

Chapter Twenty-Two: The Thin Line Between Man and Monster

"W-What are you going to do with those?" Yuffie Kisaragi

Time passed by so slowly for Reeve. He had no sense of what was reality and what was just a manifestation of his feverish, deteriorating mind. Names and faces passed by him in a flurry of motion, and Reeve didn't know whether or not the owners of these names and faces were living or deceased. Madness had planted its seeds deep within his brain, and those horrible embryos were just beginning to hatch, their burgeoning growth ripping away his sanity piece by piece, memory by memory. In a few days - months? Years? Weeks? - he'd be just a hollow shell, an empty vessel hanging from the shackles in this insubstantial prison that Reeve was no longer sure was a real place or just a portion of his nightmare world.

But sometimes, in the midst of the chaotic whirlwind that Reeve used to call his waking mind, he sometimes knew the real world for a few moments. All of the faces and voices would disappear, and he would open his eyes and see the mist-filled, rank dungeon in which he was imprisoned, and he would know without a doubt that what he was seeing was complete and horrible reality at its most hideous worst. And Reeve would feel hopelessness start to blossom in his heart like a night bird flying to infect the world of the light with its harsh cries of exquisite darkness. And the madness, which was never really gone completely from his brain, would seize this opportunity and leapt out to reclaim its victim, sending Reeve back to the pool of chaos that he was rapidly drowning in.

It was during one of these moments that Reeve realized that he had a visitor.

Of course, he couldn't see this mysterious figure, but he knew it was there, hidden in the mists. He could feel its eyes on him, watching him intensely as he struggled to raise his head and focus on the figure. But he couldn't. His eyes had lost the ability to focus long ago, and Reeve knew in the back of his mind that it was only a matter of time before he lost his sight altogether.

"Your condition has worsened," a voice commented, ringing through the silence of the dungeon to reach the ears of its only prisoner. Reeve could have sworn he had heard the voice before - deep and raspy.

"It's a small miracle you're still alive, you know," the voice said again, and this time Reeve was able to match up the voice with a face...or rather a face covered with a sky mask.

The Running Man!

"The madness won't leave you alone, will it?" the dark man asked as Reeve tried vainly to lock down on where the voice was coming from. "It must be terrible for you."

All Reeve could see with his permanently blurred eyes was a mass of green and black all around him. He could see no indication that the Running Man was even in the room with him. For all he knew, his kidnapper's voice could be coming from the mists themselves.

"I would think that death would be a mercy for you by now."

No! Reeve thought, jerking violently against the chains with the sheer force of his will. *I can't die! Not yet!*

For a while, the Running Man was silent, as if surprised by Reeve's reaction, and when he spoke next, his voice was somewhat softer.

"You hear and understand every word I'm saying...don't you?"

Yes, I do, Reeve tried to say, but nothing emerged from his mouth. The words didn't even reach his throat.

There was a brief pause before the Running Man spoke again. "Your friend Yuffie Kisaragi is down here now."

Reeve's blood turned to ice. *N-No! Yuffie! No!*

"She put up quite a fight," the Running Man continued flatly. "It seems that all members of AVALANCHE have wills made of tempered steel. I didn't think she would be so hard to capture."

Damn you! Let Yuffie go!

"I'm going to see her right now. She will undergo the same torture processes that you did."

No...no...don't do it to her! Please!

"I don't even know why I'm telling you this," the Running Man said quietly. "It's not to torment you, despite what you're probably thinking at the moment. Anyway, I'm leaving now."

Reeve suddenly surged against his chains, long inactive muscles abruptly reanimating themselves. The chain links jangled together loudly, wordlessly demanding that the Running Man stop and pay heed to the indomitable will of the once Shinra manager.

"You have something to say to me?" the Running Man asked, the mists delivering his words for him.

If you hurt Yuffie, I'm going to kill you! Reeve tried to say, but all that emerged was a bestial snarl that he couldn't believe had come from his throat.

"That what they all say," the Running Man deadpanned.

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Drip.

"Vincent!" Yuffie cried, running across the liquid-like surface beneath her feet, saltwater splashing her bare legs as she chased after the painfully distant figure of Vincent Valentine.

"Come back!" she yelled, gasping for breath as she tore across the watery plain as fast as her legs would carry her, all too aware of the fact that no matter how hard or how fast she ran, Vincent's figure wasn't getting any closer.

He had his back to her, raven's wing black hair billowing in some unseen breeze until it seemed to meld into the perfectly black sky that hovered ominously over their heads. His dark clothes fluttered around his tall figure like silk, the motion of the garments much like undulating dance of water itself.

"Vincent!" Yuffie called again, running for all she was worth. "Please, Vincent, turn around!"

Drip.

"Vincent!" she gasped, stumbling and almost falling. "It's me, Yuffie! I...I want to see your face, Vincent!"

But it was no use. She felt her legs give out beneath her from sheer exhaustion, and she could only watch helplessly as Vincent's already distant figure slowly faded like a shadow returning to the darkness that had birthed it.

She was all alone.

Drip. Drip.

Her heart was in so much agony that Yuffie felt it was going to shatter into a million pieces. Tears violently stung her eyes, and she lowered her head, allowing her unbound hair to cascade all around her in a waterfall of chocolate.

"Vincent," she whispered, as a tear rolled down her cheek. "I'm sorry, Vincent. I'm so sorry. Sorry that I was wrong, Vincent...please...forgive me..."

Drip. Drip.

"I just want to see your face, Vincent. One last time..."

Drip.

"Vincent...I..."

Drip. Drip. Drip.

Slowly, the realm of dream abandoned the weeping form of Yuffie Kisaragi, sending her tumbling back into reality with a thud. She suddenly became aware of a splitting pain in her head, like some wacko was trying to saw her head open or something gross and deranged like that. There was a strange odor in the air, faint yet very displeasing; Yuffie couldn't resist wrinkling her nose in distaste. Something hard and cold was supporting her head and back, and it took her a few seconds to realize that it was the floor.

Where am I? she wondered, starting to open her eyes. *Gawd! This floor is freaking hard! And what the hell is that annoying dripping sound?*

Even though her eyes were fully open, they were almost entirely out of focus, and it took precious seconds of waiting for Yuffie to be able to see clearly. But when the world around her finally emerged, all she saw was that she was being held in a cold, damp cell with stone walls and a ceiling to match. There was light coming in from a door with a barred window, but other than that, her new home was inhabited by purebred shadows.

Boring, she thought, groaning slightly.

"I see you're finally awake," a voice behind her suddenly deadpanned.

Yuffie was up like a shot despite the roaring pain in her head. Trying to ignore the loud pounding of her heart in her chest, she wrestled to her knees and trying to pinpoint where the voice had come from.

"Who's there?!" she demanded, her voice ringing loudly through the cell.

The darkness in front of her seemed to shift, and the Running Man stepped out of the shadows.

Her heart skipped a beat as she stared up into those eyes that she had recognized just before she had blacked out in Midgar. Up close and out of battle, she saw that the Running Man was a lot taller than he had originally seemed. He was a lot thinner, too, but her expert eyes could easily spot the well-developed muscles even under the folds of his leather jacket and dark pants. His face was still covered by his black ski mask, the dark cloth offsetting those horribly familiar eyes.

"You've stolen Aeris' eyes," Yuffie whispered, blurting out the first thing that came to mind, as was her tendency to do.

The objects she had been referring to narrowed dangerously, their natural glow becoming so concentrated that they seemed to bore into her face with the intensity of two lasers. Squirming underneath that icy gaze, Yuffie was reminded of just whom she was dealing with here. Reeve's and now *her* kidnapper.

Without warning, the Running Man lifted a gloved hand and took hold of the bottom of his ski mask, pulling it off of his head before Yuffie could even blink.

"Um...whoa," she stammered, eyes wide as she was finally able to see the face behind her kidnapper's mask.

The Running Man could only be accurately described as "drop dead gorgeous." He was around Cloud's age, with longish white-blond hair that shimmered in the darkness and was long enough to nearly cover one of his eyes. Strong facial features gave him an aristocratic look, as if he were a noble from some forgotten time and place. But, of course, the most striking and disturbing feature was his eyes. They were large and green, just as Aeris' eyes had been, only this man's eyes held none of that fresh innocence that Aeris had been known for. No, the Running Man's eyes were as cold as primal ice, silently telling her that her life meant absolutely nothing to him.

"Uh...hello," Yuffie said nervously, not knowing what else to do.

"On your feet," the Running Man ordered, the look on his face daring her to disobey him.

Yuffie made a face. "But I'm on my knees. Isn't that enough? I'm really tired right now and-"

"On your feet *now*," he suddenly snapped, eyes hard as steel.

"Fine," Yuffie muttered reluctantly, climbing shakily to her booted feet, trying not to stumble. "There," she told the Running Man. "Are you happy?"

Face emotionless, the Running Man suddenly reached behind his back. Yuffie stiffened as she heard a metallic, jangling noise resound through her cell like the dark laughter of an unseen being. For a moment, she feared that the Running Man was going to pull out some kind of weapon, but when his hand came back into view, a pair of gleaming shackles was clutched in his gloved fingers.

"Turn around," he ordered flatly.

Yuffie laughed nervously, her eyes on the shackles. "Hehe. W-What are you going to do with those?"

The Running Man's eyes narrowed menacingly, not at all pleased with her belligerence. "Yuffie Kisaragi, you are a member of AVALANCHE and a descendent of the Kisaragi-Chao bloodline. Wutainese ninjas are known for their unmatched skills and powerful magic attacks. I'm not taking any chances with you. Now, turn around."

Yuffie blinked dumbly at him, surprised with how much he had known about her and her ancestors. The way he had talked about her had made her feel like she ranked up there with the Cetra as far as importance went. Yet, surprisingly enough, she wasn't sure she was flattered by the comparison. After all, the Cetra were extinct.

Yuffie made sure to keep her hands out of the Running Man's reach and stammered, "Oh, those aren't really necessary, you know! I'm not going to try and run away or anything!"

Yeah right, she thought.

"Yeah right," the Running Man suddenly said dryly. "Don't make this anymore difficult than it has to be or I'm going to have to get rough."

Yuffie had the audacity to roll her eyes. "Like I'm so sure, Running Asshole! I whooped your sorry ass back in Midgar! Your dumb little partner - whoever they were - had to knock me out because I fried your ass with my *totally* powerful Bolt 3 spell!"

The Running Man glared at her, spinning the shackles around with one finger, as casual as a bounty hunter like him would get. "Fortunately," he told her. "We won't have to worry about such pesky spells anymore, will we?"

A cold feeling washed over Yuffie, and she looked down at her wrists to see that she had been completely stripped of all her armor, and her materia was nowhere to be seen.

Anger darkened her pretty face as she glared at the Running Man. "You slimy bastard!" she declared, clenching her small hands into fists. "Where the hell did you put my armor and all my materia?!"

Shit...I was carrying the Knights of the Round! Cloud's gonna murder me! If I ever get outta here, that is...

The Running Man smiled coldly at her. "It's in a safe place," he said mysteriously.

"Bastard!" Yuffie spat, scowling deeply at his amused expression. "I hope you **SUFFERED** during my Bolt 3 attack!"

"Not really," he said flatly, suddenly tossing the shackles into one of his hands and pulling back the cuff of his leather jacket to reveal a metal bangle hanging around his wrist, the runes etched on it turning into deep pools of shadow in the meager light.

Yuffie recognized the armor immediately. She remembered how she had had to surrender it over to Red before going down into the center of the Planet to fight Sephiroth. Little fuzzball put up quite a fight over it, too...

"Bolt Armlet," she growled. "Aren't you just the luckiest bastard, to be wearing it at the time?"

"Quit calling me a bastard," the Running Man ordered coldly, pulling his cuff back down over the Bolt Armlet. "That is not my name and so I will not tolerate being called such."

Yuffie sniffed. "Fine. So...what IS your name, then?"

The Running Man paused, then, to her utter surprise, said, "Titus."

Yuffie blinked. "Oh. Hey! That's a pretty name! It's probably fake, but it's still pretty."

Titus rolled his emerald green eyes and suddenly strode over to the door and shoved it open, letting the light from the hall filter into the cell. Even then, some of the deepest shadows still lingered in the corners of the room.

"Out," he ordered flatly, holding the door open with one hand and gesturing with the other, shackles jangling unpleasantly as he did so.

As long as they stay in his hand and not on my wrists, I'll be just fine, Yuffie thought nervously as she slowly walked towards the door, keeping her hands as far away from Titus as possible.

Making sure to keep a certain amount of distance between her and Titus - which was rather hard, being that they were both in the same doorway - Yuffie cautiously poked her head out of the cell and took her time examining the hallway, noting that there were more cell doors lining either side of the corridor. Her heart skipped a beat as she wondered if Reeve was being held in one of them, but something told her that Reeve was somewhere else entirely. The other cells were silent and appeared to be unoccupied, and this simple observation was enough to placate Yuffie for the time being. She also noticed that one end of the hallway was more brightly lit than the other.

I'll bet the exit is that way, she thought, a plan beginning to hatch in her devious little thief's brain. *Let's just hope good ol' Titus here is the impatient sort.*

Finally, after another thirty seconds of watching her continue to examine the empty corridor, Titus - usually a very patient man - got fed up with waiting. Placing a gloved hand on her narrow back, he gave her a somewhat hard shove that sent her flying out into the hallway.

Big mistake, Yuffie thought with an internal grin. *Can't believe the sucker actually fell for it!*

She pretended to be on a collision course with the hard floor, but instead, she twisted gracefully around and bolted to the right, thinking that there was no way in hell that Titus would be able to catch and swift, nimble creature such as herself.

But after only two running strides, she suddenly felt two hands close on her arms and yank them behind her back...rather painfully, too. Her flight to freedom was brought to a brutal close when she felt the cold metal of the shackles bite into her wrists and heard the loud snap as Titus clicked them shut with an air of smug finality.

"Damn it," she cursed under her breath, feeling her hopes of escape fluttering away.

"Nice try," Titus praised, and Yuffie thought he sounded genuinely impressed. "I wasn't expecting that, you know. Well done."

"A trick is only well done if it works," Yuffie grumbled as Titus spun her around to face him, her hands now completely immobile in her new bindings.

"A good philosophy," Titus commented, lifting a pale blond eyebrow. "But if you try something like that again, you'll give me justification to kill you."

"She just *gave* you justification, honey," a new voice suddenly said. "Why don't you just kill her now? She's probably going to end up dead anyways."

A scowl already marring Yuffie's features at the arrogance in the accented voice, she spun around to find her face to face with a Wutainese woman dressed in a leather bodysuit that fit her like a second skin. Her dark brown eyes glared down at Yuffie snootily as she walked closer to the pair, heeled boots clacking on the floor.

"Who the hell are you?" Yuffie demanded in the nastiest tone she could muster.

Titus suddenly laid his hand on her shoulder, drawing her attention away from the woman. "Who she is doesn't matter," he said curtly. "Let's get going."

He started to drag Yuffie down the hallway but stopped short when he saw a mischievous grin on the young girl's face. "Is this your *girlfriend*, Titus?" she teased, nudging him her elbow and winking at him as if they were old friends instead of kidnapper and prisoner. "Why don't ya introduce me to her? Huh? Huh?"

Titus glared at her angrily.

The woman suddenly planted her hands on her narrow hips and huffed. "You told her your name, Titus?" she asked incredulously.

"What does it matter in the end?" Titus said coldly, directing his words at the woman even though he was staring down at Yuffie. "She's never going to see daylight again."

Yuffie swallowed hard, and for the first time, she realized that there was actually a chance that she may not get out of here alive.

The woman threw up her hands suddenly. "To hell with it all!" she declared. "I'm Fa-Li. Now, let's go!"

Yuffie found herself being ushered somewhat roughly down the hall with Titus on her left and Fa-Li on her right. Both of them had one of their hands wrapped around Yuffie's upper arm, like she was REALLY going to try and run with her hands in shackles. (She probably would, but that was beside the point!) She had no idea where she was in the first place, which put her at a disadvantage. She had no doubt that even if she, by some miracle, managed to get away from her captors, she would quickly find herself lost in this outlandish place. Knowing her rotten luck, she would probably end up stumbling into a place much worse than where her two escorts were taking her.

Her soul deflated slightly as thoughts of escape grew dimmer and dimmer. *Maybe the others will come for me*, she thought hopefully. *I'm sure stupid Vincent will notice when I don't show up in the office building and start raising Cain for having to walk all around the building in the rain. They'll come and rescue me...I hope...*

But how were Vincent and the others even to know where she had been taken? Unless Titus had left some sort of trail this time, the others were shit out of luck...and so was she.

Sighing internally, Yuffie focused on her surroundings as she passed them since neither of her escorts seemed to be in a chatty mood. The walls on either side of her were lined with cell after cell, barred windows high up on the doors resembling gaping mouths lined with stained teeth. Were there other people in these cells? So far there was nothing but

silence hanging in the air, and as she passed the barred windows, she could see no sign that the cells were occupied. Still, she had a feeling that at least a few of these cells held horrible secrets for her to witness.

The prison corridor seemed to go on forever, but soon Titus and Fa-Li stopped at a rusted metal door that had a circular handle resembling those on submarine hatches. Yuffie had no interest in the nasty old door, but what *did* interest her was the fact that Titus and Fa-Li released their grips on her arms so that they could open the door. Well, at least *Titus* started to open the door. Fa-Li just stood there in a bratty fashion, practically tapping her foot with impatience.

Yuffie was just about to open her mouth and start annoying her captors when she suddenly heard a scuffling noise from the cell on her left. Leaning back slightly so she could see around Titus, she narrowed her eyes, trying to pierce the darkness beyond the window's bars. She could see nothing, but she suddenly heard the rustling noise again.

Yep, there was definitely *something* in there.

Now, Yuffie was a curious person by nature, but she tended to shy away from situations that might end up with her pushing up daisies with "Curiosity killed the cat" written on her tombstone. But, hey, there was a cell door between her and whatever was in the darkness. No harm with a little peek now, was there?

Even though Yuffie felt Fa-Li's watchful eyes on her, neither of her captors moved to stop her as she slowly approached the occupied cell, intent on finding out what was in there. She hadn't heard the scuffling noise again, but she felt *something* watching her from behind the barred window. But stopping a foot away from the cell, she could still see nothing in the darkness.

Frustrated, Yuffie strode right up against the door and, standing on her toes, practically shoved her face up against the bars, peering curiously into the darkness.

She saw the creature coming almost a moment too late.

A head suddenly materialized out of blackness, oversized and monstrous, and Yuffie was just about to scream when two hands came flying through the bars, grabbing for her throat with the fervor of demon reaching from its fiery pit. A grotesque moaning suddenly split the air, and Yuffie felt hands clamp down on her shoulders and yank her backwards so that she collided with something hard: Titus' chest.

Yuffie just stood there for a moment, leaning unwittingly on Titus for support as she tried to recover her wits. Her mouth kept opening and closing, and she knew that she was either trying to scream or talk; she couldn't decide which to do. The horror standing before her had banished all rational thought.

Her first thought was that the thing screaming in the cell was a Faceless Man. It the same bald head and glistening pink flesh as the ones she had fought a couple of days ago, but the only difference was that this one...had a face. Or what was left of a face. Whereas the Faceless Men had had only indentations where its eyes, mouth, and nose should have been, this horrific creature actually had something resembling the parts its predecessors had been lacking.

Only, instead of a real nose, this creature had a gaping hole in which Yuffie could see gray tissue and something white that might have been bone; it looked much like someone had just ripped the entire nose off of the thing's face. There was a bandana covering the thing's eyes, thank God, but there was a clear watery substance trickling out from underneath the cloth that Yuffie didn't even want to guess the nature of. She somehow knew that the thing no longer possessed organs with which to see. But the most horrible thing was the mouth, or what was left of it. The creature's lips had been literally *stitched* together with some sort of thick leather straps, making it look like some sort of diabolical rag doll come to life. But it wasn't so much the sight of the mouth being prevented from fulfilling its natural purpose that made Yuffie freeze in terror.

All the Faceless Men Yuffie had fought so far had been eerily silent, and though at the time Yuffie had been unnerved by the lack of sound that the abominations made, she now had a newfound respect for the silent ones.

For this one - this monstrosity in the making - was trying to scream. No, it was trying to *TALK*, but the only sounds that emerged from its stitched mouth were horrible moans that echoed down the hall and made Yuffie's heart shudder in her chest. She could hear the desperation and fear in what was left of the thing's voice, and it suddenly struck her as unbelievably cruel that a creature could be such a condition and still be emotionally aware of the nightmare it was in. Too cruel...

Suddenly, Yuffie found her voice and realized she was in the mood for screaming.

"Ohmygodwhatdidyoudotoit????!!!" she shrieked, suddenly feeling more angry than frightened.

Titus squeezed her shoulder painfully, a signal for her to shut up.

But Yuffie was beyond listening to reason. "What did you do it?!" she raged as the thing in the cell moaned again, its pink, emaciated hands slicing the air inches from her face.

Fa-Li suddenly jerked her out of Titus' grasp, her manicured fingernails digging brutally into Yuffie's arm. "Shut up!" she screamed at the girl, then turned to Titus angrily. "Titus! Get that thing in there to stop its moaning!"

"It'?" Titus echoed, looking amused. "I don't think he or she is so far gone into the transformation to be considered an 'it' yet."

Something in his words broke through Yuffie's haze of rage. "'He or she'?" she cried, tearing her eyes away from the monstrosity clawing for freedom and shifting her gaze to Titus. "I thought the Faceless Men were only men!! No wait! This...thing - it was *human*???!!!!"

Just like Vincent said...

"Key word being 'was'," Titus commented dryly as he strode fearlessly up the cell, just out of reach of the Faceless Man/Woman's clawing hands. "Well?" he suddenly demanded of the creature. "Were you male or female...or do you even remember?"

The Faceless Man/Woman's response was only to screech louder, trying desperately to swipe at Titus with its clawed hands. The watery substance was still streaming out from under the bandana, and Yuffie realized for the first time that the liquid was actually tears. The thing was crying.

"Stop it!" Yuffie hollered at Titus, surging against Fa-Li's grasp. "It can still understand you!! Stop it!! Please! It's crying, goddamn you!!!"

Faster than lightening, Titus suddenly sprung forward, grabbing the creature's flailing hands and yanking them forward so that the thing's face - or what was left of it - was shoved up against the bars. It moaned plaintively.

"Oh gawd!!!" Yuffie hollered at Titus, trying to kick the back of his leg with her boot. "Leave it alone! Please!!"

Titus turned around to glare at the half-crazed girl held in the grip of Fa-Li, which was surprisingly strong for such a slight woman. "Why should I leave it alone?" he demanded coldly, his gloved hands still wrapped around the thing's arms. "It he or she doesn't submit to the treatment, then in two or three days, they'll turn into an Evict."

"And what the hell is a goddamn Evict?!" Yuffie raged.

"Think zombie," Titus replied, turning away from her disinterestedly. "Think smart zombie. Think smart zombie that can move fast when it wants to. Think smart, fast zombie that screams a lot and eats anything it can get its claws on. That, my little friend, is an Evict." Then he added, as an afterthought, "I let one loose in the Midgar sewers, you know."

Yuffie's heart froze in her chest. "What did you say?" she gasped.

Titus' cold voice drifted back to her. "You heard me."

"But three of my friends were in the sewers!!!" Yuffie burst out, gray eyes full of pain.

"Not anymore," Fa-Li muttered under her breath.

Yuffie felt something in her shatter and wither away. She shut her burning eyes tightly and gritted her teeth, unwittingly sliding from Fa-Li's grasp and to the floor, the stone cold underneath her bare legs.

Reno...Elena...Red...

"G-God damn you!!!" she roared, her entire body trembling. "God damn you to hell!!!!!"

Titus suddenly appeared in front of her and yanked her roughly to her feet, gloved fingers digging into her skin. Yuffie opened her eyes and glared up at him angrily, the fire of hatred scalding her veins. Somewhere in the background she could hear the Faceless Man/Woman moaning plaintively, but all she knew was the unearthly light in Titus' green eyes, which were right in front of her. She wanted to do something to him. Punch him or kick him. But her hands were still bound by her shackles, and her legs felt weak and watery. All she had left was her voice and her fury.

"How could you?!" she spat, oblivious to the tears of rage and heartbreak rolling down her face. "They were my friends! You're a goddamn monster! I hope you burn in hell!"

Titus' eyes narrowed, and a bitter smile crept across his lips. "This *is* my hell," he whispered softly. "And now it is yours as well. Better get used to it because you're never leaving this place."

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Cloud massaged his temples in an attempt to ease the headache that was threatening to make its home in his skull. The thunder in the night outside rumbled in sinister amusement at his pain, and the ex-SOLDIER cursed the storm that wasn't showing any signs of letting up. Kalm was already mostly flooded, and soon an emergency evacuation would be called for. That would not be a good thing, of course. Where else would they station their base of operations? In Midgar? No way, not when the Running Man may or may not be prowling the city still.

Yet Cloud knew - somehow he just *knew* - that the Running Man was no longer in Midgar.

Sighing wearily, he tried to force himself to focus on the maps spread out on the table in front of him, but the many lines and curves blurred before his overworked eyes, and he let out a growl of frustration. Elena and Rude had been nice enough to make the trek back to their hotel room to bring back old maps of Midgar Reeve had given them a while back in case of an emergency. Strangely enough, Reno had declined to go with them and instead had trudged upstairs without a word to almost anyone.

Don't know what's wrong with that guy, Cloud thought. *He didn't even drink himself into a coma tonight like he usually does. Maybe he's embarrassed because of the whole snake thing.*

Unconsciously, Cloud's gaze shifted to the long scrapes that now ran almost the entire length of both of his arms, courtesy of a certain redheaded Turk and his massive fear of snakes. Cloud absently ran a gloved finger along one of the angry red lines and winced as a jolt of pain went through him. The scrapes weren't enough to merit a Cure spell or even a Potion, but the things sure stung like crazy. Like big, long paper cuts. Reno must have literally been *clawing* at him in his attempt to get away from the snake earlier that day. And lucky Cloud had to be the stepping stone.

He was still prodding at the scrapes when he suddenly heard a light footstep on the stairs leading to the upstairs bedrooms. Looking up, he was surprised to see Tifa standing there, barefooted and wearing a pale blue robe.

"Hey Cloud," she greeted a little nervously, tucking a lock of dark brown hair behind her ear.

He managed to muster up a weary smile for her. "Hey Tifa. What are you doing up so late?"

"Couldn't sleep," she said, smiling wanly at him and padding over to take a seat in the chair across from him, heedless of the maps consuming most of the table space. "Did you see Vincent pass through here?" she asked.

Cloud blinked in confusion. "No, but he might have gone through while I was sleeping."

Tifa's brow creased. "You fell asleep down here?"

Cloud nodded. "Yeah, right on the maps, hence the drool spot on Sector 2."

She laughed softly, smiling a little. "Cloud, have you been down here all night?"

He nodded his spiky head, staring wearily at the maps between them. "These are maps of Midgar and the Midgar sewer system," he explained tiredly.

Tifa leaned forward and peered at one of the maps, brushing aside rebellious strands of her hair when they made clear that they wanted to see the maps too. "How can you make any sense of this?" she asked dubiously. "It's just a bunch of lines to me."

"To me, too. But somehow I *have* to make sense of them." He tapped the map with one gloved finger. "Something keeps telling me that the key to finding both Yuffie and Reeve is in the sewers."

"Because that's where the transport tunnel led?" Tifa asked.

Cloud nodded. "Yeah, so we're pretty sure that the Running Man left the lab by way of the sewers. And also, that snake was huge. Something that big couldn't have been slinking around the sewers for a long time and not be noticed by someone. It had to have come from somewhere."

"And you think that somewhere might lead to the Running Man," Tifa finished.

Cloud looked at her helplessly. "It's all we have to go on right now."

Tifa propped her elbows up on the table and rested her chin in her hands. "So we're heading back to Midgar tomorrow?" she asked softly.

Cloud shook his head. "No, not tomorrow. We need to recuperate a little."

"But Cloud!" Tifa suddenly exclaimed, eyes filled with worry. "We have to find Yuffie and Reeve! And quick, too!"

Cloud felt a similar worry rising in his heart, but he held it back with a great force of will. "I know, Tifa," he said as calmly as he could manage. "But Cid still needs to fix up Cait. With Yuffie gone, we're going to need Cait's help as much as possible. And everyone's a little shaken up right now." Avoiding her gaze, he said, "Especially Reno."

Tifa didn't say anything. She lowered her dark head, and Cloud was starting to wonder if he had accidentally hurt her feelings when she suddenly said, "Do you want me to tell you?"

He looked up in surprise. "Tell me what?"

"About me and Reno," she replied softly.

Though something in him desperately wanted to cry "Yes!" Cloud shook his head and returned his attention back to the maps. "That's between you and Reno," he forced himself to say.

"But don't you care?" Tifa asked suddenly, raising her head and fixing her burgundy gaze on him.

Avoiding those beautiful, pained eyes, Cloud said, "Of course I care. More than you'll know, but...that's between you and Reno," he finished lamely, not knowing what else to say. He never had been a man of many words.

"Cloud..." she whispered softly, and he heard the longing and the love in that one word, but he refused to believe it, not when things were the way they were.

"I'm sorry for the way I acted the other morning," he rushed on, speaking blindly now. "It's just...I didn't...I mean...I just...if Reno needs help, you should help him, you know? I...I won't stand in the way." He practically choked on the words as he said them.

He was in so much emotional trauma that he didn't even see Tifa leave her chair and come to stand beside him. One moment he was staring at the maps without seeing them, the next he was feeling soft, graceful arms slipping around his shoulders and gently pulling him so that his head was resting against a slender stomach.

"I'm sorry for your pain, Cloud," Tifa whispered softly, stroking his hair. "I know you're feeling confused and helpless right now. Don't worry. We're going to find Yuffie and Reeve. Everything's going to be alright."

Something in Cloud seemed to give and he shuddered violently, his eyes slipping closed and he wrapped his arms around Tifa's waist and buried his face in the soft cotton shirt that covered her lean stomach, breathing in the scent of clean clothes and Tifa's personal feminine scent. And for the first time in a long time, he felt a sense of peace settle over him, like the calm after a storm.

True, he knew that he may still be in danger of losing the woman he loved, but...she was with him now, holding him and understanding his pain. And that was more than enough.

* * * * *

Vincent shut his window quietly behind him, water streaming from his soaked clothes to pool on the ground at his feet, shimmering like puddles of pure night on the hardwood floor. He knew it was rude to be getting Tifa's floor wet like this, but he would just have to clean it later. He didn't want to have to go through the bar itself to get up to his room because that would have meant bothering Tifa and Cloud during their moment of solitude, something that he felt he had no right to disrupt. And being that the back door was locked, Vincent had had no other choice but to enter his room using the very same method that had indirectly made Yuffie Kisaragi meet her doom.

Turning away from the window, Vincent looked dispassionately around at his room. He knew that Tifa had stayed in his room long enough to watch and wave to him as he walked away along the beach to stare at the churning ocean and violet, stormy skies. Now he could hear her and Cloud talking softly downstairs in the bar's main room, their voices hushed and soothing, meant entirely for each other. He had no right to even listen to such rhythmic emotion.

You should just leave, he told himself viciously. You are good for absolutely nothing around here. Thirty years in a coffin atoning for your sins was not nearly enough to lift the burden from your shoulders. You need a great spiritual cleansing, Vincent Valentine. Something that will purge your horrid, tainted soul of all the wrongs you have done.

Raking his human hand roughly through his tangled hair, Vincent realized that he had lost his hair clasp sometime during his midnight meanderings. Almost against his will, he walked over to the full length mirror that was hung on the wall and looked to see just how ghastly his appearance was.

It may have been a man who had gone to take a walk outside, but the tempest had returned a monster to Tifa's bar.

Vincent's dark hair hung around his face like a shroud, clinging to the sides of his ghostly white face like spindly fingers of pure darkness. His borrowed clothes were waterlogged and felt like lead weights holding him down. And, as always, his crimson eyes gleamed in defiance of everything about Vincent Valentine that might be called human. One look at his eyes, and he knew that it was no man staring back at him from the mirror's reflected realm.

He spun away from the mirror in disgust, hating himself, hating the world, hating the very womb that had birthed him and the evil man that had made him into a monster on the outside - an appearance to mirror the soul within. For Vincent had always been a monster at heart. After all he had been a Turk, hadn't he? Only good for ending human life, not saving it.

"I hope you're happy, Vincent! You managed to get rid of me!"

"Leave me alone," Vincent whispered feverishly, rubbing his eyes with his human hand as if he could erase the image of Yuffie's face from where it was engraved on the inside of his eyelids, beautiful and inescapable.

He had failed her. Failed her badly. And to think of her, innocent and teeming with life, in the hands of the creature known as the Running Man only generated in Vincent an even deeper sense of self-loathing than ever before. He had always hated being called "Vinnie" but at that moment, he would have given anything in the world to hear Yuffie calling his name. If she died, he would never ever forgive himself.

So leave, he told himself. That way when Cloud and the others find out she is dead, you'll never have to face up to the sin. You'll never have to face up to the fact that you abandoned her when she needed you the most. You monster. Cowardly monster. Go ahead. Run from the truth like you always do.

Something inside him - something that felt suspiciously like his heart - began to break, and in his moment of vulnerability, Vincent suddenly felt an extreme sense of ominous foreboding wash over him. Hot and cold chased each other across his skin, and a wave of dizziness hit him like a freight train and disappeared just as quickly.

Something behind him suddenly demanded his attention, and Vincent whirled around to look in the mirror.

And saw Chaos staring back at him, monstrous and terrible, its dark form filling the entire mirror without enough room left for the wings that Vincent couldn't see but knew were there. And as he stared in horror, the demon...smiled.

With a scream of rage and fear, Vincent's hand shot out, snagged the lamp from the dresser and flung it blindly at the mirror. The image of Chaos dissolved into a thousand lethal shards of broken glass and crumpled to the hardwood floor with a dozen ringing cries, shards shimmering in the moonlight like a puddle of crystalline tears. The thunder roared outside, as if shocked by the atrocity of his actions.

Silence fell for a second, broken only by the sounds of Vincent's ragged breathing and the rain pounding the window like demons crying to be let in.

He suddenly became aware of someone pounding up the stairs and heading towards his room.

INTERVENERS. STOP THEM.

Before he knew what he was doing, Vincent leapt clear over the bed with inhuman swiftness and threw his body weight against the door, barely glimpsing Cloud coming up the stairs before the door slammed shut with a bang. Dizziness hit him like a fist in the gut, and Vincent sank to the floor with his back against the door. His head was throbbing.

Someone started pounding on the door. "Vincent!" Cloud cried. "Are you alright?! What happened?!"

"Vincent!" Tifa's voice echoed her companion's cries.

"I'm fine," Vincent gasped, suddenly finding it hard for him to breathe. "Just leave me!"

"What was that breaking sound?!" Cloud demanded. Vincent dimly heard the other man trying to turn the doorknob, but the sound was distant, like he was hearing it from underwater.

"Vincent," Tifa's voice suddenly whispered, right next to his ear. She had apparently kneeled down so that she was basically level with him even with the door between them. "Vincent, open the door," she begged. "Please!"

"I'll still be here in the morning, Tifa," he whispered back, forcing the words through his mouth. "I'll still...be...here..."

He blacked out for a second, and when he reemerged from the abyss, he vaguely heard Tifa trying to convince Cloud that everything was fine and Red XIII's gravelly voice asking what was wrong. But Vincent wasn't interested in what was going on in the world outside his door. All he felt was the fever throbbing in his head and the cold that was making his limbs shiver uncontrollably.

Was he getting sick? No, he knew that he was immune to all diseases. If the whole Planet were suddenly wiped out by a plague, he alone would remain unaffected. Such was his curse, his penance for his well of sins. But if he couldn't fall ill, then what was happening to him? What was burning his flesh and freezing his blood? He felt detached from the world around him - completely unaware of his surroundings. The voices of Cloud, Tifa and Red were unreal, as if he were dreaming.

Vincent knew only one creature was to blame for this. Only one creature on the Planet could exert this much power over him.

Chaos?! he demanded silently while hugging his shivering body and fighting to remain conscious. What are you...what are you doing to me?!

And this time, he heard it, unmistakable. He felt it rolling across his soul like a dark, sinister wave. Laughter. The beast was *laughing* at him.

So it was you! Leave me be! Back to the dark with you, demon! Vincent focused all his energy behind these words.

The rumbling laughter seemed to increase at this ancient incantation. Vincent felt the demon shifting in the well of his soul, a strange demonic babbling issuing from its unseen mouth. Something clicked in his feverish mind that the demon was speaking in its native tongue, the language of all things evil and demonic, but something inside Vincent - perhaps something just as evil and demonic - could make primitive sense of the words.

BANISH ME TO THE DARK?

BANISH YOURSELF TO THE DARK...

YOU ARE MY DARKNESS

I AM YOU!

A tidal wave of images suddenly washed over Vincent without warning, plunging him into what could only be described as utter and complete chaos.

A corridor. Rows of cells on either side.

A door with a circular handle.

Another hallway.

Hallway.

Hallway.

Hallway.

Endless hallway.

A room. A torture chamber! Raised platform and a walkway circling around the entire room. Green light. A girl stood on the platform, chains around her wrists.

"Yuffie!" Vincent cried, hands reaching out to grab her, but the image of her suddenly dissolved before his eyes, falling apart and fleeing from the hands that sought to liberate the one they had failed to save the first time.

Slowly, Vincent's vision cleared, and he saw the raindrops rushing down the window across the room from him. He felt the wetness of his soaked clothes against his feverish skin and the incessant throbbing in his skull. He was still shivering with unexplainable chills, his back firmly against the door to his room, preventing the outside world from being tainted with the darkness that had just passed through him.

And Chaos was where it was supposed to be - furtive, hidden deep within his being, but always there.

"Chaos," Vincent whispered weakly, feeling as if all the life had been drained from his body. "You...show me the way to her, demon? Why? Why do you want me to find her?"

But apparently Chaos declined to answer, for Vincent heard nothing from the demon, not even a whisper.

He let the silence fill the niches of the room before whispering, "Yuffie...I will find you. I promise."

Then he sagged against the door and curled up into a ball, closing his eyes and letting the fever run its course.