

Chapter Twenty-Five: AVALANCHE on the Rise

"Go splash in some puddles outside." Red XIII

I look at her in that paper dress

I wonder why she won't burn

She's just a paper doll that's all

Just a paper doll

"Paper Doll"

Kittie

"Holy SHIT!" Cid cursed angrily, manhole cover nearly falling from his rain-slick hands. "Spike, get your ass over here!"

Cloud maneuvered his way over to the pilot, tossing his wet bangs out of his eyes as he did so. "What is it?" he asked.

Cid scowled. He hadn't had a cigarette in the last five minutes, and already the nicotine withdrawal was making him cranky. "The hell you mean 'what is it'?! Take a look down the hole, kid! Ain't nothing but water down there now!"

"What?!" Elena practically screeched, pushing past Cid and nearly knocking Cloud down the manhole simultaneously. "No way! It wasn't like this yesterday, I swear it! If Reno and Red were here, they could tell you the same thing!"

"The water must have risen," Cloud stated grimly.

Cid tossed the manhole cover to the side angrily, not noticing when it rolled and made a small dent in the side of a car abandoned in the street. "No shit, Sherlock!" he yelled at Cloud. "Anyone who ain't blind can see that! What the @#\$\$% are we gonna do now, smart guy?"

Cloud didn't reply, just glared down the manhole at the veritable RIVER that was now flowing along its merry way. The cement portion that Elena, Reno, and Red had been traveling on yesterday was nowhere to be seen - covered completely by rushing water. DIRTY FILTHY rushing water. Cloud resisted the urge to scream. The sewers were the only way to Yuffie, according to his opinion and Vincent's as well. So far this was the only entrance they could find to the sewer tunnels that wasn't flooded. Another option would be to trek all over Midgar in search of another way to access the sewer system that wouldn't lead them into torrents of rank sewer water. Of course, they could always head all the way back to the old Shinra building and take a dive down the "snake tunnel", as they had come to call it, but that would just be more precious minutes wasted.

Everyone was cold, tired, and grumpy, including Cloud. Cid was throwing fits left and right because he couldn't smoke in the rain. Barret was actually behaving himself, not wanting to do anything that would piss off Vincent, who he believed was still peeved at him. Tifa was trying to be encouraging as usual, but Cloud could see in her eyes that she was extremely dubious of their plan. Cait Sith was asking questions from everyone, trying to catch up on everything he had missed. Elena was making it no secret that she was scared to go back into the sewers. And Rude and Vincent were, well...Rude and Vincent. Cold, aloof, and nearly imperturbable, as usual.

They were also short two fighters.

After a brief debate, it had been decided that Reno and Red would remain behind at the bar.

~*~*~*~*~

"I'm not gonna be much help to you guys ANYWAYS," Reno said bitterly, wringing rainwater out of his ponytail. "Chances are that effing snake is still in the sewers, right? I'm fucking scared of snakes, in case you guys didn't notice that fact yesterday. If it shows up again, I'm going to be more of a hurt than a help. I'd probably be better off...staying behind."

"But Reno!" Elena protested, absently tugging on the hem of her hastily thrown on suit. "We need you with us! You're the leader of the Turks!"

Reno gave her a hard, angry glare and sat down in a stool, heedless of his waterlogged suit and pants. "Damn straight I'm the leader. And as such, you should have faith in my decision. Go on without me. That's an order."

Elena looked like she wanted to argue some more, but she caught her lip between her teeth and held back her words. She knew the truth in what Reno was saying. He didn't even have his nightstick any longer. True, he was a fair shot with a gun, but the nightstick was still his weapon of choice; his skills with it were unmatched, and with it, he could fight close range as well as long range.

"Elena, Rude," Reno said flatly when neither of them replied to his order. "Am I understood? You're under Cloud's leadership now. Is that clear?"

"Yessir!" Rude said immediately, standing ramrod straight and raising four fingers to his forehead, locked firmly in a crisp salute.

"Yessir!" Elena mimed, wondering how long it had been since she had saluted someone like this.

Reno sighed, the hardness in his face melting away into a melancholy mask of tragedy. "Good. Now put your damn hands down and slouch a little bit, for crying out loud."

"I'd probably be better off remaining here as well," Red said suddenly, voice calm.

Cloud looked up in surprise from where he was inserting materia into the Ultima Weapon. "Red?" he asked incredulously.

"The sewers are probably flooded," Red said, striving to be logical in order to cover up his frustration at his own helplessness. "The rising water will greatly hinder my mobility, being that I haven't the height advantage that you all possess. I'd have to be swimming everywhere. I would only slow you down."

Cloud's jaw clenched, but he only nodded mutely and went about snapping his Crystal Bangle onto his wrist.

~~*~*~*~*

"So?" Cait suddenly spoke up, unfazed the raindrops running down his fur and down the sides of his moogle. "What are we gonna do, Cloud?"

Cloud scratched the back of his head, glaring down the manhole into the watery darkness. "I don't know," he said helplessly. "Does anyone have any other ideas?"

Suddenly, Vincent brushed past him, hesitated a split second at the edge of the manhole, and then jumped down it.

"Vincent!" Tifa gasped, shoving a dumbfounded Cid aside and falling to her knees on the pavement, peering down into the sewers. Cloud followed in suit after recovering his wits.

Cid crowded up next to him, yelling, "What the hell, Vince?! You trying to kill yourself or something?!"

Crimson eyes stared up at them calmly, literally glowing in the darkness. Rain plummeted through the open manhole and struck Vincent's pale skin, but he didn't seem to notice. The water was barely up past his ankles.

"It's not that deep," he said calmly.

"Yes, yes, yes, we can SEE that!!" Cid exclaimed, raking his fingers through his blond hair and nearly knocking his goggles off of his head. "Thank you for DEMONSTRATING that for us!!" He turned to Cloud. "Spike, don't let him DO shit like that no more!!!"

Cloud blinked rainwater from his eyes. "It's not like I TOLD him to do it, Cid."

"Whatever," Cid grumbled. "I need a smoke. So who's goin' down next?!"

"I'll go," Rude volunteered, clearly trying to avoid sprouting any more arguments. Cloud moved out of the way to allow the tall Turk to crouch next to the edge of the manhole, glancing down only briefly before swinging his legs over the edge and free falling to the bottom. He landed with a faint splash that was almost drowned out by the sounds of the pouring rain.

"Are you alright Rude?" Elena asked immediately, rushing up to the edge to make sure her friend had made it down in one piece.

"I'm fine, Elena," he asked calmly.

"I'm goin' down next!" Cid exclaimed, one leg already dangling over the edge of the manhole.

Trusting his team to make it down without any mishaps, Cloud turned to where Cait Sith was waiting patiently a little ways away from the others.

"Just how waterproof are you?" he asked worriedly.

Cait spread his gloved paws, looking as helpless as a robotic cat could look. "I'm here in the rain, aren't I?"

Cloud nodded, still looking dubious as he cast a glance over at where Barret was trying to squeeze through the manhole. "I know, but I'm sure that there are deeper parts of the water down there in the sewers. Can that moogle swim or anything?"

Cait beamed. "It doesn't need to swim, O' Fearless Leader! It floats! If worse comes to worst, we can always use this guy for a raft of sorts! No worries here, Cloud!" He flashed the swordsman a thumbs-up sign, with a big goofy grin to compliment it.

Somehow, that didn't ease Cloud's worries.

* * * * *

BEGIN.

yessssssir

"T-That hissing is r-r-really annoying, ya know???"

name

"W-What?"

name. give name.

"C'mon! You guys kidnapped someone and you don't even know their name?"

give name now.

".....Y-Yuffie...Yuffie Pristina Kisaragi..."

father name.

"My father? Um, Lord Godo Kisaragi...shouldn't you guys already know this?"

mother name.

"...my mother? Why do you want to know about my mother?"

mother name.

"Go to hell! I'm not telling you anything about my mother!"

kira ayami kotori.

"W-What???! How...how did you know that?!"

about mother. tell.

"No! Not until you tell me how you knew my mother's name!"

The pain began without warning. Her limbs suddenly spasmed violently, chains jangling with harsh laughter. A scream fought to rip from her throat, but she bit it back with a sheer force of will. Then the pain was gone, leaving her gasping for breath, body trembling with the aftershocks the agony had left behind.

mother. tell.

"Gawd! What the hell do you want to know?! She's DEAD, for crying out loud!!"

know thiss already. tell more.

"There's nothing more to tell!"

there iss.

"What?! What is there left?! She died when I was five years old!!!"

death never the end. what elssse?

"I told you before! There IS nothing!"

As soon as the words left her mouth, the pain began again, filling her limbs with searing agony like no other. It froze the scream that was struggling to emerge from her mouth, pinning it in her chest where it burned her heart.

ALRIGHT, STOP.

The pain ceased.

DON'T DRAIN HER TOO SOON. SHE'LL STILL NEED TO BE STRONG ENOUGH TO SURVIVE THE MIND PROBE IF SHE REFUSES TO TALK.

undersstood.

* * * * *

Reno sighed deeply as he watched the raindrops chasing one another down the window, splitting and merging and barreling into other droplets in a frenzy. Stupid raindrops. He had seen enough goddamn water to last him a lifetime. His suit jacket was hanging over one of the bar's chairs to air dry, but the dress shirt and slacks he was wearing were still a little on the damp side. Normally, even a petty thing such as remaining clad in damp clothes would have put him in a grouchy mood, but it wasn't bothering him this time. Maybe because the bar was virtually empty, and being grouchy was only fun when he had someone to listen to him bitch about every little thing.

"I wonder how the others are doing," Reno commented out loud.

Red didn't even stir from where he was resting on top of the one of the tables (a big no-no).

"I hope the snake didn't eat 'em," Reno continued, tugging thoughtfully on his gloves as he wondered if he would get any reaction out of his companion.

Of course, he didn't. One of Red's pierced ears twitched, but that was it.

"I hate snakes," Reno said loudly, making it obvious that he was trying to get Red's attention.

A growl emerged from the lion-like creature's throat. "And I hate people who are loud just for the sake of being loud," Red grumbled.

"Geez, you must hate half of your friends, then," Reno shot back, slumping in his uncomfortable chair and propping up his feet on a nearby table (another big no-no).

One golden eye flicked coolly in his direction. "Reno, this conversation is utterly pointless," Red said flatly.

Reno scowled. "This conversation is NOT pointless. No conversation is pointless. I'm trying to be NICE over here, and you're biting my head off. And I'm bored; there's nothing to do here, and you're no fun to fight with."

"Go splash in some puddles outside," Red suggested, actually sounding half-serious.

"Haha, very funny," Reno said sarcastically. "You're such a wit. Besides, there are no puddles outside, just one big goddamn LAKE." He scowled at the rain running down the window. "The others better get back before water starts flooding the bar."

"That's probably what you and I should be fighting to prevent," Red commented, lifting his head from his paws and gazing absently at the front door to the bar, as if expecting the entire thing to cave in and water to come rushing into the room.

Reno snorted, not at all thrilled with the idea of doing manual labor. "What can we do? Stand on the porch and try and push the water away when it comes onto the decking?"

"No," Red replied calmly as he gracefully bounded off the table and onto the floor. "But we could start lining the edge of the decking with things to prevent or at least slow down the water's progress." He glanced at Reno. "Actually, you'll probably have to do most of the work since my hands are somewhat lacking in the dexterity area."

Reno's aquamarine eyes narrowed. "No matter how bored I am, I'm not in the mood to work right now. Why don't you—"

Red suddenly stiffened, his muscles going rigid and his ears pivoting to point towards the door. "Shhh!" he hissed at Reno. "Did you hear something?"

Reno hadn't, but he immediately swung his feet off the table and stood up, hand flying to his hip before he realized that he had no weapons. His beloved nightstick was floating around in the sewers somewhere, and his gun was hidden upstairs in his bedroom.

"What is it?" he whispered to Red, tensing his muscles and wondering if his hand-to-hand combat skills were as rusty as he was imagining.

Red one good eye darted around the bar. "I heard something, but it was gone after a second. Some sort of thumping noise."

Reno's eyes narrowed as he stepped further away from his window, remembered from Turk training that windows were the most common entry place for surprise attacks. "This bar is on stilts, right?"

Red nodded. "Yes."

"Well, there's all kinds of debris floating around in the water, right?" Reno continued, feeling rather proud of his logic. "Maybe something just hit one of the stilts and bounced off?"

Red relaxed a little, but Reno could tell that the AVALANCHE member wasn't fully convinced. "That's seems to be the most logical assumption. But we have to keep in mind that, as far as we know, this bar is one of the only buildings that isn't underwater in Kalm. Other citizens might be coming here to seek shelter, and if they believe this place is abandoned, they might just break in like your common thief."

Reno snorted and plopped back down in his chair. "I'd like to seem them try. I'll toss 'em back out into the rain. Or on second thought, I'd probably let them in. At least another person might prevent me from DYING of boredom in here."

Red rolled his eye. "If you're so bored, Reno, why don't you watch TV or something?"

Reno immediately snapped to attention. "TV? Where's the TV? I didn't even know there WAS a TV in this bar!"

"It's in the living room," Red replied calmly.

"There's a living room in his place?!" Reno echoed incredulously.

"Reno, for a Turk, you aren't very well aware of your surroundings," Red scolded. "Look behind the bar area. What do you see?"

Reno bristled slightly at his companion's tone, but he looked anyways. "I see a refrigerator. And a stove. And a sink. And some shot glasses. And some cupboards. And a pantry."

"That's not a pantry," Red interrupted.

For a moment, Reno just blinked at him dumbly before his face lit up with realization. "A hidden door!" he exclaimed, leaping up from his seat. "That sneaky bastard Cloud HID the damn living room back there! C'mon, Red, let's you and me raid the kitchen and watch TV! It'll be great!"

Red looked dubious. //Well...it's not like I have anything better to do. It's not like I'm going to get any rest with Reno running around the house. Wonder why he insists on me coming with him? He must be lonely...//

"C'mon, mutt!" Reno urged, marching determinedly back behind the bar.

"Joy," Red grumbled, following the Turk against his better judgment. He had the feeling he was in for a very long day.

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//This is going to be a long day// Cloud thought grumpily as he tried very hard not to concentrate on the nasty water all around him. Sure, the water may have been ankle-deep to start off with, but once they had taken off into the darkness of the Midgar sewer system, the water had very quickly increased its depth and was now clawing at Cloud's waist, greatly hindering his maneuvering capabilities. Not everyone had the enormous height advantage that SOME PEOPLE were fortunate enough to possess. And "some people" did not include Cloud Strife.

After much bickering and stumbling over each other in the near-darkness (they were all out of flashlights), the present members of AVALANCHE and the Turks had fallen into a sort of formation. Cloud was leading the pack with Vincent since the gunslinger was the only one who seemed to have the faintest idea as to where he was going, and Cloud needed to be close to action in case it came time to make a split-second decision. Close behind them was a trio of Rude, Elena, and Tifa, all three of them barreling forward determinedly. Elena, surprisingly enough, kept most of "gross, that's nasty!" comments to herself. Maybe it was due to the fact that she had already been in the sewers yesterday, but Cloud had a sneaking suspicion that it had something to do with a tall, bald-headed Turk that was walking next to her without complaint. And finally, in the WAY back was the noisy, constantly bickering trio of Cid, Barret, and Cait. They insisted they were "covering everyone's asses" but what it sounded like they were doing was more along the lines of fighting over Cait's much-prized moogles. Cait hadn't been lying when he had told Cloud that the thing could float, and the robotic cat was having an easier time navigating the murky waters than his human companions.

Resisting the urge to sigh, Cloud cast a furtive glance at the shadowy form of Vincent walking next to him. The man's crimson eyes shone bright as fire in the darkness, narrowed with determination. Cloud didn't think he had ever seen

Vincent looking so intent before. It was odd having the man beside him, taking the lead. Usually, when AVALANCHE moved in a large group like this, Vincent was always playing drogue in the back, constantly on the lookout for dangers that might have eluded the others.

//All this determination to find Yuffie?// Cloud thought to himself as he sidestepped some of the trash that was floating on the surface of the water. //It's strange. Vincent seems so much younger now. Maybe it's because he doesn't have that cape covering half of his face? You know, if this was anyone else looking so intent on finding a girl, I would think...but I can't think THAT. This isn't just anyone. This is VINCENT VALENTINE. He Who Feels Nothing And Cares For Nothing.//

"How much longer do you think we have?" Cloud asked Vincent, voice pitched at a level that only Vincent's abnormally sharp ears would be able to pick up.

"Longer for what?" Vincent replied distractedly, eyes methodically roving the darkness.

"Longer until we go wherever you're leading us," Cloud said, looking at the taller man carefully.

"I wish I could tell you, Cloud," Vincent answered. "But I honestly don't know. I'll know when we get there, though."

Cloud's eyes lingered on Vincent's shadowy profile for a second longer before turning his gaze forwards again. "You know, Vincent," he said offhandedly. "I can't help but wonder at HOW you seem to know exactly where we're going."

"What you should really be concerned with is what will happen if I DON'T know where we're going," Vincent said coolly.

Cloud's jaw clenched. It was times like this that Vincent's experience overshadowed Cloud's leadership abilities. "I was just curious is all," Cloud replied, trying not to sound like a pouting child. "Is Chaos telling you which direction to go in?"

"You mean is the demon speaking to me?"

"I suppose so, yes."

"Chaos is a demon, Cloud. It speaks in a language that cannot be understood by any human."

"But you can understand it?" Cloud asked shrewdly.

"I'm not human, but I'd like to think that I'm not so far gone that I am capable of understanding the language of a demon. That would imply that I have a darkness inside me that is equal to theirs."

Trying to ignore the chill that ran down the length of his spine, Cloud said, "I guess what I should have asked was if Chaos was in any way, shape, form, communicating with you and directing you down the right path."

"Yes, it is," Vincent replied simply.

Cloud sighed and shoved away a shrapnel of metal that was intent on skewering him in the belly. "You're a man of few words, Vincent."

"I send those words back at you, Cloud," Vincent said smoothly, sounding slightly amused in spite of himself.

A grin found its way to Cloud's lips. //Already his speech is becoming slightly less formal. Must be Yuffie's influence. Soon he'll start saying "Gawd!" and "Grossness!" God forbid.//

"Hey, everyone?" Cloud called loudly, noticing a change in the objects that were floating on the surface of the water.

"The HELL do you want?!" Cid snapped.

Ignoring the pilot's grumpiness, Cloud replied calmly, "Watch out for debris on the water. A section of the sewers must have collapsed somewhere around here. There are all kinds of metal shrapnel and plaster floating around. Make sure you don't get skewered by one of the them."

"Hear that?" Cid demanded of Cait. "I might get stabbed by a piece of metal, ya damn cat! Gimme a ride on that hunk of junk!"

"No way!" Cait replied stubbornly from where he was seated high and dry on the massive stomach of his moogle. "This here is my moogle, Cid! I need it to fight, for crying out loud!"

"You don't fight on the water!" Cid insisted, tugging on one of the moogle's fangs. "What are you gonna do if something tries to eat us? Beat it to death with your megaphone! That thing's useless in the water!"

"If it's so useless, then why do you keep asking me to use it?" Cait demanded smugly.

Cid didn't say anything. He only scowled deeply and stormed away from Cait, making a point of splashing sewer water all over the robotic cat as he went.

* * * * *

ALRIGHT. BEGIN AGAIN.

yesss.

"Aw...shit..."

mother. tell.

"Up yours!"

tell now.

"Screw you!"

The pain came again, more intense than before. Fortunately, it was only a quick burst that assaulted every nerve in her body before it was gone, leaving her trembling against her will, her breath coming in ragged gasps from her dry, chapped lips.

mother taught you thingsss.

"W-What?"

you learn thingsssss she taught.

"I...I know nothing..."

lying.

"No! I don't know anything! And even if I did know something, you really think I would tell you?!"

we ussse mind probe.

"Well, you know what? You can TAKE your goddamn mind probe and shove it up your ass! Or asses. There's more than one of you guys, right?"

tell now. what mother taught.

"..."

talk.

"..."

The pain came again, encompassing and searing her delicate nerve endings, but this time, she kept her mouth firmly closed, teeth digging into her lower lips until blood welled up in the punctured flesh. She would not give them the satisfaction of hearing her scream. She would not talk. She wouldn't make a sound.

ssssing ssssong.

"..."

ssssing ssssong mother ssssang.

"..."

ALRIGHT. THAT'S ENOUGH OF THIS METHOD. SHE'LL NEVER TALK. PREPARE TO USE THE MIND PROBE.

* * * * *

Vincent suddenly came to an abrupt halt, his eyes widening.

Cloud cast a worried glance in his direction. "You okay?" he asked.

The other man didn't reply. He closed his eyes tightly, the fiery orbs swallowed by darkness. Cloud's night vision was good enough that he could see Vincent raising an unsteady hand to his head, pale fingers sinking into the ebony strands. They dug into his scalp as if in pain, and a nearly inaudible gasp escaped his lips.

Raising a hand to signal a temporary halt, Cloud asked Vincent quietly, "Is something wrong?"

Instead of answering, Vincent's body suddenly leaned violently to one side, and Cloud barely had time to open his arms and catch the taller man as he tumbled towards him.

"Vincent!" Tifa cried, starting to splash towards them, Rude and Elena following close behind her.

Still supporting Vincent's weight, Cloud made a sharp gesture with his hand, telling them to stay back. Vincent was still conscious, and Cloud was sure that the man wouldn't appreciate everyone and their mother running and flocking around him during one of his rare bouts of weakness.

"We have to hurry," Vincent suddenly whispered, using Cloud's shoulder for support as he straightened himself back up again.

"Are you alright?" Cloud asked for what seemed like the third time. He couldn't disguise the worry in his voice.

"I will be if we hurry," Vincent snapped, quickly disentangling himself from Cloud's helping hands and plowing through the water with renewed vigor. "Yuffie doesn't have much time."

//Shit...how the HELL does he keep finding out these things? I know Chaos is "communicating" with him, but still, this is intense...//

"Alright!" Cloud called to the others, voice echoing in the sewers. "Let's move out! We're getting closer!"

Everyone obeyed, but Cloud could practically hear the questions that were hovering on their tongues, begging to be spoken. He turned away before he was tempted to reply to those soundless demands. How could he even begin to answer their questions when he had so many of his own?

Vincent vaguely heard Cloud rapping out orders to the others, but he allowed the swordsman's words - though not meant for him - to go in one ear and out the other. His only concern was honing in the mysterious force that was calling to him in the distance, drawing and reeling him in. He was strangely pleased that Cloud was putting so much faith in him, but what he didn't want the younger man to know was that Vincent was relying almost completely on Chaos to guide him. Of course, the demon wasn't SPEAKING to him, but it was, in its own way, telling Vincent which way to go. Whenever he tried to take a wrong turn in the winding sewer system, he would feel an inexplicable pain lance through a part of his body, usually his side. Maybe it was the light slap from clawed hand, but who knew? All Vincent knew was that it was Chaos' way of telling him when he was going in the wrong direction.

//Why does Chaos seem as desperate to find Yuffie as I am? Knowing that recovering her from the enemies' hands is something that IT wants should probably suggest that it would be better to do just the opposite...and leave her to die. But...I can't do it...I just can't...//

Shaking his head to expel these thoughts from his mind, Vincent focused on nothing but the fiendish resistance the water kept placing on his legs, trying to shove him backwards. He fought this natural force with every fiber of strength within him, determined not to let anything keep him from achieving his mission. The steady pulsing of Chaos' "voice" in his mind told him that he was headed in the right direction.

Something in the back of his mind told him that he was maybe moving too fast for the others to keep up. Cloud, Tifa, and Rude were having no problems, Vincent could tell. Elena was having trouble keeping up due only to the fact that her legs were shorter, but Vincent could sense her determination in a strong wave that beat against his back. Barret, Vincent knew, was probably having little difficulty moving through the water on account of his prodigious height and raw strength. There were only two reasons for him to be lagging behind in the back. One was to put as much distance between himself and Vincent as possible, thinking that the gunslinger was still angry with him. The other was surely to keep Cid and Cait company. Given his age, Cid had an almost youthful vigor to him, but one cigarette too many was enough to destroy the strength that age couldn't eliminate. Vincent was sure that - though Cid would never admit it - the pilot had trouble breathing sometimes due to lungs that were probably already black with tar.

As Yuffie would say: Grossness.

Trying to push painful memories of the young ninja out of his mind, Vincent let his eyes rove through the darkness of the sewers. He noticed that the sound of rushing water was getting louder...and then he realized that they had a problem.

Cloud was so focused on keeping up with Vincent's taxing pace that he almost didn't realize that the man had stopped until he practically plowed into his back.

“What’s wrong?” Cloud demanded, stepping around so he could stand beside the man, not able to see anything other than Vincent’s glowing eyes and crimson headband in the darkness.

“Watch your step,” Vincent warned, and Cloud was wondering if he had meant those words in a figurative sense when the older man suddenly reached out and placed his hands palm down into the water in front of him, as if expecting the surface to be solid. Thinking Vincent had seriously lost his marbles this time, Cloud was surprised when the water only rose up to Vincent’s elbows.

//There’s a solid surface underneath the water there// Cloud realized as Vincent swung himself up to the higher ground. The water was only up to his knees.

Mimicking the man’s actions, Cloud sank his gloved hands into the water and felt them come into contact with what had to be cement. Sliding his hands down the hard surface, he found that the new level appeared to span the entire width of the tunnel, like a big stepping block.

“Everyone be careful!” Cloud warned as he levered himself onto the new level, now staring down at the shadowy forms of his friends in the darkness. “There’s higher ground over here but watch out that you don’t slip when climbing up.”

He received only a few grumbles in response, mainly from the back ranks. He tried to think of something encouraging to say, but he gave up within the first seconds. He wasn’t exactly in a cheery mood.

Resisting the urge to sigh tiredly, Cloud turned around, realized that Vincent hadn’t moved from his spot, unusual for someone who seemed to be such in a hurry a few minutes ago. Then, Cloud saw the reason for Vincent’s hesitation.

“Oh crap...” he growled, seeing the veritable WATERFALL that they now had to face. The water trickling past Cloud’s legs didn’t have much power to it, but from the sound of it, the water going down the cement slope in front of him was moving at quite a different speed. A much faster speed. Beyond the end of the slope was the continuation of the river of sewer water they had just waded through, only from what Cloud could see, the new water looked slightly cleaner.

“What now?” he asked Vincent.

Vincent suddenly crouched slightly and put one booted foot into the rushing water on the slope, testing the strength and depth of the current.

“Well?” Cloud demanded when the man didn’t say anything.

“It’s not incredibly deep,” he replied. “And the current isn’t terribly fast.”

“But that slope is pretty steep,” Cloud argued, knowing he was just taking a shot in the dark. He really couldn’t see anything to make him arrive at such a conclusion, only the fact that the “river” seemed to pick up FAR below them.

“It’s not as steep as it looks,” Vincent countered, putting his other foot on the slope in an amazing display of balance. He now had the current beating against his calves. “I’ll go down first. If I make it, you all can follow.”

“Sure,” Cloud replied, sounding anything but enthusiastic.

“Vince!” Cid suddenly cried, having climbed onto the higher ground in time to see Vincent walking carefully down what appeared to be the beginnings of a waterfall. “What the hell are you tryin’ to do, kill yourself?!”

“You can’t even see ‘em,” Barret muttered from his place next to the pilot.

“I’m sure Vincent needs to use his full concentration,” Rude said flatly. “It would probably be best if both of you be quiet.”

“Yeah,” Elena quipped, leaning around Cloud to scowl at Cid and Barret. “You two shut up!”

Cid squinted in Elena’s direction, his normally keen eyesight failing him in the darkness. “Woman, you’re-”

Cloud cut him off with a sharp movement of his hand, gesturing for silence.

Together, the seven of them watched nervously as Vincent continued to maneuver his way down the slope. At first, he didn’t seem to have much trouble, going down the slope slowly and carefully despite the water beating against his legs and trying to topple him over. But the farther down he got, the stronger the current became, pounding ruthlessly against the man’s legs. It was probably Vincent’s inhuman strength or his desperation to find Yuffie that gave him the willpower to go on. There were several instances where Vincent was forced to lean backwards and crabwalk his way down, but all his persistence and tenacity paid off, for he made it to the bottom without any serious injury. He crouched agilely on the end of the slope, ignoring the water pounding against his legs, trying to shove him off. Cloud couldn’t tell what he was doing,

but he seemed to be scanning the depths of the water for any hidden dangers. Apparently seeing none, Vincent hopped nimbly off the slope and into the water.

And promptly sank, the water rising all the way up to his shoulders before it stopped its fiendish ascent.

//Oh crap...// Cloud thought, his heart plummeting to the bottoms of his boots.

"It's deep!" Vincent called up to the others, his hair and the trailing ends of his bandana floating in the water behind him.

Cloud scratched his head. "Just great. Okay, anyone under six feet tall is going to have a hell of a time navigating. Who here is actually six feet tall or over?"

Silently, Barret and Rude raised their hands, both of them looking a little ill as they watched Vincent tottering around in the water below.

//Great, just two. Alright...that means Cid, Cait, Tifa, and Elena are going to need to find other means of getting around. And me, well, I'll worry about myself later...//

Thinking fast, Cloud turned to the others. "Cait, off the moogle."

Cait's mouth fell open, and he clutched at one of the moogle's ears possessively. "Aw, c'mon, Cloud! What are you going to do with him?"

Cloud's gaze hardened. He was in no mood for belligerence at the moment. "I'm going to give him to Cid. Cait, you get onto Barret's shoulder. You'll be safer up there than you would be on the moogle anyways. Cid, the mog's all yours, I guess. Take good care of it, alright?"

"Roger that," Cid enthused, shooting Cait a smug glare as the robotic cat petted his moogle somberly.

"C'mon, stupid cat," Barret grumped, snatching Cait off the moogle with his human hand.

"Okay, everyone, down the slope. Try not to run into each other, alright? And Cid, watch the moogle! Watch the moogle, I said!"

Going down the slope was living hell. Cloud would have rather had each of them go down one or two at a time, just to avoid any mishaps, but time was growing short, and it already looked as if Vincent was ready to take off without them. Barret and Rude made to the bottom first, and Cloud immediately ordered Barret - with Cait Sith perched on his shoulder - to ahead with Vincent. True, Barret was only taller than Vincent by a few inches, but if those few inches meant that, in the face of danger, Barret would get his gun-arm up faster than Vincent could draw his gun, then such a minor difference was rather important. And Cait Sith...well, if all else failed, Barret could always use him as a projectile...

Second to the bottom was a rather clumsy Cid, who lost his footing three-fourths of the way down the slope and ending up tumbling the rest of the way, Cait's moogle rolling after him. Neither Cid nor the moogle was damaged permanently, but Cid let out the longest stream of cuss words Cloud had yet to hear come from his mouth before the pilot clambered up on the moogle's belly and started following Barret, Vincent and Cait. Making rather practical use of the Venus Gospel, Cid used the spear as a sort of oar to make maneuvering the moogle raft easier.

Cloud purposely lagged behind the others, making sure they had all made it to the bottom safely before crawling up to the edge himself. A quick glance around showed that most everyone was following Vincent's lead. Rude, who had stayed behind at the bottom of the slope, was in the process of lifting Tifa onto his back. This made Cloud frown slightly, but he knew that Tifa would probably be safer with Rude than with him.

That only left...

"Ready, Elena?" Cloud asked calmly, fighting to keep his balance as water pounded against his legs and back.

The short woman turned toward him in surprise. "W-What?" she stammered.

"You're going to have to ride on my back," Cloud responded, glancing at her out of the corner of his eye. She didn't look particularly pleased about the situation, and he couldn't really blame her. It wasn't like he was a happy camper, either.

"I don't need to ride on your back!" Elena protested indignantly, her gaze, for some reason, straying to where Rude was moving out with Tifa firmly adhered to his back, her long brown hair trailing behind her on the surface of the water.

"Elena..." Cloud said warningly.

"I can swim!" she said hotly, flipping her short blonde hair back from her face.

"I'm sure you can," Cloud replied as calmly as he could manage. "But it will be faster this way. Come on."

A scowl darkened Elena's face. "Cloud, I SAID that..."

Cloud cut her off with a fierce glare, Mako blue eyes flashing in the darkness. "Look Elena, I'm the leader of AVALANCHE and you're a member of the Turks, right? Now get over it. Do you want to find Reeve or not?"

//If he's even still alive...//

That did it. If there was something Elena took seriously, it was her duties as a Turk, one of which was to guard the President, with her life if necessary. For a moment, her eyes once again shot to the tall figure of Rude, but then her face hardened with determination and she carefully climbed up onto Cloud's back, wrapping her arms around his neck in death grip.

However, it was only when Cloud stepped into the water with her on his back that she realized something.

"Cloud!! You're not even that tall!!! Ohmigod!! I'd better not drown, Cloud Strife, or I swear, I'll come back to haunt you!!"

"Shut up, Elena," Cloud tried to say, but only ended up with a mouthful of sewer water. He hated being short.

* * * * *

Yuffie wasn't even ashamed to admit it anymore. She was scared. The aftershocks from the pain were still coursing through her limbs like unwanted phantoms, but such things were insignificant when she thought about just what this "mind probe" was. The light above her was still obscuring her vision; she couldn't even open her eyes all way without being blinded. Yet, she could hear the things called Hissers moving around in the darkness, and every once in a while, she thought that she caught a glimpse of them - little brown creatures with what a looked to be thousands of arms that were in constantly motion, writhing, twitching, hissing.

READY?

yesss.

"....."

She waited for it. Waited for the mind-searing agony to tear through her entire body. But all she felt was a sudden, sharp pain lance through her skull, as if she had been pierced with an invisible needle. Then there was nothing. She was about to abandon her code of silence and laugh in their faces when the world around her suddenly vanished, and she fell into infinity.

All around there was blinding white light, wrapping her plummeting form in a whirlwind of intensity. She might have tried to scream, but no sound emerged from her mouth. All she knew was the mindless terror that engulfed her soul, akin to the fear she felt in the deep sea complex. That horribly familiar scent assaulted her nostrils, and a loud throbbing sound filled the air, like the ceaseless pounding of some monster's heart.

Quite suddenly, Vincent's words - seemingly so far in the past - returned to haunt her.

"I think there might be something alive down here. Something big."

And now - in the worst possible moment - she realized that she knew what was making that horrible beating sound.

//No! It can't be...it's still alive...all these thousands of years...//

YOU KNOW!!! TELL USSS NOW!!!!

"No! Never! I'd rather die before betraying my family!"

SSSECRET...TELL NOW!!

Blinding pain speared her head, and she felt memories from her past surfacing of their own accord, ripped from where she had them cherished in her heart, locked away for safekeeping. Fa-Li had lied when she had told Yuffie that she wouldn't be raped. This was rape, plain and simple. Her mind was being violated, torn apart, all its secrets spilling out in small, sporadic waves, but spilling they were, slowly and surely. Yuffie suddenly felt dirty, tainted; never before had she been violated in such a fashion. And what disgusted her more was that she felt utterly and completely helpless as she sensed memories being extracted from her mind by force, sucked away as if by a hungry leech.

Most were memories of her late mother. Kira Ayami Kotori. Usually referred to merely as Ayami. She saw her mother's beautiful face leaning down to kiss her goodnight, the light scent of her perfume so wonderfully familiar and comforting.

Then that loving, heartfelt memory was rudely brushed aside as it gave way to the time Yuffie had watched her mother practicing her martial arts, loose robes billowing around her slender form, dark brown hair flying behind her like a battle banner. Ayami had been such a strong woman - powerful and loving all at the same time.

//Mama...I'm so sorry...mama...//

Yuffie knew what the Hissers were searching for. Her mother's song. The one she had taught Yuffie. Ayami had always said that it was a secret song, one that Yuffie couldn't go around Wutai singing at the top of her lungs, as the little girl was prone to do at times. Yuffie had grown quite a bit from that little innocent girl of so many years ago, and she no longer insisted on making the whole world listen to her off-key singing, but...if memory served her correctly, she had been singing in the shower the night she and Vincent and stayed in the hotel. Had Vincent heard her song?

VALENTINE?? VALENTINE KNOWSSS??

"No! Vincent doesn't know anything! You just leave him alone!"

VALENTINE...

"Goddamn you! I said-"

The pressure in her head abruptly increased again as the Hissers' mind probe began ripping into another part of her memories. These were recent, jumbled, and fresh - the memories that Yuffie had put aside for sorting and figuring out later. They were all of Vincent. Vincent looking down at her as they rode the jet ski, his cape covering half of his face, crimson eyes intent as they gazed at her. Vincent in the hotel, holding her gently against him, his scent surrounding her, chasing away the horrible nightmares. Vincent's face so close to hers as they sat underneath the overhang. Vincent coldly ignoring her as he climbed up on the crates, leaving her in the rain.

Despite the predicament she was in, Yuffie found herself vainly reaching out for this last image of Vincent, watching to touch him, his hair, his shoulder, anything. She wanted to follow him up those damn crates. She wanted to yank on his ponytail until he stopped and waited for her. She didn't want him to leave her alone.

//Vincent...//

Something deep inside her seemed to shatter, and quite suddenly, she was in the sewers. The air smelled of rank sewage and decay. Moss and algae clung to the stone walls, having made their homes long before anyone had dared arrive to disturb their sanctuary. Heaps of trash and debris were floating around in the murky water, colliding and bouncing off of each other, begrudgingly changing their courses.

But Yuffie really didn't care about all the glorious crap she was seeing.

She only cared about one thing. Or, more accurately, eight things.

Cloud and the others were in the water, plowing through the nasty liquid with looks of determination on their faces despite the fact that the water was, for the most part, hovering around all of their shoulders, trying its hardest to take them under.

And, in the front and leading the pack, was Vincent Valentine.

Yuffie was ashamed to feel her heart swell with joy at the sight of him, the ends of his black hair and crimson headband trailing in the water behind him. How terrible of her, to ever have doubted her friends!

//They're coming to save me!//

Then, suddenly, the vision shattered like a dropped glass, but Yuffie didn't complain. She knew whatever she had just seen, the Hissers had seen as well. The tumultuous whirlwind in her mind was silent for the first time, distant, contemplating. Apparently, the arrival of AVALANCHE had thrown a nice, big wrench in their plans.

And, of course, Yuffie leapt at the chance to gloat about it.

"Did you guys see that? Huh? Huh?"

Silence.

"They're coming to save me! Don't I just have the bestest friends in the whole wide world?"

Silence.

“Yeah, they all looked pretty pissed off. If I were you guys, I would watch my ass. They’re about to find your oh-so-hidden faction down here in this shithole...”

Silence.

“That’s right, tremble and be afraid. Now you know how it feels...”

And the silence just droned on and on.

~owari chapter 25

Author's Notes: I know it took me forever and a freaking day, but, hey, I have 2 excuses! 1) I started school again 2) I dropped boiling hot wax on my left hand, encasing two of my fingers and burning the skin off of one of them. Needless to say, typing was out of the question for me for a while. -_- But I'm all better right now!

Just for reading this way-too-long chapter, here's a couple of treats, I guess you could call them that...

This is the pic (below) that inspired Ch. 23: Reno's story. ^_^ Just imagine the girl as Tifa and the guy as Reno.

Remember Montana? The male bounty hunter Fa-Li collided with in the last chapter? Well, here's Sanosuke from RK, the model I based Montana after.

