

Chapter Thirty-Four: Trial by Fire

"You can have the sword when you pry it from my cold, dead fingers." Cloud Strife

CEDRIC TAKAI IS PROPERTY OF NOVOK, WINNER OF THE 3333 COUNTER-FIC PRIZE! CONGRATULATIONS! ^_^

A/N: I know it's been forever since I updated so I'll go ahead and give you a little recap of past events from recent chapters:

AVALANCHE and Turks are currently hiding out in Junon with one of Rude's old friends, Kyra. They've managed to capture Titus and Fa-Li and imprison both of them down in the basement of Kyra's restaurant. Cloud and the others tried to extract information from Titus, but their efforts yielded no results. As far as their search for Reeve goes, they are now at a total standstill until Titus decides to talk. In the meantime, Cid has been mentally traumatized by his mind-rape by the Hissers. He decides that he's no use to the team in such an unbalanced state, and informs Cloud that he's headed back to Rocket Town. Cloud understands, and says that rest of the team will go with Cid. So everyone prepares to "move out," but they have no clue that out in Junon, the Master's bounty hunters, Jezebel and Montana, have their eyes set on killing Titus and Fa-Li. These two will stop at nothing to complete their mission and have no qualms about cutting down those that stand in their way...

And another note: Most readers didn't realize that the man who visited Kyra's restaurant (the hottie with the bare feet and soaking wet clothes ^_^) was none other than Montana, the male bounty hunter who holds a personal grudge against Titus. Montana is also the one who burned down the Final Heaven bar in an attempt to kill the wily Reno.

Well...I think that's pretty much all you need to know. Hope you enjoy this chapter, even though it is another oh-so-loathed battle scene. :P

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"You're leaving?" Kyra exclaimed, looking dismayed. "But how can you just come and go so soon?"

Cloud shrugged his broad shoulders. "It's time for us to move on. But thank you for giving us shelter, Kyra. Us and our prisoners."

Kyra waved her hand dismissively, as if such things were normal occurrences in her life. "Don't worry about it. I got to see my friend Rude again so it was all worth it."

Cloud grinned slightly, readjusting his Crystal Bangle as it started to slide down his arm. "I'm glad you think so, but we'll probably end up being a danger to you if we remain here any longer."

Sighing, the auburn-haired woman folded her arms across her chest and leaned against the side of the counter, staring at Cloud with her amber eyes. "I grew up in the Junon slums, Cloud. It's not like danger is anything new to me."

Cloud was just opening his mouth to respond to her statement when Barret suddenly trudged down the stairs, dragging his pack behind him like a child with its prized blankie.

"We ready to leave yet?" the big man asked, dropping his bag on the floor next to Cloud's. Both nylon packs looked limp and underfed; though Reno and Red had tried their best to save as many possessions as possible from the untimely fire that devoured the Final Heaven bar, there had naturally been limitations on how much one man and one quadruped could carry. As a result, everyone basically only had a few changes of clothes to get by on until they managed to go shopping (fat chance).

"Almost," Cloud responded to Barret's question, hopping easily onto a bar stool and glancing around the room.

Aside from Barret, Kyra, and himself, the only other comrades present in the room were Red, Cait, Vincent and Yuffie. Their punctuality was due to the fact that not a single one of them had anything to pack. Kyra had lent Yuffie a few garments to put in a small knapsack, which was currently serving as an impromptu pillow for the young ninja as she sagged on the table in apparent exhaustion even though Cloud had seen her up and chirping not even an hour ago. Vincent sat in the chair beside her, looking calm and unflappable, as per usual. Red lounged on floor near Vincent's feet, seemingly sleep except for the gentle swishing of his tail. Cait had decided it was his sacred mission to keep Yuffie awake by thwapping her on the head with his megaphone whenever her breathing started to get deep and even. Twice Yuffie's patented Fist O' Rage had punched him off his moogles, and still he kept coming back for more.

"The hell is everyone?" Barret demanded grumpily as he sat down heavily in the chair across from Vincent. The piece of furniture squealed in protest.

Cloud shrugged. "If you tell over ten exhausted people that they have to have their asses ready in a couple of hours or they get left behind to walk all the way to Rocket Town, there's usually more fighting than there is packing."

"There's a line for the shower," Yuffie mumbled, eyes still closed. "I had to fight Reno for first dibs. I won, too!"

"How did you manage that?" Kyra asked with a smile.

A devious grin split Yuffie's face, even more disconcerting since her eyes were closed. "I gave him a shot in the pills."

Barret winced, shifting in his seat. Cloud resisted the urge to cross his legs. Everyone else was unfazed.

"What a dishonorable method of combat," Red muttered.

"Oh, stifle it, Red," Yuffie snapped.

Everyone managed to maintain amusing small talk as they waited for the rest of the crew to plod down the stairs one by weary one. First Cid, an ever-present cigarette between his lips. Then came Tifa, followed by Rude, Elena, and at long last, Reno, his hair still soaking wet from his hasty shower.

"I can't believe you guys are leaving," Kyra moaned, putting her hands on her slender hips. "It's going to be so damn DULL here without you."

Tifa smiled at the woman. "Don't worry. We'll come by and visit when this is all over."

"As long as we get free food!" Cait added, before giving Yuffie another bonk on the head with his megaphone.

Kyra still looked upset. "But just how do you guys propose to get down to the runway? It's not a short drive, mind you, and you have...let's see...one, two, three, four...THIRTEEN people to transport including your prisoners! I hope you're not planning on walking. I have an idea." She said this massive tumult of words in one single breath. Cloud was suitably impressed.

"What idea?" he asked dubiously.

"You can take my van," the woman suggested. "If, of course, you don't mind rubbing shoulders with your prisoners. I'd be happy to drive you down there."

"You have a restaurant to run," Rude interrupted.

Kyra looked at him incredulously. "Gimme a break, Rude. No one's coming in during this weather, and I want to see that you all make it out of here safely."

Cloud shook his spiky head. "No, we can't endanger you like that. We have two dangerous bounty hunters as prisoners, and there are other assassins after us as well."

Glowing at the swordsman, Kyra opened her mouth to argue when Rude suddenly cut in quietly, "Kyra, you just escaped from a life of shoot-outs and murder. Wouldn't it be counterproductive to willingly jump back in?"

Kyra glared at her friend with anger still simmering in her amber eyes, but Cloud could tell Rude's soft-spoken words of logic had defeated her vehement persistence. "Fine!" she snapped. "But if I can't drive you, someone else I trust is going to. I'm calling my friend Cedric. HE'LL drive your stubborn asses to the runway."

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Kyra's friend, Cedric Takai, turned out to be much younger than Tifa had expected. He entered the restaurant and threw back the hood of his black rain slicker, revealing a head of short, unruly brown hair and a youthful face. But though he didn't appear much older than Yuffie, his green eyes bore that soul-searching shrewdness similar to the gleam in both Kyra and Rude's eyes. A quiet, unthreatening air swathed his figure, but Tifa was fairly certain that he could turn dangerous in an instant if the need presented itself. Quiet without being shy. Unthreatening without being meek. It took a person with a lot of inner strength to develop such qualities.

Rude immediately strode over and shook the young man's hand, not all fazed by the dampness of the newcomer's slender fingers. "Cedric, it's good to see you again," he said, and Tifa was surprised at the deep sincerity in the normally stoic Turk's voice.

Cedric nodded. "I could say the same for you, Rude. It's been years since I've seen you last."

"You've gotten taller," Rude commented.

"Growth spurt," Cedric said by way of explanation, a faint smile on his lips. He peered around Rude at the bar area. "How are you, Kyra?"

The woman smiled. "Just fine, hon. Thanks for coming down on such short notice."

The green-eyed man shrugged. "Not much business in this rain anyways. The boss didn't have a problem with letting me come down. I hear I'll be drivin' the bus."

Kyra sighed tolerantly. "VAN, not a bus."

A small smile came to Cedric's lips, but he didn't say anything. Tifa had a feeling it was a running joke between the two.

"Cedric, this is Reno, commander of the Turks," Rude announced formally, stepping back and gesturing towards Reno with one hand.

If Reno was surprised at the sudden introduction, he didn't show it. He had been in the middle of slipping on his suit jacket when Rude first spoke, but when Cedric's calm gaze turned his way, he finished putting his arm through the remaining sleeve and strode forward to shake the young man's hand. Reno, surprisingly enough, had no witty comment to offer as a first impression. The two men merely nodded to each other.

Rude continued, "And this is Cloud Strife, leader of AVALANCHE."

Cloud had to slide off his stool and cross the entire room to shake Cedric's hand. He nodded to the young man and said, "Thank you for coming down."

Cedric stared at him. "No problem."

Cloud lifted an eyebrow. "What is it?"

Frowning, Cedric replied unobtrusively, "There was so much hype over AVALANCHE a year ago. Everyone made such a big deal about you, and no offense, but I was expecting someone a little taller."

Snickers spread throughout the room. Cloud only shrugged casually, scratching the back of his head and unconsciously standing a little straighter.

Reno laughed. "No dice, Strife. Even that Chia pet hair of yours can't help you now."

"I don't know," Barret said jokingly. "I ain't seen no Chia pet grow THAT big."

"Everyone's a critic," Cloud sighed dismally.

More laughter erupted, and though Tifa felt bad finding humor at Cloud's expense, she needed to laugh wholeheartedly for once. No more forced smiles or hollow laughter. Often, in dire times such as these, she found it necessary to remind herself that in the end, her friends were still...her friends.

//Chia pet hair and all// she thought fondly, staring at Cloud's comically sour face. She smiled, sharing a personal joke with herself.

Cedric looked apologetic. "I'm sorry, Mr. Strife. I didn't mean to insult you."

Cloud waved a gloved hand dismissively. "Don't worry about it. I've always been short. You get used to being the butt of jokes after a while." He glanced around the room. "Well, I guess we'd better get going. Not much use delaying it any longer."

Cloud sent Reno, Elena, and Cedric out to pack up the van. Tifa experienced a brief moment of dread when she thought that Reno might put up a fight, but to everyone's surprise, he obeyed without a word. It was strange, but Reno and Cloud seemed to be getting along a little better as of late. Now, wasn't *that* uplifting!

Getting everyone's things packed up was the easy thing. However, packing up their two prisoners was a different story. Cedric drove the van out to the front of the restaurant, and Tifa and the rest had to act as an armed guard to escort Titus and Fa-Li out of the basement and to the van. Their progress went smoothly; neither of the prisoners put up a fight. But Tifa noticed that Fa-Li's eyes kept darting nervously around, probably searching for her ex-husband and fearing the prospect of facing him again. Fortunately, Reno was mysteriously absent when they ushered the two prisoners into the back of the van, and he magically reappeared once everyone else was filing in. Fa-Li ended up pressed against one end of the van with Reno on the other. With the long seat and a bunch of people between the two ex-lovers, Tifa's nerves were placated.

They had to wait a few more minutes while Rude said his good-bye to Kyra. The tall Turk hugged the woman and kissed her cheek (much to Elena's consternation), climbed into the front seat of the van beside Cedric, and then they were finally off. Kyra stood in the restaurant's entrance, waving good-bye until the van disappeared into the pouring rain.

Tifa sat quietly in between Elena and Reno, her hands folded in her lap and her mind trying its best to ignore the discomforts of riding in the back of the van with eleven other people. The heat from so many combined bodies was stifling, and she found herself taking deep, measured breaths to avoid feeling like she was about to suffocate. She, Elena, and Reno had been the three lucky humans (Red XIII didn't count) to be given the opportunity to sit on the floor of the van, their backs resting against the van's rear double doors. Every time Cedric drove over a pothole, Tifa could feel the doors rattling dangerously behind her. She swallowed hard. It would definitely put a damper on their trip if the doors flew open, and she went flying back onto the street behind her.

The van hit an overzealous speed bump, and the doors creaked so loudly that Tifa and Elena both leaned forward fearfully. Reno stayed reclining against the doors, seemingly unconcerned.

"Stupid doors are gonna fly open and spill us out onto the pavement," Elena muttered, breaking the weary silence that had settled over the group.

Tifa agreed wholeheartedly, but Reno spoke up, "Quit complaining, Laney. I'd rather be running around in the rain than dying of suffocation back here." The redhead dug into his pocket, pulling out a pack of cigarettes and a lighter. Tifa looked at the ominous objects and began to feel faint just *\*thinking\** of what inhaling second hand smoke would be like in such a confined space.

"Turk!" Barret yelled. "You light one of those up, and I'm gonna ram that lighter up yer ass!"

Reno sneered at him. "You're all the way across the goddamn van. I'd like you see you get your big, bulky butt over here."

Barret's brown eyes bulged with anger. "You little shit!" He leapt to his feet and promptly smacked his head on the top of the van. Cursing, he plopped back down onto the seat, and Vincent let out muffled grunt.

"Oops, sorry, Vince. Was that yer hand?"

"Yes," Vincent replied, flexing his fingers.

Reno put a cigarette in his mouth and flicked his lighter.

Cid glowered menacingly at the Turk. "Don't even think about it. If I can't light up, then neither can you!"

Reno rolled his aquamarine eyes in exasperation, but he didn't make a move to light the cigarette. "Once again, I would like to bring to your attention the fact that you're way the f\*\*\* over there, and I'm way the f\*\*\* over here. In other words, your threats don't mean jack shit to me."

"Reno, Cid, cool it," Cloud snapped.

Cid scowled. Reno flicked his lighter obnoxiously, this time prompting an annoyed outburst from half the van's occupants. Yuffie got so overexcited that she accidentally kicked Red in the ribcage, which spurred another angry argument. Cait jumped in, and soon everyone was bitching at each other without end.

Tifa sighed and looked at Elena, who in turn stared back at her. The two women were the only ones not yelling, with the exception of Vincent, who was trying to keep a very pissed-off Yuffie from leaping to the other side of the van to strangle Cait.

"So what do you think is worse," Elena asked Tifa sourly. "This, or riding in the buggy?"

"I think they're both different rungs of Hell," the brunette grumbled, raising her knees up to her chest and folding her arms across them. She groaned and closed her eyes, remaining in the same position until the van finally rumbled to a halt. Immediately, all the noise in the back died down, as if someone had flicked a switch. The following silence was deafening after so much angry chatter.

The doors at Tifa's back suddenly flew open, and Elena would have tumbled right onto the wet pavement if Rude hadn't caught her.

"You alright?" he asked the female Turk, who only stared up at him with wide brown eyes, her mind apparently not registering how close she had come to munching the asphalt.

"Man, Rude," Reno chided. "Warn us before you do that. I almost fell out."

"\*You\* almost fell out?" Elena exclaimed as Rude helped her out of the van.

Tifa tugged nervously on the hem of her miniskirt, wondering if there was any way she would be able to whirl and slide out of the van without flashing someone. After a moment's hesitation, she decided that there wasn't, and she would just have to make the action as quick and least humiliating as possible.

Taking a deep breath, she spun on her backside and hopped out of the van in one swift motion. She was actually starting to think that the worst anyone had seen was a long line of thigh when she caught Reno grinning at her.

"I flashed?" she asked warily.

"You flashed," he confirmed.

A tinge of red colored her cheeks, and she yanked her skirt down some more. "Because someone packed me nothing but minis and tank tops when they left the bar," she grumbled.

"Hey, the bar was on fire," Reno protested. "It wasn't like I had a lot of time to deliberate. You're lucky I packed your panties."

"Thanks," Tifa mumbled. She never thought she'd see the day when she'd stand underneath a stormy sky, getting pounded by the pouring rain and discussing underwear with Reno.

Someone jostled her back, and she turned to find Cloud close behind her. "We're going to unload the prisoners," he whispered, cutting his eyes briefly towards Reno.

Of course, the Turk didn't miss the exchange. "You got something to say to me, Strife?" he demanded.

"We're going to escort the prisoners to the elevator," Cloud said in a regular tone of voice. "Why don't you and Tifa go check and make sure it's functioning properly?"

Reno glared at him. "All you had to do was ask. No need for the 'whisper, whisper, nudge, nudge' crap."

That said, he stalked off, and Tifa had to run a few steps to put herself beside him. She knew Cloud had wanted her to take Reno off so he didn't have to be exposed to Fa-Li's presence any more than was necessary. He was treating Reno like a walking time bomb, and Tifa thought there was good reason for his actions, but she also believed that Reno had a bit more control over himself than everyone was assuming.

Tifa looked dubiously at the elevator as they made their way towards it. "Is this thing going to hold thirteen people?"

Reno shoved his hands in the pockets of his dark blue slacks. "If it doesn't, then we're screwed."

"Great," Tifa said, stepping tentatively onto the metal surface. She thought she heard it creak beneath her, and it took some effort not to wince.

Reno took a flying leap onto the elevator, and the whole thing shook. Tifa let out a startled yip and clung to the railing, squeezing the metal bar tightly and praying the thing didn't break and spill her into the ocean below.

Noting her discomfort, Reno put an arm around her shoulders and smiled soothingly. "Don't worry, honey. This thing is meant to send loads of heavy machinery up to the runway. It's not going to break just because my skinny ass was stomping on it."

//But what about when everyone else piles on?// Tifa thought to herself, but decided not to voice her morbid prediction of how many violent deaths awaited them if the elevator suddenly gave out.

It took a while for everyone to squeeze onto the elevator, and during the entire time, Tifa maintained her deathgrip on the railing, chanting the words, "It's not going to break. It's not going to break" over and over in her head. She had never had a fear of heights, but now it seemed that such a phobia was beginning to take root in her mind. And once she found herself crushed in between Reno and Vincent, she decided claustrophobia would probably be coming along from the ride.

After what seemed to be an eternity, Rude called, "Everybody on?"

A chorus of grumbled "yes"s issued from the dissatisfied bunch, but Tifa focused all her efforts on drawing a breath. Vincent's hair was nice to look at, but she had to keep her head lolled back in order to avoid dragging some of the ebony strands up her nose.

"All necessary body limbs on board the elevator?" Cait quipped, then let out a cry of surprise as someone - presumably Yuffie - gave his moogles a good, stiff kick.

There was the sound of a switch being thrown, and then the elevator gave a violent shudder, like a frightened child awakening from a horrendous nightmare. Tifa felt the elevator's gears grinding and squealing, straining underneath the weight of so many people. For a single, heartless moment, she was completely convinced that the entire thing wasn't going to hold, but then, slowly but surely, the elevator began to ascend towards the runway, inch by reluctant inch.

"This thing looked a lot bigger when there weren't so many damned people on it," Reno muttered from behind her. They were pressed so close together his breath fluttered a few select strands of her hair.

Tifa didn't reply, but she agreed wholeheartedly.

"Cloud, I really hope that's your sword poking me and not something else," Yuffie suddenly said.

"Idiot, Spike ain't even NEAR you!" Barret snapped.

"Well, I can't see! Here I am pressed against the railing. Vinnie's standing on my foot, and I'm practically sitting on a goddamn moogles!"

"Don't damn my moogles!"

"Someone's breath smells."

"No, I think someone cut the cheese again."

"Dammit, Titus, move over! You're invading my personal space!"

"....."

"Elena, get off my tail."

"Oops! Sorry, Red!"

"Are we there yet?"

"Shut up!" Reno roared, and Tifa cringed away from him, leaning her upper torso over the railing. She was pleasantly surprised to find the air was more plentiful and much cooler away from all the cramped bodies, and she would have spent a few more moments savoring the crispness of it when Reno suddenly jerked her back towards them.

"Whoa, sister," he warned. "Don't dangle over the railing like that unless you want to be sliced in half when this thing finally gets up to that damn runway."

"But I can't breathe," she murmured.

"Just hold on, Tifa," Vincent urged calmly. "We're almost there."

Vincent spoke truly, for as soon as the words were out of his mouth, the elevator suddenly shuddered to a gentle stop. Tifa and Reno were both positioned so that they had an unobstructed view of the runway, and it was with great relief that Tifa greeted the sight of the Highwind hovering obediently in the rain-filled air, braving the barrage of raindrops and the incessant roar of thunder above it.

But unfortunately, the Highwind wasn't the only thing waiting for them on the runway.

At the base of the airship stood two figures, one male and one female. Both of their appearances were striking enough that even from this distance, Tifa had no trouble discerning the majority of their features. The man was tall with long, well-muscled limbs hidden in loose, billowing white garments that gave the initial impression of an angelic entity, but the gleam in his dark green eyes and the angry scar that ran down his left cheek - there was nothing angelic about those. He stood with his hands shoved in his pockets and a smirk on his handsome face. Glancing downwards, Tifa saw that oddly enough, the man's feet were bare, and she immediately pinned him as a martial artist. Some of the more seasoned fighters preferred having their limbs free and unfettered during battle, and apparently this man was one of them. Tifa made a mental note to watch him closely.

His female companion was all sensuous curves accented by clinging black pants, a pale blue tank top, and knee-high brown leather boots. She would have been absolutely breathtaking had it not been for the severe, cruel expression that even her full lips and flowing brown hair couldn't compensate for. Her only other flaw might have been that her arms seemed overly muscular when compared with the rest of her solid, but still feminine, figure, but once Tifa saw the weapon the woman carried, she knew that all those muscles were absolutely necessary. The woman had a huge scythe braced against her trapezius, balancing it with those corded arms in the same fashion that Cid sometimes held his spear outside of battle. It was one of the largest weapons Tifa had ever seen. The blade alone appeared over three feet long and looked wickedly sharp, though how sharp Tifa wasn't eager to find out.

"Off the elevator," Cloud suddenly uttered, hand gripping the hilt of the Ultima Weapon, but not pulling it from its sheathe just yet. "Fan out across the runway, but stay away from the edges."

The two figures made no move to attack as Tifa and the others flooded off the cramped elevator, spreading out across the end of the runway. The area was easily fifty feet wide - more than enough space to accommodate eleven fighters and two prisoners - but still Tifa's heart thudded loudly in her chest no matter how she urged it to be still. She tried to calm herself, to allow her mind to slip into cold battle mode, but it just wasn't happening.

Tifa found herself on the left side of the runway, close to Rude, Titus, and Yuffie. In the back of her mind, she vaguely registered the fact that Titus had come off the elevator as well, standing amongst them even though he had no means of attacking or defending himself. Tifa wasn't sure how she felt about that. Humanized villains only made for more emotional conflicts, as she had learned in the past.

The scythe-bearing woman stepped forward, a gust of wind sending her long brown hair fluttering about her slender figure. "Members of AVALANCHE and the Turks," she greeted in a voice that bore the heavy accent of the Midgar slums. "I am Jezebel, and my partner and I have come for Titus and Fa-Li. You are not our targets so why don't you just step aside?"

Cloud rebelliously stepped forward, eyes cold. "I think you're the ones that need to step aside. You're standing between us and our Airship."

Jezebel smiled unkindly. "And you are standing between us and our targets. I will not lie to you, Cloud Strife. Eventually, we will kill you, but for today we will let you and your friends go free out of the kindness of our hearts."

Cid snorted. He had the Venus Gospel in his hands but hadn't raised it yet. "I can see in your eyes that there ain't nothin' kind 'bout you. I'd rather throw this shit down now instead of later."

"You said it, fool!" Barret seconded.

The look in Jezebel's deep brown eyes was scornful. "I've heard many things about AVALANCHE, but no one ever said that they were fools as well."

"You're blocking our escape route," Cloud snapped. "I think you need to reevaluate who are the foolish ones in this situation." With one graceful motion, he pulled the Ultima Weapon free of its sheathe, its faintly luminescent white metal shimmering with anticipation.

Jezebel's eyes followed the movement of the blade. "So this is the Ultima Weapon," she commented. "High Priest Ajax is extremely interested in this sword. He told me to try and bring it back to him if at all possible."

Cloud lifted the sword in front of him as his feet slid into the customary battle stance. "You can have the sword when you pry it from my cold, dead fingers."

Jezebel laughed, a deceptively sweet sound. "Oh, I like you. No wonder you're the one they call leader."

"Get out of our way," Cloud deadpanned. Behind him, Cid and Barret readied their weapons, positioning themselves to defend the helpless Fa-Li if worse came to worst.

Jezebel saw this and frowned. "Why do you defend your prisoners?"

"Because they can't defend themselves," Cloud replied.

Again the woman laughed, but it was bitter this time. "By Shiva, you ARE fool. At least ONE of your prisoners is perfectly capable of defending himself even if he had all his limbs bound and broken. Isn't that right, Titus?"

"That is true," Titus replied calmly.

Out of the corner of her eye, Tifa glanced at him dubiously. Mythril-reinforced handcuffs bound his hands, they had stripped him of all his armor (one measly Bolt Armlet), and he had no weapons on his person. Sure, he still had his feet, but unless he knew a martial arts style that focused on powerful footwork, Tifa seriously doubted the bounty hunter's ability to hold his own when it came to an actual battle.

"I'm going to give you one last chance," Jezebel said, voice hardening. "Hand over Titus and Fa-Li, or we're going to have to get serious here."

"Then hurry up!" Reno suddenly snapped, striding forward to stand next to Cloud, a familiar nightstick of tarnished gold clutched in his gloved hand. "We've been serious all along, sister."

The two leaders had spoken. That was everyone else's cue to ready themselves for battle. Taking a deep breath, Tifa raised her fists and fell into a battle ready stance. All around her, weapons were coming out, fists coming up. Titus tensed, sliding his feet wider apart and hunkering lower to the ground in some kind of defensive position.

Jezebel sighed, though what flashed through her cold brown eyes wasn't disappointment, but a wintry eagerness, a dark lust for battle. A small smile came to her lips as she curled her gloved fingers around the shaft of the scythe, lifting it off her shoulders as if it weighed nothing. Everyone stiffened, the scent of dread thickening in the battle-charged air. Tifa had never seen anyone use a scythe as a battle weapon, and this unknown factor gave birth to a thick and choking uncertainty. But Jezebel didn't move to attack, only stood there with her scythe raised above her head, a smile on her full lips.

The man behind her, silent until now, suddenly smirked and launched himself straight into the air. The minute his bare feet left the ground, Tifa knew they were in trouble. She had seen many graceful martial artists in the past, but this man made all the others seem like lumbering elephants in comparison. His white garments billowed about his lean form as he twisted once in the air, and, still grinning, lashed the suddenly heavy air with one bare foot. Sparks blossomed in the wake of his foot like a swarm of fireflies, and then a massive storm of white-hot fire sailed in their direction, flames roaring with sinister hunger. Heat blasted Tifa's body, beating against her skin like a dozen fire ants set loose on her flesh.

She had time for only one thought. //To call fire without materia...that's impossible!//

"Move!" Cloud cried.

At the sound of his voice, Tifa flung her body to the left, away from the approaching flames. She vaguely saw Titus tackling Yuffie and shielding the girl's body with his own as they rolled across the rough concrete. Heedless of the stinging scrapes she received on her arms and legs, Tifa kept rolling away from the blistering heat until she struck something warm and solid: Rude.

Lurching to her knees as fast as her spinning vision would permit, Tifa saw that she, Rude, Titus, and Yuffie were separated from the rest of their friends by a wall of fire that seemed to sprout straight from the concrete itself, burning ceaselessly. Another impossible feat. That man - that martial artist - could call fire without a magic incantation OR the aid of materia. And the fire he called could burn in places where no fire would ever be able to burn...

//No...it can't be!//

Tifa felt her heart beating out of control as she watched the flames dancing and contorting of their own accord. "Rude," she whispered. "That fighting style - is that...?"

"I hope not, Tifa," the Turk whispered back. "For all our sakes."

//Rude sees it too...//

Yuffie's voice suddenly came from somewhere off to Tifa's left, high and shrill. "Get offa me, Titus! You're squashing the Conformer!"

Quickly, Tifa leapt to her feet, raising her fists once again, for all the good they would do against the incredible power she had just witnessed. Rude remained crouched on the ground, his gun clutched in one large hand.

The man who wielded the fire walked casually towards them, a smile playing on his lips, hands shoved in the pockets of his baggy white pants. The wind tore at his spiky brown hair, sending some of the longer strands flying into his eyes, deep green wells in which flames danced eternally. He looked very pleased with himself. Jezebel was nowhere to be seen.

Tifa stood her ground, though something deep inside her wanted to run. The unnatural wall of fire flanked her right side, and beyond it, she could only assume that her remaining friends were battling Jezebel, judging from the sounds that fought to be heard over the roar of the flames. Rude knelt slightly behind her, gun held at the ready. Further beyond him were Titus and Yuffie, sprawled dangerously close to the edge of the runway. Titus crouched on all fours over Yuffie in a position that looked vaguely obscene, but he had all of her body completely shielded. However, the awkward stance also hindered the movement of Yuffie's limbs, much to the ninja's consternation.

"Titus! Move!" she cried, eyes on the approaching man. "We're gonna get burnt to a crisp!"

The dark-haired man smiled. "Don't worry about it, Yuffie Kisaragi. Titus knows that as long as he sticks close to you, I can't fry him. You're still such a sly bastard, Titus."

Titus didn't reply, only stared fearlessly at the man.

The man stopped about ten feet away from their group, a darkly fond look crossing his face as he looked at Titus. "It's been a year, Titus. One entire year. Man, how time flies."

"I see your scar has healed nicely," Titus deadpanned.

Anger flashed briefly across the man's face before it was quickly contained. "You know," he said casually, "this wasn't our original plan. No, Jezebel wanted us to whittle away at your numbers and destroy your morale before moving in for the kill. I WAS going to take out that pretty, red-haired lady at the restaurant, but someone had to show up and ruin my fun."

He looked pointedly at Rude, who only stared back at the man impassively, face inanimate and eyes hidden behind his dark sunglasses. But Tifa detected a fine trembling in his shoulders and knew that he was furious - furious that the enemy had lurked right under their own roof, and he had failed to realize it. Tifa understood completely; she would have been absolutely livid if she were in Rude's position.

"C'mon, Titus," the man urged in a light, jesting tone, as if the two were old friends instead of what looked to be sworn enemies. "Why don't you and me go at it one more time? I've been waiting a long time for this day." He took a menacing step forward, a smile still on his face though his eyes held a dark cruelty, a deep-rooted sadism akin to what Tifa had seen in Jezebel's eyes. And the focus of that hungry darkness was the immobilized, handcuffed form of Titus who, despite what the man said, looked as if he were trying to protect Yuffie rather than save his own skin.

//I can't let this happen// Tifa thought. //He's our prisoner. If he weren't in handcuffs right now, he might be able to defend himself, but...//

Scrambling past Rude, Tifa stepped in front of the prone forms of Titus and Yuffie, blocking them from view. "Don't come any closer," she said coldly. "Titus is under my protection."

The dark-haired man stopped, staring at her as if she had just appeared out of nowhere. "You?" he asked incredulously.

Steeling herself, Tifa stated, "If you are a true martial artist, you will honor my claim. To get to him, you'll have to go through ME first!"

"Tifa, no!" Yuffie whispered fiercely.

The man looked annoyed, but a certain gleam flickered in his eyes, as if she were dog who had done a remotely interesting trick. "You've got to be kidding me," he growled. "State your name and style."

She balled her hands into fists. "Tifa Serenity Lockheart of the Zangan Ryu."

"ZANGAN Ryu?" the man echoed with a condescending sneer. "Don't make me laugh. How can a silly woman who practices an outdated family style expect to beat me?"

The mockery in his voice made Tifa's blood boil, but she willed herself to remain calm. "You didn't give me your name. As your challenger, it is my right to know who I face."

The man's green eyes narrowed, suddenly brimming with a dark fire that gave them a faint glow akin to Mako luminescence. Tifa held her breath, muscles rigid and face emotionless. Honesty was highly valued between martial artists of any style, and if this man refused to give her his name, the transgression would be unforgivable.

However, after what seemed like an eternity, the man answered in a low voice, "Hiei Montana [1] of the Shido no Hi Ryu."

Tifa's heart skipped a beat as she heard those four dreaded Wutainese words drop from his lips. //Just like I thought. He uses the Dawn's Fire Style. Good God, I thought everyone who knew this style was dead//

"Dawn's Fire!" she heard Yuffie gasp.

"Tifa!" Rude exclaimed.

She ignored them both. "Very well, Hiei Montana, if you wish to fight someone, then you shall fight another martial artist. You shall fight ME!"

"I don't have time for this," Montana said with a weary sigh. "I'm impressed that you all seem to be familiar with my fighting style, but a battle with you would be nothing but slaughter."

"If you take me or my fighting style lightly, you're going to regret it," Tifa seethed, raising her fists in front of her face, the razor-sharp metal of the Premium Heart a shimmering design against the deep red and black of her glove.

Montana stared at her. "You're serious, aren't you?"

"Deadly," Tifa said flatly, and she meant it.

The dark flames within Montana's deep green eyes leapt and contorted, and suddenly Tifa felt another wave of blistering heat strike her. Only this new assailant didn't come in the form of a roaring firestorm. Instead, it lashed and buffeted her like a hot, scalding wind, invisible to the eye but undeniable in its presence. It burned her lungs like poisonous smoke, crackled against her skin like wildfire. The air suddenly smelled of sulfur and brimstone.

The air in front of her shimmered as if in the grips of a massive swelling of heat, but she still heard Montana's words, thick and pulsing with power. "My power is a blessing from Fire God Ifrit himself. You in your wildest dreams could never conceive of defeating me."

"Doesn't matter," Tifa gasped, fighting to keep her voice steady. "Titus is under my protection, and you're not getting to him unless you go through me first!"

Montana sighed, and his power swooped back into him. "So be it. I swear by my honor that Titus will remain unharmed until you are defeated."

"And the others as well."

Montana smiled slyly. "They weren't part of the deal, but I'd be willing to throw them in for a small price."

"Name it," she said immediately.

His smile widened into a satisfied grin. "Your life. I fight for keeps, Tifa Lockheart. I do not just defeat my opponents; I kill them. Give me your life, and I'll spare theirs."

"Fine," she said.

"No, Tifa!" Yuffie cried again.

"Don't do this," Rude uttered. Only Titus remained silent.

Their words fell on deaf ears. At that moment, all Tifa knew was Montana. Her brown eyes roved over his slender, well-muscled limbs, watching for any indication that he was about to attack. All of Tifa's past opponents had usually borne some telltale indication that betrayed their intentions a split second before they executed the action itself. Tifa clearly remembered Zangan training her for hours on end, trying to break her from the habit of shifting her weight to her right foot before attacking, as it signified the beginning of her attack and was painfully obvious to a skilled opponent with well-trained eyes.

In the end, Tifa had managed to shake herself of the nasty habit, and she still prided herself for accomplishing such a task. She thought herself a more than decent fighter, but...but if she was so powerful, then why was her heart racing as she stared into Montana's green eyes? Why did sweat pour down her face in rivulets, eagerly taking the place of the rain that had stopped without Tifa realizing it? Montana stood before her, hands casually shoved in his pockets and a devil-may-care smile playing on his lips. No raised fists, no battle stance, no sign whatsoever that he was (as far as Tifa knew) the heir of the Shido no Hi Ryu, a martial arts style that had supposedly been dead for centuries.

Then, without warning, Montana suddenly leapt into motion, dancing – there was no other word for the massive upheaval of graceful motion that animated his limbs – to his left, towards the flames that still burned defiantly on the concrete. Tifa automatically started moving in the opposite direction, trying to keep a safe distance between the two of them, but then she stopped dead in her tracks, realizing that he was trying to set her up with her back to the edge of the runway so that one well-placed attack would send her flying into the ocean below. According to the stories she had heard about the heirs of the Shido no Hi Ryu, Tifa had no doubt such an attack would have been easy for Montana.

//He'll try and close the distance between us// she thought to herself. //I have to attack first//

Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Rude making a run for the Highwind. Yuffie, at Titus' insistence, followed only a few steps behind, and Tifa felt a great rush of relief that at least they were going to be alright. On the other side of the flames, she knew that Jezebel had probably engaged her other friends in combat, and she could only send out a brief prayer that their battle prowess wouldn't fail them.

Tifa launched herself forward, booted feet flying across the concrete. Montana came to a halt, and Tifa threw a powerful punch with her right hand, aimed on shattering every bone in his face. The man dodged it with lazy ease, spinning so that Tifa went flying right past him, suffering more from wounded pride than anything else. She felt his bare foot connect with her back, making several of her vertebrae crackle in disharmony. The force of the blow actually lifted her into the air for a few seconds before she came to a stumbling halt, her lower back a mass of writhing agony. The blow Montana gave her didn't just hurt, it *\*burned\**, as if someone had shoved a torch against her bare skin.

The familiar sensation of ants crawling over her body returned, and Tifa lurched to her feet and ran for all she was worth, going straight and then diving to the right just as another wave of unnatural fire crashed down behind her, hungry tendrils of flame reaching for her legs. Tifa rolled and was on her feet in an instant, heedless of the bleeding scrapes now adorning her knees.

She whirled around, already lifting her hands in preparation of another attack. Montana suddenly came leaping over his own flame wall, all billowing white clothes and powerful muscles. By the time his feet contacted the ground, Tifa was on him, concentrating all her power into one kick. Faster than lightening, faster than anything Tifa had ever known, Montana batted her leg aside with his own foot and punched her in the stomach.

All the air left Tifa's lungs in a great burning whoosh, and she felt her body swing forward, her cheek brushing the sleeve of Montana's white jacket. The scent of him, youthful and masculine, reached her nose, and it was only then, with her body completely wrapped around Montana's fist, that she felt the true extent of his power. It coursed through his veins like liquid fire, originating from an unnatural yet holy essence sheathed deep in his body. It was ghastly. It was great. And it was very much inhuman.

//Fire God...Ifrit//

A spark suddenly ignited itself where Montana's fist was pressed against Tifa's bare stomach, and the woman suddenly realized why Montana left his feet, hands, and chest bare, and why the jacket could be easily removed in the heat of battle. Montana's power wasn't just inside him, it was on him, and all around him. It sang in his blood, and zinged its way across his very flesh. Therefore, the more contact his bare skin made with his opponent, the better.

The smell of burning flesh assaulted Tifa's nostrils a second before she felt the Holy Fire of Ifrit blossom right on her stomach. For a second, she felt like Montana's punch had injured more than just her body; she felt as if he had made contact with her spirit, and was in the process of forcing it from her body with a wave of rolling fire. Blinding pain seared her mind, and then she felt herself streaming through the air like a rag doll, sparks dancing like energetic fireflies to mark her flight. She caught a glimpse of Montana through the swarm of fire, and she saw the smug grin on his handsome face, his fist still hanging in the air, frozen in the position that had been her undoing.

Darkness swallowed her vision a second before she felt the jarring impact of her body slamming into the concrete. The added pain was too much for her wounded spirit to handle, and she fell unconscious even as her body continued rolling across the pavement.

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Cloud narrowly dodged another swipe from Jezebel's scythe, reluctantly maneuvering himself closer to the flame wall that separated him from Tifa and the others. Jezebel hadn't said a word since she had begun her attack, and her cold brown eyes gave Cloud no indication of what her intentions were. The swordsman assumed that she and her partner's primary goal was to capture Titus and Fa-Li, but it sure didn't look like she was trying to get to Fa-Li, who was at the moment, fairly safe behind a human barrier made of Cid Highwind, Barret Wallace, and Vincent Valentine.

Thankfully, neither Cloud nor any of his friends bore any major injuries though Cloud and Reno both had bruises from their failed tactic of dodging underneath Jezebel's scythe and moving to attack her. Both times, the woman had easily repelled the two men with powerful kicks and punches, knocking them back from her while never releasing her grip on her weapon.

Cloud had to admit that the woman's fighting abilities were more than commendable. Though Cloud's group had over half of the runway to move around on, Jezebel had managed to drive them all back against the edges without allowing a single fighter to sneak behind her for a surprise attack. What made her so dangerous was her great scythe, which had a five-foot reach, give or take a few inches. Whenever Jezebel sent the scythe swinging at one person, everyone nearby was in jeopardy as well.

In other words, though the odds were drastically tipped in AVALANCHE's favor, Jezebel had them running around blindly, trying to figure out ways to get around her scythe and attack her without getting pummeled in the process.

And AVALANCHE was doing a crap job of it, if Cloud did say so himself.

//I can't have Vincent or Barret open fire with us all bunched up like this// Cloud thought furiously. //Besides, the bullets might go through the firewall and hit Tifa or one of the others. And I need to get Cait out of here; that moogles is way too big of a target...//

"Cloud!" someone cried, right before the blonde felt the presence of something descending on him from above. He instinctively raised his sword and felt metal clash against metal. An ominous force pressed down on him, seeking to drive him to the concrete, but Cloud instead gritted his teeth and threw Jezebel's scythe off to the side, where the tip of it crashed into the runway, sending a spiderweb of cracks slinking throughout the concrete.

Elena seized the opportunity and pulled a golden orb from inside her jacket. "Take that!" she cried, and sent the orb flying towards Jezebel, who was trying to wrench the end of her scythe out of the concrete.

The gold orb struck the woman's shoulder dead on, and the Fire magic compressed into the sphere sprung loose, crackling over Jezebel's skin with all the alacrity of a forest fire in the middle of a dry summer.

"Everyone, run for the Highwind!" Cloud ordered, not bothering to hide his intentions from Jezebel, who was just standing shock still and patiently letting the flames dance all over her skin and clothes.

Across the runway, he saw Cid and Barret hesitate, gripping their weapons uncertainly.

"Go!" Cloud roared. "Get the hell out of here!"

Cid's shoulders sagged in defeat. "Fine, kid. Come on, woman." He grabbed Fa-Li and slung her over his shoulder like a sack of potatoes.

"Hey! Put me down!" the Wutainese woman exclaimed, but she made no great efforts to extricate herself from Cid's grip. Barret and Vincent followed the pilot as he raced for the Highwind, and Red and Cait mimicked their actions. Reno began moving in the same direction, but at that moment, the flames surrounding Jezebel's body died out, revealing her face and clothes to be absolutely unmarked by Elena's attack.

"You'll have to do better than that if you want to beat me," Jezebel told Elena smugly, her brown eyes glittering dangerously as she pulled her scythe out of the concrete.

Elena swallowed hard and drew her gun from inside her jacket, raising it and aiming down the barrel at Jezebel. The bounty hunter smirked and launched herself straight into the air, causing the bullet to sail harmlessly below her. Flexing the muscles in her powerful arms, she raised the scythe above her head, scissoring her legs to gain momentum. Reno and Cloud both scrambled to get out of the scythe's range, but Elena stood frozen five feet from the edge of the runway, her eyes filled with the dark knowledge that she was Jezebel's primary target.

At the last moment, she snapped out of her stupor and tried to dodge Jezebel's plummeting scythe, but it was too late. The Turk screamed as the scythe's blade opened a wide, deep gash in her left arm, blood spilling onto the concrete beneath her like crimson tears. The blow knocked her to the ground, where she lay with one arm dangling off the edge of the runway, a hundred feet above the churning ocean. Her brown eyes fluttered as she fought for consciousness. She was a sitting duck just waiting to be skewered.

Cloud immediately started moving across the runway, using every bit of fancy footwork he knew to maneuver his way behind Jezebel's back. Of course, his movements didn't escape the woman's detection, and her attention immediately shifted from Elena's prone form to the newest threat at her back. She tucked her scythe in between her arm and her right flank in order to shorten the shaft's length and swung it in a horizontal arc, twisting her body in order to increase the power of her attack.

But Cloud had predicted her reaction, and he quickly ducked underneath the scythe's blade while bringing the Ultima Weapon up to prevent the weapon from finishing its swoop. Sparks flew from the clashing metals, and Cloud felt his boots slide a little ways across the wet pavement, but his ultimate goal was accomplished as Jezebel's scythe stopped its forward motion.

Before his opponent could react, Cloud unexpectedly let the Ultima Weapon clatter to the floor and transferred his grip to the shaft of Jezebel's scythe, tucking the weapon underneath his arm and holding on tightly. Albeit it wasn't the best tactic to use if Cloud was interested in keeping all of his limbs attached, but his primary objective for this fight wasn't self-preservation.

"Reno!" he cried, as he and Jezebel began a perilous tug-o-war over the scythe. He felt the blade grinding into his shoulder armor, but he stubbornly planted his feet and held onto the scythe for all he was worth.

Reno suddenly materialized to Jezebel's right, his nightstick spitting angry sparks and murder gleaming in his aquamarine eyes. The instant Jezebel caught sight of the Turk, she dropped her end of the scythe and pivoted to avoid getting a faceful of electricity. All the nightstick managed to burn were the ends of her brown hair, and the woman instantly took advantage of the situation. She grabbed Reno by the throat, easily lifting him into the air even though he outweighed her by fifty pounds.

Cloud was already rushing towards the duo with his Ultima Weapon in his hand (he didn't even remember discarding his end of the scythe) when he heard a cold voice come from behind Jezebel.

"Drop him or I drop you," Elena said flatly, brown eyes hard and emotionless beyond the barrel of her handgun.

For a split second, Jezebel's eyes flicked to the side, trying to catch a glimpse of the Turk with her peripheral vision. Elena and Reno saw the opening and immediately filled it with violence. Reno fired a burst of electricity right into the woman's face, and Elena shot her in the back of the knee.

As Jezebel crumbled to the concrete without so much an exclamation of pain, the blast from Reno's own weapon sent him flying backwards, where he hit the ground in a coughing, hacking heap before lurching drunkenly to his feet. Elena rushed around Jezebel's fallen form and joined her male comrade, her left arm hanging useless at her side and leaving a trail of blood in her wake.

Secretly thankful that both of them were alive, Cloud turned around to head for the Highwind and was instead greeted by the horrific sight of Tifa flying through the air, trailing blood red sparks like a train of crimson stars. Her body struck the ground, bounced once, and then continued rolling across the pavement, her arms and legs getting scraped and bloody. After what seemed like an eternity, she came to a stop, brown hair a tangled mass beneath her and limbs completely devoid of motion. She looked dead.

Cloud was already running across the concrete, legs eating the distance between himself and Tifa's lifeless body. He heard Elena and Reno behind him, but they didn't matter. All that mattered was getting to Tifa in time, praying that she was alive, and hoping there would be a way to save her from the brink of death.

His progress was cut short when Jezebel's nameless partner suddenly stepped right in Cloud's path, hands shoved in the pockets of his loose white pants and a serious expression on his face.

Cloud skidded to a halt. "Get out of my way!"

"You don't have to worry about her," the man deadpanned. "She's still alive."

//Tifa...alive...//

Something had wound itself tight inside Cloud's chest, but it eased slightly as the man's words struck home. "But she's still injured," the swordsman snapped, raising the Ultima Weapon menacingly. "And if you don't move out of the way, I'll just have to go through you." Reno and Elena came up beside him, weapons held ready.

The tall man rolled his green eyes. "Just go around me. It's not like I'm going to attack you." The disgust in his voice was thick enough to choke on.

Cloud's blue eyes narrowed. "And why is that?"

"Tifa's life is yours," the man said flatly. "As per say our agreement."

Cloud felt a chill go through his body. ~Tifa's life is yours~

"I didn't hear about any 'agreement'," he snapped, surprised to find that he felt left out, as if Tifa and this man had forged some intimate bond that he had only been informed about ex post facto.

"Of course you didn't," the man snorted. "It was a promise between martial artists. Nothing to do with you at all."

"So you're just gonna let us walk right past you?" Reno asked dubiously, and Cloud winced at how hoarse and strangled the Turk's voice sounded.

The man's green eyes slid to Reno. "I'm honor-bound. It's not like I have a choice in this matter. And it's nice to see you again, Reno Akuma Mitsuru."

Reno grinned mirthlessly. "Same to you, Montana. And it must really suck to be honor-bound and all that crap. It must *\*really\** suck." With that, he ran right past Montana with a wary Elena following at his heels. Montana stood still and let them go, arms tense with the effort not to run after and kill them on the spot.

Though he wanted nothing more than to be at Tifa's side as quickly as possible, Cloud gave Montana a wide berth, his eyes never leaving the man's dark green ones. He noticed that Montana's eyes shone with a luminance akin to Mako, but not quite. There was something "off" about the glow, but Cloud couldn't put his finger on it.

"That attack was supposed to kill Tifa, wasn't it?" Cloud whispered. "But she survived instead, and now you can't touch us until she's dead."

Montana's eyes were harsh, but a frightening, eager smile spread across his mouth. "You tell Tifa to hurry up and get better before our next battle because I assure you, I will kill her next time around."

"Will do," Cloud said flatly, and ran to where Reno and Elena were already at the fallen Tifa's side.

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"Yuffie, we really should be getting inside the Highwind," Vincent urged. "You'll want to be indoors when Cid takes off."

"No," the girl insisted from where she crouched on the deck, her arms wrapped around her knees to ward off the beginnings of nausea that were already forming in the pit of her stomach. "I'm waiting for Tifa to come up here. She didn't have to fight that Montana guy, but she did! So that me and Titus and Rude could go free!"

Vincent resisted the urge to sigh and gave up trying to get Yuffie to enter the Highwind. He could tell from the sounds down below that the battle was not going in AVALANCHE's favor. The scent of blood mercilessly rode the thick air, a strong wind carrying both the sounds and smells to Vincent, assaulting his senses with them while tearing at his unbound hair. Beneath his feet, the Highwind hummed anxiously, its multiple engines fired up and ready to make their great escape as soon as all its passengers were safely on board.

Leaving Yuffie crouched stubbornly on the metal deck, he went to the railing and peered over the edge. The sounds of the battle had tapered off, and if it turned out that AVALANCHE had indeed lost the battle with Jezebel and Montana, Vincent would have to be the unlucky one to run inside and inform Cid that they were going to be short several passengers indefinitely.

But instead of a runway littered with the bodies of his friends, Vincent instead saw a crippled Elena climbing weakly up the rope ladder, using only her right arm and her feet to propel her along. Her left arm dangled uselessly at her side, dripping blood onto the concrete far below them.

Behind the female Turk came Reno, who seemed to be having no major trouble scaling the ladder, save for his bouts of worried impatience, as he had to wait for Elena to proceed. And still below Reno was Cloud with an unconscious Tifa draped over his shoulders. Though at any other time, Vincent knew Cloud would have had no trouble carrying Tifa's

weight, he could see now that the swordsman was laboring, gripping the rope ladder lightly with his gloved hands and making sure he had secure footholds before going up another step.

Even through the haze of her obvious pain, Elena somehow sensed Vincent's presence and looked upwards, her dull brown eyes meeting Vincent's crimson orbs. "Help me," she whispered. "I can't...feel my arm."

//She's loosing consciousness// he realized. //That can't happen. If she stops, the others have nowhere else to go//

The dark gunslinger leaned his entire weight forward onto the railing and dangled his arm down towards Elena, the metal bar digging into his lower chest. The railing had been built high to keep overexcited sightseers from tumbling off the deck, but now that extra safety precaution was acting as a double-edged sword. It gave Vincent something to brace himself with, but it also cut precious inches off his reaching distance.

"Elena," he said as calmly as possible. "I need you to climb a few more steps."

"No," the Turk muttered, her body trembling from head to toe. "No more steps."

"You can do it, Elena," Vincent urged. "Just a few more and I can pull you up without a problem."

Elena shook her head again, and Reno put a hand on her backside and shoved. "Go, Laney. You can do it. I know you can. Because you're a Turk, and you're strong. Okay, Elena?"

"Don't...grab my...ass," Elena mumbled, and lurched upwards another step, swinging the whole ladder with her jerky, desperate motion. Vincent knew she only had enough energy left for a few more upward staggers like those.

With Reno supporting her from behind and – surprisingly enough – yelling encouraging words, Elena managed to make it up those last few steps. True to his word, Vincent reached down and snagged her forearm, holding onto her tightly and lifting her away from the ladder with little effort. Yuffie came up to help, and together the two of them hauled Elena onto the Highwind's rain-slick deck, heedful of Reno's warnings to be careful with the female Turk.

As Vincent laid her gingerly on the deck, she whispered, "Watch for Montana."

"I will," Vincent assured her. He was going to assume Montana was the male bounty hunter.

Elena seemed content with this, and her agony-filled brown eyes finally slipped closed. Vincent turned away from her inanimate face just in time to see Reno clamber over the railing, nearly falling as the soles of his dress shoes slid on the deck.

"Is she alright?" he demanded hoarsely, and Vincent realized the ring of bruises adorning his pale throat had to be responsible for the vocal distortion. That would be twice in the past few days that enemies had tried to throttle the redheaded Turk. [2]

"She'll be fine," Vincent said. "But we need to get her inside. Cid's ready to take off."

Reno cast an ambivalent glance over his shoulder, but his indecisiveness didn't last long. "I'll take her inside," he volunteered, dropping to his knees beside Elena's body. His aquamarine eyes were wide and more worried than Vincent had ever thought possible. "But you've got to help Tifa and Cloud up safely, Valentine. Tifa's hurt, bad."

Vincent nodded. "I understand."

Leaving Reno to tend to his fallen comrade, Vincent joined Yuffie at where she was pressed against the railing, fingers dancing worriedly over the wet metal bar, her face creased in anxiety. A few feet below her, Cloud Strife clung to the rope ladder, his hands holding onto the rungs in a strong, immovable death grip. He kept his forehead pressed against the

ladder as if he hadn't the strength to move his neck. But then again, he couldn't move his head very far back, for he had one hundred seventeen pounds of Tifa Lockheart draped across his shoulders like a morbid ornament, her arms and legs dangling into open space.

"We're here, Cloud," Vincent called. "What do you want us to do?"

Cloud's voice emerged amazingly calm. "I'm going to climb up these steps, and you guys are going to pull her off my shoulders as soon as I get in close enough, okay?"

"We're ready!" Yuffie affirmed, leaning herself so far over the railing that the soles of her shoes lifted off the decking. Vincent knew the young ninja had excellent balance, but his nerves still jangled unpleasantly at the thought of her pitching over the side and plummeting towards the concrete.

In a feat of amazing strength, Cloud lurched up a couple of more steps, maneuvering close enough that Vincent could reach down and snag the strap of Tifa's suspenders with his claw. Apologizing silently, he dipped his right arm down and fisted his hand in her tattered tank top, pulling her upwards. The white material ripped a little, but held stubbornly.

Yuffie quickly came to his aid by grabbing the woman's legs, and together, they carefully hauled Tifa over the railing and laid her on the decking like Elena before her. Tifa's head lolled to the side, and with her limbs sprawled bonelessly, Vincent could see that scrapes and bruises covered nearly every inch of her exposed skin. But that wasn't the worst of her injuries.

"Vincent, her stomach!" Yuffie gasped.

"I know," he replied calmly, clinically eyeing the massive burn. "But that's not what we have to worry about. The burn will heal, but her energy is very low, almost as if she's near death."

"The Holy Fire of Ifrit burns away the spirit as well as the body," Yuffie whispered, sounding as if she were quoting from a textbook. Vincent looked at her questioningly while behind him, Cloud flipped himself artlessly over the railing, landing in a hapless, painful heap on the decking, where he lay gasping for breath.

Vincent touched his leader's shoulder. "Are you alright?"

Cloud's Mako blue eyes met his for a second, but that brief time was all Vincent needed to know that the AVALANCHE leader was not alright, and he wouldn't be until they were far away from Junon and the two hunters they had just fought.

"Yuffie!" Cloud exclaimed, forcing himself into a sitting position. "Run and tell Cid to get us the hell out of here!"

"Right!" Yuffie said, and was off like a shot, slipping and sliding across the slick deck and tumbling through the door leading into the interior of the Highwind.

"Vincent," Cloud said in a low voice as he scooted closer to Tifa's prone form. "Go look over the railing and tell me what you see."

An ebony eyebrow lifted at the peculiar request; Cloud usually wasn't so cagey about things, but Vincent obeyed without a word, striding over to the railing and peering down at the expanse of runway just below them.

The woman named Jezebel lay in a crumpled, bloody heap near the elevator, her great scythe lying calmly next to her body like a docile pet waiting with absolute assurance for its owner to awaken.

The bounty hunter Montana stood on the wet concrete, the rain-scented wind tearing at his loose, white clothes. Though the man's features would have been blurry and indistinct to a human's naked eye, Vincent was very far from human. He had no problem making out the satisfied smirk on the man's lips or the smug gleam in those fathomless green eyes. The man raised a long-fingered hand and waved at Vincent, mocking him.

But Vincent didn't bother to wave back, for he was suddenly distracted by the fact that the supposedly dead Jezebel had begun to rise to her feet.

\*\* \*\*

Yuffie tore up the stairs two at a time, the wet soles of her tennis shoes occasionally flying out from underneath her and spilling her painfully across the metal steps. But each time she went sprawling, she doggedly bounced back to her feet and continued on her hasty way.

"Cid! Cid!" she cried as she half-stumbled/half-ran into the Highwind's control room. "Cloud says get us the hell outta here!"

Cid turned from where he had been anxiously pacing in front of the control panel. "Everyone's on?" he demanded, puffing furiously on his cigarette.

"Yes!" Yuffie exclaimed in exasperation, jumping up and down in one place. "Hurry! Hurry!"

//I hope Vinnie and the others are inside already// she prayed silently.

"Alright! We're getting the f\*\*\* outta here!" Cid said, turning back to the controls. "Hold onto your panties!"

The Highwind suddenly lurched beneath Yuffie's feet, and her stomach decided to take a vacation from her midsection and scurry into her throat. She fell into a crouching position, arms wrapped around her belly and a hand clamped over her mouth lest her breakfast decided it wanted to pop out and say hello to the Highwind's metal floor.

"Dammit, foo, keep this thing steady, will ya!" Barret snapped, holding onto some of the nearby gadgetry. Beside him, Rude also clung for dear life, but in a much calmer fashion.

"Shut yer flapper," Cid said tersely, as the Highwind's direction of motion suddenly switched from "upward and shaky" to "forward and REALLY shaky." Yuffie's stomach started doing cartwheels, and nausea completely swamped her senses.

Then, quite suddenly, the Highwind came to a jerking halt, and Yuffie felt herself sliding across the metal floor, only coming to a halt when she plowed into Cait's moogles.

"Whoa! Are you alright?" the robotic cat demanded worriedly, peering down at the young ninja, his whiskers twitching. "You look kinda green."

"No shit, Sherlock!" Yuffie tried to say, but all that came out was a nauseated, "Uuugh!"

Reno suddenly barreled into the control room, bloodstains all over his white shirt. "What the hell is happening? Did we hit something?"

"Shut up!" Cid roared, gloved hands flying over the control panel. He jerked the joystick downwards, and the floor beneath them vibrated with the power of the Highwind's multiple engines. Power that was taking them nowhere fast.

Cid kicked the side of the control panel. "The f\*\*\* is wrong with this thing?! If I didn't know better, I would swear we were caught in a tractor beam!"

Cait hopped over to the control room's equipment console. "I've got nothing else on radar!" he announced, voice high with worry.

The Highwind suddenly jerked violently to the left, as if some ancient giant had taken hold of the airship and was playfully shaking it around like some sort of insignificant toy.

"Cid!"

"It ain't me! I'm not doin' anything!"

Yuffie's vision began to spin and darken. //I'm gonna barf! No...I'm gonna faint...yeah.....//

Cool fingers clad in fragrant leather brushed her sweaty forehead, and Yuffie abruptly felt her nausea recede like a nightwalking critter scurrying away from the dawn. The darkness left the corners of her vision, and she found Aeris' green eyes in Titus' face staring down at her calmly even as instability raged on every side of her in the form of trembling floors and fearful shouts.

"This is Jezebel's power," Titus said, the tips of his fingertips still lingering on her forehead.

Yuffie blinked. "Jezebel?"

"Hey, you're supposed to be in the cargo hold!" Reno hollered at Titus right before the Highwind tilted almost completely onto its left side.

Amazingly enough, Titus managed to keep his balance, and his grip on Yuffie's arm kept her from sliding across the floor and into the wall. The Highwind abruptly righted itself, and Titus relaxed his hold, leaving Yuffie on the floor as he quickly made his way over to the cockpit's large viewing windows.

"Hey!" Reno called. "Someone grab him!"

"No!" Yuffie cried, hauling herself to her feet and tottering after Titus. "Leave him alone!"

The Highwind was being shaken as haphazardly as a dog's chewtoy, but by the grace of Water God Leviathan, Yuffie managed to lurch over to where Titus clung to the railing. She wrapped her fingers tightly around the metal rod and pulled herself against it, making sure her footing was secure before looking up at Titus.

"What are you going to do?" she asked breathlessly.

Titus tossed his head to get some of his platinum blonde hair out of his eyes. "Jezebel's magic is powerful," he said flatly. "But I can break it."

"So hurry up and do it!" Yuffie cried, watching as Titus wrapped both his legs around the railing, using the strong muscles of his thighs to cling to it while he raised his gloved hands and clasped them together, handcuffs still binding his wrists. The dark purple half-spheres embedded in the backs of his hands flashed in the light, and Yuffie felt Titus' power, otherworldly and dark, begin rising inside of him. Purple, black, and blue chased one another across the glimmering surface of the strange orbs as the hidden world inside them began to churn. Yuffie suddenly received the impression that if she could plunge into that confined realm, she would find herself assaulted by purple rain that fell from an eternally black sky, and the mists that tried to devour her would be blue and black instead of green...

The Highwind suddenly flipped upside down, and Yuffie found herself dangling from the railing by her hands, as if it were part of the monkey bars she and her friends used to play on when they were younger. Outside on the runway, she caught a horrific glimpse of Jezebel, whose beautiful face had been reduced to a shapeless mass of red blood and burnt skin. Yet more blood pooled beneath one of her legs, but frightfully enough, the woman didn't give any impression that she was crippled. She had her muscular arms raised in the air, palms open towards the airship that had become her personal toy.

The hushed murmuring of voices reached Yuffie's ears, so very different from the surprised screams of her friends all around. Stunned, Yuffie turned to her head to see if Titus was making the noises...and instead she saw Aeris kneeling on the crystalline altar in the Forgotten Capital, light brown hair woven in a thick twist behind her head and amazing green

eyes closed in peaceful concentration as she prayed to the Planet, prayed for Holy to come and save humanity from the Dark...

Yuffie's heart caught in her throat, but when she blinked, there was only Titus beside her, hanging upside down from the railing with his hands clasped together in front of his heart.

~SHATTER~ a voice whispered, and something buried deep within Yuffie's psyche felt the exact moment when Titus' power pierced Jezebel's spell and shredded it with frightening ease.

The Highwind suddenly seemed to sag as if a great burden had been removed from its shoulders, and the airship shot forward at a frightening speed, the mass balance system returning the ship to equilibrium at the same time. The end result of the simultaneous actions sent Yuffie flying to the floor, where her head slammed into the unforgiving metal. She barely had time to think "ouch" before blackness rolled over her in a massive, world-devouring wave.

She awoke to find Red sniffing her face like the dog she often teased him as being. His whiskers brushed her cheek, and she resisted the urge to giggle like she used to when her mother instigated tickle fights during Yuffie's childhood.

"Down, doggie," Yuffie joked, before following her words with a fit of coughing. Her head throbbed like someone was slamming a sledgehammer against her temples, and far above her, the ceiling of the Highwind swam in the sudden haze of pain.

//Could be worse// she thought giddily. //I could be lying on the ceiling and staring up at the floor. Or I could be smeared across the windows. Or I could be...//

"My head hurts," she groaned, twitching each of her limbs to see if anything was broken. Nothing seemed to be. Goody. Now all she needed was a Hi-Potion to cure this lulu of a headache.

"Not surprising," Red XIII replied, sitting next to Yuffie's sprawled body. "Your head struck the floor with a fair amount of force."

"And why didn't any of you half-witted goobers try and save me?" Yuffie grumped, trying to decide if it was absolutely \*imperative\* that she sit up. Naw.

"A thousand pardons," Red said dryly. "We were too busy sliding across the floor and breaking various bones in our body."

"Can it, Red. None of your legs are broken."

"No, but Rude broke his arm. Barret has a bloody nose, and Cid has a concussion. Elena and Tifa are both severely injured. Cloud is unconscious, and Vincent broke a crate in the cargo hold when he tumbled off the staircase. Amazingly enough, he only emerged with a few splinters in his arm."

Yuffie nearly laughed at the image of Vincent pinwheeling off the stairs and landing smack-dab on a crate. "Um, wow, is everyone...okay? Where's Titus?"

"Back in the cargo hold, handcuffed to a pipe with his lady friend. He's the only one who was unharmed by this entire fiasco."

Yuffie sighed, staring up at the ceiling. "Yep, that sounds like Titus alright. He's Mr. Invincible, that he is."

Red was watching her carefully. "Rude said that Titus shattered the spell Jezebel was using to snare us."

Yuffie closed her eyes briefly, trying to chase away the image of Aeris praying superimposed over Titus' face. "Yeah, he did."

"I wonder how he did it," Red said meaningfully.

Snorting, Yuffie struggled to sit up. "Don't look at me. Titus is a freakazoid. If you want to know about the mysteries of the universe, ask him. And hold still." She looped an arm around Red's neck, fisting her hand in his fiery mane as she tensed her stomach muscles and hauled herself into a sitting position, doggedly focusing on the laces of her tennis shoes until the room stopped spinning. She looked around to find that the control room of the Highwind was completely abandoned save for Red, herself, and Cait, who was hovering over the equipment console.

"Well, look who's up!" he exclaimed once he found Yuffie's gray eyes resting on him. "How are you feeling, sunshine?"

"Like squatty poo-poo doo-doo," Yuffie replied. "And yourself?"

Cait gave himself a once-over and readjusted the crown settled between his pointy ears. "I got a bit...roughed up, but other than that, I'm fine and dandy."

"Good to hear. Are we headed to Rocket Town?" All Yuffie could see outside of the viewing windows were mountains and endless gray skies. They could have been flying in circles around Midgar for all she knew.

Red nodded. "Yes."

"But we have no pilot! We'll get struck by lightening or something!"

Red rolled his eye. "No...we still have one pilot left."

Yuffie's gray eyes were wary. "And who would that be?"

"That would be me," Reno announced, clomping up the stairs and giving Yuffie a toothy grin.

//Oh crap....//

The young ninja was starting to think that she should have stayed unconscious.

~owari Ch. 34

Jesus, Christ, that was a long, fuck-off chapter. X\_X I'm tired now.

[1] I know, given my recent Yu Yu Hakusho obsession, you probably think that I got this name from Hiei, but actually I got it from Mt. Hiei in Japan. I thought what name would sound good with "Montana" and I ended up with "Montana...mont...mountain...Mt. Hiei!" ^\_^

[2] The Faceless Man back at the Final Heaven bar nearly choked Reno into unconsciousness.