

## Chapter Thirty-Two: Scare Tactics

*"If I told him not to go down to the cellar, you know where he would tell me to shove it." Cloud Strife*

THIS CHAPTER IS DEDICATED TO INDARKNESS, WINNER OF THE 7777 COUNTER-FIC PRIZE, WHOSE ONLY REQUEST WAS FOR ME TO WORK MORE OF "SINK"! DOMO ARIGATOU! ^^

"You have failed," she said icily.

Montana couldn't resist scowling at her back even though he knew it was not his place to be angry. "I know," he mumbled.

Jezebel made no reply to his begrudging admission, but Montana really hadn't expected one. Though a sensuous woman when it suited her fancy, Jezebel was all business when it came to fulfilling the Master's commands. Montana had been her "partner" for years and knew that her condescending attitude was perfectly normal, but...still...he hated it when she actually had a REAL reason for talking down to him.

He had failed. Miserably.

Heedless of the rain rolling down his face, Montana allowed his green eyes to remain riveted on Jezebel's back though he kept a careful watch of her feet and hands. Sometimes she liked to teach him "lessons" when he did something she found displeasing. Montana was sure Jezebel's hand-to-hand fighting abilities were not superior to his, but the woman was full of nasty surprises. At least she didn't have her scythe with her...

"Why are you lingering back there?" she suddenly demanded, half-turning so that he could see her profile, which was nearly hidden underneath the strands of saturated brown hair that clung to the sides of her face. "Come here and stand next to me."

Montana snorted, making it clear he didn't trust the woman's intentions, but he began walking warily towards her, bare feet sinking into puddles that had gathered on the cement of the rooftop, little pools of quivering raindrops huddling together as if cold. He stopped slightly behind Jezebel, careful to keep a certain distance away from her.

"I won't beat your pathetic ass this time," she said without turning around. "But we are in a near-crisis situation here, Montana. Failure simply isn't an option."

Shoving his hands in the pockets of his baggy white pants, the man muttered, "Yeah, yeah, I know. I took it for granted that the Myrmidon would be able to eliminate the two at the bar. My fault. Totally my fault."

"Glad to hear you still have your wits about you," Jezebel deadpanned. "Now come HERE."

Though he bristled at the direct order, Montana sauntered up beside her like a dog that had just been admonished for stealing a biscuit. From their vantage point on top of a tall hotel building, he and Jezebel had a clear view of the street below them, wide and glistening with rain. He had found Jezebel in the restaurant district, standing alone on top of this building. What for, he didn't know, but he had a feeling he was about to find out.

"Look over there," Jezebel ordered, pointing to the brightly lit building across the street, oblivious to the rivulets of rain streaming down her muscular arm.

Frowning, Montana looked where her finger indicated and found a simple two-story wooden building with the words "Moonbeam Café" emblazoned above the doorway in large block letters. Below it, in smaller script, read, "Restaurant and bar."

"It's a restaurant," Montana said carefully. If Jezebel had hoped to make him feel inferior and stupid by asking him a trick question, she was certainly succeeding.

Jezebel glanced at him out of the corner of her eye, her condescending tone suddenly escalating to an even higher degree than normal. "Don't tell me you don't sense who is in there?"

A sour expression came to the man's face. "I don't want to play these games with you," he grumbled irritably, then decided to take a shot in the dark. "Is AVALANCHE in there?"

"Yes. As well as Titus."

"What?!" Montana practically yelled, whirling on his companion with a look of unadulterated shock on his handsome face. "You're kidding me? He's thrown in with AVALANCHE?!"

"No, idiot," Jezebel snapped, shoving some of her waterlogged hair away from her eyes as she explained, "As you know, my mission was to come here to Junon and destroy Titus as soon as he surfaced. Unfortunately, though, AVALANCHE beat me to the punch and somehow managed to kidnap both him and his infamous little whore before I could even get close to them."

Montana's hands clenched into fists as he glared at the restaurant with renewed vigor. "So Titus is in there...as a prisoner?"

"That certainly seems to be the case, but as ironic as this situation may be, it greatly hinders our plans. Our mission is to take out Titus and all those loyal to him, but so long as he's safe within the womb of AVALANCHE, we can't touch him."

"But aren't we supposed to wipe out AVALANCHE as well?"

"In the end, I suppose. But that is not our primary objective. Besides, remember the Master gave strict orders that Yuffie Kisaragi is not to be harmed."

Montana bared his teeth in what might have been a smile, but it came out more like a wicked snarl. "Just one little brat. The rest of them are cannon fodder. We should just barge in there and destroy Titus while all of them are still unaware of our presence here!"

Icy brown eyes suddenly locked onto his face. "Your lust for revenge clouds your mind, Montana. You've said many moronic things in the past, but calling AVALANCHE 'cannon fodder' has to be one of your more dim-witted comments. AVALANCHE and the Turks may be many things, but 'cannon fodder' is most certainly not one of them."

"Hey!" Montana protested angrily. "I was just—"

"Shut up!" Jezebel snapped. "Since you don't have your head screwed on straight, I'M in charge of this mission since I know that if I surrender control over to YOUR hands, you'll probably fuck everything up! Timing is vital right now, Montana. Our underground lair has collapsed, and the Master is in the process of relocating the faction via the subterranean tunnels. AVALANCHE not only infiltrated our lair, but they rescued Yuffie Kisaragi in the process, and the President of Neo-Shinra has gone missing from his prison cell. In case you haven't noticed, our world is falling apart around our ears."

"I KNOW all that!" Montana exclaimed, green eyes flashing with indignation. "I KNOW timing is vital, and I KNOW what's happening with the faction!"

"Then quit acting so stupid," Jezebel seethed in a frighteningly cold voice. "AVALANCHE will not be releasing Titus until they receive answers to all the questions I'm certain they have."

"Titus won't talk," Montana said immediately.

"His bitch might, though," Jezebel countered, her gaze drifting back towards the bar. "Though I'm fairly certain AVALANCHE won't torture him, remember that Titus has no affiliation with our faction any longer. Spilling all our secrets probably won't faze him in the slightest."

"That's why we need to silence him before he does!"

Jezebel scowled. "You're not thinking again! With a group this large, the two of us, despite our strength, are at a tactical disadvantage. What we need to do is whittle away at their numbers. If we destroy the weaker ones first, the morale of the remaining others will drop, making them easy targets."

Montana frowned at his companion and then in the direction of the restaurant across the street, an establishment filled to the brim with his enemies. Since they were all unawares, Montana believed it would be *\*tactically\** prudent to attack while the element of surprise was still theirs for the taking. But...

"You make it all sound so simple and easy," he grumbled to his partner, crouching agilely on the rooftop. He always felt like too big of a target when he was standing on a high place.

Jezebel remained on her feet, infernally unafraid and confident. "It *\*is\** simple," she sniffed disdainfully. "However, this isn't going to be easy...not one bit..."

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Titus grimaced as he shifted position, the cold cement floor of the cellar scraping underneath the soles of his boots. His arms cramped terribly, just as they had been for the past five hours. It seemed that every time he was able to ease the ache out of one muscle, another would contract and freeze, putting him in a world of discomfort. Of course, Titus had been chained, bound, and tortured in the past; this was small beans compared to some of his more...*"exotic"* experiences.

Stretching his long legs out in front of him, his eyes roved around the cellar for the millionth time, taking in the dusty shelves built into the walls, the large crates filled with who-knew-what, and the wooden stairs leading up to the door he knew was locked and deadbolted from the other side. To top it all off, he could sense that the door was guarded by two AVALANCHE members. Which ones he didn't know, but he could feel their calculating minds like thick-plated steel flattened against the cellar door – a metaphysical barrier.

He and Fa-Li wouldn't be escaping anytime soon.

Titus' eyes drifted from his dark surroundings to the woman bound to the chair in the center of the room. Since her back was to him, he could see nothing of her face. However, the image of a wilted flower came to mind as he traced the curve of her shoulders, which sagged in defeat, and her long dark hair, tangled and dirty as it hung down her back and around her head like the hands of an ancient crone, gnarled and knobby.

Right after the tragic blowout with that red-haired Turk, Fa-Li had wept softly, half out of terror and half out of something else that Titus didn't want to even bother attempting to discern. He could understand the terror part, though; never before in his life had he seen such a maniacal gleam of animosity as the one he had beheld in the Turk's eyes. Keep a beast locked up in a cage for a long time, and it becomes wild with the need for escape. Human emotions were much the same way, and Titus could feel the Turk festering with such hostility and rage that was ready to overflow at any second.

//The proverbial walking time bomb. There's one in every group.//

Titus wished he could distance his own emotions from the situation, but he found it virtually impossible when Fa-Li filled the room with the bittersweet musk of her secret internal agony. During the course of their relationship, Titus had never seen or heard her cry. But even though she shed no tears for \*him\*, she certainly wasted no time dissolving into hysterics over that redheaded Turk. Her sobs had begun the moment AVALANCHE had left the cellar to pursue their spastic colleague.

Titus was surprised how much that bothered him.

He had to admit, however, that the woman bound to the chair five feet away from the tips of his boots barely resembled the promiscuous creature with whom he had had a torrid love affair for two years. Her personality had done a complete one-eighty within the past few days, and Titus knew that the individual who was his only companion in this dark, dank cellar had to be the woman who had hid behind Fa-Li's expertly constructed mask for years and years. Gone was the woman who lived only for sensual pleasures, and in her place was this weary, melancholy creature that wept for a past that Titus knew not an inkling of.

A painful cramp suddenly spread up the entire length of his back, and Titus sharply twisted his body in an effort to ease the aggravating discomfort. The metal of his handcuffs clanged against the pipe he was chained to, and Fa-Li stirred.

"Titus?" she asked in a low, timid voice.

The man grit his teeth to suppress the urge to tell her to shut up. He was in no mood to talk to her at the moment.

A short sigh escaped her lips, a lonely sound in the silent cellar. "It's fine if you don't want to talk to me ever again. I don't really care." A brief pause, and then her voice came in a hushed, fearful whisper, "That man is going to kill me, Titus."

He could hear the tears in her voice, but he still gave no reply.

"I never thought I'd see him again after all these years," she continued, nasal voice trembling and echoing against his wall of stillness. "It's been such a long time. I knew he had joined the Turks and everything, but..."

"Your obsession with Turks," Titus stated flatly. "Aside from seduction, the Turks were the only other things you had knowledge of. Now I know why..."

//All those years...//

Fa-Li's shoulders trembled as a shudder ran through her body. "You're so cruel to me, Titus. You have no heart whatsoever."

//...all her men...//

Titus replied disinterestedly, "Believe what you wish, but you'll get no pity from me."

//...she was searching for him...//

"I never expected any pity from \*you\*, Titus," she told him harshly, not bothering to disguise the way her tears warped her voice. "You who's so cold and callous and distant! You were never like any of the other men..."

//...searching for a man with his face...//

"Then why did you even become my lover?" Titus asked with forced offhandedness. "I'm nothing at all like that \*man\*."

//...a man who was just like him...//

"His name is Reno," Fa-Li snapped coldly, a bit of steel sharpening her voice. "Reno Akuma Mitsuru."

//...the only one that ever meant anything to her...//

"You followed me around because you knew I would be close to the Turks," Titus said in a voice that seemed soft and harsh at the same time. "And all the while, you knew that if we were discovered, you would come face to face with the person who wants you dead more than anyone else on the face of the Planet. Masochism at its best. You're a real stickler for suffering, you know?"

"I know!" Fa-Li whisper-screamed, jerking against her ropes in obvious irritation. "I love suffering! Is that what you want to hear, Titus?! I loved watching Reno from afar...and thinking about him every goddamn day of my miserable life! I love being so afraid of him that I wish I could just DIE right now rather than face him again! And I love being locked up in this hellhole with a bastard like you!! There, I admitted it! Are you HAPPY now...Ti...tus?"

As Fa-Li proceeded to dissolve into weeping again, Titus glared at the back of her chair, at the ropes binding her, at the trembling of her slender shoulders. His eyes narrowed, and a cold feeling settled in the pit of his stomach.

"You really are a masochist," he told her flatly. "You're still in love with him, aren't you?"

"Yes!" she declared tearfully, voice raw with emotion. "God...I am, aren't I? I can't stand that he hates me. I...I...he's still so beautiful.....wonder where he got those scars from? He didn't have them before..."

Titus did not deign to reply, and the silence fell thickly between them. He felt Fa-Li pulling away from the conversation, away from the little slice of time called Here and Now, as she rapidly descended into a well of memories that housed a pain she seemed to revel in. The only other person Titus knew that adored the intensity of pain was Ajax, and the current High Priest was...twisted, to say the least. Not exactly a compliment to be dumped on the same boat with him, as far as Titus was concerned.

Closing his eyes, the man leaned back until he felt the pipe's metallic coolness against the small of his back and the rough texture of the wall against his skull. The darkness behind his eyelids was clean and unbroken, unlike the world around him, which was tainted and falling apart more and more with each passing second. AVALANCHE. The impending collapse of the faction. His humiliating capture. And, of course, there was Fa-Li...but there was always Fa-Li.

//Or should I say...Alette?// Titus thought with no small amount of bitterness. //Everything's being shot to hell, and I find out that the one person I thought I knew inside and out is a complete stranger. But then again...how many people know about me? No one. Not a conscious decision of mine, though. That's simply the way it has to be.//

Titus resisted the urge to sigh. Loneliness crashed down on him as it did from time to time, but he felt it even more acutely locked down here in a dark cellar with only a single light bulb waiting placidly to pierce the blackness and a disheartened Fa-Li as his sole companion. He could feel the buzzing energy of the two sentries at the door – whoever they were – and up above in the restaurant itself, he felt a mass of gently seething, contorting power that had to be the remaining members of AVALANCHE...all together in one room.

Eyes still closed, Titus allowed a grim smile to come to his lips. AVALANCHE was plotting something...

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After fifteen minutes of arguing, Yuffie came to the conclusion that Cloud Strife was not one of her favorite people.

Sure, it had been great when she first waltzed down the stairs clad in a pair of denim shorts and an oversized sweater than kept falling off her shoulders. Ecstatic were her friends. Yuffie received smiles from just about everyone and a massive, bone-crushing bear hug from Barret that left her feeling like a tube of oversqueezed toothpaste afterwards. But she loved every minute of it. She loved her friends. She loved the rain. She loved her narrow-ass shoulders and tiny feet. All was great. All was good.

Until Cloud decided he wanted to be an assmunch.

"I said 'no,' Yuffie," he repeated for what had to be the millionth time in a row.

Yuffie barely repressed the urge to scream and snarled through clenched teeth, "I KNOW that! I heard you the first time!"

Mako blue eyes glared at her from underneath thick strands of blonde hair. "Then why do you keep asking me?"

"Because you're being stupid!" Yuffie blurted, unable to restrain her angry words.

"Yuffie," Red XIII calmly spoke up from his position sprawled on top of one of the tables (with Kyra's permission, of course). "I'm sure Cloud believes it's imprudent for you to go alone to speak with your kidnappers. You've just recently recovered from your...illness, and facing the Running Man this soon might be too big of a shock for you."

"His name is TITUS, okay?" Yuffie snapped, her quick tongue leaping at the slightest chance to argue. "And you don't understand, I HAVE to talk to him!"

Cloud glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "When did you get on a first name basis with our enemy, Yuffie?" His voice was cold as ice.

Yuffie's eyes flared at what he was implying. Angrily, she sprung up from her chair, small hands clenched into fists. "Are you suggesting I'm a traitor?!" she yelled at her leader from across the table. "You haven't even heard all of what happened down there, and already you're jumping to conclusions!"

"Are you saying that the Running Man ISN'T our enemy after all?" Cloud challenged, staring hard at her. "I find that difficult to believe."

A scream of pure frustration bubbled up in Yuffie's throat, but she stubbornly swallowed it, only to have it scald her stomach like acid. "You still think I'm just a stupid little brat, don't you?!" she demanded, eyes riveted on Cloud though her desperate question didn't just apply to him. "Why can't you believe me?!"

"Yuffie," Cloud sighed, all the anger draining from his eyes, the two-dimensional emotion unable to withstand the pent-up force of Yuffie's very real pain.

To her embarrassment, the young ninja found herself on the verge of tears. Dammit! In her opinion, nothing ruined a perfectly good ranting session like a bout of untimely tears streaming from her angry eyes. But she couldn't help herself! She needed to talk to Titus, and she just wasn't getting through to anyone!

"Please, Cloud, just trust me!" she exclaimed, some of her hostility leaking away now that it didn't have Cloud's mutual anger to thrive on. "Please, let me talk to Titus!"

The AVALANCHE leader shook his spiky head stubbornly. "No, Yuffie. I can't let you do that."

A fine but intense trembling began in her body, originating in the pit of her stomach and spreading outwards to all her limbs with the vigor of a wild forest fire. The room wavered around her, lost in the force of her frustration, and she felt her muscles tense with anger. She was going to scream now. Boy, was she EVER going to scream!

Cold, metallic fingers suddenly fastened around her arm, their owner careful not to pierce clothing or flesh with the sharp digits. Biting back her scream, Yuffie whirled to see Vincent staring up at her with cool eyes, their crimson irises accented by the blood-red bandana that peeked through the darkness of his hair, the ends of it trailing down his back. His claw lightly gripped her arm just above the elbow, the tarnished gold inhumanly steady against the angry quakes coursing through her limbs.

Fully expecting Vincent to scold her like a little child, Yuffie had a harsh reply armed and ready to lash out at him. Only, Vincent didn't reprimand her. There wasn't any "Sit down, Yuffie" or "Behave, Yuffie." All he did was stare up at her with those frighteningly calm eyes of his, and for the first time, Yuffie noticed that he had flecks of some darker color forming a flowery shape around his pupil, like abstract designs dancing an endless waltz upon a crimson lake.

Abruptly, she felt her anger flow away from her like rain down a pane of glass. The sensation left her body feeling drained and unstable, and she plopped down in her uncomfortable wooden chair with a sigh. She stared morosely at the surface of the wooden table before she realized that everyone in the room was gazing at her like she had grown a second head. Flushing, she slumped in her seat and glared at the room's occupants.

//Gawd. They just don't understand! How can I convince them to let me talk to Titus?//

For some reason unbeknownst to her, Yuffie felt a driving need to speak with her former kidnapper. Sure, he had left her to be tortured by those nasty Hissers, and Yuffie would never forgive him for that, but Titus had also been the one who told

her to keep all her hidden knowledge away from the grasp of the Hissers, something that Yuffie liked to think she had succeeded at. All that kidnapper-sadistic-bastard stuff put aside, Titus didn't seem that THAT bad of a guy. He sure as hell didn't seem to like the "Master" – something that earned him a brownie point in Yuffie's book. And second...well...

//Nope. Titus only has one brownie point...but I still need to talk to him!//

"Let's look at this from a logical perspective," Vincent suddenly spoke up, and Yuffie glanced at him in surprise. Mr. My-Mouth-Has-Been-Figuratively-Stapled-Shut was actually going to say something for a change?

"Just what chances of success do you think you'll have interrogating the Running Man?" Vincent asked Cloud, voice deep and calm.

Cloud lifted an eyebrow and scratched his head, the leather of his glove glaringly dark against his golden spikes. "Honestly? Slim to none."

"Then I don't see why there is any objection to Yuffie talking to the Running Man," Vincent stated bluntly. "Apparently some type of 'bond' was forged between them during Yuffie's time down there. Out of everyone here, I think he would be more likely to talk to her."

"Still don't like it," Barret grumbled, folding his arms across his massive chest. "Jes ain't good to be around those kinds of people for so long."

Yuffie blinked, still trying to register the fact that Vincent had actually stood up for her. What was next? The Apocalypse? "What do you mean by that, Barret? It's not like dumb ol' Titus is going to try and KIDNAP me again."

"Yuffie," Cloud spoke up, eyes serious. "The main reason we're not letting you talk to the Running Man alone is because every enemy we encountered from his faction seems to be skilled in some type of mind control. Those brown creatures Barret described did SOMETHING to Cid that caused him to become mentally unbalanced. Ajax and Montana are both able to summon creatures without spoken words. I've fought against the Running Man in battle, Yuffie. He was a tough opponent to beat even though the odds were in our favor. Who knows what else he's capable of?"

"You think Yuffie's under some type of mind control?" Tifa asked worriedly from her place at the bar. Behind her, Kyra was cleaning glasses and trying to appear as if she wasn't listening carefully to everything that transpired in the room.

"Mind control!" Yuffie exclaimed incredulously before Cloud could reply. "That's a bunch of BS, Cloud, and you KNOW it! Do I LOOK like I'm under mind control?"

"It could be passive mind control," Rude suggested. He was seated on one of the bar stools next to Tifa.

Yuffie spun and wagged a finger at the Turk. "Be quiet, Rudey-poo! You're just making that up!"

"Back off, brat," Reno snapped, coming to his friend's defense.

Yuffie had to twist around in her chair yet again to get a clear view of the dark corner Reno was lurking in, slouched in one lonely chair with half of his face shrouded in shadows. The ninja had a nice, witty comeback ready and waiting, but for some reason, she was reluctant to snap at Reno. Vincent had filled her in on what little he knew about Reno's emotional condition, showing her the bruise on his neck to prove just how unhinged the Turk really was. Looking at those aquamarine eyes glittering at her from the shadows, Yuffie didn't detect any sign of madness, but still...she wasn't too keen on the idea of Reno blowing up in her face so she opted to keep her mouth shut and instead turned her attention back to Cloud.

"Pleeease, let me talk to Titus," she begged, putting careful emphasis on the first syllable and trying to appear as innocent as possible. The "Angel Yuffie" face always worked on strangers, but there was always the chance that Cloud would prove to be impervious to her charms.

The swordsman's resolute expression wavered slightly.

//It's working!//

"Please, Cloud," she whispered imploringly, clasping her hands together in front of her face - the visage of purity.

The blonde's stoic countenance broke completely as he threw his gloved hands up in the air in exasperation. "Dammit, Yuffie!" he cursed her with a strange breed of weary affection.

"Please!" she exclaimed, just for overkill's sake.

Cloud's eyebrows snapped together in a half-hearted attempt to redeem himself by acting stern. "Fine! You can talk to the Running Man, but we're all going to be down there with you, watching his every move."

Yuffie hesitated for a split second. She wasn't sure Titus would talk to her in the presence of the others, but it was worth a try...

"Alright!" she declared. "You got yourself a deal, Mr. Strife!"

Cloud just glared at her with a sour expression on his handsome face.

A stray thought interrupted Yuffie's session of cheeky grinning. "Wait a minute! You've got to shake on it!"

Practically scrambling out of her chair, Yuffie lurched forward so that her stomach was pressed flush against the plastic tabletop as she strained to reach Cloud with her not-so-long arms.

"Yuffie!" Barret roared. "Girl, get offa the table! You gonna get in trouble!"

"People eat on that, Yuffie," Red added.

The young woman cheerfully ignored them and stuck her hand in Cloud's face. "Shake," she ordered.

In spite of Barret's outcry, Cloud didn't seem at all bothered by the fact that Yuffie was sprawled across the entire length of the table, waving her hand under his nose.

"You could have just got up and walked around," he told her, a smile curving his lips as he shook the young ninja's hand. His grip swallowed her fingers.

"That would have been boring, though," Yuffie told him with a grin, squeezing his hand as tight as she could and trying not to cry uncle when Cloud squeezed back. The swordsman had always been fun person to play "Mercy" with.

Cloud's blue eyes laughed silently at her with a brotherly friendliness that Yuffie had unfortunately been deprived of during her entire youth. No brothers, no sisters, not very many friends. Just Yuffie, her endless adventures, and her materia. How lonely she had been. Yuffie never understood the full extent of her peculiar solitude until she lay there on the table staring into Cloud's Mako-bright eyes and wondering how she had ever been happy without friends like these.

She reached out and gave Cloud's spikes a playful touse before sliding back into her seat, nearly kicking Vincent in the face on her way back. "So? Are we ready to go down there?" she asked.

Barret held up one big hand. "Wait a minute. What are we gonna do about the old man?"

Everyone glanced around awkwardly, an action that was needless since Cid was guarding the cellar door with Elena and Cait Sith. There was no way the pilot would be able to hear their conversation.

A grim expression came to Cloud's face as he said, "I know he's...unbalanced right now, but so far we have no grounds for making him stay away from the Running Man." A mirthless smile curved his lips. "If I told him not to go down to the cellar, you know where he would tell me to shove it. We'll just have to keep an eye on him and watch for any erratic behavior."

"Sounds like we're talking about some kind of loon here," Reno commented dryly. "What are you gonna do next? Put him in a straitjacket?"

Cloud's eyes barely flicked in Reno's direction. "No," was all he said. No one else added any other comments; they were too busy concentrating on not letting their gazes drift to the redheaded Turk.

"Don't forget that—" Cloud started to say.

"Hey!" Reno snapped, suddenly unfolding himself from his chair in a motion so quick that it appeared he had simply snapped his body forward.

Cloud frowned at the Turk, or rather, at the wall just behind the Turk. "What is it?"

Reno stalked up to the table, all lanky limbs and flashing eyes. "It's common courtesy to look someone in the eye when you're talking to them," he growled, crowding in between Vincent and Barret and forcefully slamming his palms flat down on the table.

"What are you talking about, Reno?" Cloud asked tiredly.

"I'm talking about how everyone is avoiding me like I'm the bubonic f\*\*\*ing plague!" he snapped, words dripping with bitterness.

Neither Barret nor Yuffie had a smart alec remark to make about that one. Yuffie, for one, didn't want Reno turning his anger in her direction. Cloud was leader; he could take care of whatever "concerns" Reno wanted to voice. Besides...what the Turk said was true. Everyone HAD been avoiding him, Yuffie included, even though she hadn't been there when he "snapped." She heard it had been terrible, though. For her, the bruise on Vincent's pale throat was all the "terrible" she needed to see.

Cloud raised his eyes and locked gazes with Reno's angry, bitter one. "Would you rather us swamp you with our heartfelt concerns so you can rudely turn our kindness away?" he asked flatly.

Reno straightened, eyes widening almost imperceptibly.

"It's the kind of thing you would do, Reno," Cloud continued. "You don't like people near you when you're feeling...vulnerable."

A spark of annoyance slunk back into Reno's eyes, but it was a mere shadow of the fury that had dwelt there seconds before. "I'm not vulnerable," he growled half-heartedly.

"Fine," Cloud said levelly. "You're not vulnerable."

Reno gave an exasperated sigh and flung his pale hands up in the hair. "Whatever! I just want everyone to know that I'm not going to need a goddamn straitjacket either."

Cloud nodded. "That's good to hear."

"DAMN good to hear," Yuffie echoed before she could stop herself. She clamped her hands over her mouth in embarrassment. Geez! Reno just had a nervous breakdown, and here she was harassing him about being a fruit loop!

To her surprise, though, the Turk only laughed and tugged her hair gently. "Don't worry about it, brat."

Yuffie decided she wanted to be bold and craned her neck backwards so she could stare up at Reno. "I'll let the 'brat' go this time, but only 'cause you went bonkers," she teased.

A grin split Reno's upside-down face, and he pinched her cheek. Hard. "Fine by me." He turned his attention back to the others, laughter draining from his face. "Can we get this over with?"

Cloud nodded and rose from his chair, face dead serious. "Remember, Reeve is our priority. We NEED to find out what happened to him. All other things have to take a backseat for now."

No one answered. The sound of chairs scraping against the green carpeting filled the room as Yuffie and the others began to file out of the restaurant area. Yuffie clenched and unclenched her hands unconsciously, realizing that she was nervous.

//I finally get to talk to Titus. Gawd...what the hell am I going to say to him? Oh well...I'll figure it out later...//

Yuffie waved to Kyra as she left the main room. The auburn-haired woman waved back, pristine towel trailing in the air. She had been polishing the same glass for half an hour now. Apparently, AVALANCHE's conversations were more stimulating than those of your average customer.

Then Yuffie found herself surrounded by darkness and silence as she began the trek down to the cellar. Cautiously, she glanced around her to see that all her friends slipping on their "game faces," all emotion draining from their eyes. Rude had his sunglasses back on, and Yuffie imagined that Red's one golden eye had a colder, more bestial gleam to it. Even Tifa's normally open expression looked empty. How depressing.

//Can't go showing emotions to the enemy, I guess. I don't think it matters for me, though. Titus has already seen me at my crybaby worst.//

A familiar scent drifted to her nose like the lingering musk of cologne after its owner had long departed. Yuffie turned to find Vincent walking a couple of steps behind her. His face was set in unyielding lines, and strands of ebony hair fell across his forehead, making his crimson eyes flare as bright as fire against the dark strands. No change of expression needed there. Vincent was still Vincent, regardless of the situation. There was a strange comfort in that.

Yuffie fell back to walk beside him. "Hey, Vinnie," she whispered, figuring if she was going to break the unspoken vow of silence, she might as well do it quietly. She didn't know why she was bothering to talk to Vincent anyways; it wasn't like he was such a sparkling conversationalist.

He glanced at her out of the corner of his eye. "Are you alright, Yuffie?"

She blinked. "Of course," she said, puzzled. "I'm just fine and dandy. Why?"

The corners of Vincent's mouth twitched in what was probably a frown. "The Running Man is very dangerous, Yuffie."

Yuffie sighed as she maneuvered out of the way to avoid a collision with a small table adorned with a vase and one lonely white flower. The motion put her arm right up against Vincent's, her shoulder brushing the warm solidity of his bicep.

"I KNOW he's dangerous, Vinnie," she grumped. "He DID kidnap me, you know."

"But then you went and made friends with him," Vincent pointed out, voice flat and emotionless.

Yuffie scowled. "Titus is not my friend! And if you think he's so dangerous, why did you tell Cloud that it was okay for me to talk to him in the first place?"

Vincent just snorted and stared straight ahead. Yuffie was amused; she had never heard Vincent snort before. He did it with slightly more grace than others, but it still sounded goofy coming from such a "dark" and "mysterious" man. Mystery men were not meant to snort like pigs.

So tickled was Yuffie that she grinned cheekily and nudged Vincent with her elbow. "Aww! You're jealous, aren't you, Vinnie?" she taunted good-naturedly.

Vincent's eyes widened with indignation.

Yuffie fluffed up her shoulder-length brown hair, preening melodramatically. "Yes, I know everyone wants a foxy lady like me, but you're going to have to wait in line just like everyone else!"

"Ain't nothing foxy about your skinny ass," Reno muttered from behind her.

Yuffie whirled and pinned the Turk with dark glare, all psyched to chew him out when Vincent suddenly took hold of her arm.

"We're here," he informed her, gaze riveted straight ahead. "If you're interested in going to see your friend, you'd best get up front with Cloud."

"Titus is not my friend," Yuffie repeated grumpily, moving forward as Vincent's warm fingers slid away from her arm. Actually, she would have much rather hung out in the back with Mr. Stony Silence Valentine and Royal Pain in the Arse Reno, but she figured if she was going to get any chance of talking to Titus before someone else butted in, she had to be on top of things.

Slinking past Barret and Tifa and hopping clear over Red (much to the lion-like beast's displeasure), Yuffie made her way to the front to see Cloud conversing with Cid, Elena, and Cait.

The young swordsman had a half-worried/half-stern expression on his face as he addressed Cid. "Are you sure you're alright?"

Cid's blue eyes flashed darkly, and he was just about to reply when Elena and Cait interrupted him, chorusing, "He's f\*\*\*ing fine so leave him the f\*\*\* alone."

Cloud blinked, looking stunned. Cid just snorted and puffed resentfully on his cigarette.

"Cait and I asked him the same thing, too. That was the answer he gave us," Elena explained dryly, absently fidgeting with her blond hair, tucking it behind her ears and then untucking it the next second. Her brown eyes were wider than normal, darting around constantly as if seeing so many people gathered in one hallway unnerved her. She more closely resembled a nervous rabbit than the tough Turk she often tried to be.

//Great// Yuffie thought, wiping her sweaty palms on her shorts. //Is everyone gonna have an anxiety attack down there? Titus is going to think we're a bunch of weenies.//

"Hey, Yuffie," Cait chimed, sitting casually on his moogle and tossing his megaphone from paw to paw. "What are you doing up here with us losers?" He grinned impishly. "Shouldn't you be back there chilling with Viiiiiiiiincent?"

Yuffie's eyes bulged at the little bugger's audacity. "Shut up! You're just jealous because I find Vinnie better company than YOU!"

Cloud held up a gloved hand, expression sterner than Yuffie had ever seen. She immediately shut her mouth, back instinctively snapping ramrod straight like a soldier at attention. Geez, Cloud was really serious about this interrogation thing...

"Barret and Cait," the AVALANCHE leader ordered, "you two will stand guard at the base of the cellar stairs in case one of the prisoners tries to escape. Vincent, Tifa, Red, you flank the woman and make sure that she doesn't work her way free of her ropes. The rest of you, stick close to me. Especially you, Yuffie."

The young ninja blinked in surprise. "Huh?"

"Don't leave my side," Cloud repeated firmly.

Bewildered, Yuffie stared into Cloud's Mako blue eyes. What was this all of a sudden? Just because she had been captured once didn't mean she was a weakling. Or...was it because Cloud really thought Titus was THAT dangerous?

"Sure, Cloud," Yuffie said quietly. "I understand."

Cloud nodded stiffly, strands of blond hair fluttering near the corners of his eyes. In one deft motion, he reached out and shoved open the cellar door.

Darkness yawned before them, and Yuffie swallowed convulsively, not trusting the sight of that abysmal blackness even though she knew the only things lurking down there were Titus, Fa-Li, and a bunch of old crates. Cloud went down first, followed by Cid. Cait Sith hopped to one side of the doorway and gestured for Yuffie to proceed, giving her a cheery thumbs-up sign. She didn't bother to return the kindly effort, bracing herself as she stepped into the darkness.

The smell of old mildew and gunpowder assaulted her nostrils, a mixture that left her senses tingling with the impression of impending danger. She suddenly wished she had brought the Conformer with her.

//Stop it, Yuffie!// she scolded herself. //Don't be a pansy! It's just Titus and Fa-Li...you don't have to be nervous about seeing them again. What am I going to say to Titus anyways? Should I get mad at him for kidnapping me and making me suffer?//

The stair underneath her sneaker creaked suddenly, and Yuffie started, instinctively groping for a railing that wasn't there. Her balance threatened to betray her, but a gloved hand suddenly settled on her shoulder, holding her steady until she regained equilibrium.

"You okay?" Tifa asked softly.

Yuffie bobbed her head quickly, feeling a mixture of embarrassment and relief wash over her. "I'm fine. I just can't see the stairs. I've never been down here before."

Tifa's other hand came to gently clasp Yuffie's remaining shoulder. "You'll be fine," she said comfortingly. "There aren't too many left."

"Leviathan be praised," Yuffie muttered, cautiously lowering her foot to the next step. She could sense Cloud and Cid moving around in the darkness close by, and she gratefully hung onto the comfort of Tifa's presence at her back until she felt her sneakers come into contact with the wonderfully solid concrete floor of the cellar.

Just as she was about to let out a sigh of relief, a single light suddenly snapped on, burning away the darkness so quickly that Yuffie had to blink rapidly to chase away the multi-colored spots that now danced playfully in her vision.

Fa-Li sat bound in the center of the cellar, a lone light bulb suspended by a ratty string swinging gently in the stale air over her dark head. Yuffie's eyes widened slightly as they took in the layers and layers of rope that encompassed the woman's petite frame, making it look like some unseen beast was in the process of devouring her. Her dark eyes were averted, head lowered so that her tangled hair hid her face from view. She was trembling and muttering a Wutainese prayer under her breath.

Yuffie opened her mouth to ask what was wrong, but a flash of white against the far wall suddenly captured her attention. Titus was either chained or handcuffed to some sort of pipe that ran parallel to the floor, his white-blond hair shimmering like moonlight in the dark of the night. His eyes were closed as if asleep.

"He is SO not asleep," Yuffie growled to herself, clenching her hands into fists as she stormed past Cloud, heading right for Titus.

"Yu—" Cloud warned, reaching out with the intention of grabbing the girl by the shoulder.

"Crummy bastard," Yuffie muttered angrily, and Cloud retracted his hand, not sure whether or not Yuffie had been referring to him.

Yuffie marched and stood in front of Titus, her fists trembling with sudden anger. Regardless of all other factors (including her and Vincent's mutual stubbornness) Yuffie blamed Titus for her capture and subsequent torture at the hands of the Hissers. How dare he just run off and leave her there with the Cold One and his mindless hissing bastards? Titus was one of the only people who knew what the hell was going on down there, and he hadn't let her in on the secret until he was already making his great escape. Lucky bastard. Yuffie needed to release her anger on someone, and Titus seemed a better candidate than most.

"Get up, Titus!" she yelled. "I KNOW you're awake, you slimy bastard!"

She heard muttering behind her, but who it was or what they were grumbling out, she didn't care. All her attention was riveted on Titus.

"Look at me, damn you!" she ordered, gray eyes flashing with unchecked anger. No need to hold back the intense, dark emotions that raged within her. Not for Titus.

To her surprise, the man's eyes slowly slid open, the infinite emerald depths literally glowing in the darkness with a gleam that was totally unlike Mako, unlike anything ever known to man. A collective gasp rose from behind Yuffie as at last everyone clearly beheld a pair of eyes that had once belonged to someone loved and cherished by many of those present.

Unfazed by Titus' cold gaze, Yuffie bent at the waist, bringing herself eye-level with the Running Man, but still out of range in case Titus decided to kick her in the face. "Yeah, bet you thought you'd never see me again, huh?" she mocked, graceful eyebrows drawn low over simmering orbs of stormy flames. "You're such an asshole! Why the HELL did you leave me down there with those....THINGS??!! Do you know what they did? Well, duh, of COURSE you know what they did! Mr. High Priest!"

Soaring on the tide of angry impulse, Yuffie kicked Titus in the shin. Not hard enough to break anything, but with enough force to make him flinch and draw his leg away from her reach. "There!" she told him, still glaring. "I hope you have a nasty bruise in the morning, crum bum."

Titus just stared up at her, green eyes flickering with something halfway between anger and laughter. Knowing Titus, it was probably a little bit of both. The guy had a damn WIERD sense of humor.

Yuffie was contemplating whether or not stomping on the man's toes would be overkill when Vincent's low, deep voice drifted from behind her, "Yuffie, I believe it would be prudent if you would kindly stop abusing the prisoners."

Not bothering to glance at Vincent, Yuffie snorted, placing her hands on her narrow hips. The sides of her oversized sweater ballooned and swallowed her hands up to the wrists. She stared down into Titus' mesmerizing eyes, at how his pupils shone astoundingly dark against the emerald seas. His handsome face was a beautiful blank that betrayed nothing of what went on inside his head. Some of his white-blond hair had fallen over one eye, adding a taste of wildness to his normally unflappable composure.

"Fine," Yuffie said with a begrudging sigh. "I'm finished." She turned to see that everyone had somehow managed to maneuver to their appropriate positions. Vincent, Tifa, and Red surrounded Fa-Li like watchful sentries while Barret and Cait flanked the bottom of the stairs. The three Turks had chosen to hover in the far left corner of the room, a triad of blue suits and carefully blank expressions. To Yuffie's right was Cloud, and further beyond him, an angry-looking Cid.

"Well?" she prodded when no one moved or spoke. "Aren't you going to interrogate him?"

"He looks like Aeris," Tifa said quietly.

"He looks like Sephiroth," Cloud countered, voice cold as he stared deeply at Titus, who only gazed at the AVALANCHE leader impassively.

An awkward silence fell after that statement; no one really wished to recall the events that befell them a year ago. In the end, all their pain and strife had been more than worthwhile, but no one could deny that their hard-won victory had been sealed in blood not their own. Sacrifices were so bittersweet, and just one glance into the Running Man's emerald eyes had reminded them of everything they had gained...and lost.

"Let's start with an easy question," Cloud finally said, all his attention focused on the man who sat handcuffed to the pipe at his back. "Yuffie says your name is Titus. Is that your real name?"

Titus made no reply, just continued looking steadily up at Cloud, his persistent gaze never wavering. After a few breathless moments, Cloud sharply averted his eyes, much to Yuffie's surprise. He seemed to have trouble meeting Titus' stare. That

was bad. How was Cloud going to get any information out of Titus when intimidation lay thick in the air like the heavy reek of decay? And Titus sure as hell wasn't the one being intimidated, that was for sure.

Though she felt she might be overstepping her boundaries, Yuffie decided to jump in. "Titus," she said, trying to conjure up her most reasonable tone. "Where's Reeve? I know you know where he is. I heard you say so in the torture chamber."

Titus' green eyes flicked in her direction, and Yuffie met them without flinching. He still said nothing, but one of his pale eyebrows quirked slightly.

Yuffie frowned down at him. "Okay, if you want to play the silent game, fine by me! I can keep up a one-sided conversation better than anyone! And don't act like you don't what I'm talking about, Titus, because I know you know where Reeve is..." Something suddenly occurred to her, and she turned her gaze to where the Turks remained veiled in shadows in their lonely corner. "Hey, Rude, this IS the guy you saw in Hojo's lab, right?"

Though Yuffie couldn't see Rude's eyes behind the dark lenses of his sunglasses, she sensed the intensity of his stare hone in on Titus. "Yes," he replied without hesitation. "This is the one."

"Okay," Yuffie said uncertainly, not knowing what to do now that she had received the confirmation.

//Man...we really suck at interrogating people.//

"I'll be you're laughing at us right now, Titus," Yuffie grumbled. "Well? Are you chuckling inside?"

Silence, but Yuffie thought she saw a flicker of laughter in Titus' eyes. He WAS chuckling. Goody for him.

"Well, I'm glad you find me so damn amusing! Now...how about telling us where Reeve is?"

Titus just sat there, as unresponsive as a rock.

Yuffie rubbed the back of her neck. All this tactical questioning sure took a lot out of her. She knew there was nothing she could say that would pierce all Titus' thick armor; he would never talk if he didn't want to. After all, the guy was a freaking master torturer, for crying out loud! Her questions and bantering must be only minor annoyances at best. However, what she REALLY wanted to do was talk to Titus about what had gone on during her torture – something that she blatantly refused to speak of in front of the others. It was far too personal and...humiliating. Yet, somehow, somehow, she knew Titus would understand.

//Please talk to me, Titus// she begged silently, staring him in the eye. //Please...//

But he only gazed at her blankly. There was no sign that he had heard her. Of course he hadn't; it was impossible for humans to speak mind to mind. She was just being silly.

"Mr. Titus?" Tifa suddenly spoke up, taking a cautious step towards the Running Man. Titus' eyes locked ruthlessly onto her, and Yuffie saw Tifa almost waver under that heartbreakingly familiar emerald gaze. Memories of Aeris hung thickly in the air.

Burgundy eyes steady and resolute once more, Tifa drew a deep breath before continuing. "Mr. Titus, I know you probably don't really care about our feelings. You captured two of us, and then we turned around and captured you and your... friend." She faltered a bit trying to find the right title for Fa-Li. "I know two wrongs don't make a right, but for what it's worth, no one here is interested in harming you. All we want to do is find our friend again. I'm begging you, Titus or whatever your name is, \*please\* tell us where Reeve is! Or at least if he's even alive!"

Real tears glittered in Tifa's eyes like liquid diamonds, and Yuffie felt her own throat tighten at the woman's heartfelt desperation. She was suddenly aware of her own deep-rooted worry for Reeve, and she had to scramble to fend off the flailing grasp of sudden panic.

"Please!" Tifa begged again, voice sounding unnaturally loud and echoing in the cellar.

Anyone's cold-hearted resolve would have withered in the face of such an outflow of raw emotion like the one that marred Tifa's pretty face, but Titus didn't so much as bat an eyelash. Just kept right on staring, unmoved by Tifa's anxious entreaty.

Anger resurfaced in Yuffie's heart again, setting her blood boiling. Her eyes darkened as she pinned Titus with a glare hot enough to melt skin from bones. "Answer her, Titus!" she demanded. "Damn you, don't you care about all the pain you're causing?!"

Naturally, she received no response, just the same empty emerald stare. Goddamn it all to hell if Titus wasn't as good, if not better, at hiding his emotions than Vincent was.

Fists trembling with rage, Yuffie decided to grab at one last straw. She whirled around, ignoring her hair as it spun with her and planted stinging slaps on the sides of her face.

"Fa-Li!" she cried, addressed the back of the woman's bowed head. "Please tell us where Reeve is!"

Uneasy silence.

"Please, Fa-Li, please!" Yuffie begged, humiliated to hear her voice cracking. Frustration and tears always did that to her.

There was a brief hesitation that seemed to span an eternity, but then the woman's head shifted slightly, dark, tangled locks scrambling for new positions as she began to lift her head.

Her nasal voice came, thick with a pain that no one in the room could comprehend. "President Reeve...of...Neo...Shinra?" she asked slowly.

Yuffie's heart leapt into her throat, beating with a mixture of hope and trepidation. "Yes," she murmured. "That's him..."

As if she were moving underwater, Fa-Li turned with agonizing slowness so that Yuffie could barely discern her lovely profile hidden behind the thick mass of her brown hair. The silence in the room was so heavy with dark, quaking anticipation that Yuffie half-expected to suddenly hear someone's heartbeat echoing in the abysmal void of sound.

"President Reeve..." Fa-Li whispered, voice detached and dream-like. "I'm afraid...he...he..."

"Fa-Li!" Titus' harsh voice suddenly lashed brutally through the air of the cellar. A whimper escaped Fa-Li's lips, and she shrank in on herself again, bowing her head and trembling like a scared rabbit.

"Dammit!" Elena cursed vehemently, voice evincing nothing but pure frustration.

"Fa-Li," Yuffie whispered. "Please!"

The woman only trembled harder, and Yuffie suddenly knew that her silence was permanent this time. And apparently, Reno realized this is well.

"This is going nowhere," he seethed, pushing himself away from the wall, body moving in slow jerky movements as he approached Titus. Beside her, Yuffie felt Cloud stiffening, and even Rude and Elena looked ambivalent, as if they couldn't decide whether to follow Reno or try to hold him back. In the end, they just stood there.

Yuffie took one look at Reno's cold, forbidding expression, at the mad, desperate glint in his aquamarine eyes, and she knew they were in trouble. Instability was the last thing they needed right now, and Reno was brimming with it.

"Tell me where Reeve is, NOW," Reno demanded of Titus, voice low and deadly. "No one else in this room may have qualms about killing you, but let me tell you right now that I'm not so squeamish. Blowing your brains out doesn't faze me in the slightest."

If she hadn't had an unbalanced, angry Reno less than two feet away from her, Yuffie would have sighed and shook her head in chastisement. She was sure that Reno wasn't making an idle threat, and under normal circumstances – with a normal prisoner – his standard "Turk interrogation" tactics might have worked, but Titus was far, FAR from normal. Yuffie was certain that he had seen scarier things in his lifetime than pissed-off spitfires like Reno.

"Back off, Reno," Cloud ordered.

Reno whirled on him. "Why should I?!" he roared, fury written in every rigid line of his body. "This is my President we're talking about here! He's my responsibility!"

"Reeve is our friend, too," Cloud insisted.

"Well, what he f\*\*\* are you doing, then?! You're so damn scared to get your hands dirty that you can't even get information out of this guy! Hell, you can't even look him in the f\*\*\*ing eye, much less make him tell you where Reeve is!"

The look in Cloud's eyes hardened. "Reno, if you're going to be counterproductive, then get the hell out of here," he ordered flatly, but everyone heard the subtle menace in his voice.

"F\*\*\* you," the Turk spat viciously. "It's no use trying to explain something that a do-gooder like you will never understand."

Then, to everyone's surprise, the redhead turned on heel and strode out of the cellar, movements stiff and angry, like a corked bottle of emotion just awaiting the prime opportunity to explode. Barret and Cait watched him warily as he thundered up the stairs and out the door, slamming it so hard that Yuffie thought she heard some of the wood crack.

Though Reno's departure sucked some of the crackling tension out of the air, the majority of it still lingered like the remains of some foul odor. Yuffie felt everyone's edginess, their frustration, their helplessness.

//Crap// she thought shakily as she used the sleeve of her sweater to mop cold sweat off her forehead. //One of us is going to snap soon//

Someone suddenly brushed past her, and Yuffie started slightly, only to see Vincent Valentine moving to stand in front of Titus, who watched the ominous man with wary, shifty eyes. It was as much emotion as Yuffie had seen Titus show so far. Slowly, completely oblivious to everyone's eyes on him, Vincent lowered himself into a crouch so that he was at eye level with the Running Man. Titus drew his legs close to his body, something that looked suspiciously like fear passing over his eyes for a single fleeting movement.

"Vincent?" Cloud asked quietly. "What are you doing?"

"Reno was right," Vincent deadpanned, voice flat and cold. "No one but an individual who is highly trained in the darker forms of information retrieval can understand just how far desperation can push a person."

Cloud's eyes narrowed slightly. "And you understand?"

"I was a Turk, Cloud. A monster wearing human skin. Though I have to admit that personal motives are far more nerve-wrecking than direct orders from the President."

Yuffie saw Cloud's eyes dart between Vincent and Titus, who were engaged in a deep staring contest that left everyone else – including Yuffie – feeling estranged and severed, as if they were merely looking at the two men from some intangible distance.

"What do you propose we do, Vincent?" Cloud asked warily, as if afraid of Vincent's reply.

Without disengaging his crimson stare from Titus' emerald one, Vincent answered, "Violence will not work on him, I know that much." His eyes narrowed, two small slivers of bloody redness in his pale face. "Am I right, Mr. Titus?"

Silence, then came Titus' raspy voice, "Correct."

Yuffie's eyes widened. //He's talking!//

"And let me guess," Vincent continued calmly. "Mind games don't work with you either."

"They do not."

"Why do you speak to me and not to Cloud or Yuffie?"

A sly, secretive smile curled one corner of Titus' mouth. "I speak when I wish, to whom I wish. It is an unalienable human right, is it not?"

"You are no human," Vincent stated bluntly.

Titus' eyes flashed with some foreign emotion, then resettled into a strange, angry glitter, like a bird ruffling its feathers. "And neither are you, Vincent Valentine," he said callously.

Yuffie saw Vincent's shoulders stiffen. "Master of mind games," he uttered. "No wonder they don't work on you; you know them all."

Titus stared at Vincent. "Out of everyone in this room, you and her are the only ones who meet my eyes without flinching."

It took Yuffie a few seconds to realize that the "her" Titus spoke of was none other than herself.

"They are only eyes," Vincent deadpanned.

"True, but do they not remind you of someone? The one called Aeris?" Titus cocked his head to the side, longer locks of white-blond hair grazing the collar of his leather jacket. "Or what about Sephiroth? Did both of those people mean so little to you?"

This time it was Vincent who refused to reply.

Titus' eyelids suddenly closed so that only half of each eye was visible, the natural gleam in them becoming even more intense, if such a thing was possible. "Or maybe you don't think of either of them?" he murmured, more to himself than Vincent. Yuffie felt a power building in the room. "Maybe someone connected to one of them...the one called Aeris?...no... there was no one...Sephiroth?.....yes...the mother..." Titus' eyes widened. "I see a woman...Lucre—"

Vincent suddenly lunged forward, claw outstretched. Titus reflexively jerked backwards, trying to bring his knees up to shield his face, but no matter how quick he was, Vincent was a step quicker. Not even flinching as Titus' updrawn knees dug into his stomach, he grabbed the man by the neck, razor sharp tips of his claw pressed against the pale skin, on the verge of puncturing it. Titus went deathly still, like a deer caught in a pair of headlights.

"Vincent, what are you doing?" Tifa gasped.

"He's a mind reader," Vincent spat, uttering the final two words as if they were something foul and abominable that he couldn't stand having in his mouth. Yuffie had never seen him so angry.

Titus had the audacity to smile. "Only if your defenses are so weak that I can worm my way inside your head. Your fault, not mine."

Something dangerous flickered in Vincent's eyes, and Yuffie saw his claw tighten almost imperceptibly around Titus' pale throat.

//Oh crap...oh crap...//

"Vincent, step away from him, please," Cloud requested quietly.

But Vincent still remained, staring into Titus' emerald eyes with cold rage frozen on his face. With his dark hair falling into his crimson eyes, the usually composed man closely resembled a wild beast that had been unwisely released from its cage. Yuffie wasn't even sure he had heard Cloud until his grip on Titus' neck began to loosen, metallic finger by metallic finger. Slowly, he stood and stepped back from the Running Man, who watched his every movement with undisguised wariness.

"Geez, Titus. You're just pushing everyone's buttons today," Yuffie sighed as Vincent moved to stand a good, safe distance away from the Running Man. Though to whom the "safe" referred, Yuffie was no longer clear on.

However, one thing she was clear on was that when you began wondering if you should start protecting your enemies from your friends during a harmless "interrogation," it was time to beat a hasty retreat before someone's hands got dirty. Yuffie was just about to voice her oh-so-agreeable suggestion when she saw something metallic and shiny snake past Cloud and press itself up against Titus' throat.

"Cid!" Elena exclaimed sharply.

//I knew this was gonna happen!// Yuffie thought wildly as she realized that pretty shimmering thing hovering near Titus' exposed neck was none other than the spearhead of the Venus Gospel. //The shit's about to hit the fan...//

Amazingly enough, Titus' eyes still bore that infinite sense of cool detachment even with the business end of one of the most dangerous weapons on the Planet practically rammed up his nose. Clear emerald orbs flicked in Cid's direction, sizing up the pilot.

Cid gripped the shaft of the Venus Gospel with unnaturally steady hands, keeping the wickedly sharp edge pressed firmly against Titus' throat, tottering on the verge of breaking the skin. His tanned, weathered face was blank and emotionless, but the glint in his dark blue eyes sent a chill down Yuffie's spine.

//Cid...what HAPPENED to you?//

"Those brown hissing things," the pilot growled, all his attention focused on Titus, as if the others were merely insignificant phantoms from another place and time. "What the hell were they?"

Titus lifted an eyebrow. "They were torturers," he said levelly.

"Torturers my ass!" Cid hissed, but everyone heard the uncharacteristic tremble in his rough voice. "They were...something else." His gloved hands tightened around the spear. "Tell me what the hell they were! Was what they said true?!"

Yuffie frowned. //What they said...?//

Realization washed over Titus' face in a wicked tidal wave, and he grinned slyly up at Cid, emerald eyes suddenly flashing brightly. "Tell me, Cid Highwind. What is your greatest fear?" he whispered intimately, mockingly.

Those words severed the thin string of sanity that had kept Cid from falling off the deep end. A guttural cry ripped from the pilot's throat, and suddenly the spearhead sharply danced away from the pale column of Titus' throat...only to come arching back down in a blinding jab, shiny metal hungering for blood to stain its glimmering surface.

Out of the corner of her eyes, a stunned Yuffie could see both Red and Vincent moving in a blinding blur of motion, on a beeline for Cid and the lethal spear. Cloud beat them to the punch. Lunging forward, the swordsman hit the shaft of the spear with a forceful backhand slap, making the near-fatal jab go wild. The glittering point of the spear ended up lodged in a brick less than one inch away from Titus' neck. The clang of metal on the wall's rough surface seemed to echo perpetually in the farthest corners of the cellar, the sound bouncing back and forth in an act of cruel mockery.

Silence hung heavily in the cellar except for Cid and Cloud's shallow breathing. Yuffie was barely aware of Vincent hovering behind her or the tense, poised form of Red XIII directly to her right. Her mind was still trying to grasp the fact that Cid had nearly killed Titus. If Cloud hadn't been within grabbing distance...there went Reeve's location, there went all the answers to Yuffie's endless stream of secret questions, there went everything...what was Cid thinking? What had the Hissers done to make him this way?

"Oh, Cid," Tifa murmured, and Yuffie heard something she never thought she'd hear in the other woman's voice. Hidden underneath the sympathy, underneath the worry, was the faint glimmer of plaintive horror.

//Things are getting ugly// Yuffie thought despairingly. //We're falling apart. I don't even know who the freakin' bad guys are anymore!//

"Out," Cloud suddenly ordered in a low, cold voice, gripping the shaft of the Venus Gospel so tightly the leather of his well-worn clothes creaked and creased around the junctures of his knuckles. Behind him, Cid still clung numbly to the spear, face slack and eyes wide. His pupils were tiny pinpoints in a sea of endless blue. He looked blind.

"GET OUT NOW!!!!!" Cloud roared, infuriated when everyone just stood rooted in their places. "Everyone, get out of here! Rude! Elena! Out! Barret and Cait! Go on! Red! Let's go!" Cloud wrenched the spear out of Cid's limp grasp and placed one firm hand on the pilot's broad shoulder, pushing him ahead as they made their way toward the cellar stairs with the others. Yuffie thought she saw Cid make a half-hearted attempt to extricate himself from Cloud's grasp, but the swordsman's hand only reinforced its hold, squeezing Cid's shoulder tight enough to bruise.

"Shit," Cid was saying as he ascended the stairs with Cloud at his back like an irate parole officer. "Shitshitshitshitshit."

As soon as the Rude and Elena went past her, Fa-Li lifted her head and tried weakly to turn her upper body around. "Titus?" she whispered. "Are you alright? Titus? Titus?"

Yuffie felt a gloved hand land on her shoulder. Startled, she looked up to find Vincent's crimson eyes peering down at her, strands of jet-black hair brushing the curves of his pale cheekbones. She realized that she had been staring dumbly after the others with her mouth hanging open.

"Let's go," Vincent said calmly, fingers tightening briefly. She could feel the warmth of his skin even through the thick fabric of the sweater, through the resilient leather of his glove. Fancy that.

She nodded, pushing her hair back as the motion flung it into her face. "Okay," she muttered.

Vincent started moving away, and Yuffie was just about to follow him when she heard Titus' voice behind her. "Yuffie."

Whirling so fast his hair whipped in a wild arc, Vincent fixed the Running Man with a dark, intense stare. Yuffie turned and pinned Titus with a glare of her own.

"What is it now?" she grumped. "Haven't you caused enough trouble for one day?"

Titus didn't reply, only extended his right leg towards her, sole of his combat boot scraping across the cold concrete with series of grinding noises that made Yuffie want to grit her teeth. He stared up at her pointedly, green eyes wide and striking in the darkness, glittering up at her from behind strands of soft-looking white-blond hair. In the back of her mind, Yuffie wondered if it hurt to be so beautiful.

"What's wrong?" she asked, bewildered as to what POSSIBLE significance Titus' stinky old shoe could have. "If your shoelace is untied, I sure as hell am not tying it for you! You can just trip next time you get up...if you ever do manage to get up, that is."

Vincent took a step forward, placing the heel of his boot over Titus' toes.

"Vinnie, that's mean!" Yuffie exclaimed half-heartedly. If anyone should be able to stomp on Titus' feet, it should be her...

"Roll up his pant leg," Vincent ordered flatly.

Yuffie stared at him, then at Titus, thinking they had both lost their marbles. Then she shrugged. "Fine, whatever." She started to step forward and kneel down, but Vincent stopped her.

"Go around to my left side," he said. "You don't want him to kick you with his other leg."

"Right, right," Yuffie grumbled, marching around to Vincent's left side and crouching next to Titus' leg. Flushing slightly and thanking the great Da Chao that Titus was currently playing the staring game with Vincent instead of eyeballing her, Yuffie took hold of the bottom of his jean leg and carefully rolled it upwards, exposing more of his combat boot.

//Geez, how high do these things go?// she thought, trying not to think of how weird she must look, groping Titus' leg.

Her fingers brushed something cold and metallic. Frowning, she jerked the denim material upwards.

"My materia!!!" she exclaimed happily, as her Crystal Bangle was revealed in its glorious entirety. Titus had the damn thing strapped to his upper calf!

"Lightening! Knights of the Round! Whoo-hoo!" Yuffie exclaimed, unable to help herself. "Cloud won't kick my ass after all!" She looked up to find Titus gazing at her, something like a smile tugging at the corners of his thin mouth. She grinned at him. "'Safe place' my ass! [1] You were carrying it the entire time, you crummy ol' bastard you!"

Titus smiled at her. His expression looked less severe when he smiled.

"Grab your armor and let's go, Yuffie," Vincent spoke up.

"Sure thing," she quipped, unclasping the bangle from Titus' calf and letting his pant leg fall back into its rightful place. She smoothed the material down until it was pretty much wrinkle-free, then hoisted herself to her feet using Titus' knee as leverage. Vincent removed the heel of his boot from Titus' toes and proceeded towards the stairs, trusting Yuffie to follow.

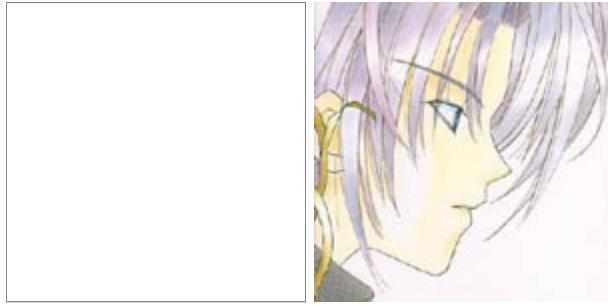
With one last glance back at Titus, the young ninja trailed behind her tall companion. When Vincent leaned over Fa-Li to turn off the single light bulb, the Wutainese woman shivered and leaned away, as if he would infect her with some alien disease should he come too close. Yuffie patted the woman on the head reassuringly as she passed her, but averted her face before Fa-Li's dark, haunted eyes could make contact with hers. No need to be on even friendlier terms with their alleged prisoners than she already was.

At the top of the stairs, Yuffie turned and stared back down into the darkness, hands clutching her Crystal Bangle to her chest. Her weak, human eyes could see nothing in the inky black. Nothing but the luminescence of Titus' green eyes glittering up at her from the darkest corner of the cellar.

"Thank you," she whispered to him, grip tightening on the piece of armor in her hands.

Titus' eyes bobbed once. A nod.

Yuffie nodded back and turned away, shutting the door behind her and once again leaving the darkness to devour the cellar whole.



[1] Remember waaaaay back in Ch. 22 when Yuffie asked where her materia was, and Titus replied, "In a safe place"? Nope? Didn't think so...