

Chapter Thirty: Old Wounds

"But I'd be much obliged if you'd take your sense of humor elsewhere." Vincent Valentine

*Come into these arms again
And lay your body down
For 'tis the rhythm of this trembling heart
Is beating like a drum.
It beats for you, it bleeds for you
It knows not how it sounds.
For it is the drum of drums
It is the song of songs.*

*"Love Song For a Vampire"
Annie Lennox*

Vincent sat in a chair beside Yuffie's bed, cleaning the Outsider absently with a rag Kyra had given him and trying not to look at the clock that hung on the wall just above the bed's headboard. His friends had been gone a long time, and in spite of himself, he was starting to worry a bit. He knew all of them were dead tired and running low on stamina. Even Cloud had been unconsciously dragging his feet as they piled into the van and drove off.

Sighing internally, Vincent lifted the end of his borrowed shirt and replaced the handgun back in its holster, folding the rag and setting it on the lamp stand next to the bed. His arm felt strangely heavy, and he knew it was a telltale sign of fatigue that he hadn't felt in years. How long had it been since he had last slept? If memory served him correctly, it had been with Yuffie in the hotel three days ago, unless he counted the fitful, nightmare-ridden periods of unconsciousness over the last three days. Normally, Vincent could go quite a while without sleep, but their recent endeavors had been rather...taxing to say the least.

Unfortunately, now that he had actually acknowledged the fact that he was tired, sleep kept trying to make his eyelids heavier than normal. He contemplated getting up and walking around, but he knew that if he started, he would just end up pacing back and forth, worrying about Cloud and others and glancing at the small figure buried underneath the covers in the bed.

Vincent was glad to see that Yuffie was finally getting better. Holding her feverish body in his arms all the way to Junon had shaken him more than he was willing to admit, and even when she woke up, he could tell that the fever had not quite run its course yet. In fact, her over excitement when she realized her state of undress had probably caused her to have a relapse quicker than normal. What caused her strange "illness" in the first place was still in question, and Vincent wasn't entirely sure that he wanted to know the answer. The Hissers had done something severely traumatic that had disturbed even a tough man like Cid Highwind. Had they done the same thing to Yuffie? Or worse?

Carefully, he reached out and grazed Yuffie's cheek with his fingertips, unable to wonder if his happiness at seeing her alive and well had been premature. Accident victims sometimes didn't realize they had life threatening injuries until several days after the accident had occurred. He was afraid that Yuffie might have not physical, but mental or emotional damage, and unless they knew what had happened down there in that place between heaven and hell, no one would be able to help her.

Vincent withdrew his hand sharply. //You're worrying too much// he told himself cruelly, as if trying to frighten away the timid emotions that had been to tentatively rear their heads, cautious creatures peering out to see if the cold, brutal winter was over and wondering if spring had finally arrived.

Folding his arms across his chest, he sank back into the chair, the wood digging into his spine as his eyes drifted almost unwillingly to where Yuffie was slumbering in relative peace. He couldn't recall the last time he had ever just sat and watched someone sleep. He never did so because he felt like an intruder when he watched someone in their moment of rest, when they were at their most helpless. Strangely enough, sleep didn't make Yuffie look any more youthful than she already appeared. If anything, she looked a bit older, a bit more mature than she did when she was awake. Just went to show that there was a woman hiding underneath the ninja's naiveté.

The door to the bedroom suddenly creaked open, and Reno poked his head in, glancing at Vincent with undisguised wariness in his aquamarine eyes, as if he weren't sure if he was welcome in the room or not. Vincent met his gaze indifferently, eyes and face betraying nothing. Reno shrugged and entered the room, shutting the door quietly behind him before sprawling his long frame into the chair on the other side of Yuffie's bed.

There was a brief moment of silence, and then Reno asked, "How long has it been now?"

"Two hours and forty-five minutes," Vincent replied.

Reno looked at him in surprise. "So you've been counting, too, eh?"

"Yes," the other man said calmly. "Where is Cait Sith?"

An annoyed look crossed Reno's face. "Downstairs chatting it up with Kyra. She'd rather talk to the robotic cat than to me."

"She seems to honestly dislike you."

"I KNOW that. Thank you for reminding me."

Vincent didn't even bother replying. Sarcasm was, in his opinion, only to be answered if one had sarcasm to give in return. And Vincent was one man who was pretty much sarcasm-less so he let the silence fall like a thick blanket of snow, broken only by the thudding of raindrops against the restaurant's walls. Faintly, he could hear the voices of Kyra and Cait downstairs, and it provided him with a small bit of comfort to know that at least they were safe.

"Where did I go wrong?" Reno suddenly asked quietly.

Vincent looked up in surprise to find an odd, pensive look on the Turk's face, aquamarine eyes misted as they stared up at the ceiling. "What do you mean?"

"C'mon, Valentine," Reno urged with a touch of impatience in his voice. "You used to be Turk, didn't you?"

Vincent just stared at him, not liking where the conversation was heading. His dark past had never been one of his favorite topics of discussion.

"Then, tell me," Reno continued. "What's wrong with me? Why aren't my unstintingly loyal Turks following my orders? Why do they keep leaving me behind? Why am I losing control of them?" There was barely restrained frustration in his tone, a strange inflexion that for some reason made it seem as if Reno was bordering on panic.

Vincent lifted an eyebrow. "You're asking me?"

Reno's eyes were intense, the dark scars on his cheekbones standing out on his pale face. "What do you think of me, Valentine? Am I a leader? Why do Rude and Elena keep acting on their own?"

"These questions will get you nowhere Reno. I'm not the person to ask."

"I think you're JUST the person to ask. You follow Cloud. Why?"

"You're upset at being left behind, Reno. Take it up with Rude and Elena when they return."

Reno leaned forward determinedly in his chair, damp ponytail falling over his shoulder. "If you were still a Turk and I was your leader, would you follow me?"

Vincent resisted the urge to sigh. Reno was nothing if not persistent. "I can't answer that question, Reno, due to the fact that I'm nearly three times your age—"

//three times Yuffie's age for that matter//

"—and I see you as youthfully impertinent. You're from an entirely different generation than I am."

Reno opened his mouth.

"And to answer your question," Vincent cut in. "Yes, I would follow you, but only because I had to. It's what Turks do: never question orders."

"Exactly! So what the hell do Rude and Elena think they're doing now?"

Vincent folded his arms across his chest. "Do you really want the answer?"

"I wouldn't have come in here if I wasn't prepared."

"It's simple. They're torn between two leaders: you and Cloud." Vincent stared Reno in the eye. "But this you already know, right?"

Reno nodded. "Yeah, but Cloud told me that his only purpose is to bring AVALANCHE together. You think for yourselves."

"Of course we do. He's not our master, just our leader. We trust him to make good decisions. We trust him to think things through completely before acting. We trust him with our lives." He gave the Turk a deep look. "And since you're prepared for anything I have to say, I have no qualms in telling you that Cloud's leadership abilities clearly overshadow yours."

Reno's face darkened.

"You know what I say is true. Even the ever headstrong Elena is starting to take orders from him more easily."

"Are you saying Rude and Elena don't trust me?" Reno snapped. "Are you saying they'd rather follow Cloud than follow me?"

Vincent shook his head, some of his midnight black hair falling over his eyes. "No, they would follow you into hell itself, not because you're their leader, but because you're their friend."

The surprise on Reno's face was evident. The angry light in his eyes died abruptly.

"Surely you consider them your friends as well?" Vincent asked shrewdly.

Reno was taken aback. "Of course I do. They're the only friends I have."

"They'll follow you, Reno. They'll die for you. And right now part of what they're doing is trying to protect you. You've been in emotional distress recently, and they're trying to keep you from having a breakdown."

"By leaving me out of the action?"

"Yes."

Reno slumped in his chair, looking overwhelmed. "Well, shit, this is all too damn much for me. Anything else you want to add before my brain overloads?"

"Do you have any more bothersome questions?"

Reno's face was serious. "Yeah, I do, actually. What do you think of the Turks now, Vincent?"

Crimson eyes stared the man right in the face. "The Turks are a dead organization, Reno. They fell alongside Shinra. All you carry now is their name. Under Reeve, the Turks have an entirely different purpose, and that purpose is no longer a foul, amoral one."

Reno was staring at him as if he had sprouted another head. "Geez, Valentine, you sure can talk a lot when you want to. Is your mouth sore? Do you need a glass of water?"

"No," Vincent said calmly. "But I'd be much obliged if you'd take your sense of humor elsewhere."

Reno laughed, not in the least bit offended as he rose from his chair and stretched languidly. "Fine, fine." He glanced down at where Yuffie was sleeping. "Is she gonna be okay?"

Vincent nodded. "It seems like it."

"Well, isn't that good to hear," Reno commented, sauntering towards the door. "If you need me, my lazy ass will be asleep down the hall. And try and get some rest, Valentine. You're looking a little pale." He laughed at his own joke and slipped out of the room, leaving Vincent frowning at the closed door.

//Quite a character, that one// he thought.

A sigh escaped his lips as he finally gave into his fatigue and slouched in the chair. It seemed logical that, after three days, he should be getting some sleep, but he wouldn't forgive himself if something happened to Yuffie or one of his friends when he was immersed in his world of perpetual nightmares. Despite his resolve not to fall asleep, Vincent found himself dozing slightly in the uncomfortable chair, hovering in a world somewhere between reality and dream.

When he managed to rouse himself, Yuffie was wide awake and staring at him with dark, haunted eyes.

//Her illness is gone// he thought with absolute conviction as he straightened in his chair. True, the brightness of the fever had dissipated from the stormy depths of her eyes, but it seemed to have taken something with it. The prominent flash and shine that he had come to associate with Yuffie was dimmed slightly, and he knew it had something to do with the memories of her kidnapping and the events that occurred beneath the earth. In those gray eyes, he saw the dark remnants of unimaginable horrors.

"You're awake," he said softly, leaning forward slightly to peer down at her face, which was the only thing poking out of the blankets.

She merely nodded, eyes a bit wide.

"Are you feeling alright?" Vincent asked.

"I'm...okay, I guess," she said quietly. "Did I...have a relapse or something?"

"Yes, you did," Vincent answered, rising from his chair and turning to retrieve the forgotten clothes Kyra had offered before Yuffie fainted. The look in her eyes was irking him. He'd seen rape victims with those kinds of eyes.

//Did they...to Yuffie? I'll kill them if they did. I'll do more than kill them.//

He picked up the clothes with his right arm, not trusting himself not to shred the garments with his claw in his sudden anger. When he thought of anyone touching Yuffie, defiling her, he felt a deep rage, viscous and boiling, in his soul. That was bad. Rage fed the demons, just as surely as sorrow and bitterness and self-loathing did. He didn't need to be kindling the flames of damnation with any new emotions.

There was a brief rustling behind him as Yuffie rose to a sitting position, clutching the blankets protectively to her chest. Vincent turned to see her touching her own forehead with her palm. "I don't think I have a fever any more," she said, and he heard that beloved cheerful tone trying to come back into her voice.

"You don't," Vincent said matter-of-factly. "Whatever illness you had is gone now."

"I feel...dirty," Yuffie suddenly confessed, staring hard at her sheet-covered lap. She had her hands fisting in the blankets so tightly her knuckles were white. "I feel unclean, like I want to take a shower, but I know a shower won't help."

The torn look in her eyes caused a deep pain to blossom in his chest. "I don't know exactly what happened down there, Yuffie, but I know...I must have been terrible."

A bitter, hard-edged laugh suddenly erupted from her mouth. "Terrible?" she repeated. "TERRIBLE?! 'Terrible' doesn't even BEGIN to describe it! It was...I HATED it down there..." Her voice trailed off, and she turned away from him, shoulders shaking.

Vincent just stood there, feeling helpless. He had never been good at comforting people, and despite what Tifa had said the other day about Yuffie finding comfort in his mere presence, a part of him still didn't believe it. If his presence was so bloody soothing, then why was Yuffie sitting not five feet away from him, holding a blanket up to her chest to cover her nakedness and tottering on the edge of a breakdown? Some comfort.

"Gawd!" she suddenly cried, flopping back onto her pillow and covering her head with the sheet, drawing the cloth smooth and taut. "I'm about to cry," she said, voice muffled. "I HATE when I cry! I'm such a damn baby..."

A strange sound somewhere between a sob and a laugh came from underneath the blanket, followed by dozens of others until Vincent truly wasn't sure if she was laughing giddily or sobbing hysterically underneath the cover of the sheets. His hand tightened on the clothes, holding them tighter against his chest as he stared down at the bed and girl beneath the covers who was trying not to allow her sanity to shatter into a million pieces.

Vincent wanted to leave; he couldn't bear to see her like this, not when he was powerless to help her. Was he supposed to tell her everything was going to be okay? No, that would be a lie, and a big one, at that.

Vincent had always hated it when people cried, especially females. With other males, he knew he didn't have to offer much comfort; the masculine defense mechanism would not allow them to accept comfort from another man, with the only exception being close friends. But women were a different story. Vincent had always tried to comfort Lucrecia when she wept...but that had been a long time ago. When he was only five years old, and his sisters were weeping – some hysterically, some quietly – over the brutal slaughter of their mother, he had patted their long dark hair with his tiny hands, wanting to protect them...but that had been a long time ago as well.

And in the end, he couldn't protect anything. Lucrecia perished at the hands of a madman after bearing his devil-child. Vincent's sisters died trying to protect him, not the other way around. He had long ago accepted the fact that he had no comfort, no protection, no love, to offer anyone or anything.

Or did he?

//Yuffie...//

Setting the bundle of clothes quietly on the lamp stand, Vincent eased his weight onto the side of the bed, watching Yuffie's blanket-covered figure for any signs of discomfort. Her sobs/laughter had subsided sometime during his dark musings, and the only sound coming from underneath the covers was a soft weeping.

Vincent carefully reached over and wrapped his human fingers around the edge of the sheet, gently pulling it back to reveal Yuffie's face. She offered him no resistance, letting the sheet slide from her fingers. He had expected her eyes to be closed, her face turned into the pillows, but instead those endless gray eyes were wide open, shimmering with tears that painted silver tracks down her face. Droplets glittered on the ends of her eyelashes, staining them a perfect shade of black.

"Yuffie," he whispered, unable to say anything else. He only knew that he hated to see her cry.

"I feel horrible!" she suddenly exclaimed, the words rushing from her mouth so quickly she nearly tumbled over them.

"Why?"

She was struggling to breathe; her sobs were suddenly choking her. "Because...because...for a long time...I didn't think you all were coming for me!" She stared him in the face, eyes overflowing with an endless stream of tears. "I thought you all were going to leave me down there! I was horrible, doubting you all! I doubted my friends. I'm so sorry, Vincent!"

Vincent shook his head. "Yuffie, it's not your fault. You're alive, and that's all that matters."

She swallowed visibly, making a valiant attempt to control her approaching hysteria. "My mind feels raw," she suddenly whispered feverishly, eyes wide. "I feel so dirty." Her voice broke on the last word.

Vincent reached out and cradled her cheek, wiping away her tears with his callused fingers. Her eyes got just a touch wider, and she became still as he stroked her face softly. He suddenly felt as if he could fall into the shimmering, tear-stained depths of those heart-wrenching eyes. The sensation was so tangible that his stomach lurched slightly, as if he were really plummeting into those stormy gray orbs.

"Vinnie!" Yuffie suddenly said. The word came out more forcefully than he had expected, causing him to jump slightly. Her hands suddenly were fisted in the front of his shirt, tugging him towards her. Vincent's heart skipped a beat when he thought that she was trying to pull him on top of her, but then her hands started scrabbling at his shoulders, and he realized she was only trying to hug him.

That – now that he could do.

Vincent leaned down and carefully slid his arms around Yuffie, making sure to keep the razor-sharp digits of his claw away from her tender skin. He drew her against him, and she slid her trembling arms around his neck, gripping with strength he hadn't thought a girl of her small frame could possess. Cheek pressed against her damp, feverish one, he held her tightly, but not without a certain gentleness. He was afraid she was going to break in his arms, but he also knew that she would not like him treating her like a baby. She certainly wasn't a child any longer.

Yuffie's back shook with silent sobs, and Vincent drew her into a half-sitting position so he could better wrap his arms around her, his human hand resting on her back. The blanket had fallen off long ago, and she was clad only in the black undergarment that she had been so hasty to cover up the first time she had awakened. Consequently, he had no choice but to rest his ungloved hand on the bare skin of her back. Her skin was tender and warm, almost feverish from her lying on her back for such a long period of time. He looked at his own hand juxtaposed next to the flesh, noticing that the cloth of his borrowed shirt and the skin of his hand were almost the same ghostly white color. The light golden tan of her skin only made his hand look even paler.

It was silly thing, but he just kept staring down at his hand against her gently heaving back, long fingers splayed across her soft skin. Something was happening inside of him. There was an ache in his chest that he didn't care to decipher. There was no time for such things now...

//Maybe not ever. I can't let this happen. She's just a young girl still.//

Eventually, Yuffie's tears ran dry, and she was quiet in his arms, head resting on his shoulder with her fingers buried in his long dark hair. She clung to him for a few seconds more, then slowly pulled back, wiping her face as she did so.

"Sorry, Vinnie," she muttered ashamedly, sounding more like the Yuffie he knew. "Don't make fun of me because I'm a crybaby."

Vincent sat back, folding his arms across his chest because he no longer knew what to do with them. "You've just been through a terrible ordeal, Yuffie," he said in what he hoped was a semi-soothing tone. "No one is going to fault you for crying."

She gave him a watery smile. "Thanks, Vinnie."

He nodded mutely, one corner of his mouth curling slightly. However, now that his emotions had been reigned in, he was now unhealthily aware of the fact that the sheets were all bunched around Yuffie's waist, and she was...showing a lot of skin.

She apparently noticed it at the same time he did, for she snatched the blankets and held them in front of her like a shield. "Oops," she said sheepishly. "Didn't mean to flash you."

Vincent almost said "That's okay" but stopped himself just in time, knowing that particular phrasing would have sounded awkward. Instead he just shrugged and stood, picking the bundle of clothes off the lampstand and handing them to Yuffie, who accepted them with one arm plastered to her chest to keep her sheet from falling.

"Thank you for rescuing me, Vinnie," she suddenly said hurriedly, a minor eruption of words that had been pent up for a while.

Vincent shook his head. "No need to thank me, Yuffie," he said softly. "It was..."

//Something I had to do? No...that's not it. I didn't do just because I had to. I wanted to save her. I wanted to see her safe again.//

He glanced down to see Yuffie staring up at him questioningly.

"Nothing," he finished lamely, pushing his hair back from his face with his human hand.

She frowned at him. "No fair, Vinnie. You can't give me popcorn without the butter."

Vincent blinked, stumped by the odd phrasing until he managed to grasp the meaning. Then he looked down at the girl seated in her bed, and an affectionate smile came to his lips. It was a mere shadow of the full-fledged laughter that had come from his mouth a few hours before, but it was enough to bring an answering smile to Yuffie's face. The glow was starting to return to her eyes. She would heal. He was glad.

"I'm going downstairs with the others," Vincent said. "You get dressed and join us as soon as you feel well enough."

"Others?" Yuffie asked as Vincent moved away from her bed. "Is everyone still here?"

Vincent turned back, shaking his head. "Only Reno, Cait Sith, and Kyra remain. The others went after the Running Man." He glanced at the clock above her head. "That was almost three hours ago."

Yuffie's eyes widened, face beautifully expressive as it was before her abduction. "Gawd. Vinnie, that's a long time for them to be gone!"

He could only nod grimly. "I know, but--"

Vincent never got to finish his sentence because the thundering of footsteps could suddenly be heard coming up the stairs, heading in the direction of the bedroom. His hand instinctively flew to the butt of the Outsider, and he was turning towards the door just as Kyra came charging through, nearly spilling herself onto the floor in her haste. Her amber eyes were wide, her auburn hair tumbling around her pale face as she struggled for breath.

She pointed down the hall with a shaky arm, words divided by loud gasps. "Your friends (gasp) downstairs (gasp) they have (gasp) the Running Man!"

~*~*~*~*

They put the Running Man in the restaurant's damp, leaky cellar. For some reason that Cloud didn't want to know, Kyra had a pair of handcuffs in the cellar, and these were used to chain the unconscious man's wrists to one of the pipe's jutting out of the back wall of the cellar. The dark haired woman that Elena and Tifa had captured was tied to a chair using yards upon yards of rope, knotted haphazardly here and there. When Yuffie woke up, they were going to have to ask her to tie the woman up professional style.

The whole operation seemed savage and evil somehow, chaining prisoners in dark cellars and such, and though Cloud had a feeling he was going to get his method of handling the situation thrown back in his face later on, he could see no other

way to ensure the safety of his teammates. He had seen firsthand how inhumanly crafty and quick the Running Man was in open battle. The man had held his own against four highly trained human opponents and one quadruped with a beast's cunning and above-average intelligence.

In the end of the battle, they had merely overwhelmed the Running Man with their sheer numbers, cornering him and then striking. Cloud wasn't eager to see how any of them would hold out in a one-on-one battle. As far as he knew, the Running Man hadn't even been armed when he fought against them in the abandoned building.

Even now, unconscious and slumped against the wall, the Running Man still looked dangerous. Though he was quite a bit younger than Cloud had imagined, there was certain arrangement of his facial features that screamed for others to be wary of him. A permanent coldness, maybe. Either way, Cloud knew they wouldn't be able to take the Running Man lightly.

Cloud leaned his weary body against the wall behind him, the Ultima Weapon in his hands, glowing faintly in the darkness. A small light bulb dangling from the ceiling illuminated the faces of his friends gathered in various corners of the room. No one had wanted to wait upstairs. *Everyone* wanted to look into the eyes Reeve's kidnapper when he woke up, a general mindset Cloud wasn't at all pleased with.

They were all tired, weary, angry, on the edge and ready to snap. Cloud wasn't even sure if he trusted himself to question the Running Man without hurting him, much less any of the others. Cid was crouched in one corner of the cellar (defying Cloud's suggestion that he go wait upstairs with Kyra and Cait), brimming with instability and the trembling effort of holding it in. There was a haunted darkness in the man's blue eyes that made Cloud uncomfortable, but he was sure Cid was aware of the darkness' presence as well, and he was doing his best to reign it in.

But in the event that he couldn't, Cloud had made sure Barret and Red XIII were both within grabbing distance of the man. Though it was obvious Red had to keep an eye on them both. Admittedly, Barret would stop Cid from doing something stupid, but he wouldn't be in the state of mind to stop himself from doing something of equal stupidity. The man already looked like he was ready to explode with anger, and the Running Man wasn't even awake yet.

Rude had gone upstairs to get Reno, something Cloud was REALLY not looking forward to. It was kind of like setting a bull loose in a china shop. Cloud might be able to talk his friends down from an irrational rage, but Reno was always a dangerous, unknown factor. No one knew what could set him off.

Tired though they were, Tifa and Elena each stood to one side of the bound woman, who was, unfortunately, awake and talking.

"This absolutely senseless," she snapped, and Cloud winced at her nasal, accented voice. "Why do these broads need to stand guard? It's not like I'm GOING anywhere." She jerked on her ropes pointedly.

"I'm not a broad," Tifa growled.

"Me either," Elena echoed angrily. "So you'd best just shut your mouth, bitch."

//God, not them too//

"Cut it out, Elena," Cloud ordered sharply.

Elena cut it out, but Cloud knew her obedience wasn't going to last long. As soon as Reno waltzed into the cellar, he had no problem guessing whose orders she would be following.

The door at the top of the cellar creaked open, and Cloud held his breath when he saw a tall, lanky figure silhouetted against the dim light. It was only when the door shut behind the figure and darkness once again claimed the room that he was able to see the luminescent crimson eyes in all their horrible glory.

"How's Yuffie?" Tifa asked immediately.

"She's fine," Vincent said calmly as he descended the stairs without a sound. "She's getting dressed right now, and then she's coming down."

Tifa frowned. "Do you think that's a good idea?"

The two continued to converse, but Cloud tuned them out. His allies could handle and support each other (hopefully), and that meant he had to worry about their enemies. Since the Running Man was still slumped lifelessly against the wall, Cloud was left to study the mysterious woman in the leather bodysuit. She was watching Vincent very closely, eyes tracking his movements like a rabbit listening to the sounds of the predator lurking in the night. The woman was afraid of Vincent - that

much was clear. The red eyes and pale skin had probably done it; this kind of reaction was typical of those meeting Vincent for the first time.

Then the woman suddenly stiffened, back going ramrod straight in her chair. Her dark eyes widened until they appeared grotesquely large in a face that had suddenly been sucked of all its color. What the hell was wrong with her now?

The door at the top of the cellar flew open as if hit by a strong wind, and Reno stormed into the dark room, talking angrily as Rude followed at his back like a sentinel.

"—don't think I ain't angry with you because I sure as hell am," Reno was saying as he descended the stairs, aquamarine eyes roving the room.

The woman let out a short, strangled noise, and Reno stopped short of her chair, staring down at her. The horrified woman stared back, as if enraptured by the man that stood barely five feet away from her. A stifling silence clamped down on the room; Cloud was surprised he couldn't hear his heartbeat echoing in the yawning void of sound. He had never heard a silence so complete and terrible as this one.

Then Reno spoke in a horrified, strangled voice. "Alette?!"

~owari ch. 30