

Chapter Thirty-Five: The Calm

"But it's all okay now, as long as I'm here with you." Cid Highwind

Shera hummed quietly to herself as she stood at the kitchen sink, washing the dishes that had accumulated from her daytime meals. Rain struck the windowpanes with soft patters before rolling forlornly down the glassy surface. Shera found the sound of rain very soothing in its reliable consistency, even when it fell in sporadic bursts that were anything BUT consistent. Rain always had a calming effect on her, even in the stressful of days as a Shinra engineer when she had loads of paperwork to complete and machinery layouts to look over. Rain would arrive at some time or another, and she always left her cramped Shinra office to watch it fall, letting the sight of the little droplets ease the tension from her frazzled nerves.

However, now even the rain and her own humming, a sound that reminded her of her childhood, could not alleviate her worries. The rain became an orchestra pit full of sound and fury, her humming an annoying tickle in her throat. Shera turned the last of her off-tune hums into a preoccupied sigh as she let the dirty water drain out of the sink and wiped her hands on a dishtowel.

Her eyes unwittingly drifted to where the kitchen phone lay still and quiet on its hook. She had received calls from her best friend and sister within the past hour, and although she loved them both and enjoyed talking to them, she really wished her husband would call. He had phoned her from Junon, but the connection had been so terrible that they hadn't been able to talk for long. But even through the incessant crackling of the static, Shera had had no trouble discerning that Cid wasn't himself.

And now she was worried. So very worried.

She hadn't received any messages from him within the last 24 hours, and her concern for her husband grew by the second. The news had said that Kalm and Lower Junon were among those cities completely underwater by now, and Shera knew that if the rain continued with the same relentless fervor, it would only be a matter of time before Upper Junon began to suffer as well. Rocket Town had been fortunate not to get excessive amounts of rain; they had quite a few heavy downpours, but nothing like the flooding that had drowned Kalm.

//The house is so quiet without Cid around// Shera thought to herself. //Right about now, he'd probably be going stir-crazy, pacing through the house, slamming doors, and cursing the rain. Gods, I'm so silly. I miss him already.//

A murmuring of what sounded like voices outside made Shera jump and glance towards the front door. Since the crime rate in Rocket Town was limited to a couple petty robbers and some local shoplifters, Shera rarely ever locked their doors, but...

//Better to be safe than sorry// Shera told herself. She turned and removed her apron, laying the patterned cloth next to the sink.

When she turned around, she saw Cid Highwind standing in the open doorway, soaked to the bone. Shera's brown eyes widened until they appeared abnormally large behind her glasses. She had to blink a couple of times to fully comprehend what she was seeing.

"C-Cid?" she stammered.

He stared like he had never seen her before, his blue eyes wide underneath the shock of blonde hair the rain had drug over his face. His goggles hung askew on his high forehead, and his clothes were waterlogged and disheveled. A puddle of rainwater was slowly forming underneath Cid as the couple stood gaping at one another.

"Are you alright?" Shera asked worriedly, not liking the look in her husband's normally keen eyes. He bore the haunted countenance of one who had been through hell and back, and had just maybe left vital pieces of himself behind.

"I'm...fine," the pilot mumbled, sloshing his way further into the kitchen, leaving the door wide open behind him.

Shera's brow creased in distress. "Are you sure?" she asked tentatively, though there was really no need for her query. One look into those troubled blue eyes told her that her husband was most definitely *not* alright.

His gaze remained intensely locked on her face, as if memorizing every feature. He muttered something.

She took a step towards him. "What? I couldn't hear you."

He moved forward until there was barely a breath between them, eyes still boring into hers. "Now," he whispered. "Now, I'm gonna be okay."

Instead of quelling her worry, Shera only felt her concern grow more acute. "I don't understand, Cid," she whispered back. "What happened?"

"Something bad. But it's all okay now, as long as I'm here with you."

Reaching out, he wrapped her in a soft embrace, hugging her gently to him as if afraid she'd shatter in his arms. Wetness from his saturated jacket transferred its affection to her blouse and slacks, but Shera didn't care. She held her husband tightly, laying her smooth cheek against his stubbled one. He trembled slightly from either cold or emotion, maybe a little of both. Shera felt tears sting her eyes as she imagined what sort of internal torment could best the indomitable will of Cid Highwind.

"I love you, Shera," he whispered into her hair.

She shut her eyes and tightened her grip on her husband. "I love you, too."

The sound of someone clearing their throat made Shera jump slightly. She opened her eyes and, over the rise of Cid's shoulder, she could see Cloud Strife standing the doorway, spiky hairstyle looking wilted and thoroughly wet, an uncertain smile on his face.

"Is it alright to come in?" he asked, and behind him, Shera glimpsed what appeared to be an entire crowd of people. All awaiting permission to enter her home.

//Oh my. How many are there? Do I have enough food to feed them all? Are there enough blankets and floor space and...//

She patted her husband gently on the back. "Honey, Cloud and his...friends are here."

"I know," he replied in his usual gruff fashion, squeezing her tightly before releasing her and turning to face the door. One arm stayed draped around her shoulders, a damp but familiar weight that Shera took great comfort in.

"Get in here, kid," he urged Cloud. "No use standin' out there in the damn rain."

Cloud nodded and moved quickly into the room, trailing more puddles of water in with him. Shera might have taken a brief moment to be vaguely upset about the condition of her floor, if she had not glimpsed Reno of the Turks striding in right behind Cloud. Employees of the old Shinra Company had visited Rocket Town many times before, each time bringing nothing but pain, anger, and sometimes bloodshed. The Turks she was particularly leery of, and with good reason, too.

Though, right now, she had to admit that Reno didn't look particularly threatening. His signature blue jacket was missing, revealing a white dress shirt soaked through and through with rain. A ring of dark bruises encircled his pale throat, and his features were arranged into a countenance that leaned more towards "tired and weary" than "murderous and menacing."

His aquamarine eyes met hers, and Shera gave him a faint smile. He acknowledged her gesture of greeting with a curt nod as he crossed the threshold, and Shera saw for the first time that Reno's left hand was wrapped around the chain of a pair of handcuffs.

The unlucky recipient of those handcuffs' binding embrace was a slender man dressed entirely in black. Black leather jacket over black turtleneck. Black jeans tucked into back combat boots. All the darkness contrasted sharply with skin the color of a pristine lab coat and hair a shade of blonde so pale it almost appeared white. Wet strands hung into his eyes, which, as he shifted his attention to her, were a deep emerald green that struck a familiar cord in her memory. He was eerily beautiful.

Shera swallowed hard. What was going on? She knew AVALANCHE and the Turks were desperately trying to locate the missing Reeve, but was this...a prisoner?

"Where do you want this guy?" Reno asked Cid, and from the way he uttered the words 'this guy,' Shera could tell Reno didn't much like the green-eyed man.

Cid frowned and scratched his head thoughtfully with his free hand. "Eh...there's a radiator in the living room. Cuff him to that."

Shera glanced questioningly at strange, leather-clad man. He stared intensely back at her for a second before his gaze shifted to Cid. "Your greatest fear," he stated.

Cid's true blue eyes didn't waver as he tightened his grip on Shera's shoulders. "Yeah, my greatest fear."

An odd smile curved the man's mouth, and Shera once again found herself the focus of those unnerving eyes. "Have you broken your glasses lately?" he asked.

Shera blinked, instinctively raising one hand to adjust the objects in question. "No, not lately."

"You cut yourself?"

"N-No."

"Blood on the floor?"

"No."

"Okay, enough of your shit," Reno announced, dragging the strange man off in the direction of the living room.

Shera's eyes nervously tracked their progression before returning her attention to the suddenly overcrowded kitchen. There seemed to be bodies packed into every available crevice, and as Shera watched, the large form of Barret Wallace shuffled carefully through the doorway, carrying somebody in his strong arms. That somebody was wrapped in what was probably Reno's blue jacket, but a long fall of chocolate brown hair dangled nearly the floor, those dark tresses clearly proclaiming their owner's identity.

"Tifa!" Shera gasped. "What happened to her?"

"She's badly injured," Cloud said. "Do you have a place where we can put her?"

"The guest bedroom," Shera replied instantly, grimly noting the scraped and bloody condition of Tifa's legs. "There are antiseptics and medicines in the hallway bathroom."

Cloud thanked her, and gestured for Barret to follow him. The big man obeyed him without a word, looking just as battle-weary as the others.

"Cid, what's going on?" she asked worriedly, looking up into her husband's face. "What happened to Tifa? And what about that man with the green eyes? What was—"

He silenced her with a gloved finger over her lips. "I'll tell ya later," he said.

Shera looked at him dubiously.

That earned her a smile. "I promise, woman." He kissed her gently. "Can you go help with Tifa? I'll take care of the rest of these knuckleheads."

Part of her wanted to insist, but all she did was smile gently and nod. If Cid said everything would be alright, she trusted him.

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Montana sprawled languidly in the creaky wooden chair and watched Jezebel rebuild her face, piece by painstaking piece. He'd been her partner (or the closest thing Jezebel could *have* to a partner) for a little more than three years now, and he had only seen her perform such a recovery feat once before. He found the whole process vaguely disgusting, watching the muscles of her face twisting and pulsating as they regenerated and reshaped themselves. After the red and pink muscles were done, her pale skin reappeared in patches, thin and flimsy as tissue paper, but still present in deference to Jezebel's inhuman regenerative abilities.

"I think I'm gonna barf," Montana grumbled, resting his cheek against his closed fist as he braced his elbow on the chair's arm. "I've seen you do this before, but I don't remember it being *this* grotesque."

~Grotesque?~ Jezebel's harsh laughter rang in his mind. ~Picking up new vocabulary, I see.~

"Always," Montana said through gritted teeth. "By the way, do me a favor and rebuild your mouth and throat so you can stop speaking through telepathy. It creeps the shit out of me."

As if the raw, meaty mass of Jezebel's face wasn't disgusting enough, she had the audacity to spread her lipless mouth in a grin that exposed all of her newly rebuilt teeth, shining and white against the burnt flesh and exposed muscles.

Montana made a revolted sound and turned his dark green eyes up towards the single light bulb swinging from its chain on the ceiling. But his acute hearing could still pick up the fleshy sounds of Jezebel's facial reconstruction, and thus, he was actually relieved when he felt a spark of dark, familiar energy flare in the shadows of the room.

"Mr. High Priest," Montana said in a sing-song voice, still staring up at the light bulb. "You're late. I expected you much earlier."

High Priest Ajax (or rather, High Priest Ajax's spiritual projection, for Montana knew that by sacred duty, High Priests were never allowed to leave the subterranean tunnels) stepped out of the shadows and stood in the light offered by the lonely bulb, a smile on his face, as per usual. "As you know, Montana, things are still a bit hectic within the faction. As such, I was not informed of Jezebel's and your failure to recapture Titus and dispose of AVALANCHE until a little while ago."

Montana didn't answer, biting back his anger as he thought of the woman Tifa Lockheart and how she had managed to survive his attack. Obstinate bitch.

Ajax's hologram looked about the room with mock-curiosity. "What is this place?"

~Safe house~ Jezebel's mental voice replied.

Montana snorted. "Safe *shithole* is more like it. Serves me right for letting a woman without a face guide me to shelter."

Ajax's soulless blue eyes drifted towards where Jezebel sat against the wall opposite Montana, her back ramrod straight and her hands folded neatly in her lap, as if she were lazing about idly instead of concentrating on growing herself a new pair of eyes, among other things.

"Jezebel," Ajax said cheerfully. "You're not looking too good."

~Of course I'm not. I need absolute concentration, High Priest, so if you do not have any pressing business, then I'm politely asking that you leave us.~

"I'll be happy to oblige you...as soon as I deliver additional orders from the Master."

Montana heaved a weary sigh and ran his fingers through his mass of messy brown hair. "Figures he'd give us more shit to deal with."

Ajax ignored this in the same sanguine fashion which he ignored all things he didn't wish to hear. Ever the belligerent one, Montana lazily lifted one of his bare feet and thrust it through Ajax's projection, swiping his leg around so that it looked like he was kicking right through the High Priest's chest. Ajax watched with a happy, empty expression on his face, unfazed as Montana wiggled his toes right under his short nose.

"Well," the martial artist grumped. "Aren't you going to tell us our orders?" He stuck his foot through Ajax's face.

"I was hoping you'd ask," the High Priest replied undauntedly. "In addition to leaving Yuffie Kisaragi unharmed, the Master also demands that Cloud Strife and his sword, the Ultima Weapon, not be tarnished in any way, shape, or form."

Montana bolted upright in his chair, feet falling back to the dirty cement floor. "He wants us to leave Cloud Strife ALIVE?! Those sound like the kind of orders YOU'D give, you masochistic bastard. You're freakin' insane!"

Ajax just smiled.

Jezebel spoke up in a displeased tone. ~High Priest, Strife is their leader. If we can't eliminate him in SOME way, our chances of beating AVALANCHE are greatly reduced. He keeps the entire team tied together.~

The blue-eyed man shrugged his narrow shoulders. "So capture him, but allow me to remind you that AVALANCHE is not comprised of weaklings. If Strife falls or is captured, there are several who will rise up to take his place. Reno of the Turks is one. Cid Highwind is another."

~Your point being?~

"Whether or not you capture him is entirely up to you. The Master only demands that Cloud Strife and Yuffie Kisaragi are left alive and well, and Titus is brought back to the faction."

"I thought he wanted us to dispose of Titus?" Montana grumbled.

"Change of plans," Ajax explained.

"There's ALWAYS a change of plans," the martial artist snapped. "Titus is gonna be a pain in the ass if we leave him alive."

"Well, you two will just have to deal with that, now, won't you? Good luck. I hope you don't die." With a final smile, the projection of the High Priest winked out of view, leaving nothing in its wake but shadows and dust. The dark-edged presence that the High Priest always carried with him dispersed like dust in the wind.

Montana glared at the place Ajax's projection had occupied. "Man, I really can't stand that little shit. Even Titus was more decorous than he is."

Jezebel hesitated before saying quietly, ~You'd best hurry and kill that Lockheart woman, Montana.~

The man's green eyes widened fractionally, and a smug grin came to his lips. "What's this? Is the great Jezebel actually admitting that she's going to have trouble carrying out the Master's bidding all on her own?"

Jezebel's gloved hands tightened in her lap, and when she spoke next, her mind voice was cold, like icy fingers prodding at Montana's brain. ~We have to leave Strife, Kisaragi, and Titus alive. That's just asking for trouble. If we were at LEAST able to kill Strife, there would be a brief moment of pandemonium before a new leader rose to take his place. Now, we won't even have that advantage. And if things like THIS~ she gestured to the ruin that had once been her face ~happen every time I fight AVALANCHE, then yes, Montana, as much as I loathe to admit it, I'm going to need your help.~

Montana was too stunned to reply. Jezebel actually admitting that she needed his help was just...scary.

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Tifa fell to the ground with another bruise on her leg and a busted lip as an added bonus. Her hair had long since extricated itself from its restraining hair tie, and now it tumbled forward, the strands clinging to her sweat-soaked arms and shoulders. She spat blood into the unforgiving dirt and blinked back tears of frustration. She was never going to get it right! Why did she even **need** to work on such a tactic?

Zangan's firm but gentle voice drifted from above as his large shadow fell over her crumpled figure. "Get up, Tifa. You need to learn this."

To her humiliation, Tifa found herself ready to cry. "No," she said through a tight throat. "No more."

"Yes, more," Zangan said, voice sounding strange and echoing in the well of her memories. "If I don't break you of this habit now, it will end up killing you later on. Now, get up! Or are you giving up already?"

Tifa shut her eyes tightly, small, silvery teardrops welling at the corners of her eyes and rolling down her face. "No," she whispered to the backs of her eyelids. "I can't give up..."

"Damn right you can't," a young, masculine voice mocked her.

Gasping, Tifa whirled around, her burgundy eyes widening when she saw not her beloved instructor but Hiei Montana looming over her, hands in the pockets of his baggy white pants and an infuriating smirk on his handsome face. Behind him, the horrific visage of Nibelheim being consumed by hungry flames blazed on the fabric of the dream, every bit as real as it had been that terrible day during her adolescence. Heat buffeted her skin like the rough caress of an overeager Zephyr, and smoke mercilessly seared the tender lining of her throat. Directly in front of her, the flames that had destroyed her hometown danced in the depths of Montana's dark green eyes, mocking her as they undulated in their world-devouring waltz.

Montana smiled, his teeth yellow and red in the firelight. "Go ahead and surrender yourself to me. Give up so I can claim the lives of your friends."

"Never!" Tifa screamed at him.

The young man cocked his head to the side, spiky brown hair ruffled by an unseen breeze. "Out, out, brief candle," he quoted in a strangely intimate voice, one strong, murderous hand extricating itself from his pocket and reaching towards her with callused fingers. Tifa scrambled away from that touch, knowing that he meant to snuff her out, extinguish her life like--

"Tifa..."

--the brief candle he--

"Wake up, Tifa!"

--believed her to be. Full--

Small, strong hands clasped her shoulders.

--of sound and fury--

"Tifa!"

--signifying--

Yuffie's voice rang from the air above her. "Tifa, please, answer me!"

"...nothing," the woman whispered, shocked at the sound of her own voice issuing from her parched throat.

Though the darkness behind her closed eyelids remained whole, she sensed someone moving above her, felt a wave of gentle human warmth pulsing nearby. "Tifa, are you alright?" Yuffie asked worriedly, tentatively squeezing her friend's bare shoulders.

"I'm fine," Tifa tried to say, but all that came out was a dry wheeze. Her throat felt scorched and raw, just like the rest of her. She tried to summon strength to open her eyes, but her entreaties went unanswered. She was weak, slack-limbed, frail, and she hated it. A cough fought its way out of her chest and though she tried to contain it, a painful hacking fit soon wracked her battered body, making her mostly bare flesh brush against the sheets that covered her. Agony exploded on her stomach, and recent memories of her defeat by Montana came fast and furious, just like their nightmarish predecessor.

Tifa suddenly felt a slender arm slide behind her to cradle her head, lifting her a little ways off the bed. Something blissfully cool came into the contact with her lips.

"It's water," Yuffie said. "Drink, please."

It took an outrageous amount of effort just for Tifa to open her mouth and force her uncooperative throat to permit some of the cool liquid to course down its length. Much ended up dribbling down her chin and cheeks, which Yuffie quickly mopped up. Tifa cracked her eyes open a bit, and the world around her came to life in a blur of colors thrown together haphazardly. Pain lanced through her head at the intrusion, but she doggedly ignored it and instead focused her efforts on deciphering the Yuffie-shaped blur that hovered over her.

The young woman's face swam into view as she was taking the glass away from Tifa's lips. "Are you okay?" she asked, brow creased with worry. "Can you see me?"

"Yes," Tifa whispered, trying to smile for her friend, but her lips remained motionless.

"We were really worried about you!" Yuffie confessed, tucking some of her dark brown hair behind her ear, the sleeves of her over-sized white sweater nearly swallowing her small hands. "We used a Cure on all your scrapes, but that burn..."

Tifa felt her hands tighten to fists in the sheets. "It's not going away?" she asked, feeling the first tickle of fear in her chest. She had just woken up. This was too much for her to handle so soon.

She looked around the room as far as her stiff neck would permit, taking in the cheerful designs on the wallpaper and the home-sewn quilt that covered her body.

Yuffie followed her gaze. "We're at Cid and Shera's house in Rocket Town," she told Tifa, dipping her finger into the glass of water and dabbing some on the older woman's cracked lips.

Tifa looked at her friend with questioning eyes.

For a second, Yuffie just stared down at her blankly, then smiled wanly as she recognized the query burning in her friend's mind. "Everyone's fine, Tifa. We're all as safe and sound as we ever were. Cid's doing a lot better, too."

Tifa closed her eyes briefly in relief, sending a silent prayer of thanks to the Planet for protecting her comrades. Until now, she had never realized just how frightened she had been. When she had fallen unconscious after Montana's devastating fire attack, she hadn't know whether she would live or die. Right now, she was the only obstacle standing between her friends and the disparity of Montana's unnatural power. If she died...

She didn't even want to think about that. It was too unbearable.

Swallowing painfully, she made an attempt at speech. "The burn..." she rasped. "I want to...see it."

The corners of Yuffie's small mouth turned down in a frown. "Tifa, I don't think you want to do that."

"I do," Tifa insisted, looking at the younger woman with faintly desperate eyes. "Please, Yuffie. I need to...see what he did...to know this is real."

Yuffie fidgeted and replied uncertainly, "I don't know. I'm afraid to move you. Maybe I should call Cloud."

Tifa shifted, gritting her teeth against the dull aches that plagued her body. "I can sit up."

"Wait!" Yuffie moved frantically to support her friend, placing an arm around Tifa's shoulders to bear the burden of the woman's weight. The sheet covering Tifa threatened to slide off, and for the first time, she noticed something.

"Where are my clothes?" she asked, voice emerging a bit stronger.

"We had to take them off," Yuffie explained. "They were all ripped up, anyways. And don't worry; we kicked all the guys out so they didn't get a free peek."

Tifa smiled weakly. "Thanks."

Taking a deep breath, she slowly released her grip on the sheet that hid her wound from view. The fabric crept slowly downwards, hesitating briefly on the swell of her breasts before sliding down her body, exposing her stomach.

For a second, Tifa didn't recognize the mass of charred, peeling flesh that had overtaken the area her stomach had once inhabited. What had formerly been smooth, unbroken flesh was now a gross combination of burns that ranged from reddened skin that hurt no worse than sunburn to raw, glistening tissue left exposed by the traitorous, blackened flesh that surrounded it. There was no blood, but the sight of that burn on *her* body made her feel dizzy.

"Montana's fire cauterized the wound," Yuffie was saying. "That's why there wasn't much blood."

"Will it heal?" Tifa asked in a high, thin voice that she scarcely recognized as her own.

"Yes," Yuffie said quickly.

"Don't lie."

She felt her friend shift uncomfortably behind her. "I'm not lying, Tifa. The wound will probably heal, but what we're really worried about is the damage done to your spirit."

Tifa frowned, not comprehending. "My spirit?"

"The Holy Fire of Ifrit injures both body and soul," Yuffie replied quietly. "That's why you feel so weak right now, and that's why Montana's power is so deadly. Bodily injuries can be mended with time and care, but spiritual injuries that damage your very aura..."

"Are more dangerous," Tifa finished, voice slightly above a whisper.

Yuffie nodded, loose strands of her hair brushing Tifa's shoulder. "Yes."

A frown marred Tifa's pretty face as she cast her eyes to the ceiling before carefully bringing the sheet up to cover her wound again. Her mind felt so heavy, so raw, as if she were bleeding from the inside out. Montana injured her body, tainted her spirit, haunted her dreams...and all that was fine. Sufficient strength and willpower on her part would dispel any opponent, just like Zangan had taught her. But Montana had also threatened her friends, and that was not fine.

Yuffie hesitantly lowered Tifa back down onto the bed before worriedly peering down into her friend's pensive face. "You okay, Tif?" she asked.

The woman looked at her with overbright eyes, a faint but firm smile curving her dry lips. "Don't worry, Yuffie," she said. "You can have faith in me. I can protect you all. I won't let Montana touch a single one of you."

Yuffie swallowed hard against a throat that felt painfully tight, and telltale signs of tears swam in her gray eyes. "Okay, Tifa," she said with a forced smile as she patted her friend's hand. "But right now, you concentrate on getting better, okay? We've all been so worried about you."

Tifa's burgundy eyes shone with gratitude. "I know, Yuffie. Thank you for watching over me."

The young ninja felt her own optimism returning as she saw evidence of her friend's growing strength. "No problem!" she enthused, hopping to her feet. "You took care of me while I was incapacitated in Junon, and now I can watch over you. But right now, there's a certain Cloud Strife asleep outside the door, waiting for you to wake up. Is it alright if I send him in?"

Tifa brought the sheets closer to her neck. "Yes, but warn him that I look like something the dog dragged in."

Yuffie smiled. "I don't think he'll care."

And Cloud most certainly did not care. His sleeping position slumped against the wall couldn't have provided him with a very refreshing sleep, but he nearly fell over his own two feet when Yuffie roused him to announce that Tifa was awake and talking. Yuffie watched him with wistful eyes as he entered Tifa's room with a bright smile already plastered on his face, belying the dark circles underneath his eyes.

Sighing, Yuffie slowly began walking down the hall towards the kitchen, thinking that she could offer to help Shera do...something. She needed to keep herself busy, or she'd start thinking about stupid things like how she wanted to have someone who would look at her the way Cloud looked at Tifa. Someone who would think her beautiful in spite of her skinny legs, her small breasts, her loud mouth, her mischievous mind. Would her husband be like that? Though marriage was still a long way off for her, but she liked to think that out there, maybe not too far away, there was someone who would hold her, kiss her, hug her, love her...

"Ah!" Yuffie whacked herself on the forehead to derail her uncharacteristic thoughts. What was the matter with her? She was too young to think about getting married and spending the rest of her life with someone, being a wife and having kids

or whatnot. She didn't think herself the motherly type anyways. With her rotten luck, all her offspring would be good-for-nothing little twerps like...

"Hey, brat!"

"Like you!" Yuffie growled, whirling around angrily at the sound of an obnoxious voice behind her.

Reno blinked in bewilderment. "Huh? What's your problem? And why aren't you watching over Tifa?"

Yuffie indignantly placed her hands on her hips. "Don't you dare patronize me! And I'll have you know that Tifa's awake."

Reno's eyes widened. "Is she alright?"

"Yep, she's fine. But Cloud's in there right now so don't bother them."

"Right, whatever," Reno replied, turning on heel and beginning to stride back down the hall to Tifa's room.

Yuffie wanted to stamp her foot in frustration, but she contained the urge, barely. "Reno!" she whisper-screamed. "Get back here! Doesn't the word 'privacy' mean anything to you?"

"No," the redhead called back. "Oh, and can you go help Valentine bring up the blankets and sleeping bags from the basement? I was supposed to do it, but now I'm busy. Thanks!" He flashed a mocking grin and continued on his merry way.

If there had been a heavy object near at hand, Yuffie would have cheerfully clobbered the Turk with it. But she figured violence would disturb Tifa's rest, not that she was going to be able to get much anyways, with the way people kept bustling about. They'd just fought a grueling battle not even a day ago! Wasn't everyone supposed to be **tired** or something?

//Apparently not// she answered herself, folding her arms across her chest and growling when they got tangled in the folds of her over-sized sweater. She missed her old clothes. A lot. This borrowing thing just wasn't working out for her.

"I guess it's off to the basement for me," she grumbled to no one in particular.

A nondescript wooden door marked the entrance to Cid and Shera's basement/storage area/storm cellar. The best of all three worlds, Yuffie supposed. And it would be better if Cid wasn't such an avid collector of random crap. A glimpse into the pilot's garage suggested that the basement was going to be equally cluttered. Not something to look forward to.

Since the door was already slightly ajar, it only took a minute amount of coaxing on Yuffie's part to open the door all the way. A rectangle of yellow light spilled from the hallway into the darkness of the basement. Unlike Kyra's basement in Junon, Cid's basement had a dirt floor and smelled like grease and machinery.

Leaving the door wide open behind her, Yuffie carefully descended the short flight of stairs and squinted into the darkness. "Vinnie?" she called.

"Right here," a deep voice answered from surprisingly nearby.

Yuffie nearly jumped out of her sneakers. "Geez, Vinnie do you hav—"

She cut her exclamation short when he realized she was speaking not to Vincent Valentine, but a wall of blankets and sleeping bags that seemed, for all purposes, to be hovering in midair with Vincent's jean-clad legs poking out the bottom.

The absurdity of the image made her grin. "You behind there, Vinnie?" she joked.

The stack of sleeping backs sashayed to the side, revealing Vincent's perpetually serious face, scarlet eyes staring calmly from behind strands of sloe-colored hair. The gunslinger still wore the same garments Cloud had lent him back in Junon, the pristine whiteness of the long-sleeved shirt nearly matching the pallor of the man's porcelain skin, which was visible through a few tears that adorned the cloth here and there. A hairtie maintained a shaky hold on the end of his loosely-tied ponytail, allowing shorter strands of silken but tangled-looking hair to slide onto Vincent's shoulders and brush the sides of his face.

"What?" the man asked, and Yuffie realized that she'd been frowning thoughtfully.

She shook her head. "Nothing. It's just that you always look the same, no matter what happens. Red eyes all calm. Hair falling everywhere."

"Where's Reno?" Vincent asked abruptly.

Trying to feel offended at the rather brusque change of subject, Yuffie replied resentfully, "Being a lazy bum."

Vincent lifted a dark eyebrow and shifted the load of blankets in his arms to a slightly more comfortable position. "Are you going to help me with these, then?"

"Yes!" Yuffie exclaimed. "Geez, don't get grumpy at me. It's not I came down here just to yak your ear off."

A slight frown suggested that Vincent believed otherwise, but Yuffie pointedly ignored it. The man set his burden down on the dirt floor, upsetting some of the sleeping bags and blankets that were balanced precariously on top of the load. Yuffie moved to brace them before they could fall onto the nasty ground and get even grungier than they already looked. She started making herself a pile to carry up the stairs, watching Vincent out of the corner of her eye as he worked across from her. The top button of his shirt was undone, and as he leaned over, she could catch glimpses of a strong collarbone and the smooth lines of his pale chest.

She hurriedly diverted her eyes, glad Vincent couldn't see the blush that heated her face like the glaring noonday sun. She could never recall being more aware of Vincent as a man than she was now. Must be something in the air...

"Hey, Vinnie?" she asked after a few moments of silence save for the rustling of sleeping bags.

"Yes, Yuffie?" he replied, trying to stack a blanket onto his pile and frowning as it threatened to plummet back to the ground.

Yuffie absently wrung her hands in a threadbare cotton blanket. "Do you think we're going to find Reeve? I mean, honestly, do you think so?"

"Well, I guess that all depends on you," Vincent stated candidly, without a single glance in her direction. He could have been talking about the price of tea in Wutai for all the emotion his voice betrayed.

Yuffie froze. "What?"

Vincent's blood-colored eyes suddenly pinned her with a hard stare. "You and Titus, actually."

"What's that supposed to mean?" the young woman demanded, her temper starting to flare at his enigmatic statements.

"You seem to have made rather good friends with your former kidnapper. And apparently you trusted him enough to put all our lives in his hands when the Highwind was being attacked."

Yuffie couldn't think of anything to say to that. She did trust Titus in a way that she couldn't explain to anyone else. He'd kidnapped her, left her to be tortured, maybe even killed Reeve. Why the hell would she be stupid enough to put her trust in such a person? Then again, intelligence had never been one of her strong points.

Something dark and keen glittered in the depths of Vincent's eyes, a single fleeting brush of malevolence in crimson seas that never showed the slightest hint of waves. "Why do you have so much faith in him, Yuffie?"

"I...don't know," she muttered truthfully. She suddenly felt that she couldn't lie to Vincent even if she wanted to. That kind of pissed her off. It had taken her years to perfect the art of lying to a fine degree, all to be torn down by one man.

"I think you're hiding something," Vincent said.

Yuffie glared at him, the hurtful accusation making her voice harsh. "Who, me?"

"Yes, you."

"Well, I have no idea what you're talking about, Vincent!" she snapped, snatching an armful of sleepwear from her stack. The other blankets immediately keeled over out of upset balance, dirtying themselves on the floor.

Huffily, Yuffie lurched over them, nearly falling in the process, and was about to make a grand, angry exit when Vincent suddenly grabbed her arm, fingers finding no obstacle in the billowing folds of her sweater.

"This secret of yours had better not harm AVALANCHE in any way, Yuffie," he said flatly.

Her heart was suddenly in her throat, Vincent's hand burning hot even though a layer of heavy cloth separated their skin. "Are you THREATENING me?" she demanded, barely managing to keep the squeak out of her voice.

He frowned and released her arm. "...Hardly."

"Hardly??" she echoed, upset. "Vincent, I would never hurt AVALANCHE. You know that!"

Scarlet eyes narrowed fractionally before once again averting themselves to attend to the task of arranging the blankets in a stable position. "I know. But still, I worry."

"About *what*?" Yuffie asked, feeling distressed by Vincent's lack of faith in her. "About me betraying you guys? I mean, sure I stole you guy's materia a year ago and left you stranded in Thunder Valley with all those nasty lightning birds and poisonous bugs, but it wasn't like I *wanted* to! It was all—"

"For the good of Wutai," Vincent finished. "I heard this story, Yuffie, remember? Right before you dropped that cage on Barret and me."

"Cloud was SO the one that pulled the lever!"

Vincent looked at her, dark eyebrow quirked so that it nearly disappeared underneath the crimson line of his remaining bandana. "Right," was all he said before lifting the entire pile of sleeping bags and blankets into his arms.

The gunslinger moved to ascend the stairs, but Yuffie stepped in his way. "Please tell me you trust me, Vincent," she suddenly blurted, her brow unwittingly creased in distress.

He eyed her a long moment before maneuvering around her body. "I don't like you hiding things from me, Yuffie," he said, boots echoing hollowly as he went up the stairs.

She must have stared into the musty darkness of the cellar for a good thirty seconds, contemplating the weight of Vincent's words. Had he really said, "lying to *me*"? Not lying to Cloud, or to Tifa, or to AVALANCHE in general, but to *him* in particular.

//Implying that he and I share a special relationship?// she wondered, gathering the blankets close to her chest as if the dusty cloth would muffle the sound of her heartbeat throbbing in her ears. //Is he aware of me like I am of him? Like...no, what am I thinking! He's just tired so he's saying weird things. He probably hasn't slept in a while. Yeah! Silly me//

Shaking her head in wistful amusement at her own youthful idiocy, Yuffie hurriedly scaled the stairs with her mini-pile of blankets. She'd probably have to make a gazillion trips back and forth from the cellar. Joy.

The air in the hallway was like a fresh breath of spring after the yucky smell of the cellar, and Yuffie breathed it in greedily. Then, she stopped. Looked up and down the hall. Nobody. Was she alone?

No, that was just her being silly again! She could hear the TV blaring in the living room. The smell of cooking food wafted from the direction of the kitchen, making her stomach rumble hungrily. A loud snore erupted from a guest bedroom a little ways down the hall. No way was she alone.

Then she found the source of her unrest. In front of her, a set of cheery curtains half-masked a window unstreaked by rain. Outside, she saw the dark sky rolling endlessly on, but for once, the air was utterly devoid of raindrops. No pitter-pattering on the roof, either.

She took that as a bad sign.

//Calm// Yuffie thought grimly. //It's way too calm.//

~owari Ch. 35

A/N: I know everyone wanted Vincent/Yuffie stuff, and I know this was more angst and tension than the people wanted, but I figured a confrontation was inevitable, seeing that Vincent knows more about what Yuffie's going through than any other member of AVALANCHE. Not to mention that Titus is still pretty high up on Vincent's doo-doo list. ^_^

the only thing they like more than seeing a hero succeed, is to see him fail...

can't nobody hold me down. so fuck off.

Summary: After being mind-raped by unnatural creatures called Hissers, Cid keeps having images of a pair of glasses shattering on a floor drenched in blood. Finally, he announces to Cloud that he's going to leave Junon, AVALANCHE's current safe haven, and head towards Rocket Town to see his wife, Shera. Cloud states that the rest of AVALANCHE will follow.

However, as they're making their way to the Highwind, AVALANCHE finds two of the Master's bounty hunters, Jezebel and Montana, waiting for them. In an attempt to keep Montana from harming the others, Tifa binds herself to other martial artist, promising her life to him if he'll leave the others alone. In return, Montana must kill Tifa before he can pursue the rest of AVALANCHE. But Montana's power was more than Tifa bargained for, and she barely manages to survive a deadly fire-blow inflicted by the bounty hunter.

While Montana fights Tifa, Jezebel gets her face blown off by Reno's nightstick. However, the woman does not go down easily, and as AVALANCHE attempts to escape in the Highwind, Jezebel suddenly trapped the airship with her power. Titus, backed by Yuffie's faith in him, manages to shatter the spell using a prayer that oddly enough, reminds Yuffie of Aeris. Now, AVALANCHE heads to Rocket Town...

WARNING: Ok, this a crap chapter. It's a filler chapter, which means no plot, minimal character development, no action of any sort. If you're disappointed, fine. Don't tell me about it cuz I warned you! :P