

Chapter One: The Ninja and the Gunslinger

"How about 'Piss on yourself'?" Vincent Valentine

It's a reason

Why I'm down

I am beaten

And pushed around

It's a ceiling

Without a sound

Everyone I know

Considers me a clown

"Why I'm Here"

Oleander

A shadow hung over the docking bay, deeper than the bluest midnight. The sharp tangy smell of seawater permeated the night air like a thick blanket. At first, Yuffie Kisaragi had relished the smell of the ocean so close. At Wutai, if she stood on the top of the Da Chao Statue, she could see the ocean stretching for miles and miles and feel the gentle sea breezes caress her face. It had always given her a sense of peace and serenity, but not now. Nope, right now it felt as if someone had stuffed packets of salt up her nose. *Open* packets of salt. The saline smell hung so heavily in the night air that she had to resist the urge to hack and cough like she had a frog stuck in her throat.

The full moon was obscured by a flock of thick and bloated thunderclouds that didn't even allow the barest fingers of moonlight to peek through, and Yuffie couldn't decide whether that was a good or bad thing. The utter lack of light hid their hiding spot behind a box of crates well enough, but it also made things a hell of a lot more difficult to see. She could barely see the nose in front of her face, much less the person they were "following."

She turned to her partner for what seemed like the millionth time and said, "Psst! Hey, Vinnie! Any sign of him yet?"

The shadow next to her, the one more ominous than the rest, shifted slightly, and for a moment, she saw a flash of a red bandanna covering even redder eyes. "No," Vincent Valentine said shortly, then turned away from her.

Yuffie folded her thin arms across her chest and made a face, shifting restlessly to get the blood flowing back into her legs again. She and Vincent had been in the same crouching positions for what seemed like hours, with Vincent keeping a lookout around the side of the crate while Yuffie tried her best to keep herself entertained (which wasn't working at all). "If he doesn't show up soon," she threatened grumpily, "then I'm leaving."

Vincent didn't say anything so Yuffie continued venting her frustration.

"It's past midnight, and I'm cold and wet and tired and grumpy. Why did dumbass Cloud have to send us *here*? We could have investigated Midgar just as well as freaking Reno, Rude, and Elena! But no, instead he sends us onboard an old stinky ship to look for some dude that we know next to nothing about. And just when we're about to leave, who shows up but the dude we're looking for! Then we have to stay on the damn ship and let it take us to who the hell knows where we are! And then, to top it all off, Vinnie here decides to push me into the water just as we're getting off--"

Vincent suddenly whirled around, startling her so bad that she jerked away from him, the edge of the Conformer poking one of her numb legs. "Yuffie, be quiet," the older man said calmly despite his sudden motion.

Yuffie scowled, refusing to be intimidated. "Vinnie, I'm cold and I'm wet and my legs are asleep. Can we *please* go home now? That guy already knows we're here."

"And whose fault is that?" Vincent asked flatly.

"Are you saying it's *my* fault?!" she demanded, squinting at him in the darkness until she could just make out his left claw braced on the concrete between them and his red eyes glittering faintly in the darkness. "You're the one that knocked me into the water, Vinnie!"

"No," Vincent said without a trace of emotion. "You slipped in a puddle and fell into the pool. I had nothing to do with your mishap. And while we're on the subject, our quarry would have no idea of our presence if you hadn't insisted on yelling and screaming after you had your accident."

"It was no accident!" Yuffie insisted, knowing she was whining and not caring. "Someone pushed me and that someone had to be you!"

"I told you before that you slipped in the puddle. All I did was pull you out of the water. Blame me if it will ease your state of mind and keep you from complaining. I don't care either way." He turned away again, the end of his red cloak brushing her leg in the darkness.

Yuffie pouted, but kept her mouth shut. It was bad enough that she was here, even worse that she was here with *Vincent*. Not that Vincent was a bad guy. In fact, he was okay if you wanted someone who didn't talk much, and he was kind of good-looking in a twisted sort of way, but he definitely wasn't Yuffie's idea of amiable company. Why couldn't Cloud have partnered her up with Tifa, who would probably at least sympathize with Yuffie's soaking wet and miserable condition? Even Cid or Barret would have been better company than Vampire Boy. Cid's cigarettes could drown out the seawater smell, and both of them would have been more fun to fight with than Vincent, whose flat tones and one-word answers tended to kill any attempt at conversation.

"Hey, Vinnie," she said again, glancing at the statue-still shadow next to her.

"Yes, Yuffie?"

"I need to go to the bathroom."

"There's a lovely pool of seawater three steps to your left." Yuffie's mouth dropped open. "Did the dark and gloomy Vincent Valentine just make a joke? Wow, and I was here to witness it. Tifa and Cid will be so jealous. But that still doesn't change the situation. I have to go to the bathroom!"

Vincent turned to stare at her again. "What do you want me to say, Yuffie?"

"How about, 'Oh, Yuffie, since I know you're wet and cold because I pushed you in the stinky seawater that was probably filled with gross amoebas and who knows what, let me go find you a nice clean hotel where you can rest, eat, and go to the bathroom.' I think you should say something like that, Vinnie."

"How about, 'Piss on yourself'?"

Yuffie's mouth dropped open again, but she managed to sputter out, "That was so rude, Vinnie Valentine! I see you've been hanging around Cid and Reno a bit too much!"

"Actually, I think it was spending two hours with you on a boat and then waiting here with you for one more hour that did the trick."

Yuffie punched him in what she hoped was his shoulder. "You're so mean to me, Vinnie! Next time, leave me in the sea water with the amoebas; I'm sure they'd be better company than you!"

"Forgive me, Yuffie," he said flatly. "I'm afraid I'm not in the best of moods tonight. I'm sorry for insulting you."

"No, you're not," Yuffie grumbled. "But I'll just pretend your apology was sincere. At least we can be cold and miserable together."

Vincent didn't reply; he simply turned away from her and continued to watch for their quarry. Yuffie drew her trembling knees up to her chest and shivered, pushing impatiently at her shoulder-length hair, which she had been allowing to grow out at Tifa's prodding in the year since they had defeated Sephiroth.

The young ninja sighed inwardly and found herself reflecting on all the things that had happened in the past year, something she had started making a habit of. Reeve, formerly known as Cait Sith, was working hard on rebuilding what was left of Midgar. He had taken over the remnants of Shinra, going as far as calling the Turks back in to help. Naturally, and with the Planet's best interests in mind, he had discarded the idea of Mako reactors and was in the process of changing all the reactors into electric generators to power the sectors. The progress was slow, but with Reno, Rude, and Elena to help him out, the former Urban Development manager was optimistic about the future of both the Neo-Shinra and Midgar.

Cloud and Tifa had taken up residence in Tifa's new bar at Kalm. Surprisingly, the two hadn't gotten married as most of the others, Yuffie included, had thought. Though they pretty much lived next door to each other in the rooms above the bar, their relationship didn't seem to be deepening all that much. Both Tifa and Cloud, however, seemed content with their neighbor-like existence, and though Yuffie thought that they should have gotten together, she was happy as long as her friends were happy.

Barret had taken his daughter Marlene and moved to his ravaged hometown of Corel, where he was working on revitalizing the town with the same dedication and uncharacteristic optimism that Reeve had for Midgar. Personally, Yuffie thought he should just put that dump out in the pasture and shoot it, but if that was what he wanted to do with the rest of his existence, then that was fine by her. Whatever floats his boat.

Red XIII had returned to Cosmo Canyon, of course, and was in the midst of reading all he could on the history of the Planet, the Cetra, and whatever other bits and pieces of information he had in that old, musty library of his. He would soon be the Guardian of Cosmo Canyon, and the lion-like creature was taking his responsibility very seriously. Yuffie visited him whenever she could and bugged the living hell out of him. Hey, the furball needed a little spark in his life.

Cid had immediately returned to Rocket Town and asked Shera to marry him. He was both surprised and overjoyed when she said yes. Yuffie was surprised, too. If someone who had used to treat her the way Cid used to treat Shera asked her to marry him, she would have told him to shove that ring up his you know what. But she was happy for her friends at the same time. Even from the very beginning, she had felt that Cid and Shera belonged together. It hadn't taken an idiot to see the unspoken attraction between them.

The wedding had been fun, too, with Cloud, Cid, and Reno all a bit giggly and tipsy during the reception after drinking too many shots of whatever it was they could get their hands on. Before the bride and groom had said their vows, however, Cid had been so nervous that he smoked cigarette after cigarette until finally Yuffie and her unwillingly partner in crime, Reeve, had swiped his pack and flushed it down the toilet. That wedding had been one of most fun times of her life. Even if she had to wear that uncomfortable bridesmaid dress that made her feel half naked. The highlight of her evening, aside from watching Reno try to climb up and dance on a table only to fall in a very surprised and very unhappy Barret's lap, had been when she had managed to drag Vincent out onto the dance floor. She practically had to pick him up and carry him, but that had been the best part of it.

Yes, life had been good.

Then one day, out of nowhere, Cloud had called Yuffie on the PHS, sounding extremely morbid for a man who seemed to be leading a very happy existence.

"Hey Cloud! What's up?" Yuffie asked as she lay on her mat, holding the PHS with one hand and juggling a mastered Fire materia with the other.

"We're having problems, Yuffie," he said dully, but the ninja could hear the underlying worry evident in his voice.

"Who? You and Tifa?"

"No," Cloud answered. "Reeve is missing."

Yuffie's heart skipped a beat. She forgot to catch the materia she had tossed in the air before Cloud's previous statement, and the emerald orb plummeted down to smack her right in the middle of the forehead. "Ow!" she cried, but quickly returned her attention to the situation at hand. "What? How can that be? When did this happen?"

"Last night. Reno was going to ask Reeve to go drinking with him and Rude when he heard scuffling sounds in the office. He burst in there, but it was too late. The window was broken, but there was no sign of Reeve or his attacker, whoever he or she was. Reno tried to call someone on Reeve's office telephone, but the lines had been cut and all he got on his own cell phone was static. He and Rude showed up at the bar at dawn today to ask me and Tifa for help."

"Who do you think could have done this?" she asked, trying to keep down the flutter of fear in the back of her throat and ignore the growing lump in the middle of her forehead. "A rebel group? I'm sure that there's plenty of people who would want to kidnap the President of Neo-Shinra."

"I don't know," Cloud said glumly. "There's rebel groups for almost everything, but somehow I have a feeling that this has something to do with Reeve being part of AVALANCHE. I'm calling in everyone and organizing a search. Can you bring all our materia to Tifa's bar in Kalm?"

"Okay," Yuffie said eagerly, surprised at how much she wanted to help. "What do we have to go on?"

Cloud sighed. "Not much, I'm afraid. Me, Tifa and the Turks searched the office, but the kidnapper left no trace of anything. We found drops of blood, however..."

Yuffie swallowed a lump in her throat, and forced herself to ask, "Were they Reeve's?"

"Yeah," Cloud said grimly. "They were Reeve's."

"Crap," Yuffie said, unable to think of anything else to say.

"We had pretty much the same reaction. There were only a couple of drops so we still have hope that wherever Reeve is, he's not seriously injured. But what we're really worried about is the man Rude saw in the remains of Hojo's lab a few hours after Reeve was captured."

"What kind of man?"

"Rude said he was dressed all in black with a ski mask covering his features. He was searching through old files of Hojo's when Rude surprised him. The man ran away and managed to escape through a place that we haven't been able to find yet. Turns out that Reno, Rude, and Elena had seen this man sneaking around before, but he had always run away when they attempted to talk to him. We're calling him the Running Man..."

Which brought her to the present moment, soaking wet and stuck in the docking bay next to a rotting and seemingly abandoned boat that Cloud had wanted Yuffie and Vincent to investigate. Now she had no idea where she was, what time it was, how long they were going to be here, or if they would even get a chance to apprehend the Running Man. All she knew was that she was cold, wet, tired, and ready to let Reeve fend for himself, wherever he was. She had a broken and waterlogged PHS, a rumble in her stomach that sounded every bit as fierce as those damn green dragons at Mt. Nibel, and boy was she ever COLD!

Yuffie shivered again and rubbed her bare arms. She glanced over at Vincent, who despite what he had said earlier, looked warm and toasty in his long red cape and black pants.

"Hey, Vinnie," she spoke up again. "Can I use your-"

Her entreaty was cut short when her dark companion suddenly spun around and clamped a gloved hand over her mouth. Though her first instinct was to struggle until she was released, she quickly repressed it, trusting Vincent's senses and knowing that he rarely touched anyone for any reason. She flicked her eyes to the side and was just able to see a shadowy blur as Vincent shifted closer to her.

"I saw him," he whispered, lips close to her ear. His warm breath against her ear sent pleasurable chills running down her spine. Strands of ebony black hair flopped forward to caress her cheek, and she was suddenly aware of how close he was, close enough that she could feel the warmth radiating from his body. Suddenly, she wasn't cold any more.

"He went down a stairwell to a lower level," Vincent continued, oblivious to the change that had overtaken her. "Just follow me. Got it?"

Yuffie nodded, not trusting her voice.

Vincent removed his hand from her mouth and crept closer to the edge of the crate, peering out from behind it to see that there was no one hanging around the docking bay. He took the Death Penalty from its holster, and seeing this, Yuffie followed in suit with her Conformer, trying to work the kinks out of her muscles as she did so.

Vincent stepped out from behind the crate and into the open, motioning for Yuffie to follow him. The young girl did so, wincing as her knees and back popped loudly, protesting so much movement after being inactive for almost an hour.

Keeping as quiet as possible, she followed her shadowy friend into the darkness until the inky black seemed to swallow them whole.