was coming from any specific direction anyway, but was coming from all around. With the stinging in my chest growing more painful, I finally managed to comprehend one thing: 'south.' We were headed south. And that's when it dawned on me who was speaking; it was the ocean itself."

"The ocean?" Barret asked, "I know Aeris and her, er, *your* people could talk to the Planet 'n all, but the ocean? Don't think Aeris ever said nothin' 'bout that."

"It's all facets of a whole," Titus replied, "to commune with the Planet is to engage our own spirit energy with the Lifestream, to hear the Planet's voice. In the end, however, all life is born from that same source. As massive as it is, the Planet is the easiest lifeform for a Cetra to commune with, but with practice it is possible to read the spirit energy of any living being."

"So wait, does that mean the ocean is *alive* then!?" Elena asked.

"Yes, that is what I'm getting at," Titus said flatly, voice twinged with subtle irritation at the question, "the Planet has served as a host for countless lifeforms over the eons, including many ancient gods and beasts. The ocean is one such primordial entity, the mother of all life. We are all her children, though modern man has grown ignorant of this. Through her this Planet has flourished, and life has prospered."

"We once sailed across the sea between Junon and Costa del Sol with Aeris, and she never said a thing..." Tifa said contemplatively.

"That's not altogether surprising," Titus replied, "If I understand correctly, that girl grew up in Midgar, a place sapped of its lifeblood, where the Planet's voice is weak. Her ability to commune with the life around her was presumably stunted by such a dismal environment. On top of that, she wasn't exposed to the Mother until she was an adult, so she probably lacked the sense to hear her."

"Sounds like a bunch of nonsense to me." Cloud said, sounding notably irritated.

"Believe what you want to believe." Titus said flatly with a shrug.

*On the other side of the room, Yuffie fell into contemplation. The ocean is alive? And it can talk? Sounds nutso to me. But then again... She recalled her strange experience on the way to Mideel. No, couldn't be...*

"And what about those feelings you had all over your body?" Tifa asked, "What was that about?"

“I had unconsciously synched my aura with the Mother’s, meaning I could feel everything she could. Ships that crossed the water’s surface sailed along my skin, creatures in the depths swam in my veins. In time, I’d learn to do it intentionally, and to do it with other creatures as well.”

“That sounds completely deranged,” Reno said, “so what, you got fish inside of you? Guess it’s a good thing that cat isn’t here, he’d try to eat ya!”

Titus rubbed his temples. Why was he telling them all this again? “It’s simply an extension of the Cetran ability to engage our spirit energy with others. Our energy can resonate with that of another, and we can feel as they feel and think as they think. In the macro scope, it allowed the Cetra to know when the Planet ailed, so they might better tend to it, but on a smaller scale it can let you know how another person is feeling, or even what they are thinking if you focus enough. It’s how I am able to take a peek into your unguarded minds if I so choose.”

Reno shuddered at the thought of this strange man peering into his thoughts.

“What exactly is the ocean thinking, then?” Elena asked.

“She is angry,” Titus said curtly, “angry that her voice continues to go unheard by her ignorant and ungrateful children.”

Cloud was about to interject with another snide remark, when he suddenly recalled a strange thought he’d had a while back. *The land... Swallowed by the ocean. She’s taking back what is rightfully hers...* The ever-present pitter-patter of the rain outside came into sharp focus in Cloud’s ears, filling him with a certain unease.

“May I continue my story, now?” Titus said with unmasked annoyance.

“Please, do.” Reeve replied.

“As I said, the ship was headed south. I was too weak then to do anything about my restraints, so I had little choice but to wait and see what would happen. Eventually we docked, and a group of masked men descended from the upper deck to drag us out the cargo bay door. It was pitch-black out; we had arrived in what I would later learn was a shady side-port of Costa del Sol, and were escorted by armed men into a collection of waiting trucks. One brave soul tried to make a break for it, but... it didn’t end well for them. I just watched as I was shepherded along. The ocean behind me grew silent.”

“We were taken to an underground holding pen in the basement of some kind of theatre, and I could just make out the echoing voice of an over-eager presenter playing to a perverted crowd somewhere up above. It was an underground black-market auction, and we were the merchandise; brought from all over the world to sate the desires of the

rich and perverted. We were dragged up to a stage one-by-one for the gaggle of disgusting pigs to bid on, then we'd be carted off to who-knows-where with our new 'owners' once a price was settled on. I could hear the panicked thoughts of my fellow prisoners as they were led away, and the hungry mania of the crowd awaiting their next chunk of meat. Then, it was my turn."

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

The memory washed over Titus like it had just happened the day before. Dragged up from his cell by the cuffs that bound his wrists, bare feet bleeding from his still frostbitten toes. He was blinded by the glaring spotlights shining down on him, the crowd a barely distinguishable undulating black mass in the shadows beyond the stage, murmuring in excitement at the sight of him. He was far from the small little world he had known, and he'd never felt more alone.

*"Alright ladies and gents, we've got an extra special one for you now! This delicate beauty was procured in the icy plains of the far north! Don't his porcelain skin and platinum hair just embody the purity of the driven snow? And his green eyes, sparkling like dazzling emeralds, shine so boldly against his muted features! A real rarity, this one. Then, let's hear some offers! Starting bid is 100k gil!"*

The conglomeration of shadows roared into a frenzy. Hungry shouts from a hundred indistinguishable voices filled the air, merging into a cacophonous din.

"110!"

"130!"

"200!"

"250!"

"280!"

It was the most Titus had ever been "valued" in his short life, for all the wrong reasons. His dull resignation bubbled into a rage.

*"Animals!"* Titus screamed, the mass falling silent *"Is THIS how you get your sick entertainment? Treating people like objects to be used? You're all disgusting!"*

He huffed in a fury, but was met with silence. Then, after a moment, a choaked back snort echoed out from somewhere in the dark, and before long the auditorium roared with laughter. The young Titus was taken aback by the reaction.

*"Wha- what's so damned funny!?"* He asked desperately, lurching toward the audience

as his chains strained against the hook he was latched to on the ground. *“Is the suffering of others really so entertaining!? Well!? Answer m—”*

Titus suddenly felt a firm grasp painfully gripping the hair on the back of his head, and before he knew it, he had been slammed hard into the ground. The large man who had escorted him from his cell was now restraining him on the cold wooden floor.

*“Agh!”*

*“Looks like we got a lively one here, folks!”* The auctioneer boomed, gesturing to the grounded Titus as he walked over to him.

*“Easy there, man, the people are paying good money for this kid. Don’t rough him up too much.”* The Auctioneer said to the guard who restrained Titus. He squatted to his knees and grasped Titus by the chin, tilting his head up and forcing Titus to meet his eyes. *“You, my friend, have a lot to learn. Those who have prey on those who have not, that’s how this world works. There’s not a single person who isn’t looking to take advantage of you, and from the look of you, you haven’t got jack shit. That’s why you ended up here, down in the pits of Hell. Better get used to it.”*

The man rose to his feet, and gestured broadly to the audience. *“Now then, where were we!”*

*“450!”*

*“600!”*

*“670!”*

And on and on it went.

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

“In the end,” Titus said, “I went for 2.5 million gil, to the leader of a local crime syndicate. All my outburst had accomplished was heightening their awful sense of frenzied desire. I was by far the highest buy of the night, or so I was told. Such an ‘honor’... After that, I became that disgusting pig’s ‘pet,’ and my new hell began.”

Titus grimaced, clenching his fists tightly.

“Titus... I never knew...” Fa-Li said, placing a gentle hand on his shaking arm. “I’m so sorry...”

He shook her off. “Enough. I don’t need sympathy, especially not from a vile thing like you. You know all about taking advantage of other people’s weakness, don’t flatter yourself by thinking you’re any better.”

Fa-Li fell silent, looking away with some inscrutable emotion on her face.

Reno watched the exchange quietly, a mix of emotions he didn't want to process running through his head. He kept staring at his ex-wife, that woman who ruined him. On the surface, he agreed with Titus' words implicitly, he'd certainly felt taken advantage of, but... why had she saved his life? Why did he get so irritated at the way Titus treated her despite what she'd done? Despite all the rage he'd felt towards her? Why...? He forced his mind to be blank.

"The man who bought me was a crime boss by the name of Maximilian Night," Titus forced things back on track, "he was the kingpin of a massive syndicate that operated all over the western continent, selling drugs, weapons, and other such illicit contraband on the black-market, raking in millions of gil annually. He owned a lavish seaside estate on the outskirts of Costa del Sol where he spent much of his time, and evidently collecting 'dolls' at those underground auctions was something of a hobby of his. I never met any of the others, and I don't care to dwell on what may have become of them."

Titus took a deep breath before continuing.

"I was confined to a room on the back end of the building. The door was always bolted shut with a guard stationed outside at all times. The sole window was barred as well, and my wrist was cuffed to a chain connected to the bedframe which kept me from going far regardless. It was relatively well furnished, some might've called it 'nice,' though the frilly, overly saccharin and childish aesthetic of the room made me feel sick to my stomach, personally. I was alone most of the time, save for when one of Night's grunts would bring me meals or changes of cloths. The man himself only visited occasionally, a few times per week, when he was in need of..."

Titus didn't finish the statement, and so the uncomfortable implications lingered on.

"My only company was the Mother. The room overlooked the sea, and without the noisy thoughts of others to cloud my mind, her voice became that much clearer to me. I would just sit and listen as her waves broke on the cliffside, again and again, from morning to evening. Those lonely hours are where my worship of her truly began; I would listen to her words, synch with her essence, and slowly come to understand her. She was a Titan, one of the last, a primordial god from an earlier era. Once, the people of the world had revered her, loved her for all she had given them, but now only a few remained to receive her words. Most would find the sensation maddening, but I welcomed it openly. The disassociation, being one with something bigger and losing myself... it was a welcome reprieve. Anything to get away from that room, and my thoughts."

Titus walked over to the window, and watched the rain trickle down.

“She’s lonely, you know. So very lonely... Nearly as old as the Planet itself, gave rise to all who inhabit it, but so few can hear her... so few to understand... it’s been millennia since the last great civilization that paid her due respect had roamed the land. So long since people truly cared for her, since anyone understood her... now she’s just a tool, a thing to be exploited, no consideration given...”

Another uneasy silence fell, which none dared to break.

Yuffie, from her perch on Reeve’s bed, looked over the man. She’d never expected him to reveal so much of himself, so much of his pain, to them. The bitter anguish in his words had become unmistakable, and his eyes stared off to some distant point a long way off.

*You play it all cool most of the time, but I can tell. You’ve been holding it all in for a long time, haven’t you? You’re talking more to yourself than us at this point, just to let out the tears you can’t shed. You don’t need to cry any longer, Titus... you aren’t alone anymore.*

Vincent noticed the tender look Yuffie was giving her ex-captor, one full of sympathy and concern. Some dismal feeling smoldered inside of him at the sight, but he dared not dwell on it. With some hesitance, he forced himself to turn his attention back to the somber man.

Titus, meanwhile, had returned to the present at the sensation of Yuffie’s commiseration. Realizing what he was doing, he snapped himself shut once again, and carried on.

“In any case... I became quite adept at slipping out of my restraints as time went on, as I’m sure you’re all aware by now.” He said, single cuff still dangling from his right arm, “with little else to do, practicing that trick became a regular pastime of mine. With all routes of escape barred, however, it didn’t do me much good on its own. But I had time, so much time, and so I conceived of a plan. I broke off one of the decorative wooden bars from the bedframe, and positioned those awful gaudy pillows such that it wouldn’t be easily noticed. Then, I spent a while slowly sharpening it to a dull point by rubbing it along the stone wall. Eventually, when next Maximillian came for one of his ‘visits,’ I made my move.”

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

It was a dark night, the sky coated in inky black clouds. The rain beat down on the estate like a hail of bullets, and the waves pounding the cliffside threatened to swallow the place whole. Maximillian Night stormed into his lavish home in a fury, his yes men struggling to keep up. He had arrived late due to a particularly frustrating meeting with one of his regional administrators. Something was rotten. The numbers weren’t adding up on the recent sales of contraband; the profit margin was far smaller than it should’ve been.

Somebody was fucking him, and he was having a great deal of difficulty figuring out who and how. He was royally pissed off, to put it lightly.

“*S-sir!*” a nervous subordinate began, rushing up beside his master, who was leaving a sopping wet trail through the foyer as he continued his ceaseless march. “*C- can I take your coat, sir? Get you a drink? A cigar?*”

“*Piss off.*” the bulky man replied curtly, waving him off.

“*Of-of course, sir...*” The terrified lacky squeaked out before slithering away.

When Maximillian got in a mood like this, you did what he said. That is, unless you wanted yourself and your entire family to cease to exist, anyway.

*There’s only one thing I need right now, and that’s to let off steam. The boy will do...*

The man made his way to the wing of his manor where his “doll collection” was kept, carelessly discarding his sopping-wet jacket on the floor for one of the little people to deal with later. Thunder shook the hall as he went, and before long he’d arrived at his destination. A lone guard stood before a conspicuously heavily fortified door at the far end of the hall, armed with a handgun at his waist.

“*Step aside. I’m here to see my pet.*” Maximillian ordered.

“*My apologies, sir.*” The guard said, moving away from the door.

Maximillian rummaged through his pocket for a massive keyring that held the keys to all of his “pets” rooms, and picked out the one for Titus’ door with a practiced motion. The key slipped perfectly into its place, and the door creaked open slowly. The room beyond was dark, the bright, childish colors of the décor cast in an eerie shadow. Maximillian stared into the room, looking to the bed in the far corner where he assumed Titus slept, which was shrouded in impenetrable darkness.

“*Daddy’s here for a visit, boy...*” Maximillian said softly, passing through the room’s threshold.

Suddenly, a bolt of lightning illuminated the whole room for a fraction of a second, revealing the bed to be empty, save for the unoccupied restraints lying upon it.

Maximillian swiveled around in a panic, “*Hey! Where the hell is—*”

It all happened in a lightning fast motion. Titus, who had been hiding behind the open door, twirled behind Maximillian with inhuman speed, delivering a forceful kick to the back of his leg to knock the man to his knees, then quickly wrapped his arm around the burly man’s neck in a vice grip and pressed his makeshift shiv into his jugular with his

free hand.

*“H-hey—! Don’t move!”* The shocked guard sputtered out after a stunned moment, drawing his weapon.

*“I wouldn’t try it if I were you.”* Titus said, pressing the shiv into Maximillian’s neck.

*“Hrgh!”* The crime lord grabbed at Titus’ arm fruitlessly, the boy’s strength far exceeding his age and frail physique.

A tense standoff took place, Titus and the guard not moving a muscle, only the sound of the thunder and rain to punctuate the moment. Before too long, however, another sound joined the mix. It was Maximillian. He was laughing.

*“Hehehe, feisty, verrrry feisty. That’s why you’re my favorite, you know. Knew you would be ever since you talked all that shit up on the auction stage heh heh.”* The perverted man said jovially, though he struggled to speak under Titus’ grip, *“But... heh heh, what’re you going to do now, boy? Kill me and he shoots you dead. Drag me to the front door and escape into this miserable downpour, and you get to live the rest of your life in fear knowing I’ve got every man in my employ out hunting you down to bring you back to me. Hehehe, so tell me, what’ll it be?”*

Titus had known all along that those were never options for him, not if he wanted to survive. There was only one path available to him.

*“...job.”*

*“Excuse me?”*

*“A job,”* Titus repeated, *“you’re going to give me a job, a REAL one, and you’re going to let me out of this damned room.”*

*“...Hehehe... HAHAHA!”* Maximillian burst out laughing *“A job? A JOB? You’re threatening my life, and you expect me to hire you? Quite the bold request, my friend! Haha! I don’t know if you realize this, but you already do exactly what I want you to do around here. What else do you think you could offer me?”*

*“Just locked up in this gaudy little prison, I’ve already gotten you into this position, haven’t I? With actual resources, I could manage quite a bit more.”* Titus replied, *“And beyond that, I could also help you uncover where all of your money has vanished off to.”*

*“Hub? How the hell do you...?”*

*“You pick up on a lot when you’re stuck in one place for so long, and your guard dogs like to bark.”*

*“Guard dogs...?”*



Maximillan turned to look at the guard, who watched the two nervously. Maximillian could see the fear creeping into his subordinate's eyes at Titus' remark, and his blood began to boil with the realization.

"Well, *what do you say?*"

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

"Hold up," Reno interrupted, "the bastard did all... *that* to you, and your move was to work for the guy?"

"It was as he said," Titus replied, "it was the only path I had that would keep me alive and raise my standard of living, however meagerly. I understood by then that people exist to exploit and be exploited, and I had knowledge he wanted."

"Still, man..." Reno trailed off.

*To exploit and be exploited...* Fa-Li had a sinking feeling about where this story was headed.

"In any case," Titus continued, "my standing quickly grew from there. A large subset of Maximillian's underlings had grown discontented with how he ran the operation, which I was privy to by way of listening in on their thoughts while they guarded my glorified prison cell. The exorbitant amount of funds he dedicated to his lavish living style and his exotic... *hobbies...* were beginning to undercut the bottom line of the organization, and many of his administrators were left to clean up the mess. Resentment grew as questions arose about his competency as a leader, and eventually they had started funneling product into a rival crime family by skimming off the top of shipments in hopes of staging a coup. That was why the profits were lower than the shipments would suggest; they were amassing their power in order to off Maximillian and instate a leader that suited them better. Of course, I wasn't aware of any of that when I made my arrangement with him, but I more or less had the picture after pointing a few fingers. Before long, all of the would-be usurpers were food for the Mother, and I found myself as 'Chief of Intelligence Collection' within the organization."

"Did... did you still, um..." Tifa hesitantly began.

"I was still property at the end of the day" Titus emotionlessly replied.

"Ah, um... I'm sorry..." was all she could manage to say.

"In my new role," Titus brushed past her apology, "I had much more freedom than I did before, though I was still beholden to Maximillian's whims. I was moved to a room in the syndicate's living facilities, located some further distance toward the Corel Mountain

range from Night's estate, and was implanted with a tracking chip in lieu of a guard. From then on, it became my duty to snuff out would-be traitors within the syndicate, as well as wringing information out of debtors or members of rival syndicates, be that through my more direct methods or through torture. I became very skilled at interrogation before long."

"Would torture really be necessary with your abilities?" Rude probed.

"Generally, no." Titus responded, "However, I pointedly never revealed my full capabilities to the organization in order to give myself an ace-in-the-hole, and so utilizing alternative forms of information collection was needed to save face if a live demonstration was requested. I put a number of innocents through hell to maintain my position, as you might imagine. In the end, I really was no better than the rest of them..."

"Those skills certainly came in handy later on though, didn't they?" Cloud said jeeringly.

"Hmm hmm, yes, I suppose they did," Titus coyly replied, "of course, there were always those rare few who had the mental fortitude to seal their thoughts from me, but then again, torture rarely worked on such people either."

"Tch." Cloud crossed his arms and looked away.

"If I may interrupt," Vincent cut in, "I would like to know when this 'faction' of yours gets involved. Your story thus far has done little to inform us of the threat we now face."

"C'mon, Vinnie, be a little sensitive, would ya?" Yuffie said, tugging on the brooding man's sleeve, "This is hard for him... even if he's too stubborn to show it."

*This girl...* Titus thought.

"If he finds it so difficult, perhaps he should stick to the relevant information." Vincent coldly responded.

"V-Vincent—!" Yuffie blurted out in shock at the callousness of the remark.

*What the hell's gotten into you, Vinnie!? You of all people should know how hard remembering the past can be!*

"Something gotten under your skin, Valentine?" Titus chuckled to himself.

"..." Vincent silently glared at the man.

"Well, fret not," Titus carried on, "my little sob story is almost over, then we'll get to what you want to know. My actions then require this context, I assure you."

“...Very well.” Vincent flatly said, leaning back onto the wall.

“Now then, if I may continue.” Titus said.

“Beyond interrogation, my other duty as Chief of Intelligence Collection was tracking the activities of our many competitors, as well as keeping out of Shinra’s watchful gaze. Much of the drug and black-market weapons trade passes through the middle sea which connects the Eastern, Western, and Northern continents, so, with my connection to the Mother, it was all too easy for me to track our rival syndicates’ movements, as well as Shinra’s naval patrols. I was able to reroute our shipments accordingly, saving us millions in hush money to Shinra and allowing our muscle to covertly raid and procure product shipments from our enemies. Over the course of a few years, I had become one of the top executives of the group thanks to these activities. My rise to prominence drew the ire of many in the lower ranks, who saw it all as little more than nepotism from Maximillian towards his favorite pet. However, as long as I held on to that status, I was untouchable. That is, through direct means...”

Titus let out a frustrated sigh. He had worse memories still to come, but this was certainly not a favorite.

“Rumors are an ugly thing,” Titus said bitterly, “It only takes a single individual to start one, and as they spread their origins become muddled and their veracity left to speculation. The agenda of the purveyor of the lie is diluted into the greater consciousness of the group, making them difficult to track down. That is to say, the ability to read minds did me no favors once the whispers about me started to spread.”

“Whispers...?” Yuffie asked dumbly.

“Personnel had started occasionally going missing out in the middle sea,” Titus answered, “and along with them went hundreds of thousands of gil worth of weapons and drugs. Searches of the vanishing points always turned up nothing either, they were simply gone without a trace. As I had become the director for our sea-based shipments, word on the wind was that I had been recruiting grunts to make off with the product in order to lay the groundwork for my own coup. I hadn’t, of course—I lacked the ambition for such things—but a growing number of the rank and file didn’t see it that way. Everything I’d done had bettered their lives; profits were higher than ever thanks to my efforts, and every single member of the syndicate from bottom to top saw a share of that. Fear of a Shinra crackdown was also a thing of the past, even as we continued to funnel weapons into Wutai’s war effort against them. I had even continued submitting myself to Maximillian’s disgusting carnal desires without complaint, just to keep my head above water, but it wasn’t enough. The old pig had seen firsthand how resourceful I could be even when I had nothing to work with, so he was perhaps the most suspicious of all. There was no good will

to be had for me in that den of vipers; every man there was just waiting for the moment I would fall. And they wouldn't have to wait long..”

~\*~\*~\*~\*~

It was an overcast afternoon, approaching evening. A light drizzle peppered the land without the gusto to develop into a downpour, and the sea's tides pulsed an uneasy ebb and flow. As the young Titus sat in the scantily populated harbor, he could feel a certain nervous tension building in his god.

*“Something has got you on edge, ne?”* He said to the dark horizon before him. *“Yes, I suppose I feel the same way... Damocles' sword hangs low these days.”*

Titus dangled his legs over the edge of the pier, swinging them absently as he contemplated his predicament.

*“You didn't make those men your meal, I know that much...”*

He had considered that it may have all been a plot by the lower-ranking administrators to oust him, and he was sure at the very least that that's how the rumors had spread, but all his personal investigations had gotten no deeper than that. By all accounts, those grunts and all their cargo had simply vanished, and no one within the syndicate knew why. He supposed it could have been the work of another syndicate raiding and capturing their shipments—he had been directing his men to more or less do the same thing, after all—but the Mother gave no sign to that end. In fact, she had been conspicuously mum on the subject since the issue began.

*“So even you can't say...”*

Anger flashed through his tired mind.

*All I've built for them, and this is what my reward is. They don't even care what really happened, they just want me out. They dragged me into their pit, reaped all the benefit they could from me, and now I'm just a barricade to their own progress. Is that it? Is that all I was good for? Bastards...*

Titus stood up, growing weary of the dreary contemplation, and began a trek back through the resort town. He made his way to the outskirts, passing by a group of laughing children kicking around a ball, a couple stumbling drunks who had barely made it out of the bar before toppling over, gossiping bikini-clad beachgoers, and all other manner of common tourist fare. Their careless joviality irritated him greatly.

*Such ignorant creatures. Utterly blind to how this world really works. Frolicking with such bliss as the very source of their joy languishes... they don't even see the vultures overhead. There's*

*nothing here but pa—*

Suddenly, a ball came belting straight for Titus' head. He instinctually caught it with one hand.

*"Aah! Sorry, mister!"* A young boy ran up to Titus, bowing apologetically. *"I wasn't looking when I kicked, and..."*

Titus wordlessly tossed him the ball.

*"A-ab, thanks!"* The boy said, running back over to his friends.

*"Rodney! You gotta be more careful, dude! We'll get in trouble!"*

*"Yeah, dummy! Now pass that thing over here!"*

The children went back to their game, passing the ball back and forth as they raced down the cobblestone road into the haze of the crowd. Titus quietly watched on as they went.

*...What have I been doing, all this time? He thought to himself after a while, I've suffered so much indignity and abuse, carefully navigating the minefield I've been placed in by this cruel world... for what? To keep living? Why? So I can keep experiencing agony? To justify all of the agony I've inflicted on others? To deny all of those miserable ghouls the satisfaction of seeing me break to pieces? Is that all?*

Bitterness flooded into him like a torrent from a broken dam. When had he started to care so much about what he had "built" within the organization? When had he started feeling pride for what he had accomplished for them? He was still just a prisoner, just the property of an aging pedophile. That had never changed. He was still in a cage, even if it had grown far larger. Whether it was a confined little room or the belly of a behemoth organization, the result was the same. His blind drive for survival had made him forget those basic truths, but reality was catching up to him. He was an object to be used and discarded at their leisure, and even the old man had grown weary of playing.

Titus had arrived at the grassy cliffside bordering the sea. He looked on at the waves crashing into the rocky shore far below.

*It's all just sunk-cost fallacy, isn't it? Futilely continuing to live for the sake of living, only because I've lived so long already. No support, no chance of freedom, everyone just waiting until I collapse so they can trample over me...*

The horizon had grown yet darker. Wind whipped through his platinum hair.

Titus leapt from the high cliff, plummeting into the sea. He put up no resistance

to the strong pull of her tide, welcoming the abyss. He focused his remaining conscious moments into fully synching his aura with that of the Mother. He sought to completely deny himself—to become one in body and mind with his god, the only one who had ever loved him and the only one he had ever loved. He would finally be liberated from his miserable and unwanted existence, and at last find peace.

But it wasn't to be.

After a few short moments, he was unceremoniously spat back out onto the shore, being battered by stones as he tumbled limply upon the cold ground. He had been utterly rejected even by his god.

He thoughtlessly stared up at the darkening gray sky as the light rain trickled down his damp face.

Eventually, he realized his own tears had also entered the mix.

\*\* \*\* \*

Night had fallen, and with it came the cold. Titus, soaked and freezing, miserably lurched his way to the back entrance of the syndicate's living compound. He hoped to slip by unnoticed—his only desire being to go to his bed and collapse into a dreamless slumber he didn't care to wake from. As he staggered his way down the hall to his room, however, he found that such a merciful end to his day would unfortunately not be possible. Loitering just outside the door to his quarters was a group of five black-suited men, all armed with handguns. Titus didn't say a word as he stopped a few feet away from them.

The head of the group approached Titus.

*"Sorry, but Maximillian has requested you come in for questioning regarding recent matters."*

He placed a hand on Titus' shoulder.

*"If you would please come with us."*

Titus didn't budge.

*"Er..."*

The man tugged on Titus' arm, but Titus still refused to move an inch.

*"Sir, I'm going to have to ask y—"*

Faster than any of the men in black could react, Titus rammed his gloved fist into the man's sternum, shattering his ribs instantly with inhuman strength.

“*Agh!*” The man crumpled into Titus’ blow, and was flung into his companions by the platinum blonde boy’s rising fist. Before they had time to react, Titus rushed another of the men, elegantly leaping over the collapsed body of the man he’d thrown, and, in one fluid motion, grabbing the head of the next black-suit and smashing it into his rising knee.

As the second man fell, blood oozing from his broken nose, Titus scooped up his weapon and made a break for it down the hall, at which point the remaining three men in black recovered from their shock and began to open fire. Titus bobbed and weaved to avoid the peppering of bullets, and returned fire just before ducking around a corner, nailing one of the men in the leg. He then raced down the following corridor to make for the main entrance.

The two men left standing were stunned at how quickly their group had been dismantled by a mere fourteen-year-old boy, the supposed “spoiled pet” they’d grown to resent.

“*H-hey,*” one of the men said to the other after a moment, “*go gather reinforcements, I’ve got to radio this in.*”

“*R-right...*” The other man said before rushing off.

The remaining man lifted his walkie-talkie from his belt.

“*This is Yamazaki. We’ve got a situation at the living compound. He overwhelmed us, and is now attempting to escape. He’s armed. Please send backup. Over.*”

\*\* \*\* \*

Titus had no idea what his plan was. He had no idea where he was running to. Thanks to that accursed chip they’d implanted in him, they knew his location at all times. Removing it would be no easy task at the best of times, and this moment was far from that. Titus didn’t care about any of it at that moment, however. He just ran and planned to keep on running. Running until the pain went away. Running until the voices stopped. Running until he broke.

As he ran, he mindlessly dealt with the men who came to block his path, either through avoidance or by force. His was a blind and unstoppable momentum, the pure and simple desire to be away from where he was without any consideration for where he was going. Just to keep moving.

Unfortunately for him, however, his run wouldn’t last for very long.

As Titus emerged into the foyer, a massive swarm of black suits awaited him on all side. Every single gun in the room was fixed on his present position.

*“Surrender yourself, now!”* One of the men shouted.

From behind, Titus could here yet more men filing into the hall he had just emerged from. He was completely surrounded and hopelessly outnumbered.

*“You’ve got nowhere left to go!”*

*No where left to go...?*

That struck Titus as oddly funny. Had he ever had anywhere to go in the first place? Anywhere he truly felt safe? Anywhere he actually belonged? No. He never had. Not from the moment he was born.

*It couldn’t even end on my own terms... no, it had to end like this. That’s just the life I’ve lead... heh.*

Tears of frustration threatened to pool over onto his cheeks. In all his fourteen short years of life, he’d never felt so utterly defeated.

*“Hehehe...”* he bitterly chuckled through clenched teeth as he raised up his hands in surrender, dropping his stolen gun to the floor.

*“Good. Don’t make this harder than it has to be.”* A black suit said, approaching Titus.

*“Now don’t move,”* he produced a pair of handcuffs and made to restrain Titus.

His left hand was cuffed.

Titus was still.

Resigned to his fate.

But then he felt the cold steel brush his right wrist.

*“Hey, what are you...?”* The man began, as Titus had lowered his right hand before it could be cuffed.

The man made to grab Titus’ arm to try again, but recoiled at the touch. It was burning hot, like molten iron. And then that heat enveloped the man.

*“AAAAAGH!!!”* Before their eyes, the men in black watched as their comrade was plastered across the wall in a bright red streak, little else remaining of him but the stain. Titus stood like a statue, right fist extended out into the air where his would-be captor had stood a moment prior.

There was a stupefied silence for a moment. Just a moment. Then Titus turned to the men below him, eyes glowing wildly with newly awoken power.



Then came the screams.

Before long, the foyer had transformed into an ocean of blood. All the bullets in the world couldn't stop Hell's fury. Indeed, they seemed to simply disintegrate in the air before making contact. Titus was a blur, a fuzzy silhouette with pinprick glowing green eyes leaving a dazzling trail as he streaked from one man to the next in a blinding flurry. He had completely lost himself to the massacre, all of his sorrow turned to vengeful rage, fueled by power he never knew he'd had.

Drenched in blood from head to toe and panting like a mad hound, he truly looked the picture of a demon.

All of the men had either fled or become part of the inch deep puddle on the linoleum floor. Titus was alone.

*"Haaaaah... haaaaah..."*

Coming back to his senses, he looked at his shaking, crimson hands.

*"What... what the hell...?"*

Then, a creak at the entryway.

*"Nn. Quite the mess you've made here, boy."*

Maximillian Night had entered the housing complex, flanked by heavily armed men.

*You—!*

Titus lunged at his abuser without hesitation.

*"Stop!"* Maximillian yelled, raising his cane.

*As if I'll listen to—*

Then, Titus realized he had literally stopped in midair.

*"Hehe, you don't get to be my age in this business without having a few contingencies."* He tapped the head of his cane, which faintly glowed green with inlaid materia.

*"Grrrrggh!"* Titus growled, murderous thrust frozen in the air.

*"I know chains don't work on you, boy, so I had a few... 'alternative' methods of restraint prepared, hehe."* He sickly chuckled.

*"Now then,"* he continued, *"I must say, I'm disappointed in you, lad. I gave you a home, gave you love, even accommodated your demands..."* He gestured broadly to the massacre

surrounding them, *“and THIS is the thanks I get. I was going to give you a fair shot, let your suspicious business of late pass by since you’ve been so good to me, but you’ve gone and bit the hand that feeds too hard this time.”*

The rank metallic stench of gore filled the air.

*“I must say, though, I’m impressed with all the damage you’ve done here. Can’t even imagine how you did all this on your own. Some monstrous materia you’ve picked up with all that cash you’ve swindled off of me I suppose. No matter. As it so happens, I’ve got a few of those myself, hehe.”* A second green orb began to glow brightly on his cane.

Titus’ fingers twitched fruitlessly.

*“This hurts me boy, it really does. My nights just won’t be the same without your delicate caress. But you’ve gone and soiled yourself now, and I can’t have filth in my chambers.”*

Maximillian rested the tip of his cane on Titus’ nose.

*“Goodbye, my pet.”*

The green glow grew radiant. Titus shut his eyes tightly.

*“ULTIM—”*

Titus felt something warm hit his face. It wasn’t the white-hot fury of ultima burning him to ashes.

Then, he heard a thud.

*“What the f—”* he heard one of Maximillian’s guards start to say, followed shortly by two more thuds. Then, Titus himself fell limply to the bloody ground. After a moment longer, he finally dared to open his eyes once more.

Maximillian and his guards lay dead upon the floor, the fluids from their caved-in skulls pooling in with the menagerie of gore already on the ground. A pair of robed figures stood in the threshold behind the bodies, their arms outstretched with the faintest bits of frost still lingering from the ice spell they’d cast. Retracting their arms, they stepped aside and bowed, and a third figure entering from behind them, face shrouded in a hood. He approached Titus, heedless of the blood into which he stepped, and offered a wrinkled hand to the wreck of a boy.

*“My apologies for keeping you waiting so long, my eternal friend.”*

-tbc

Author's note:

Hooooo boy. Bit off more than I could chew with this one. Once again I'm having to break the chapter up, originally this was going to run all the way through Titus' time at the cult, but it got too long again. I didn't think my made up pre-cult backstory for him would go on for so long, but I guess that's what happens when you write from the top of your head. I fear for the next one. You still don't even know what a "Cetra Ocuris" is lol.

I should probably discuss why I took this to the places I did. Catalina never alludes to what Titus' pre-cult life was like, if he even HAD a pre-cult life. It's just as likely he could've been raised in the faction for all I know, but that wasn't what I wanted to go with. In chapter 32 of Cat's Sink, Titus thinks to himself that he's been "chained, bound, and tortured" before while AVALANCHE has him locked in Kyra's basement. Now, I suppose the Cult could have done that to him, but it didn't really make sense to me because he was a trusted and beloved figure in the group up until an unspecified incident took place which caused him to leave, and it seems he left in a hurry and wasn't imprisoned at that point, so that's part of why I decided he was involved with a different group that he had a lot more hostility with pre-cult. Originally, I was just going to have him join a street gang or something, but I felt like his life needed to be a lot more miserable than that to justify him joining a world-ending death cult, which is where the human trafficking sex-slave angle came in. I feel that underneath the cool exterior he's someone with a lot of trust issues and difficulty connecting with people that stem from these experiences and what happens while he's in the cult. I'll leave it up to you if these subjects were handled tactfully, because I was pretty nervous about adding them.

I had him start up north because of reasons that will be elaborated on next time, but if you're familiar with the original FFXVII you can probably guess. Costa del Sol was a convenient place for Max's gang to be since it's by the ocean, and one of my other goals with this chapter was explaining how that whole deal got started with Titus. Titus mentions in Chapter 38 that he's worshiped "age-old gods" longer than Yuffie had been alive, so I should explain how old he is too. He's described by Cat as being "around Cloud's age," but I decided to stretch that a bit and have him be 28 in the present day to Cloud's 22. He's around nine when he gets trafficked (yeah I know) so he'd be worshipping the ocean near two years before Yuffie was born. Continuity saved. I've got a whole timeline written up with these events given specific years and sometimes days that I'll include as an extra once it won't spoil anything. For now I'll just say that Titus' birthday is on December 13<sup>th</sup>, [ μ ] – εγλ 1980 (FYI that's what FFXVII's canon date system looks like, FFXVII itself starts on December 9<sup>th</sup>, [ ν ] – εγλ 0007. Sink would be in early [ ν ] – εγλ 0009 probably, so Titus would've just turned 28). I decided to make him a little older than Catalina implied for the sake of him not having an unbelievably cramped backstory. Also so he and Fa-Li would be over 18 when that happens lol.

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Aaand that's a wrap for this book. As I intend to finish the story, there will be a third volume with the rest of my writing eventually. I probably should have split it so the third book was ALL of my writing and this one just has Catalina's, but I was concerned with keeping the page counts between the books even and giving myself some leeway in case my chapters run long. The rest needs to fit in about 400 pages, and I figured it was safer to put the first four chapters here to give myself more space. Consider it a "preview" of what my writing is like I guess. If you don't think it's any good, well, you've got everything Catalina wrote right here. No need to carry on.

I've got a lot of ideas for where things will go, and have some very extensive notes to that effect, so I'm really looking forward to where I can take *Sink to the Bottom With You* from here. Titus' back story especially has required a lot of thought to make work how I want. Hope you're looking forward to it!

—Odysseus

Final Fantasy VII  
*Sink to the Bottom With You*  
—Volume 2—



**FANART GALLERY**



Yeah, so, like, I kinda blew my load of art in the first book... There's only two bits of fan art left, since they pertained specifically to scenes from chapters that were contained in this volume... so... not too much of a "gallery" really. My bad lol. Should've spaced them out better.

There are a decent few other art pieces by some of the artists that don't specifically pertain to *Sink* but were included in Catalina's fan art gallery regardless that I'll also include here for the sake of it. Never really need an excuse to look at old *FFVII* fan art anyway.

As per usual, barely any of the art is used with permission. Basically none. People who were children online 23 years ago posting anime art of Vincent and Yuffie hugging are hard to find in present day, sue me.



# Catalina

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*Reno*

use your imagination,  
minna-san!

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By: Catalina (using bland color so know one will notice it was her)

**“Crappy Reno drawing”**

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# Catalina

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Tifa Lockhart  
of  
Final Fantasy VII



Art by: Catalina

“Pencil drawing of Tifa”

## Gabriele (The Art Engineer)

Art used with permission! By the one and only "Art Engineer," who did the covers for these books and drew the doujinshi adaptation of *Sink!* This was her very first piece of fan art for the fic!



**“Vincent Descends into the cellar”**

This is one of the two pieces directly related to the fic

## Moira (CoffeeTimeWorks)

Art kind of sort of used with permission maybe. I've spoken with them and they're aware of the project at least lol. Moira and Cat were friends back in the day, and is still active online here:  
[twitter.com/CoffeeTimeWorks](https://twitter.com/CoffeeTimeWorks)



**“Reno of the Turks”**



**Moira (CoffeeTimeWorks)**



**“Reno smoking”**

# Shireenko

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“Reno”

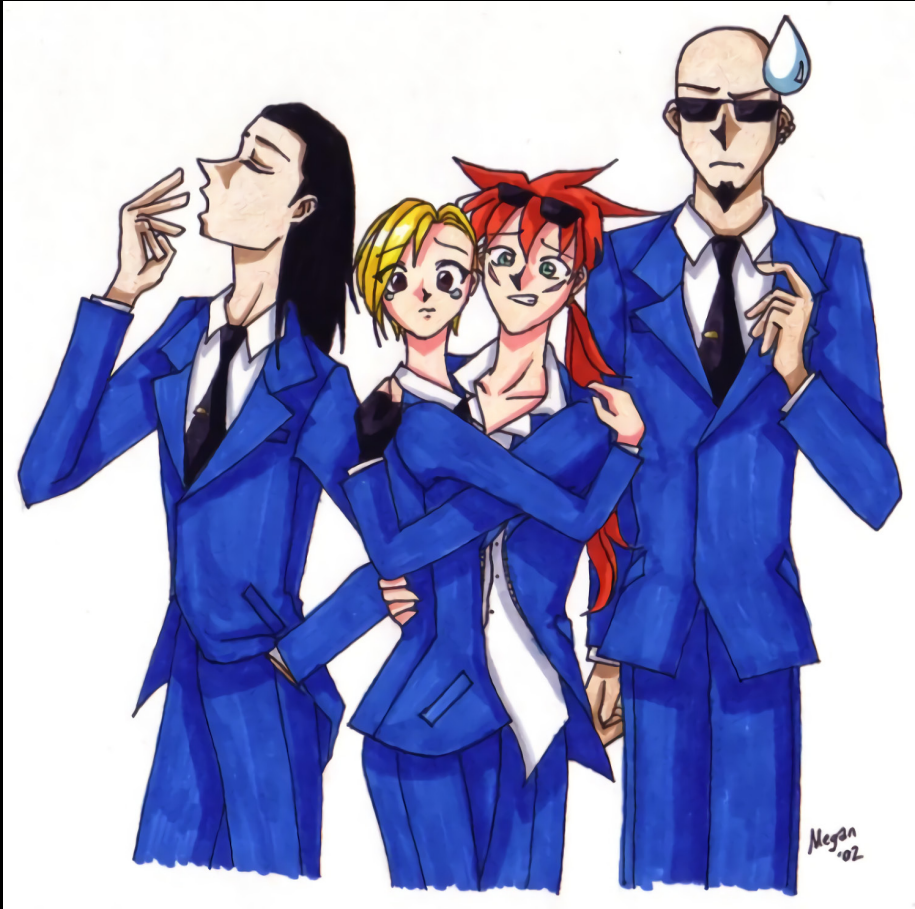
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## Trick Sparrow



**“Reno Winking”**

# FANART GALLERY



**“The President is Very Angry...”**

# Trick Sparrow

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**“My Punishment”**

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## Trick Sparrow

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**“Vincent Kicks Back”**

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## Trick Sparrow



“Materia Girl”

Veki



“Cid and Cait”



Veki



“Reno in action”

Veki



“Barret Wallace”

Veki



“Lucrecia and Vincent”

Veki



VINCENT

-Veki- 2002

**“A melancholy Vincent”**

# Veki



## “Watching the Clock”

This is the other of the two pieces directly related to the fic

Final Fantasy VII  
*Sink to the Bottom With You*  
—Volume 2—

## LINKS

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### PRIMARY SOURCES

**DIEBUS FATALIBUS:**

<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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**Special thanks:**

Charles Xavier, for founding the X-Men.

Other Charles Xavier, for providing Catalina's Email.

Gabriele Hopfenmueller, for drawing the cover art and insert art, and also for proof-reading my chapters.

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Concluded in

# Volume 3



*The faction is on the hunt.  
Can AVALANCHE survive?*



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Yuffie has been saved, but that doesn't mean she's safe. With the infamous "Running Man" and his companion in custody, AVALANCHE and the Turks become all too aware that a target has been placed on their heads, and so the fight for their lives begins anew. Will they be able to prevail against foes the likes of which they've never before faced? And what of President Reeve? The tumultuous tale continues...

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