

### Chapter Thirty-Three: A Moment to Deliberate

*"It's called 'getting comfortable.'" Reno Mitsuru*

Crawling in my skin  
These wounds they will not heal  
Fear is how I fall  
Confusing what is real  
There's something inside me that pulls beneath the surface  
Consuming  
Confusing  
This lack of self-control I fear is never ending  
Controlling  
I can't seem  
To find myself again  
My walls are closing in

"Crawling"  
Linkin Park

"It's hot," Cid complained to no one in particular. Barret and Vincent were crashed out on the floor of the upstairs living room, seemingly dead the world. Cid thought it was awful weird to have a living room upstairs instead of downstairs, but he figured if you ran a huge fuck-off restaurant, you'd want the living room to be upstairs where no one would mess with it. Made sense in the end. Most things did, when you thought about them long enough.

Taking another languid drag of his cigarette, Cid expelled the smoke in the general direction of the ceiling, though he knew the small particles of whatever cigarette smoke was made of would never rise high enough to touch the wooden beams. The living room was dark, and the burning end of Cid's cigarette was the only source of the light save for the sporadic flashes of lightening that deigned to illuminate the inky room.

//Really should get some shut-eye// Cid berated himself, absently tapping some ash onto the hardwood floor.

Sleep, however, seemed virtually impossible given the magnitude of Barret's earthquake-caliber snores. Though Cid never claimed to be a quiet sleeper himself, he had to admit that the big man's snores were annoyingly impressive. He had no earthly idea how Vincent had managed to get to sleep when he was lying barely five feet away from the source of the snoring. Guy probably had an on/off switch or something. Cid sure wished he had one.

Grumbling intelligible phrases to the hot darkness, he squirmed on the couch, trying to find a position in which his ass didn't end up sinking in between the cushions. Cid would have much rather crashed on the floor than the couch. It seemed that whenever he slept on a couch, he could never escape the lingering remnants of his own body heat on the material. It was annoying, to the say the least. Especially when the room had morphed into something resembling a sauna. The last thing he wanted was to be smothered by his own body heat.

Cid wiped the sweat off his forehead, snuffing out his cigarette in an ashtray Kyra had graciously provided him with. The smoke was giving him a headache, something that had never happened before. Cid never thought he'd see the day when smoke from his own cigarettes would cause him discomfort; the end of the world truly was near.

Thunder crashed outside like the boom of a Wutainese gong, and Cid suddenly had a silly image of the Thunder God Ramuh knocking on the window with his mighty thunder staff, asking to be let in because he was tired of being out in the damn rain. Crazy. Cid had the Ramuh summon materia sheathed in the Venus Gospel; the once-mighty Thunder God wasn't going anywhere.

Maybe it was a mixture of the rain pattering against the window and Barret's constant snoring, but within a few minutes, the ceiling began to dance and blur before Cid's hazy blue eyes. The shadows in the room grew thicker, more peaceful, like fluffy nighttime clouds. The Sandman was a-comin'. Cid was both scared and relieved.

//Please just let me sleep this one damn time// he prayed to whatever deity would listen. His eyes started to drift shut.  
//I'm so damn tired...//

Then the hissing began, blaring through Cid's head with the urgency of a siren in the night. Blood splattered his vision. A pair of glasses fell to the ground and shattered, glass flying everywhere until warm crimson soaked every shard.

~So much blood...has to be dead...~

"Fuck!" Cid cursed, bolting upright so quickly that the room spun wildly around him. Gritting his teeth with rage and fear, he snatched the nearest object – a pillow – and flung it at the wall with a vengeance. The soft object struck the wall with a soft poofing sound before plummeting meekly to land in a nearby chair.

Cid covered his face with his hands, palms sliding roughly over days of unshaved stubble. His breathing was slightly ragged, and he wished he could plunge his fingers into his brain to wipe away those horrible images that arrived to haunt him every time he came close to sleeping. And that incessant hissing...

He was going insane.

Shakily, he swung his weary legs off the couch, wanting to feel the solidity of the carpet underneath the soles of his feet. The well-trodden fibers felt vaguely unsubstantial, much like the undulation of the waves, which appeared solid but would swallow you up in an instant. Cid would have much rather preferred the cold tangibility of wood or concrete beneath his feet, but the carpet would have to do for now.

He needed a cigarette to soothe his frazzled nerves, but the effort to grab the pack of smokes from the lampstand and fumble for his lighter simply wasn't present in his weary, trembling limbs. On the floor in front of him, Barret and Vincent slept on, blissfully oblivious to his emotional turmoil. He was thankful he hadn't awakened them with his vehement cry of frustration.

The roaring silence closed in around him like the embrace of ghosts in the darkness, trying to leech from his ears the endless hissing that haunted his every waking moment, that mocked him as surely as the rumbling thunder outside the window ridiculed him with its mighty laughter. Rain beat relentlessly on the glass, and a sudden flash of lightening threw his hunched-over shadow against the far wall, a clone constructed purely of darkness. Then the lightening was gone, taking Cid's shadow twin with it.

The pilot sagged back onto the couch, curling into a half-fetal position that he was sure looked vulnerable as hell and wasn't sure if he really cared at the moment. No one was awake to see him but the darkness and shadows. Though two of his closest friends were no more than five feet away from him, he felt estranged from their world of idyllic unconscious. For him, inner peace was a foreign concept, sleep an unattainable dream.

Dimly, Cid wondered how much more self-torture he could take before he snapped even worse than Reno had. He loathed to call it "self-torture," though, simply because he honestly wasn't into causing himself pain. But as far as he could tell, there was nothing other than his own unstable mind to blame for his plight.

Of course, he could always blame those "Hissers" for what had befallen him. Even days after their unseen assault, Cid could still remember the lacerating pain in his head, the terrifying sensation of being...filled, like too much clutter shoved into his head at one time. But worse than the pressure pounding through his skull was the sense of defilement as the demons tried to draw out of him more than he could give, drinking up thoughts and memories like leeches. Sucking away his strength, his being, his sanity, and leaving behind their venomous poison, a seed planted to fester until it obliterated everything that made him who he was.

Then came the terror. Then came the blood. The pair of glasses covered in dripping redness. Then came death.

In the air before him, Cid suddenly glimpsed Titus' green eyes snapping open and that dark, raspy voice whispering. ~What do you fear, Cid Highwind?~

Gasping more out of surprise than fear, Cid scrambled to the other end of the couch to escape the glare of the disembodied eyes, but they were no longer there. Only darkness dwelt in the place where Titus' eyes had hovered seconds earlier.

"Shit," Cid cursed with feeling, wiping the cold sweat from his high forehead. His hands were trembling. "I'm f\*\*\*ed up."

The brief burst of adrenaline the visage had caused dissipated, leaving his limbs feeling weak and drained, as if some vampire had fed on him during those periods of dark reflection where he hovered between reality and dream, unable to discern which was the actual realm he belonged to. Cid laid his stubbled cheek against the back of the couch, material rough against his skin. What was happening to him? He was losing his marbles was what. Okay, so there was the problem. Now, what the hell was he going to do about it? He had thought Titus would know something about it, but now he would be lucky if Cloud even let him within twenty feet of the Running Man after the unexpected stunt Cid had pulled in the cellar.

//I didn't even think about it. Those eyes just...begged for me to kill him.....//

~"Tell me, Cid Highwind. What is your greatest fear?"~

Why, the death of a loved one, of course.

Naturally.

Gripping the arm of the couch for support, Cid rose unsteadily to his feet, staring down at the floor and trying to discern the locations of his two friends in the thick darkness. He had no trouble finding Barret. The big man was sprawled on his back, loud snores issuing from his half-open mouth. Cid carefully stepped over him. Vincent was a bit harder to locate, as the man seemed to wear shadows and darkness like second skin. In the end, the only thing that betrayed the gunslinger's location was white shirt he had borrowed from Cloud, and Cid easily avoided stomping all over the slender man.

Sighing, Cid paused a moment to scratch the back of his head before proceeding down the hall towards Cloud's room.

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High Priest Ajax sat on the throne, a small dragon draped languidly around his narrow shoulders. Visages of open-mouthed, screaming faces carved out of obsidian adorned the gleaming surface of dark throne. Some prodigy of dark artistry had lovingly shaped every last detail of each terrified face, down to the crooked teeth on one face there or the tears of horror running down that face over there. Ajax himself didn't seem at all bothered by the ghastly piece of architecture; a smile played on his thin lips as he absently stroked the dark purple scales of the dragon. He wore nondescript black garments: loose pants and an open jacket that exposed his pale, thin chest. Either intentionally or on accident, the dragon raked its silver claws over the High Priest's bare chest. The smooth skin gave way under those razor-sharp nails, and blood ran in thin rivulets down to Ajax's stomach.

"Doesn't that hurt?" Cloud asked him.

Ajax's smile widened. "I like pain," he said simply, his slender, pale fingers caressing the neck of the dragon. The small, winged creature suddenly lifted its reptilian head to stare at Cloud, who was surprised to find its eyes shone a startling shade of aquamarine.

Cloud blinked, his mind slowly throwing off the cloak of sleep that had brought him such a distasteful nightmare. Reno was staring down at him, his aquamarine eyes identical to those of Ajax's dragon.

Cloud frowned at the Turk. "What are you doing here?" he tried to ask, but the only thing that emerged from his lips was an intelligible groan. "Urrrrrrgh."

Reno lifted an auburn eyebrow, flicking his fiery ponytail back over his shoulder. "Speak English, Strife. I didn't understand a single word you just said."

Growling, Cloud rolled onto his left side, putting his back to the Turk with the hopes that if he ignored him, he would magically disappear. No such luck. Within a few seconds, he felt another body plop down onto the area he had just abandoned, and Cloud nearly rolled backwards into the depression Reno's body created in the mattress.

"Why don't you go sleep in your own bed?" Cloud snapped grumpily, rearranging his limbs to compensate for Reno's added weight.

"Elena kicks and snores," Reno grumbled back, jerking half of the pillow out from under Cloud's head. "And Rude's hogging the only comfortable chair in the room."

"What time is it?" Cloud slurred, kicking Reno with the heel of his foot.

Reno kicked him back. "Me and Yuffie just got off of guard duty. Your shift doesn't start for fifteen minutes."

//Hurray. Fifteen more minutes of nightmares//

And, he realized within the next second, fifteen minutes of Reno's constant squirming. Though he was fairly certain the Turk wasn't going to stab him in the back or shoot him in his sleep, Cloud was still uncomfortable about sharing a bed with \*anyone\*, especially an individual he had considered an enemy until a few days ago. Even now, the prospect of Reno truly being a friend was still up in the air...but Cloud was too tired to care. Sleep pressed heavily on his eyelids, and he readily gave into Somnus' touch, feeling the warm darkness of dreamless oblivion rising to embrace him.

Reno's elbow dug into his side, and Cloud jerked awake, beside himself with annoyance.

"Dammit, Reno!" he snarled, lifting himself up onto one elbow and looking over his shoulder to glare at the Turk. "Do you always wiggle this much in your sleep?"

"It's called 'getting comfortable,'" Reno corrected, voice muffled by the pillow.

Cloud sighed and sat up, wearily swinging his feet to the floor. "I really wish you would have chosen another place to get comfortable," he grouched, rubbing his face with his dry, chapped hands as he waited for the room to stop spinning.

"Your lazy ass needed to get up anyways," Reno muttered, snatching the entire pillow and hugging it to himself like a teddy bear.

Taking one last glance at the Turk, Cloud shook his head and rose to his feet, rubbing the small of his back to ease the knots of tension that seemed to be having a pow-wow at the base of his spine. He was only twenty-two years old, and here he was clutching at his achin' back like a man three times that age. Sighing again, he rotated his neck a couple of times, listening to the vertebrae crackle sleepily, just as displeased at being awakened from their slumber as Cloud was. He padded over to the window in only his socks, his customary pair of dark purple pants, and his untucked sleeveless shirt. Reaching up with one bare hand, he pulled back the curtain that he had lowered the previous night to blot out the flashes of fiery lightening that had insisted on disturbing his rest.

Outside, the world hovered precariously between night and day. Dark gray clouds still covered the sky like a thick winter cloak, but the rain had died down to a gentle drizzle. Shadowy streets and buildings rose to greet Cloud's eyes, each of them just as morbid and gloomy as the sky overhead. That was Junon for you: a city woven entirely of shadows with a small sprinkling of yellow lamplights to illuminate the darkness. If he concentrated hard enough, Cloud imagined that he could hear the ocean roaring in the distance, laughing and gloating at his monstrous tides, swollen with rainwater and awaiting the impending downpours with dark anticipation.

Cloud rubbed the back of his neck, still trying to shake off the lingering remnants of the Sandman's sleeping dust. The room seemed too quiet without the sounds of rain and thunder. Sad thing, but he had sort of gotten used to the world being in a perpetual state of thunderstorms.

"I choked down there," Cloud said quietly, still staring out at the depressing scenery.

"You sure did," Reno seconded. Apparently, he hadn't been even close to sleeping.

"I just couldn't look him in the eye," Cloud continued. "One minute he reminded me of Aeris, the next of Sephiroth. I never thought I'd meet a person who would make me think of two entirely different people at the same time. It was just too disconcerting for me."

He heard the rustling of bedclothes as Reno shifted position, rolling onto his back. "I'll level with you, Strife. At least you could stay down there. I had to leave."

Cloud frowned. "I ordered you to leave. It was no decision of yours."

Reno laughed bitterly. "You think I left just because you ordered me to?"

"No. I guess not."

"I left because I had to get the hell out of there before I lost it again. Just...being in the same room with her was making me crazy. If I hadn't left, I would have done something...bad."

Cloud turned, placing his elbows on the windowsill behind him and staring at the man who had taken over his bed. Reno was gazing up at the ceiling, arms folded underneath his head, flame red ponytail trailing on the bed next to him, where it blended in rather aesthetically with the brightly colored comforter.

"Can you tell me who that woman is?" Cloud asked unobtrusively. "If you want to, that is..."

"I don't want to," Reno said immediately. One of his hands suddenly dipped into the pocket of his dark blue dress pants and, to Cloud's surprise, pulled out a pack of cigarettes and a small lighter.

"When did you start smoking again?" the blonde demanded.

Reno waited until he had filled his lungs with a healthy dosage of cancerous tar before responding, "I've been smoking since I was ten years old."

"Not lately, you haven't."

Reno glared at him. "I'm falling apart here, Strife. I need them to calm me down, okay? Humor a basket case, will ya?"

"Consider yourself humored," Cloud said with a shrug, pushing himself away from the window and proceeding over to the corner where he had thrown his boots the night before. Stooping down, he snatched them off the floor with one hand and crossed the room yet again to seat himself on the end of the bed, narrowly avoiding squashing Reno's feet.

"Hey, Strife?" the Turk suddenly asked, bed springs creaking as he rose into a sitting position.

Cloud was busy trying to wriggle his right foot into its matching boot. "What is it?"

"I gotta favor to ask of you."

"I dunno, Reno. It had better not be anything outrageous," Cloud warned.

"It's not," Reno replied, voice suddenly gone quiet. "It's just...if something happens to me, or I do something dumb, promise me you'll take care of Rude and Elena."

Cloud's hands froze at where they had been tucking the hem of his pants into his boot. He turned around and stared at the redheaded Turk, who only gazed back at him, face devoid of all emotion. "You can't be serious," Cloud said incredulously. "What are you thinking, Reno?"

The man rubbed his eyes with his free hand. "Don't make this harder than it already is, Cloud. I'm serious here."

"I know. That's what scares me."

Reno took a hasty drag of his cigarette, an annoyed expression marring the horrible stillness that had pervaded his face seconds before. "Look, I'm trying to do the responsible thing here. If something happens to me, I want to make sure my friends are taken care of."

Cloud suddenly turned back around and resumed putting his boots on. "Reno, you're many things, but stupid isn't one of them. I thought you had more control over yourself than this," he said flatly.

"NORMALLY, I do," Reno declared hotly. "But the circumstances are different right now! I need someone who can be a leader for Rude and Elena if I can't do it. So I was THINKING that YOU, Mr. Do-Gooder, would be up to par, but if you're gonna be an asshole about it, then just forget it!"

"You have my word."

That stopped Reno's angry tirade. "What?"

Cloud closed his blue eyes, massaging his temples with the tips of his fingers. "I promise you that no matter what happens, I'll take care of Rude and Elena for you."

"...Thanks."

"But one condition," Cloud added.

Mistrust flickered in Reno's eyes for a second, but then he shrugged. "Fair enough. Name it."

Cloud turned to stare at Reno, eyes somber. "Hang in there for as long as you can, Reno. Believe it not, your loss would be a great blow to all of us, not just Rude and Elena."

Reno snorted derisively, as if he didn't quite believe Cloud's seemingly sincere words, but he muttered, "Yeah, yeah, I understand. I promise that I'll try and be tough."

Cloud nodded. "Alright then. But one other thing?"

Reno lifted an eyebrow, expelling smoke through his nose at the same time.

"I think Vincent might want his gun back eventually."

"Huh?" Reno echoed, bewildered. He glanced down and saw the lower half of his white dress shirt gaping open over his waistband, exposing the white-blue metal of the Silver Rifle. "Hey, this thing saved my ass back in Kalm. You think Valentine will let me borrow it for a while? I lost my nightstick in a pile of shit, and I'm sorry to say that my trusty 9mm isn't as portable as this pansy-ass gun here."

Cloud shrugged. "I don't think Vincent will mind." Then he suddenly remembered something. "Oh yeah. I think I may have a weapon for you." He rose to his feet still clad in only one boot and walked with an uneven gait over to the bureau of drawers, reaching behind the piece of furniture to pull out a slim, golden rod.

"Tifa and Elena said that – what was her name again? – Fa-Li was using this as a weapon when they captured her," he explained, holding it out for Reno to take. "I'm not sure if you want to use it or not."

//Since it belonged to HER...// he added silently.

Transferring his cigarette to the other hand, Reno stared at the weapon in Cloud's hand, eyeing it as if the metal rod were a poisonous viper that wouldn't hesitate to bite him if he wasn't careful. Cloud watched a thousand indiscernible emotions float on the cold surface of those aquamarine eyes, there one moment and gone the next.

"So she was using this?" Reno muttered, finally reaching out to take the nightstick gingerly from Cloud's grasp. "I'm the one that taught her how to use these things."

"Really?" Cloud echoed, not really knowing what else to say.

Reno's long, pale fingers danced over the bottom of the weapon, and Cloud jumped instinctively as two more segments seemed to appear out of nowhere, adding about a foot of perilous metal and escalating the intimidation factor the weapon brandished.

The skin on the bridge of Reno's short nose crinkled in distaste as the glared at the nightstick. "This is more like a goddamn cattle prod," he uttered, twirling the thing nimbly between his fingers. Cloud couldn't help but be impressed; he probably would have dropped the thing and shocked the hell out of his foot by now.

With another brush of his fingers, Reno retracted the nightstick's extra segments and looked up at Cloud. "I'll use it," he said firmly. "But I'm still keeping Valentine's gun just in case. If I managed to drag that heavy-ass Death Penalty out to the Highwind, he can let me borrow his bloody water gun."

"As long as Vincent says it okay," Cloud said, plopping down on the edge of the bed and dragging his remaining boot closer to his new position. Reno lay back on the bed again, still examining the nightstick.

Just as Cloud was about to slide his foot into the worn leather footwear, Cid appeared in the open doorway of the bedroom, looking more disheveled than normal.

"Cid," Cloud stated, setting his boot back down on the floor. "What's wrong?"

The pilot wandered into the room, scratching the back of his neck, a habitual gesture that silently declared that he was in a state of anxiety. "Gotta talk to ya, kid," he said gruffly.

Cloud nodded, wondering what he could do to put the pilot at ease. "Sure thing."

Cid glared pointedly at Reno, dark blue eyes relaying a silent, forceful message.

Unfortunately, his efforts were wasted on the redheaded Turk, who only stared back at him before relenting slightly and rolling onto his side, back to Cid and Cloud. "Just pretend I'm not here," he muttered, grabbing the pillow and cuddling it again.

Cid looked like he wanted to argue a bit more, but he sighed and instead turned his attention back to Cloud. "Kid, I'm gonna go ahead and tell ya this straight up, right to the point."

All Cloud could do was nod.

Cid drew in a deep breath, and on the wings of his exhalation said, "I'm going back to Rocket Town."

Cloud's eyes widened. "What?"

Reno rolled over. "What?!"

Cid didn't meet either of their surprised gazes, instead opting to trace an imaginary design on the carpet with the toe of his sock. "I can leave ya'll the Highwind if you want, but...I just gotta go back. I'm no good to everyone staying here like I am."

"Is that the only reason you're going?" Cloud asked quietly, raising one of his hands to stop Reno from making an angry exclamation.

Meeting Cloud's eyes for only a brief second before rubbing his face with his hands, Cid mumbled against the palms of his hands, "I wanna see my wife again."

Cloud folded his bare arms across his chest and raised his eyes to the ceiling, as if his Mako-enhanced vision could see beyond the structure of wood and brick and pierce the heavens above. Behind him, he could feel Reno's trembling restraint as he tried not to let loose a string of heated words. Surprisingly, Cloud could understand the Turk's indignation. Reno and Cid were both in states of emotional trauma, and if Reno was going to stick around, the Turk sure as hell expected Cid to tough it out as well. But Cloud knew Cid and was well aware that whatever had happened to him had to be very severe - severe enough to cause the pilot's will of iron to shatter...

Lowering his gaze, Cloud found Cid staring at him with those new haunted eyes that he had borne in varying degrees ever since they had emerged from the cellar. But underneath the surface coat of dark weariness, he saw trust gleaming steadily in the azure depths. Though the pilot had come claiming that he was going to leave, the unspoken bond between the two friends dictated that the final decision rested in the leader's hands. If Cloud said, "No, Cid, you're staying here because we need you," then Cid would remain, and if Cloud said, "Yes, Cid, you can go ahead and leave," then Cid would go. Simple, but those were merely the two extremities. Dozens of compromises painted in varying shades of gray dwelt in between the two absolutes.

Cloud nodded. "Fine, you can go, but we're coming with you."

"You are?" Cid echoed in surprise.

"We are?!" Reno exclaimed.

The swordsman wished there were some way he could glue the Turk's mouth shut for a few precious seconds. "Cid, it's not like we have any pressing matters here in Junon. Unless we result to more drastic measures, Titus won't talk until he feels like it. But I'm convinced he or Fa-Li will eventually come clean."

Cid stared deeply at Cloud, as if trying to see into his leader's head. "You're really gonna pack up and move everyone to Rocket Town just because I'm goin' crazy and need to run home?"

Cloud nodded seriously. "Unless you don't want us to go with you. We will, after all, be taking our prisoners with us. I can understand if you don't want Shera or Rocket Town in danger."

Shaking his head, Cid replied, "Don't worry about that. Here Kyra and Junon are in danger. No matter where we drag those two, danger will always be somethin' we gotta worry about." He sighed, broad shoulders sagging with unadulterated relief. "Thanks, kid, thanks so much for all this."

Cloud acknowledged his friend's heartfelt gratitude with a smile, knowing that the pilot wasn't one for dramatic displays of emotion. "It's no problem, Cid. I'd hate to lose you this late in the race. We should be ready to leave in a few hours."

"Right," Cid said with a firm nod, turning to leave. He stopped in the doorway, one hand resting on the frame. "Thanks again, Cloud. Just...thanks."

The AVALANCHE leader just grinned and shook his head. "Go on, Cid."

The pilot gave him a lopsided smile and waved once before exiting the room, calling over his shoulder as he went. "I'm goin' for a walk, then I'll pack my shit up."

"Will do," Cloud called back.

//That means I should get my crap together, too. Not that I have too much of it, though. And how the hell are we going to escort Titus and Fa-Li down to the landing strip without them escaping? I'll probably keep Vincent and Red close to Titus. Barret and Tifa can probably take care of--//

"Strife!" Reno suddenly exclaimed.

Cloud blinked, coming out of his pensive mode. He had almost forgotten the Turk was still lounging on his bed like he owned the place. "What is it?"

Reno puffed angrily on his cigarette and growled, "You mean I gotta pack ALL my shit up and be ready to go in a few hours?"

Cloud rolled his eyes. "It's not like you have so much shit to pack up in the first place, Reno."

The Turk blew a cloud of resentful smoke in his companion's direction. "Hey, I still gotta wait in line to take a freakin' shower. And then it's my sacred mission to make sure Elena gets all her crap together. Do you have any IDEA how LONG she can take to put her goddamn make-up on? I swear that woman would forget her head if it wasn't attached to her shoulders. And then—"

Forget glue. Staples were sounding good right about now.

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"Careful," Kyra warned. "It's hot."

"I know, I know," Yuffie replied, blowing on the liquid to cool it. Her exhalation was a bit too forceful, however, and some droplets of coffee splattered across the counter. "Oops."

"Oops' is right," Kyra said with a tolerant smile, taking out a towel and wiping the bar counter. "Don't worry, hon, I've seen much bigger spills."

"Really? Like what?" Yuffie asked, grazing her lips over the surface of the coffee to test how hot it was. "A bunch of people spilling their coffees at once?"

"Small beans, that," Kyra replied, pushing some of her auburn hair back from her eyes. "Some guys squabbed in here a couple of years back. One pulled a gun on the other one. I was mopping and scrubbing bloodstains for two hours after that."

Yuffie's gray eyes widened. "Oh my god! Did anyone die?"

"Unfortunately, no."

"Reno gets into a lot of bar fights," Yuffie added, dipping her finger into her coffee to ascertain its temperature. Her other method wasn't working very well.

Kyra stared at her. "Whose blood do you think I was mopping up?"

Realization dawned on Yuffie. "RENO got into a fight in here?"

"Reno gets into fights everywhere. Seems like every time he comes here, something gets broken or he leaves some mess behind for me to clean up. Now I've forbade him to set one foot into my restaurant unless Rude's with him."

Yuffie grinned. "Sucks to be Reno." She sipped her coffee. Not too hot. First instead of third degree burns. What an improvement.

Shifting on the bar stool, Yuffie glanced around the empty restaurant while tasting her coffee gingerly. She and Kyra were alone in the hush of the early dawn. Normally, Yuffie found silence oppressive and uncomfortable, but here with friends to talk with and warm coffee trickling down her throat, the absence of "noise pollution" seemed rather...cozy. The perfect way to spend a rainy day, as far as she was concerned. Maybe if she tried real hard, she could ignore the fact that Titus and Fa-Li were still down in the cellar or "dungeon," as Yuffie had come to call it. She wondered if the two of them were hungry, but quickly banished the thought. She knew it was her companions' general opinion that she was way too attached to Titus and Fa-Li as it was; what would they say if Yuffie insisted on catering to their prisoners' needs?

"No offense, but is the restaurant always this empty?" Yuffie asked the young woman on the other side of the bar.

Kyra sighed and leaned her elbows on the counter, resting her chin on her hands. "No. I usually have regulars who come in every day, but with all this rain, no one even wants to venture outside. Business has been so slow that I even told the waiters and waitresses not to come in unless I call for them."

"I see," Yuffie said, then abruptly fell silent as she heard the heavy fall of footsteps on the stairs.

Cid Highwind emerged from the stairwell, looking bedraggled and tired. Dark bags hung under his midnight blue eyes, looking like smudges of black fingerpaint against the tanned skin. He had his blue flight jacket clutched absently in one hand, oblivious to the lonely sleeve that trailed on the carpeted floor as he trudged towards the bar.

"Hey Cid!" Yuffie greeted as cheerfully as she could manage. She briefly tossed around the idea of cracking some joke about how he went bonkers, but one look at the haunted look in his eyes told her that Cid might not appreciate her humor.

He wearily waved at her. "You gotta back door here?" he asked Kyra. "I wanna go for a walk or something, but not on the main roads."

"Sure," Kyra nodded, pointing to a doorway on the other side of the bar, the one that led to the bathrooms. "Right over there. It's the door next to the men's room. But...do you want an umbrella, if you're going out in the rain?"

Cid paused, as if the idea hadn't even occurred to him. "I guess so," he said with a shrug.

Kyra exited the bar area to open a door designed to blend in with the texture of the wall. After a few moments of fumbling around, she turned around brandishing a pinkish-purple umbrella with little ruffle-like extensions embellishing the rim. Yuffie hid a smile in her coffee cup as Cid made a sour face.

"Sorry I don't have anything more 'manly' for you," Kyra said with a grin, placing the girlish umbrella in Cid's outstretched hand.

The pilot eyed it with obvious distaste, but said, "Oh, hell. If it'll keep me dry...thanks."

"No problem," Kyra responded, heading back towards the bar area. Cid began to plod in the direction of the doorway Kyra had indicated earlier, boots scraping on the floor, purple umbrella looking far too lively against the melancholy aura that surrounded him.

"Bye, Cid," Yuffie called quietly.

Without turning around, he lifted a lead-heavy hand in a gesture of parting before his figure disappeared into the shadows, umbrella and all. Yuffie heaved a great sigh.

"Is he going to be alright?" Kyra asked in a low voice, amber eyes lingering on the doorway Cid had gone through.

"I hope so," Yuffie said softly. "He still won't tell us what happened to him. So far, only he and Titus seem to know anything about it."

Bewilderment clouded Kyra's eyes for a second. "Titus? Oh. Your prisoner, right? You know, it's sad that a man that good-looking is one of the bad guys." She sighed gloomily, expression glum. "There aren't many gorgeous men left who aren't rotten to the core. And by Shiva, that Titus has to be one of the best-looking men I've ever seen."

"I would have to agree with you," Yuffie seconded.

//Speaking of good-looking men though...//

"Can I have another cup of coffee?" she asked.

Kyra glanced at Yuffie's half-full mug. "But you haven't even finished yours yet."

Yuffie shook her head, tucking her hair behind her ears as a few strands flopped into her eyes. Now she was starting to remember why she had kept it short her entire adolescent life. "It's not for me. It's for Vinnie."

A slow smile lit Kyra's face. "Vinnie?"

Yuffie stared at the woman, unable to think of a reason for her sudden grin. "Yeah, you know, Vincent? The freaky red-eyed one that looks like a vampire? I was thinking that he might be awake already. Maybe he wants coffee."

Kyra was still grinning as she pulled a mug out from beneath the counter. "Oh! THAT Vincent. Your special friend."

Yuffie flushed and glared the amused woman with a dark glare. "VINNIE is so NOT my special friend! He's just...Vinnie."

"I'm sure he is," Kyra said soothingly as she filled the mug with steaming coffee and set it before Yuffie. "I hope he just likes plain black coffee."

"He'd better," Yuffie muttered as she climbed off the stool, balancing one mug in each hand. "Because I'm not giving him any of mine! Thanks, Kyra."

"Of course," the auburn-haired woman said, still smiling mysteriously as Yuffie concentrated on ascending the stairs without accidentally dumping scalding hot liquid all over herself. She shook her head.

//I don't care what Yuffie says. She's got in bad for that "Vinnie"//

Now that her source of companionship (and amusement) had departed, she examined the spotless countertops with a sigh. It was slow days like this that she actually wished for dirty dishes or something to keep her occupied. She hated having nothing to do. All she had to look forward to was when the next "guard shift" would end, and the two sentries designated to keep watch over the cellar door would come into the main room for coffee and a something to eat. Until then...it was just Kyra and silence.

She picked up her ever-present hand towel and started to fold and refold it absently. Maybe she should rearrange the tables just for the hell of it...

The front door of the restaurant suddenly swung open, the unlikely harmony of rain and thunder outside suddenly roaring through the room like a night bird flying. Startled, Kyra looked up, eyes widening when she saw what the tempest had blown into her restaurant.

If there were a competition for stunning male beauty, she figured it would be a toss-up between Titus of the dungeon and this new stranger. He had apparently been trekking around in the pouring rain for some time for his white garments were plastered wetly to his muscular body, clinging like a second skin. Raindrops glistened on his bare chest and belly, which were left exposed by the open, buttonless jacket that covered the rest of his torso. Dark brown spikes stuck up in wild disarray from his head, but Kyra got the impression that he had meant for them to be that way. Ordered chaos. Even the rain had failed to flatten most of the rebellious strands of hair to his skull. A pair of dark forest green eyes sparkled amiably at her, and she was surprised at her ability to discern their color even from across the room.

"Hey there, Miss," he greeted, voice deep with softer undertones that gave it a very melodious sound. He could have been a damn good singer with that voice.

Kyra realized that she had been staring and quickly tried to compensate for her rudeness. "I'm sorry! You startled me. Please come in!"

A smile curled the man's lips. "Are you sure you want me to? I'm gonna get your floor all wet."

Kyra waved her hand dismissively, averting her face at the same time. His beauty of his eyes was making her dizzy. "Don't worry about it. It's just water; it'll dry."

"Thanks for your kindness," the man said, gracefully shutting door behind him with one foot. He wore no shoes. What the heck was he doing parading around the streets bare-footed?

The man walked across the restaurant with unnatural grace, feet making no sound at all on the well-worn carpet. His eerie green eyes remained steadily riveted on the auburn-haired woman, a secretive smile still playing on his lips. A scar marred the left side of his face, but instead of detracting from his good looks, it only gave his face an extra boost of character that many men could use, in Kyra's opinion.

"What can I get for you today?" she asked as he seated himself easily on the bar stool directly in front of her.

The man casually leaned his elbows on the countertop, the cuffs of his sopping wet jacket peeling back to reveal wrists that looked strangely delicate next to his large, strong-looking hands. "Just coffee," he answered.

That made Kyra grin. "Just coffee, stranger? Nothing harder?"

His mysterious smile widened. "Only coffee. Alcohol is bad for you."

"Amen to that," Kyra said, pouring more coffee into a clean mug. At this rate, she would need to make another pot fairly soon. "You take anything in your coffee?"

"No, just plain black," the man answered.

Kyra shrugged and set the mug before him. "There you go."

The man gave her another one of those charming smiles. "Thanks, Miss."

"No problem. I'm glad you came in today. Business has been really slow, to say the very least."

"Rain doesn't bother me at all," the man said, sipping his drink while his dark green eyes roved around the restaurant, studying everything intently.

//Apparently not// Kyra thought dryly, eyeing his soggy clothes. Small pools of water had already formed where his elbows pressed against the countertop, and she heard a suspicious dripping noise on the other side of the bar. Looked like she was going to have to bust out the mop again, but, hey, she HAD been looking for something to do. Besides, it wasn't like she could refuse the man entrance just because he was a little on the damp side.

Studying the man before her, Kyra realized that he was younger than she had first assumed. No telltale signs of age marked his face, and the wild hair only strengthened the impression of youthful vitality. Some strands fell prey to gravity and hung against his cheekbones while in the back, the hair was long enough to curl slightly at the nape of his neck. The lashes

around his green eyes were thick and lush; his skin had a healthy tan to it. All in all, a stunningly attractive young man. Yet... Kyra sensed there was something...off about him.

"If you don't mind my asking," she spoke up. "Are you new to Junon?"

The man stared at her with a strange sort of detached intensity, as if he could turn up the heat of his stare in a single instant if he so wished. "Why do you think I'm not from around here?" he queried. Kyra hated people who answered questions with more questions.

"I don't know. I think I would have remembered a face like yours."

His eyes narrowed, and she realized he must think she spoke of his scar rather than his attractive features. "I'm just passing through," he replied, taking another drink of his coffee.

"Passing through? Where are you from, then?"

Full lips curved into another mysterious smile. "From a land far, far away."

Kyra frowned, not knowing quite what to make of this stranger. //I don't think it would be rude if I asked his name, though...//

"By the way..." she started to say, but the man's eyes suddenly distracted her.

They seemed a lot closer than they had been a second ago; deep and drowning green pools hovered inches from her face. Now that she was staring right into them, she noticed that the man had black flecks scattered throughout the forest green iris. That was odd. Kyra had seen black eyes flecked with green before, and green eyes flecked with darker green, but never deep green shot through with obsidian black. They were beautiful eyes, beautiful as tigers were beautiful – eyes she could just fall into...

The man suddenly waved strong, callused fingers in front of her face. "Hey!"

Kyra blinked, awakening from her stupor with a start. "Hm? I'm sorry...I must have zoned out."

That smirk was back, lightly teasing her from over the rim of the coffee cup. "You were staring at me," he said bluntly.

A blush darkened the woman's pale cheeks. "Was I? Sorry about that. I...had a question for you, but...I seem to have forgotten it..."

//What was I going to ask him?//

The man shrugged his broad shoulders. "If you forgot it so quickly, it must have not been that important."

"No," Kyra said uncertainly. "I guess not..."

"Nice place you have here," the man commented, looking around the restaurant again. "You the owner?"

The change of subject was so abrupt that it took Kyra a few precious seconds to regain her mental footing. "Oh, yeah, I'm the owner. Who else would be crazy enough to come to work on a day like this?"

"It looks a lot bigger on the outside." The stranger looked at her out of the corner of one eye. "I'll bet the cellars run deep in this place."

Kyra frowned. "You're a bit odd, if you don't mind my saying so."

To her surprise, the man laughed, a sound that was strangely playful. "I don't mind at all. I've been called a lot worse than 'odd' in my lifetime."

An auburn eyebrow quirked slightly. "You don't say?"

The mysterious stranger winked at her, sexy as hell. "I do say." Throwing back his head, he downed the rest of his coffee in one gulp, setting the mug on the countertop and sliding nimbly off the barstool. "Well, Miss, it's been fun, but I'd best be on my way."

"You're going out into the rain again?"

The man reached into the saturated pockets of his white pants and produced the appropriate amount of gil, tossing the coins onto the counter with soft jingling sounds. "A little rain never hurt anyone," he said, gracing her with one last smile before turning to walk away.

Rude entered the restaurant area just in time to see a man in white walking across the room towards the entrance. The tall Turk paused in the threshold, body going completely still. The graceful movements of the stranger's limbs rang a familiar cord of danger in Rude's mind. His bare feet made not a sound on the carpet, and the mere motion of walking was so graceful it seemed he flowed from one step to the other. Even the swing of his broad shoulders underneath that soaking wet jacket appeared perfectly in sync with the rest of his body. A perfect order. Either that or bottled chaos just waiting to explode into violence.

Leaving the doorway, Rude strode over to the bar area where Kyra was watching the stranger with semi-appreciative eyes. The man opened the door and vanished into the rain without so much as a glance behind him.

Together, Rude and Kyra waited until the silence had settled into a more comfortable lull. "Gangster," they declared at the same time.

"Though I've never seen a gangster half as graceful or gorgeous," Kyra added wistfully.

Rude took a seat at the bar, leaning his elbows on the counter. "I'm fairly certain that grace comes from practicing some form of martial arts."

"And his heartstoppingly beautiful appearance?" Kyra said with a grin.

Rude shrugged, looking disinterested. "Good genetics, I'm guessing."

"DAMN good genetics," Kyra seconded, laughing. "What can I get for you, Rude?"

"Beer."

A smile lit the woman's face. "That's my Rude alright. Good thing, too, because I was running low on coffee."

Rude removed his sunglasses and rubbed his tired eyes as she set the dark green bottle in front of him. "That man didn't drink any booze?"

Kyra shook her head. "No, just coffee."

"Odd." Rude opened the bottle and took a swig, relishing the cold, bitter liquid as it coursed down his throat, the foul taste of it wonderfully familiar. For him, booze always tasted better in Junon. It wasn't because the brands were different or the bartenders any more skilled; the flavor of the alcohol simply seemed to suit his palate better in this desolate city where he had spent his miserable childhood. Quite an ironic thing, if he thought about it long enough. The memories of his hometown were bitter, but the alcohol was good. Praise Shiva for the small things.

Rude lowered his bottle to find Kyra staring at him with a contemplative expression on her pretty face. He lifted an eyebrow. "What's wrong?"

Kyra blinked, but the thoughtful gleam refused to abandon the golden depths of her eyes. "Nothing. It's just good to see you again, Rude. You should come down to Junon more often."

Rude smiled at her. "I know, but..."

"You don't want to," Kyra finished when his voice trailed off. "Why not?"

"Bad memories," Rude said quietly, taking another drink in an attempt to extricate himself from the grip of her steady gaze.

"We all have bad memories of Junon, Rude," Kyra said sternly. "You're not the only one, you know. Out of the old gang, you and I are probably the best off right now."

Rude began to peel the label off his beer bottle, an old habit that he found exceedingly hard to break. Bartenders usually hated him for leaving messes on their countertops. "I found your armory," he said flatly.

"Collection, not armory," Kyra corrected sharply. "I don't traffic weapons anymore."

"What's the price on the Remington?" Rude asked, as if he hadn't heard her previous statement.

Kyra lifted a suspicious eyebrow. "Oh? Since when does the infamous Rude of the Turks use a shotgun in battle?"

"First time for everything."

"But never for that. You're too dedicated to your little martial arts/boxing thing. Maybe you could take on that man with the good genetics."

Rude frowned, remembering the man's unnatural grace, like danger in a bottle. "No, I would rather not, actually."

Kyra shrugged, either not noting his preoccupation or simply declining to acknowledge it. "Either way, I think martial arts is a more honorable way to go than firearms."

Rude pulled back the lapel of his suit jacket to expose his standard issue 9mm secured in his shoulder holster. "Honorable, yes, but safer, no."

Kyra was still a bit standoffish. "That, of course, is a matter of opinion."

Rude let his jacket fall back into place. "Trafficking firearms is a dirty business, Kyra."

Anger flashed in the woman's eyes. "Hey, I don't need you babysitting me, Rude! This restaurant may have been built with 'dirty money,' but I run a respectable business now."

Rude's bright green eyes met hers, full of sincere concern. "Then why all the firearms?"

The woman sighed, unable to stay angry when faced with those eyes. "Sometimes...some of the old gang comes around, needing...'help.' Call it selfish, but I have no intention of going back to the slums and getting tangled up in all their messy drug deals. So I give them the only help I have left to offer, aside from my continuing friendship." Her voice was sad. "Some of our friends weren't as lucky as us, Rude."

The tall Turk reached out and patted the back of her small hand. "I know. How is everyone doing? I saw Jamil the last time I came to Junon, but what about the others? Has anyone else managed to get out of the slums?"

A bit of light returned to Kyra's face. "Cedric did."

Rude looked up in surprise. "Cedric Takai?"

Kyra smiled at his shock. "Sure did. You never would have thought, right? He was so quiet and everything. He's still paying off a few old debts, but he's gonna get out, I can tell. He works for the silversmith a couple of blocks over. Makes a sweet set of throwing knives."

The normally stoic man made no effort to stop the smile that came to his face. "That's damn good to hear. About him getting out, I mean."

Kyra nodded. "Damn straight it is. And you?"

"Me?"

"How's your new 'gang'?" Kyra asked, making quotation marks with her fingers. "Have you found new bar buddies up there in Midgar?"

Rude shook his head. "Just Reno and sometimes Reeve. Elena will go with us to bars if we ask her, but she doesn't drink much."

"She's a good woman," Kyra said quietly, watching as Rude studied his beer bottle, wiping droplets of condensation off the green glass before they could roll down and get the counter wet.

"You know, that Elena really likes you, Rude," Kyra told him softly, knowing her tall friend had a tendency to balk and clam up when hit with too much emotionally shocking information at once. He was never one for discussing feelings.

Rude continued to poke at the bottle, noting how the drops of liquid slowly dripping down of the sides of the bottle resembled the raindrops outside. "Really?" he muttered. "I never noticed."

"...You did, too, Rude."

\*\* \*\* \*\* \*\* \*\*

China all the way to New York  
I can feel the distance getting close  
You're right next to me  
But I need an airplane  
I can feel the DISTANCE as you breathe  
Sometimes I think you want me to touch you  
How can I when you build a great WALL around you

In your eyes I saw a future together  
You just look away in the distance

"China"

Tori Amos

Vincent lay awake in the darkness, listening to the light sound of the rain drizzling against the window. Beside him, Barret snored in the blissful embrace of complete and total sleep. Without even opening his eyes, Vincent knew that Cid had long since abandoned his makeshift bed on the couch. He felt none of the teeming, crackling aura that he had come to associate with the emotionally disturbed Cid. Somewhere down the hall, he could hear Cloud and Reno's raised voices as they bickered about some trivial matter.

All was well.

Rolling onto his side, Vincent brought his knees up in a half-fetal position, pondering whether or not he should try and get a bit more rest. Albeit the floor wasn't the most optimal place of rest, but when compared to the soft cushiony embrace of a silk-lined coffin set amidst the silence of a catacomb, Vincent preferred the thin, scratchy carpet and the discordant symphony of Barret's thunderous snores. He sighed and adjusted the lumpy pillow that provided his head with only minimal comfort. Both he and Barret had forfeited more luxurious pillows, instead allowing Cid to use the best one out of the three cushions Kyra had offered them. Vincent figured if the pilot couldn't have his sanity, he might as well have a comfortable pillow.

Quiet footsteps treading softly over the floorboards suddenly snapped Vincent out of his period of lazy reflection. His red eyes opened wide, piercing the blackness with flawless ease as his claw began to edge closer to where the Outsider was tucked underneath his pillow.

His precautionary measures proved groundless, however, when Yuffie Kisaragi suddenly poked her head around the corner, squinting in the darkness as she tried to pinpoint the locations of the living room's occupants.

Her eyes fell on Vincent, her pupils oversized orbs of darkness amidst seas of stormy gray. "Oh, you're awake, Vinnie," she stated, stepping around the corner and into the living room area. She had two mugs in her hands.

Vincent propped himself up on one elbow, pushing his hair away from his face. "Is something wrong, Yuffie?"

The young ninja shook her head and plopped gracefully down on the floor in front of him, folding her slender legs underneath her with the ease of long practice. "Nothing's wrong. I just thought, you know, you might want coffee or something since your shift is coming up." She laughed softly, gray eyes glittering with mirth even in the darkness. "Me and Reno were practically falling asleep on our feet during our shift. Some guards we made." She held out one of the mugs to him. "Here you go. I hope you like it plain and nasty."

Vincent sat up, silently touched by her kindness but bewildered as to why she chose to direct such effort towards him. "That's fine. Thank you, Yuffie," he said politely, taking the mug from her fingers.

"You're welcome," Yuffie said cheerily, speaking in a semi-low tone so as not to wake Barret with their conversation. Vincent leaned his back against the leg of a nearby chair, drawing his knees up to his chest in a position that would have looked more vulnerable if seen on another man. His pale skin, midnight black hair, and ruby red eyes dimmed any impression of vulnerability he might have exuded.

"Cid went for a walk," Yuffie announced, probably just for conversation's sake.

"I know," Vincent replied, holding his coffee mug close to his face just to feel the comforting warmth of the steam against his skin.

"I hope he's going to be okay," Yuffie continued, sipping her coffee and watching him intently.

Vincent said, "All we can hope for right now is that his sanity doesn't deteriorate to a point where it obliterates his personality."

A sour expression came to Yuffie's face. "Geez, you're so morbid, Vinnie."

Vincent only shrugged, broad shoulders straining against the cloth of his borrowed shirt. It was then that he realized his cape and other gothic-ish garments had been missing for days. He had hardly noticed the absence of the clothes he used to be so attached to.

Yuffie shifted position, uncoiling her legs and sitting on her backside. The movement put her closer to Vincent, close enough that he could feel the gentle warmth emanating from her body. It made him want to move away and edge closer at the same time. Ambivalence. Vincent hated being ambivalent; it was a state of mind that would more than likely get him killed one day, but that was the dominant effect Yuffie seemed to have on his mentality. She made him hesitate, question things, doubt the dark convictions that he had abided by for years...

Turning his head, he studied the girl seated barely two feet away from him. She was staring blankly into her coffee cup, eyes distant and pensive. Such a state had become rather common for Yuffie as of late, Vincent was unhappy to see. It was quite obvious something lurked in the depths of her mind, an irking thought that turned her mouth down at the corners and dimmed the light in her eyes.

"What are you thinking, Yuffie?" Vincent asked shrewdly, surprising himself. He usually didn't make such inquiries, but it bothered him to see her expression so dark and closed-off.

She looked up calmly, as if she had been aware of his attentiveness all along. "I really need to talk to Titus alone," she whispered, eyes large and strangely endearing. But what Vincent saw shifting underneath the stormy seas wasn't so appealing. Vincent, along with his four older sisters, had run from assassins when he was just a boy. He had been an agent of comfortable rank during his time with the Turks. And finally, he had served as a guinea pig for Hojo.

Vincent Valentine knew fear when he saw it. He knew the taste of it, the smell of it, and that was the emotion prevalent in the depths of Yuffie's eyes. She was sincerely desperate to talk with the man formally known as the Running Man. But why?

Vincent found the untouched contents of his coffee cup a more interesting study, thankful for the shadows that hid his deep frown. "Why are you telling me this, Yuffie? If you wish to speak with Titus, then you should discuss it with Cloud."

Yuffie hesitated, then said, "Vincent, could you...ask Cloud for me? I mean, put in good word or something?"

Questioning garnet eyes flicked in her direction, and Yuffie hastened to explain. "Cloud respects you a hell of a lot more than he does me. I know that if I tried to get him to let me talk to Titus by myself, he wouldn't listen to a word I said. But he'd listen to you, Vincent."

"And why is that?"

Yuffie watched his dark profile fixedly. "Because he likes you. Cloud has a lot of respect for you, Vincent. He values your opinion a lot more than he values mine...or anyone else's for that matter."

"A pity in that," Vincent commented.

Yuffie frowned. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Cloud pegs me for the most sound of mind amongst us. That's utterly false, not to mention frightening."

His self-deprecating words brought a scowl to Yuffie's face. "You're so frustrating, Vincent. After all this time, it's like you still can't accept that we're your friends."

A hushed rustling of garments dispersed through the intimate darkness as Vincent shifted to face her, eyes red as fresh blood. "I don't see how that's possible. Anyone who finds comfort in my presence has to be lacking intelligence-wise."

Yuffie dropped her gaze, but not before he saw the flash of hurt that flickered across her face. "Oh," she muttered. "I see."

Uncomfortable silence filled the air in between them, as abysmal as the unseen rift that separated their two mentalities. Vincent watched the undulating motion of the coffee in his mug, its glittering surface illuminated as lightening flashed outside the window, followed by the distant call of yet more approaching thunder. He was sorry he had hurt Yuffie's feelings, but...he just didn't understand the girl.

When he first had the pleasure of meeting her thieving acquaintance a year ago, Yuffie had appeared a rather simple girl, cheerful and mischievous. Yet, even then, Vincent had perceived the faint darkness of maturity shifting underneath her laughing eyes. But such was typical of adolescent girls on the verge of emerging into womanhood so he had paid no heed to the realm of infinite possibilities that danced within those eyes.

But somehow within the past few days the gentle stirrings within those eyes had turned into tidal waves, drowning out the girl in Yuffie and allowing the hidden, shadow-wrapped woman within to emerge at choice moments. Despite her many adventures, there was much of life Yuffie had yet to experience, and Vincent suddenly felt horribly angry that Yuffie was

being coerced to bloom amidst adversity, amidst darkness, amidst thunderstorms and lightening. It seemed a heinous crime to force upon a human being.

A small hand suddenly reached out, gently covering the claw that gripped the coffee mug so tightly it most likely the kitchenware would have shattered in a few seconds. Her fingers were warm. Vincent's eyes widened, but he didn't dare turn to look at the young woman next to him.

"We're your friends, Vincent," Yuffie said firmly. "We like you...I like you."

Vincent's heart clenched painfully. "That is..."

'Unfortunate,' he started to say, but he couldn't bring himself to do it. His frightening relief, his muted elation, was simply too strong to allow such words.

Yuffie's fingers lightly gripped his wrist, fingertips grazing the sensitized metal like the touch of a phantom. Vincent heard her swallow. "Um...when I realized that you and the others were coming to save me, I was...really happy, Vincent. I was glad...that you were there."

Vincent said nothing, watching her short, blunt fingernails tap the metal of his claw nervously. Her fingers looked so pale against the tarnished gold.

She continued, "Sometimes – this may sound silly – but, I just want to...touch you, Vincent. Like...hug you or something... only I don't...because I know...that you don't like to be touched..."

"You're right," Vincent said hollowly. "Being touched by others sometimes...displeases me."

Her hand tightened around his metallic wrist as he felt her lean her forehead against his shoulder, hair tickling his arm even through the material of his shirt. Vincent didn't stiffen; he felt as if all the energy had been drained from his limbs in order to keep up with the echoing pounding of his immortal heart.

"Do you like us, Vincent?" Yuffie suddenly asked. "Are you our friend as well?"

The man felt his head nod. "Yes, I'm your friend."

"And...you like us?"

"Yes...I like you...all." As he said it, he realized it was true. He liked being with Yuffie, with AVALANCHE, and that was why he wanted to leave. He liked everyone far more than was healthy. Some of them more than others.

Yuffie drew back abruptly, as if realizing the intimacy of their position. Good little girls didn't cuddle up to men twice their age in the embrace of darkness, where no one could monitor their actions. She did, however, place a small hand on Vincent's shoulder, her fingers unavoidably tangling with wayward locks of his dark hair.

Though Vincent didn't look at her, he could hear the smile in her voice and knew that it was for him, and it was genuine. "No matter what you say, Vincent, I don't think you're a monster."

Vincent looked at her shining eyes in surprise. The words were reminiscent of those she spoke at the hotel, when they had shared a bed for one night.

Yuffie smiled at him, patting his shoulder and absently brushing some of his hair back from his face before rising to her feet. "Better drink your coffee before it gets cold," she warned him good-naturedly, waving once before striding out of the living room and disappearing into the lightening shadows of the hall.

Dawn was near, or as much of dawn as the overcast skies would permit.

Alone again, Vincent stared at the reflective surface of his still untouched coffee, trying with all his might to combat the maelstrom of emotions that raged within him. Yuffie was fortunate that optimism was a basic trait of her personality; she could always wrap that around herself like a cloak, a corner of her own soul in which she could rest from the darker, more taxing emotions that plagued her. Vincent wasn't so lucky. All he seemed to know was torment and more torment.

Sighing internally, Vincent gazed out the window at the gray skies. The rain had slowed down to a lulling drizzle, but the silence now seemed thicker, more choking, especially since Barret had finally stopped snoring.

"How long have you been awake?" Vincent asked.

The muscular bulk lying on the floor shifted like a bear awakening from a fitful slumber. Barret sat up and leaned his broad back against the couch Cid had abandoned. "Long enough," the big man answered gruffly, brown eyes uncomfortably keen. "Jus' what do you think you're doin'?"

Vincent tore his eyes away from the window and resumed studying his coffee cup. "I'm doing nothing. At least, nothing that I can control."

Barret scratched his bearded face with his normal hand, still staring at Vincent. "You know she only seventeen, don't ya?"

"I am well aware of that fact. Trust me, Barret, if I knew what was going on, I would tell you."

"Oh?" Barret sounded suspicious. "Would you? I don't think ya would."

Vincent shrugged. "Think what you wish."

"You're confused," Barret stated, sounding surprised even at his own words. "Man, Vincent, you sure is messed up in the head."

"I think I'll have to agree with you on that account."

"WeeeIII," Barret drawled, folding his arms across his chest. "Since you both seemed all mixed up, I guess I'll leave you and Yuffie to your own thangs, but you hurt the brat, and I'll cap your ass so fast you won't know what the hell hit ya."

Vincent smiled slightly. "Of course." He and Barret didn't see eye to eye on many things, but he knew when the ex-leader of AVALANCHE made an idle, jesting threat. Barret would never dream of shooting Vincent. One, they were friends. Two, Vincent would shoot back.

The two men sat in comfortable silence in the wee hours of the morning until the sound of a door opening down the hall disrupted the quietude. A pair of footsteps came padding down the hall, and a moment later, Cloud appeared, still clad in only one boot. The other was clutched in his now-gloved hand.

Cloud blinked in surprise at finding two pairs of alert eyes staring up at him. "Good, you're both awake. Start getting your stuff together. We're—"

"—MOVING OUT!!" Reno cried, rushing by just in time to steal Cloud's thunder before striding down the hall towards his room, laughing at his own wiliness as he went.

~owari ch. 33

