

Chapter Sixteen: The Stuff Nightmares Are Made Of

"And he's about as interesting as a pile of bricks, so who suffered more, huh?" Yuffie Kisaragi

*If there's a way to infiltrate you
Sway your mind and complicate you
I'm gonna crash into your world
And that's no lie*

*"Violet"
Savage Garden*

"Ow! Stupid chocobo!" Yuffie cried, clutching her punctured hand to her chest. "That hurt, you dumb bird-brain!"

Butterfly just warked loudly and turned her face away from the indignant girl at the front of her pen, refusing to acknowledge the presence of the master who had left her to stew in the rain for an entire day.

"Gawd!" Yuffie exclaimed, putting her hands on her hips. "It's not like I meant to leave you behind, dummy! Besides, you had Lamia with you keep you company. Look at me! All I had to keep me company for the past day was Vincent Valentine! And he's about as interesting as a pile of bricks, so who suffered more, huh?"

Butterfly just stared at her with her big blue chocobo eyes.

Yuffie smirked at the bird. "That's what I thought. Yeah, you'd better shut up. Who's the dumb one now?"

Butterfly blinked at her.

Yuffie sighed, leaning against the gate of the pen. "Yeah, yeah, I know, I know. The idiot ninja girl who's standing here talking to her chocobo like the bird-brain could actually answer back - that's who's the retard, right?"

Butterfly warked in agreement, swishing her feathered tail back and forth proudly as if it was the plumage of a peacock rather than just several plain blue feathers.

Yuffie scowled at the azure bird, but started digging through the bag of greens hung near the door. "You know, Butt-butt," she said conversationally, using her charming pet name for her chocobo. "You'd better watch what you say to me, or I'll just ask Cid to feed you from now on, and you know how inconsistent he is with his feedings. He's worse than Barret, you know."

Butterfly smartly ignored Yuffie's babbling, more interested in what Yuffie was going to dig out of the bag than in any lecture the girl was giving her. She was still sticking stubbornly to the back wall of her pen, like she always did when she was being standoffish with Yuffie. But the young ninja knew that as soon as she had one of the magical greens in her hands, Butterfly would be stumbling over her feet trying to be her friend again.

The girl yanked a Curiel green out of the bag and smiled at Butterfly, waving the leafy sustenance in the air enticingly. The blue chocobo immediately perked up, her foul mood starting to evaporate as her appetite got the best of her.

"Lookie here!" Yuffie sang cheerfully. "A yummy, tasty green for my favorite chocobo! Hmmm...should I give it to her or not?"

"I think she'll take your hand off if you don't," a deep voice suddenly said.

Yuffie screamed in shock and whirled around, the Curiel green falling from her hand and into Butterfly's pen, where it was immediately consumed by a very contented blue chocobo.

"Vinnie Valentine!" Yuffie bellowed, angry gray eyes fastened on the dark figure that was standing in the threshold of the door leading into the chocobos' barn. "You scared the living crap out of me! If you ever do that again, I'm gonna run over there and smack you upside your head so hard you won't know what hit you!"

Vincent didn't even blink or show the least interest in what Yuffie had been blathering about. She could have been rattling on about the price of tea in Junon for all the attention he seemed to be paying her. Not even bothering to reply to her tirade, he simply moved away from the threshold and padded across the hay-covered floor of the chocobos' barn. Yuffie, who was trying to desperately stop her heart from pounding right out of her chest, glared at the dark man indignantly as he brushed past her without a word.

"Vinnie!" she snapped, putting her hands on her narrow hips and realizing belatedly that her borrowed shorts had begun to slide again. She hurriedly hitched them up and continued, "I was talking to you, Vincent! The polite thing to do is answer back, you know!"

Still refusing to reply, the dark gunslinger strode over the pen that housed Lamia, his chocobo. Only seconds after he had reached the front of her pen, a soft wark could be heard as Lamia roused herself from her resting spot on the hay-softened floor and rushed over to greet her master. Vincent leaned against the gate to the pen and patted the ebony bird gently on the head with his normal hand, pale, naked fingers stroking the soft feathers lightly. Lamia cooed softly and started nibbling on Vincent's jet-black hair, which was still hanging majestic and loose around his head.

Yuffie stared at the two of them for a second before sighing. "You're so lucky," she told Vincent.

"However so?" he asked without looking at her.

"Your chocobo is so cool," she lamented, shooting a venomous glare at where Butterfly was combing her feathers with her beak. "My chocobo is being a...well, you know what she's being."

Vincent didn't reply. He pulled a bag of greens off the shelves next to Lamia's pen and threw a couple of bundles into the chocobo's pen, where they landed on the ground right in front of the large bird. Lamia cooed her thanks to her master, and immediately began to devour the greens as Vincent looked on, his long arms draped over the wooden gate and one booted foot hooked into the space between the wooden boards.

Yuffie leaned thoughtfully against Butterfly's pen, forgetting that she was supposed to be angry at her chocobo. She fell into staring at Vincent, her mind light years away from the barn. Vincent's still had found nothing to tie his hair back with, and the soft-looking black tresses shimmered in the dim light that the lanterns provided the barn with. He stood watching his chocobo with a calm, almost serene expression on his face, red eyes downcast so that his long eyelashes were all the more obvious now that the brilliant majesty of his garnet eyes didn't distract from them. The man shifted slightly, lean muscles flexing underneath his loose covering of clothes. Now that she saw him standing instead of sitting, Yuffie realized that the shirt and pants he wore were actually a few sizes too big for him. The black pants sort of bunched up around the ankles, and the collar of the shirt hung low enough to expose his collarbone and a blessedly small section of his well-muscled chest.

All in all, he was a sight for sore eyes. He looked almost...normal.

So enraptured Yuffie was with the uniqueness of her companion's appearance that she didn't notice that she had been staring at him until she saw cool garnet eyes locked onto her gray ones, staring back.

"Oh!" she exclaimed, turning bright red and floundering for words. Why did this always happen with Vincent? It seemed he was always catching her staring at him like a total moron.

"Um," she said, trying to make up for her little faux pass. "Whose shirt is that?" she suddenly blurted. "It's too big."

"Rude's," Vincent answered calmly, undeterred by her bluntness.

Yuffie lifted an eyebrow. "Are you sure?"

"He's the one that gave it to me. Why?"

"Half of the buttons are missing," Yuffie responded, proud of her observation. "Rude would never have a shirt with missing buttons in his wardrobe." She pointed matter-of-factly to the bottom of Vincent's shirt. "See there."

Vincent nodded. "I noticed." He didn't say anything more.

Yuffie resisted the urge to stamp her foot in frustration. Vincent was so freakin' hard to talk to! "Well?" she prompted. "What happened to it?"

"Rude lent it to Reno one day. In a drunken stupor, Reno got the bottom of it caught in a door, and, instead of opening the door and pulling it out like any sober person would have, he yanked on it until the shirt came free of the door, hence the missing buttons."

Yuffie placed her hands on her hips and grinned at Vincent smugly. "See!" she said. "Now, was that so hard? You could have just said that from the beginning and it would have saved me a lot of breath."

"And why would I have wanted to do such a thing?"

Yuffie scowled, not sure whether or not Vincent was insulting her. "Because if I lose all my precious breath, I can't talk!"

"What a pity that would be," Vincent said, turning away from her and starting to pet Lamia again.

Yuffie's gray eyes widened, and she raised her fists, about to go off on him, but then she suddenly sighed and dropped her hands at her sides. "You know what, Vinnie, just punch yourself really hard in the shoulder right now. I'm too sore and tired to go over there and do it."

"What happened to your hand?" Vincent asked suddenly, still not looking at her.

The girl blinked dumbly for a couple of seconds before she realized what Vincent was talking about. "Oh? My hand? Butterfly-oh my god, you stupid chocobo! You made me bleed!"

And sure enough, the hand that Butterfly had pecked with her beak earlier had a small droplet of crimson blood welling up in the puncture wound and starting to dribble down the side of Yuffie's hand. Between fighting with Butterfly and arguing with Vincent, Yuffie had failed to notice her injury. But now that she beheld the damage her chocobo had done, the little hole in her hand stung like crazy, and Yuffie was definitely not happy about it. Her temper vanished in an instant.

Butterfly warred in alarm and scampered to the back of her stall as Yuffie kicked the pen's door with one booted foot. "Dumb bird!" she cursed angrily. "As if I don't already have enough holes and bruises on my body, you had to go and add one more! Are you happy now, huh?! Well, guess what? How would you like to find out what it's like not to eat for two days instead of one, or maybe...two weeks! How would you like that, huh?!"

"It's not her fault, Yuffie," Vincent said flatly, his calm voice easing the violent words that still hung in the air.

"Great! And now Vinnie's siding with the damn chocobo!" she raged, turning her scowling face to her dark companion. "Thanks for making my day end just perfectly, Vincent!" Somewhere in the back of her mind, Yuffie knew that she was taking out her stress and worries on Vincent, but she was far too aggravated to really notice much of anything at the time.

Vincent, of course, showed not a shred of emotion in response to Yuffie's outburst. He gave Lamia's head one last pat, the kind of resigned gesture one makes when they're about to make an exit from a situation suddenly turned awkward. Vincent placed the bag of greens back on the shelf and started to walk away, his blue-black hair shimmering in the lantern-lit barn.

All of Yuffie's anger immediately evaporated. *Crap!* she thought. *I did it again! Leave it to me to chase him away just when he might have started to get chatty. Damn me! Why can't I do anything right? Now he probably thinks I'm Super PMS Woman...*

But, to Yuffie's surprise, instead of walking towards the barn door, Vincent strode silently over to where she was shifting uncomfortably in front of Butterfly's pen. Before she could react or open her mouth, his claw reached out and took gentle hold of her injured hand, lifting it up in front of him so he could see it better in the light. A thin stream of blood was still running from the small puncture hole like a liberated imp, and Vincent suddenly produced a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped away the red stream before it could drip onto the barn floor.

"The blood should clot in a little while," he said calmly, wrapping the handkerchief around the small wound and tying it there.

"Um, thanks," Yuffie muttered, not knowing what else to say. Having Vincent this close to her, touching her, was making her dizzy. There was so little space between their bodies that she was practically standing on his feet, the warm closeness of his presence soothing her in ways that were outside physical comprehension. The clean smell of soap drifted from his unbound hair, and Yuffie barely caught herself in time when she found herself leaning closer to Vincent, trying to breathe in his scent even more deeply. The man was lightly running his fingers over the tender flesh surrounding Yuffie's puncture wound, each unconscious brush of his callused fingertips sending waves of pleasure coursing through Yuffie's body.

He keeps doing that, she thought giddily. *And I'm going to have to beat a hasty retreat out of here.*

She felt a mixture of relief and disappointment when Vincent suddenly stopped his ministrations, but her heart suddenly leapt up into her throat when she felt the fingers of his human hand brush against her bruised cheek with startling gentleness.

"Ow," she said automatically, more out of surprise from his caress than any pain she was in. The bruise had actually stopped hurting long ago.

"Forgive me," Vincent apologized in his typical monotone, his soft breath whispering gently across her skin as his warm fingers brushed over her bruise again. She was staring right up into his face, her punctured hand still gripped loosely in his claw.

"No," Yuffie replied hastily to Vincent's apology. "You didn't hurt me. I was just surprised, that's all."

Vincent didn't respond, only continued to run his fingers over her bruised cheek. Yuffie's head was swimming with the intoxication of having him so close, and she was having a difficult time getting her thoughts straight. She kept thinking about how warm Vincent's fingers were, or how the light from the lanterns flickered in the depths of his garnet eyes like fires in the night. His lips were very slightly parted as he studied her bruise, for some reason making him look too vulnerable for a man of his age. A lock of blue-black hair suddenly flopped over his right eye, and he tossed his head unconsciously to put it back in its rightful place.

Oh my God, Yuffie thought dumbly. He's absolutely gorgeous! How come I never noticed that before? I wonder what he thinks of me? Does he...No, Yuffie! Get those thoughts out of your head right now! This is not the time to be getting a crush on Vincent Valentine! He's a grown man...and you're just a girl. It can never be...

"Does it still hurt?" Vincent suddenly asked.

Yuffie blinked. "Um...does what still hurt?"

"Your bruise," Vincent answered calmly, garnet eyes not even flickering in her direction.

"Oh!" Yuffie exclaimed, feeling like an idiot. "No, not too much anymore, I mean, you know." She laughed weakly. "Guess the Brother of Battle was gentle with me, huh?"

Vincent's eyes suddenly fastened onto hers in surprise. "You remembered that?" he muttered, fingers still hovering over her bruise.

Yuffie nodded. "Of course, Vincent. It's not like I never listen to what you say. You said the Brother of Battle had given me a kiss."

Vincent continued to stare, a strange emotion flickering in the crimson depths of his eyes.

"So," Yuffie floundered after letting the silence drag on for a few more seconds. "Who exactly was the Brother of Battle anyways? You said you'd tell me."

For a moment, Vincent's garnet eyes remained locked onto hers with a gentle intensity, but then he suddenly averted them, apparently finding the wall more interesting at the moment. "I'll tell you later, Yuffie."

Yuffie scowled at his profile. "No fair, Vinnie. You said the same thing back at that horrible place with that...green light." She repressed the urge to shudder, barely. "C'mon, Vinnie! Tell me!"

Vincent stared at her, his fingers suddenly brushing her cheek lightly. "I'll tell you," he promised. "If you'll tell me what song you were singing last night."

Yuffie blinked, horribly confused for one second, but then she flushed in embarrassment when she realized what he was talking about. "You mean, when I was singing in the shower?" she stammered. "You were listening?"

Amusement suddenly flickered in Vincent's eyes, even as a lock of black hair suddenly tried to hide that emotion from her view. "It's not like I never listen to what you say, Yuffie," he said softly.

The young girl's eyebrows shot upwards, and a smirk came to her face. "Oh my god! Vinnie made a funny! Vinnie made a funny!"

Vincent cast his gaze away, looking uncharacteristically bashful, and he gave a short peal of rumbling laughter that came from deep in his chest and never entered his throat. Though he never cracked a smile once, Yuffie perceived a strange relaxation in his demeanor that she would never dream of finding in Vincent. Was he comfortable around her? Wow, that would be a first. The notion of Vincent Valentine actually relaxing and "chilling" for a change was as inconceivable as Cid surviving without cigarettes for five minutes.

Unfortunately, his relaxed state didn't last for long. His gaze suddenly shifted back to her face, so quickly, in fact, that it actually startled her. Her body suddenly froze up as a rabbit's does when it senses danger. A dark shadow seemed to fall over Vincent's face, subtly contorting his features until he seemed more like a creature that was to be feared than pitied. The shade of his eyes could suddenly be more accurately described as "demon red" instead of "garnet." A mass of uneven bangs suddenly rushed forward to fall over one eye, as if trying to prevent Yuffie from seeing what lay in those fiery depths. But that red eye, that one red eye, still glared out at her from between spaces in the strands of midnight hair, the crimson glow refusing to let up its soundless assault. She was suddenly all too aware of the fact that her hand was still gripped in his claw, about how wickedly sharp the digits of the false appendage were...

Yuffie let out a startled gasp as Vincent suddenly moved past her, fingers falling away from where they had been hovering close to her cheek. Later on that night, when she would be fighting sleep, fighting the nightmares, Yuffie would reflect on that one moment as Vincent moved past and away from her. She would realize with a start that she had memorized every single detail about that one motion. She would remember how his human fingertips, callused from all kinds of hardships and labor that he had been faced with in his lifetime, brushed like a ghost's whisper across her face, just under her bruise, one last time. She would remember his long blue-black hair tickling her bare shoulder as he strode past so coldly, so suddenly. She would remember the sound his rustling clothes made, the sudden whiff of clean soap that drifted to her from his body as he moved past her. She would remember even minute detail of his passage, down to the soft fabric of his borrowed shirt, to the aching void in front of her that Vincent had previously occupied.

Then, just like that, the moment was gone. She was facing empty air, her hands limp at her sides, her eyes overbright as they stared at the spot where Vincent Valentine had been standing just a second before. She could hear him moving away towards the door of the barn, his boots only making the faintest noises on the ground as he moved like a phantom in a dream.

Her next actions were on pure reflex. Somewhere in the back of her rational mind, she knew that Vincent had left suddenly for a reason, and that reason was probably to be alone with whatever dark emotions she had glimpsed in those crimson orbs before he made his great escape. Her common sense told her that the man with those eyes of hellish fire was a *dangerous* man, an assassin, a murderer. The logic of her human mind told her that she needed to be deathly afraid of Vincent Orion Valentine.

But Yuffie Pristina Kisaragi, daughter of Kira Ayami Kotori and Lord Godo Kisaragi, had never been known for her common sense. Her heart was at the controls now - her heart was pulling the strings to make her dance, and her blessed, bleeding heart told her that she needed to stop him, that something was wrong with him. Her heart said that Vincent needed her help.

"Hey!" she cried, her own voice sounding far away as she whirled around. "Vincent! Where are you going?"

"Sleep," came the flat, cold answer. No life in his words at all. Just sharp sounds that were soon lost in the air of the barn. He never once stopped walking.

"Oh," Yuffie said, feeling rejected. "But I thought we were going to talk about my song..."

No! What are you doing, fool girl?! You can't tell him about that song! Are you crazy?!

"Later," was all Vincent said. His hair danced a little goodbye waltz for her as he flung open the door leading into the bar and vanished, the wooden door slamming violently behind him.

Then Yuffie was alone, and all was quiet. She lowered her head in dejection, a few wayward strands of brown hair coming out of her ponytail to flutter lonely in the air in front of her bowed head. Her lower lip suddenly trembled, and she bit down hard on the pink flesh in anger of her own weakness. Her view of the hay-covered ground suddenly became blurry as unexpected tears sprang into her stormy gray eyes.

"No!" she suddenly whisper-screamed, clenching her hands into fists, her punctured hand protesting loudly. "You *will not* cry! You *will not* cry!" she told herself fiercely though clenched teeth. "You are not a baby anymore! You are a young woman, and you are not going to cry like a sissy!"

Sure, you big baby, tell yourself that all you like! You know you won't be able to do it! Go ahead and cry your little eyes out! You were just snubbed! He can't stand being around you...

Yuffie hissed under her breath and covered her face with her hands, pressing back against her tightly-shut eyes as if that harsh pressure would stop the tears that were threatening to flow out like raindrops forsaken by their respective heavens. Her breaths were coming thick and ragged, and her entire body was shaking from head to toe.

God, what is wrong with me?! He's just a man! He's just one man! He has issues! It was nothing personal, you big wuss! Pull yourself together!

Despite the way she had been treated by her master in the recent past, Butterfly just couldn't cower at the back of her pen while her rider was shaking and trembling in the middle of the barn. The blue chocobo cooed softly, her big eyes alight with the chocobo version of concern as she took a cautious step towards the gate of her pen, closer to Yuffie's quivering form. In the pens on either side of Butterfly, the Vincent's chocobo Lamia and Jet, Cid's green chocobo, also cooed in an attempt to ease the soul aches of the young girl who smelled of suffering and tears.

But Yuffie didn't hear the soothing voices of the birds behind her. She suddenly dropped her hands away from her face, wetness glistening on the palms as the lantern light struck the tears she hadn't been able to prevent. She raised her face up so that the light also glinted off the two glittering, silver tracks on her cheeks.

"Vincent," she said softly, her voice somehow rising above the sympathetic cooing of the chocobos. "What's wrong with you, Vincent? Why are you like that? Why? I don't understand you, Vincent. For a moment there, you were almost human again. Why did you return back to the monster you think you are? Why? I don't understand, Vincent Orion Valentine. I just don't understand..."

Silence descended once again as Yuffie's words died in the air. All was quiet for two seconds before Yuffie spoke again, her voice ringing out softly, without wavering or trembling - the strong voice of a woman.

"Without you beside me tonight, Vincent, I'll have nightmares."

But, of course, no one was around to hear her admission but the chocobos.

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The Planet was bleeding. The earth was dry, cracked and barren, and the blood raining from the churning heavens was a poor substitute for what the land really needed. The rivers ran red. The horrible stench of death and decay and fear was everywhere, absolutely everywhere. Not one inch of the land was spared from the wings of...of...whatever was doing this destruction. Bodies lay festering in the heat, bloated and stinking, all of their expressions frozen in the epitome of terror. Some of these bodies had primitive weapons of destruction lying beside them, and that was fine. Their deaths were either honorable or well deserved, if they had died the warriors that they appeared to be.

...WAR...

The battlefield was alive with motion. Millions upon millions of bodies, all bearing indistinct, insignificant faces upon their bodies, screamed from unseen mouths as they murdered and slaughtered each other in the name of whatever it was they were fighting for: religion, honor, loyalty, freedom. Blood stained the cracked earth in mass amounts as weapon after weapon tore into sensitive flesh, opening up horrendous wounds that spurted the thick red liquid like bile from the throat of a sick child. Metal clanged against metal as the two - three? Four? Five? - titanic armies clashed on the barren battlefield, all bathed in a hellish red light that emanated from the glowering heavens above. There were flashes of multicolored light amongst the writhing, battling bodies as several of the warriors called upon their coveted magic abilities to endear them to Victory's heart. Yes, all this blood, all this fighting, all this death, all this suffering, all this...chaos.

...YES, WAR IS GOOD...

But all in the name of what? These faceless armies have forgotten their meanings. They've ceased to become individuals and are just one seething, murdering mass of bodies, no, of machines. Wars have no meaning at all. It is only in the talks before, during, or after the wars that the leaders of the armies discuss the cause for which they fight. Peace, justice, freedom. Yes, worthy, noble causes, all of them. But when the first platoons of killers in the guise of saviors set foot on the battlefield, how many of them still recall the reason they are out there? A few might, a few who are strong, noble, and true to themselves and to others. But the vast majorities suddenly have no cause at all. They have forgotten or just don't care. Wars with true, noble causes are beautiful, and the blood left behind by them sows the seeds of the land and may in turn bring great things. Wars without qualm or conscience are hideous things, great and terrible, eaters of their own children, destroyers of their own land, ghastly mothers as titanic as the ocean itself, spawning only more and more killers from their bloody wombs and laughing maniacally as their offspring give birth to yet more pointless fighting.

Vincent Valentine was at the center of this bloody matrix, and yet he did not understand it all.

...WAR IS GOOD...

Blood.

"Who are you?!"

WAR. More blood.

"What is this?!"

Blood, ceaseless and flowing eternal. The rivers are as blood. The mountains are covered in it. The ocean belches its tides, chock full of the red stuff. The angry skies spit torrents of it down to the parched earth.

...YES, WAR IS GOOD...

"What?!"

Consciousness. A sense of self. A sense of humanity.

"Why?! I don't understand! Why are wars good?!"

...WARS ARE CHAOS...

"Chaos?! No..."

Vincent woke up.

For a moment, he just laid there in bed in the cold dark, letting the light drizzle pattering against the window soothe his frazzled nerves. He was completely still, as still as death. The sounds and motions all around him moved on without him, as most of the world tended to do to an abomination like him. Lights from a streetlamp outside seeped in through the opaque glass of his window and danced in neat patterns on his bedspread, only broken by the glittering raindrops that slithered down the window. The fan above him creaked softly as it spun, drying the sweat that had appeared on his bare chest and upper lip sometime during his restless sleep. Vincent's garnet eyes were open wide in the darkness. He blinked slowly.

The bed creaked softly as he suddenly rose up into a sitting position, the handmade bedspread falling away from his muscular chest and down to his waist. The room suddenly spun, and Vincent had to brace himself with one hand against the mattress to avoid falling onto his side.

He rubbed his face with his human hand, wiping away the salty sweat from his forehead and trying desperately to get his heart to stop pounding so loud. He felt cold and hot at the same time, a sensation that he had rarely felt in his entire life, a sensation often attributed to severe illnesses. For a moment, as the room whirled around him and his heartbeat thudded in his ears, he felt his head become dizzy with fever, but it was gone as quickly as it had come.

"Was that a dream?" he suddenly whispered, his deep voice lonely in the darkness of the room.

No, he argued with himself as he rubbed his eyes. *Too vivid to be a dream. More like a memory. But even though a monster like me has many bloody memories to reflect upon, that horrific battlefield with faceless warriors is not one of mine. And if it's not mine, then it must be...*

"You!" Vincent suddenly gasped, his hand falling away from his face in shock as realization dawned on him. "You, unholy demon! Chaos! Your memory? No! How can that be!"

The very idea was horrifying even to a cold, callous man like Vincent. A demon with memories? A demon with thoughts? A demon with dreams?

"Of course, you bloody fool," Vincent whispered harshly to himself. "It thinks. It reacts to stimuli like any human would do. It has thoughts, and it seems to have the ability to feel at least the most primitive of emotions, but...memories..."

Vincent's mind was trying vainly to use logic to process the recent unveilings. *If Chaos has memories of battles such as those, Vincent thought, that would mean that Chaos had once been free, that it had once lived, a creature with a beating heart and skin that could be touched, pierced. It could bleed. It could suffer. It could scream. It could...die? It's intelligent, but I already knew that. It thinks, but I don't hear its thoughts. It doesn't let me. Does it feel? Does it know what fear is? Does it know what honor is? Is it aware of its situation right now? Is it aware of...me?*

"Are you listening?" Vincent demanded of the darkness around him, a lonely man in the inky gloom of his room, speaking to the air as if it could respond. "Do you hear what I think, Chaos? Do you know that I am the host and you live within me? Do you know...me?"

No answer, external or internal. The demon was silent, as it always was, for it never used words. It had no use of them, at least that's what Vincent assumed. It was then that the man realized that everything he supposedly "knew" about the Chaos beast were just mere assumptions or theories. He knew it was powerful, and that it was destructive, and he knew

what it looked like, but that was basically all. The rest of his knowledge was just ideas he had about the demon, about its life span, about how it came to be, about its personality, if such creatures could have personalities.

Vincent lowered his head, staring at the blanket still draped over his legs. His long black hair swooped forward to cling comfortably to the small trickles of cold sweat still sitting on his cheeks. He closed his eyes.

"Chaos," he said to the darkness behind his eyelids. "Who are you?"

No answer, but he felt a shifting in his mind and couldn't help but wonder if the beast had somehow heard his words.

Sighing, Vincent flung back the blanket and lowered his feet to the hardwood floor, reaching for his discarded shirt in the same fluid motion. There would be no more sleep for him tonight.

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"Take one drink when you hear thunder," Cloud muttered to himself, poking at the shot glass with one naked finger, as if the glass were something distasteful that he didn't trust himself to pick up with his bare hands. The alcohol sloshed against the sides in amusement.

Thunder roared outside, and Cloud downed the glass in one gulp, wincing as the liquid burned his throat. He hated drinking, but it helped with the pain. But when he had become such a weakling, using alcohol to tell his problems to? This was more like something he would find Reno doing...

Reno...

"Take one drink when you see lightening," Cloud told himself, refilling the shot glass with a bottle of...whatever he had picked up beneath the counter. He watched the clear liquid fill the glass, then set the bottle back on the counter beside his elbow. He waited.

Lightening flashed outside the window, lighting up the front room of the bar where Cloud and his bottle sat alone in quiet companionship. The ex-SOLDIER lifted the shot glass and downed more of the alcohol. It didn't burn so much this time. He wondered what Tifa would say if he drank the whole bottle...

Tifa...

Cloud suddenly swept the shot glass aside with one violent brush of his strong arm, not bothering to see if it had shattered on the floor or not. He scowled at the bottle of whatever in front of him, a sudden anger making his vision turn red at the corners. "Take one drink when your life sucks so bad that you feel like maybe that crazy bastard Sephiroth had the right idea when he was going around killing people and threatening to blow up the world!"

With that said, Cloud grabbed the bottle by the neck and took a long chug, the potent liquid searing his throat as it went down and making his head spin. He grunted and took the bottle away from his lips, wiping the small trickles of alcohol that had seeped out of the corner of his mouth. The room was spinning, the darkness beyond the area he stood in all melding into one shapeless mass of shadows.

Then, suddenly, a creature loomed out of the darkness of the room. Cloud's mouth dropped open as he saw the red eyes, the long black hair, so black that it was almost blue...a monster!

As the creature sat down at the bar, Cloud's buzzing mind kicked into terrified mode. His heart leapt into his throat, and he started violently, letting out a small cry of fear and dropping the bottle onto the floor, where it shattered into a million pieces, clear liquid flowing like blood onto the hardwood floor.

Cloud stared blankly at the mess he had made, forgetting for the moment that he had just seen a "monster" in the room. *Great, Tifa is gonna kill me...if she can tear herself away from Reno, of course.*

"Cloud?" the creature suddenly asked, his voice breaking the silence.

"Hn?" Cloud grunted, tearing his bleary gaze away from the broken bottle and back to the creature that had scared the crap out of him. "Vincent?!" he exclaimed, suddenly recognizing the red eyes and golden claw, which was resting contentedly on the bar countertop.

"Yes," Vincent replied calmly, watching as Cloud's Mako blue eyes strained to focus on him. "I'm sorry. Did I frighten you?"

Forgetting about the mess he had made for a moment, Cloud put his hands on his hips and leaned against the refrigerator behind him, waiting for Vincent's figure to come into focus. "Vincent," he said, voice slightly slurred. "Coming from anyone else, that question would be called innocent, but since it's coming from you..."

"Then it's either malevolent or idiotic in nature," Vincent finished.

Cloud blinked dumbly. "Huh? I didn't understand a single word you said, man."

Vincent shook his head, raven hair detaching itself from the shadows around him so that it could frame his pale face. "Never mind, Cloud. Do you need help cleaning that up?"

The younger man stared at Vincent for a while longer before shaking his spiky head wearily. "No, I can do it myself." He grabbed a dishtowel from the rack by the sink and knelt down to mop up the mess behind the counter while Vincent looked on.

"Be careful with the glass," the dark gunslinger warned, eyes watching Cloud's ungloved hands for any sign of unsteadiness. "Don't cut yourself."

"I won't," Cloud muttered, and his voice was steadier this time, the insta-buzz he had received from the alcohol fading as his Jenova cell and Mako-enhanced bodily processes broke down the poison in his system. He finished cleaning up the broken bottle and wasted alcohol without any mishap and threw the shards in the trash, dishtowel and all. Vincent raised an eyebrow, wanting to ask whether or not Tifa wanted one of her good dishtowels carelessly thrown away, but once he saw the pained look on Cloud's face, the other man decided it would be inappropriate to ask at the moment. Instead, he watched as Cloud wiped his hands on his sweat pants, the only piece of clothing he had on, and turned to Vincent.

"What are you doing up?" he asked the dark man, not looking like he cared about the answer either way.

"Couldn't sleep," was Vincent's simple reply.

Cloud leaned against the counter top, elbows resting on the Formica. "Oh," he said flatly. "Me either."

Vincent let the silence hang in the air for a few more seconds before speaking. "Would it be out of place to ask what is bothering you, Cloud?"

Something flickered in Cloud's blue eyes, but then they froze over in apathy and bitterness. "Why should you ask? You don't care."

"You're right," Vincent answered just as flatly. "Your problems are none of my concern, but it seems that whatever is bothering you at the moment is affecting your abilities as a leader, and I don't think you want that to continue."

Cloud suddenly dropped his cold façade and sighed, all of his pain suddenly welling up in his soul like acid. "I know," he muttered. "I need to pull myself together. I'm afraid I behaved rather badly today. Sorry about that."

"There's no need to apologize to me. I sense the maelstrom within you. It is no big surprise that you let your emotions manipulate your actions."

Agonized sapphire eyes locked onto emotionless garnet ones. "You know, Vincent," Cloud said wearily. "Sometimes I don't know whether you're insulting me or not."

"All I was saying was that your actions were perfectly normal for your average, sentient, human being."

"Oh. Thanks, I guess." Cloud looked away, never able to hold Vincent's gaze for long. There was just something about those fiery orbs that had always shaken him to the core, and for that reason he could never endure the naked intensity of Vincent's stare for a long period of time. "Anyways," Cloud continued hastily, wondering if Vincent had noticed how quickly he had averted his eyes. He didn't want to insult his friend. "Hopefully, I'll have my damn head screwed on straight by tomorrow. Now that you and Yuffie are back with us..."

Yuffie. The moment that name left Cloud's lips, Vincent's thought processes seemed to freeze up. He suddenly recalled the horrific episode in the barn with grim clarity. He was ashamed of himself, leaving Yuffie there all alone without even so much as a goodbye or a goodnight. What unacceptable, impolite actions. Vincent hadn't been raised to mistreat women in such a fashion. He'd have to ask her forgiveness tomorrow, but he'd have to do it in such a fashion that she would not ask questions concerning his abrupt departure. Which meant he would probably have to give a coldly polite, seemingly insincere apology to discourage her from holding up conversation with him. Vincent was in no condition to explain his uncharacteristically ungentlemanly actions - even he didn't know what had come over him in the barn earlier. He had just gotten the sudden urge to get out the barn and away from the charming smile and disarming eyes of the young girl as

quickly as possible, which was completely irrational. Yuffie was just a girl - more like a young woman, actually - but that was all she was.

Yes, a voice in his mind suddenly sneered. *She's a woman, and you're a man - and a lonely man, at that. Now it's only natural for a man and a woman...*

"Vincent!" Cloud suddenly called loudly.

The gunslinger blinked, realizing that he had completely zoned out of the conversation. If he had been more human, he would have blushed in embarrassment, but since he wasn't...

"Forgive me, Cloud," Vincent apologized immediately. "What were you saying?"

Though he continued to look at Vincent strangely, Cloud responded, "I was saying that now you and Yuffie are back safe and sound, thank God, we can focus all our efforts on finding Reeve, wherever he may be."

"What do you believe our next move should be?" Vincent asked.

Cloud drummed his long, tapered fingers on the counter top, looking a little bit more like the leader Vincent knew him to be. "Though it may sound crazy, I think we should head back to Midgar and search there again."

"But didn't Red and Turks already investigate, with Red on the ground and the Turks in the air?"

Cloud leaned easily against the counter, eyes shrewd as he thought out the situation. "Yeah, but they came up with nothing. Red could pick up no scents outside Reeve's office, and the Turks, though they were in the air, really didn't have the chance to go through all of Midgar as thoroughly as I would have liked. On the other hand, if we all went and investigated Midgar together, not leaving an inch of it untouched, I think we might have a better idea as to what happened to Reeve. We might want to search the surrounding areas as well, though I really don't see much need to, being that we are now certain the Running Man escaped on the 'ghost' ship." He glanced at Vincent with a strange breed of childish hope flickering in his eyes. "Do you think that is a good plan?"

Vincent shrugged. "It's all we have to go on, but I have one question: If the Running Man did abduct Reeve from his office, as Reno said, why couldn't Red find his scent?"

Cloud looked his friend square in the eyes, easily locking onto the slightly luminescent red orbs in the darkness. "We thought it was because the Running Man wasn't a normal human being."

Vincent's brows drew together, and he folded his arms across his chest. "I wouldn't doubt it," he deadpanned. "If the Running Man is from the same people that employed or created the Faceless Men, then I certainly wouldn't be surprised to find that the Running Man isn't human at all." He paused briefly. "In fact, now that I think about it and remember what little I saw of our quarry, the more certain I am that he isn't human in the slightest."

Cloud blinked in surprise; Vincent rarely ever made such bold statements. "What makes you say that?"

"The man moved with unnatural grace," Vincent responded without looking at Cloud. "His movements were fluid and unnaturally agile, and I received strange vibes from him, you might say. I didn't want to mention it at the time because I thought I was imagining things, and I didn't want to frighten Yuffie anymore than she already was."

Cloud frowned upon hearing this. "Yuffie was frightened? Was she in the way, then?"

Vincent's eyes locked onto his, and his voice suddenly became cold. "No, she was not in the way. Besides, it wasn't her fault..."

Vincent stopped, immediately wishing he could retract his words. He couldn't tell Cloud about Yuffie's irrational terror without telling him about the way Chaos had been behaving during their time spent in the deep-sea complex. But Cloud was the leader; he certainly needed to know if one of his friends would be a danger to the others. Of course, Vincent wouldn't have to worry about anything if he were just to leave...

"Vincent?" Cloud asked, noticing that his friend had drifted off again. "What wasn't Yuffie's fault?"

The other man snapped out of his stupor and stared at Cloud for so long that he began to get severely uncomfortable. He wondered if Vincent knew just how intimidating he really was? The red eyes, the pale skin, and the black hair all made for a very unsettling person to have staring at you. He was just about to ask what was wrong when Vincent suddenly spoke again.

"Never mind," he said softly but firmly. "I'll tell you later."

If I'm still here, he added silently.

Cloud repressed his curiosity and nodded. They knew that Vincent kept certain things to himself, and he had no other choice but to respect the other man's privacy, knowing that Vincent didn't react very well to overly nosy people. "Then," Cloud said. "We're going to Midgar together in the morning after a brief meeting here to discuss the groups."

And I'm going to make sure that Tifa and Reno are separated, he thought as Vincent nodded silently. *I need time to sort out my feelings without having to worry about what they're doing. It may sound selfish, but if I want to be operating with a sound mind, this is how it must be. Sorry, Tifa. Sorry, Reno.*

"Well, I'm going to bed," Cloud said, moving away from the countertop and turning towards the stairs. "You going to sleep again?" he asked Vincent.

"No," he said simply, spinning around in the stool and walking into the darkness towards the front windows, a phantom in the gloom. Cloud could see the shape of his shoulders and head silhouetted against the rain-ravaged windowpanes through which light from the street lamps filtered in, as if seeking refuge from the terrible night that they strove so hard to pierce.

"Okay," he said quietly, knowing better than to second-guess Vincent. He started to walk to the stairs again, but halfway there, he stopped and said, "And Vincent?"

"Hn?" the other man responded without turning. He seemed to be watching the night.

Cloud shifted uncomfortably, not sure what to say. He didn't want to upset his friend after the gunslinger had unconsciously talked a little bit of sense back into him. "If you ever, you know, want to tell me what *really* happened in that deep sea complex, I'll be ready to listen."

Vincent didn't move or reply, and after waiting for a few moments for an answer that he knew would never come, Cloud resumed his walk back to the stairs, disappearing up them and leaving Vincent alone in the darkness.