

## CHAPTER I: OLD FEARS

"I'm tired."

Vincent swung around, his red eyes falling upon Elena. They stood in the middle of the forest, on a slope that varied from gentle to steep. They had been climbing it steadily for almost an hour now. It was nearly noon, and the sun was almost directly overhead. Although the trees provided some shade from the sun, they also blocked out the refreshing breeze the blew in gusts from the south. As a result it was oppressively hot. Perspiration stained Elena's shirt and beaded on her forehead.

She looked at Vincent. Although he had been exposed to the elements as much as she, he seemed completely unaffected. He was not sweating, in fact, seemed not the least bit discomforted. This only caused Elena to be even more annoyed. If he was going to drag her out here in this heat, the least he could do was suffer along with her.

"It's not much farther," Vincent stated. He nodded ahead, then turned around and continued walking.

Elena just stood there for a moment glaring at him. Vincent had made great strides since she had known him, and especially since they had returned from Grouchoon, but there were still plenty of times when he fell back into his old ways. It would have been nice if he had suggested they stop to rest. She hadn't really been asking for that, but she had expected at least a small show of sympathy. Even an 'I know how you feel' would have sufficed. Even though she now drew some emotion out of him on occasion, which was a tremendous improvement over the old Vincent, there was still plenty of times when he was cold and mysterious. Dammit, he hadn't even told her why he was dragging her up here in the first place!

She shook her head. She knew there was no use obsessing over this. Vincent was Vincent. She knew going in what she was in for. No matter what anyone did, he wasn't going to turn around in one day. She supposed she should be happy with the progress he had made so far.

He had gotten quite a ways ahead of her now. He hadn't turned around to see if she was following. She took a deep breath and started after him. She had seen the worst of him and they had gotten through it. She didn't want to turn back now. Both in this trip and their relationship.

As they progressed up the slope the conifers closed in around them. Usually trees weren't something that Elena took much notice of. Normally she wasn't one to go traipsing around in the woods at all, actually. But being surrounded by them now she couldn't help but notice how huge these were. They were easily bigger than any trees she had ever seen before. The trunks were massive, some of them perhaps twenty meters in circumference. Large enough to carve a quite comfortable home in, Elena thought. Though why that particular thought came to her she had no idea. They actually reminded Elena more of the pillars that held up the plates in Midgar than anything else. They were bare of branches for a good 20 meters. After that the huge branches swept out around them, high overhead, some of them as large as trees in their own right. The thick intertwining of branches and blanket of green pine needles almost completely blocked out the sunlight here, creating a perpetual twilight. Vincent wasn't far ahead of her, but still he blended with the shadows so well that she had a hard time making him out. There wasn't much ground vegetation. A carpet of needles lay beneath their feet instead, with only a few small green plants struggling up in the half light. The needles crunched softly beneath Elena's feet as she walked. Ahead of her Vincent walked in complete silence. Just for the hell of it she tried to trend as lightly as she could, to walk as soundlessly as he did. It only took her a few moments trying to give up, realizing it was impossible. Impossible at least, for a normal human being.

Abruptly the ground leveled out in front of them. Elena silently thanked the gods that the climbing was at least temporarily over. She looked up and saw the forest brightening ahead. At the same time she became aware of a dull rumble. It took her but a moment to recognize the sound as fast moving water.

She could see Vincent clearly now. He had emerged from the shadows of the forest, and stood starkly outlined in bright sunshine. Beyond him she could see blue sky.

As she approached she saw the reason the forest abruptly ended. He stood at the edge of a precipice. The ground dropped off in front of him as if rent by a knife. She stepped out into the sunlight herself, coming up nearly beside Vincent, who stood but a step from the abyss, much closer than seemed prudent to her. She looked down and her eyes widened in awe. A thousand feet below them lay an almost circular bowl of crystal clear water. The mountains rose up around it, almost completely surrounding it except for a narrow valley at the southern end. Here the water gathered into a fast moving river, just a thin ribbon from this distance, that quickly disappeared from sight to the south. Yet even the tremendous view of the lake below was not what caught her eye the most. Just a short distance away to their right, a huge waterfall cascaded down the face of the mountain. The roar of it was loud in her ears now, and they were so close she could feel the light touch of the spray from it on her face. For a long time she just stood there in silence, staring at the water pouring down the face of the cliff, stunned by the beauty and sheer power of it. She had never seen anything like it before in her life.

And for a long time Vincent remained unmoving, staring at the waterfall as well. She wondered what thoughts were going through his head. It was obvious the beauty of the scene was not lost on him. It was obvious he had brought her up here for the express purpose of sharing it with her. Her admiration for him immediately increased. Perhaps there was hope for him after all.

"It's beautiful," she called out, wanting to be heard above the roar of the water.

He turned to look at her. He obviously wanted her to come up beside him, but she motioned for him to come to her, trying to make it apparent without words that she wasn't comfortable getting any closer to the edge. It appeared she got through to him, for, with a slight nod of his head, he strode over to her.

"We are a little early," he said. "It is most beautiful at sunset, with the fading light glinting off the water like sparks."

He looked up at the sky, half filled with high floating wispy clouds. It was perhaps an hour or two from nightfall.

"But perhaps the sun will be obscured by then," he finished.

"It doesn't matter," she said, stepping closer and taking his hand. "I'm glad you brought me up here anyway. How did you find this place?"

Vincent shrugged.

"Just sort of blundered upon it," he replied. "I used to come here often."

Elena said nothing, looking at the waterfall. She had seen it once or twice before. She had flown over this area a couple of times in the past. But most of the time when she was in an aircraft she was there on business, and wasn't really interested in looking at the scenery. And anyway, that had been thousands of feet overhead, and everything on the ground below had been far away, almost abstract. But now she was just a few hundred feet from the falls. She could feel the spray and sense the power of the water from the vibration beneath her feet. Here, instead of being abstract, it was larger than life.

Sugar Mountain Falls, she knew, was its official name. But she also knew Vincent and all his friends referred to it as something else. To them it was Lucrecia's falls.

She glanced at Vincent, who was staring out into the space in front of them. In all the time she had known him, he hadn't said much about Lucrecia. She knew about his parents and siblings, but much of the part of his life he had spent with Hojo and Lucrecia was still a mystery to her.

"Do you still think about her?" she asked slowly.

For a moment Vincent did not reply, did not even move. Then he turned toward her.

"Think of who?" he questioned.

Elena gave an almost apologetic nod of her head.

"Lucrecia," she said.

As far as Elena knew, Vincent hadn't seen or heard from Lucrecia in almost two years. Not since shortly after Aeris had been resurrected. But they all knew how he once felt about her. He had loved her, had literally suffered a fate worse than death for her. Can that kind of love ever be truly extinguished? Vincent was often alone. Aside from his periodic transformations, he seemed to have a compelling need to spend time by himself, to get away from everyone. She had seen other people like that. Was like that herself on occasion. But no one seemed to have such an absolute need to do so as Vincent. Was this where he went when he wanted to be alone? Did he often come here, to look at the beautiful falls, and to think about her? Was it possible he had even seen her here?

"Sometimes," he said slowly. His head turned toward her. A gust of wind blew his dark hair across his face, but it didn't hide the penetrating look in his eyes.

"Lucrecia will always be a part of me," he said, as if divining her thoughts. "Just as my sister Victoria will always be a part of me. But that's all in the past. It was part of a different age, a different me. There's no need to be jealous."

Elena turned her head away, pretending to look out over the valley, but it was really to try to hide her slight embarrassment. She knew she shouldn't be jealous, after all they had been through, after he told her he loved her. She just wasn't very good at hiding her feelings.

Vincent came up beside her, so suddenly it startled her.

"People change," he said. "I found that out once I was reunited with Lucrecia. We couldn't rekindle the feelings we had once had for one another. There was a wall between us, one neither one of us knew how to penetrate. I originally blamed it on Hojo. I thought his experiments had taken away my ability to feel like a human being again. But then I met you, and I realized that wasn't true. I realized that I really could still love someone, that my emotions hadn't been completely stripped away by Hojo. As much as I care for Lucrecia, it wasn't her who made me realize that. It was you."

Elena did not react for a moment, just stood there basking in the warmth those words made her feel. Not just because it felt good to hear him say something like that, but because she knew it was true.

She reached out to take his hand, but he suddenly spun around, away from her. She turned as well, startled again by his sudden movement. The turn brought the forest behind them into view. She gasped in surprise when she saw what had caused Vincent's reaction. A man was coming out of the woods just a few feet away.

He wore dark brown trousers and shirt. Both were thickly stained and dirty. The left knee of his pants was torn open, exposing a bloody patch of skin. He was walking toward them with an irregular gait, weaving and stumbling, seemingly barely able to stay on his feet. His sleeves were rolled up, his arms exposed, and Elena could see that they were as dirty as his clothing, and covered with scratches as well, as if he had been running heedlessly through the forest. His hair was a tangled mass. She thought it was brown, but she couldn't really tell with all the dirt and sweat covering it. His face looked as bad as his arms, covered with sweat and grime. The thing that caught her attention most, however, and which caused her to give a gasp of surprise, was the fierce glow that emanated from his brown eyes.

He was coming toward them, but he really didn't seem to be looking at them. He really didn't seem to be looking at anything at all. His eyes roved around constantly, but didn't seem to be focusing on anything. It was almost as if he were stumbling blindly along, not having any idea at all where he was going.

As if they needed any more confirmation that there was something seriously wrong with this man, he suddenly started to give out a gasping wheezing sound. At first Elena thought the man was trying to say something, but after a moment she began to doubt that. It didn't sound like language at all. It sounded like the gasping of a dying man.

Vincent had drawn his gun as he had turned. Now Elena saw him slowly lower his arm.

The man stumbled closer, suddenly turning and heading straight for the cliff edge. Vincent stepped forward and grabbed hold of him. Elena thought the man was oblivious to his surroundings, but Vincent's grabbing him provoked an immediate

response. The man cried out and pulled away, so quickly that even Vincent was taken by surprise. The man stumbled away, heading right for the cliff once again, but fortunately fell to the ground before he could reach the edge.

Vincent stooped down beside him, not touching him this time. Elena came up beside him, her face filled with concern. The man was lying on the ground, his arms and legs moving spasmodically, but he did not seem to have any notion as to how to get himself back on his feet again, if he was even aware that he wasn't. He continued making the strange sounds. For some reason those sounds were more unnerving to Elena than anything else.

"What's wrong with him?" she questioned. She didn't want to look at the man, but she couldn't help herself. She had seen mako eyes before. She had seen members of SOLDIER on occasion, and both Cloud and Tifa had them. But still it was such a rare thing to see these days. And she didn't remember ever seeing them glow so brightly. She couldn't help but think there was some sort of connection between the man's eyes and the illness he appeared to be suffering from.

"I'm not sure," Vincent said slowly. "I think..."

Elena bent down closer. The man's hand brushed against her, and she pulled back. His touch alone made her shudder.

"I think I've seen something like this once before," Vincent continued. "After Cloud gave Sephiroth the black materia he disappeared. We found him again a few days later in Mideel, and the symptoms he had were almost identical to this."

Vincent stood up.

"He was suffering from mako poisoning."

Elena looked helplessly back and forth between Vincent and the man on the ground. Vincent seemed to think what he had just said was very important, and it probably was, but right now Elena wasn't thinking about that.

"We've got to get him to a doctor," she said.

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"Miss Yuffie should be down momentarily. Would you like some refreshment while you're waiting?" Shake asked.

"Sure shorty," Reno replied. "Get me something that's got a little kick to it."

Shake did not appear rankled by Reno's remark. Of course, since he had been wearing a frown of displeasure from the moment Reno walked in the door, that didn't mean much.

"Very good," Shake replied. He motioned toward a couch placed along the wall under a large mural of samurai in battle. "Please make yourself comfortable."

They stood in the reception hall of the Lord of Wutai's new home, the Imperial Palace. Construction had just finished on it a month ago. Now that Wutai had regained some of its former prestige, had indeed become a major economic center, Godo had decided that his old home was no longer suitable for a man of his stature. The place was huge, more than twice the size of Godo's old abode, and rivaled the Pagoda of the Gods in square footage, if not in height. Built at the foot of Da-Chao, it was high enough to see and be seen from the entire town. This was the first time Reno had been in it, and he had to admit he was impressed. The place was exquisitely furnished. As a man with an eye for luxurious items, it was obvious to Reno that no expense had been spared in the construction of the palace. The furniture was in a classic Wutai style, obviously antiques, and just as obviously to Reno's discerning eye, authentic. The parquet floor, waxed to a brilliant sheen, was covered in the center with a frilled throw rug on which was embroidered tradition Wutai art. A couch and wooden coffee table with delicately carved figures around the base stood on the rug. Hand painted vases as tall as Reno stood like sentries on either side of the couch. Reno walked over to one and inspected it more closely.

Shake, who was almost out the door, glanced back.

"And please don't touch anything," he added hastily before disappearing out the door.

Reno did not reply, his roguish smile saying all that needed to be said. If they were worried he was going to break something, he certainly wasn't going to say anything that might ease their mind.

Besides, if he identified the period of manufacture correctly, the vase was over a thousand years old. Even he had to respect that.

He looked around to make sure Shake was gone, then sat down on the couch. He looked at his watch. He had arrived just a few minutes after eight. He had hardly eaten all day, saving his appetite for the anticipated pleasures awaiting him at the restaurant. He was hungry. He hoped Yuffie didn't keep him waiting long.

Shake came back a short time later with Reno's drink. He looked around for a moment, apparently to make sure Reno hadn't been causing any mischief. He handed the Turk his drink, then turned around again and disappeared as fast as he had come. Reno sat back in his chair, amused by the fact that, though Shake obviously didn't like him, there was absolutely nothing in the world the man could do about it.

But Reno's amusement did not last. It was over an hour later that Yuffie finally made her appearance. By that time he was fuming, fidgeting in his seat and fiddling with his nightstick. He knew it didn't take even her this long to get ready. He knew she was just yanking his chain. Still, by the time she showed up his nerves were frayed, his stomach was growling loud enough to wake the dead, and visions of chucking the entire restaurant idea altogether and just using his nightstick to barbecue her instead were dancing in his head.

He didn't see her approach. She came up behind him, and the first he knew that she was there was when she spoke. "You ready?"

He got to his feet, hastily spinning around to confront her. But at the sight of her his anger vanished in a flash.

She was wearing a dark green floor length gown. Sleeveless and, he couldn't help but notice, extremely form fitting. One side was slit up to her thigh, exposing her right leg as she stood in front of him. The dress had an almost metallic sheen to it, and sparkled in the light whenever she moved. A thin tiara replaced her usual headband. The same color as her dress, a single brilliant sapphire sparkled in the center of it. Long white gloves completed the look of elegance, a look so foreign to Yuffie that all Reno could do was stare. This was a Yuffie he had never seen. This was a Yuffie he had never imagined!

For a moment they just looked at one another.

"I'm shocked," she said, looking over the immaculate and very expensive tux he was wearing. "You don't look like a slob."

"I'm shocked," he replied. "You look like a lady."

She made a face, then smiled and walked over to him.

"Shall we go?" she said pleasantly.

"Indeed," he replied, taking her arm. He had expected he'd get a night at a nice restaurant, and perhaps have some innocent fun with Yuffie as well, hopefully at her expense. He had known Yuffie for a long time now, and he had always been somewhat amused with their relationship. He suspected she had a 'thing' for him. Perfectly understandable. Most women did. And he suspected she thought he felt the same way about her. He wasn't about to dissuade her, or any girl, for that matter, from that belief. But he had never felt that strong an attraction to Yuffie. Sure, he had kissed her once, but that had just been as much to piss her off as anything else. He had always thought of her as a kid, and the way she dressed and acted only reinforced that opinion. But he had to admit she sure didn't look like one now. The soft skin of her arm against his, the curve of her dress as he looked down at her, all bespoke of the woman he hadn't noticed she had become. As they walked out the door, his trademark smirk grew wider still. Perhaps this was going to be a more interesting night than he had suspected.

The restaurant was just down the street from the palace. Less than a block away. It was a warm night, the moon bright in the sky. It took them only a few minutes walking along the lantern lit streets to arrive at their destination.

A crowd was gathered at the front of the restaurant. They bypassed it, of course, and walked right in. A few people shot a dark look at them, but it faded as soon as they recognized the daughter of the Lord of Wutai.

Inside the maitre'd came over to them immediately.

"Good evening, Miss Yuffie," he said formally. "You're looking lovely this evening. We have a table ready for you over by the fountain. I hope it's to your liking."

"Thank you," Yuffie replied.

The maitre'd them through the room to an empty table beside a sparkling fountain located in the very center of the room. Reno could tell that all eyes were upon the two of them as they sat down, and he couldn't have loved it more.

Menus were already on the table. Reno picked his up and looked through it slowly. He didn't have much time to look it over, however, when the waiter appeared.

"Good evening," the man said pleasantly. "Would you like something to drink while you are deciding on your meal?"

"Certainly," Reno replied. "I'll have a scotch on the rocks."

"And for the lady?" the waiter said.

"A margarita please," Yuffie responded.

The waiter nodded and walked away. Reno slowly looked around, ignoring the looks they were getting from the curious crowd.

"They certainly went all out with this place," he said. "I have to admit, I'm impressed."

"This is only the beginning," Yuffie declared. "There's two more restaurants being built. Both of them are going to put this place to shame."

Reno raised an eyebrow. He knew how Yuffie felt about Wutai. He suspected she couldn't be more pleased with how well the town was doing these days. He also suspected that she wouldn't hesitate to embellish the truth a bit.

"I'm sure you're very proud of Wutai," he said. "But this place isn't a two bit tourist trap anymore, you don't have to be a walking travel brochure for it."

Yuffie looked down at her menu.

"True," she replied. "And you don't have to be an idiot, but that doesn't seem to stop you from acting like one."

"Oh nice," he replied. "Not wasting any time with the barbs, eh? I guess I should have know better than to pick on your precious town."

"Yes you should have," she replied.

They were interrupted as the waiter brought them their drinks.

"Have you decided what you'll be having?" he asked as he set them down.

"Yes, I'll have the Garuda steak," Yuffie stated.

"Excellent choice, madam," the waiter said pleasantly. "How would you like that cooked?"

"Medium well."

"And for the gentleman?"

Reno looked over the menu once again. He couldn't help but notice that Garuda steak was the most expensive item on the menu. But that hardly surprised him.

"I'll have the same," he said. "Make mine rare."

"Very well," the waiter said. He took the menus and walked off once again.

"So where did you get that dress?" Reno questioned. "I have to admit you surprised me. I didn't think you had anything like that in your wardrobe. What, was that buried under your sneakers somewhere?"

"I'll have you know that I have quite a few dresses," she replied. "I've had to go to a few state functions in my time. You haven't seen me in one because I don't waste my time wearing them unless it's for something important."

"So you think this date tonight is important?" he questioned. "I'm flattered."

"Don't be," she replied. "I'm only here for the food."

"I'm sure you are," Reno stated. He slowly looked around the room. The place was full, as he had expected, though it seemed there were surprisingly few couples. Most of the tables had small groups of at least four people, some even more. In one corner two tables had been pushed together to accommodate a party of nine. Most of the people were middle aged businessmen. Yuffie was easily the youngest female there, and Reno suspected he might also be the youngest male. Again, not really surprising. The place was so expensive and so in demand, that only a man, or woman, with a great deal of pull could get a reservation. Reno thought that the people he was looking at were the CEO's and upper management of the most prominent companies here in Wutai. It felt good to be included.

Most of the people in the room were also natives of Wutai. Besides himself, he saw only one other table that was an exception to that rule. To their left, at a table that also stood beside the fountain, was a group of four men in gray suits. From their features they were obviously not Wutai natives. It seemed odd enough for him to mention it to Yuffie.

"Do you know who those guys are?" he questioned.

The table he was referring to was behind her back. She turned for a moment and glanced at them.

"Some businessmen," Yuffie replied, obviously not much interested. "Represent a company called Van..Vanguard, I think it was. They had a big meeting with Godo yesterday. They kept him for hours. Apparently they have big plans for Wutai, though I'm not sure Godo was all that interested."

"Why wouldn't he be?" Reno questioned.

"He thinks we've been doing fine on our own," she replied. "He's not sure he wants some big company to come in here and start making demands. I didn't tell him, of course, but I happen to agree with him. We don't need some outsiders coming in here to tell us the future of Wutai. We've got our own vision."

Reno didn't reply. Vanguard. That sounded vaguely familiar. He was sure he'd heard it before somewhere. It took a moment, but it did come to him. Elena had mentioned it to him back at headquarters in Junon. They had bought out the Junon Power Company, the successor to Shinra in Junon that had been losing money since it's inception.

Hmm, so they were here in Wutai too? Sounded like they had big plans. Maybe he should look into this when he got a chance. Not that it was any concern of his, or had anything to do with the Turks. But Reno had found out long ago that any

piece of information, no matter how useless it might seem at the time, could come in handy someday. In the business world, information was power.

Their dinners came shortly afterward. The steaks were, of course, excellent. In Reno's opinion, the best he had ever had. The restaurant was certainly living up to his expectations. The liquor flowed freely as well, with both of them being rather liberal in their consumption of it. By the time they were finished, Reno was feeling quite well, and Yuffie seemed a bit tipsy, if not downright drunk. But Reno thought that was a good thing. Perhaps because of it, they actually had a fairly pleasant conversation.

Stepping out of the restaurant when they were done a light breeze sobered them up a bit. Reno looked around. The night was cool, but not unpleasant. Yuffie stood by his side, so close he could feel the warmth coming off her body. He looked at her again, her eyes sparkling, her dress glinting in the moonlight, and suddenly he realized he wasn't anxious to have this night end.

"Let's take a walk," he suggested.

She looked around, but did not seem surprised.

"Where to?" she asked.

He shrugged.

"Down that way," he pointed in the direction of the Pagoda of the Gods.

They walked farther down the road, into an area sheltered by trees. They stopped on a small wooden bridge overlooking a pond. The silvery forms of fish could be seen meandering just below the surface. Yuffie leaned against the railing and looked down.

"It's such a beautiful night," she said. "I love this kind of weather. The summer is too short around here."

"You mean there's actually something you don't like about Wutai?" Reno questioned.

Instead of replying Yuffie just looked thoughtful. Reno came up beside her and put his arm around her, looking down at the pond as well.

She turned to face him.

"You know, I kinda had a good time tonight," she said slowly. "You hardly acted like a jerk at all."

"Thanks a lot," he replied. "And you weren't much of a pest yourself."

"You promised you wouldn't call me that," she admonished.

"That was while we were in the restaurant," he countered. "That's over now."

She slid her arms up to his shoulders.

"So, does that mean the date's over too?" she asked.

He looked down into her eyes, glinting darkly in the dappled moonlight.

"Not at all," he replied.

He had both arms around her waist now. One of them slowly dropped lower.

Yuffie reached around and intercepted it, pulling it back up to its former position.

"Bad boy," she said, though she did not seem annoyed. "You don't want to do that. Not with our little shadow watching."

Reno couldn't help but turn his head slightly, just enough to catch a glimpse of the dark figure that had been following them since leaving the restaurant, and now stood in the shadow of the trees, not far away. He was barely visible, but he hadn't escaped Reno's eye, nor Yuffie's, obviously.

"So you noticed Godo's little spy as well," he stated.

"Of course," Yuffie replied.

Reno looked around casually.

"Shall we try to lose him?" he questioned.

Yuffie pondered that for a moment.

"It might be fun," she replied eventually.

With a grin Reno turned and the walked off the bridge.

"You know the area better than I," he said. "Which way?"

Yuffie looked around for a moment, then nodded her head to the right.

"The gardens surrounding the palace are over this way," she said. "Should be pretty easy to give him the slip there."

She led them down the road off to the right. They crossed a well lit street, then stopped at the head of a narrow path that led into an area surrounded by high shrubs and trees. She paused for a moment to slip off her high heels, then they plunged down the trail. It was much darker here, with only small covered footlights appearing periodically along the trail. The path turned to the left, and as soon as they turned the corner Yuffie grabbed hold of Reno's arm and pulled him into the woods. They ducked down behind some bushes and waited.

A figure walked by a few moments later. It was Shake, not that that was any surprise. He paused for just a moment to look around, then continued down the path. Seconds later, he was gone.

"This way," Yuffie said softly.

She led Reno farther into the woods. But a few moments later they came upon another trail. Yuffie turned left and followed it. They walked for a ways in silence. On their left another pond appeared, or perhaps it was the same one. Reno wasn't sure. Yuffie stopped underneath a large willow tree overhanging the pond, some of its sweeping branches dipping down to touch the surface. She looked down the trail, but there was no one in sight.

"Now, where were we?" she questioned, slipping her arms up around his shoulders once again.

Reno looked at her for a moment, a bit surprised. He knew she liked him, but she had never acted so forward about it before. Perhaps it was the romantic atmosphere of the evening, or perhaps it was the liquor she had imbibed. Either way, he wasn't going to complain. Especially with the way she looked. He didn't think the atmosphere was affecting him, and he was certain the liquor wasn't. Nevertheless, he had to admit her lips had never looked more inviting.

His head drifted down toward hers, and a moment later he was kissing her.

She didn't resist, in fact, she pulled him closer, one of her hands slipping down behind him to rest on his rear end.

Their lips parted for a moment and Reno looked at her critically. He reached down and put his hand in his pocket.

"What are you doing?" Yuffie questioned.

"Making sure my wallet is still there," Reno replied.

She laughed softly.

"I'm not after that tonight," Yuffie replied coyly.

Reassured, Reno grinned and leaned closer.

"The way you like to goad your father, I'm surprised you didn't let his little spy see us making out," he said.

She merely smiled.

"I don't want to send him too far off the deep end," she replied. "Knowing how he feels about you, if he caught us doing this, he'd probably have you executed."

Reno's eyebrow rose. She was joking, right? But before he could question her anymore her lips were plastered against his once again. The smell of her perfume was in the air, the heat of her body warm against his own, making his temperature rise as well. Still, he couldn't help notice how exposed they were, here on the shore of the lake. He could see the lanterns along the road across the pond. Anyone passing there could see them. He liked to make out as much as anyone, and he really really didn't want to spoil the mood, but he also didn't want to pay for it with his life.

"Umm, could we find a more secluded spot?" he asked when they came up for air. "It's really kind of...open here."

"No one's going to see us," Yuffie replied confidently. She slowly began to unbutton the shirt of his tux.

"Don't rip it," he muttered.

She giggled.

"Don't worry, I'll be nice," she replied.

She pulled his shirt open. His arms encircled her again, their lips coming together once more, more forcefully this time. His arms were around her, and once again his hands slid down her back to rest comfortably below her waist.

Suddenly he heard a shout.

He pushed her away, spinning around, looking wildly for the source. It took him but a moment to realize the sound had come from across the pond, and in fact, was just the sound of some revelers and had nothing to do with them. Only a moment it took for him to realize this, then his head spun around again at a shout from Yuffie.

He hadn't pushed her away very hard, but she hadn't expected his sudden violent movement. Just as she was leaning forward, his shove caused her to lose her balance. She stumbled, her arms swinging wildly to try to keep her on her feet, but to no avail. She fell to the ground, then tumbled down the slope and into the water with a loud splash.

Reno just stared at her with his mouth open for a moment as she flailed around, then scrambled to her feet in knee deep water. She stood there, staring at him, her tiara askew, soaked to the skin, the water dripping from her hair and dress.

"You stupid JERK!" she screamed.

Still Reno said nothing. He was still in shock.

"Shake!" she yelled.

"Yuffie, I..." he stammered.

She stumbled out of the water, heading toward him with murder in her eye. He stepped back.

"It...it's your fault!" he snapped. "I wouldn't have been so paranoid if you hadn't started in with that execution stuff."

"My fault! My fault!" she blurted out, coming up right in front of him. "You are such a moron!"

She lunged forward and pushed him with all her might. He fell back on his rear end.

"I should have known something like this would happen!" she shouted. "Why I ever agreed to come along with you in the first place I'll never know. You're going to pay for this gown! You're going to pay for everything!"

Running footsteps interrupted her rant. Shake suddenly appeared on the path. He ran up beside her.

"Are you alright Miss Yuffie?" he exclaimed.

"No, I'm NOT alright!" Yuffie shouted. "I'll never be alright as long as I'm in the presence of this idiot! Take me home, Shake. Now!"

"Of course, Miss Yuffie," Shake said.

Grabbing hold of her hand, he started to walk away, but not before he cast Reno a self-satisfied grin.

Reno just sat there. In spite of Yuffie's anger, he was trying hard not to laugh. He should have known that somehow the night would end up this way.

When they were gone he picked up his nightstick and got to his feet. For a moment he looked down the path in the direction Yuffie had disappeared. He was amused and yet a little disappointed at the same time. He had to admit she had gotten him hot under the collar, and he couldn't help but wonder where it would have all ended. Still, he wasn't too upset. After all she had done to him, there was some satisfaction in seeing her dripping wet. It might not make up for what might have been, but there were plenty of other fish in the sea.

He tapped his nightstick on his shoulder and started off jauntily down the road. The Red Scorpion wasn't too far away, and there a blonde waitress there that got a sparkle in her eye every time he walked in.

~\*~

Godo was finishing up some paperwork when he heard the commotion from the front foyer. He heard the sound of Yuffie's angry voice, and Shake trying to soothe her. He turned around as the sounds grew, and was facing the doorway when Yuffie walked in, her high heels in her hands, her dress dripping wet and leaving a trail of puddles behind her. For some reason, Godo was not in the least bit surprised.

"Have a nice time?" he questioned mildly.

The look on her face could have wilted a dragon.

"Oh shut up!"

INotes:

Not long ago I got an email from Justin Smith with the suggestion that, among other things, and I quote, said; "This Materia also allows Cat to combine any two materia to create a new attack." In the first chapter of Shadows I had Yuffie attempting to use two materia at once. Although I consider these two ideas different enough to be independent, it is possible that subconsciously this email influenced me when coming up with that idea. I don't want anyone to think that I'm taking their ideas without giving them credit. Besides, it's almost impossible for me to remember every single plot idea everyone has ever sent me. With my lousy memory, it would be quite easy for someone to send me something and me to forget totally that they did, while blissfully thinking I came up with the idea myself. So, in order to avoid any possible confusion in the future, I'd like to ask you all NOT to send me anymore plot ideas. I know most of you are just trying to help, but the truth is, I consider coming up with plots to be part of a writers job and I'm not going to use anyone else's anyway. If you insist on sending one anyway, I'm putting a warning up right now, you will NOT get any credit for it if I somehow, by chance or otherwise, end up using it sometime in the future. I'm kinda sorry it has to be this way but I see no other way to prevent this from happening again.

Just wanted to make sure we all understood one another!

Frank