

Chapter Twenty: Messenger Who Comes From the Dark

"And of course you would know about being stupid." Vincent Valentine

*But you, you're not allowed
You're uninvited
Unfortunate slight
Like any uncharted territory
I must seem greatly intriguing
You speak of my love like
You have experienced it like mine before
But this is not allowed
You're uninvited
Unfortunate slight
I don't think you unworthy
But I need a moment to deliberate*

"Uninvited"

Alanis Morissette

Fa-Li watched Titus' leather-clad back tiredly as she followed him down yet another infernal alleyway. It seemed they'd been around Midgar five times over, what with all the walking she had been forced to endure. She wasn't used to so much exercise, and her heels were killing her. She had given up keeping track of their path a long time ago and had surrendered just to watching the raindrops course down the back of Titus' leather jacket like a thousand tears from a pair of unseen eyes. Looking at all those poor little raindrops, Fa-Li was reminded of the very last time she had cried real tears of joy or sorrow. It had been quite a long time ago, actually, back when she could actually say that she still lived something remotely resembling a normal life, even if it had been in the slums Midgar.

But that life was now forever unattainable to her. She could never go back, and after all that had happened that fateful night so many years ago, she wasn't sure she ever wanted to go back.

Fa-Li was jolted out of her unusually contemplative thoughts when Titus suddenly stopped walking and leaned against the gray brick wall behind him, those beautiful luminescent eyes of his sliding shut in an expression that she had come to loathe. He could stay like that for hours on end, listening to whatever the hell he was listening to, apparently finding it more interesting than her presence.

Well, this time she wasn't going to let him go without a little arguing. "Why did you stop, honey?" she asked him, staring at his darkness-cloaked profile and wishing that she could see the face underneath the ski mask. Titus was such a tragically handsome man. In her life, Fa-Li had only seen one other man whose looks rivaled Titus', and that man she could never face again...

"Waiting," Titus replied to her earlier question.

Fa-Li blinked. "For the girl?"

"Who else?"

She scowled. "No need to get all huffy. What makes you think the girl will come this way?"

"This is the President of Neo-Shinra's office building. This is where she and Valentine were headed, remember?"

Fa-Li repressed the urge to shudder as she recalled instead where President Reeve was at the moment - shackled in a dungeon in the Master's lair, swathed completely in those horrible green mists...

She shook the memory away and said, "But this place has a back door. They'll probably go through there."

"No, they won't," Titus said calmly.

"Why not?"

"Because I locked that door."

"Oh," Fa-Li said, feeling like an idiot. Titus seemed to be an expert at making her feel that way. That was probably one of the reasons their little relationship hadn't worked out. Titus was always so different from the other men she had been with...

"You think of everything, don't you, Titus?" she suddenly said with a sigh, leaning against the wall next to him. She felt so tired all of a sudden.

Titus opened his eyes and stared at her, surprised that she had actually called him by his real name instead of "honey" or "baby", as was her habit to do. He found her face completely devoid of anything resembling the promiscuous woman she had become. Instead, all he saw was a deep sorrow etched in the lines of her beautiful face, as if the rain had washed away the outer layers of her personality and brought this tormented, melancholy creature into the light for the first time in years.

He turned away, refusing to become entranced with her beauty again. "Valentine might be with her," he clipped, eyes watching the area in front of the lobby doors relentlessly. "If that's the case, I'll distract him while you get the girl."

"Fine," Fa-Li said quietly. "I understand."

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"Yuffie, I believe that stop sign was there for a reason," Vincent commented after the young girl had run her third one in a row.

"What stop sign, Vinnie?" she asked cheerfully, keeping her eyes on the road.

"Never mind," Vincent replied, folding his arms across his chest.

Yuffie glanced out of the corner of her eye at the man in the passenger seat. He had barely said anything to her the entire journey, and any attempt at idle conversation made by her was usually answered with silence or a one-word reply. She was grateful that Vincent had been kind enough to let her drive, but his constant silence was making her edgy.

"You're not in a very chatty mood today, are you, Vinnie?" she asked lightly while she stopped at a red light.

"When am I ever, Yuffie?" he countered, staring out of the rain-streaked windshield and not even looking at her.

Yuffie laughed, albeit a little nervously. "Never."

And so ended that conversation.

Resisting the urge to sigh, Yuffie forced herself to look away from Vincent's tragic profile and focus on driving. But it wasn't easy. Vincent was radiating even more dark energy than usual, and it was making her nervous and agitated, not a good thing while one is driving. She was tempted to ask him what was wrong, but she knew that she would get no response from the stoic man across the car from her. Yuffie was pretty sure she wouldn't understand even if Vincent was willing to explain to her what was wrong. The man was just so complex and darkly mysterious that it often left her feeling overwhelmed just by listening to the sounds of his silence filling the air. Maybe one day, she would be able to interpret the language that his silences spoke, but for now, she had no other choice than to listen and wish for the day that she would be able to see the man that was surely hiding behind Vincent's mask of ice.

"Yuffie," Vincent said suddenly.

The girl turned to him with wide gray eyes. "He speaks!" she declared with a grin.

Vincent ignored her. "Get in the turning lane," he ordered. "This is supposed to be our turn."

Yuffie looked at the road in front of her and noticed her blunder. She was almost passed her turn, and she still had yet to get in the turning lane! Damn. Oh well...who needed turning lanes ANYWAYS?!

"Hold on Vinnie!" Yuffie warned, just before throwing the wheel hard to the left, cutting clear across the turning lane and the other two lanes of traffic without even so much as a signal to warn the other drivers. Their rented car fishtailed, almost slamming into a lamppost on the corner before righting itself and continuing down the alley Yuffie would have missed if it hadn't been for her mad driving skills.

She grinned at her companion smugly, knowing that he would be fuming. "Pretty cool, huh, Vinnie?" she asked cheerfully. "I'm a pretty damn good driver, aren't I?"

Vincent glared at her from underneath the locks of ebony hair that had snaked into his eyes. "No," was all he said, then added, just for overkill, "I don't think you're ever going to get your license if you continue pulling maneuvers like that."

Yuffie just smiled and continued speeding down the rain-soaked street, the tires shooting up humongous waves of water as she plowed through puddles the size of small swimming pools. "Aw, Vinnie!" she declared. "You're such a stick in the mud! Lighten up a little bit, my bestest buddy ol' pal!"

Vincent folded his arms across his chest and stared forward again. "Now is not the time to be fooling around," he deadpanned. "We are in a very serious situation here, Yuffie."

"Gawd! Gimme a break, Vincent! You know Cloud just sent us off on another crappy mission! He knows the Running Man isn't going to show up again at Reeve's office! No one is that stupid!"

"And of course you would know about being stupid."

What?! Oh, I KNOW he just didn't...

Yuffie's eyes practically bugged out of her head as she glared daggers at her stoic comrade. "Vinnie!" she shrieked. "That was mean and cruel! Take it back! You're developing a very nasty personality, young man!"

Great...I sound like my dad now!

Vincent turned to her with some strange emotion flickering in his eyes. "I'm learning from an expert," he said calmly, one corner of his mouth curling up in what suspiciously looked to be a smile.

Yuffie was too pissed-off to care, though. "If that was joke, it was SO NOT FUNNY!!!!!" she yelled at him, narrowing her eyes into slits.

Vincent looked like he was about to reply, but his crimson eyes suddenly flicked toward the windshield. They widened. "Yuffie!" he said sharply.

The young girl quickly shifted her gaze to the front of the car to find herself on a collision course with a brick wall! She shrieked loudly, more out of surprise than fear, and quickly punched the brakes, feeling the pedal shake underneath her boot as the anti-lock brake system kicked in. She squeezed her eyes shut tightly, expecting an explosive impact to end her life in one huge fireball of pain.

Instead, all she felt was a slight bump as the rental car came to a squealing stop.

What the hell? Yuffie thought in bafflement as she opened one eye, then the other, expecting to find herself floating on a huge fluffy cloud and approaching the golden Gates of Heaven with a not-so-amused Vincent Valentine next to her. Instead, all she saw was the brick wall, which was staring at her mockingly, its lines of cement appearing to be turned up in an amused grin.

"Hey!" Yuffie cried happily. "I didn't hit the wall!"

"Just the curb," Vincent muttered grumpily.

Yuffie made a face at him. "You say that like it's a bad thing, Vinnie! At least we're not dead."

"Whatever," Vincent clipped. He suddenly opened his car door and stepped out into the rain.

He's leaving?! Crap! Was it something I said?

"Vincent!" Yuffie cried, putting the car into "Park." "Where are you going?!"

Vincent leaned back into the car and said, "We're here." Then he slammed the door.

For a moment, Yuffie thought Vincent might have hit his head on the dashboard or something. Then she opened her door and saw that the building she had almost put a hole in was actually Reeve's office, only from the back. She was used to going through the lobby area.

Feeling like a total idiot, Yuffie grabbed her Conformer from the backseat and slammed the door behind her, rushing after Vincent in the rain. He was already halfway across the parking lot, his loose ponytail hanging like a rope of smoldering blue-black fire against his borrowed shirt. Making a face at his back for not waiting up for her, Yuffie wrapped her arms around herself and hunched her shoulders to protect herself from rain, not that it helped any. She was drenched for what felt like the thousandth time in the past two days by the time she reached the back door.

To her surprise, she found an equally soaked Vincent waiting there for her, completely undaunted by the thick strands of jet black hair that had snaked into his eyes, trying their hardest to dim the intensity in the crimson orbs.

"Gee, thanks for waiting, Vinnie," she told him sarcastically even though she was happy to see him there. "You're a pal."

"The door is locked," he deadpanned, brushing past her and back into the rain.

"What?!" Yuffie cried, watching dumbly as he began splashing through puddles in the parking lot, his head turned upwards as he appeared to examine the upper floors of the building.

Though she was pretty sure that Vincent was telling the truth, Yuffie stomped over (almost slipping three times) to the back door and gripped the doorknob with her slippery hands. She yanked hard, but nothing happened. The damn door just stayed stupidly shut, making little squeaking noises of laughter as it did so.

"Damn it!" Yuffie cursed angrily as she gave the door a good, stuff kick with her boot, happy to see that she had left behind a scuff mark on the paint. It served the damn thing right! How dare it be locked on such a miserable day?

Great, Yuffie thought grumpily, turning her back on the unmoving door. *Now I have to go BACK into the goddamn rain...*

"Vincent!" she called, realizing that he was a ways along the side of the building and staring up at something. She held her Conformer over her head like an umbrella and splashed through a million and one puddles to reach his side.

"What's up, Vinnie?" she asked him, not willing to lift her face into the stinging rain to see what he was staring at.

"That window," he deadpanned. "We're going up that way."

Yuffie's eyes widened incredulously. She removed her Conformer from the top of her head and shifted her gaze to see that Vincent's window was at least three floors above their heads and reachable only by a series of soggy wooden crates that had been stacked haphazardly up against the wall, balanced precariously on top of one another.

She stared at Vincent's strong-boned profile and watched the rain drip down his face before laughing and saying, "Hahaha! That was a funny joke, Vinnie! Now let's go around the front and through the lobby like normal people would do!" She pointed to her right. "See! There's an alley we can take around the building and go to the front and everything will be just peachy keen!"

Crimson eyes turned away from the window and focused on her face. "We're going through the window," Vincent said firmly.

A tide of stormy anger began to rise in Yuffie's gray eyes. "No, we're not," she growled. "Do you see how high up that is?! I'm not going up there!"

"We'll use the crates."

Yuffie cast a dubious look at the flimsy-looking wooden boxes. "Those hunks of crap don't look like that could support *Marlene*, much less you or me!"

"They'll do just fine," Vincent insisted.

Though something in her mind was telling her that Vincent wasn't going to give in this time, Yuffie kept on fighting him. "If you want to crawl through a window so goddamn bad, there are plenty on the ground level near the lobby doors!"

"The Running Man will be expecting us to enter from the front," Vincent said rationally. "He'll be waiting there."

"No, he won't!" Yuffie counterattacked, refusing to see the logic. "That's dumb, Vinnie!"

Something akin to annoyance flashed across Vincent's usually calm face, and when he spoke, Yuffie thought she heard impatience in his voice. "Yuffie, why don't you listen to reason for once?"

Yuffie's scowled deepened. "Don't patronize me!" she cried, glaring up at him angrily. "What you're saying makes no sense! It's irrational!"

"No," Vincent said firmly, eyes glittering down at her. "The way you're behaving is irrational. And immature. You're about to throw a hissy fit just because things aren't going your way. You're seventeen years old, Yuffie. Act your age."

Without another word, he whirled away from her and began to climb on the first crate.

Yuffie was hurt. Hurt and angry. No, pissed-off was more like it. For some reason, Vincent's words were like stakes being shoved in her heart, but instead of releasing a flood of tears, they inundated her senses with red-hot rage.

"Damn you, Vincent Orion Valentine!" she suddenly screamed at him as he continued to climb methodically from crate to crate like he hadn't a care in the world. Even her outburst had no effect on him. He didn't even ask her where she had learned his middle name from.

"I'm not going up that way!" she continued yelling, her hands clenched into fists at her sides.

Vincent ignored her, using his strong arms to pull himself up to the next level, muscles of his back flexing underneath his black shirt, which had been plastered to his skin by the rain.

Yuffie was so furious she thought she would explode. "Fine then!" she screamed as loud as she could, resisting the urge to throw her Conformer at him if she wasn't so sure he would shoot it out of the air and ruin it. "You go up your goddamn window! I'm going around the front!"

She whirled on her heel and began to stride away in a rage, but then she turned back and said, for good measure, "I hope you're happy, Vincent! You managed to get rid of me!"

Not waiting to see if she had managed to get any reaction out of him, Yuffie spun around and ran off, Conformer in her hand and her hair plastered to the sides of her face. She didn't know why she was running. All she knew was that she wanted to get away from Vincent. So through the puddles she ran, and didn't stop running until she had turned off into the alley than ran along side the office building, a long narrow pathway with two straight gouges etched permanently into the pavement by the tires of vehicles that liked to take the easy way from the front of the building to the back. Stupid lazy people. Yuffie hated lazy people, even thought Barret was constantly telling her that she was the dictionary definition of the word.

God, I'm so mad! I feel...I feel...

She felt like crying, and she HATED feeling that way. She wasn't a big baby, bawling just because something hadn't gone her way...argh! Why did she even give a damn what stupid Vincent said?! His opinion didn't matter to her at all!

Yet, here you are, a cruel voice taunted her. *About to cry because a man hurt your feelings. You feel rejected, don't you, Yuffie dear? You'll always be nothing more than a little, immature girl to him. A little brat...*

"Shut up!" Yuffie cursed, putting all her frustration behind that scream as she leapt up high in the air and crashed down into a puddle, ignoring the water splashing her already drenched legs.

She remained standing in the puddle for a few moments, letting water seep into her boots as her rage began to trickle away slowly like the raindrops racing down her skin. Then she stomped off, cursing her all too human emotions and the cruel Fate that had bestowed them upon her. Why was she so upset? She shouldn't be upset at all! Why did one man have so much sway over her? She didn't need him! She didn't need any man! And she didn't want one! She had her materia and she had her life! And as soon as they found stupid-ass Reeve, she was gonna pack up and leave stupid-ass Vincent and the others...behind...yeah...whatever...

She knew that she didn't want to leave any of them, especially Vincent, behind.

It didn't take long for Yuffie's angry stomps to turn to depressed, contemplative trudges. Water sloshed in her boots and seeped in between her toes, but she neither noticed nor cared. The fires of fury dissipated from her gray eyes, leaving behind stormy pensiveness that shone even through the chocolate brown locks of waterlogged hair that had fallen into her eyes. Her thoughts were a million miles away as she rounded the corner and started to advance towards the doors of the lobby.

Why do I even bother having friends? she wondered as dragged her feet through another puddle, the double doors of Reeve's main office building looming in front of her. *I never had any before I met Cloud and the others. All they do is hold you back and make you do and think things that you normally wouldn't think under any other kind of...*

Her train of thought was abruptly snapped when her eyes absently flicked in the direction of the alley on the right side of the building. Yuffie was later to wonder if Fate or chance had guided her gaze to that shadow-filled alley, but in any case, she saw the figure, swathed in darkness though it was, watching her from the alleyway like a hungry wolf.

Dark leather clothes soaked and glittering with wet rain. Black ski mask. Gloved fingers curled almost delicately around the corner of the wall, miniature pillars of darkness against the gray building. It was the Running Man...

"The Running Man will be expecting us to enter from the front. He'll be waiting there."

"No, he won't! That's dumb, Vinnie!"

Vincent, Yuffie thought, wishing for nothing more to see him at that moment, if only to say goodbye. *You were right. I'm... I'm sorry... Vincent...*

"Running Man," she whispered, unable to take eyes off of the figure in the alley.

He was waiting for her. Waiting to take her back to the place with the sea water and the horrible light that made her afraid. Back to the Faceless Men that never died and the things that were watching her in the cargo hold. No! She was never going back to that place! Never!

"I won't go back!" Yuffie cried as panic and rage took hold of her at the same time. She scarcely knew what she was doing when she pulled back her arm and let her Conformer fly from her fingers, the shuriken slicing easily through the rain on a collision course with the ominous figure responsible for Reeve's disappearance.

Only when her weapon struck the spot where the Running Man had been standing, her quarry was no longer there. The Conformer whizzed past the wall and started to return to its owner, but before she knew what was happening, Yuffie sensed, rather than saw, a dark blur approaching from her right side with a speed that even Vincent couldn't hope to match.

Yuffie barely had time to scream before she felt an unbelievably powerful force slam into her side, stealing her breath from her lungs and sending her on a painful flight to the pavement five feet away. Pain wracked her body like wildfire dancing across her delicate nerve endings, but years of training kicked in and she was on her feet in a matter of seconds, adrenaline pumping through her system and her muscles locked for another attack.

The Running Man stood in the spot she had been standing in seconds earlier, her Conformer held loosely in one of his gloved hands and his eyes - which were some indiscernible glittering color - staring intensely at her from his ski mask. He did say anything, not so much as a threat, or an evil diabolical, "Mwahahaha! I have you now!" He just stood there in the rain. Like a big fat dork.

"Come on, you bastard!" Yuffie taunted, though she was in no position to be doing so. "Show me what you got!"

He didn't move.

Yuffie flung her bangs out of her eyes and ignored the raging pain in her side. "Tell me where Reeve is!" she ordered, raising her fists to show him just how goddamn serious she was.

The Running Man wasn't impressed. He suddenly dropped her precious Conformer on the pavement and rushed at her. Only this time, his attack was a lot slower, and Yuffie was actually able to track his movements as he approached her. She could see his boots slapping the wet pavement and the way his right hand suddenly shot out to the side, fingers stiff as boards. Yuffie felt an instantaneous chill go down her spine as she saw the way his fingers were locked.

He's going for one of my pressure points. I know that stance! That means I'd better move my ass!

Yuffie managed to fling herself up and out of the way, executing a neat flip through the air just as she felt a humongous whoosh of wind as the Running Man passed beneath her. She no longer felt neither the rain nor the pain in her side as she twisted her body so that she landed on the wet pavement in a crouching position, her battle-darkened eyes riveted on the Running Man.

Before the ominous man could turn around and attack her again, Yuffie raised her right arm, not in self-defense, but so that her opponent could see the glittering green materia sheathed in her Crystal Bangle. She wanted him to be afraid of what she was about to do.

"Bolt 3!!" she screamed in a rage, raising her arms towards the stormy sky and focusing all her thoughts on the Mastered Lightning materia in her armor.

Instantly the angry clouds and dark skies complied with her wishes and sent an enormous bolt of white-hot lightning streaming down to earth to strike the figure of the Running Man.

And as the magic engulfed her opponent in blinding white light, Yuffie made a decision she was to regret the rest of her life. Suddenly becoming aware of the fact that the Conformer was lying only a few feet behind her, Yuffie figured she had enough time to reach it before the Running Man could recover from the Bolt 3 attack. Without even thinking twice, she twisted her body and lunged for her weapon.

But just as her fingers touched its ornamental surface and Yuffie was starting to think that victory would be hers, she became aware of *another* dark clad figure rushing to her from the left, some sort of weapon flashing in its hand.

There's two of them! she realized, a moment too late.

Something slammed into the side of her head, creating a burst of agony that had no equal in the entire universe. Despite the life she lived, Yuffie had never been knocked unconscious by a physical blow before; she was too quick for most opponents. Magic had always been her weak point. Good 'ol Sephy's Super Nova had knocked her flat on her ass, and Jenova-Life's Aqualung had sent her flying top over teakettle into darkness, but never before had she been sent into oblivion by a single, physical attack.

Well, Yuffie learned right then and there that there was a first time for everything.

Darkness threatened to take her under as she felt her body crumple to the pavement, the Conformer inches away from her numb fingertips. She was fighting to keep her heavy eyelids from closing eternally when she suddenly felt someone dig a boot into her aching side and flip her over so that she was facing skyward, eyes roving over a feminine figure that she could barely see, skin being hit by raindrops that she barely felt, her mind thinking thoughts that she never would have thought before...

Please, Running Man, she pleaded silently as she saw the figure above her abruptly disappear, only to be replaced with the familiar figure of Reeve's kidnapper. Have mercy on me. I want to see my friends again. I want to see Vincent again. I have to tell him I'm sorry, sorry that I doubted his knowledge, sorry that I was wrong. I want to see Vincent again...

But if the Running Man had any way of hearing her thoughts, he had no intention of complying with final wishes of Yuffie Pristina Kisaragi. Through the darkness clouding her vision, Yuffie vaguely saw him kneel at her side, his darkness-cloaked face inches from hers and as cold and distant as that of a judge in Purgatory. Suddenly, she realized what color his eyes were, and that she had seen them somewhere before.

"Aeris?" she whispered, her pupils dilating and contracting as the darkness threatening to swallow her grew more demanding.

The Running Man blinked in surprise and shock. Blinked those heartbreakingly familiar eyes.

Green eyes, she thought giddily. Pretty green eyes. The Running Man has green eyes.

Those were her last coherent thoughts before the darkness took her under.