

Chapter Twelve: One Big Happy Family

"Goddamn. How the hell did you stand being around her for an entire day, nonstop?" Cid Highwind

And we stare each other down

Like victims in the grind

Probing all the weakness

And hurt still left behind and we cry

The tears of pearls.

We do it. Oh we do it.

"Tears of Pearls"

Savage Garden

Yuffie frowned at her reflection in the mirror and tugged on the bottom of her borrowed tank top, whose straps kept sliding off of her narrow shoulders. All of her and Vincent's clothes had gotten wet when their chocobos were forced to wait outside in the rain for almost a day until the bird-brains decided being wet was not fun and ran for shelter. Both Yuffie and Vincent were going to be wearing hand-me-downs until their clothes dried. Yuffie was now clad in a white tank top and a pair of slightly large black shorts of Tifa's since Elena had turned up her nose at the prospect of Yuffie wearing any of her clothes.

Wincing at the pronounced ache in her bones, Yuffie reached up and readjusted the wayward straps and pushed her hair, still damp from the shower she had taken, away from her face. She sighed with sudden wistfulness as she beheld the girl in the mirror, for some reason very dissatisfied with what she saw.

Why hadn't she ever realized that she was so...unattractive? Her figure had acquired more curves over the past year, but they still weren't enough to rival the voluptuous figure of Tifa or even the feminine curves of Elena. She had none of their fresh beauty, either. If she tried putting on makeup, she looked like a clown. If she put on a skirt, she looked like, well... Yuffie in a skirt. If she cut her hair short, she looked like a boy. That was one of the other, secret reasons for letting her hair grow out - she was tired of being the bratty tomboy of the group. But in Yuffie's opinion, it would take nothing short of a face-lift to make her into something resembling beautiful. Her legs were too bony, her shoulders too narrow, her eyes too big, her hair too limp and plain, her face too round, her stomach too skinny. Damn! Why hadn't she ever noticed that there were so many things wrong with her?

Maybe I did notice them, she thought, only I didn't care or I didn't want to admit up to my many faults. How could I have been so blind? No wonder no one likes me. I'm as ugly as homemade sin in the heat of summer, and now this nappy bruise on my face makes me even more hideous!

Yuffie touched her reflection in the mirror with trembling fingers, an immense sadness darkening her gray eyes and making her mouth turn down at the corners. Then she realized with a start that Tifa was standing in the doorway behind her with a thoughtful expression on her face.

"Yikes!" she said, whirling around to face her older friend. "Tifa! I didn't know you were there!"

Tifa smiled and walked over to Yuffie, her boots thudding on the wooden floor. "Sorry," she said sheepishly. "I got caught up watching you. Your face is very expressive."

"Does that mean I show too much emotion?" Yuffie asked, tugging on her tank top again and wishing that she had the figure to fill it so it wouldn't be so loose.

Tifa just smiled again, reaching out to adjust the shirt. "No, expressive is a good thing, trust me." She fluffed up Yuffie's hair. "Your hair's getting so long! Soon I can do all sorts of neat things with it!"

"And I get to be a Barbie doll!" Yuffie said with mock cheerfulness.

Tifa laughed and picked up a brush from the dresser. "Can I put your hair in a ponytail? It's just long enough."

"Oh. Okay," Yuffie said uncertainly. She'd never worn her hair in a ponytail before; it had never been the proper length.

Tifa gestured to the chair in front of the dresser. "Sit there. I can't reach with you standing up. You're almost as tall as me now!"

"I wish," Yuffie muttered, plopping down gratefully in the chair and trying not to focus on her reflection in the mirror. She knew Tifa was just paying her all these compliments because she'd seen her getting all depressed over her reflection. Yuffie

wasn't sure how to react. On one hand, she wanted to tell her friend it was okay to drop the act; she didn't care about how she looked, right? But on the other hand, Yuffie was grateful for the support. Tifa had seemed sincere...

"Watch out. I have tangles galore," she told Tifa as the brunette brought the brush to bear on Yuffie's brown locks.

"Don't worry, Yuffie," Tifa said comfortingly. "I know how to deal with long hair. I'll try and make this as painless as possible."

"Good," Yuffie replied nervously. "I've had enough pain for one day."

Tifa laughed and started to get the tangles out of Yuffie's still-damp hair, starting at the bottom and working her way up. Yuffie soon found out that Tifa *did* know what she was doing. Aside from the occasional tug on her scalp, she found the experience strangely comforting. Then, unexpectedly, a shadow from the distant past rose up in her...

"Yuffie Pristina Kisaragi! Come here!"

Five-year-old Yuffie shuddered and burrowed further underneath the blankets in the sitting room. "No!" she shot back. "I don't wanna!"

Ayami Kisaragi sighed good-naturedly and tossed a lock of chocolate brown hair over her slender shoulder. "Please, honey, I just need to brush your hair. Then you can go out and play."

"Why can't I go out and play now?" Yuffie whined. "My hair's fine, Mama."

"No," Yuffie's mother replied patiently, entering the sitting room and noting the misshapen pile of blankets in the middle of the floor with a smile. "My, my," she said teasingly. "I wonder where my lovely daughter Yuffie could be hiding? Maybe under here!"

Yuffie laughed with delight as her mother attacked her ticklish stomach, squirming out from underneath the blankets. Still laughing and wishing her mother would just chase her around the house all day, Yuffie made a beeline for the door, only to be caught around the waist and pulled into her mother's lap.

"Look who I found!" Ayami exclaimed in mock surprise, a smile on her pretty face as her almond-shaped eyes twinkled with laughter. "A bug underneath our rug! And what were you going under there?"

"Hiding!" Yuffie said happily, still laughing from the aftermath of the tickle-fight.

"Hiding from who?" her mother asked. "The boogeyman?"

Yuffie shook her head, her long brown hair flopping around her face. "Nope! From you and Mr. Brush, Mama!"

Yuffie's mother laughed and held on to her daughter as the little girl tried to wiggle out of her grasp. "Just sit still for one minute, honey," she urged soothingly. "I'll be done in a second."

"Aw, Mama," Yuffie pouted, but remained still as her mother brushed her hair, humming softly as she did so...

"There you go!" Tifa said triumphantly, securing the elastic band around Yuffie's hair and tightening the ponytail.

Yuffie snapped out of her reverie to find that Tifa had finished brushing her hair and had already put it in a ponytail, something that Yuffie hadn't seen in her hair since she had been very young. Turning her head to examine the unfamiliar thing that was sticking out of her head, Yuffie had to resist the urge to laugh as the ponytail flopped around her head like something alive. She had always thought ponytails, especially short ones like this, were the goofiest things...

"What so funny?" Tifa demanded, trying to look serious and not being very successful.

"It looks like I have a turd sticking out of my head!" Yuffie exclaimed, bursting into giggles.

Tifa laughed at the sheer absurdity of the prospect. "That's gross, Yuffie!" she scolded good-naturedly. "Well, I think it looks cute! It brings out your cheekbones quite nicely."

Yuffie made a face. "What cheekbones? My face is so tubby you can't even see my cheekbones."

Tifa gave her ponytail a playful whack. "No, it's not, Yuffie. You have a very pretty face."

The girl rolled her eyes. "Yeah, sure, whatever, Tifa. You're just so happy to see us that even my ugly face looks good."

"Come on, Yuffie, don't talk like that," Tifa chided gently, beginning to sense that underneath Yuffie's carefree exterior, there was a bit of a self-esteem complex. She hugged her friend gently, being mindful of the many bruises that graced Yuffie's body. "If it's any consolation to you," she said soothingly. "Vincent's still as ugly as he was before."

Yuffie laughed. "Tifa! That was mean!" She pulled back so that she could look at her older friend. "Do you really think Vinnie is ugly?" she asked, not sure whether or not Tifa had been serious. In Yuffie's opinion, Vincent wasn't ugly at all.

Tifa smiled and fluffed up Yuffie's ponytail. "No, of course not. Actually, I think he's very, very attractive, but don't go around telling everyone that."

"Of course not!" Yuffie agreed, glad that she had Tifa to talk about "girly things" with. "I think Vincent is, well, you know, um, kind of...nice-looking, too, in a weird twisted vampire/boogeyman sort of way." By the end of her sentence, her cheeks were as red as tomatoes.

Tifa smiled knowingly, though she was a bit surprised. She had had no idea that Yuffie becoming conscious about her appearance all of sudden was stemming from a crush on Vincent, of all people!

"What?" Yuffie asked her friend, not trusting that smile. "What is it?"

Tifa grinned. "Nothing, nothing." She hugged her friend again. "I'm just so glad to see you guys again. I missed you both so much. It's been horrible around here with nothing but a bunch of men to talk to."

"Elena's not a guy," Yuffie said smartly.

"I know, but Elena's...Elena." Tifa shrugged. "We're not home girls yet."

"Home girls?" Yuffie laughed. "Been taking grammar lessons from Barret?"

"Oh, shut up!" Tifa said. "Let's go downstairs before they send someone up to get us."

Yuffie hopped out of the chair and followed her friend to the door. "Sure thing, home girl."

Tifa stuck her tongue out at Yuffie. "You're never going to let me live that down, are you?"

"Nope," Yuffie said proudly.

Everyone was already seated around the table when the two girls came down the stairs.

"Hey, brat!" Reno exclaimed, a taunting grin on his face. "Showing some cleavage there, I see."

Yuffie smiled sweetly at him and gave his ponytail a hard yank as she went by to plop down in a chair next to Vincent, narrowly avoiding getting her butt slapped in retaliation by Reno. Looking at Vincent, she saw that he had apparently found clothes that were of a much better fit than the ones Yuffie had borrowed. The black, long-sleeved shirt he was wearing was a bit large on him, but the black jeans and brown boots were a good fit.

Yuffie looked up to find Vincent staring back at her calmly. Blushing slightly, she said, "I see you've found some clothes that don't make you look like an evil blood-sucking vampire."

Vincent raised an eyebrow. "Charming, to the last."

"Goddamn," Cid commented from his seat beside Vincent. "How the hell did you stand being around her for an entire day, nonstop? You must be Superman, Vince."

Reno grinned. "Actually, I think even Superman probably would have flown into the sky and dropped her in the North Crater after the first two hours."

Yuffie slumped in her chair, a scowl on her face. "You guys suck!" she exclaimed.

"Leave Yuffie alone," Tifa added, looking strangely uncomfortable in her seat between Cloud and Reno. There was a peculiar tension in the air, a sort of electric crackling, but Yuffie didn't give it much thought, being that she was too busy being humiliated by her companions.

"So what the hell happened to you two?" Barret asked, leaning his beefy bulk on the table. "Did ya find the Running Man?"

Vincent nodded, absently pushing a stray lock of damp black hair away from his eyes. "You might say that."

"Did you see any sign of Reeve?" Elena asked hopefully.

Cid pivoted in his chair to glare at the female Turk. "Hot damn, woman! Let them get a word in, why don't ya?"

Cloud nodded, speaking for the first time. "Yeah, start at the beginning."

"Very well," Vincent deadpanned. "I'll start, and Yuffie can fill in anything that I fail to mention."

"Sounds like a plan," Yuffie agreed, pleased that he had included her and hadn't just pretended like she had never been on the journey with him in the first place.

The dark gunslinger folded his arms across his chest, and everyone, except Yuffie, leaned forward in anticipation, eager to hear the story. So Vincent began the tale of how he and Yuffie had followed Cloud's orders and gone into the cave in search of the mysterious "ghost ship" Cloud had talked to them about. He gave a mild description of the ship, and Yuffie was surprised at how much more he had noticed about the ugly thing than she had. When she had seen the old, rotten, algae-crusted ship in the back of the cave, she had simply declared, "Oh, it's a ghost ship! No one home!" Vincent apparently had thought the abandoned thing to be more interesting than she had.

"That's all about the ship?" Cloud asked, apparently expecting more. "It didn't appear as if it had been used recently?"

Vincent shook his head slowly. "Not to my knowledge. There could have been something I missed, though."

"It don't matter now," Barret quipped gruffly. "That thang was outta there when we went to check this mornin'."

"Was it the Running Man who sailed the ship away?" Red asked.

Vincent nodded. "Yes."

"And you guys followed him onto it?" Cloud supplied, leaning against the wooden table.

"No," Yuffie spoke up grumpily. "We were already on it. Mr. I'm-So-Damn-Clever Vinnie here had this bright idea that we should explore the interior of the ship, like it was going to be any prettier than the outside! We ended up stuck in the cargo hold between two crates for the entire trip."

"We were investigating the cargo hold when the Running Man came on board," Vincent clarified. "For further reference, we found nothing on the ship, just old crates full of tea bags and skeletons of fishes. There were some blankets rotting in the crew's quarters, but they didn't warrant much attention, apparently. Yuffie and I were in the cargo hold getting ready to leave when we heard footsteps on the upper deck."

"Vinnie heard them," Yuffie jumped in, still in a grumpy mood as she recalled how miserable the old ghost ship experience had been. "I didn't hear a damn thing. I thought he was pulling my leg."

Cid rolled his eyes. "Vince doesn't pull nobody's leg, Yuffie. You should know that by now."

"I know," Yuffie said quietly, trying not to think that she and Vincent had become close friends during their little adventure. If she got to thinking about that, then she was probably going to be brutally disappointed when he started shunning her like he did everyone else. Why should a little brat like her warrant any special attention from a man like him?

Yuffie slowly emerged from her morbid thoughts and listened to Vincent as he recounted the tale of how they had hid in the cargo hold for two hours as the ship sailed off into oblivion. The young ninja felt her stomach becoming queasy again as she listening to Vincent's vivid description of the rocking waves and musty fish smell. Much to her embarrassment, she was almost ready to toss her cookies when Vincent finally ended the reliving-the-nightmare process at the time they had docked at the deep-sea complex and followed the Running Man off of the ship.

"You have no idea where the ship might have taken you?" Rude asked.

"No," Vincent deadpanned. "All I know is that we were in some sort of docking bay on the ocean. I received the impression that the complex wasn't very large, but we were either being held in the extreme front or the back of the complex so my judgment on such a thing isn't trustworthy. There were hundreds of crates in this area, and the ceiling was open so that we could see the sky. The ocean stretched in all other directions except the north, where there was a door to inner complex."

"And you followed the Running Man down there?" Red asked. "Did he have anyone with him?"

Vincent shook his head. "No, but we lost sight of him for about an hour's time before we actually followed him through the door."

Cid jumped slightly. "An hour? Damn, that's a long time. What was he doing in a docking bay with a bunch of boring crates for an entire hour?"

"Hiding from us."

Now it was Cloud's turn to be surprised. "He knew you were there?"

"Great spy job, you guys," Reno said sarcastically, reclining in his chair with a leering look in his eyes.

"Vinnie pushed me in the seawater!" Yuffie burst out before her companion could say that she had had an "accident."

Reno burst out laughing. "Way to go, Vincent!"

"I knew you had it in you, man!" Cid said approvingly, a big grin on his face.

Vincent didn't even blink. "Yuffie fell into the docking bay pool on accident; consequently, the Running Man was alerted to our presence and hid amongst the crates."

"Way to go, brat," Barret snapped.

Face bright red, Yuffie opened her mouth to defend herself when suddenly Vincent stepped in. "It wasn't her fault," he deadpanned, red eyes steady from behind strands of ebony hair. "She was out in front. It was dark out and she couldn't see. There was a puddle that I failed to inform her about, and she slipped into the pool. Therefore, it actually is my fault that she fell in."

Everyone just sort of stared; they had never heard Vincent defend someone like that. Yuffie, in particular, was shocked out of her mind and just sat there with her mouth hanging open. Last night, Vincent had practically said that it was her fault the Running Man knew about their presence, and now he was defending her? Geez! She just didn't understand this man! Never before in her entire life had she met someone who was as frustrating to be around as Mr. I-Need-To-Atone-For-My-Sins Valentine here.

"Okay," Cloud said slowly, raising a blonde eyebrow curiously, probably making a point to ask Vincent about his peculiar behavior later. "What happened next?"

Vincent, unfazed by everyone's curious stares, continued the story of how he and Yuffie had chased the Running Man through the maze of crates until they lost track of him and agreed that they would watch the only exit from the cargo area, assuming that the Running Man would try and enter the complex from there. He had to stop his recounting of the experience twice, once when Cloud asked him to describe the Running Man and when Elena interrupted to ask if he was sure the Running Man didn't have any prisoners with him or on the ship. Yuffie had started to growl a response to the question that was starting to get redundant, but Vincent had quickly cut her off and given a more polite, monotonic answer. On the story went, with Vincent making vivid descriptions about things that Yuffie hadn't even noticed while the others listening attentively, hanging on every word. Yuffie found herself almost lulled into a doze by Vincent's deep, soothing voice, but she jerked herself awake every once in while to add something into the story, just to remind everyone that she was still there.

Cloud, in particular, hung on Vincent's every word, his Mako blue eyes sharp and attentive as he leaned on the table, stopping Vincent every once in a while to fire another question at him. He even asked Yuffie for her opinion every once in a while, something that she gratefully provided. He stopped Vincent again when they started talking about the battle with the Faceless Men.

"Wait a minute," Cloud said dubiously. "You said these men had no faces at all?"

"No faces at all," Yuffie confirmed, stressing every word.

"Isn't that, like, physically impossible or something?" Elena asked suspiciously, her brown eyes darting from Yuffie to Vincent. "You need eyes to see with, and a nose to breath. Every living thing needs those to survive."

Yuffie's eyes narrowed. "Are you calling us liars?"

Elena glared back at her. "And what if I am?"

"Elena," Rude said firmly but softly, eyes unreadable behind his dark sunglasses.

The blond-haired Turk looked in surprise at her tall companion. "Rude, I-"

"Elena," Rude said again, this time more firmly. Elena opened her mouth as if to say something more, but instead she shut it abruptly and sank into her seat with a humiliated, if not hurt, look on her face.

After a few more moments of silence in which everyone wondered at how well Rude had handled the situation - not to mention *why* he had done such a thing in the first place - Cloud once again broke the silence.

"Describe these creatures to me," he said to Vincent and Yuffie.

"Average man's height," Vincent clipped. "Male, or at least they appeared to be. None of them had any feminine features, but when Yuffie dealt one a...low blow, it didn't appear to be affected by the assault."

"Maybe these creatures do not feel pain," Red suggested, looking intrigued with the story.

Vincent nodded. "That's probably the most logical assumption."

"Faceless Men," Barret mused in a grouchy tone. "Do ya think these things were natural kinds of monsters?"

"No," Vincent answered without hesitation. "These creatures were abominations, but, whatever happened to them, I feel certain that they were once human."

"How horrible," Tifa said quietly, eyebrows creased in distress. "I wonder what happened to them."

"Who knows," Vincent replied, his monotone the antithesis of Tifa's sympathetic one. "But whatever befell them left these creatures with abnormal strength and endurance. It appears as if the brain is the very center of these creatures' activity. If you don't destroy the brain, then these things just keep on coming with no let up."

"How do you figure that?" Reno asked flatly.

"We busted our asses trying to kill five of these things over the past day," Yuffie grumbled, the memory of the battle making her limbs ache all over again. "Vinnie blew up their jet skis while escaping the complex, but somehow they managed to crawl on shore and follow us all the way up to the mountains near the Chocobo Ranch."

Reno snorted. "So what's the big deal? Any human could have done that."

"Not at the rate they did," Vincent deadpanned. "Especially considering the fact that all five of them were missing either a leg or an arm. It took nothing short of summoning the Knights of the Round to kill two of them at long range."

Cid's mouth dropped open, and he had to scramble to hold onto his cigarette. "You're kiddin' me? Damn, that's some heavy shit, guys."

"Heavy, yes," Vincent confirmed. "But frighteningly real. I shot one point blank range in the chest and it didn't even stumble. And they seem to have at least the most primitive intelligence, for they attack in strategic formations, either in a pack or by using other methods."

"Yeah," Yuffie spoke up. "Three of them acted together to try and knock me off of one of those cliffs between Kalm and the Chocobo Ranch." She absently fingered one of the bruises on her stomach. "Almost succeeded, too, if it hadn't been for Vinnie. And while we were in the Green Room, three of them cornered Vincent and were pounding on him with their guns."

"Pounding?" Cloud asked, a perplexed look on his face. "Why didn't they just shoot you if they had guns?"

"I assume that up to a certain point in time, they wanted us alive," Vincent answered. "Either that or the first three we encountered in the complex were a weak batch; they were dispatched easily enough, but apparently sometime during the course of our escape on the jet ski, they decided that we would be better off dead. They opened fire on us."

"Are you guys okay?" Tifa asked worriedly.

Vincent shrugged. "I'm fine, but one of them shot Yuffie in the shoulder."

Yuffie nodded, hand flying instinctively to her left shoulder, where Vincent's red bandana (clean, of course!) was still tied around the scar. She had no idea why she had left it on; all that remained of the bullet hole that had originally bled like Niagara Falls was a new, nasty-looking scar. For some reason, however, she hadn't wanted to untie it from her arm. Maybe it was really a "souvenir" like she had told Vincent. Her thoughts started to shift to what had happened, or what *hadn't* happened, under the overhang a couple of hours ago. Once again, she saw Vincent's beautiful garnet eyes lingering on her face and felt his warmth as he sat close to her with the rain pouring down inches from them.

"Yuffie!" Barret's voice suddenly cut through her thoughts.

She snapped out of her reverie with a startled flush coming to her cheeks. She had zoned out totally and hadn't even realized it! Now everyone was staring at her like she had grown another head.

"What?" she demanded, cheeks on fire, as if everyone at the table had heard what she was thinking about.

"Jes' making sure you was done wit your little trip to the Twilight Zone," Barret growled at her. "We gonna start the story again."

"I was part of the story," she grumbled. "I don't need to hear it again. It was hard enough living it."

"Yuffie, quit being a pest," Cloud said flatly.

Anger clenched her jaw. There was that word again! Pest! That's all they ever called her! Cid and Barret didn't even call her Yuffie anymore! It was always, "Great going, pest," or "Oh no, it's the brat." Reno and Elena called her even worse names when they were in bad moods. And now Cloud was starting! God, where did it end?! She was so sick and tired of this! Even she had to draw the line somewhere.

She was just about to open her mouth and start the biggest spiel of all time when she suddenly noticed Tifa staring at her desperately and making motions with her hands, obviously telling Yuffie not to say anything. Tifa shook her head emphatically yet discreetly, eyes darting from Cloud to Yuffie. The young ninja glared angrily at Tifa, then at Cloud, who was beginning to catch onto the silent communication between the two girls. In the end, Yuffie held her tongue out of respect for Tifa and the fact that a fight between two of the AVALANCHE members wasn't going to make planning go any faster. She still had no idea why Tifa didn't want to upset Cloud, but she was betting that it had something to do with the crackling tension in the air that Yuffie still hadn't been able to pinpoint.

Clenching her hands into fists, Yuffie bit the inside of her cheek and lowered her eyes to her lap, focusing all of her attention on the weave of her borrowed denim shorts to keep from exploding in anger. God, she was ready to go nuclear!

Silence hung awkwardly in the air.

"Awright!" Barret suddenly bellowed in irritation. "What the hell is going on here?!"

"Nothing," Cloud said coldly, for some reason looking almost as peeved as Yuffie was.

"Like hell 'nothing'!" Cid snapped, shrewd blue eyes darting all around the table. "I don't know what the hell happened to you, Cloud, but you've been acting weird. Even Reno's being more pissy than usual. And what's wrong with Tifa? Yuffie, too?"

Good thing he called me "Yuffie," she thought, still staring at her clenched fists in her lap. Or you could have just forgotten about going nuclear. I would have gone positively ATOMIC! Wait a minute, aren't those the same thing...

"Nothing is wrong with us," Cloud said apathetically, though the turbulent emotions in his Mako blue eyes sang a different tune. "We're just all under a lot of stress right now."

"As are we all," Rude said calmly. "Fighting won't solve anything, though."

Reno snorted, flicking a lock of flaming hair away from his eyes. "Well, me and Tifa both know what's bugging Cloud."

"Reno!" Tifa gasped, hands flying to her mouth. "Be quiet!"

Reno cast his eyes away, but he was unable to conceal the smug yet strangely bitter smile that crossed his face. He knew his words had struck home, and the damage had already been done. Cloud was now staring blankly at the tabletop, looking like a zombie. Tifa was hugging herself with her arms, eyes on the floor, apparently not trusting herself to look at anyone at the table.

Cid raised an eyebrow. "The hell? Did we miss something here?"

"Seems like it," Elena commented dryly, watching Reno carefully as if expecting him to bust out the answer at any moment.

But Red spoke up before anyone else could further exacerbate the already inflamed predicament. "I believe Rude spoke it true when he said that fighting won't help us right now. Bickering amongst each other isn't going to get Reeve back any faster. I believe it is the general consensus that our mutual friend is in grave danger, and whether we like it or not, AVALANCHE and the Turks are going to have to work together to get him back." He stared hard at Cloud, Tifa, and Reno. "That means putting aside these disputes to be dealt with later."

Rude nodded. "We need all three of you right now. There's no way we can make plans without you three."

Cloud said nothing. Tifa lowered her head further, feeling ashamed. Reno yawned.

Barret looked at the Rude suspiciously. "Well, ain't you Mr. Peacemaker now? You and your Shinra buddies up to somethin'?"

"Barret," Red growled, beginning to lose his cool.

The large man glanced at the panther-like creature to his right before sighing and folding his arms across his chest. "Gotta lot of things on my mind right now," he grumbled as a way of explanation.

"We all do," Vincent suddenly spoke up, glancing at the still simmering Yuffie out of the corner of his eye. "Yuffie and I have undergone a very taxing ordeal, and it appears as if problems arose while we were away."

"What problems?" Cloud suddenly asked in a low voice, eyes never moving from the wooden tabletop. "No problems here."

Everyone stared at him incredulously. He was the very embodiment of a man with problems.

Cloud suddenly sighed with world-weariness in his soul and rose to his feet, shoulders rigid with some nameless emotion and his eyes still averted. "I'm not up to this right now," he muttered almost inaudibly. "We'll do it later."

He climbed out from behind the table and started to walk towards the stairs, his movements jerky and stiff.

Reno lost his cool almost immediately. "Okay!" he exclaimed, voice dripping with sarcasm. "Let's just all jump when he says! Mr. Big Shot Leader over there thinks the world revolves around him and we have to do whatever he says!"

Cloud gave Reno the finger and stomped up the stairs while everyone stared in wonder at Cloud's uncharacteristically vicious actions. A second later they heard a door slam upstairs.

Reno pounded the table with his fist, beside himself with rage. "@#%\$!" he exclaimed. "I've had enough for one goddamn day! We're never gonna find Reeve with *him* as a leader!"

Silence hung in the air for a few moments before Tifa suddenly stirred. "I'm going to go check on the chocobos," she said in a soft, wavering voice, her long chocolate brown hair hiding her watering eyes from view. "Excuse me."

She quickly rose and literally ran out of the room and down a side hallway, her boots thudding on the wooden floor. A second later everyone heard the back door slam.

"Great going, Turk," Barret snapped.

"Damn you, Reno," Cid said at the same time.

Reno's jaw clenched, and his face turned as red as his hair. "Man! %\$#@ all of ya'll!"

He leapt to his feet, knocking his chair over, and stormed out of the front door, slamming it behind him and making all the shot glasses tremble. Rude and Elena leapt from their seats and followed him out, ignoring the fact that it was still raining.

With vivid and loud curses issuing from both of their mouths, Cid and Barret got up and left the room, Barret going down the hallway Tifa went, saying something about calling Marlene, Cid going upstairs to barricade himself in his room where he could smoke in peace. Red shook his head miserably and padded out of the room with his head hung low.

Vincent just stared at the empty table around him, as if noticing for the first time that everyone else had left. Unconcerned, he fingered his split lip gingerly, noticing that it was already healing. His thoughts were a million miles away.

Yuffie suddenly lifted her head, looking around to see that everyone had magically disappeared and it was just she and Vincent alone...again.

"Hey, Vinnie?" she asked, her voice echoing in the empty room.

"Yes, Yuffie?" he responded automatically.

"Are 'nuclear' and 'atomic' the same thing?"