

Chapter Seven: Awkward Moments

"Don't worry everyone! The two dripping wet freaks have left the building!" Yuffie Kisaragi

*I want to hold you and love you
In my arms and then
I want to need you 'cause
I need to be with you till the end
Then I hear myself reply
She'll never let you in
This time, tonight
If only I had the guts
To feel this way
If only you'd look at me
And want to stay
If only I'd take you in my arms
And say I won't go 'cause I need you*

"If Only"

Hanson

As Yuffie and Vincent strode defiantly into the lobby of the hotel, onlookers turned and gasped at the sight of the waterlogged and ravaged travelers the tempest had blown in, eyes taking in their battle-worn bodies and dripping clothes. Yuffie had suspected that she and Vincent looked bad, but judging from the looks on everyone's faces, she upgraded their appearance from just "bad" to something closer to ghastly and hideous. She nervously tugged at her tank top and hitched up her soaked shorts from where they had been sliding down her narrow hips. Shivering in the air conditioner and trying to avoid everyone's horrified glances, she followed Vincent up to the counter where the manager was looking at them with a mixture of distaste, fear, and annoyance.

"We need two rooms for the night, please," Vincent said with cold politeness as his waterlogged cloak and dripping hair made a puddle of water beneath his feet. Although he didn't appear at all bothered by the stares of the other customers, Yuffie was uncomfortable enough for the both of them, fidgeting nervously and chancing glances around them, for some reason expecting to see the fleshly, black-clad figures of the Faceless Men staring at her with their eyeless heads glistening in the fluorescent lights. Instead, all she saw was a group of very cute guys in the corner staring at her in obvious disgust.

Great, she thought, blushing fiercely and lowering her gaze. *I must look positively horrid. They probably think me and Vincent are-grossness!*

She shivered at the thought, but it had nothing at all to do with disgust.

"Um, sir?" the manager said cautiously, obviously afraid of Vincent. Even soaking wet and missing his headband, the dark gunslinger was still one of the scariest things on the Planet. "We, um, only have one room left tonight. There was a major influx of tourists this evening on their way back from Costa del Sol. You know how those things go--"

"Oh gawd!" Yuffie exclaimed incredulously, temporarily forgetting her dripping state. "One room? Are you sure, mister? That would be so uncomfortable!"

"Could you check again, please?" Vincent asked flatly, ignoring Yuffie's outburst.

"C-Certainly, sir," the manager stuttered, turning to his computer and tapping a few keys as both Yuffie and Vincent watched intently, willing the machine to be wrong. The man squirmed underneath Vincent's ruby red and Yuffie's stormy gray stares; nervous sweat glistened on his brow, and his hands shook a bit. He, too, hoped desperately that his computer would be wrong, but his search came up with the same results.

"I'm terribly sorry, sir," he said weakly, directing his answer at Vincent. "One room is all we have left."

"That sucks!" Yuffie spat angrily. "Does this crappy little room of yours at least have two beds? Because I'm certainly not sleeping in the gutter outside, thank you very much!"

The man nodded quickly, blue eyes wide. "Y-Yes," he stuttered. "Two warm, dry comfortable--"

"We'll take it," Vincent interrupted.

"Of course, sir!" the man exclaimed in relief, fumbling underneath the counter and producing a key, which he handed over to Vincent with shaking hands.

Vincent took the key. "How much gil will it be?"

"Oh!" the manager said, apparently having forgotten that even freakish, dripping wet, fishy smelling members of AVALANCHE had to pay to stay in hotels. "That will be 500 gil, sir."

Yuffie's mouth dropped open. "500 gil?! Since when did the price go up? Sheesh! Your service here had better be good, buddy! I mean, you'd think that you would be more flexible, being that we're members of AVALANCHE and could seriously kick your--"

"Here you go, sir," Vincent said politely, handing over slippery coins that he had pulled out of his waterlogged pocket, trying very hard to pretend that Yuffie wasn't fuming beside him for the time being.

"T-Thank you," the manager said. "Have a nice stay, you two!"

Yuffie rolled her eyes as she and Vincent walked towards the elevators. "Oh pu-lease!" she snarled under her breath, in a huffy mood and making no effort to conceal it. For some reason, she was extremely uncomfortable with the fact that she would be sharing a room alone with Vincent for the night. And like her irrational and unjustified fear in the complex they had recently escaped from, she had no idea why she felt that way. It wasn't like Vincent was in the picture as far as prospective single men went. He was too weird, for one thing, and he scared the living crap out of her sometimes with his dark, gothic attitude, and unfeeling countenance. And he was old, too. Sure, he may only look 27, but in reality, he was way older than that. Definitely not able to meet Yuffie Kisaragi standards, whatever those were. She would rather go out with that drunkard womanizer Reno than Vincent Valentine. But if that was the case, then why was she so nervous...

The elevators chimed as they slid open with a gentle whoosh of air. Vincent strode in calmly, the room key clutched in one hand, but Yuffie suddenly turned around and glared at all the people in the lobby, who were still staring at the two travelers like they were the amazing Mud Monsters from Mars.

"Don't worry, everyone!" she cried, sarcasm dripping from her voice. "The two dripping wet freaks have left the building! No need to gawp and panic like a bunch of retarded cows who have nothing better to do than--"

Vincent hooked his claw onto the waistband of her tan shorts and yanked her inside the elevator just as the doors whooshed shut.

Yuffie relaxed nonchalantly against the metal wall and smiled sweetly at her dark companion as he glared at her, dripping strands of ebony hair practically hiding his red eyes from view. She was fully expecting him to start bitching at her about proper etiquette, but he did no such thing, only kept glaring at her in a reprimanding fashion. Vincent was actually kinda cute when he was angry...

With a shudder that Yuffie thought didn't belong there for a hotel that cost so much, the elevator began its ascent up to the fifth floor, where Vincent and Yuffie's room was located.

"Hey Vinnie?" she suddenly asked as they watched the numbers above the doors light up as they passed each floor.

"Yes Yuffie?" he replied calmly, studying the closed doors, apparently having gotten tired of scolding her with his eyes.

She fidgeted nervously. "What if, you know, the room had only one bed? What would you have done then, huh?"

No! *Whatever* had possessed her to ask such a question?!

The elevator doors opened with a chime, and Vincent strode out without a glance at her.

Yuffie ran out after him, her yellow sneakers sinking into the plush carpet and making squishing noises when her feet meshed with the water in them. "Hey!" she called, ignoring the fact that there could be people sleeping in the rooms they passed. "I asked you a question, Vinnie!"

"I know," he said calmly, ruby red eyes searching the numbers on the doors. "But I see no reason to answer it due to the fact that the scenario didn't present itself."

"Huh?" Yuffie asked dumbly as they stopped in front of the room marked 532 and Vincent inserted the key into the keyhole. "You know, Vinnie, since I'm really stupid, I would really like it if you would speak in English to me."

"I don't worry about situations that didn't happen," he translated.

"It's all gone and past, you mean," she said softly.

Vincent paused, and Yuffie received the distinct impression that she had surprised him. "Yes," he said finally, "something like that."

He opened the room and stepped back, motioning for her to precede him through the door. Yuffie quickly scampered through the doorway, flushing slightly at the chivalry he was showing a little brat like her. She had always thought Vincent was too damn polite for his own good.

Yuffie strode into the hotel room, relishing the sight of the obligatory bland color schemes of the beige walls and tan bed covers. It was freezing, and room had that special "hotel" smell lingering in it like a phantom, but she didn't care.

"I've got dibs on the window bed!" she cried, racing across the room and dropping the Conformer onto the spotless bedspread to reserve her space, having enough sense not to throw her dirty body on the clean bed along with her weapon.

Vincent didn't reply, only shut the door behind him and walked calmly into the room, examining his surroundings with that same cool, detached way that he examined everything.

Yuffie turned and watched him a few moments before asking, "So Vinnie, what are we gonna do?"

He turned his fiery gaze to her, eyes unreadable. "What are you talking about?"

"You know!" Yuffie said, trying to make him sound like the idiot instead of her. "About our situation?"

"What situation?"

She rolled her eyes and put her hands on her hips. "Gawd, you are so thick sometimes! Are you sure you cleaned out all the cobwebs from your thirty-year long nap in that stinky coffin? I mean, I case you haven't noticed, we're in a predicament here!"

Vincent just stared some more.

Yuffie resisted the urge to scream. "What are we gonna do about Cloud and the others?" she said with exaggerated patience. "We were supposed to meet them back at Tifa's bar like five hours ago! They're probably worried sick about us right now! What if they go looking for the both of us in that cave? They'll see that the ship isn't there, and they'll think we died or something!"

The man shrugged. "There is nothing we can do about it right now. Our PHS is broken; Cid will probably have to repair it again. I overheard two mechanics down in the lobby saying that the hotel's lines are down due to the storm. We'll stay the night here and leave in the morning."

"Even if it's raining?" Yuffie whined.

"You want to dish out five hundred gil to stay here another night?"

Yuffie pouted. "Well...no, but-"

Vincent waved his hand. "No buts. It's already been decided."

"Well, excuse me for breathing! Who died and made you leader?"

Vincent ignored her. "I'm going to take a shower..."

"No way!" Yuffie immediately exclaimed. "I'm taking a shower first, Vinnie! You're not the one who almost had your shoulder blown off by some freak with no face! Now move it or lose it!"

Without giving him a chance to protest, she made a beeline for the bathroom, brushing rudely past Vincent and shutting the door behind her. After a moment, she locked it, too, not because she felt that Vincent was going to come sneaking in on her, but because, for some odd reason, she had become particularly big on having her privacy lately. Maybe she was starting to finally grow up, but she didn't think so. After all, Yuffie still believed profoundly in the philosophy that if you whined and bellyached enough, you could get anything you wanted.

After figuring out how to work the water faucet in the bathtub (every hotel seemed to have a different mechanism just to annoy unaware people who stepped into the shower, turned a knob, and found themselves under a waterfall of either burning hot or freezing cold water. Not that such a thing had ever happened to Yuffie!), she glanced in the mirror to see an incredibly horrid sight.

"Grossness!" she exclaimed, her voice echoing in the bathroom as she made an ugly face at her reflection. There was a huge whopper of a bruise on her left cheekbone, the ugly circle of flesh a myriad of purples and yellow and blacks. Already she could hear that pain-in-the-ass Reno laughing and making fun of her. Her dark brown hair was tangled almost beyond help and smelled of seawater and the remnants of terror. But even worse, she saw that her tank top was ripped in...very inappropriate places.

"Great!" she growled at her reflection. "I've been walking around with my boob practically hanging out of my shirt!"

Goddamn that Vincent! Why didn't he say something?!

Rearranging her tattered shirt so that she wasn't showing so much skin, Yuffie gingerly untied Vincent's red bandana from her wounded shoulder. She had gotten off lucky, at least in her opinion. The bullet had taken off a chunk of her shoulder, but after a couple of Hi-Potions all that was left of the gaping wound was a section of tender, shiny-looking scar tissue. The arm still ached when she moved it; she suspected that the dull pain was something that time and time alone could heal. She knew from experience that she would have to take it easy, or she would risk busting the wound open again, something that had happened to her in the past. Oh well, at least it wasn't spewing out blood anymore.

Making one last ugly face at herself, Yuffie turned away and proceeded to take a shower, eager to wash away all the aches and pains that plagued her, the physical ones, at least.

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Vincent waited until he heard the water going and was content that Yuffie wasn't so weary that she would fall asleep and drown in the shower before he sighed internally and removed the Death Penalty from his holster, setting on the floor beside the bed would be sleeping in tonight, seeing that he other was reserved. He could hear Yuffie talking to herself in the bathroom, and the sound of her whining, high-pitched voice was a world of comfort. He had been worried in his heart of hearts that the girl might experience a sort of emotional aftershock that would reawaken the great earthquake of irrational terror that had gripped her in the deep sea complex they had fled from. Apparently, she was, for the most part, unharmed and was only suffering from severe crankiness, a "Yuffie" trait that he had learned to put up with from his adventures with AVALANCHE.

Walking up to the room's dresser, metal boots not making a sound on the plush carpet, Vincent stood in front of the mirror and stared at himself coldly. His blue-black hair hung around his face like a shroud, sharply contrasting with his deathly pale skin. Shorter strands of tangled ebony locks hung over his forehead and into his face, but even the ominous darkness of those tresses couldn't obscure the faintly luminescent red eyes whose coldly bestial nature shone defiantly from behind the veil of black hair...laughing, taunting.

Without any outer change in expression, Vincent stood unnaturally still and listened closer to the frozen wasteland that was his soul, searching the icy plains for the consciousness of the demon whose name no human tongue could pronounce, whose language no human, even a freakish hybrid like Vincent, could understand. Yes, this demon was almost another entity entirely, with thoughts and ideas of its own, a creature that was possibly as old as the Ancients, but to Vincent's callous mind it was simply...Chaos.

The dark man listened even more carefully, hearing the biting wind whistling through the valves of his frozen heart, until he could just barely sense Chaos. The demon glared out at him from between two glaciers with absolute apathy, its soundless voice stubbornly silent now. Vincent coolly turned away from the demon's resting place and emerged from his trance-like state, red eyes coming back into focus. Chaos may be subdued and recessive now, but it hadn't been so when he and Yuffie had been sneaking around the deep-sea complex. Though he had given no outward signs of discomfort, Vincent had been fighting the transformation the entire time he had been there. Chaos was being unusually assertive and clamorous, trying to forcefully take over Vincent's form by using its sheer and incredible will. So adamant and dominating it had been that he had almost lost control on the demon several times while descending the stairs into the Green Room.

Vincent thought that Chaos' aggressive behavior might be connected to the irrational fear Yuffie had felt. Maybe there had been something down there that was producing some sort of...vibes that were meant to incite fear in the hearts of mortals. In his wanderings, Vincent had encountered several creatures with such an ability, but their fear-inducing attacks had always proved ineffective on him. He supposed that he had no emotions - fear included - for them to manipulate. Or maybe he was already too much of a monster already, and his inhuman nature immediately nullified their attacks. Whatever the case, such "fear vibes" had never worked on him before.

Until tonight.

But it hadn't even been him who was perturbed, really; it had been Chaos who brutally shattered and shoved its way out of its abode in darkness of Vincent's soul or wherever it resided. It had hovered there close to the surface of Vincent's consciousness, watching and waiting like it had never done before. The demon had gotten rowdier and more assertive as he and Yuffie had descended deeper into the earth, attempting to instigate the transformation without the consent of its host. It took all of Vincent's icy will power and grim resolve to contain Chaos. Everything from the eerie green light to the exotic stench hanging in the air to the rhythmic pounding from down below had - dare he say - disturbed the heartless demon.

Vincent was at a total loss to explain why, though. There were many things that he didn't know about Chaos...many things he had no desire to know. He loathed the demon as much as he loathed himself, but if Chaos acted like this every time it came in contact with circumstances like the ones of the past few hours, then new problems could arise. Vincent couldn't afford to be fighting the demon with every mental tooth, nail and claw he possessed whenever it became agitated. And no matter how much distaste he felt when discussing his "other halves," he knew that he would have to tell Cloud about this.

Or maybe he wouldn't tell him anything and simply disappear into the night. It would probably be safer that way...for them and for him. Why subject their sublime innocence to his dark presence and risk tainting them with his poison?

A loud thud from the bathroom jolted him out of his customarily morbid thoughts. Vincent stiffened but did not turn his head. Instead he listened carefully, suddenly gripped by incredible worry. He heard Yuffie swearing vividly with words she must have learned from Cid. Fortunately, the situation was completely benign. She had dropped a shampoo bottle on her toe and apparently was not very happy about it. No faceless monster had emerged from the toilet to attack her.

Vincent relaxed and, making sure that the door to the room and bathroom were both locked, removed his cloak, hanging it up to dry on a rack that was supposed to be used to hang clothes. Ignoring all the aches and pain generated just by moving, he slowly lifted the hem of his black shirt and pulled it over his head, hanging it up next to his cloak. Even though he wasn't standing in front of the mirror, Vincent could see that his chest and rib cage were covered in nasty purple bruises that splattered his pale skin like leeches. The tender, naked human flesh of his right arm also sported similar marks, silent testimonies to how narrow their escape had been indeed. He considered himself lucky that he had gotten by with only bruises; the strength of the Faceless Men had rivaled his own. In the worst case scenario, he could have ended up with a score of broken ribs or a crushed skull, but instead the blows of the monstrosities had only left these nasty reminders that would be gone come morning. They always were. Even bruises found Vincent's presence so distasteful that they didn't hang around for long.

Sitting down on his bed, he pulled off his boots, making sure to hide the Outsider underneath the bed where it could be easily reached, Vincent realized for the first time that he and Yuffie didn't have an extra change of clothes. They had left their packs on their chocobos just on the outskirts of the mountain range near Midgar. A bad thing, considering the condition of their current garments. The lack of suitable clothes, however, didn't really bother Vincent. He would just sleep in his pants, knowing that his clothes would be dry in the morning. Unlike his human friends, embarrassment and discomfort weren't really two emotions that he experienced often. He didn't care what others thought of him...

Completely oblivious to the fact that the air conditioner was turned on high and he was half-naked, Vincent climbed underneath the sheets, the human part of him feeling a strange comfort as the scratchy linen settled over his naked chest and damp pants.

As he lay there alone in the airy dark, listening to Yuffie sing softly to herself in her native Wutainese tongue, Vincent unwittingly let his thoughts drift to the thieving ninja who would be sleeping in the bed five feet away from him not long from now.

Even he had been surprised at how much she had changed when he had arrived in Kalm yesterday evening. Her short cap of dark hair with misplaced blond highlights had been swapped with an ever-lengthening waterfall of deep chocolate locks that brushed against her smooth, slender shoulders as she walked. A year of growing up had added womanly curves to her formerly stick-like figure. A year hadn't been long enough to add much to her height, but the girl who had once stolen their materia and chased Barret around Choco Billy's ranch with a pooper scooper had taken on quite a mature air. Though the look in her deep gray eyes was still flat out mischievous, buried underneath that was a keen intelligence and burgeoning woman's mind. The way those youthful eyes lit up with happiness the evening Vincent had ridden up on his midnight black chocobo Lamia had made his frozen heart jump for some unknown reason. She had rushed up and hugged him around his chest the way she had done when AVALANCHE had parted ways a year before. He still recalled with surprising detail the way he had placed a tentative hand on her narrow back, thinking that she was still such a small slip of a girl despite her obvious strength. She had stepped away quickly, an attractive maidenly flush coming to her face as she sheepishly tried to explain how happy she was to see him.

Of course, her happiness had been a Yuffie sort of happiness...

"Geez, Vinnie! You're the last one here! Even I was getting old waiting around for you! Look at me, I'm withering away! Hurry up!"

Rolling onto his side and ignoring the cries of protest that his many aches and pains gave, Vincent thought wistfully that Yuffie was going to grow up to be a beautiful woman someday. He only hoped that he might be around to see it...

He suddenly remembered with startling clarity the way she had fallen asleep in his arms earlier, her slender, warm body pressed against his as they skimmed across the ocean on the Black Stinger. Her head had slipped from under his chin to rest on his shoulder, her face serene as she slept. He recalled how he had gazed down at her for what seemed like forever, unable to tear his eyes away from the girl - young woman, really - with the willowy limbs of a nymph who was nestled with complete trust in the arms of a monster. So many things he had wished then...

Not wise to think of such things, Valentine, he told himself harshly. She's so young...

As he felt his eyelids drifting shut, the sound of Yuffie's continuing song suddenly struck his mind with startling clarity. He could still hear her singing softly even as the rushing water of the shower tried in vain to drown her out. Her voice was a beautiful, high soprano; he would have never guessed that Yuffie would have been able to sing. And that song, what was it? He couldn't understand the words, but the way the ethereal notes lingered in his ears made the little obstacle of language seem insignificant. He wondered vaguely what the enchanting song was about, but then sleep claimed him, and he was left with the mysterious aria to haunt his dreams.

In the shower, completely oblivious to the audience she had had, Yuffie abruptly stopped her song and cried out in pain as she dropped the conditioner bottle on her other toe.

Rotten end to a rotten day, she thought angrily.

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Tifa sat on the bottom step of the stairs leading to the upper level of the bar where the guest rooms were kept. From her vantage point, she could see the front room in its entirety. Lightening flashed outside, reflecting off of the shot glasses behind the bar. Thunder quickly followed its eternal companion, rattling the very same shot glasses so violently that Tifa briefly worried if they were going to fall over. The room was emptied and darkened except for the snoring form of Reno on one of the tables. Everyone else had gone up to their rooms a long time ago with heavy hearts that resulted from waiting around into the dead of the night for Vincent and Yuffie to return. Except for Reno, who had curled up on one of the tables and promptly fell asleep after amusing himself for hours by torturing Elena with all the stories about vomit and puke that he had locked up in his pea-sized brain. When Elena had turned a sickly shade of green and ran up to barricade herself in her room, Reno had switched subjects abruptly and started singing every version of the "diarrhea" song that he knew.

The woman curled up on the bottom of the stairs sighed, a lonely sound in the stillness of the room, and rested her chin on her knees, remembering what a pain in the ass Reno had been. He had been especially hard to deal with since Yuffie wasn't around to beat him up and distract him until he passed out. Rude had had to subdue Reno, a feat that had been quite amazing to watch. Big, scary Rude with his dark sunglasses and bald head coaxing his lanky, flame-haired companion to "take a nap." Reno had obliged almost immediately, curling up on one of the tables like a little kid with his knees drawn almost up to his chin. Tifa had almost expected him to start sucking his thumb.

Getting up from her seat on the wooden steps, she walked gracefully over to a closet and pulled out a blanket. Maneuvering her way easily around tables and chairs whose positions she had long ago committed to memory, Tifa strode up to the warm, snoring shadow that was Reno's sleeping form and draped the blanket gently over him in a motherly fashion, the ends of the soft fabric trailing off the edges of his makeshift bed. Reno mumbled something under his breath, but didn't awaken.

Sighing again, Tifa turned away from Reno and looked glumly towards the closed door, her heart plummeting to the bottoms of her feet. Being with Cloud and her friends had given her strength and had relit the flicker of hope that Vincent and Yuffie would return during the night and laugh at how worried Tifa had been for them. She had even stayed up later than the others to wait for her two friends, but her efforts had been fruitless. Vincent and Yuffie hadn't come back, and as the storm worsened, Tifa felt that fragile hope begin to wither. Even now, the merciless rain continued to beat relentlessly on the windows, mocking her incessantly as thunder rumbled with laughter directly overhead, shaking the shot glasses again with its mighty sounds of mirth.

Reno suddenly snorted loudly and flipped onto his back, muttering something that sounded an awful lot like "Mika." Tifa, startled out of her morbid thoughts, turned to see that her ex-enemy was tossing and turning, apparently in the grips of some nightmare. Though she couldn't see his expression in the dark, she thought for a moment that she heard him whimpering deep in his throat, a sound that was very disarming coming from a tough guy like Reno. A motherly tenderness suddenly rose in her, and she reached over and gently readjusted the blanket around Reno's lean form, tucking it around his shoulders and brushing a lock of flame-red hair away from where it was making mischief by tickling his nose. She made a mental note to ask him about his strange mutterings in the morning.

Lightening suddenly flashed outside the window, illuminating the entire room as bright as day.

She saw a figure standing in the corner of the room, staring impassively at her with glowing Mako eyes.

Tifa's heart leapt into her throat, and she almost fell into a fighting stance, building a scream in her throat that would wake everyone up...but then she recognized the mysterious watcher.

"Cloud!" she gasped, clasping her hand to her chest. "Don't scare me like that!"

"Sorry, Tifa," he said apologetically, walking towards her across the wooden floor, trying to be extra quiet so as not to awaken Reno.

As he got closer, she finally realized why she hadn't recognized him at first. Her childhood friend was wearing a dark rain slicker that covered his entire body down to his ankles. He was also dripping wet.

"Cloud," she whispered, gesturing to his rain-sodden garments. "What happened? What were you doing out in the rain?"

She could just make out the curve of his shoulders as he shrugged. "I just had this hunch..."

Tifa squinted her eyes to see better in the darkness. "A hunch?"

Cloud shifted uncomfortably, and she received the impression that he was embarrassed about something. "Yeah," he muttered. "Just a hunch. I went to check on the chocobos' pen; I thought that maybe Vincent or Yuffie might have sent their chocobos back with a note or something in case they had been trapped or attacked." He shook his spiky head slightly. "I found nothing. Lamia and Butterfly are still missing from the pen."

"Wishful thinking," Tifa commented weakly. "It was worth a try, though."

Cloud nodded. "That's exactly what I was thinking. I wish we had some sign that they were at least okay."

She reached out and gently touched his cheek, which was wet from the rain. "They'll be okay, Cloud. I know they will be."

The leader of AVALANCHE nodded quietly, but in his heart, he was thinking differently. He had this strange sense of foreboding that he hadn't felt since he had heard Aeris' voice calling to him in the City of the Ancients. The feeling that something bad was brewing wouldn't go away. It tickled at the back of his mind and ate a hole in his heart. And it didn't help one bit that two of his friends were missing, maybe trapped in a cave that was being rapidly flooded by rain, a cave to which they had gone to on *his* orders. If Vincent or Yuffie died, it would be all his fault.

"Cloud?" Tifa asked. "Are you okay?"

He stared at her beautiful face for a few seconds, and felt his heart breaking. "Yeah," he muttered. "Let's go up. I don't think they'll be coming back tonight."

Tifa hesitated. "I want to stay up a bit longer. What if we just miss them and there's no one to let them in?"

"Tifa," Cloud said warningly.

"Or what if Reno gets cold? We don't have a heater down here."

"Tifa," Cloud said again, putting his hands on his hips.

"What if Reno falls off the table and hits his head? Someone will need to--"

"Tifa!" Cloud exclaimed, as loudly as he dared.

The young woman jerked in surprise. "Yes, Cloud?" she said innocently.

He resisted the urge to laugh. "You're being a worrywart again. Everything's going to be fine. If Vincent and Yuffie come by, they can always get in through the back door. And Reno will be fine; he's a tough bastard...or maybe just a bastard."

"Cloud!" Tifa said in surprise, wondering what had made him say that. He usually made an effort to be kind to their old enemies.

"What?" he asked grumpily. "Sorry if I don't think too highly of the guy. He's the one passed out on our table like any common drunkard tottering around in the slums."

"Cloud! What's gotten into you?" Tifa hissed, shocked by his sudden show of anger. She knew he wasn't overly fond of any of the Turks, especially Reno. Tifa herself only put up with the redheaded spitfire because he was Reeve's friend, but she got along okay with Elena, and Rude had always been nothing but polite to her. Reno, however, was always putting the moves on her, flirting with her and grabbing her butt and such, and that tended to make Cloud angry, but she never thought that he would be so vicious even when speaking about someone like Reno.

He was silent for a while, and though Tifa could only see a faint glow coming from his eyes in the darkness, she knew he was staring at her blankly.

Finally, he shook his head. "Sorry. I'm just worried. I'm going to sleep."

He brushed past her without another word, heading for the stairs, but Tifa hurried to catch up with him. "Cloud?" she asked softly. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong," he answered, slipping off his rain-sodden slicker and draping it on the coat rack to dry.

Tifa moved quickly and blocked him as he tried to proceed up the stairs. She put her hands on her hips and said sternly, "I'm not moving until you tell me what's bothering you, Cloud Jeremy Strife!"

He sighed, shaking his head; he knew that when Tifa decided she was going to be stubborn about something, there was no stopping her. But he couldn't tell her what was really bothering him. There were too many things on his mind. The Running Man. Reeve. Vincent and Yuffie. Her. Cloud had to suddenly fight down a raging jealousy and ache in his heart as he recalled watching how tenderly she covered Reno with the blanket, brushing a lock of hair away from his face with gentle fingers while he watched, unseen in the dark corner with crumbling emotions. He kept telling himself that Tifa was just experiencing maternal instincts; she was one of those kinds of pure, wonderful people who took care of everyone else before even considering their own comfort. She was just worried about Reno because he was having a nightmare. That was all. Maybe he was overreacting.

"Cloud?" Tifa's voice suddenly cut through his thoughts, bringing him back to reality.

"I'm fine, Tifa," he said softly. "Just tired."

"Okay," she said uncertainly, not knowing whether to believe him or not. "Let's go to bed."

"Yeah."

She led the way up the stairs, and Cloud followed, suddenly aware of the deep, aching void in him. He watched wistfully the way the strong muscles of her smooth legs flexed as they climbed the stairs one by one, her long brown hair brushing the backs of her legs. Though he wanted this beautiful woman to be his wife more than anything in the world, he was afraid that if he asked, it would destroy what they already had, which was a companionable neighbor-like existence with rooms next to each other. Besides, she seemed happy with things just the way they were. Why should he go and bungle it with his selfish desires? Why ruin her happiness so that he could have his?

Cloud shook these thoughts away, trying his best to clear his mind of all his worries as he and Tifa emerged into the hallway where the guest room, including hers and his, were kept. He could hear Cid snoring from a room further down the hall, and that sound of unconscious contentment somehow lent a spark of life to the deserted hallway.

When they reached the door to Tifa's room, she turned around and gazed up at him, relieved that she was able to see his face clearly in the lights from the lamps she had set up in either corner of the hallway. "So, oh fearless leader, what's the battle plan for tomorrow?" she asked.

"Well," Cloud replied cautiously. "As soon as dawn breaks, Barret, Cid, Red, Rude, Elena, and I are going to check on that cave I sent Vincent and Yuffie to investigate."

"You're leaving me here?" she asked, looking hurt. It broke his heart.

He fumbled for the words to explain this to her. "Well, you see, we need someone to keep watch here in case Vincent and Yuffie do come back when we're away. I would call Marie back to work, but I gave her the week off, and besides, I don't think she can quite handle the things we've seen."

Tifa put her hands on her hips again, still looking hurt. "You've got to be more convincing than that, Cloud," she said sternly. "Why can't I come?"

Words rose in his mind from a treasure chest of such forbidden phrases whose lid he had sealed and thrown away the key. *I don't want you to come because it might be dangerous. I can't let you get involved. If the Running Man is waiting for us, and I meet my death either by his hands or by the forces of Nature, I want to die knowing that you are safe. I want to know that when I'm dead and gone, you'll still be here, continuing, helping people, your heart made of gold, your beauty eternal and timeless, like that light in your eyes. I don't want you to come because I can't bear the thought of losing you...to anyone or anything. Without you, I would just curl up and die.*

Instead he said, "Someone has to take care of Reno."

No! Whatever had possessed him to say something like that?

Tifa looked puzzled. "Reno?"

Okay, Strife, you dug your own grave, and now you have to dig your way out of it.

"Yeah," he stammered. "Um, Rude said that when Reno drinks like that, he wakes up with a major hangover, and to get him up bright and early is to listen to him bitch about every little thing. Rude and I both thought it would be best if we would leave him behind."

"He's going to be mad," Tifa said in a flat tone with some indiscernible emotion in her wine-colored eyes.

"Yeah, I know," Cloud replied hastily. "That's why you have to stay here and watch him. If we leave him alone and he wakes up to find that we're gone, he might try and follow us, leaving the bar unattended. And you know about Reno's temper; he might decide to trash a few things before he leaves. I wouldn't put it past him."

"So I'm staying behind so I can babysit a 25 year old kid?" Tifa said slowly. "And make sure that he doesn't trash the bar in his anger before he leaves?"

Oh crap. She's mad; she's really mad.

"Just don't let him leave at all," Cloud urged warily, looking for any signs that she was going to blow up in his face. "He'll just get in the way."

"Like me?" she asked coldly, her eyes emotionless.

"No!" he exclaimed loudly, his voice echoing in the empty hallway. "No," he said softly, lowering his voice as Tifa continued to stare at him with an apathy that she must have learned from Vincent. "It's nothing like that, Tifa. Nothing like that at all. I just that I don't...I mean...you know."

"No, Cloud, apparently I don't know," she said waspishly, and now he could see that she was hurt as well as angry. "And I would think that after all we've been through together, you could trust me. Goodnight."

With that, she whirled and disappeared into her room, shutting the door behind her and locking it, leaving a stunned and baffled Cloud in her wake. However, it only took a second or two of staring at the wooden door to realize that he had made a huge mistake.

"Tifa!" he whisper-screamed, knocking on the door with his gloved hand. "Open up!"

"Go to bed, Cloud," she said flatly from the other side of the door. "You said you were tired."

"Tifa, open the door."

"No."

"I want to talk to you. Please?"

"I've talked to you enough tonight. I already know my place is to stay here and babysit Reno. I have nothing more to say to you."

"Tifa!"

"Go away, Cloud. Good night."

"Tifa! C'mon, don't be like this!"

No answer.

"Tifa, I know you're there. Open up."

No answer.

Well, I really fucked that one up, he thought miserably as he banged his head against the door and sighed in defeat. As far as he could remember, he had never made her this mad before. But Tifa was never one to hold a grudge, and he hoped she would get over it come morning. If not, he would apologize. However, a problem would arise if she asked him to justify his actions. If he started telling her how he felt, everything would come bubbling out. He couldn't let that happen, not when she was so happy.

I have to make a decision. I can't go on like this forever. It just hurts too much. No, I can wait longer; I have to.

"Goodnight, my love," he whispered to the closed door.