

Chapter Twenty-Six: The Prisoner's Release

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

It had been a long time since the Planet had sung.

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

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

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

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

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

This made them angry.

So very angry...

* * * *

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I live in a coal-mining town, dumbass."

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

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

"What's wrong?" Tifa called from the back.

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

//This can't be right//

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

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

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

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

"Yuffie's somewhere beyond this wall, isn't she?" Cloud asked evenly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Vincent?" Cloud asked.

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

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

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

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

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

Cloud frowned. "Are you sure?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Clenching and unclenching her sweaty hands, she was about to ask Titus what was wrong with the orb imbedded on the back of his hand suddenly started to pulse with a black-purple light, illuminating the farthest reaches of the tunnel and chilling the depths of Fa-Li's soul. There was an unspeakable darkness in that light, and it wasn't the normal kind of blazing/blaring/shining light. No, this light was *pulsing*. Like a heartbeat.

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

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

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

Then their world started to fall apart.

* * * * *

One with one final stroke of his arm, Vincent's head broke the surface of the water. He sucked in a breath of the strange-smelling air and nearly inhaled a clump of his hair in the process. Struggling to draw air into his aching lungs and shove his hair away from his face at the same time, he was only able to catch a brief glimpse of a dimly-lit, echoing cavern all around him before he sensed an ominous force moving beneath him in the water. He water-rolled to the side just in time because, 1 second later, the waterlogged forms of Cid and Barret broke the surface, fighting to pull air into their oxygen-deprived lungs. Cid was an amusing shade of blue, and Barret was hacking like he had a frog stuck in his throat. A split second later, Rude and Elena broke the surface, followed by Cloud and the bobbing form of Cait Sith and his moogles.

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

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

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

A couple of good, hearty coughs later, the young woman had her voice back and was staring wide-eyed up at Vincent through a soaking wall of brown bangs. "I swallowed...sewer water!" she gasped, shaking his arm for emphasis.

"I see that," he replied coolly.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Vincent! Are you alright?!" Tifa.

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

"I think the ground is shaking." Rude.

"Vincent, talk to us!" Cloud.

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

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

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

"You alright?!" he demanded of Vincent, voice loud so he could be heard over the roar of the falling rocks and the cries of his comrades.

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

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

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

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

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

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

As soon as he managed to lurch into the slightly quivering tunnel, Vincent sagged against the trembling rock wall, bracing himself with both hands and trying to catch his breath. Beside him, he could hear Cid, Barret, and Cait calling out to the others, urging them to hurry. Despite his worry, Vincent forced himself to breathe slowly and deeply, his eyes slipping closed. He could feel Chaos within him, only the demon was doing nothing but emitting this odd *crackling* energy, like a wolf before it launches itself at the throat of its victim. Was Chaos afraid of the earthquake? No, that wasn't it. It almost seemed as if the demon was in a standoff, but with what? Vincent knew the odd smell and the eerie green light had something to do with it, but...

He was so confused. He hated being confused.

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

Rock tunnel.

Hidden door.

Hallway with cells.

Door, like on a submarine.

Another hallway.

Hallway.

Hallway.

Hallway.

Endless hallway.

And the torture chamber. And Yuffie.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

...FAST...

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

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

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

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

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

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

God help them all.

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

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

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

Cait Sith raised his hand. "Me! I'll stay!"

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

"None taken!" Cait replied cheerfully.

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

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

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

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

Elena looked like she wanted to say something, but all the fight suddenly drained from her form. Her shoulders sagged, and she heaved a weary sigh, looking pitiful in her mud-covered suit. "I'll stay," she grumbled, trudging over to stand next to Cait. The robotic cat patted her shoulder sympathetically.

"Thank you, Elena," Cloud said sincerely.

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

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

Crimson eyes darting around the tunnel, he searched relentlessly for the hidden door he had seen in his mind. The smell in the air was starting to make him a little light-headed; it seemed to be more potent down here than it had been in the deep-sea complex. But it wasn't really that aggravating compared to Chaos, who was still emitting that crackling energy and just generally being a bothersome nuisance. It was extremely distracting, especially when Vincent needed to concentrate now more than ever, but he also noticed that when he focused on Chaos' unseen energy, it was almost as if he could feel the hidden door *pulling* him. However, it was a lot like creeping closer to a patch of quicksand; if he wasn't careful, he would get pulled under, and Chaos would take control of his body.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Nothing stirred in the cells to either side of them as Vincent led the way down the corridor, his eyes locked on the door at the end. A door with a circular handle, like one might find on a submarine. He was definitely on the right track. The *pulling* feeling was stronger, almost as if Yuffie herself was calling to him. Vincent could faintly hear the others conversing softly behind him, but all his attention was riveted on the door. When he got close enough, he simply ran the last ten feet to the door, filled with a sense of urgency. He wrapped both of his hands around the aged metal of the handle, flakes of rust falling to the metal floor. He twisted it experimentally, pleased to find that it wasn't that hard to turn. He could probably get it open all on his own.

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

//They must be looking for Reeve//

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

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

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

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

In front of them stood a young man.

He was leaning on one of the cell doors, his positioning allowing both trios to clearly see his profile. Short and pale with forgettable features, he wore a plain brown robe that covered almost every inch of his body and dragged on the floor. The

hood was bunched up behind his head, making him look even smaller than he already was. He didn't move, just stood there, separating Cloud's group from Vincent's.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Vincent stiffened.

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

Vincent glared at the man, his blood-red eyes locking onto the sanguine face. Those eyes could tell a lie and never flinch, but Vincent could **feel** the truth in the man's words. Chaos shifted inside him, and the man's eyes suddenly widened slightly, as if in surprise.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Door!" he gasped.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

He was just about to pull the trigger when a hissing sound suddenly crept through the room, unnaturally loud in the silence. Cid let out of a cry of surprise, and a split second later, something shifted in the shadows to the left of the platform. Vincent immediately readjusted his aim as a creature emerged from the darkness and into the circle of light. It could have been more than two feet tall, and it looked like nothing more than a shapeless mass of brown, glistening flesh. It had two short, stubby legs that forced it to waddle clumsily, and there were two limbs protruding from its ventral side that might have been arms, only these arms had dozens of other phalanges that were in constant motion, writhing back and forth as if alive. The thing hissed like a basket full of vipers.

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

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

"Shit!" Cid cried, swinging his spear in the direction of the approaching micro-army of hissing creatures. "Hurry it up, Vincent!"

Trying to ignore the things that were congregating behind the platform, Vincent quickly shot off Yuffie's other ankle shackle and aimed upwards at the chain holding up her right arm. He pulled the trigger, and the links snapped, Yuffie's arm flopping bonelessly down to her side, the remaining chain length jangling unpleasantly. By that time, some of the Hissers

were nearing the platform, and he had to fire into the writhing mass of them while still holding Yuffie's unconscious body against his to keep her from swinging off the platform.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You alright, old man?" Barret asked him gruffly.

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

* * * * *

"Your friend Vincent – he's quite a unique one, isn't he?" the blue-eyed man asked lightly, his voice still maddeningly cheerful. He turned his full attention to Cloud, Tifa and Rude. Goody.

"What do you mean 'unique'?" Cloud asked flatly. He had idea what the odd man was talking about, but he decided to play dumb.

"Quite a beast, isn't he?" the man asked, then laughed as if he had just told the funniest joke in the world. Cloud frowned at him and tightened his grip on the Ultima Weapon, not at all bothered by the sword's weight.

"And what's that supposed to mean?" Tifa demanded harshly from her place where she was guarding Cloud's left side, his fists held at the ready.

The man smiled cheekily. "Never mind. You wouldn't understand anyways."

Cloud grew tired of the stranger's shady ways. "Who are you anyways?" he snapped. "Why do you insist on standing in our way?"

The man's pale blue eyes were empty and innocent, his mouth an "O" of surprise. "Oh my," he lamented. "I would have thought the leader of AVALANCHE would have been a bit...quicker on his feet."

A tight smile came to Cloud's face. "It's been a long day."

"I can see that," the man said conversationally, folding his arms across his chest, two pale hands peeking out from the billowing sleeves of his robe. "Well, if you really have to know, my name is Ajax, and I'm not going to let you get any further into our lair."

Something suddenly occurred to Cloud, and without turning, he asked, "Rude? Is this—"

"No," Rude said immediately. "This is not the Running Man. The man I saw in the labs was taller, and he *felt* different from this one."

"My, my," the man exclaimed, sounding impressed. "Quite the perceptive one! I suppose one needs to be perceptive to be a Turk, don't they, Rude Dominicus Sheik?"

Rude didn't say anything, but Cloud heard him inhale sharply. As an unspoken rule, Turks weren't supposed to have last names. Their pasts were – for the lack of a better description – wiped out when they join Shinra.

"How did you know Rude's name?" Tifa snapped. Cloud could feel her tensing, like a panther ready to strike.

Ajax smiled again, still annoyingly cheerful as he began to saunter towards them casually. "I know everything about AVALANCHE and the Turks. It's only practical to know your enemies, isn't it?"

"So everyone down here considers us an enemy?" Cloud asked sharply. "Is that why you took Reeve and Yuffie from us?"

"I'm not at liberty to say," Ajax replied, one of those infuriatingly happy smiles still on his face. Now that he was closer, Cloud noticed that the stranger was actually shorter than he was, a true rarity. The slight build and the jovial disposition made Ajax seem to be around Yuffie's age, but his soulless, ancient eyes told a different story.

"Tell us where our friends are!" Tifa demanded, edging forward menacingly, burgundy eyes blazing with angry fire.

Ajax shrugged gracefully, a look of mock-sadness on his youthful face. "Why worry about them?" he asked. "They're probably already dead by now."

//He's lying// Cloud thought. //Vincent knows where Yuffie is. He knows she's not dead//

"Tell you what," Ajax continued. "Since you really don't have any reason to be here, how about if I just let you three turn around and walk away?"

Cloud shook his head. "You're a liar. You won't let us escape. You intend to kill us."

Another one of those shrugs. "You're right."

His words were followed by a loud pounding sound, like an abnormally powerful fist striking a metal wall. Immediately, the sound came again, and Cloud realized that behind Ajax, something was trying to break free of one of the cells. He could see the metal door bending outwards as whatever was in the cell kept slamming against the door over and over again.

"Um," Cloud started. "Ajax, you might want to look behind you."

Ajax just stood there, smiling serenely, blue eyes devoid of fear.

With a loud crash, the door suddenly flew from its hinges to strike the opposite wall with a metallic clang that echoed down the prison corridor. Cloud held his breath, muscles locking in place, fully expecting some humongous monster to come lumbering out the cell, roaring and screeching. But instead, what he got was the anticlimactic appearance of a man-

like creature that walked gracefully and quietly on two legs, just a human would. Only there was no way this thing was human. It was a pink, fleshy creature, completely smooth all over, with a bald head...and no face.

"Faceless Man," he breathed in shock. So this was one of the creatures Vincent and Yuffie had faced...

Ajax laughed softly as the creature came up behind him. "Is that what you call it? Very practical name, I must say."

Cloud watched the creature warily, wondering if it was going to attack Ajax before the swordsman realized that the blue-eyed man must have summoned the Faceless Man from its cell. It wouldn't lay a finger on Ajax unless it was ordered to. Damn.

"Surrender," Ajax ordered cheerfully. "And I'll spare your lives. There's no use fighting this creature." He gestured to the Faceless Man that had come to a stop at his right side. "It's very tough, let me assure you. You can hack it to pieces and beat it to a bloody pulp, and what's left of it will still keep coming after you. Bullets won't work either, Rude-san."

A quick glance to the left revealed that Rude had taken out his gun and was aiming it in the general direction of Ajax and the Faceless Man, his pale green eyes flat and emotionless.

Cloud was about to tell Ajax that he and friends were going to call his bluff when a low moaning rang through the prison corridor, chilling Cloud to the bone. Next to him, Tifa shivered violently, and Cloud had to suppress a shudder of his own as he looked down towards the end of the corridor – near the gaping door Vincent and the others had vanished through – and was horrified to see a pair of emaciated, pink arms sticking out the spaces between the cell bars, scrabbling at the air with raw, bleeding fingers. The pitiful moaning flowed down the tunnel like a foul stench, and this time Cloud didn't bother not trying to shudder.

Ajax suddenly turned his back to them and put his hands on his hips, staring down at the end of the tunnel, the Faceless Man waiting patiently at his side, still as the dead. "That thing's going to turn into an Evict," the blue-eyed man said conversationally. "I tell you, these creatures are so utterly—"

Cloud didn't even wait for the man to finish. His mouth was already opening and giving the signal to attack when his cry was cut short by a blast of light from the blade of the Ultima Weapon. He took one hand off the sword and covered his eyes to avoid being blinded. As he turned his face away from the light, he saw Tifa also covering her eyes.

//What the hell's going on?!//

A powerful tremor suddenly shook the ground, nearly throwing Cloud backwards into Rude. He stumbled and almost fell, the Ultima Weapon pulsing in his hand, showering the corridor with blinding white light intense enough to pierce the soul. He was blind.

"An interesting weapon you have there," Ajax suddenly commented, voice gone dead serious. Cloud couldn't see him because of the light and the violently trembling ground, but he thought that the man sounded WAY too goddamn calm for someone who was caught in the middle of an earthquake.

The tremors suddenly died down, though the metal floor beneath Cloud's feet was still quivering slightly, doing nothing for his balance as he took up his stance again, trying to ignore his blasted sword as it continued to pulse with light, as if it had some kind of luminescent heart within its cage of unnatural metal.

"Where did you get that sword?" Ajax demanded, visible only when the light wasn't pulsing and gone when it blazed brightly again.

"From a friend," Cloud said through gritted teeth, closing his eyes as the Ultima Weapon pulsed again.

"Liar," Ajax accused, suddenly sounding dangerously cheerful again. "Your 'friend' never would have given that sword to you willingly. That blade is linked to the Planet itself. It feels its pain." He cocked his head to the side curiously. "And it feels your pain as well, doesn't it, Cloud-san?"

Whatever else Ajax might have wished to say was drowned out by both the pulsing light from the Ultima Weapon and the arrival of another tremor, this one the most violent yet, strong enough to send Cloud reeling into the metal wall, his shoulder armor clanging against the cell door and sending jarring pain running down his arm. He threw one hand up and felt his fingers wrap blindly around the bars of the small cell window, a small act of self-preservation that kept him from tumbling artlessly to the shifting metal floor.

Cloud's world was just one massive nightmare. The glaring light streaming from the Ultima Weapon's blade blinded him, and he desperately wanted to see how Tifa and Rude were holding up, but he didn't dare release his deathgrip on the cell's

bars. With his sword still in his hands, it would be dangerous for him to be tumbling all over the place. He could end up impaling himself or one of his friends with the blade for all he knew. It wasn't a perky thought, so he stayed where he was, letting himself be flung against the wall left and right. One of the lights embedded in the ceiling overhead burst, raining down stinging glass shards that sliced into Cloud's bare arms and opened up a thin cut on one of his cheeks. He squeezed his eyes shut even tighter and gritted his teeth to avoid screaming in frustration of his own helplessness.

A particularly violent tremor suddenly seemed to birth itself right underneath his feet, flinging him to the side so roughly that his head slammed against the metal wall. He saws stars for an instant before darkness threatened to consume his vision. His eyes began to close, and it took an extreme force of will to keep them open. Everything was lost in a haze of fuzzy darkness, like a blank TV screen with only the sound turned on, and then his head cleared.

Vincent Valentine was standing before him, and the limp form of Yuffie Kisaragi was in his arms.

"Is she alright?" Cloud tried to ask, but he choked on the heartbeat that had leapt into this throat. All that emerged from his mouth was strangled wheeze, not a very charming sound.

"We have to get out of here," Vincent said, voice sounding more urgent than Cloud had ever heard. "This place is going to fall down around our ears."

Cloud could only nod silently and gesture weakly with the end of the faintly glowing Ultima Weapon, indicating that Vincent should lead the way.

//Shit...Reno would be having a field day if he could see me now...//

It was only as he was stumbling away from the wall that he noticed Ajax and the Faceless Man had disappeared.

* * * * *

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

"Where are we going, Titus?" she asked fearfully as another tremor shook the ground, nearly spilling her onto the rock floor.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Titus reappeared in the doorway, the limp form of President Reeve of Neo-Shinra flung over one shoulder. The man looked lifeless. Without even looking at her, Titus kept on striding down the tunnel, heading deeper into the earth. Fa-Li, of course, followed him, talking nervously.

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

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

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

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

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

"What are you going to do with him?"

"Dump him into the Lifestream."

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

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

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

Titus didn't reply to her question, and they continued walking deeper down into the tunnel, deeper into the earth, down to a place somewhere between heaven and hell.