

Chapter Twenty-Eight: Safe Haven Junon City

"I didn't see a thing until you unintentionally...exposed yourself." Vincent Valentine

FOR KYRA, WHO WON THE 2222 COUNTER-FIC PRIZE! ^_^ CONGRATULATIONS!

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The sky above them was yawning and black, filled with churning storm clouds and flashing lightening, but at least it was there. Cloud never realized how much he had taken a typical, stormy sky for granted until, walking around in the dark sewers, it had seemed that he would never see one again. It was a beautiful sight to him, if anything could be considered beautiful at a time like this. Cloud was beyond tired, beyond exhausted, beyond fatigued. His body had stopped hurting a long time ago, and his legs were trudging along on autopilot, one foot in front of the other mindlessly. He was afraid that if he stopped walking, he would never be able to start up again. Freezing rain chilled him to the bone, and he would have hugged himself for warmth if he hadn't known that it would be futile.

The others were no better off. Everyone knew the trashed landscape of Sector Five like the backs of their hands, but with their weary limbs and downtrodden hearts, they were having trouble navigating. Rude was trudging along with Elena riding on his back. The female Turk had injured her ankle trying to escape back through the underwater cavern. Heels were not meant for rock hopping. Cid was barely managing to stay on his feet, even using the Venus Gospel as a cane of sorts to help him along. Several times Tifa or Barret had offered to aid the pilot, but each time they had been gruffly turned away. For some odd reason, Cid didn't want anyone touching him. At first, Cait didn't seem to be having any problems, but then the left side of his moogles suddenly went dead, and he informed Cloud that a rock had busted one of his motor circuits. Now the robotic cat was forced to hobble along just like the rest of them. Out of the entire damn group, Cloud would have said that Vincent was having the least trouble, even with Yuffie in his arms, but the swordsman had seen the red-eyed man stumble and fall to his knees once or twice. It both relieved and scared him to know that Vincent wasn't as impervious to physical and mental ailments as everyone seemed to think.

Nearly tripping over a piece of scrap metal lying in his path, Cloud forced himself to plod forward, the exit of Sector Five coming into view. He almost called back to his teammates to report his findings, but he knew there would be no use in doing such a thing. They wouldn't hear him anyways.

At the snail's pace they were moving at, it took an eternity for the group to finally make it to the outskirts of Midgar, now covered with mud as well as sewer grime. It took Cloud a couple of minutes to order his feet to stop. They didn't seem to be interested in doing anything he wanted them to do, but once he finally got his message across, the numb limbs finally halted their mindless motion and just stood there in the dark mud.

There was nothing but water as far as he could see. Just water and more water, maybe broken by the tops of what was once rolling hills but now looked like miniature islands in an endless sea. The highway was gone. The buggy was gone. The mud surrounding Midgar melded into the flooded land twenty feet from where they were standing.

He vaguely heard some of the others give loud cries of frustration behind him. He heard the sound of still more of them collapsing wearily into the mud. But Cloud felt nothing. He just kept staring out over the water, wondering dumbly where all the land had gone.

//It was swallowed// came his soundless answer. //Swallowed by the ocean. She's taking back what is rightfully hers.//

"Right," Cloud muttered to himself. Of course, he might have simply thought the word. He couldn't tell; he didn't even really care any longer.

He turned his face up the night sky, letting the needle-sharp raindrops lacerate his numb skin. He felt so cold, so unstable. There was a vague trembling in the core of his being that he couldn't contain, and he knew it wasn't from the cold. But not once did he stop to ponder the strange sensation. He just stood there and let the rain soak and chill him to the bone.

When the Highwind came, he didn't even see it at first.

He thought it was another star, this one moving and swirling in some kind of mysterious dance. It never occurred to him that stars didn't move, didn't dance. Then he heard the sound of the engines, sensed a mighty wind causing turbulence in the dark water. The searchlight suddenly exploded around him, and without thinking, he lifted his arms to shield his sensitive eyes from the blinding light. His spiky hair was whipped into a frenzy by the drafts created by the airship. The cockpit windows flashed as lightening illuminated the night.

Yet his jaded mind still refused to believe it until something brown whooshed past his body, swinging back and forth.

//A rope ladder?// he wondered dumbly.

Automatically, his eyes trailed up the length of the ladder, and it was only then that he saw and recognized the impressive airship known as the Highwind and the quadruped known as Red XIII, who was waiting for them on the deck, his fiery fur a beacon in the darkness.

Cloud smiled.

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Flying the Highwind wasn't quite as hard as Reno had thought it would be, especially considering that he had no previous experience flying the bucket of bolts. Once he got it started up and discovered the wonderful thing called the "autopilot", it was fairly smooth sailing. The only thing he had to worry about was flying too high and getting struck by lightening. It had taken a couple of close encounters to convince him to take the thing off autopilot and fly it manually, which was what he was concentrating on doing when he suddenly heard someone walk - no, limp - into the cockpit.

"Who's there?" he demanded, feeling stupid talking to air, but he wasn't quite confident enough to take his eyes off the control panel.

"Me," said a voice so weary that it took Reno a couple of seconds to realize it was Cloud's.

"Get up here where I can see you," the Turk ordered, trying to keep his voice as least authoritative as possible. The last thing he needed was for the leader of AVALANCHE to get standoffish when Reno was too busy worrying about crashing the Highwind into a mountain range.

Boots scraped across the metal floor, and a second later, Cloud appeared to Reno's left. The Turk chanced a glance at the swordsman, his eyes widening slightly as he took in the lacerated skin, the dried blood, the damp, torn uniform.

"You look like shit and a half," he declared.

Mako blue eyes glared at him tiredly as their owner leaned heavily against the control panel. "Good to see that you're as eloquent as always."

"Hands off the control panel," Reno snapped.

"It's either the panel or your shoulder."

Reno let him lean on the control panel. The two stood in silence for a few minutes with nothing but the whirl of the Highwind and the sound of the lashing rain all around them. Reno alternated between studying the control panel and nervously watching the ever-present mountain ranges through the massive cockpit windows. He had been having a semi-difficult time before, but now that Cloud was leaning on the panel only inches away from Reno's left elbow, the Turk was having trouble concentrating. He kept glancing at the swordsman, expecting him to say something degrading about Reno's less-than-perfect flying job or to ask him what the hell happened to the Final Heaven bar. Cloud did none of these things, though; he seemed to be focusing most of his efforts on staying on his own two feet.

"You know, Strife," Reno said coolly. "If you want to faint, go ahead and do it. Normally I'd laugh at you for being a weakling, but I think I'll make an exception just this one time."

Cloud suddenly sat down on the floor. Hard. Reno jumped in surprise, and the Highwind jumped with him.

"Goddamn, Cloud!" he exclaimed. "You trying to make me crash or something?" He readjusted his sweaty grip on the steering mechanism. [1]

"Sorry," Cloud said wearily as he leaned his back against the side of the control panel, slouching against the cool metal.

"No you're not," Reno accused half-heartedly. "Where's Cid when we need him?"

"Down in the cargo hold."

Reno frowned without taking his eyes off of the cockpit windows. "What the hell is he doing down there? He should be up here piloting this damn thing."

Cloud shook his head, and a couple of locks of blonde hair fell into his face. He didn't bother to brush them away. "Something happened to Cid. He's not at his best right now."

"None of us are," Reno said dryly.

"I know," Cloud said thickly, as if it were costing him much strength just to talk. "Red told me about the Faceless Man and the bar."

"Glad the furball took the initiative," Reno commented.

"Did you have anything to add?" Cloud asked.

Reno briefly thought about telling the AVALANCHE leader that their mysterious attacker's name was Montana but, looking down at Cloud's mass of tangled blonde spikes and torn uniform, he decided that such things could wait until later.

"No. Nothing to add."

Cloud didn't reply this time, and Reno let the silence spread its wings long enough for him to steer the Highwind past a dangerously tall mountain peak, the glistening craggy surface of the geological giant passing a little too close to the side of the ship for comfort, but at least they didn't crash. Reno was just thankful that the blasted Highwind had headlights of sorts so he wouldn't be - literally - flying blind.

"So," he suddenly spoke up, voice loud in the quiet. "You guys...found Yuffie?"

The blond spikes lying against the side of the control panel shifted slightly. "Yeah. Vincent has her right now. Hasn't let go of her for a single second since we first found her."

Reno hesitated. "And Reeve?"

There was a long pause, and then Cloud said quietly, "We didn't find him."

Reno's throat tightened with a strange mix of anger and anguish. "Did you even *look* for him?"

Cloud shifted, and suddenly Reno found two Mako blue eyes staring up at him. "I'm not going to lie to you, Reno," Cloud said evenly. "We didn't have time to look for him. The entire lair was falling down around our ears. We had to get out or we would have all been killed."

Reno believed him, but still insisted, "Whatever. Next time you guys want to go on a so-called 'rescue mission', my ass is going along to make sure we get *everyone* out alive."

The blonde suddenly slid away from the control panel to lie on his side on the floor. "You're more than welcome to come, Reno," he said tiredly. "Going down there, I kept thinking how hard it was going to be to keep track of so many people at once, but when we were down there running around blind like chocobos with our heads cut off, I realized that we needed *all* of our forces."

Something occurred to Reno. "Speaking of chocobos, Red let the ones in the stables out of their pens. Here's to hoping the bird-brains will come back."

"They'll come back. They always do. Chocobos can actually swim fairly well."

"Lucky for them," Reno said dryly, trying to not look at the pale figure lying on the metal floor of the Highwind. For some reason, seeing Cloud sprawled there so...lifelessly bothered the crap out of him. Weakness wasn't something he wanted to see in a man who he had to call "leader."

"For god's sake, Strife, get your ass up," Reno snapped, forcing himself to keep his eyes riveted on the cockpit windows.

"Don't know if I can," Cloud muttered.

Reno's aquamarine eyes narrowed, and though he wasn't looking in the Cloud's direction, there was no mistaking whom his words were for. "Well, you better get up because let me tell you something: those people down there in the cargo hold - your friends - they're just waiting for you to keel over and give up because then that'll give them permission to knuckle under, too."

Cloud laughed, but there was no humor in the sound. "They know they don't need my permission to show weakness, Reno. It's not like I'm the backbone of AVALANCHE. I may unite them under myself like a leader is supposed to do, but they support each other, and they support me as well. Besides...why do you think I waited until I was up here to fall to the floor?"

That almost made Reno tear his gaze away from the cockpit windows. "What? You thought collapsing in front of me would be better than collapsing in front of everyone else?"

"You don't like me anyways," Cloud said with a shrug.

Reno frowned. "I like you just fine, Strife."

//Can't believe I just said that//

"That's nice," Cloud said levelly.

"You don't really care either way, do you?"

"Not in particular, just like you really don't care whether or not I like you."

"That's different. I'm used to not being liked."

"Sad."

Reno scowled and said sarcastically, "Yeah, that's really sad, isn't it? Too bad I couldn't give less of a damn."

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Cloud watching him thoughtfully. "You know, I take back what I said a few seconds ago. I think you do care what people think of you in some distant, repressed sort of way."

Reno's face darkened. "You're full of shit. Don't you dare tell me what I'm thinking when you don't know what you're thinking because if you're thinking that I'm thinking about *caring* what other people think of me, then you're thinking down the wrong lines there, buddy."

Cloud blinked. "You lost me back on the 'shit' part."

Reno suddenly laughed. "I lost myself back on the 'shit' part, too." He glanced down the control panel, all the laughter vanishing from his face as he beheld the electronic map in front of him. "I think I'm lost, Mr. Leader."

Cloud rolled onto his stomach and rested his head on his folded arms. "So turn the autopilot on," he muttered.

"I did," Reno insisted. "But it started flying us too high, and we almost got struck by lightening. Twice."

"So adjust the altitude controls," Cloud suggested.

"Where are those?" Reno responded grumpily. He didn't like asking for help, especially when he couldn't decide whether said person was a friend or an enemy.

"Somewhere on the control panel," Cloud said, quite unhelpfully.

Reno rolled his aquamarine eyes. "Thanks a lot. You're about as helpful as a thorn in the side."

"I want to go back down into the cargo hold with the others," Cloud suddenly said, thinking out loud.

Reno made a face and steered the Highwind carefully over another mountain range. Or was it the same one? "What are you telling me for?" he demanded of Cloud. "Just get up off the floor and march your happy ass back down the stairs."

"Don't think I can walk on my own," Cloud said after a brief pause.

Reno felt a mischievous grin spreading across his face. "You want to me to yell for one of the others?"

"No," Cloud said sullenly.

"Okay," the Turk said cheerfully. "Have fun crawling back down the stairs, then."

Cloud glared at him. "Reno..." he growled.

"Shut your flapper. I'm trying to not crash here, you know."

"Reno," Cloud snarled, managing to sound tired and angry at the same time.

"Look, Strife, like I told you before, unless you want to end up splattered across-"

"Oh, goddammit! Reno, can you *please* set the ship on autopilot and help me hobble down the goddamn stairs?!"

"Oh??? You wanted *help* from *me*! Well, why didn't you say so?"

Cloud groaned and banged his forehead against the metal floor.

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Vincent pressed his naked palm against Yuffie's forehead, cool skin to feverish flesh. A frown creased his brow, his crimson eyes narrowing ever so slightly. It had been quite a while since they had escaped from the underground lair, and Yuffie still

had yet to awaken. Her fever was still present, the fiery demon, and it didn't seem like it was going to be departing from its victim anytime soon.

Carefully, he sank the bare fingers of his ungloved hand into the tangled brown hair, feeling the illness throbbing along the scalp. Yuffie had no other noticeable injuries save for the fever. There was a line of oval-shaped bruises on her upper arms, most likely from being manhandled at one time or the other. A knot graced the side of her head, hidden underneath her hair, probably a result of being knocked unconscious by her kidnappers, whoever **they** were.

Vincent huddled further into the corner he was sitting in, resettling Yuffie's limbs in his lap and tucking her head underneath his chin, just to feel her breath flit across the skin of his neck. He was glad to have her back, and the intensity of his own emotions was starting to frighten him a bit. He shouldn't be **this** relieved. He couldn't afford to be...

Holding her closer against him, Vincent laid his cheek against her too-warm hair and surveyed the rest of the cargo hold, where the others sat in silence in various corners of the room. Tifa was lying down on one of the crates, her tangled brown hair dangling off the edge and almost brushing the back of Red XIII, who was lying on the floor beside her crate. Barret was slumped against one of the walls, arms folded and chin resting on this chest, seemingly asleep. Rude and Elena were sitting against the wall opposite Vincent, tucked in between two crates like a pair of overgrown children trying to hide from the monster that they just discovered lived in their closet. Cid was huddled in the farthest corner of the room, a brooding look on his weathered face and the Venus Gospel clutched tightly in his gloved hands. He hadn't spoken a word since they had escaped the underground lair, and the aura he was emitting silently forbade anyone to approach him. Vincent was fairly certain the pilot's predicament had something to do with their encounter with the Hissers, but so long as he didn't know what was bothering Cid, there was nothing he could do for his friend.

The sound of boots on metal drew Vincent's attention to the top of the stairs that led into the cargo hold. Reno and Cloud appeared above the cargo hold, the swordsman's arm flung around his companion's shoulders. At first it seemed as if Reno was only supporting a minimal amount of Cloud's weight, but Vincent could tell from the strain he saw in both men that Reno was practically carrying the other man as they hobbled carefully down the metal stairs, two souls weary from battle. Cloud's uniform was ripped and torn, and there was a cut on his face that was probably going to leave a scar. Reno had dried blood smeared on his white dress shirt, and there was a ring of bruises on his slender neck that probably wouldn't disappear for days.

Reno's condition apparently hadn't affected his sense of humor, though. The minute he and Cloud reached the cargo hold, he deposited the swordsman on a nearby crate and smiled.

"Well, how's everyone doing this fine and lovely evening?"

Silence, except for the humming of the Highwind's engines.

Vincent saw worry flash briefly in Reno's aquamarine eyes, but the Turk quickly covered it up with a scowl. "Well, don't everyone answer at once."

"We're heading for Junon," Cloud announced. "We should be there within half an hour."

"Why so long?" Barret asked gruffly, rousing himself from his pseudo-nap.

"We have to fly slower because of the storm," Reno replied. "There's a couple of nifty instruments in the autopilot that can react automatically if we come across a mountain range, but they need time to calculate a reaction. At least it'll stop us from crashing and burning."

"What will we do once we get to Junon?" Tifa asked, sitting up on her crate. "Lower Junon has probably been evacuated due to flooding. We would have to stay in a hotel in Upper Junon. We have enough money, and it would be the only place big enough to fit all of us."

"But we also have assassins after us," Red spoke up. "Innocent bystanders might be caught in the crossfire if we take up residence in a public establishment."

"I know a place where we can go," Rude suddenly said, and everyone - even Cid - turned their gaze to where the tall man was sandwiched in between two crates, back against one and feet against the other.

"I have a friend in Junon named Kyra," the Turk continued.

"No, no, NO!!" Reno exclaimed, shaking his head violently, ponytail lashing the air behind him.

"She and Reno don't get along very well," Rude explained calmly, "but I've known her for a long time, and I assure you that's she's completely trustworthy. She owns a restaurant in Upper Junon. The entire top floor is a living quarters, and she told me that if I ever needed help or shelter, to contact her."

Reno looked less than pleased. "She *also* told you that if you brought me along, she would make me sleep in the dumpster outside the restaurant."

Rude just stared at him. "I believe I can convince her to make an exception this one time."

"Sounds like a plan," Cloud said approvingly. "Does anyone have any objections?"

Vincent wasn't too thrilled about shacking up in a stranger's house, but he knew it was the best they were going to get at the moment. Yuffie might need medical attention soon, and she wasn't going to find it as long as he was being picky about the housing situation. He also had a feeling that he would be able to trust Rude's judgment as far as friends went; the Turk seemed like the kind that chose his companions carefully. And from the looks on everyone else's faces, they all seemed to accept Rude's suggestion as their next course of action. The only one who made a remotely sour face at the idea was Elena, but whatever her protests might have been, she didn't voice them.

The others continued speaking amongst themselves, but Vincent was only half-listening. He looked down at Yuffie, at her pale face, slack lips, delicate eyelids with their dark lashes, and he silently willed the Highwind to get them to Junon as soon as possible.

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She was warm all over, but it was bad sort of warm. The warmth of fire that was burning too close to weak, fragile skin. The warm of a soul-eating fever caused by a disease that would devour her from the inside out. The warmth of the flames of Hell. That was the heat that was racing across her skin, pulsing in her head, running its dark course along her nerve endings. And then there was the madness, like a yawning whirlpool beneath her, a hungry Charybdis inhaling the meal it consumed thrice a day. Only this ravenous madness would not spew her back out; once she was sucked in, that was it.

Was this what had happened to Reeve? Did he feel this fever? Did this madness swallow him up? Did he hear these voices like she was hearing? The voices that blurred, echoed and shattered within the recesses of her mind?

~"How much longer? We need to get her...get her to a doctor...doctor as quickly possible."~

~"...be too much longer. But do you really think...really think a doctor will be able to help her...help her?"~

Floating...floating...in the sea of voices. For an instant, she thought she might have heard her friends, but she knew it was just her memories. She imagined she smelled Vincent's scent, felt the closeness of damp clothes, a warm hand pressed against her face, but it couldn't have been real, could it? There were so many sensations in this place that she couldn't find the sense of mind to hang onto just one of them.

~"Better not crash this ship or...ship or I gonna beat his ass!"~

~"Geez, have a little faith in him, why don't you...why don't you?"~

Yuffie was five years old, and she was sleepy. She didn't know why Mama had woken her up so early. Normally, she only got up when Seki and Hikaru came and asked her go outside and play. But here was her mother, standing above her in her battle clothes, shuriken strapped onto her back and sword resting against her narrow hip. And though they weren't visible, Yuffie knew that there was an array of throwing knives hidden underneath the traditional Wutainese female ninja uniform.

Where was Mama going? Was there a battle? Yuffie was worried now. Confused and worried. Ayami leaned down and kissed her forehead, the ribbons woven in her dark hair brushing the little girl's robust face softly, tickling. She smiled down at her daughter, and Yuffie smiled back. Then her mother whispered softly to her, telling her secrets, secrets about her song, secrets about hidden meanings in the tales that old fisherman sang drunkenly in the local bars - more than what they seemed. //Heed their seemingly foolish words// she said. //Listen and learn from them// Yuffie nodded enthusiastically and said she would, even though she had no idea what Mama was talking about. Her mother's brown eyes were right in front of her, so warm and lovely. Yuffie fell into them, into their tender light, surrounded by the scent of her mother's perfume. She fell into a deep asleep, and when she woke up, her mother was gone.

And Kira Ayami Kotori never returned.

~"What's wrong...wrong with your pretty little girlfriend, stranger?"~

~"She needs a doctor...doctor right now."~

~"Well, good evening to you, too."~

~"...my manners, Ms. Kyra...Kyra..."~

Yuffie and Aeris were running through the green mists together, hand in hand. The young ninja was lagging behind; she didn't want to be around the mists, around the green light, around that horrible smell. But Aeris seemed unafraid. Her long hair was wound into its usual twist, so wonderfully familiar, and it bounced around the back of her pink dress as she ran. She had left her red jacket somewhere, and her shoulders were pale and ghostly in the greenish darkness. Yuffie was holding her soft, cool hand in a sweaty grip, wanting to hang on and let go at the same time.

//It's down here// Aeris was saying as she continued tugging Yuffie along. //It's down here in the heart of the Planet. We must kill it//

But Yuffie didn't want to see it. Didn't want to see the Beast, the monster that lived in the heart of the Planet. Didn't want to be swallowed by its mighty heartbeat, the same one that was echoing off the walls as they ran. She was scared, and Aeris must have sensed that fear because she suddenly turned her head and smiled gently at her friend, soft pink lips curling beautifully. And her eyes were green, green like the mists, green like Titus' eyes.

~"...take first shift...shift."~

~"Are you sure...you sure?"~

~"Positive."~

Vincent and...Tifa? Were they here in this realm of chaotic memories? Were they lost amongst the madness like her? Please let the answer be 'no.'

~"Hey, woman! Wash my shirt, why don't you?"~

~"Watch it, Reno. The dumpster's nice and cozy this time of year."~

~"Oooh, feisty!"~

Reno?! No, it couldn't be. He, Red, and Elena got eaten by stupid Titus' *stupid* Evict...didn't they? Titus had said...Titus... Titus...

TAKE ME TO TITUS.

~"...fever...coming down..."~

Titus was standing in front of her, looking like he had been through hell and back a dozen times. His leather jacket and dark jeans were covered with rock dust, staining parts of the fabric a strange shade of brownish-white. The same substance was clinging to his white-blond hair in powdery sections. His eyes were steady, though, fearless and unwavering as he strode through a tunnel in some dark place. There was a shadowy, feminine figure behind him, but it was indistinct, shifty, insignificant. Yuffie was only watching Titus. Watching that determined, stubborn set to his full mouth. Watching the pride in his elegant features. Watching the deep purple orbs on the back of his hands flashing in the darkness. Watching those green eyes, green like the mists, green like Aeris' eyes.

He was heading to Junon. He was trying to escape this last time when he knew that, in the end, escape was futile. They would hunt him down. They would kill him. He would never be free. He needed to get rid of Fa-Li while there was still a slim chance that-

Yuffie didn't know how it happened, but Titus somehow *saw* her. Those horribly familiar eyes suddenly shifted and focused on the exact spot where she was hovering. It almost made her want to look down and see if she was really there. It certainly didn't *feel* like she was there - physically, at least. But Titus apparently knew of her presence, and it didn't please him one bit.

And invisible *something* suddenly lashed out from him, struck her squarely, and then Yuffie was falling again. But this time, instead of falling into madness, she fell into herself. Into a cage of aches and pains. Into her body.

Of course, it took her a couple of seconds to realize that she once again *had* a body. A body with toes and fingers and legs and arms. A body that was aching like someone had beaten her from head to toe with a sledgehammer.

//Man this sucks. I need to quit waking up like this// she thought grumpily.

She opened her eyes as slowly as possible, expecting a sudden invasion of light to blind her. There was only a blurry world around her, a myriad of colors all swimming together like happy fish in a pond. She was able to discern certain shapes, like the light fixture embedded in the ceiling, shining with dim light. Slowly, the plain wooden walls swam out of the sea of

blurriness. She became aware of the fact that there was a blanket covering her body, a pillow settled beneath her head, and staring at down at her was a man.

And what a handsome man he was. Long dark hair cascaded around his face, brushing his pale skin. There were a couple of nasty-looking bruises marring the masculine perfection of his features, and the faintly luminescent red eyes were a bit disconcerting, but other than that...

//Whoa! Hold on a second! I *know* this guy! He's...//

"Vinnie!" Yuffie cried, her voice emerging weakly from her throat. At the same time his name left her lips, she abruptly sat up in bed for some absurd reason unbeknownst even to her. The result was rather painful. Her forehead ended up colliding right smack with Vincent's, with enough force to send both of them reeling from the blow, clutching at their smarting foreheads. Yuffie even received the distinct honor of hearing Vincent Valentine say:

"Ouch."

Yuffie gritted her teeth and tried her hardest not to feel like a big fat klutz. "Geez Vinnie!" she exclaimed. "You sure have a hard head!"

Vincent just looked at her, and she was amazed to see his face infused with not just one emotion, but several. Indignation, disbelief, awe, and strangely enough, something that looked suspiciously like happiness.

//Naw...my vision must still be blurry or something// Yuffie quickly amended silently. No way Vincent could be happy to see *her*.

Blinking her eyes to keep the world from spinning crazily, Yuffie was about to make another witty comment to make up for her lack of grace when she suddenly saw Vincent's eyes flick to her chest before he cleared his throat and looked away pointedly.

Yuffie frowned at the man sitting on the edge of her bed before glancing down at herself.

"Ahh!" she shrieked, grabbing the edge of the blanket and covering herself quickly. "You pervert! What the hell did you do with my clothes?!"

//Had to be the black bra. Damn it! First I bash him in the forehead, and now he sees me in my black bra! This isn't happening. This isn't happening//

Vincent crossed his arms over his chest and made a point of studying the floor. "I didn't do anything with your clothes," he said calmly. "They were wet from the rain so Tifa undressed you and covered you with a blanket. I didn't see a thing until you unintentionally...exposed yourself."

"Damn straight it was unintentional!" Yuffie exclaimed hotly. Her face was burning up; she couldn't *believe* she had just "exposed" herself in front of Vincent. How goddamn freaking embarrassing! And the silence that was falling between them was making it even worse so Yuffie decided to sacrifice even MORE of her dignity to fill it.

"Whose clothes are you wearing *now*?" she asked, noting that Vincent had changed into a long-sleeved white shirt and a pair of blue jeans. Average clothes for a SO not average man.

Vincent glanced down at the garments, as if they were alien objects not attached to his person. "The jeans are Rude's. The shirt is Cloud's."

"No wonder," Yuffie continued, still clutching the blankets to her chest. "The shirt is too small and the jeans are WAY too big."

Vincent looked at her from the corner of his eye, ebony strands of hair making the crimson depths of his eye even more noticeable. "Why are you harping on my clothes again, Yuffie?"

"To distract myself from the fact that I'm not wearing any!" Yuffie snapped.

The corners of Vincent's mouth tightened in what might have been a smile. "Don't worry, Yuffie. Would you like me to call Tifa and ask her to bring you some?"

Yuffie blinked her gray eyes, some of the fire in their depths dimming slightly. "Tifa? She's here? Is everyone here? Where are we anyways?"

"In a restaurant in Junon."

"Junon?! What happened to the Final Heaven bar?"

"It burned and then flooded," Vincent stated bluntly. "But that's not my story to tell. Right now we're staying with one of Rude's old friends named Kyra."

"Oh. I see," Yuffie replied, looking around the room, which was actually rather pretty now that she paid more attention to it instead of her state of undress and the man sitting casually on her bed. The walls were wooden like those of the Final Heaven bar, and it gave Yuffie a comforting sense of familiarity. The bed she occupied was actually one of two that took up the space against one wall. To her right was a nightstand with a nice, simple lamp perched on it. Further beyond that was another bed, various weapons, including - Yuffie was delighted to see - her beloved Conformer, the materia glittering its rightful slots. The shuriken's companions were a rather colorful assortment of guns, gloves, spears, and even a pair of nunchuku.

//Geez, put a sick lady in the freaking armory, why don't they?// she thought sourly.

She felt a strange weight against her face and looked back to find Vincent looking at her. Making a face at him, she pulled her blanket up higher. Damn thing seemed intent on slipping all the way down. "What are you looking at?" she demanded.

For a moment, Vincent didn't say anything. The intensity in those crimson eyes made the blood come rushing back to her face, her blush returning with a vengeance. Her eyes widened slightly, and she would have squirmed if Vincent hadn't practically been sitting on her blanket-covered legs. Here it was again, this warm, throbbing feeling in her chest, the weakness in her limbs, the acute awareness that everything she was - women, ninja - was laid bare for all to see. It made her feel naked even though the feeling wasn't necessarily a bad one. What boggled her was that *Vincent* was the one making her feel it.

Something glimmered in those scarlet eyes, and Vincent suddenly stunned the life out of her by turning his face away and laughing. Beautiful, full-throated laughter that she couldn't believe was coming from the likes of Vincent Valentine. Presently, the darkness that Vincent usually radiated was absent, and he seemed more like the man Yuffie knew he was, rather than the monster he thought himself to be. His shoulders shook slightly as he laughed, his dark hair shimmering under the lights, and Yuffie wanted to reach out and sink her fingers into that thick hair, just to reassure herself that he was real. And to think that if she had died down there in that place of green mists and unearthly torturers, she might never have seen him again.

The door suddenly creaked open, and Yuffie jumped slightly, jolted from her thoughts of unfamiliar emotions.

Tifa strode into the room, asking, "My god, Vincent, what in the world is so-" Her eyes fell on Yuffie, and they got so big they nearly bugged out of her head.

Yuffie smile at her friend. "Hey, Tifa!" she said cheerfully and was surprised to find that her good mood was genuine.

//Wow. If Vinnie's laughter affects everyone like this, then he should do it more often. Wonder what he found so funny anyways?//

Then the young woman suddenly found herself wrapped in a crushing embrace by one Tifa Lockhart, who was unintentionally choking the life out of her good friend. Yuffie's sore body protested the painful hug while she scrambled to keep a grip on her blanket. Tifa was one mighty strong woman.

"I'm so glad you're safe! I'm so glad you're safe!" Tifa kept saying over and over again.

"Me, too," Yuffie choked out, her arms pinned between herself and her friend.

Tifa suddenly pulled back, but kept her grip on Yuffie's bare shoulders, squeezing gently as if to make sure that the girl before her was real. The martial artist's burgundy eyes were shimmering, but her smile was just as bright as ever.

Yuffie laughed. "Oh no, Tifa, don't you *dare* start crying!"

The woman smiled and released her friend's shoulders, folding her callused hands in her lap. "Of course not, but I'm just so happy you're okay, Yuffie!"

Yuffie cast a glance at Vincent, who had stopped laughing and was watching the joyful reunion with a neutral face. "I'd be even happier if I had some clothes."

Tifa patted her hand reassuringly. "Don't worry. I told Kyra to-"

As if on cue, a feminine figure came through the doorway with a bundle of clothes in her arms. Yuffie blinked in surprise at the unfamiliar person. The new woman was in her late teens or early twenties, barely taller than Yuffie herself, but far more striking. With auburn hair and eyes a startling shade of amber, the woman gave off a bold, independent air like most other females gave off perfume.

Kyra walked to the foot of the bed and smiled at Yuffie. "It's good to see you're awake. A while ago, your boyfriend here was thinking about calling a doctor."

Yuffie looked at Vincent and turned beet red. "Boyfriend?! Vinnie is NOT my boyfriend!"

The mischievous glint in Kyra's eyes said that she didn't quite believe Yuffie. "Whatever you say, honey. Here, I brought you some clothes. They're mine so they might be a just a little bit big on you, but beggars can't be choosers, right?" She winked, taking the bite about what could have been a harsh statement.

Yuffie smiled at the woman and was about to reply when she was distracted by the light glinting off Kyra's auburn hair, turning some strands red like fire. Red...sewers...the Evict!

"Tifa!" Yuffie suddenly cried, grabbing her friend's arms in a vise-like grip, her blanket slipping all the way down to her waist. Vincent dutifully looked away, and Kyra let out a small sound of surprise.

Wide burgundy eyes willed her to calm down. "What is it, Yuffie?" Tifa asked, clasping her friend's hand.

Yuffie was suddenly having trouble breathing. She saw that horrible Faceless Man/Woman clawing at her from behind its cell, still coherent enough to moan piteously, still coherent enough to weep salty tears. She saw Titus pulling mercilessly on the thing's arms, heard him talking about the Evicts - creatures that would eat anything they could get their claws on. And she imagined Reno, Red, and Elena alone in the sewers with such a thing. Somewhere in the midst of the chaos brought on by her fever, she had thought she heard Reno's voice, but still...

"Red!" she cried, staring into Tifa's startled eyes. "Where are Red, Reno, and Elena?!"

Tifa squeezed her hand. "They're safe, Yuffie," she said soothingly. "Would you like us to get them?" She looked at Kyra.

"Uh-huh!" Kyra exclaimed, shaking her head. "Reno's in the shower, and there's no way I'm going to get him!"

"Just take our word for it, Yuffie," Vincent spoke up, voice low and calm, but something in it made Yuffie focus all her attention on him, forgetting that Tifa was holding onto her hand. "Everyone is fine."

"And Reeve?" Yuffie heard herself ask. For some reason, she couldn't get her eyes to focus properly. The room started to swim.

Vincent's red eyes bore into her. "We didn't find him," he said quietly.

"Oh," Yuffie wanted to say, but her mouth no longer wanted to work. What was happening to her? Was the madness coming back? No, no, that wasn't it. Something...there was something...

Tunnel.

Abandoned building.

Escape. Escape to...

"Junon," she suddenly whispered. "Titus is coming..."

"What's wrong with her?" Tifa's voice asked, the first edge of panic starting to make its appearance.

Vincent's voice came, flat and soothing in its own way. "She might be having some kind of relapse. Overexertion, maybe."

Darkness started creeping in on the sides of her vision, seeking to drown her already blurry world. She felt no fear, though, no panic whatsoever. She was going to go to sleep in a little while, but first she need to tell them...

"Titus," she murmured, not knowing if her voice was loud enough.

One of the blurs shifted, and the scent of Vincent suddenly surrounded her. "What is it, Yuffie?" he whispered, voice so soft and intimate that it would have made her blush if she wasn't about to pass out.

//Titus...he doesn't know the name...yet...//

"Running Man," she muttered, forcing the words past her throat. "Coming...15th street...downtown..."

The blackness devoured her vision then, but not before she felt a hand brush her face, warm and callused. She smiled to herself because now she knew that when the madness had been at its worst, Vincent had been the one holding her the entire way through.

~owari chapter 28

[1] Hey, I honestly didn't know what to call it! What would you steer the Highwind with? A steering wheel? No. A joystick? No. O_O