

### Chapter Thirty-Six: Rocket Town Interlude

"I am not overly fond of having other men scrutinize me while I bathe." Titus

Tifa tried not to flinch as Titus ran careful fingers over the hellish burn gracing her stomach. Since her tank tops had a bad tendency of rubbing against the burn, she had instead opted to borrow an over-sized shirt from Cloud. Now, she had said shirt hiked up scandalously high, much to her embarrassment. Her cheeks burned slightly, as she was certain that everything from her navel to the bottoms of her breasts was exposed to a pretty much complete stranger. Normally, she would never have given anyone a "free peek" (as Reno called it), but the burn on her stomach was...something else.

They had tried Cure spell after Cure spell until Tifa felt like running around Rocket Town a few hundred times to shake off the excess healing energy. Salves, magic, one of Shera's "home remedies," an evil-looking concoction of herbal paste Yuffie had whipped up, warmth, cold.

Nothing seemed to work. Even after everyone's efforts, Tifa still felt as if some vampire had sucked the life-blood from her body. She supposed the constant weakness was due to her depleted supply of spirit energy, but still, she found it quite ridiculous when she had exert an outrageous amount of strength just to get up to go the bathroom. Lately, though, she had gotten to feeling a little better. Her bones and muscles still hummed with the remnants of great pain, and her legs wobbled a bit when she tried to walk, but Tifa had felt well enough to pose to her friends the idea of having Titus look at her battle wound.

As expected, the normal amount of frowns and periods of deep contemplation ensued, especially on the parts of Cloud and Reno, both of whom seemed to have a strong dislike for the Running Man. She was forced to listen to the typical "you can't trust him, he's the enemy" talk. Yuffie, on the other hand, had vouched for Titus' reliability and urged the others to let him take a look at Tifa's burn. In the end, a combined trio of the heartfelt Yuffie, the ever-logical Red XIII, and the normally silent Rude, had managed to convince Cloud and Reno to back down.

No one else had complained, which Tifa found odd, but she supposed their little tussle with Jezebel and Montana had lifted Titus onto higher ground in the eyes of AVALANCHE. Tifa had engaged herself in a running deathmatch with a martial arts master to save Titus' life, and in turn, their supposed "enemy" had returned the favor by breaking Jezebel's perilous hold over the Highwind. It was no big secret that if not for Titus' intervention, they would have most likely been dead by now.

Which brought Tifa to the present moment, kneeling in front of Titus and biting back pain and embarrassment as his fingers prodded gently at her burnt flesh. Red XIII crouched in the corner with his one good eye fixed on the duo, searching for any indication of foul play on Titus' part. An equally vigilant Rude hovered in the doorway. He had dutifully looked away when Tifa lifted her shirt, but he still loomed over them with his intimidating presence.

"Ouch," Tifa murmured when Titus poked a particularly harmful spot. He still had handcuffs around his wrists.

His green eyes cut upwards, and Tifa met them instinctively. "So," she said. "What's the verdict?"

"The burn is superficial," Titus replied. "But since it was inflicted by the Holy Fire of Ifrit, it can't be cured by materia or human remedies. Your body will heal it in time."

"How long will this healing take?"

"That depends on the condition of your mind and spirit," Titus said matter-of-factly, leaning closer to examine a fluid-filled blister on Tifa's skin. "Cetra curative magic would be the only outside force that could heal this burn in such a short period of time."

Tifa frowned. "But I thought the knowledge of the Ancients was contained within the materia?"

Titus nodded, some of his white-blond hair flopping into his eyes. "It is."

"But if that's true, then shouldn't we be able to use a Full Cure and heal the burn?"

Titus finished probing the wound and sat back against the wall. Tifa lowered her shirt gratefully and sat on her heels so that she was at eye level with the green-eyed man. The burn on her stomach protested her movements, but she ignored its cries with practiced ease.

"Though the restorative magic contained in the Restore, Heal, and Full Cure materias \*did\* come from the Cetra's knowledge," Titus explained, "the magic can never heal that burn so long as the materia is wielded by humans. If the magic channels through an impure vessel, it becomes useless on a wound inflicted by Holy power."

"Impure vessels," Tifa murmured to herself, burgundy eyes misted with dark contemplation. Titus didn't say anything, instead opting to leave the woman to her own thoughts until she suddenly stirred and looked him in the face again.

"What do you know about Montana?" she asked in a soft, hushed voice, as if even speaking the name would suddenly bring the Shido no Hi Ryu master down on them in all his flaming glory, spitting fire from his eyes and hands in blind fury. The image of Montana standing in front of the backdrop of her burning hometown still blazed in her mind with painful clarity, and Tifa resisted the urge to shudder.

Titus looked at her like he knew exactly what she was envisioning. "Do you fear Montana?"

"Of course. I'd be foolish not to."

He nodded. "I'll admit that Montana is to be feared, to a certain extent. His powers are formidable, and his command of them is masterful for one so young, but most of the time he acts with the recklessness of a spoiled child."

"Is he part of this...faction that Yuffie talks about?"

Titus frowned, and for a moment Tifa feared he was going to clam up again. Already he had spoken more than she thought he would.

But he continued. "Yes, and no. Montana is a bounty hunter for the faction, but that's all he is. Nothing else binds him to the faction but his own personal choice to remain in the Master's service. It makes Montana unique amongst all the other loyal followers. He's somewhat of a wild card, you might say."

"I'm...not quite sure I understand," Tifa said hesitantly. "Why is Montana not bound to the faction?"

"Montana's soul already belongs to one god," Titus replied darkly. "He cannot pledge his allegiance to another."

His words sent a chill down Tifa's spine. "I know Montana serves Fire God Ifrit, but what's this other god you speak of?"

"No one you need to know of," Titus responded smoothly, idly running a gloved finger along the chain of his handcuffs. The others had reluctantly freed him from the radiator in order to give him full use of his hands, but it would take more than one life-saving feat on Titus' part to prove he was loyal enough to have his hands permanently unfettered.

Questions still burned inside Tifa, demanding voice. "But do you mean that you were bound to the faction as well? Yuffie called you 'Mr. High Priest' back in Junon. But then Jezebel called Ajax the High Priest. And why would you kidnap Reeve?"

"I thought you wanted to hear about Montana," Titus said neutrally, eyes tracing the motion of his finger on the gleaming metal chain. Left. Right. Left.

Tifa hands clenched in the loose pair of gym shorts she wore. "I did, but..."

"Then ask me about him," Titus interrupted flatly. "I will answer you nothing else."

She refrained from protesting his stubbornness. "Fine. Have you ever fought Montana before?"

"Yes, a year ago. That scar on his face is from a wound I inflicted on him."

"And...how did you beat him?" She felt almost guilty for asking the question, like she was demanding the answers for a test.

Titus lifted his cuffed hands, experimentally flexing his fingers as if testing the strength in them. The leather gloves creaked as the flesh underneath moved, and the strange orbs embedded in the backs of his hands flashed underneath the lights. "I was always several levels above Montana in terms of power, experience, and skill. He will never beat me."

He sounded so sure of himself. Not proud, just certain. "How does one go about becoming a Shido no Hi Ryu master?"

He lowered his hands and shrugged. "You'd probably be better off asking that question of a historian that specializes in Wutainese history. I do know that you have to endure an arduous training underneath a present Master. I then assume that somehow the student presents their 'perfected' soul to the Fire God, and if they are deemed worthy, Ifrit gives his blessing and instills his essence into them, thus rewarding them with Master status." His eyes locked onto hers. "Are you thinking of learning the Shido no Hi Ryu?"

Tifa frowned. "Well, the thought did cross my mind, but that's hardly possible, isn't it? If my history and timeline are accurate, there hasn't been a Dawn's Fire Master in such a long time that everyone believed the style had died out. Montana is the first Master in a long time, and it's not exactly like I could train under him."

Titus' voice was sharp, almost reprimanding. "And you think learning Montana's style will automatically put you on his level?"

Tifa looked at him in surprise. Apathy, she had expected. Disapproval, she had not.

Titus plunged on relentlessly, "You could spend your entire life learning the Shido no Hi Ryu and perfect every move there is to know, but every time you challenged Montana to a fight, you would lose. The flaw isn't in the fighting style, but in the one who executes it."

She blinked. "Me?"

"Yes. You are the only one responsible for your defeat."

Tifa could feel the truth in his words. She had lost to Montana not because his style was superior to hers, or because he was the more experienced fighter, but because she was flawed somehow. Montana wasn't.

"All his life, Montana has known nothing but the heat of battle," Titus said. "He conceived a hatred for life at a very young age, but later overcame it. Most human beings are blinded by love, fear, or hatred. If Montana feels such an emotion, he regulates it to the degree that it does not affect his fighting. The only petty emotion Montana is guilty of is the desire for revenge, as his pursuit of me clearly shows. But unless you can find a way to exploit that emotion in him..."

His voice trailed off, and Tifa did not prod him to continue. She had heard all she needed, and Titus knew it.

Behind her, Red XIII snorted and rose to his feet, the beads in his mane clicking together to join the muted clack of his claws on the hardwood floor as he walked over to stand in front of Titus. "Mr. Titus, why do you share information with Tifa now? Why not back in Junon when we first posed these questions to you?"

Titus glanced at Red disdainfully. "I hardly thought the behavior and questioning methods you all used in Junon deserved any cooperation on my part."

Tifa rose to her feet so abruptly that Red instinctively moved aside to avoid being stepped on. He glanced up to see her pretty face set in hard, determined lines as she glared down at Titus, almost as if the man had slighted her in some fashion. "I \*will\* beat Montana," she announced emphatically, and stalked out of the room. Rude pressed himself against the doorway to allow her past him, and though his eyes were hidden behind the dark lenses of his sunglasses, Red could sense the Turk's attention follow the brown-haired woman as she disappeared into the kitchen.

Red gave Titus a hard look. "How do you expect Tifa to fight if you cripple her confidence?"

"I didn't cripple her confidence," Titus countered. "She's flawed, and now she knows it."

"A pretty phrase for something that yields the same result," Rude said flatly. "And if I didn't know you were only trying to help Tifa, I would be particularly displeased with you right now."

Titus' eyes were decidedly aloof as he gave Rude a sideways glance, but he didn't reply to the Turk's comment.

Red allowed an uneasy silence to persist before he recalled a particular subject he needed to address. "Are you in need of a bath?" he asked Titus. "Your female friend has already taken hers."

"If I do say I want a bath, someone will have to keep an eye on me, won't they?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Then I will forgo one. I am not overly fond of having other men scrutinize me while I bathe."

"Very well, then," Red replied disinterestedly. He didn't know for long Titus had gone without bathing, and Red had traveled often enough with his human companions to know that they tended to amass a considerable stench of they did not wash their bodies fairly regularly. But Titus did not smell at all. Sure, he carried the scents of leather, rain, and mud on his body, but as for any type of personal, distinctive scent, he had none. In fact, if not for the slow, steady beat of Titus' heart, or the sound of his breath passing in and out of his lungs, Red could have closed his eye, and Titus would have vanished completely from his senses.

It was not a comforting thought.

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Mirrors on the ceiling  
Pink champagne on ice  
And she said  
We are all just prisoners here  
Of our own device  
And in the master's chambers  
They gathered for the feast  
They stab it with their steely knives  
But they just can't kill the beast  
"Hotel California"  
The Eagles

For some, bathing was a way of cleansing the spirit. Washing away worries and problems along with dirt and grime. So long as the steady stream of water beat down on the shoulders, the bather was granted a temporary respite from the toils of life.

Vincent admitted that he found that concept rather attractive, but also supremely idiotic. For him, bathing was a priority, and sometimes not a very important one.

But now he found himself wishing he could believe the uplifting words of those who idealized the act of bathing. But the water sluicing along the curve of his back and down the length of his legs was just water, and always would be. Pity in that.

Placing one hand against the wall in front of him, he lowered his head to permit the water expelled from the shower head to pummel the back of his head, the warm liquid coursing down between his shoulder blades. It took a second or two for the soothing dampness to thread its way through the thick tresses, but within a minute, nearly all of his waist-length, raven-black hair was saturated, water streaming steadily from the ends of the strands.

Vincent watched the water swirl down the drain with tired, misted crimson eyes. His bones and muscles ached from the recent hardships, but that was nothing new to him. Now, the weariness that seemed to drug his brain, that was a true rarity. Come to think of it, he actually felt a little...ill.

//Idiot// he chided himself. //You cannot get sick. Tired is what you are. You need sleep.//

The spray of shower water had long since numbed the back of his scalp, and Vincent numbly raised his head and began the mechanical process of washing his hair and body with the nearby soaps. In a muted fashion, he noted that the movement of his limbs was sluggish, as if it took his body a few moments to respond after his brain had issued an order. His own body was rebelling against him. Go figure.

Obligatory cleanliness finally achieved, instead of relinquishing the shower to the next person in line, Vincent instead stood underneath the needle-sharp spray of water, listening to its cadence of whispers fill the narrow shower stall. He could almost hear a voice...

~"Please tell me you trust me, Vincent."~

Yuffie again. Vincent was starting to think he'd never be able to escape her face, her voice. If he left AVALANCHE after they found Reeve – which he still fully intended to do – would he be able to forget her? Surely he would. The life of a wanderer was filled with many distractions, and Vincent was adept at repressing emotions better left untouched.

Steam from the hot water had filled the confined space, and when Vincent inhaled the moist vapors, he had the sudden impression that he had taken in more water than air, like he was breathing underwater. Drowning.

His skin suddenly turned cold, and the water became blisteringly hot against his chilled flesh. The world spun, and he instinctively lowered himself to the floor of the shower stall to avoid falling over. That was the last coherent decision his listless brain could make before chills and fever began to ride him again, just like they had the night after Yuffie's kidnapping.

Darkness swallowed his mind, ripping his breath from his lungs. His consciousness unraveled at the ends before re-weaving itself into something demonic and malicious. Chaos' laughter rang through the hell like a cacophony of imps in their fiery pit, and it took every ounce of Vincent's will not to shudder violently at the sound. The word rippled around him in shades of dark crimson, as if he were immersed in an ocean of blood.

BLEED FOR ME, came the order from the dark.

"No!" Vincent rebelled with everything he was worth. He could only manage that one word, that one thought.

Chaos' will bore down on him, pushing Vincent across the scarlet waters, filling his nostrils with the reek of death, disease, and suffering. Figures writhed underneath the surface of the waters, an army of corpses trapped underneath the glistening surface, clawing for freedom with mangled hands and bloody fingers. Their mouths hung open in silent wails, but they had no voice. No, the only sound that rang through the stillness of the hell inside Vincent's mind was the weeping of a woman, no, several women. His heart froze in his chest as he realized he knew the owners of those cries. He had listened to them night after night...

SISTERS CRY FOR YOU. ANSWER THEM.

Vincent clamped down on his own mind, trying to seal his memories away from the demon, but it was like fumbling for a key with slick, clumsy fingers. "Stay out of my mind, demon! I have no quarrel with you!"

SHOW YOU THE PIT.

"The what?"

THE PIT.

Vincent had no idea what Chaos meant by 'the pit,' but he knew it could be nothing good. And it was nothing he was in any state of mind to see. "Leave me in peace, Chaos. I have no desire to see your pit."

The demon's fiery rage suddenly burned Vincent's mind like scalding water on tender, unprotected flesh. He braced himself against it best he could, but the fury slammed against him, drowned him in images as anger made the demon forget how to properly communicate with its host. Yuffie. She was everywhere. Her face, her eyes, her voice. Chaos had guided Vincent to her! And what thanks did the demon get in return? Chaos would punish Vincent for such an unjust exchange!!

"I made no deal with you, demon! Return to the dark!" Vincent allowed every incantation he had ever learned as child to bubble up in his soul, flinging them desperately at the darkness with hopes to drive it back. Chaos found that highly amusing. Didn't Vincent know that if Chaos fell into Darkness, Vincent would follow? Humans. So silly.

DREAM FOR ME. PIT AND SISTERS. AND OF GIRL.

Vincent started to say 'no,' but Chaos abruptly relinquished its hold on the man, leaving Vincent naked and shuddering on the floor of the shower, water streaming over him. Someone was pounding on the door.

"Vincent! Did you fall in or what? Other people are waiting, too!" It was Cid.

Bracing his claw on the edge of the tub, heedless of the small scratches the sharp digits left on the tile, Vincent shakily rose to his feet and shut off the water. Silence now, save for the lonely dripping of water from the showerhead and from Vincent's body. Darkness gnawed at the edges of his vision as his mind swirled with fever. He turned his head to the left, and it took his vision a few seconds to follow. Damn.

Vincent wasn't sure if he'd be able to walk. He could call for Cid to come in and help him... But, no. He would not draw others into this.

Vincent managed to pull aside the shower curtain and climb unsteadily out of the tub without slipping and killing himself. He was struggling to get his jeans to slide over his wet skin when Cid resumed his insistent demands that Vincent hurry his ass up. Studiously ignoring the man, Vincent had to pause twice in dressing as nausea and unconscious threatened to overtake him. Each time the sensations faded, but left a little more darkness in his vision. The world was beginning to look a little blurry, Vincent noted in a detached fashion.

Leaving his jeans zipped by not buttoned, Vincent grabbed the same filthy white shirt he'd been wearing for the past couple of days and wretched the bathroom door open. Cool air buffeted his overheating skin, and his vision cleared long enough to glimpse Cid's annoyed expression frozen on his face like still-life painting, his hand raised, caught in the motion of knocking on the door. If Vincent looked at terrible as he felt, he could fully understand Cid's reaction.

Vincent stumbled past him as quickly as possible. Cid might have called after him, but the gunman could not be sure. Sounds were slowly diminishing, being faint and insignificant.

//Not here// he ordered his feverish mind. //You can't collapse here. That room. Go there. Go!//

The door to the room was open, darkness still and silent within. Vincent gripped the threshold with human hand and half-tripped half-flung himself into the room. The air was cool here, and quiet. Placating. There were blurry forms stacked everywhere, clothes spilling out of various openings. Luggage. AVALANCHE had used this room as a makeshift storage closet, but by nightfall, some of them would most likely be sleeping in here.

He slid down the wall, letting the texture of the well-worn wallpaper grind against his back. His wet hair clung to his skin like chilled fingers tracing patterns on his back. Vincent's eyelids were trying to shut on their own accord. //Hopefully// he thought. //Hopefully...this will have...passed...before anyone...sees...//

He felt his body sway to the side, but he was unconscious before he hit the floor.

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Rude sighed and reached underneath the bottoms of his sunglasses to rub his burning eyes. As if everyone wasn't tired, injured, or in bad spirits, Reno had chosen the most impeccable time to vanish. No one had seen him for an hour, and though Rude knew how easy it was to sneak away from a large crowd, it bothered him that everyone allowed things like disappearing teammates to go unnoticed. With such lax observation skills, it was no small wonder that Yuffie and Reeve had both been kidnapped.

The tall Turk strode purposefully into the living room. No Reno here either. But Red XIII was asleep on the couch, and someone had reattached Titus' handcuffs to the radiator. The man also looked to be asleep with his chin resting on his chest, but Rude wouldn't have bet a valuable item on it.

After giving the Running Man a stern look, Rude's pale green eyes swept the room to where Cloud leaned against the windowsill, looking out at the town. His back was to the living room, but Rude was fairly certain the man had sensed his entrance.

Rude walked over to the AVALANCHE leader, making sure he stayed within the range of Cloud's peripheral vision in the rare case the man did not know he was in the room. Pitching his voice low so as not to wake the room's other two occupants, Rude asked, "Cloud, have you seen Reno?"

Cloud's spiky head nodded. "Yeah, he went into the town about an hour ago. Said he was going for a walk. You need him for something?"

Rude was infinitely relieved that at least the leader of their ragtag team was keeping tabs on everyone. "No. Just wanted to know where he was."

Cloud didn't reply, and Rude decided to take the silence as a dismissal when the blonde suddenly spoke, "She's been out there for a while now."

Rude frowned at the cryptic phrase and stepped closer to the window, standing next to Cloud. The difference in their heights was quite obvious now, and a bit of a surprise to Rude. Cloud often had a way of carrying himself that made others forget his small size.

Through the window's glass, Rude could see Tifa Lockheart seated on the top step of Cid's porch, facing out towards the town with her legs folded underneath her and her hands resting in her lap. He didn't have to see her face to know her eyes were probably closed. They were not needed for what she was trying to see.

"Meditating," Rude commented, not quite able to prevent himself from admiring how her chocolate brown hair pooled on the wooden decking behind her.

"Yeah," Cloud said, abruptly turning around and giving his back to the window. He leaned on the edge of the windowsill and folded his arms across his chest. "I want to talk to her, but I don't think anything I say will matter."

"Why not?" //Why is he telling me this?//

"I'm not a martial artist."

"I didn't think you would need to be one," Rude replied levelly. //Just being you would be enough for her//

Cloud sighed. "I'm like you, Rude. I learned almost all my principles from Shinra Inc. My friend Zax tried to teach me some of his own morals, but he died so suddenly..." Pain flashed briefly across Mako blue eyes before it was contained. "Tifa learned her fighting style from an honorable teacher. Try as I might, some part of me just can't understand what she's going through right now. Whatever it is, though, I think it goes beyond just meeting an opponent stronger than herself."

"Titus said the flaw lies within her," Rude said, resisting the urge to glance over his shoulder at the man he spoke of.

The corners of Cloud's mouth turned down in a contemplative frown.

"She wagered her own life for our safety," Rude murmured, more to himself than to Cloud. The words sounded so noble, even falling from his mouth, in the deep voice that had kept repressed as he executed countless individuals who rarely deserved such a cruel fate at the hand of such a cruel man.

"She's a good person," Cloud said, voice soft, the words needless. Rude knew just what kind of person Tifa Lockheart was. The kind that he could not have. The kind that would not be happy with him. No, Tifa's happiness stood not a foot away from his side, pained and brooding over her plight while she sat out there underneath a sunless sky, trying to look for a way to rid herself of her flaws, to become a better person than she already was.

Rude wanted to say something about how he admired her, not just for her beauty or for her battle prowess, but for her heart. But the words died in his throat. He could not speak of such things. Not of her. And not to Cloud, who felt so much more for her than Rude ever would.

At some moment in time, Cloud said that he was going for a walk, and that he would keep an eye out for Reno to make sure the Turk wasn't causing havoc of any sort. Rude heard him, but didn't reply. He stared for so long at Tifa's seated figure that his eyes burned from staying open too long. This would be the closest he would ever be to Tifa, and he wanted to remember her as she was, seated there in her over-sized white shirt and gym shorts, meditating on her flawed soul.

Rude was tired of trying. So tired.

He suddenly became aware of the fatigue in his limbs, and just how exhausted he was. He would see if he could help Shera with anything, and then he would retire somewhere to rest.

Rude turned his back to the window and strode away. Outside, the skies shifted restlessly, and the raindrops once again began to fall.

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Yuffie had never wanted a pair of pajamas so badly in her life. Pajamas would mean her activities were over and done with for the day. No more, "Yuffie, what are you just sitting around for? Do this" or "Yuffie, can you go get this from this place?" or "Go tell so and so to blah blah blah." She liked doing things for people, but this was getting ridiculous. No, scratch that. She liked the warm, fuzzy feeling she got from making people happy, and if she could just cut out the manual labor part, it would be a good deal.

Barret had almost sent on her a third run to the grocery store for food supplies when the sudden return of the rain had foiled his scheme to turn her into a mindless slave good for nothing but running errands. Before the fatherly man could find yet another task for her, Yuffie had hightailed it out of the kitchen. Now, she had every intention of finding clothes that didn't smell like butt, putting them on, and seeking some place to sleep.

She turned into the room where they had chucked all their luggage and nearly tripped over Vincent Valentine's bare feet.

Of course, she didn't know it was Vincent at first. All she saw was a pair of pale feet and legs clad in damp denim before she realized "Hey, I just might fall over this weirdo's feet!" Her reflexes kicked in just in time to keep her from munching the floor, but the awkward maneuver sent her into a half-spin, and she had to sit down hard on someone's duffel bag to avoid losing her balance completely. The bag made a loud "poof!" noise as she squashed its contents. Oops. She hoped there was nothing breakable in there.

She was in the right mind to screech at whichever idiot had been dumb enough to fall asleep in such a ridiculous position when she recognized the ghostly pallor of the "idiot's" skin and the fall of ebony tresses that pooled on the floor all around their owner, curling around each other like slumbering serpents.

The yell that had been building in Yuffie's chest emerged as a pitiful squeak. //It's Vincent!//

She took a second to take in Vincent's state of dress. Or rather, undress, as the man only wore a pair of denim jeans – that weren't even freakin' BUTTONED, for crying out loud – which, upon closer inspection, had damp spots on them as if he had hastily pulled them on while his skin was still wet. He lay on his side with his back pressed against the wall, hair obscuring his face. He had the same ratty white shirt he'd been wearing for the past couple of days clutched tightly in his metallic claw.

Yuffie frowned. Normally, she'd be embarrassed about seeing, erm, so much of Vincent, but instead she found herself bothered. Why would he fall asleep in here? Did he hate being around other people THAT much? Well, come to think of it, she had seen Vincent do weirder things, like morph into boogeymonsters and whatnot. But still...why here, in a dark room with no blanket, no pillow, his jeans not buttoned, his shoes gone, his shirt still in his hand...

Slowly, Yuffie rose off her makeshift seat, leaving a deep indentation in the duffel bag from her backside's untimely impact with it. She cautiously crouched a few inches away from Vincent's sprawled form. Yes, that was a good word for his position. Sprawled. And Vincent never sprawled on things. He never allowed himself such freedom. Always contained and reserved, was Vincent Valentine.

//Should I try and wake him?// she wondered, drumming her fingers on her knees. Her last attempt at waking him hadn't worked so well. He had ended up lashing out at her from the abyss of sleep and scaring the crap out of her and then she had babbled her head off and then they had spent the night together and oh geez that sounded so bad even in her own head and she was babbling to \*herself\* now, which was really sad.

//I should at least move some of his hair before he ends up sucking it up nose or something// she argued with herself, trying to ignore how that pale, pale skin and dark hair begged to be touched. Shadows shifted on the muscled lines of Vincent's stomach as he breathed. //What's the worst he could do?// she thought. //Wake up and yell at me? Or hit me? And that would hurt, especially if he does it with his claw. Ok, touching Vinnie while he's sleeping: bad idea. But...what did I come in here for?//

"Pajamas," she announced aloud. Vincent didn't even stir at the sound of her voice. He was really out cold.

Resolved to achieve her initial goal, Yuffie hopped quietly to her feet and marched across the room where her borrowed bag lay lonely and friendless underneath the window. She examined its contents, squinting to see in the darkness. No pajamas. Damn. Oh, but there was a really big shirt and sweat pants that looked to be a good fit. Score!

//Wonder if Vinnie is cold? And he needs a new shirt. That one is dirty and full of holes already. And it probably smells bad, too. Vincent is weird enough as it is. No need for him to be stinky, too//

She looked to her right and saw Cloud's duffel bag sitting most invitingly on the carpet, easily discernible from the others by the pretty glittery stickers Yuffie had considerably placed on the dark material in a bout of boredom. //Well, I'm sure Cloud won't mind// she decided, shamelessly opening the bag and digging through it.

She returned to Vincent's side a few minutes later with a plain black shirt and dark jeans with annoying suspenders dangling off of them. She wasn't sure Vincent would go for the pants, but it was better than the near-rags he currently had on. She folded the garments with the same care that she folded her mother's old kimonos, and laid the pile of clothing near Vincent's lax fingers.

Carefully not letting her eyes drift to the man, lest she be once again tempted to touch him, she whispered, "Sorry, I couldn't find a blanket. And I can't use the bedspread because everyone else's crap is on it."

She thought about saying something more, but then she realized she was alone in a dark room, talking to a sleeping man who would remember nothing of what she said. Before she could get all sad over it, Yuffie gathered her nightclothes to her chest and left the room, giving Vincent's feet a wide berth. She hated that Vincent could make her chest tight when he wasn't even DOING anything besides lying there like a lump on a log.

She passed by the window again on her way to wait in line for the bathroom. The calm outside had once again been replaced by heavy air and tumultuous skies. Rain streaked glass. The ocean stretching infinitely in so many directions, like Yuffie's mother's futon, which had seemed so large and roomy to Yuffie's tiny five-year-old body. She felt as if she could lay there for hours, soothed just as much by the calm blues and grays of the cloth as she was by the sounds of her mother bustling around the room, humming to herself as she once again readied herself for another day.

A deep frown marred Yuffie's features, the expression mimicked by her dark grey eyes. Thinking of her mother made her think of Wutai. Her homeland. So close yet so far. More close than it was far, actually.

An outrageous idea sparked in her mind, only to be frantically doused. She couldn't do that! Not now! What if her friends needed her?

But...it wouldn't take long. She would just go for a little while. Skulk around Turtle's Paradise and listen to the drunken sailors. Gather some of her own clothes. Touch her mother's kimonos again. She wouldn't be gone long. Maybe not even a day. No one would even notice her absence.

She hastily turned away from the window and tried to occupy her mind thinking of how she could argue her way to the front of the bathroom line, but she was painfully aware of the window at her back, the thunder rumbling in the distance like the gravelly cry of her Fatherland beckoning to her, calling her home...

~tbc

a/n: Yes, Yuffie is having a love affair with that window.

Next chapter is a Reno chapter. Yay!