

Chapter Two: I Think I'm Paranoid

"I have to hold onto your nasty claw?" Yuffie Kisaragi

It took several seconds for Yuffie's eyes to adjust to the darkness, and even then, she probably couldn't see half as good as Vincent. She found herself groping blindly in the darkness with her hands and allowing her fingers to graze the rough, wooden surfaces of crates on all sides of her while she kept her eyes locked on the dark form of Vincent's flapping cape just a few feet in front of her. From what her hands touched, she speculated that they were in a maze of crates and would probably have gotten hopelessly lost without Vincent's unnaturally acute eyes to guide them. All Yuffie could see was dark, hulking shapes all around her that anything could have been hiding behind.

Anything at all...

The instant she starting thinking all paranoid like that, she couldn't stop the sudden influx of thoughts that inundated her mind. She had always been that way: make one crack in the dam that held back her fear and the whole thing came flooding out over her. But this time it was different. An unexpected irrational feeling of terror and foreboding bloomed in her heart, obliterating all other thoughts or emotion in its intensity. All of the shadows seemed to grow eyes and a wide, cavernous mouth that was just waiting to devour her should she venture too close. The concrete beneath her feet suddenly developed holes that led into pits of seawater, pits so deep that even Vincent wouldn't be able to pull her out. She would be trapped down there with only the amoebas and sea serpents to keep her company...

Yuffie suddenly noticed that in her terror, she had allowed Vincent to pull quite a distance in front of her.

"Vinnie!" she hissed, her heartbeat thudding in her ears as she hurried to catch up. "Don't leave me back here!"

The moving shadow that was Vincent suddenly stopped moving and faded into nothing in the darkness. She could no longer see which shadow was Vincent. Panic suddenly rose in her, unbidden and uncharacteristic. She hadn't even been this scared when they had been in the North Crater waiting to fight Sephiroth! What was wrong with her now?

"Vincent!" she whisper-screamed in a panic. "Where are you?! I can't see you anymore!"

There was a loud crash behind her, and if Yuffie had been thinking rationally, she probably would have realized that the sound was probably just a few crates collapsing, but in her panic, she was being everything but rational and immediately realized that some big sea monster had emerged from the depths of its watery grave to devour her.

She let out a scream of terror and ran forward, dropping the Conformer on the concrete floor. All she knew was that she had to get away; she just *had* to. There was no other thought running through her panicked mind but escape, and since the monster was behind her, she concluded that running forward would be the most logical way of staying alive.

Unfortunately, she had only taken two running strides before she ran into a different monster, one with red eyes, a crimson cape, and a claw of tarnished gold. It was this claw that immediately flew around her slender shoulders and clasped her to its warm body. Yuffie let out another terrified yelp and raised her fists to pound the creature before she realized that her "monster" was none other than the lovable, huggable...

"Vincent!" she gasped in a mixture of terror and relief, flinging her trembling arms around his slender waist, holding him tightly to her as if she could disappear into his tall figure and be rid of all her fear. Burying her face in his chest, she was ashamed and angry to find herself on the verge of tears. Instead of giving in to them, however, she gritted her teeth and clung to Vincent, her fingers digging into the flesh of his shoulder blades. Her heart thundered in her ears, and for a moment she was afraid she was going to faint.

Vincent's claw tightened its grip around her shoulders with surprising gentleness. Glancing around and seeing no immediate danger, he put the Death Penalty back in its holster and rested his gloved right hand on the bare flesh of Yuffie's lower back. The young ninja was shaking so hard he almost expected to hear her bones rattling.

"Yuffie, it's okay," he said in his soft, deep voice, attempting to offer some kind of solace even though it was out of character for him to do so. He couldn't recall the last time he had held a female like this. All such emotions that were needed to instigate such an embrace Lucrecia had taken with her to her watery grave.

"What happened, Yuffie?" he tried again when the girl didn't respond to his initial statement.

"I-I don't know," Yuffie said shakily, unconsciously tightening her death grip on Vincent's waist. For the first time, she noticed that she could hear Vincent's heart racing in his chest, and she realized that he had received quite a scare, too. That comforted her somewhat to know that the unflappable Vincent Valentine felt fear just like the rest of the little people.

She cautiously raised her head from the folds of Vincent's cloak and craned her neck backwards so she could look into his face. All she could see in the darkness were his red eyes staring down at her impassively. "There's something here, Vincent," she suddenly whispered, sweat rolling down her forehead in beads.

Vincent didn't even blink. "Of course there's something here," he responded. "The Running Man. He went down below."

Yuffie shook her head, dark brown hair sticking to the trickles of sweat that covered her face. "No, not just the Running Man. There's something else here. Something we can't see."

"There's no one else here," Vincent replied calmly. "A bunch of crates fell over. That's all that happened. Now go get your Conformer. We need to go after that man."

He tried gently to disentangle himself from Yuffie, but the girl suddenly clung to him with renewed vigor, hiding her face in his cloak and squeezing his waist with strength he hadn't known she possessed. She suddenly trembled so hard that she sent a tremor through Vincent's body as well.

"Don't leave me, Vinnie!" she gasped in a panic, her voice muffled in the fabric of his cloak. "I'm scared!"

"I'm not going to leave you," he said without a flicker of emotion, but he had to admit that her fear was starting to catch. "Just go get your Conformer. I'll be right here."

"@#\$% the Conformer!" Yuffie suddenly exclaimed vehemently, voice harsh in her terror. "I'll just use my ninja skills!"

"You're being irrational."

"I'm scared shitless! I have a right to be irrational if I want to!"

"You'll need your weapon," Vincent insisted.

"I don't want it!"

"Keep your voice down. What do you want then?"

"I want to go home."

"Besides that."

Yuffie paused. "I want you to hold me."

That remark caused a pang in Vincent's heart for some reason, but he quickly shoved it away, telling himself that Yuffie was scared and not thinking clearly. "Very well," he said. "You can hold onto my hand and we'll go get your weapon."

Yuffie raised her head and stared at Vincent with her stormy gray eyes. "Together?" she asked softly.

That pang in his heart again. "Yes," he replied. "Together."

Yuffie nodded and slowly released her death grip on Vincent's waist, only to grab his right hand in an equally tight clasp.

"Yuffie, I need that arm. That's my gun arm."

She squinted up at him in the darkness. "I have to hold onto your nasty claw?" she blurted before she could stop herself.

"Given the circumstances, I'm afraid so."

She didn't say anything, wondering if she had hurt his feelings with her remark about his claw, but then she realized that it was *Vincent* she was talking to. Vincent wasn't supposed to have feelings, or at least he claimed he didn't, which she thought was the biggest crock of crap she had ever heard. She'd seen him show emotion several times, not much emotion, but he had shown it. Anyhow, she didn't even think his claw was nasty. She thought it was actually kind of cool looking, but she had always gotten the impression that if she grabbed and yanked hard enough, it would pop right off like the arm on one of the action figures she used to mutilate when she was a kid. That was the last thing she wanted to happen when she was scared to even let him out of her sight.

Moving quickly and making sure that one part of her body was in contact with his at all times, she moved around him and grabbed onto his claw, but instead of gripping the hand portion of it, she fastened her right hand up on his bicep, needing to feel his skin and not cold metal underneath her fingertips. With her other hand, she gripped his wrist tightly, the tarnished metal hard and unyielding. She pressed the entire arm against her body and looked up at Vincent's shadowy figure in the darkness.

"Okay," she managed to say through the lump in her throat. "Let's go."

Vincent nodded and began to lead her through the darkness back to where the Conformer lay meekly on the concrete floor. He instinctively unholstered the Death Penalty and looked around for any intruders who may have heard Yuffie's cries and come running. The docking bay was silent except for the gentle lapping of the water that the ghost ship rested in. Beside him, Yuffie was breathing heavily, her big gray eyes darting left and right as she apparently searched for whatever she thought was lurking in the darkness. He noticed with some discomfort that she had pressed his arm in the crevasse between her small breasts, and that the warmth from her skin was spreading to his own body. His first instinct was to jerk his arm away before the unbidden emotions started becoming too intense, but he knew that Yuffie wouldn't understand if he tried to explain his actions and would stubbornly refuse to budge if he didn't explain them, so he tried to ignore the flaming warmth of her body and his for the time being.

When they reached the shuriken, Vincent quickly dipped down and picked it up to prevent another argument with Yuffie on how she would have to let go of him to handle her weapon. He held the Conformer out to her, which she took in her trembling left hand while maintaining her grip on his bicep with her right. Vincent realized belatedly that Yuffie was right-handed and now would be forced to throw her weapon with her left, but with her clinging to him like this and not showing any signs of letting go, it couldn't really be helped.

Without a word, he led her to the stairwell that the Running Man had disappeared down. The steps were metal and almost every inch of them was spotted with rust, as if they had some terrible disease. They creaked under the weight of both of the travelers, and Yuffie let out a whimper and huddled closer to Vincent as the darkness all around them deepened. Though Vincent tried to keep his footfalls from making any noise, something that he usually had no trouble at all with, the creaking stairs apparently had other ideas and let out a loud cry every time his metal boots contacted their rusty surface. He just gave up after a while. Besides, Yuffie was making enough noise for both of them.

It wasn't long before they came upon a door constructed out of the same gray metal as the stairs. Like the stairs, it was rusty and practically falling off of its hinges. It would have been easy to simply knock the entire thing down, but Vincent wasn't willing to make that kind of noise yet. The Running Man knew for sure that they were following him due to Yuffie's ill-timed dip in the pool, but he still had no idea where they were or how long it would take them to find him. That gave them a little bit of an edge, not much, but a little.

Examining the door in the darkness with Yuffie practically glued to his side, he saw that it had no noticeable lock. He didn't know whether that was a good or bad thing. Without the presence of a lock, he and Yuffie would be able to get in easily, but the lack of that extra security might mean that whoever occupied this port had nothing to fear from strangers. And Vincent knew from experience that an enemy that lacked fear was a formidable enemy indeed.

He turned to Yuffie and said as calmly as he could, "We've come up to a door. It has no lock. I don't like this, but we're going in to investigate. Are you ready?"

Yuffie stared at him as if he was an idiot, but the fear in her eyes was heartbreakingly obvious. "Of course I'm not ready, but let's go ahead anyways."

"Hold onto my belt," he said firmly.

Yuffie balked and gripped his arm tighter. "No," she whined. "Why do I have to?"

"Do you want to open the door and go in first then?" he retorted.

The girl paused, seriously thinking about just flat out refusing to do as he asked, but she swallowed her fear and gripped his metal belt tightly, chastising herself for being a pansy. She didn't even know why she was so afraid; so far no one had attacked them or made any threatening gestures. Hell, they hadn't seen another living soul besides the Running Man. Vincent was right; she *was* being irrational. *It's all in your head*, she told herself. *It's all in your head*.

But in the core of her heart, she knew it wasn't.