

Chapter Twenty-One: Gone Up in Flames

"I'm the man here, not you, goddammit!" Cid Highwind

*Everybody needs a human touch.
I can't live without it,
It means too much to me.
Everybody needs one true friend,
Someone who'll be there 'til the very end.
And absolutely everybody breathes,
And everybody, everybody bleeds.
We're no different,
We're all the same,
Players in the game.*

*"Absolutely Everybody"
Vanessa Amorosi*

"What the hell was the matter with you?!" Barret raged, pounding his fists on the bar table with such force that everyone in the bar, even Reno, couldn't help but wince as the wood creaked meekly in protest of the abuse it was receiving.

"You was supposed to take care of her!" Barret continued, leaning his intimidating bulk over the table so he could peer down into the face of his victim.

Vincent didn't reply. He sat motionless in the wooden chair, hands clasped rigidly in his lap and garnet eyes riveted on the wooden table in front of him. Most of his ebony hair had come out of its clasp to tumble about his face like a shroud, clinging to his pale cheeks and snaking into his red eyes. Though it appeared as if he was completely oblivious to the intimidating, angry bulk of Barret Wallace not a foot in front of him, the others could tell from the strained set of his mouth and the bunched muscles of his shoulders that Vincent wasn't very comfortable.

"Barret," Tifa spoke up softly from her place at the bar. "Leave him alone, please. I think he knows what he did wrong."

"I ain't done with him!" the large man exclaimed, never removing his angry gaze from Vincent's emotionless face.

Vincent didn't respond.

"What was you doing?" Barret continued, leaning all his weight on the table so that he was eye level with Vincent. "Huh?! Where the hell were you when she was being hauled off?!"

Silence, except for the mighty laughter of the thunder outside.

"Answer me, damn you!" Barret roared.

"These questions do not require answers," Vincent deadpanned, no trace of emotion in his voice.

"The hell they don't!" Barret retorted. "Why did you leave her side?!"

"As I told you before," Vincent replied, not lifting his eyes, "she stalked off in a rage."

"And you didn't go after her?!"

"I saw no need to."

Barret's eyes widened in anger, and everyone saw his jaw bulge as he clenched his teeth. "Saw no need to??!!" he raged, slamming both of his fists right in front of Vincent, who didn't even flinch. "Yuffie's gone, you heartless bastard! And all you can do is sit here on your ass and act like you don't give a shit what's happening!"

"And what if I don't?" Vincent said coolly, eyes still riveted on the tabletop.

Barret faltered. "What?!" he asked incredulously.

"What...if...I...don't...care?" Vincent repeated slowly. "What if I just want to leave right now and leave you to find Yuffie and Reeve all on your own?"

For a moment, utter and total silence hung in the bar as Barret floundered for words. Everyone had heard the subtle threat in Vincent's words: Either you leave me the hell alone, or I'm outta here.

From his seat next to the rain-streaked window, Reno let a bitter smile curl one corner of his mouth. *I can see why this guy used to be a Turk*, he thought. *He's cold, callous, and boy, does he ever have guts...*

Reno's thoughts of admiration were abruptly cut off when Barret finally exploded. "Leave??!!!" he roared, the sheer volume of his voice causing some of the shot glasses to shake. "The hell you talkin' about?! Leave?!"

"My presence here seems to cause many problems," Vincent responded flatly. "If you seem to think that all I can do is lose people, then wouldn't you all be better off if I was gone?"

"All you CAN do is lose people!" Barret yelled.

Crap...I think he's going to say something he's gonna regret, Reno suddenly thought.

"Barret, back off!" Cloud suddenly said sharply, apparently sensing the same thing Reno was.

But Barret was too far gone into rage to hear anyone. "You been losing people ever since that time in Nibelheim with that Luc-"

"Silence!" Vincent suddenly roared, getting to his feet so quickly that he knocked his chair over. The piece of wooden furniture clattered to the floor with a cry of defeat, like an animal drawing its legs up in meek cowardice, responding to a sudden danger that hadn't been present seconds before.

As everyone in the bar watched in shocked silence, a suddenly very animated Vincent leaned forward and pressed his palms flat against the wooden table, metallic claw digging ruthlessly into the wood and leaving five gouge marks that would remain there long after everyone had departed. All his motion unsettled the hair tie's tenacious hold on his hair, and it fell from the ebony strands with the same defeated countenance with which the chair had plummeted to the floor. Unbound, Vincent's midnight black hair, damp though it was, spilled around his shoulders, some of the shorter strands swooping forward to frame a face that had suddenly gone as cold as primal ice. These same dark locks offset a pair of crimson eyes, usually cool and distant, that were now filled with what appeared to be the fires of Hell itself.

"I am well aware of my own miserable failures," Vincent seethed angrily, eyes boring into the stunned Barret with barely contained rage as everyone shifted nervously. "I will not, however," Vincent continued coldly, "stand here and listen to you remind of them in such an offhand, careless fashion. They are my sins to suffer and live with for all eternity, and you are NO ONE to condemn me for them. I won't have it..."

Slowly, as his voice trailed off, Vincent's face darkened further, if such a thing was possible. His brows drew down low over his eyes, accenting an age-old rage in the depths of the crimson irises. Perhaps a rage that was not his own.

"And if you EVER dare to speak her name to me again," Vincent threatened. "I shall show you the reason why I have come to call myself a monster..."

Silence, horrible and complete, descended in the wake of this threat. Barret just stood rooted to the floor in stunned silence, his eyes wide as he slowly burned in the intensity of Vincent's blood-red glare. As for Vincent, he was a demon frozen in time, never moving from his position - hands palm down on the table, claw digging into the wood, garnet eyes virtually glowing with rage, face cold and menacing.

And at that moment, as thunder crashed dramatically outside and lightening illuminated the room with its ghastly glow, everyone believed that Vincent was well deserving of the title "monster."

Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, Tifa stirred boldly, but with a certain unobtrusiveness that made approaching the two men easier.

"Barret," she said softly, walking up to the large man slowly, her burgundy eyes darting every now and then to where Vincent was still leaning over the table menacingly. It was clear she was a bit scared of Vincent at the moment. Hell, everyone probably was.

Carefully, Tifa grabbed Barret's normal arm and tugged on it gently, trying to get him to tear his gaze away from Vincent's crimson stare. "Why don't you go help Cid tune up Cait?" she suggested, eyes on Barret's face. "I'm sure he could use your help, Barret."

Barret blinked, and his gaze almost drifted away from Vincent's glare, but it seemed he couldn't disengage himself from the staring contest. "S-Sure, Tifa," he stammered. "I-I'll go."

But he didn't move. Silently, Vincent's dark stare forbade such a blasphemy.

That's when Red suddenly slunk out of the corner he had been seated in, his claws clicking loudly on the hardwood floor as he kept himself low to the ground, not wanting to attract Vincent's attention. He walked up to where Barret was standing and nudged him in the knee hard enough to almost knock the big man off balance.

In surprise, Barret's gaze slipped away from the tenacious hold of Vincent's glare and dropped down to the fiery lion-like creature at his feet.

"Let's go, Barret," Red ordered gruffly, striding pointedly past him and heading towards the hallway that led to the rest of the first floor of the bar.

"Right," Barret muttered, all but running after his friend, careful not to raise his gaze for fear of being snared by the net of Vincent's fury again.

But he didn't have anything to worry about. Vincent had already dropped his gaze to the table the moment Barret's eyes had been torn away from his. Without a victim to torment, his internal demons had forsaken the crimson eyes they had been using as a channel for all their ghastly voices and hellish screeches. Now, there was no one left to listen to their dark prophecies of doom and despair but their host body, Vincent Valentine, who was once again alone with the demons of his past even though he was in a room filled with the people he had come to call friends.

For a while no one in the room moved, as if afraid they would interrupt the delicate balance of the isolating net Vincent was weaving around himself to shut his demons off from the world. But then Tifa suddenly strode determinedly around the table over to Vincent's side and picked up the fallen hair clasp from the floor. Heedless of any instability she might have sensed in Vincent's heart and mind, she carefully gathered his thick hair in her graceful hands and pulled it back from his face, securing it with the hair clasp into a loose ponytail similar to the one he had had that morning before everything had gone up in flames.

"Thank you," Vincent said quietly as Tifa stepped back. Everyone relaxed a little to hear all the rage was gone from his voice, but the promise of violence still hung in the air like a foul musk, and everyone knew it, scented it, felt it awaken danger sensors deep within their souls, and so they said nothing to ease whatever torment Vincent may have been experiencing at the moment. For what could they say? What could they do?

Everyone knew that any attempt at solace would be rejected with the same cool and cold with which Vincent always deflected every human emotion directed toward him. What could anyone say to a man who wished for nothing more than to be alone with his pain?

Nothing, that's what.

And nothing was what they said as Vincent silently brushed past Tifa and ascended the stairs just as soundlessly, like a weeping devil retreating to its cold hell once again. No one said anything, or moved to stop him, but the words were there in the air, swirling around him, and they could only hope that he might have heard them in the farthest reaches of his heart, where he was still human...

We forgive you, Vincent, the winds whispered to him. We know your pain, and we are here for you. Always...

Reno watched the melancholy looks on everyone's faces as they heard Vincent's door shut softly upstairs. Tifa picked up the chair Vincent had knocked over in his anger and seated herself in it stiffly, gripping the edge of the table with trembling hands. Cloud hesitated a moment, then slid off of his bar stool and came up behind the brunette, putting his gloved hands on her shoulders and squeezing gently. Seated across the room from Reno, Elena sighed sadly and lowered her head, tangled blond hair hiding her face. Beside her, Rude placed one of his large hands on her shoulder in a rare gesture of solace. Reno couldn't see the expression behind Rude's dark sunglasses, but he could easily sense that what had just gone down had disturbed his tall friend.

We're falling apart, Reno thought bitterly, lying his head against the cold glass of the window and feeling the tiny vibrations as the rain struck the other side, so close to his face yet so far. Piece by fucking piece, we're falling apart. Reeve's gone. Yuffie's gone. Soon Valentine will leave. We don't even know who our goddamn enemy is yet, and they're already beating the crap out of us...

Sighing softly, Reno closed his eyes and allowed the world around him, people and all, to fade into nothing. He vaguely heard Cloud saying something about the sewers and maps and Rude and Elena replying with some answer or another, but these otherworldly phrases did not penetrate his consciousness.

Lightening split the dark night sky over Kalm, bathing the small town in its unholy illumination, tracing the outlines of shops whose doors had been forced to close due to danger of flooding. Several people had abandoned their homes in

search of higher grounds, and Reno knew that when they returned, they were probably going to find all their belongings ruined by the floodwaters that were threatening to swallow Kalm. What a waste. What a goddamn waste.

As Reno's aquamarine eyes traced the ill-fated paths of the raindrops plummeting through the night air, he felt his thoughts slipping back to the terrifying nightmare in Midgar that they had just experienced. Once again, he was traveling in the sewers, seeing the snake, and feeling the terror that froze the blood in his veins. And once again, he felt the humiliation afterwards; he was utterly and completely ashamed of his terror. Reno of the Turks...afraid of snakes? Afraid of anything? Reno had convinced himself that he had no shame, but the events that had occurred just a few hours ago had made him realize that he was dead wrong. His old fear of anything that slithered and hissed was still there, buried in his past and rearing its ugly head every now and then to torment him.

Damn you, Reno, he told himself harshly. All you are is a goddamn wuss. You nearly killed Cloud because you were being a coward. All because of some phantom from your past has returned to haunt you...

Pain suddenly tightened his throat, and his heart throbbed in agony in his chest. Of course, he knew which phantom had returned bearing all his old fears, his old insecurities, his old life before Tseng had rescued him from his personal hell and brought him to work for Shinra.

All of it - all of this pain, the pang in his heart, the tears in his eyes, the tightening in his throat, the trembling in his murderous hands, could be attributed and linked back to one and only one name.

Did he dare speak it? No way in hell. The voice of the man that had once whispered her name was long dead, and now Reno of the Turks could only speak her name in his heart.

Mika...it's you...all you, love...

Then he closed his eyes, not wanting to see the raindrops anymore. Everyone one of them was now wearing her face.

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"Owww!! That hurt, Cid!"

Cid scowled deeply at Cait. "Shut up your face!" he snapped, talking around his cigarette. "You're lucky that I'm kind enough to fix your sorry ass!"

The robotic cat huffed, planting his gloved paws on the place where his hips would have been if he had been real. "It's not my fault you and Barret took me out into the rain and my circuits got fried! You two should know that I'm delicate!"

"Delicate my foot," Cid muttered distractedly as he reconnected another wire in the pink moogles, trying to ignore the bits of stuffing scratching his arms and the way-too-talkative form of Cait Sith sitting on the moogles, right above Cid's head.

"You've been through tougher things than rain," Cid continued as Cait watched what he was doing with interest. "If you can help beat that demented Sephiroth in the North Crater, you can handle a little bit of rain."

"It's because you forgot to close my circuit board when we left the storage room!" Cait told Cid.

Cid gave the robotic cat a withering glare. "You so damn ungrateful!" he exclaimed. "I brought you back to life instead of leaving you to collect dust in that storage room! And all you can do is bitch about how we took you out into the rain! You should be thanking me! I'm the man here, not you, goddammit! I OWN you! You belong to ME!! You should bow before me and-"

"I was under the impression that dictatorships had been overthrown years ago," a gravelly voice said dryly.

Cid whirled around and glared at Red as the lion-like beast and Barret strode into the garage. "I'm tryin' to keep this guy in his place!" Cid protested, gesturing up to Cait, who stuck his tongue out at Cid. "You're not helping the situation!"

"Cid's trying to control me!" Cait whined to Red.

Cid wagged a pair of pliers in the robotic cat's face. "I got the power here!" he declared. "You belong to Cid Jericho Highwind right now and you better show some goddamn respect!"

Cait was about to say something in return when he suddenly noticed Barret standing still in the middle of the garage, right next to the buggy.

"Hey, what's wrong with you, Barret?" he asked worriedly, hopping to his booted feet, not at all frightened of tumbling off the top of the moogles.

Cid peered around the stuffed pink mog and saw that Barret's eyes were wide and staring. His brow creased. "Old geezer! What's up with you? You look like you just seen a goddamn ghost or something."

“He had a close encounter with an angry Vincent,” Red explained calmly, easing his bruised body down carefully a few feet away from where Cid was working on Cait Sith.

Cid's blue eyes widened, and he stood up to stare at Barret incredulously. "You pissed off Vincent?!" he demanded.

Barret nodded blankly. "Uh-huh."

“Why the hell did you go and do a stupid-ass thing like that?” Cid all but yelled, gesturing wildly with his hands and nearly knocking Cait off of the moogles.

Barret scowled, Cid's accusing words thawing out the fear that Vincent's blood-red stare had frozen his heart with. "Whatever, ya old fart!" he told Cid, leaning against the hood of the buggy. "I didn't do it on purpose..."

Cid snorted and crouched on the floor to resume his work on the stuffed moogle's semi-metallic innards. "Whatever," he said gruffly. "I pity the man who manages to piss off Vincent Valentine." He suddenly hopped to his feet again and wagged his pliers in Barret's direction. "No, wait! I DON'T have no pity for ya! You should know better than to go around making Vince mad! What the hell was the matter with you?!"

Barret folded his muscular arms across his chest and turned his face away. “I was mad, foo,” he snapped. “I shouldn’t have said what I did, but I did, and it’s done...and now I gotta avoid Vincent for a while.”

Cid pulled his cigarette from his mouth and expelled a long stream of thoughtful smoke. “You *that* mad that the brat got taken?” he asked, voice as gentle as his natural gruff manner would permit.

Barret snorted condescendingly at the prospect of being worried about Yuffie, but his voice was serious when he said, "Brat ain't got her father to watch out for her while she running around the world like a numbskull so I figure I got to take care of her while he can't."

"She's become another daughter to you," Red observed from his place on the concrete floor.

Barret made a face at the lion-like beast. "Whatever. You think what you want to think and I think what I want to think. All I know is that we got to get Yuffie and Reeve back quick. This Running Ass person managed to snatch two - not one, but TWO - people right from under our noses, and I ain't giving up until we get both of 'em back!"

"Amen, brother," Cid murmured, turning his face up to the heavens for a moment before lowering it again.

"I don't believe in a god," Red commented. "But I'm with you until the end."

"Hey guuuuuuuuyyyyyss!" Cait suddenly whined, tugging on Cid's blue flight jacket.

"The hell you want?" the pilot demanded, glaring down the small robotic cat.

"I'm with you, too!" Cait exalted, pumping a small, gloved fist in the air. "Now, fix me, darn you!"

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Tifa could only listen to so much rain before it began to gnaw at her mentality. Personally, she found the sound of raindrops against the windows and against the roof rather soothing, but not when she was weary at soul and feeling an empty void in her heart that her two missing friends needed to fill for her to be whole. No, she couldn't listen to the rain when she had been listening to it for the past two nights, knowing that those horrible floodwaters were trying to devour Kalm. All the roads were already flooded, and she knew that it was only a matter of time before the mayor might call for an evacuation of the city, which would only make matters worse for them.

Sighing, Tifa sat up in bed and flung the covers off her legs, lowering her feet to the floor, not at all worried about tripping over things in the dark. She had long ago committed the objects in her room to memory. Grabbing her robe from the back of a chair to cover the shorts and sleeveless shirt she had worn to bed, she wrapped it around herself and quietly opened her bedroom door, peering out into the hallway.

Everyone had long ago gone to bed, worn out after a day that had drained them physically and emotionally. As she closed her door behind her, Tifa could hear Barret's loud snoring from the room at the end of the hall. Strangely enough, it offered her a bit of comfort as she quietly crept past everyone's rooms until she reached the stairwell.

She was just about to place her bare foot on the first step when she suddenly became aware that the door to the room behind her was open, and that the lightening outside the room's single window was lighting up the entire stairwell.

Turning around, she cautiously crept up to the door and peered inside, realizing with a start that she was looking into Vincent's room. After what had happened that evening, she didn't want to see what he might do if he found her peeping into his room and invading his cherished privacy. But as far as she could tell, he wasn't even in his room. The bed was empty, and there was no one seated in the only chair in the room.

For a moment, she experienced a moment of trepidation when she thought that he might have actually left them like he had been subtly threatening to do. But then she saw the Death Penalty resting against the far wall and relaxed. The high-powered rifle was a gift left for Vincent from his lost love, Lucrecia; he never would have gone anywhere without it.

I better just close the door, Tifa thought. He probably went for a walk or something.

But just as she was putting her hand on the doorknob and preparing to close the door, a shadow next to the window suddenly shifted, and Tifa found herself the focus of a pair of luminescent red eyes.

She let out a startled gasp and jumped away from the door, her hand flying to her chest and feeling her heart beating out of control within its fleshly cage.

"Vincent!" she whisper-screamed, barely remembering to keep her voice down. "Good God, you scared me to death!"

He said nothing. His eyes blinked once, but that was all.

"You should know better than to go around scaring people like that," Tifa scolded him, holding onto the doorframe for support.

"Forgive me, Tifa," he said calmly, turning away from her and staring out the window. "I assure you that it was not my intention to frighten you."

"It's okay," she said immediately, feeling bad for snapping at him.

It must be bad enough, looking the way he does, but what probably makes it worse is when people are constantly screaming every time they lay eyes on him. But red eyes are just so unnerving to stare into...even worse when they're staring AT you...

"Can...Can I come in?" Tifa found herself asking. "I'd like to talk with you, Vincent."

"Do as you wish," Vincent said flatly as lightening flashed outside the window and threw the shadow of his tall figure against the wall on Tifa's left.

"Thank you," she said politely, walking nervously over the threshold and into his bedroom.

She had no idea why she was so cautious about entering his room. It wasn't like she had never been in it before. She had furnished the damn thing, after all, and painted the walls and picked out the kind of bedspread she wanted. Under any normal circumstances, she would have felt right at home, but for some reason, with Vincent inhabiting the room, the air seemed to surge against her with some kind of gothic darkness, infecting the surroundings so that the room around was almost as alien to her as a room in a stranger's house.

"Vincent," Tifa said, breaking the silence. "I-I just want to apologize for what Barret said today. He didn't mean it, and I think that he knows he was out of line. He...He didn't mean it," she finished lamely.

"I am not angry with Barret," Vincent said calmly. "But what he said was true, and that was most likely what angered me."

"Oh no, Vincent," Tifa said fervently, walking forward until she was standing next to him in front of the window, staring up at his pale profile. "It's not your fault," she told him. "But what exactly happened there in Midgar?"

Vincent lowered his head, shorter strands of midnight black hair slinking forward to lie against his cheekbones. "It's just as I told you," he said calmly. "She and I argued, and she stalked off in a rage."

"Argued about what?" Tifa asked earnestly.

"A petty thing," Vincent replied, and she thought she heard a faint tinge of sadness in his voice. "I wanted to enter the office through a window, and she didn't want to. So I started going up my way, and she ran off and went around to the front, where the Running Man was apparently prowling the area."

"And she got caught," Tifa finished, feeling her heart sink as she imagined her young friend being captured by the dark man who had most definitely become their enemy.

"I blame myself," Vincent said, sounding a little disgusted. "I should have been more adamant and kept her at my side. Then, none of this would have happened."

"You blame yourself for too many things," Tifa said softly, watching as lightening split the sky over the ocean. "Yuffie can be rather difficult at times."

"Yes, but I believed I transgressed unforgivably when I scolded her like a little child."

Tifa glanced at him in surprise. "You scolded her for what?"

"For being immature," Vincent replied. "I told her to act her age, and to a child who is not used to discipline, that statement didn't go over very well."

"I imagine not," Tifa said quietly, absently tugging on a thread that was dangling off of the seam of her robe. "But we're going to get her back. Both her and Reeve." She looked up at Vincent's emotionless profile. "Aren't we, Vincent?"

He didn't reply.

Resolve hardening her features, Tifa turned so that she was facing him completely, an almost-squint on her face. "You're going to stay with us, aren't you, Vincent?" she asked softly but not without a certain unmovable steel in her voice.

Lightening split the night again, dancing in his crimson eyes and speaking to her of the dark realities that stood before her, hidden in the fathomless depths of those eyes, if she only dared to look that far. Vincent didn't say anything.

Tifa was just about to repeat her question more forcefully when Vincent suddenly whirled away from the window so quickly that his hair struck her lightly on the arm, whispering across the fabric of her robe as he passed by her without a word, heading towards the door of the bedroom, intending to leave her alone in the dark with her questions.

An irrational rage suddenly gripped Tifa as she stared at his retreating back in the darkness.

How can he do that...just walk away? God! It's wrong! It is!

"And just where do you think you're going?" she demanded, the slither in her voice surprising even her.

Vincent stopped and said without turning, "Out for a walk."

But before he could start moving again, Tifa scrambled to get in front of him. Planting her hands on her hips, her burgundy eyes stared harshly out at him from her pale face, her skin made even lighter by the sporadic streaks of lightening that illuminated the night.

"And where will you go after that, Vincent?" she hissed in a whisper, fearful that if she raised her voice, she would start yelling and not be able to stop. "Will you all of a sudden disappear on us and not show your face again for another year? Two years? Huh?!"

Vincent just stared down at her. With the window and the lightening directly behind him, the only thing Tifa could see was those entirely unique blood-red eyes staring down at her with the ghost of some alien emotion flickering in their depths. He didn't reply.

"You're our *friend*, Vincent," Tifa continued, putting all her heart into that one word. Her eyes now shimmered with tears of pain as well as anger. "We need you here with us. We need your help, Vincent. We need *you*."

Vincent turned his face away and didn't say anything.

Tifa suddenly grabbed him by the shoulders, ignoring the fact that she had to reach up to do it. She shook him slightly, and even though he refused to look her, she knew that he was listening.

"Promise me, Vincent," she begged, her heart thudding painfully in her chest. "Promise you won't leave until we find Yuffie and Reeve!"

Silence. He didn't even bat an eyelash.

"Promise me!" Tifa cried, raising her voice and shaking him again, knowing that he could have thrown her away if he really wanted to. "You have to be with us, Vincent! We need you! Reeve needs you! Goddamn it! *Yuffie* needs you, Vincent! You have to be the one to rescue her!"

"Because I'm the one that lost her," Vincent finished bluntly, still gazing off into the darkness as if he found solace in the shadows.

"No!" Tifa shot back adamantly, fisting her hands in the loose sleeves of Vincent's black shirt. "Because I know her, Vincent. I know she wants to see your face when she's rescued!"

"Why would anyone want such a thing?" Vincent asked, staring at her out of the corner of his eye.

"Vincent!" Tifa snapped. "Is it so implausible that someone might actually find comfort in your presence?"

"Hn," Vincent grunted, but Tifa thought she saw the harsh light in those eyes soften a bit.

"Now, give me your word," she insisted. "Promise me that you won't abandon us! Vincent!"

"You have my word," Vincent said sharply. "I will not leave until Yuffie and Reeve are found." He turned his face to her, eyes glittering in the darkness. "Now, if you would be so kind as to unhand me?"

Silently, Tifa released her iron grip on his shirt and stepped to the side, clasping her hands in front of her and feeling emotionally drained once again. Vincent seized the opportunity and strode quickly past her, a shadow moving like liquid amongst its brethren.

He was just about to reach the door when Tifa suddenly spoke again. "You know, Vincent..." she said softly, her voice barely audible over the thunder's mighty roar.

He stopped again, his profile silhouetted against the doorway. "What is it?" he asked, a bit of irritation evident in his voice.

A bit taken aback by his abrupt mood swing, Tifa felt the words dying in her throat, but she still said, "I...I think...that... Yuffie...Yuffie..." Her voice trailed off into nothing, a lonely sound swallowed by the shadows.

"What about Yuffie?" he asked, a bit too quickly.

I think Yuffie's falling in love with you.

"Nothing," Tifa said softly. "Nothing at all."