

Chapter Thirty-Nine: Sojourn in Wutai II

Yuffie bustled about the room in nothing but her undergarments, a silent admittance to the stuffiness of her poor, estranged room. Normally, she liked being as far away from the main parts of the house (and her father) as humanly possible, but in the height of summer's mugginess, she often wished she were a little chummier with her remaining parental unit.

Her original knapsack, a conveniently portable little thing, had gone up in flames along with the Final Heaven bar. Stupid Reno hadn't had the wits to check the laundry room where Vincent's and her soaked and soiled clothes had been piled, ready for washing. Fortunately, being the kind and generous person she was, Yuffie forgave the Turk's lack of foresight on the grounds that he and Red were in a life-threatening situation at the time. No one was perfect, after all.

However, Reno's imperfection had indirectly resulted in her having to dig her old, tattered puke-green duffel bag from the dredges of her closet where she often banished hapless clothing articles she didn't want to lay eyes on again. The relic from a time period when Yuffie was too young to care about toting around such a hideous piece of luggage sat open on her bed, permeating the immediate airspace with its odor of dust and age.

The bag's begrudging owner was elbow deep in her bureau of drawers, digging out spare orbs of Mastered materia from where she'd craftily hidden them in the folds of old, ugly sweaters she never wore. Though carrying so much materia often had adverse affects on a person's ability to take high amounts of damage, Yuffie would rather be safe than sorry, especially where her friends were concerned. She had noticed that some of the slots on the Turks' weapons were empty, a potentially hazardous situation her materia-hoarding abilities could easily rectify.

Yuffie wobbled her way over to the bed and dumped the glittering orbs of red, yellow, and green into her duffel before stepping back and examining its contents. Her tendency to pack light still served her well, as the lack of superfluous garments could certainly attest to. Despite her shortcomings, Yuffie never doubted her own ability to travel light.

Satisfied, Yuffie deftly zipped up the bag and slung it over her shoulder, the strap biting in her bare skin.

It was then that she realized that between packing a minimal amount of clothes and gathering enough materia to level a large city, she was still only a bra and pair of underwear away from running around in the buff. All that, and she had forgotten to get dressed!

"Gah! Stupid me!" she berated herself, flushing at the thought of going out to greet Vincent dressed, or rather, under-dressed, as she was. Dropping the duffel onto the floor, she quickly dug a pair of shorts and a T-shirt out of her drawers and donned the garments in a jiffy. White slouch socks and a comfy pair of sneakers later, and she was ready to go.

Except for one thing. One place she had to visit before she met up with Vincent.

Yuffie quietly closed her bedroom door behind her and crept down the hall, but instead of going straight to the main area of the house, she turned down a hall that led to a place only the maids had no qualms about visiting.

Her mother's room.

Vincent had tried to protest kneeling on a futon with his clothes in the soggy state that they were, but Godo would hear none of it. "Really, Valentine," he had said, "I'm the Lord of Wutai. I have more futons than I could possibly need, but if it will put you at ease, that futon is one of the older, uglier ones. If it gets mildew, I'll have an excuse to throw it away. You'll be doing me a favor."

Quelling arguments through candid logic seemed to run in the Kisaragi family.

Vincent knelt on the old, ugly, mildew-inclined futon, sipping Wutainese green tea that was just as bitter on the tongue as it had been when the Turks used to make "diplomatic" visits during the war. Back then, Turks had doubled as diplomats and

assassins. Polite mannerisms, a prim and proper appearance, smooth-talking skills, and a quick trigger finger were the four basic components required of a good Turk. Though Vincent had lacked in the smooth-talking area, his skill with a gun and cold, unflinching eyes had more than compensated in the eyes of Shinra.

It felt odd to sit in the futon across from the Wutainese leader, a place normally reserved for the Turk who took care of the talking and bargaining. Vincent had never been the diplomat. He was the one that sat behind the Turk leader, assessing everything with a calculating eye, observing others, spotting weaknesses and devising possible ways to exploit them. Until Wutai, the Turks had a long line of successful "diplomatic-execution" missions that usually resulted in the double triumph of striking profitable bargains and high-ranking enemy officials mysteriously disappearing either during, after, or before the Turks visit to the target city.

But Wutai broke the Turks' status as diplomats. Stealth ninjas. An impressive army. A shrewd leader.

In the end, only Vincent and two other Turks escaped Wutai with their lives. Their target, an advisor very close to the current Wutainese Lord, was dead, but on the wings of his death, the Turks were exposed as assassins. Fortunately, Shinra didn't have a problem with that. In fact, the portly tyrant laughed heartily as he claimed that now his ruthlessly efficient Turks could be who they were meant to be. Assassins and bodyguards. Lapdogs.

Godo stared at his visitor over the rim of his tea cup, and Vincent idly wondered if the man recognized him. If his timeline was correct, Godo could not have been more than a child during Vincent's short-lived visit in Wutai. The man hadn't shown any indication of recognizing Vincent during AVALANCHE's previous visits to Wutai, but the gunslinger's features were no longer shrouded by the folds of his cape. Maybe now, with his body and mind seasoned with the deadly spice of age, Godo would heed whispers of childhood memories that told him that there was an eerie familiarity to this outlandish man his daughter had brought home in the middle of the night.

"Can you not grip things with your left hand?" the Wutainese man suddenly asked, breaking the half-uneasy silence.

The abrupt and odd question made Vincent quirk a dark eyebrow. "I can, but I do not wish to scratch your teacup."

Godo nodded as if he had expected such a reply. "You are a considerate man, Valentine, if not a bit on the eccentric side."

The red-eyed man didn't know whether to take the words as a compliment or an insult. Like father, like daughter. Though Vincent would never in a thousand years tell Yuffie just how much like her father she was.

"My daughter runs with such an interesting bunch of people these days," the man said contemplatively, glancing idly over at an intricate painting of a flower-laden vine twining about itself, done entirely in platinum gold. It covered the entire left wall of the room, the dark paneling making the wall look like a chasm of pure darkness, guarded only by the gold and silver creepers.

"Some still think of AVALANCHE as terrorists, you know," Godo said, taking a sip of his tea. "And the Turks..." he turned his gaze back to Vincent, eyes carefully blank. "I know from first-hand experience that they are diplomats as well as liars and assassins. Though I hear the most recent developments have them solely serving as bodyguards."

"The Turks have a long, ugly history, my Lord," Vincent said politely. "One soaked in blood and laced with lies. Of course, one could also say the same for Wutai, a country riddled with the toils of war and then immersed in vapid commercialism."

Godo snorted. "You've been hanging around my daughter for far too long, Valentine." All feigned insult faded from his face, leaving him looking older, frailer than before. "And I hope you will continue to stay with her."

The gunslinger's gaze hardened, and he set his cup of tea on the tatami mat in front of him. "Why precisely did you bring me here, Lord Godo?"

The dark-haired man set his mug down with a near-silent sigh, rising slowly from his seat as if reluctant to abandon the softness of the floor cushion. Godo was a tall man, a trait he had not passed onto his diminutive daughter, but though some men wore their height like a shield of power and prestige, Godo resembled a towering mountain weary of trying to touch the heavens and failing each time. Vincent watched in silence as Godo walked over to the wall with the ornamental vines, the hem of his gray yukata moving around his ankles like wisps of smoke. He stopped in front of the wall, trailing his weathered hands along a silvery-gold shoot.

"I'm old, Valentine," he said suddenly. "I knew I would eventually start to feel the affects of my age. So disheartening in a man as vivacious as I used to be. Of course, my daughter is just as lively as I was in my younger years. Wouldn't you agree?"

"Yes," Vincent said politely, and found that he could easily imagine Godo overflowing with life, like Yuffie.

"Your face," Godo continued. "I know I've seen it somewhere before, and it was not a year ago when you came to Wutai in hot pursuit of the materia my daughter stole from you. You wore many coverings about your face then, but tonight, I can see your face clearly in my memories." His wandering hands stalled on a thorn protruding from the stem of a silver vine. "You wore a blue suit, and you came to bring unrest to my people."

Vincent didn't bother denying the accusation. "Yes, I did. Many years ago, I was a thief, and a murderer. A Turk."

"And now?" Godo asked sharply.

"I am...what I am. When I at last discover it, I shall let you know."

To his surprise, Godo laughed softly, glancing at Vincent over his shoulder. It wasn't a particularly friendly look, but it wasn't openly hostile either. "Then I'm asking you, Vincent Valentine, Turk or not, to please watch over my daughter."

Vincent was shaking his head without realizing it.

Godo lifted an eyebrow. "So quick to refuse?"

"You cannot ask this of me." I don't want to be responsible for her. For what damages are wrought upon her body, or her heart.

"I know she is a handful, but I implore you. She will need support now more than ever."

"Explain," Vincent said flatly.

Godo turned back to the painting, and Vincent was once again distracted by the designs on his silken coat, gold embroidery dancing on a crimson background. That beast winding its way across the shoulders of the garment really did look like Chaos...

"More than anything," Godo said, voice heavy with resignation. "I wanted to spare my daughter from suffering the same fate as her mother, but it appears as if I am once again forced to stand helplessly as one of the ladies in my life is drawn towards an inevitable doom."

Though he had thought himself impervious to such things, Vincent felt a chill dance along his spine. Godo spoke as if Yuffie had been sentenced to death.

"How much do you know about Wutainese lineages, Valentine?" Godo said asked, voice almost conversational.

"Your bloodline is the Kisaragi-Chao line," Vincent answered automatically. "Direct descendants of Da-Chao himself, and the ruling family of Wutai. You are Lord of Wutai, and Yuffie will be Lady after you."

"Ah," Godo sighed melodramatically. "But who will be Lord to my daughter's Lady? Who will marry such a hard-to-tie-down girl? Oh, I grieve that Yuffie will not bless me with grandchildren before I die."

"Lord Godo," Vincent said warningly.

"Yes, yes," the man said dismissively. "Well, I'm sure you are familiar with Yuffie's defense tactic called the Clear Tranquil? Natural healing powers are rare, you know. I have none, nor did my father, or his father before him. Ayami, Yuffie's mother, had it in great abundance. I'm sure you've also noticed that Yuffie's features are not typical of the Wutainese."

"Was her mother not full-blooded Wutainese?"

Godo's dark gaze suddenly snapped to Vincent, quick and harsh as a striking viper. "My wife's blood was even purer than mine, I'll have you know."

"I spoke out of ignorance, Lord Godo, not contempt," Vincent said levelly.

Godo pinched the bridge of his nose. "Yes, yes, I know. Sorry, Valentine. You are not Wutainese. How could you have known that the purest Wutainese lines are those with Cetra blood in them?"

Vincent felt his eyebrows slowly lifting.

"So yes," Godo said. "Yuffie has the barest traces of Cetra blood flowing through her veins, just enough to give her the power to heal small injuries. She cannot speak with the Planet. Neither could her mother. But you see, the purity of Ayami's line bound her to a different fate. A fate that lies in the heart of the world, in the Emerald Mists."

"Emerald Mists?"

"It is what Ayami called them. To assuage my worries, most likely. You see, Ayami died when Yuffie was a child. We even had a ceremony for her at the temple, though Yuffie was probably too young to recall the details. But there was no body. Ayami was horribly mauled by a monster in the woods. That is what we told Yuffie when she begged to see her mother's face one last time."

Heaviness hung in the air after the words left Godo's mouth, and Vincent had the sudden urge to get up and leave, or lash out, anything to prevent the divulgence he knew was going to come.

Godo turned to face Vincent again, expression somber and eyes filled with deep pain. "But it was a lie. I lied to my daughter. I lied to my people. There was no body visible at the death ceremony because there simply was no body to bury. My wife, a skilled warrior maiden, didn't fall to a monster in the woods. She undertook a journey to the heart of the world, and there she battled with the Hungry One, the creature who wants to devour the world. Down in the center of the Planet, in the stomach of the Hungry One, is the final resting place of my wife and the mother of my only daughter."

How many years has it been? Yuffie wondered. Her perfume is still in the air. I can smell it. It makes me think of her.

"Mama, I came to see you," she murmured to the darkness. She could barely discern the shape of the dresser where her mother had always brushed her long hair until it shone like sunlit water while Yuffie watched from the warmth of the covers on the futon. Switching on the lights, Yuffie could see that the futon was neatly-made, the wood of the bureau shining as if it had just been polished. Even after all this time, she felt that if she laid down on the futon and went to sleep, her mother would be there to cajole her into waking.

But she knew it wouldn't be so. If she went to sleep on the futon, no one would be there to awaken her, except for the maids. Her father never ventured into this part of the house any longer. After his wife had died, Godo had relocated his room to the other side of the estate, far, far away from the room where the presence of his wife was still thick in the air like the smell of her soap after she showered. It must have been painful for him. Death was a common occurrence back in war-

ridden times, but the death of the woman he had pledged his life to had undoubtedly wounded Godo far worse than the deaths of the thousands of Wutainese soldiers on the battlefield.

Godo had tried to protect Yuffie back then. She remained within the walls of their estate, in her room located far away from the house proper. There was only one way to get to her room, and a dozen ways to sneak out of it. She'd learned them all during the intrepidity of her early youth; she still knew them like the back of her hand.

Looking back, she realized what danger she'd been in. If Shinra had ever stormed the estate, Godo might have lost both his daughter and his wife. Or, Yuffie might have lost her father as well her mother. She'd never thought about it like that before. Godo was such a stubborn man. For some reason, she always thought he'd live forever.

But one day, her father was going to die. Just like her mother.

What will I do then? I'll be Lady of Wutai. No more running around on adventures. No more AVALANCHE. No more materia-hunting.

Even as recent as a year ago, Yuffie hadn't grasped her responsibility as heiress to the sovereign nation of Wutai. It made her sad to think of abandoning her current lifestyle for that of a warrior-queen, dressing in flowing kimonos, speaking diplomatically, attending meetings and listening to the old crotchety elders yap and yap about inane things.

Though I wouldn't mind the kimonos so much, she thought to herself as she crossed the room to where her mother's closet lay behind a sliding door decorated with white blooming flowers. They look pretty, even if the wearer feels like they're going to pass out from asphyxiation. At least I'll look damn good when I suffocate.

The hinges of the door didn't even creak as she slid it open, the light from the room illuminating the many yards of silk hung neatly in the closet. Yuffie had only worn traditional kimonos once or twice as a child. If someone handed her all the necessary hunks of material now, she would probably just stare at them like a dumbass. Her father always said she was grossly unladylike for preferring to roll around in the dirt with sneakers and shorts instead of learning proper Wutainese manners. Yuffie always had a cheerful insult for him, but now she wished she had at least learned how to properly put on a kimono.

She reached out and touched the sleeve of one, noting how grimy her fingernails looked next to the pink fabric. Carefully, she took hold of the sleeve and held it out, the material rustling against its neighbors as Yuffie admired the green floral pattern at the end of the long sleeve. She had always been partial to green, and pink wasn't the ugly throwback of red and white that Yuffie had thought it was during her tomboy phase.

Sighing, she let the fabric fall and sat down on the floor, staring up at the kimono-laden bars above her. So many pretty blues, pinks, yellows, all of which had touched her mother's skin at one time or the other. Maybe one day, when Yuffie learned to wear them properly, she would try one on.

"I like your kimonos, Mama," she whispered to the closet. "Will you let me wear one eventually?" She laughed. "Well, I guess I'd have to get a bit taller, but maybe you weren't all that tall. You just seemed so because I was so little."

She poked at her shoelaces, winding the loop of one around her finger, and decided she wanted to keep talking since she felt her mother could somehow hear her. She needed a nonjudgmental ear right now.

"Bad things have been happening, Mama," she said. "Reeve was kidnapped. I was kidnapped. Reno had an emotional breakdown. Tifa is locked in a battle to the death with a Dawns' Fire Master. We all thought that style was dead, right Mama? It's exciting to know that there is still a Master, but too bad he's on the bad guys' side."

She tugged too hard on her shoelace and accidentally drew it out of its knot. As she busied herself retying it, she continued to confess her worries to her mother's kimonos. "Remember that song you used to sing to me? I never knew what it was

about, but now...I think I'm starting to realize. That thing is still alive down there, isn't it? And that...that can't be good, right?"

I have to kill it, she almost said, but it really wasn't her place to do such things, was it? How could she, a mere mortal, fight a fallen god? Silly her. Better not to think about it, at least not now.

Her finger abandoned her shoelace for the hard wooden sole of the one of the sandals lining the edges of the closet. Her mother's favorite pair, judging from the well-worn straps.

"I like a man," she suddenly blurted. "He's here right now, waiting in the entryway by the goldfish pond. His name is Vincent, and he's a lot older than me and has the whole 'mysterious, dark, and brooding' thing going on. But I still like him. I...really like him a lot. I know that he's done some bad things in the past – he had to have, I mean, he was a Turk, after all – but who hasn't these days? I steal stuff all the time. But Vinnie has issues out the wazoo. Some crazy scientist from Shinra experimented on him, and now he turns into all sorts of boogeymonsters. And he used to love this lady named Lucrecia, but she died, and he blames himself for not helping her. Vincent blames himself for a lot of things that aren't really his fault. If he could get away with it, I think he'd blame himself for Meteor almost hitting the Planet."

She had the sandal in her hands now, gripping it tightly as she thought about the man who had just been a red-eyed weirdo a year ago and was now becoming the biggest part of her life. "But despite all that, I like him. My chest hurts when I think about him leaving us again."

It makes me want to cry, she tried to say, but her throat and chest were constricted too tightly to do so.

"Anyways!" she said lightly, placing the abused sandal back in its rightful place. "I just wanted to tell you that. I think I need to get going now. I love you, Mama, and I wish you were here so I could see your face again. I miss you so much."

I want you to tell me what to do. I want to hear you sing to me again. I want to hear your voice.

She quickly turned off all the lights and left the room before she could start crying.

"You must tell her," Vincent said.

Godo shook his head. "I cannot. Yuffie would be consumed with the need to avenge her mother's death, and I do not want to quicken her descent into the Emerald Mists."

Those words again. Emerald Mists. The spiral staircase in the deep sea complex suddenly came to mind, and then the attempt to rescue Yuffie when she was kidnapped. And all the while, that light was there. That foul emerald light that stank of fear.

"These mists you speak of...I believe I've seen them before. Or something like them."

"I know you have. I can tell when a person has been touched by the mists that bring terror to those that bask in them. They have already touched my daughter." Godo suddenly rubbed his temples as if to alleviate a sudden pain. "What am I to do with that girl? As much as we fight, I do not wish to lose my only child."

"It seems you know quite a lot about the things that currently plague us," Vincent said carefully, trying to decide how much information to divulge without bringing Godo into the fray. The last thing he wanted to do was unknowingly draw the assassins' attention to Yuffie's father. He decided to ask about one thing that had been needling him for a while. "What do you know of a man named Titus?"

The confusion in Godo's eyes was evident. "Nothing. I don't know as much as you may think. My wife was the one who knew it all, and for the sake of my own safety, she didn't wish to involve me in that part of her life. She always said there

were things beneath the earth that were not meant to come to the surface, but if the day ever came when their world invaded ours, she wanted to know that Yuffie and I were safe."

"Why do you tell me all this, Lord Godo?" Vincent demanded. "Yuffie is the one who needs to know. She believes her mother is buried in the temple grounds. Why do you let her lay flowers and pray over an empty plot every single year?"

Godo's gaze hardened. "Need you remind me of that? I've already told you why I won't tell Yuffie. As for why I'm telling you, I want you to remain by her side. You strike me as very loyal, and very protective. You are water to her fire, and if you decide to tell her what I told you tonight, or if she somehow finds out on her own, you will need to douse the flame of grief and vengeance that will ignite inside her. Yuffie will not let the mystery of her mother's death go uninvestigated."

"Like you did?" Vincent asked coolly.

Anger flashed in Godo's eyes. "I swore an oath to my wife that I would not pursue if she met her death in the Emerald Mists, and that I would neither encourage nor deter Yuffie from falling to the same fate."

"I will make no such oaths to you, my Lord," Vincent said firmly, rising to his feet. "We are all slaves to fate."

To his surprise, Godo smiled. "So you say, but will you really abandon Yuffie to death knowing you could do something to stop it?"

Vincent stared back at him. Fight fate? Preposterous. But even as he contemplated the impossibility of such a feat, individuals came to mind, those who had battled against the own destinies and won. Or had they? Cloud Strife had been a servant of Jenova, a Sephiroth-clone, and he lived on today as his own person, but he still remained plagued by the pieces of himself that had been lost, the memories in his mind over-written by the memories of his best friend. Aeris Gainsborough, the last of the Cetra, had fallen to the sword of a madman while praying for the salvation of the Planet. If she'd known that was her destiny, would she have martyred herself for the sake a sick, decaying world? Knowing Aeris, she might have, but not everyone had a heart like hers. A heart of purest gold.

Quick footsteps came charging down the hallway a second before Yuffie Kisaragi flung open the doors, her dark glare searching for a victim and immediately finding it.

"Crazy old fart!" she exclaimed, pointing a finger at Godo. "You kidnapped Vinnie!"

"But of course," Godo said, taunting his daughter. "When my only daughter brings home a man, he must first pass my inspection before you can even consider marrying him!"

Yuffie flushed up to the roots of her hair. "Shut up, Dad! We're leaving now!" She marched into the room and grabbed Vincent by the wrist, dragging him towards the door.

"Oh, how rude," Godo sighed. "I don't even get to have tea with my daughter. Such a cruel girl."

Yuffie sent a glare in his direction, still tugging on Vincent's arm while the man walked behind her at an unhurried pace. "No way, José! Cloud will spank us if we don't make it back to Rocket Town before he gets his drunken ass out of bed."

"What unorthodox punishment," Godo commented blandly, adjusting his coat as it started to slip from his broad shoulders. "What are you waiting for? Get out of here, irresponsible girl."

"What?" Yuffie sputtered angrily at his admonishment. "Don't patronize me! I swear, you old coot, if I had my Conformer, your ass would be mine!"

"Yuffie, he was joking," Vincent said calmly.

"Yes, yes," Godo seconded. "Did you puke your sense of humor into the ocean on the way over here? Let me tell you, Valentine, when you go on your honeymoon with Yuffie, make sure not to take her overseas because she's sure to ruin the mood by throwing up all over the place. Why, I remember one time when she was little—"

"We're leaving!" Yuffie roared, grabbing both of Vincent's wrists and yanking him out the doors.

"Farewell," Godo said levelly, and though Yuffie was too beside herself with annoyance to hear the wistful note in his voice, Vincent easily caught onto it.

He glanced back at the aging man, the whites of his almond-shaped eyes almost luminous in the night-darkened room. "See you later, Valentine," Godo said enigmatically, half-turning to look at the decorations on the wall again.

The movement once again drew Vincent's attention to the warring shapes on his coat, and though Yuffie was still tugging on his wrist, he asked, "Lord Godo, what scene is depicted on your coat?"

The man blinked in surprise, holding out his arms so that the full sleeves of the coat fell past his knees, battling beasts locked in fierce combat with one another. "This? It is Wutainese doomsday. I believe everywhere else, they call it Ragnarok. The end of the world. You know something of it?" He turned his shoulders so Vincent could see the golden designs frozen on the crimson fabric.

It was Chaos. Vincent could see the demon's form as clear as day now, its wings unfurled over the shoulders of the coat, its long claws extended and ensconced in combat with a dragon-like beast. It looked happy, triumphant even.

Vincent turned away. "No, I know nothing of it."

He let Yuffie pull him the rest of the way out of the room. The girl called a rude goodbye to her father, which Godo returned easily. She slammed the doors shut behind them and stalked down the hall, still grumbling. Vincent followed with considerably more composure, his mind still trying to wrap around all that Godo had told him. He tried to imagine Yuffie doomed to death from the day of her birth, by a legacy handed down by her mother, and found that it made him sick. Better to deny her own name and denounce her family than to suffer such a fate, though he highly doubted she would feel the same way. By Wutainese standards, Yuffie was quite an unorthodox woman, but in her own fashion, she was as proud and honorable as the Wutainese soldiers that had valiantly battled Shinra's armies.

"My dad didn't say anything weird to you, did he?" Yuffie demanded, turning to Vincent with a half-worried, half-angry look on her face. "The old man likes to ramble. I think he's getting into his 'listen to me, young whippersnapper' phase."

"He's just lonely," Vincent countered. "Perhaps you should remain and have tea with your father. He's getting old, Yuffie."

The ninja swatted him on the shoulder, though her gray eyes were dark with deep emotion. "Don't remind me. I'll come back and have tea with him after we're done rescuing Reeve. It's not like he's gonna croak before all this is over."

What if you do? What if you die, and Godo never gets a chance to bid farewell to his only child? Though I wonder if he's already said his goodbyes.

Vincent felt a deepening cloud of darkness settle over his mind. Did Yuffie even have the slightest clue about her fate? Did she know that Godo believed her mother's bloodline bound her to an irreversible fate? The girl had been rather secretive lately, ever since she had been rescued from her imprisonment underground by Titus' former cult. The heartbeat Vincent heard in the deep-sea complex. The green light. The Hungry One, Godo said, lived in the heart of the Planet. Yuffie's mother tried to kill it, and failed.

Titus has to be the key. He must know how to put all the pieces of this puzzle together, and he's not saying. At the moment, Vincent felt a deep, burning rage for the man that kept answers from those that needed to hear them the most.

His fury boiled underneath his skin like liquid fire, and quite suddenly, Vincent realized the emotion wasn't exclusively his own. Deep in his being, Chaos rolled with agitation, and the cedar wood of the floor and walls started to take on the sickly yellow of old bones, dusty and smelling of rotting things. Vincent's breath caught in his throat as once again he heard the crying of his sisters in the distance.

ANSWERS? YOU FEAR THE ANSWERS.

Vincent slammed the heel of his palm hard against his forehead, wishing he could reach into his skull and pull out the demonic voice that plagued him constantly. Pull it out and bash it against the wall until its head caved in and—

Chaos' laughter rumbled through his spirit even as its presence subsided until it was nothing more than a pulse of darkness on the edge of his consciousness, watching and waiting. Always there. When was it going to end?

"Vincent, what's wrong?" Yuffie asked, touching his arm, her callused fingers cool on his overheated flesh. "You're sweating like a pig."

"I'm fine," Vincent lied, pushing his hair back from his face and opening his eyes to find that the hallway had once again returned to normal. They had somehow reached the foyer, with the pond full of goldfish swimming merrily around in their brightly-lit waters, oblivious to the evilness of the man that stood not five feet away from their happy little pool.

Instead of arguing or persisting like he had expected, Yuffie just sighed. "Liar. Oh well, I guess I'll just wait for you to tell me what's wrong with you...or until my patience runs out and I get nosy again."

Vincent just stared at her, realizing that there was an unnaturally somber air about the usually vibrant girl. Nostalgia, no doubt. That was an emotion Vincent knew well, but it wasn't his nature to readily extend sympathy so he just remained as he was while Yuffie stooped to gather a pair of black ponchos she had presumably placed on the floor before she went to rescue Vincent from her father's clutches. She tossed one of the rubbery garments to Vincent, who noted that the poncho was uncomfortably shiny, which would make them prime targets for any sniper who wished to take a shot at them, though the chances of that were slim. He heard a hollow noise of dozens of tiny objects sliding against one another, and glanced at the brightly-colored bag Yuffie had in her hand.

"Cat food?" he asked.

She grinned at him. "In case we get hungry on the way back to Rocket Town."

Vincent stared in disbelief. Surely she wasn't...

Yuffie frowned, looking honestly perplexed. "What? You never ate dog or cat food when you were little? Damn, Vinnie, you missed out. Poor deprived child. The Original mix is my personal favorite."

"...Yuffie?"

"Haha, just kidding!" she exclaimed, swatting him on the shoulder with the bag, leaving the reek of dry kitty chow on his sleeve. "I had you going there, Vinnie! You totally believed my lying ass!"

"Who is the food for?" he asked.

Yuffie rolled her gray eyes as she threw the poncho over her shoulders with a dramatic swirl. "My cats. Duh."

Vincent put on the rain slicker, wincing internally at the loud, creaking material. Sneaking up on an opponent in this garment would be hopeless. "Surely you don't mean that house with the grossly large amount of felines?"

She kicked him lightly in the calf with her sneaker. "Don't call my cats gross, or I'll tell Mimi to pee on you! She's the calico with the bladder problem, just so you know."

Vincent knew the cat. Her bladder problem had manifested quite disgustingly on the tip of Barret's boot the last time they were in Wutai. Red had nearly gagged on the stench of fresh cat urine when he and Cait arrived to relieve the wartorn trio at the local materia shop.

Yuffie picked up a tattered green duffel bag from the floor and slung it diagonally across her chest, fussing with it until it was situated comfortably underneath her poncho. With the noisy bag of cat food under the other arm, she bore an uncanny resemblance to a pear or some other bottom-heavy object.

She smiled up at him, flipping the hood of the poncho over her head. "Ready, my faithful peon?"

"Who's a faithful peon?" Vincent deadpanned, pushing his tangled hair behind his neck before pulling up the hood of the shapeless garment.

Yuffie just laughed and opened the door, the sight of a dark and rainy night greeting them with a thunderous roar that seemed to shake the very floors of the Kisaragi estate. She chattered on and on about something or another as Vincent once again placed his feet into boots that were devoid of mud but soaked with rainwater. There was an odd, lifeless quality to her words, as if they were simply noise designed to fill an emptiness that followed her like a plague.

Wordlessly, he followed her back into the rain, letting her lead the way through mud ("Oh, GAWD!" she exclaimed. "More of this goddamn mud!") and deepening puddles of rain ("Hey, Vinnie, that one looks like a lake!") towards the direction of Wutai's entrance. Lights from shops and bars highlighted the rain-slick material plastered to her narrow shoulders, the dark, shapeless garment unable to disguise the slightness of her frame. Even though the poncho covered most of her legs, the calves he saw below the hem were slender and graceful from a combination of a lifetime of martial arts and the burgeoning grace of a woman's body. Every once in a while, she would turn to half-glance over her shoulder at him, the curve of her small nose and full lips starkly pale against the darkness of the poncho's hood.

He tried to imagine watching her back as she strode into a yawning cavern mouth with that horrible green light in the distance, mists of emerald swirling around her legs and that ghastly, echoing heartbeat resounding off the walls around her. He imagined her fear, and her courage as she went to fulfill the dark legacy her mother had left behind. He imagined being unable or too stubborn to follow as her figure grew smaller and smaller until it was eaten by the mists. And in her wake would be nothing but pure darkness that even his unnaturally acute vision couldn't pierce. A void of nothingness, as if her existence had been wiped clean by a mighty hand.

The image was so clear that for a moment he feared he was seeing the definite future, but Yuffie broke the horrible visage by turning and looking back at him.

"Vinnie, why are you dragging ass back there? Come walk beside me!"

He did.