

Chapter Twenty-Four: Taste of Fear

"Hey, Vincent, are ya dead, man?" Cloud Strife

A court is in session, a verdict is in
No appeal on the docket today
Just my own sin
The walls are cold and pale
The cage made of steel
Screams fill the room
Alone I drop and kneel

"My Own Prison"
Creed

Yuffie tugged on her shackles experimentally, testing the strength of the new chain links. A frown creased her face. These new ones were even stronger than the previous ones she had been wearing while Titus and Fa-Li had been escorting her to the chamber she was now held in. Her heart sank when she realized that there was little, if any, chance that she was going to be shattering these chains, but she wasn't about to let her captors in on her fatalistic little conclusion.

"You know," she said to Titus in a pseudo-friendly tone. "This was a really STUPID way to chain me up."

The blond-haired man stared up at her calmly. "You don't say?" he replied. "It's worked for every other prisoner who has been tortured down here."

Yuffie's heart clenched at the word "torture" but she forced herself to remain calm. Unfortunately, while she was still trying to gather her wits, her motormouth was chattering away without her.

"Yeah, see, this method is *totally* imprudent since the chain length is way too long, leaving too much exposed length for, like, someone to shoot, for example. And why did you have to pin my arms up like this? I'm going to lose circulation in my hands, and then I won't be able to feel any pain so that would kind of defeat the whole purpose of torturing me in the first place, you know? It was, however, pretty darn smart of you to chain up my feet because, let me tell you, I got one mean—"

"Oh god!" Fa-Li exclaimed in exasperation from where she was leaning against the wall across from the platform Yuffie was standing. "Someone shut her up, *please!* For the love of god!"

Titus didn't share his companion's frustration; he actually looked rather amused. "Come now, Fa-Li," he chastised the woman, though his gaze remained locked on Yuffie. "She's just babbling because she's frightened. Have a heart, why don't you? Enjoy this girl's company while she's still alive, ne?"

Yuffie suddenly became angry - angry at Titus, angry at her helplessness, just flat-out angry. "You're full of SHIT," she spat at Titus, a scowl darkening her pretty face. She tried to lash out at the man by kicking him, but unfortunately the chains on her ankles only permitted about a foot of movement in any direction, and Titus was wisely standing out of her kicking range.

A mirthless smile came to Titus' lips as he watched her struggling. "So you don't think you're going to die down here?" he asked conversationally.

Yuffie made the meanest face she could muster, tugging on her chains while doing so. "No! My friends are going to come for me, and when they do, you're going to be sorry!"

"How very cliché of you to say so," Fa-Li commented.

Titus only laughed softly, green eyes glittering in the dimly lit room. He didn't reply to Yuffie's passionate claim, but she had the distinct feeling that he didn't quite believe her. Hell, she wasn't sure that she believed herself. Giving Titus one last scowl, she focused her attentions on examining her bindings, trying to ignore the fact that both the Running Man and Fa-Li were watching her every movement like a rat watching a piece of cheese.

Her gray eyes followed the length of chain holding up her right arm and saw that it ended at the edge of a circular walkway that completely wrapped around the upper level of the torture chamber. Her left arm was pinned in an identical fashion, successfully immobilizing her arms and leaving her virtually helpless. But as she had told Titus before, the chains were ridiculously long, practically begging to be shattered by one well-placed shot by a gunman or one fell swoop by a swordsman.

Vincent could shoot off both of these chains, Yuffie thought triumphantly. He never misses a shot. If only he and the others could find some way to get down here...

Turning back to where Titus was watching her, Yuffie smiled at him charmingly. "So, Titus, my good friend, where exactly AM I anyways?"

"In a torture chamber," the man deadpanned.

Yuffie rolled her eyes. "Geez, not very bright, are we? I *know* I'm in a torture chamber, Running Ass! I meant where *am* I, as in the *general* location?"

Titus replied calmly, "I know what you were asking, and if you were a bit smarter, you would have noticed that I evaded the question. Not very bright, are we?" he mocked.

"Shut up," Yuffie snapped at him, frustrated that she couldn't come up with some witty comeback. "Let me ask again. Where the hell am I?"

"Let me repeat again. You're in a torture--"

"Okay, okay, okay!!!" Yuffie roared, stamping both of her feet wildly and making her chains jangle unpleasantly. "Geez, Titus, you are *such* an *asshole*, you know that? I mean, I expected you to be KIND OF an asshole, being that you were the one who kidnapped Reeve and...hey! Where is Reeve, anyways?!"

Titus didn't reply. Just stared at her like a dumbass.

Gawd. And I thought Vinnie had a thick skull.

"Tell me!" Yuffie demanded, trying to make herself look intimidating. "You'd better tell me right now!"

Titus flicked his hair away from his eye.

"I mean it! I'll kick your ass!"

Titus yawned.

A bad thought suddenly crossed Yuffie's mind. "He-He'd better not be dead!"

Titus looked away and scratched his face with one gloved hand.

In the face of his indifference, Yuffie blew her top again. "Goddammit! Would you at least LOOK at me when I'm talking to you?! I swear to God, some people have NO manners whatsoever! You're worse than Vincent, and yes, THAT is an insult! Vincent never listens to me when I talk to him!"

And that hurts my feelings.

"All he does is just stand there like a frickin' lump on a log and not even bother to reply to me whenever I..."

I miss him.

"...am in the middle of some important speech that he REALLY should be listening to. You want to hear something?! The other day, he and I were in the chocobo barn..."

I want to see him again.

"...and he was more interested in feeding his damn chocobo than talking to a sparkling conversationalist like MYSELF!!! And you know what made matters worse?! My stupid chocobo pecked me on the hand with her damn beak and it started to bleed and..."

It all happened in the blink of an eye. One second Titus was standing on the floor beneath her, his eye twitching in a rather odd fashion, and the next minute he was suddenly on the platform with her, emerald green eyes glowering down at her coldly, his warm body pressed up against hers. Legs against legs. Hips against hips. Belly against belly. All over.

Many thanks going to the lightening-fast thief reflexes she had acquired over the years, Yuffie only took a moment to stare up at him dumbly before she recoiled from the sudden bodily contact, scrambling back as far as her chains would permit, which wasn't very far at all.

And once again, her mouth took off before she could reign it in.

"Hey! What do you think you're doing?! Get off! There's only room on this platform for one person, you know! Unless of course you want to be tor-"

Titus' long arms suddenly shot out and snagged her around the waist, crushing her against him again, his gloved fingers locked together at the small of her back. Yuffie's eyes widened considerably as an unfamiliar feeling of violation washed over her. Instinctively, she made an attempt to squirm her way out of his firm embrace, but all her movements only reassured her of the fact that she was utterly and completely at this man's mercy.

As long as she was bound and in chains, he could do anything he wanted with her.

Something foul stung the back of her throat, but at the moment, Yuffie had no desire to identify it, as she found herself forced to meet Titus' green eyes. So much like Aeris' that it was downright creepy. Same color, same glitter. Even the light - what meager light there was - hit them in the same fashion, setting alight the ring of azure that resided near the pupil, a color combination that Yuffie had thought only Aeris had. She fidgeted as best she could under Titus' cold glare, for once finding herself at a loss for words. Their faces were only inches apart, and as Titus tossed his head to remove a lock of platinum hair that had flopped into his eye, Yuffie felt a blush rising high in her cheeks.

Why couldn't he have been ugly? she wondered furiously. *I was expecting him to be ugly as sin, and instead I get...THIS!! Too gorgeous. Too cruel.*

Dark humor flickered in Titus' eyes. "You're blushing," he observed, breath fanning gently against her face. "Why?"

Yuffie was about to open her mouth to give a sharp retort when a horrible thought suddenly crossed her mind, and she found herself giving voice to that instead.

"Are you going to rape me?" she blurted.

A sinister smile curled one side of Titus' mouth. "Maybe," he murmured, eyes boring into hers. Yuffie gulped, feeling a seedling of fear settle in her heart.

No...anything but that...how goddamn disgraceful...

"No!" Fa-Li suddenly said sharply. "He's NOT going to rape you!"

Yuffie jumped slightly; she had been so engrossed in her sudden fear of Titus that she had almost forgotten that the woman was there.

With Titus blocking her view, the young ninja couldn't see her, but Yuffie knew that Fa-Li was coming closer by the rapid, agitated clicking of her heeled boots on the stone floor. "Rape is not an option," the Wutainese woman continued in a scathing tone. "It's just not how we operate down here. Those that reside down here would never sink to such a ghastly low!"

"R-Really?" Yuffie stammered, feeling a sort of meek hope blossom within her.

"You'll have to excuse my companion," Titus suddenly said, his raspy, calm voice recapturing Yuffie's attention. "She's rather slow, and doesn't quite grasp the fact that not everything down here is what it seems."

"And YOU should know!" Fa-Li huffed angrily, stomping up to the platform where Titus and Yuffie's forms were crowded against each other. "Since you so kindly forsook us and abandoned the organization over a year ago! What do you know! You haven't the right to say anything, Titus! And GET OFF OF THERE!!!"

"She's such a bitch sometimes," Titus whispered to Yuffie confidentially.

"Damn you, Titus!" Fa-Li raged. "I said GET OFF OF THERE!!!"

The small woman suddenly leapt forward and hooked her dainty fingers through Titus' belt and tugged hard, giving a whole new meaning to the phrase "put your back into it". Judging from the force she applied, Fa-Li was clearly expecting Titus to give some resistance, if not a whole lot of it. But on a moment of mischievous whim, Titus surprised her by releasing Yuffie and hopping backward off the platform at the same time Fa-Li yanked on his belt. The lack of resistance sent the woman completely off balance, and the end result was Fa-Li landing flat on her ass on the floor, with a perfectly composed and rather amused Titus standing next to her. Yuffie just stared dumbly, only thinking of how freaking GLAD she was that Titus was over THERE now instead of crowding up HER torture platform.

"Oh!" Titus suddenly said mockingly, offering a gloved hand to a still stunned Fa-Li. "You appear to have fallen. Please, let me help you up."

"@#% you, Titus!" Fa-Li spat viciously, slapping his hand away and wrestling to her feet rather clumsily, leather bodysuit squeaking with mirth as it hindered most of her movements.

"Are you alright?" Titus asked with a straight face, though his amusement shone loud and clear in his emerald eyes.

"Go to hell," Fa-Li sniffed, still in a fit of rage as she tried to smooth her hair back into place. "You're a bastard!"

"That seems to be the popular title for me today," Titus replied, turning his face away from his prissy companion as he seemed to lose interest in the conversation.

Yuffie was starting to feel left out, a sensation she despised like no other. "You know," she spoke up, her pseudo-cheerful mood returning now that Titus wasn't literally breathing the same air as her. "You have a very dry sense of humor, Titus."

"Really?" he deadpanned.

"Yep," Yuffie said with a nod. "You remind of my friend Red XIII."

If Titus' stupid Evict didn't eat the little furball...

A pale blond eyebrow lifted upwards. "I thought you were going to say your friend Vincent Valentine."

The very mention of the name stirred up painful memories that were all too recent, but Yuffie found herself keeping up her façade with the ease of long practice. "Vinnie has NO sense of humor at all! Well, there was this one time that he told me that I could piss on myself and--"

Her voice trailed off abruptly as she noticed something interesting on the backs of Titus' gloved hands. Two interesting "somethings", actually.

"What the hell are THOSE?" she demanded, leaning down as far as her chains would permit, curiosity shining in her steel-gray eyes. "Grossness! Those things are, like, STUCK onto the backs of your hands! Ew...wait! Are those...MATERIA???? Wow! They are, aren't they? Man, I've never seen PURPLE materia before! How about passing some of that over here? Well?"

Rather belatedly, Titus jerked his hands behind his back, hiding the curious objects from Yuffie's materia-hungry eyes. The look on his face was cold and forbidding, silently telling her that it would be in her best interests not to ask any more questions.

Yuffie just stared at him with childish expectance, her vacant expression carefully hiding the whirlwind of questions and observations that a single fleeting glimpse of the strange objects had provided her with.

WERE those materia orbs? she wondered furiously. Couldn't be...they were PURPLE, for one thing. Secondly, they were literally EMBEDDED in the backs of his hands! Total grossness! Or were they just attached the gloves? I don't know! If only I could see them again...

"Well?" she prodded Titus.

He scowled. "Well what?"

"Aren't you going to let me see those things again?"

"No. Whatever's on my hands is no business of yours, little girl."

Yuffie made a sour face at him, brows snapping together over stormy gray eyes. "I'm not a little girl! And while we're on the subject of hands, mine are numb!" She jangled the chains holding up her hands to demonstrate.

Titus was unfazed. "Your entire body could loose feeling in it, and the torture would still work," he said flatly.

A vise closed on her heart, and she tasted that foulness in the back of her throat again. "B-But, when you say 'torture', don't you mean whips and knives and stuff like that?"

"I'm not telling you," Titus replied. "It's a SURPRISE."

It was as if someone dropped lead weights on her shoulders. Yuffie sagged against her chains wearily, trying to still the heart that was pounding out of control in her chest. The reality of the situation suddenly came up and brutally slapped her in the face.

"My friends aren't coming for me, are they?" she asked quietly, lowering her head with the hopes of avoiding Titus' eyes, but given their present positions, Titus and those heartbreakingly familiar orbs of emerald green were always going to be lurking beneath her, inescapable.

"It's not that your friends won't come for you," Titus said seriously. "They'll try their damn hardest, but they won't find this place. No outsider has ever succeeded in accomplishing such a thing. You mentioned before that the lengths of your chains are imprudent. They are that way because no one has ever tried to free a prisoner down here. No one has ever managed to break into this torture room."

"I'm going to die down here, aren't I?" Yuffie asked, her voice dull and robotic. She was thankful for that; at least they wouldn't be able to hear the fear that was stinging her throat.

"Die?" Titus echoed, folding his arms across his chest casually. "That is possible, yes."

"Is Reeve dead?" Yuffie asked him quietly, the glittering green of his eyes suddenly reminding her of the living mists in her nightmares.

Titus looked at her sharply. "What's this obsession with death?" he demanded. "You talk as if death is the most horrible fate in the world."

"It is!" Yuffie suddenly exclaimed vehemently.

"How do you know? Have you ever been dead?"

"No! Of course not!"

"Then don't regard death as the fate to end all fates," Titus told her coldly. "Down here, little girl, death is a MERCY. I've seen countless people BEG for us to kill them. You're about to learn that there are thousands of fates FAR worse than the abyss of cold death."

Some of Yuffie's fear shifted into anger. "If you're going to torture me, just do it and get fucking over with!!!" she screeched at Titus, her attempt at kicking him once again brought to a clanking halt by her chains. "I'm tired of standing here listening to you talk your crap and spout nonsense at me!!!"

And I'm scared. I want to see my friends again.

Titus gave her a cold smile. "Fortunate for you AND me, I'm not the one during the torturing. It's not something I'm required to do given my current rank in this faction. The one who--"

A door clanged somewhere far off and above them, the sound echoing in the torture chamber, small as the room was. Forgetting all her anger, Yuffie's eyes widened with fear as she craned her neck back as far as it would go, her gaze flicking from left to right, left to right, all around the walkway, expecting an entire horde of monsters to pop out.

"What was that?" she whispered feverishly, more to herself than Titus or Fa-Li. She could see no one on the walkway surrounding the top of the room. However, she COULD hear a sound; it was quiet and echoing, but it was a sound nonetheless, and it was one that she recognized immediately. Footsteps. Slow, deliberate, unhurried footsteps. Whoever was approaching had no fear of what awaited him or her at their destination. Whoever was approaching was in complete power. Yuffie's heart sank. She had a feeling she was about to meet Titus and Fa-Li's boss.

For some reason, the prospect failed to excite her.

Though Yuffie had been expecting the leader to emerge sometime soon, she was still startled when movement suddenly flickered out of the corner of her eye. A small gasp escaped her lips as she pivoted her head up and to the right, eyes widening as they fell on a figure standing on the walkway, towering over them all and throwing its ominous shadow over the lonely figure of Yuffie Kisaragi, helpless in chains, standing on the center of the torture platform. In the darkness of the chamber, her vision was severely limited, but there really wasn't much to be seen of the new figure. It was covered from head to toe in a brown robe, complete with a large hood that cast a deep, unbroken shadow over the figure's face. No other features were visible. Even its hands were swallowed by the wide, long sleeves.

"Who are you?!" someone's voice, harsh with fear, demanded. It took Yuffie a second to realize that it was hers. Out of the corner of her fear-ridden eyes, she saw Fa-Li bowing deeply to the figure. Titus just stood there.

"I am the master of this faction," the Cold One said, and Yuffie flinched at its voice. Fathomless and infinitely colder than Vincent or Rude's could have ever hoped to be.

"What faction?" Yuffie heard herself ask. "So far I've seen THREE whole people and one poor freak locked up in a cell. Some faction."

The Cold One's attention abruptly shifted to Titus. "I see you make an excellent hunter, Titus," it said. "You've brought this girl to us in record time. Hopefully, she will yield better results than the unfortunate President Reeve."

Reeve...

"Where's Reeve?" Yuffie demanded of the Cold One, the words tumbling out of her mouth before she could stop them.

Slowly, the figure's attention flickered back to her. "An odd time you choose to worry about your friends," it said flatly.

"She's an odd girl, Master," Fa-Li quipped.

"And she's all yours now," Titus spoke up in an monotone, something in his voice making Yuffie tear her attention away from the Cold One. "My job here is done." His eyes were hard as steel as he gazed up at the Cold One. "I'll collect my pay and be gone."

Fa-Li looked stricken as she gazed at the Running Man. "Titus..." she whispered, sounding hurt for some odd reason.

"You're leaving?" Yuffie asked, feeling betrayed somehow. All along, their plans had revolved around the Running Man, and now he was...running again. Figures.

"Your job isn't done," the Cold One said flatly. "Information needs to be extracted from this girl."

Titus bristled. "Do it yourself," he seethed, eyes flashing angrily. "I am no longer under your control."

"I am the one paying you," the Cold One deadpanned.

A horrific sneer twisted Titus' handsome face. "I figured you'd do something like this," he spat, hands clenching into fists. "You can't stand the fact that I broke free of your control, and now you'll do anything and everything - use every dirty trick - to try and make me into one of your mindless servants once again."

"Your departure was an extreme blow to the faction," the Cold One said in that horrible, hollow voice. "Rebels began to form within our ranks, trying to follow your example. You were well-liked as the High Priest."

High Priest? Yuffie thought in confusion, her gaze darting back and forth from Titus to the Cold One. *But if Titus was the High Priest, then why did he quit and become a bounty hunter? Gawd. Too mind-boggling. I can't think under these conditions!*

"My affiliation with this organization has long since passed," Titus said firmly. "I don't intend to return ever again, either."

A long silence fell in which Yuffie was scared even to breath. She felt the tension in the air like a heart's resolve stretched taut, ready to give way at any moment. She saw Fa-Li's eyes darting nervously around the room, flicking from Titus to the shadow-wrapped figure of the Cold One above their heads, hovering like a demon in waiting.

Finally, that empty, never-ending voice drifted once again from the unbroken darkness of the Cold One's hood. "Cry for liberation all you want, Titus, but you'll never be truly free. You know this as well as I."

The look on Titus' face darkened considerably, and Yuffie shuddered as she felt a strange power vibrating through the torture room, lancing through the air and stinging her heart like the prick of a thousand needles. A cold feeling washed over her soul, and it was suddenly as if the room was filled with mist that hadn't been there a second before. She saw THINGS shifting in the green-stained air, and for a second, she heard a screaming cacophony of voices crying for release.

Then she blinked, and everything was gone, leaving her soul cold and trembling inside her.

Titus was speaking.

"...don't care whether you pay me or not anymore. My greatest mistake was coming back here to serve you, even if it was for a brief time! Kidnap AVALANCHE members is what you told me to do," he pointed to Yuffie, the violet "materia" embedded on the back of his hand flashing oddly in the dim light, "and THAT is what I have done! What you do with her or her friend is now your business!"

"...her friend", Yuffie thought. *So Reeve must be alive!* The thought alone was enough to lift her spirits a bit.

"On the contrary, my eternal friend," the Cold One deadpanned, still addressing Titus. "It is not I who is going to do anything with her."

Titus' eyes narrowed. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

"The Hissers will be the ones extracting the information from this girl."

Fa-Li gasped, eyes widening. "B-But Master, the Hissers - they're not always...accurate. They often damage...other things... in their 'extraction' process."

Yuffie's heart plummeted to the bottoms of her feet, and to her humiliation, she felt her knees ready to give out from underneath her.

"Um," she suddenly spoke up nervously. "I think I want Titus to torture me! These Hissers don't sound too...nice."

"But are you so sure you want Titus to torture you?" the Cold One asked her. "He wasn't my chief servant for no reason. He is very good at what he does."

"Chief servant? But I thought he was your '*eternal friend*'?" Yuffie had the audacity to mock. "You guys don't seem like friends to me..."

Fa-Li suddenly rushed up and punched Yuffie on the kneecap with her tiny fist, a blow that, surprisingly enough, made Yuffie's leg buckle. "Shut up!" the Wutainese woman hissed at the girl, brown eyes fierce. "You talk too much!"

"Step down, Fa-Li," the Cold One suddenly snapped. "We WANT her to talk."

Panic suddenly seized Yuffie as she recognized the hidden meaning in those words. "But I don't have anything to say!" she yelled up at the Cold One, jerking on her chains fruitlessly. "I'm just a stupid little airheaded ninja! I don't know anything, I swear it! You kidnapped the wrong person, I tell you!"

I want to get outta here! Leviathan forgive me, but I'm freaking SCARED!!

"I think this girl will yield very good results," the Cold One suddenly declared.

"No she won't! No she won't!" Yuffie chanted, unnerved by the fact that he was speaking of her as if she wasn't even THERE - as if she wasn't a living, breathing, sentient creature that could cry or feel pain. To the Cold One, she was nothing but a well of useless knowledge to be sucked dry, leaving nothing but a hollow, broken shell in its place. See ya later, Yuffie! Nice knowing you!

But I don't KNOW anything, Yuffie thought furiously. Nothing at all. Nothing that these people down here would be interested in...

I should have seen it, a voice suddenly said, ringing clear and true in her mind, pounding between her ears silently. It was raspy and distinctly male, or at least she thought it was.

Despite her surprise, she responded to it the only way she knew how. "What?!" she demanded, gray eyes darting fearfully around the room, searching for the owner of the voice.

How could I have been so blind? the voice lamented bitterly.

Nothing. Everyone in the room was staring at her as if she had lost her mind. Or at least, Fa-Li was. She could see nothing of the Cold One's face, though it seemed that his attention was utterly riveted on her, the intensity of his hidden gaze burning her. Titus was staring at her deeply, and quite suddenly she realized...

Don't tell them anything! Titus' soundless voice urged. *You mustn't say anything to them!*

Yuffie was baffled. Completely baffled.

His green eyes burned with hidden meaning. *You are the One Who Knows,* his voice rushed on. *If you love your Planet, don't say a word!*

"But I-" Yuffie suddenly started to blurt, the words forcing themselves past her lips before she could stop them.

"Titus!" the Cold One suddenly said sharply, the first inflection in its hollow voice she had heard yet. "If your business is done here, please leave the room."

It took Yuffie a moment to realize that no one, not the even the Cold One, had heard Titus' words to her. But they knew that he had been saying SOMETHING to her, and the scent of emotions in the air was mixture of confusion and jealousy from Fa-Li and fury and animosity from the Cold One - a horrible mingling of rhythm emotion that assaulted her senses like

the smell of decay in the air. Titus was acting like nothing had happened, of course, and Yuffie was just standing there with her mouth hanging open.

In response to the Cold One's less-than-cordial order, Titus simply nodded his head slightly and sent the figure on the walkway a dark glare before whirling and leaving the room, the heavy iron door banging shut behind him.

"Where's he going?!" Yuffie shrieked, senselessly wanting her kidnapper to come back now that he was gone. "He's supposed to torture me! I don't want the Hissers to torture me! Hey...are you two listening to me?! Yeah, me! Over here! The girl with the chains!"

Fa-Li ignored Yuffie completely and focused her earnest gaze on the Cold One. "He didn't mean it, Master, really. He's not usually that rude with people, especially someone of great esteem such as yourself. I don't know what's wrong with him. I have an idea! I'll go speak with him!"

"You do that," the Cold One said dispassionately as the woman bowed her head deeply and hurried out of the room, her heels clacking on the floor.

Silence descended after Fa-Li's abrupt departure. Yuffie wanted her to come back. The room seemed colder without Fa-Li and Titus in it. She knew that it was irrational that she was even enjoying the presences of the two people who had kidnapped her, but ANYONE was more preferable than the figure on the walkway. She could feel the Cold One's apathetic gaze on her, looking at her as if she wasn't a creature worthy of even the smallest shred of pity or sympathy. Her life was nothing to him.

To Yuffie's dismay, she felt her limbs trembling. Her knees felt weak and watery, and her shackles jangled with dark mirth whenever her arms or legs would twitch of their own violation. She felt as if she couldn't breath.

A blinding light suddenly snapped on right above her head, and it was as if Yuffie's world vanished into that abysmal whiteness. She was blinded, and the light beating down on her shoulders, weaving its way through her hair, was almost painful in its intensity. She vaguely heard herself yelling at the Cold One, demanding to know what was going on, but she wasn't really listening to her own words.

She was instead listening to a low hissing that was coming from all around her, rising and falling like the waves of the ocean. Now she knew why they were called "Hissers."

And she was finally able to identify that foul taste in the back of her throat that had been plaguing her ever since she had come down to this forgotten kingdom of unspeakable monstrosities.

It was the taste of fear.

* * * * *

"Cloud? Shouldn't you check on Vincent?"

"Hm?" Cloud looked down at Red questioningly before returning his attention back to his task of draining the last of the coffee from the coffee pot. Elena and the others were playing poker at the table with Rude, who had just come downstairs recently and was - to be quite blunt - kicking everyone's asses. No one could beat the Turk's poker face.

"Vincent," Red repeated. "I think you should go check on him. He didn't seem well last night, and he hasn't come down at all this morning."

Cloud stared into his empty cup thoughtfully, Mako eyes misted. "I don't know," he said calmly. "You know Vincent is a hell of a lot tougher than he looks, and he values his privacy above all things. He might not respect us barging in."

Not at all fazed with the difficulty Cloud was giving him, Red stole a glance at where the others were busy making fun of Elena for calling a "royal flush" a "royal blush".

"You lose! You said 'blush' instead of 'flush'!!"

"That's SO unfair, Cid!! It was a slip of the tongue!"

"Sure it was, Turk."

"Shut up, Barret! Why do they call it 'flush' anyways?!! You flush TOILETS, not cards!"

Red turned away from the arguing group and back to Cloud. "There's another reason I would like you to check on Vincent," he said quietly.

Cloud lifted an eyebrow, a silent signal for Red to continue.

“Last night at Vincent’s door, I picked up a scent that wasn’t Vincent’s or any of ours.”

Suspicion caused Cloud’s Mako blue eyes to narrow. “You mean there was someone other than us in the bar?”

“Not ‘someone,’” Red corrected. “*Something*. It was the change of scent that Vincent undergoes whenever he shifts to his Chaos form.”

“You lost me, Red,” Cloud admitted, a bit of frustration evident in his tone. “You mean Chaos was in the room at the same time Vincent was?”

Red hesitated, doubting his own recollection. “I’m not quite sure. You see, when Vincent shifts into Chaos, his entire scent changes along with his body. He loses the scent he has as a human and instead takes on the scent of the demon. What I scented last night was the beginnings of the transformation. In other words, the coming of Chaos’ scent, but the abnormal thing was that Vincent’s scent wasn’t losing any power.”

Dark emotions flickered in Cloud’s eyes. “You mean it was as if Chaos was developing as a separate being from Vincent?”

Red shrugged, looking as helpless as he could look. “Not precisely. My conclusion would be that Vincent was losing control of Chaos. Your theory is a lot scarier, actually. I’d hate to think of that Chaos creature loose and running around of its own accord.”

“But is it any safer for Vincent to have it inside himself?” Cloud pondered darkly, his eyes half-lidded in contemplation. He was worried about Vincent, truly he was, but after the gunslinger had exploded at Barret last night, Cloud was extremely reluctant to approach his friend. Yuffie’s kidnapping and Vincent’s unwitting, indirect contribution to the unfortunate occurrence seemed to have sent the ex-Turk slightly off-balance. Instability in a man like Vincent - with such raw energy inside of him - was a dangerous thing indeed. Cloud knew that Vincent kept many secrets to himself. The swordsman was still convinced that Vincent hadn’t told him the whole truth about what had happened at the deep-sea complex, and Cloud was starting to wonder if Chaos was somehow a part of that “truth.” He wouldn’t be surprised, but, still, it was terrifying to think that Vincent might be losing control of the demon. Chaos had never failed to incite a deep fear in Cloud even though he KNEW that Vincent was inside that monstrous form somewhere. It was somewhat difficult for Cloud to fight alongside the hovering form of Chaos in battle. His first instinct was always to attack the demon before it could kill him or one of his teammates, and it was only with a great force of will that he repressed such an urge.

Cloud sighed, forcing himself to act rather than think. Red was still waiting patiently for his decision. Cid and the others were once again engaged in another noisy argument. They probably wouldn’t notice if Meteor came through the ceiling and crash-landed next to them.

“Alright,” Cloud told Red. “Let’s go check on Vincent.”

* * * * *

Dark lashes fluttered slightly, warily, their owner clearly expecting pain to follow any movement he made. But when he felt not a thing, the eyelashes stopped their cautious flickering and instead opened slowly, revealing crimson irises and too-large pupils that adjusted to their sudden exposure with abnormal quickness.

From his place where he was sprawled gracelessly on the floor, Vincent forced himself to twitch each of his limbs as his eyes flicked instinctively around the room, an old habit from his Turk days that he had yet to break. It was better to evaluate one’s surroundings while the eyes were still closed in some semblance of sleep (the better to fool the enemies), but Vincent had been floating in darkness for far too long. He desired substantial objects that he knew he could touch if he wished to, even if these long-sought-after objects were the forms of his perfectly-made bed, the shards of glass lying dangerously close to his face, and the discarded form of the lamp strewn haphazardly on the floor amongst the broken glass, its cord curled around it protectively.

Once he was assured that all of his limbs were still attached to his body, Vincent shifted experimentally. The only pain he was experiencing was in his right arm, since had obviously been sleeping with it pinned underneath him, cutting off the flow of blood to the limb. Grunting slightly, he rolled onto his back and let his arm flop onto the floor next to him, feeling a flush of coolness over his skin as the blood began to rush back into his veins.

Staring up at the ceiling and listening to the rain that was still beating on the window, Vincent was, for a moment, baffled as to what he was doing on the floor. Then he remembered the sudden illness that had stricken him the night before. The

pulsing fever. The body-wracking chills. The soundless voice of Chaos rumbling across his soul. The vision of Yuffie in shackles.

"Yuffie..." he whispered, closing his eyes as the name dropped from his lips. "I know where to find you..."

He suddenly heard the quiet thumping of someone coming up the stairs. His eyes narrowed immediately, his muscles going rigid until he realized it was probably just one of the others coming back up to his or her room. Sounded like it was just one of them, but he heard the faint clacking of claws - a sound almost hidden by the footsteps of the other individual - and realized that whoever was coming up the stairs had Red XIII with them.

However, the footsteps stopped right outside his door, and it suddenly occurred to Vincent that they must have been coming to check up on him. He frowned, thinking he wasn't deserving of such kindness.

"Vincent?" Cloud voice called, pitched at the level everyone used when they want to wake someone up, but didn't wish to SOUND like they want to. "Are you in there, Vincent?"

Vincent rolled away from the door so that it wouldn't slam into him when they opened it.

Rubbing his eyes wearily, he called, "It's not locked."

The door creaked open, and the next thing Vincent knew, one golden eye and two deep blue eyes were peering down at him worriedly. The gunslinger blinked up at them in surprise.

"Hey, Vincent, are ya dead, man?" Cloud asked needlessly, putting his hands on his knees and leaning down so he could get a better look at Vincent's emotionless face.

"No, unfortunately," Vincent replied dryly.

Cloud lifted an eyebrow and studied Vincent, taking in the tangled-beyond-any-hope-in-the-world ebony hair spilled beneath him, the paler-than-usual face, the bloodshot garnet eyes, and the wrinkled clothes that were too big for Vincent's figure.

"You look like crap," Cloud blurted, then he winced. "Sorry."

"Sorry for what?" Vincent asked seriously.

"What happened HERE?" Red suddenly demanded, sounding shocked. Vincent glanced past Cloud's boots to see that Red had discovered the results of his little...close encounter...with the mirror last night.

"Holy crap," Cloud breathed as he turned around, wondering how he could have missed thousands of glittering shards of broken glass lying on the floor not a foot away from him. A lamp lay amongst the carnage at the bottom of a now-glassless mirror frame, staring meekly up at Cloud, as if to say, "Hey, it wasn't me! That guy lying on the floor over there made me do it!"

"Vincent," Cloud said. "I don't care who you are, Tifa is going to STRANGLE you when she sees this."

Rubbing his temple with his human hand, Vincent sat up slowly. "I'll be happy to pay for the damage."

Cloud glanced down at the man sitting on the hardwood floor. "You and what money?"

A flash of annoyance crossed Vincent's features, but he quickly contained it. "I have money," he said simply.

"It doesn't matter," Cloud said dejectedly, plopping down on the end of Vincent's bed, boots crunching wayward pieces of glass. "We're going to have to leave Kalm soon anyways."

"Flooded?" Vincent asked shortly.

Cloud nodded, casting a dark glare at the intrusive rain pounding noisily on the window. "Chances are the water will be leaking in through the bar door by tomorrow morning, maybe by this evening if it starts raining really hard."

"And we'll lose our headquarters," Red added.

"Where is everyone?" Vincent asked suddenly, noticing that neither Cloud nor Red had any armor on them.

"Cid, Elena, Barret and Rude are downstairs playing poker," Cloud answered. "Cait Sith is restoring his power reserves in the garage. Tifa is probably on the beach healing Reno's soul. And Red and I are up here talking to you."

"And Yuffie and Reeve are in the hands of torturers while everyone is just sitting around," Vincent said, voice frozen with cold anger.

Whether it was the tone of Vincent's voice or his choice of words that made Cloud's eyes narrow, Vincent had no idea, but narrow they did, the Mako glow becoming almost as intense as his own crimson orbs.

"What with that attitude all of a sudden?" Cloud demanded. "And what do you mean 'torturers'?"

"We need to find Yuffie quickly," was all Vincent said.

Damn, Cloud thought grumpily. I forgot about this guy's one-track mind.

"What about Reeve?" Red asked shrewdly.

"Sorry," Vincent said. "I don't know anything about Reeve, but I know where Yuffie is being held...to a certain extent."

Cloud folded his arms across his lean chest and looked down at Vincent carefully. "And how did you find out? Did Chaos tell you?"

Crimson eyes suddenly fastened on him from behind a curtain of damp black locks that had fallen across Vincent's eyes. It was most unnerving, having blood-red eyes glaring up at him from behind pillars of midnight black-blue, but Cloud didn't waver. His own Mako blue gaze was steady.

Vincent suddenly rocked backwards onto his back, putting his palms flat down on the floor beside his head and drawing his knees up to his chest. Then, in one rapid, fluid motion, he snapped his entire body upright, landing on his feet with unnatural speed.

Chinese get-up, Cloud thought. I forgot how agile he was, too. If it were anyone else, I would say they were showing off, but this is VINCENT.

"It doesn't matter where I obtained this information," Vincent said flatly, straightening his clothes. "All that matters is that I have a general idea about how to get to her."

"Vincent," Cloud said, worry and a bit of fear sharpening his tone. "I NEED to know. Are you losing control of Chaos?"

There was a brief hesitation, then a sigh slipped past Vincent's lips. Shifting his gaze back to Cloud, he said seriously, "I wish I could tell you, Cloud, but I honestly don't know." He looked away. "However, I can tell you that I don't believe Chaos poses a danger to anyone...yet."

Cloud wasn't at all pleased with that "yet", but he let it slide, knowing that Vincent was only telling him the truth.

"So Vincent," Red asked, flaming tail swooshing gently behind him. "Where exactly is Yuffie?"

Vincent turned his gaze to the rain-battered window, eyes misted with recollection. "Somewhere...underground," he said, sounding a little uncertain. "Stone tunnels. Doors like one might find on a submarine. Lots of hallways. A torture chamber. I know the way to the chamber, but that's about it."

Cloud paused only briefly before throwing his hunch up in the air. "Midgar sewers sound good to you?" he asked Vincent.

"Excellent," Vincent deadpanned, striding over to the desk, and Cloud was vaguely surprised to see him pick up one of his red bandanas and wrap it around his forehead, knotting it in back of his head, the crimson of the bandana showing up well against the ebony hair. He had forgotten that Vincent had more than one of those things. The other, Cloud knew, Yuffie still had tied around her arm like some sort of lover's gift.

"Vincent," Cloud suddenly said, something in his voice making the older man turn around. "Even if we didn't move out today, you'd go to Midgar by yourself, wouldn't you?"

"Yes, I would," Vincent answered without hesitation.

To find Yuffie, Cloud added silently. A strange thought suddenly occurred to him, but he pushed it away, unable to believe such a thing.

Cloud rose to his feet quickly, his boots crunching over glass shards as he strode to Vincent's door. "I'll go rally everyone," he said over his shoulder. "Looks like we're moving out today, after all."

"No rest for the wicked," Red muttered darkly.

Vincent didn't reply, but he agreed whole-heartedly.

* * * * *

There were days when Fa-Li cursed everything and everyone that crossed her path, and this was definitely one of those days. Her brown eyes were full of thunder as she stomped down the stone hallways that she had seen every day for years and years. She hated them. Hated them with a passion. So boring. So featureless. So JUST LIKE EVERY OTHER FREAKING STONE HALLWAY IN THEIR LITTLE "SUBTERRANEAN WORLD"!!! But she knew these hallways like the back of her hand. Some of the priests and priestesses got lost in such a labyrinth, but Fa-Li never did.

But much to her dismay, after a year, she found that she didn't know Titus quite as well as she once thought she did. He wasn't as predictable. Not NEARLY as predictable. She had already checked all of the places he used to retreat to when he wanted to sulk or be alone, but her searches had yielded no results at all. However, Fa-Li was a stubborn individual, and she wasn't ready to admit that Titus would just LEAVE without saying SOMETHING to her. It may have been on account of a bloated ego on her part, but what she was really hoping for was that Titus hadn't changed so drastically that he was a completely different person than he was a year ago.

Only one place left to check, she thought furiously, cursing her heeled boots and the stone floor that was so unyielding beneath her feet. *And that place just so happens to be one I hate the most.*

Rounding a sharp corner, Fa-Li nearly collided with someone coming in the opposite direction.

Harsh words on her lips, the woman started to spit out a heated curse, but froze when she saw whom she had almost plowed into.

Deep brown eyes cold and empty, like Death. A lean, beautiful body that put Fa-Li's to utter shame. Flowing, wavy brown hair shot through with natural blond highlights that burned brightly in the sea of chocolate brown.

As Fa-Li stared, the woman leaned forward and sniffed the air between them.

"I smell a skank," she stated nastily, her slums' accent making her words harsher than they already were. "Get the hell outta my way before I have to go THROUGH you."

Fa-Li stepped aside hurriedly, a stunned expression on her face as the other woman brushed past her without a second glance.

Gods...it's HER, Fa-Li thought. *I have to tell Ti-*

But just as she was whirling around to resume her walk, she collided with someone else.

"Whoa there, Missie," a light, male voice chided as a large hand settled on her shoulder, steadying her.

Fa-Li's heart jumped at the voice, and turned around to find herself staring up at a man with spiky brown hair that stuck up in all different directions. He would have look absolutely ridiculous if it hadn't been for the long scar on his left cheek, which crinkled as he smiled down at her, an expression that didn't quite reach his eyes.

"Watch where you step," the tall man warned amiably. "You might end up stepping on things far more vicious than me." He winked, well aware of the irony in his own words.

Then he, too, brushed past her, walking at a normal, unhurried pace, hands shoved deep in the pockets of his pristine cotton pants, his bare feet making no sound at all on the stone floors. His open white coat gently floated behind his figure like a ghost.

Fa-Li watched him until he disappeared down the hall.

Montana, she thought grimly, still feeling weight of the man's assassin-heavy hand on her shoulder. *And the woman was Jezebel. The Master's personal bounty hunters. I have to tell Titus!*

This time Fa-Li made SURE there was no one standing behind her before she took off at a dead run, ignoring her aching feet. Stone hallway after redundant stone hallway flew past her until she found what she was looking for. It was literally a hole in wall, so narrow that even a person who was just considered "hefty" wouldn't be able to fit through it. And certainly no claustrophobic people would make it through. Fa-Li herself wasn't fond of close, tight spaces, but her encounter with Jezebel and Montana had made her even keener on finding Titus and warning him.

If he wasn't here...then he was already gone. Left her behind...again.

Sucking in her gut as far as it would go and cursing her mother for passing down her large breasts to her daughter, Fa-Li turned sideways and slipped into the narrow passageway, moving along its length as quickly as her heels and the stone

scraping her back would allow. The trip wasn't that long, but by the time Fa-Li made it out of the passageway and into open air, she felt as if she had been trapped in the passageway for years.

Brushing bits of loose rock off of her leather bodysuit, Fa-Li glanced furiously around the cave, wincing at the smell of death in the air. She could never understand why Titus liked coming here. The cave's "owner" really wasn't an amicable creature...

Fa-Li was just starting to think that maybe Titus really was gone for good when she suddenly caught sight of him crouched on the ground, his back to her. He was quite a distance away, and the knowledge that she was going to have to WALK that distance after RUNNING the entire way down here didn't make Fa-Li a very happy camper. In fact, it pissed her off.

Sending out a silent prayer that the cave's owner wasn't around, Fa-Li began to stomp over to where Titus was crouched, not bothering to call his name. No, what she planned to do was give him a good, stiff kick for making her come all this way to-

She was ten feet away from Titus when she froze dead in her tracks.

As it turned out, the cave's owner WAS around.

The massive anaconda was resting on the ground in front of Titus, over half of its massively long body lost in the darkness of the cave. Now that her anger wasn't drowning out all her other senses, Fa-Li could hear the silent hissing of its scales as the snake shifted and flexed.

"She's hurt," Titus' voice suddenly split the air of the cave, and it took Fa-Li a couple of seconds to realize that he was talking to her.

"S-She is?" the woman echoed dumbly.

Titus didn't seem to mind, though. Rising to his feet, he turned around to face Fa-Li, and the giant snake also swiveled its massive head to pin the woman with its reptilian stare. Fa-Li gulped. She forgotten just how BIG the snake was. One of its slitted eyes was as big as a basketball, and its head alone was almost as long as Titus was tall. It hissed its displeasure at finding her in its lair, a dark substance spewing from its mouth as it did so. Titus patted the creature reassuringly on the snout, and the snake ceased its annoyed hissing, but Fa-Li knew that it wasn't very happy with having someone other than Titus in its home.

Titus glanced sadly at the dark substance dripping out of the snake's mouth. "Someone cut off her tongue," he said quietly.

Fa-Li blinked. "Oh," was the only thing she could think to say, especially with the snake glaring at her in that oddly human fashion.

Titus turned and patted the anaconda's snout again, and the beast immediately reverted its attention back to him.

"You should go see Dominic," Titus said to the snake, talking to it as he would a human. "He can at least cauterize the wound so you won't bleed to death. Next time, don't bite off more than you can chew, ne?"

The giant snake almost seemed to rumble its displeasure at Titus' joke, but it nudged him affectionately with its nose and took the time to give Fa-Li one last contemptuous glare before slowly slithering away into the darkness. Fa-Li could hear the sliding of its scales over the rocks long after it was gone, though.

Fa-Li suddenly let out a breath she didn't even know she had been holding. "Gods!" she breathed. "I forgot how BIG that thing was!"

"She'," Titus corrected, but there was no fire in his voice. "That snake is a female."

He sounds like he missed the damn snake more than he missed me, Fa-Li thought grumpily.

"Titus..." she started, still not brave enough to just walk over to him. She was afraid the snake would suddenly come back and bite off her head or something.

"Quiet," he said, but once again, there was no argumentative tone in his deep voice. "I already know what you're going to say."

Fa-Li wiped the sweat off her forehead in annoyance; the cave was uncomfortably hot. "Then?!" she exclaimed. "Why did you speak to the Master in such a flippant tone?! Titus, you know how the Master gets when he's angry!"

"Of course I do," Titus said, not bothering to turn around. "But, quite frankly, I don't care. I'm too *valuable* for him to dispose of." The words weren't spoken in pride, only in contempt and self-hatred. Titus had always hated himself more than anyone else.

"Titus!" Fa-Li insisted, covering the distance separating them in three strides. "The Master has sent for Jezebel and Montana!"

"I know," Titus said flatly, green eyes faintly luminescent in the darkness. "I don't care."

Frustration and anger consuming her senses, Fa-Li maneuvered so that she was standing right in front of him. "Don't you care about anything?!" she demanded of him, her voice echoing in the cave.

"I hope Kisaragi won't break," Titus suddenly commented, looking worried.

Hurt stung the back of Fa-Li's throat. "So all you care about is that stupid girl?! Don't you even think...don't you...even...notice...or consider...you're still so goddamn naïve! That part of you hasn't changed one bit!"

Titus just stared at her, and those cold green eyes suddenly looked wide and innocent in the darkness as he blinked, a little more rapidly than usual.

His eyes. I love his eyes.

Fa-Li let her head drop down against Titus' chest, the leather blessedly cool against her flushed cheek. He didn't stiffen or jerk away, but he didn't wrap his arms around her in a comforting embrace, either. But she heard the beating of his heart underneath his jacket, and the sound was unbelievably soothing to her. It was then that she finally realized how much she had missed him.

"Was she happy to see you?" she heard herself asking, her voice gone quiet. Her hands were limp at her sides; she only contact she would permit was her face against his chest.

"Hn?" Titus grunted.

"The snake," Fa-Li clarified. "Was she happy to see you?"

"She wasn't happy in the sense that you mean. She hasn't emotions like you do. But my return pleased her so I guess...she was happy to see me." He paused. "She told me many things."

"Like what?" Fa-Li asked.

This time Titus' silence was long and drawn out, but eventually he whispered into the still air of the cave, "A storm. A storm unlike any other. It's coming, and its rains and tides of fury may drown us all..."