

Chapter Three: The Men Without Faces

"You sure picked a hell of a time to develop a sense of curiosity." Yuffie Kisaragi

Again I stand against the Faceless Man

Now I saw a face on the water

It looked humble but willing to fight

I saw the will of a warrior

His yoke is easy and His burden is light

"Faceless Man"

Creed

Vincent waited until Yuffie had appeared to have collected herself and was holding the Conformer in a ready position. He reached out with his metal arm and wrapped the monstrous digits that passed for his fingers around the rusted doorknob. Yuffie suddenly tightened her grip on his pants, her fingers actually slipping inside the waistband. Vincent stiffened and almost jerked away, the touch of her cold fingers against the flesh of his hip startling him more than anything he had experienced that night. With a great force of will, however, he contained his feelings and turned the doorknob, pushing the rusted metal door open to reveal the room beyond.

Yuffie's heart was beating so loud and fast that it was a wonder it didn't create echoes. Her breath caught in her throat as the door slowly swung open, fully expecting to see some sort of gross, sea monster waiting with its maw gaping wide, but instead all she saw was a featureless room that was completely devoid of furniture except for a single wooden table and a pair of chairs. A lonely light bulb hanging on a rusted, time-devoured cord illuminated the room with its dim glow, revealing a spiral staircase of metal stairs tucked away in the corner like a neglected pet. The room smelled of seawater and smoke, but Yuffie had never seen a more beautiful sight in her entire life.

"Light!" she cried happily. "I see the light!"

She released her grip on Vincent and was about to bound into the room when his metal arm suddenly shot out and snagged her around her waist, yanking her back against his chest.

"You should know better than that," he murmured into her ear again, holding the Death Penalty in front of him as he surveyed the room. "What if there had been an assassin hiding in the corner?"

"You're overreacting, Vinnie," she grumbled, relaxing against him, all her past fears sounding petty now that she was in a room with light. His metal arm was cold against the bare skin of her stomach, but his body was warm against her back, and she suddenly wanted nothing more than to remain like this standing in the doorway with the light in front of her and the warm safety of Vincent's presence against her back.

The spell was abruptly broken as Vincent moved away from behind her and walked further into the room, holding the Death Penalty in front of him. A loud clap of thunder suddenly sounded from on deck, and Yuffie hurriedly shut the door in a fit of panic that hadn't quite gone away yet. With the horrible darkness now behind her, she felt almost triumphant, but the feeling of impending doom that she had been getting ever since they had emerged from behind the crate refused to go away, staying in the back of her mind and only emerging once in a while to tease and terrify her before running away like a cockroach from a light. It was starting to get really annoying.

Defiantly switching the Conformer to her right arm, Yuffie turned her back on the metal door and watched as Vincent, satisfied that there was no one in the room, inspected the spiral staircase in the corner. Yuffie skipped over to him, making sure she stayed well within the circle of light from the bulb attached to the ceiling.

"See anything interesting, Vinnie?" she asked, peering over his shoulder. The staircase looked like it had been part of a giant drill that had burst through the wooden floor in a corkscrew motion, going all the way up to the ceiling.

Vincent gestured upwards with his claw. "There's a trapdoor up there, but I can't see any way to open it."

"Did you try pushing it?" Yuffie asked smartly.

"Yes," he answered patiently. "It doesn't budge. Either it's not even a door, or something is holding it in place from above. My guess is that the latter scenario is correct."

Yuffie tuned him out like she always did when he started speaking in a language that didn't sound like English. "So which way did the Running Man go?"

Vincent shrugged his broad shoulders. "Only two ways he could have gone. Up or down."

Yuffie looked at her feet to see that the staircase spiraled down into an eerie glowing breed of darkness. Leaning over the hole, she could see that there was some sort of greenish light at the end of the staircase, and she caught a whiff of some ominous scent that awakened an alarm deep within her soul, a danger-sensing part of her brain that had lain dormant until that smell entered her nostrils and penetrated her consciousness. She hurriedly backed away.

"Well," she said in a falsely cheerful tone. "Since we definitely don't want to go down there, let's just climb up and give this little trapdoor another shove now, shall we?"

Vincent stared at her. "We're going down," he said flatly.

Yuffie scowled, trying to ignore the fact that her heart was starting to pound in terror again. "What's this 'we' stuff? I sure as hell don't want to go down there."

"Fine," Vincent said, taking a step onto the metal staircase. "I'll go down. You stay here."

Yuffie nearly panicked. He was going to leave her here! No, he wouldn't; he was just bluffing. Vincent was good at that. That's why he always beat Cloud and the others at poker! But this time he had to be kidding, right? Well, two could play at this game.

"Fine," she said matter-of-factly. "Maybe I will stay here. If some monster comes up and tries to eat you, just scream really loud and maybe if I'm in a good mood, I'll go back outside, jump back into the water, and try and swim to the shore to get help. Other than that, take your time."

She glanced down nervously to see how her little speech was affecting Vincent. He didn't even look like he was paying attention. All she could see in the faint green light was the top of his dark head and his crimson cape billowing behind him as he descended the staircase. Yuffie waited for a grand total of two seconds before she knuckled under.

"Goddammit, Vinnie!" she called desperately. "Wait up!"

She took a quick but fearful step onto the stairway, trying to ignore the feeling that she was going to fall, and began to descend at break neck speed. The winding design of the stairs soon made her dizzy, and the eerie green light all around her was making her feel light-headed but she continued to rush downwards, watching her feet the entire time, only intent on catching up with Vincent.

"Vincent! Vincent! Vincent!" she chanted, the sound of her own trembling voice offering her a sense of comfort. "Wait for me or you'll regret the day you met me! If you leave me behind, I swear I'll--"

She let out an involuntary cry of surprise as Vincent's form suddenly appeared in front of her, bathed in the creepy green light, his red eyes staring at her impassively from his deathly pale face. Under the light, however, the flesh looked a pale minty green that for some reason didn't seem nearly as horrible as the light from which it had been derived.

"Yuffie, be quiet," Vincent urged tonelessly, his voice betraying neither annoyance nor exasperation.

She put her hands on her hips, trying to fight down the fear that was fluttering rapidly in the back of her throat. "Why? The Running Man already knows we're here."

Vincent turned away and started descended the stairs again, his boots making no sound at all against the dark metal. "I know that," he responded without looking back at her. "I'm not expecting on apprehending the Running Man anymore. I just want to see what is down here."

"You sure picked a hell of a time to develop a sense of curiosity," Yuffie grumbled, keeping her eyes fixed on Vincent's flowing red cape as it brushed the stairs behind him.

"Allow me to rephrase myself," he replied. "I'm looking for a way out of here."

"A way out of here?" she echoed nervously. "But the boat is outside."

"We're not taking the boat."

"Why not?" she whined, knowing she was sounding like the brat that everyone thought she was and not caring.

Vincent suddenly stopped and spun around so quickly that Yuffie narrowly avoided falling over him. His red eyes suddenly bore into her frightened gray ones with an intensity that made her back up to the step above her. "What's wrong with you, Yuffie?" he demanded, and the girl thought she could detect a hint of frustration in his tone. "You couldn't wait to get off

that boat and now you want to go get back on? You complained endlessly about being behind the crate and now when I say that I'm looking for a way out of here, you keep on complaining? You're just not happy unless you're complaining, aren't you?"

Though Yuffie continued to fidget nervously, a spark of anger burst through her slowly building terror. "I'm scared, Vinnie!" she snapped. "I already told you so quit rubbing it in my face! I just want to go home and leave this place behind me. And besides, what do you care about whether I complain or not! Just ignore me like everyone always does! You don't care about me so just leave me alone!"

"You want me to leave you alone?" Vincent asked, his eyes burning into hers though his tone remained flat.

"No!" she exclaimed, forgetting her anger when faced with the prospect of him abandoning her. "Don't leave me alone!"

"Then quit complaining and being nuisance while I look for a way out of here," he deadpanned and without another word, turned and started descending the stairs as if nothing had ever happened.

Yuffie followed him meekly, focusing on the way his ebony black hair floated against the crimson of his cape so she wouldn't have to look at the light that was getting steadily brighter. Though she wouldn't have admitted for anything, but his treatment stung. His words had cut to her to the bone and made her feel useless even when people had said meaner things to her in the past that she had just laughed off. *Added baggage*, she thought with an intense sadness, *that's what everyone thinks I am. I just wanted to help find Reeve, and all I'm doing is dragging everyone down. But I can't help it if I'm scared. The thing is that I don't know why I'm scared.*

Everything from the green light originating from some nameless source below them to the ever thickening smell that was seriously beginning to get to her spoke of danger and monsters from tales she heard old crusty sailors in the Turtle's Paradise bar talking about, monsters unheard of for centuries but that everyone knew still existed, watching and waiting for their moment to rise from the murky depths...

Yuffie shook her head wildly to fling the thoughts from her mind and pushed impatiently at her hair. It wasn't like her to be this paranoid about anything. She thought it had something to do with the fact that she hated riding ships in the water and now she and Vincent were practically going so deep into the earth that if she knocked down the walls around her, gallons of seawater would pour in. But the young ninja knew it was something else, something she knew was there and sought to grasp, but couldn't no matter how hard she tried.

Instead of dwelling on these thoughts that only sparked more terror in her already jittery mind, she watched Vincent as he continued to descend the steps in front of her, unperturbed by the glow and smell of the spiraling staircase. The greenish blue light added more colorful tones to his already blue-black hair, and Yuffie suddenly wondered if those black locks were as soft as they looked. The green light seemed to embrace Vincent's entire form eagerly, making him into something that resembled a god, maybe the god Sephiroth wanted to be. Sephiroth, who now somewhere that Yuffie didn't even care to think of instead of a Promised Land full of...

"Mako!" she suddenly exclaimed. Vincent didn't even turn to look at her. "This glow reminds me of Mako!" she continued, caught up in her discovery. "It's the same color and everything! Do you see it, Vinnie?"

Vincent nodded, and she was surprised to see that he was even listening to her. "Yes, I think there may be a reactor down here. That's the first intelligent thing you've said all evening, Yuffie."

"So we're back to making fun of me?" she snapped.

"On the contrary, I'm trying to give you a compliment."

For some reason, Yuffie flushed slightly at this, but continued, "Well, while I'm in the middle of a brainstorm, do you happen to notice that smell?"

Vincent paused. "Yes. It's a most peculiar smell, unlike anything I've ever come across before. I don't like it."

"Me neither," Yuffie agreed nervously. "Does Mako smell like that? I haven't been in too many reactors in my lifetime."

"No," Vincent replied. "Whatever that smell is, it's not Mako."

"Maybe rotten Mako then?" she asked timidly, making a poor attempt at humor to a man who practically had none.

Just as she had expected, Vincent responded flatly, "Mako doesn't rot, Yuffie." He abruptly lifted his head and cocked it to the side. "Do you hear that?" he asked softly.

Yuffie balked. "W-What?"

Vincent stopped moving and listened closer, his ebony black hair spilling onto the shoulder of his cloak. "It's sounds like someone beating a gong...or a beating heart. I think there might be something alive down here. Something big."

Rampant images of sea serpents and monsters with huge mouths filled her head, and Yuffie pushed them away frantically. "Don't say that, Vinnie! Don't even think that!"

Vincent didn't reply; instead, he just resumed walking down the staircase with a nervous Yuffie just a step behind him. Below them, they could see that the winding stairs abruptly ended after descending down into what looked like another room. They still couldn't, however, see any source for the Mako-colored light that permeated the staircase. If Yuffie didn't know better, she would have thought that the metal walls around her were generating that light.

When they reached the bottom of the staircase, Vincent raised the Death Penalty and Yuffie followed in suit with her Conformer. Allowing Vincent to go into the room ahead of her, she watched as he glanced at his surroundings with an expert eye. Only when he had lowered his gun did she dare to venture forward, her heart pounding in her chest.

She found herself in a room that was quite different from the one with the light bulb, which was far above them now. The floor was made of wooden planks that creaked beneath her yellow sneakers, but the walls were constructed of some smooth stone that she had never seen before. Its surface was shiny and reflected the light that occupied the room, the same color of light that had permeated the air in the staircase.

"Yuffie," Vincent called. "Over here."

The girl tore her attention away from the wall and quickly scampered over to stand close to Vincent, who was staring at a pair of tunnels in front of him. The light coming from the left tunnel was brighter and more intense than the one in the right. Also, some sort of white veil, stained green by the Mako glow, had been draped over the right tunnel like a curtain, reminding Yuffie suddenly of a dressing room. The sheer material billowed in an unseen breeze.

"Which way do we go?" Vincent pondered, more to himself than to her.

"Neither," Yuffie responded promptly. "Let's go back up."

Ignoring her, Vincent stepped forward and took a few steps into the left tunnel, sniffing at the air and touching the surface of the stone walls.

"The air in here is slighter colder," he announced, coming out of the tunnel. "Indicating that it leads deeper into the earth. That smell and the light are also stronger, as I'm sure you have noticed. The beating sound is also louder."

"Let's not go rushing down there," Yuffie said nervously, wringing her hands together. "I'm not at all interested in find whatever is making that light or that smell."

"It may be a perfectly natural occurrence," Vincent said, approaching the other tunnel. "Sort of like the Mako fountain in the Nibelheim mountains or the materia formation we saw before the Weapons emerged from the North Crater." He suddenly stopped talking and lifted the end of the veil thing, and Yuffie saw dark stains on the underside that the eerie glow had hidden before.

"W-What is it?" she stuttered.

"Blood," Vincent said grimly.

Yuffie's breath caught in her throat. "B-Blood?" she stammered. "Is it Reeve's?"

Vincent shook his head. "I don't know. I don't think that--"

A loud grinding sound suddenly cut him off, and Yuffie looked around wildly for the source, her heart stopping when she found it.

"Oh no!" she cried. "Vincent! The stairs! Someone's pulling them up!"

The spiral stairs were indeed moving upwards, rapidly disappearing into the stone ceiling in a corkscrew motion. If they didn't hurry, they would be trapped down here! Yuffie rushed over and jumped up, grabbing onto the bottom step as it pulled further off the floor.

"Come on Vinnie!" she cried, holding out her free hand. Vincent was already headed towards her, his cape flapping behind him.

It was at that instant that a section of the luminescent stone wall literally disappeared, just vanishing into thin air and leaving a gaping hole in the wall. Yuffie felt her heart plummet to her feet as she caught sight of three bald men dressed in all black rush from the opening and descend on Vincent, all brandishing guns like old pros.

As Vincent whirled to face off against his attackers, Yuffie cast a panicked glance up at the ceiling, which was slowly but steadily getting closer and closer. If she was hanging off of the last step like this when it reached the ceiling, she was going to end up like the squashed tomato Don Corneo had wanted her to be a year before.

"Vincent! Hurry up!" she cried wildly, wanting to escape but not wanting to leave her friend, as dull and stoic as may be, to face the assailants by himself...

The dark man didn't even glance at her. "Just go, Yuffie!" he cried, raising the Death Penalty and firing at one of his attackers. "Find a way out and tell the others about this place!"

Ambivalence tore at Yuffie's heart and mind. Logic screamed at her, telling her that it would do no good if both she and Vincent were killed or captured. If at least she escaped, she could bring Cloud and the others back here and free Vincent...if he was still alive. Then the soft, clear voice of her heart rose up in her, speaking and not screaming. Singing and not talking. Telling her gently of things and emotions and concepts that her mind could never grasp in a million years.

Vincent...

In a split second, Yuffie made her decision. She released her grip on the ascending staircase and landed on the wooden floor with a thud. The spiral stairs vanished into the ceiling with a clang of metal, eliminating one escape route. She saw that Vincent was locked in desperate battle with two of the assassins. The other one was lying in a heap on the floor, a pool of blood slowly forming beneath him. The two remaining attackers had managed to somehow corral Vincent into the corner and, instead of shooting, were pounding on him with the butts of their guns, a most peculiar tactic for men who seemed to be skilled in the use of firearms. The Death Penalty lay on the floor not far away, but unreachable to Vincent for the time being.

Seeing that her companion was about to be overcome, Yuffie pulled back her arm and launched the Conformer smoothly at Vincent's attackers. It struck the nearest one in the back, opening up a shallow cut.

The man didn't cry out or even clutch at the bleeding wound. Instead, he turned around quickly and advanced towards Yuffie. The girl was just about to throw the Conformer again when she looked up and got her first good look at the man's face.

He had no face.

Instead of eyes, nose and a mouth, the man only had small depressions like miniature craters in his pink flesh. The entire warped monstrosity of what she had once thought to be a man's face was really just a mound of featureless pink clay molded into an abomination that just happened to resemble a man. And the greenish blue light that filled the entire room with its ghastly glow only made her attacker's appearance more revolting. "Grossness!" Yuffie exclaimed. "What the hell are you guys?!"

But of course, the man didn't have a mouth to answer with. He just continued to advance towards Yuffie, the mound of flesh that passed for his face locked onto her slender form even though he had no eyes with which to see her. He raised his gun menacingly.

The young ninja sidestepped his lunge easily, kicking him in the side as she did so. The Faceless Man counterattacked with surprising swiftness for a man with no eyes, hitting the corner of her thigh with the butt of his submachine gun. Yuffie cried out more in surprise than pain and retreated a couple of steps, trying to get far enough away so she could fling her weapon at him. The man, however, had different ideas and followed her closely, matching every kick she sent in his direction with a quick but painful counterattack with his own, his faceless head causing great unrest in the ninja and much as his silence did. It felt as if she were fighting a machine. She would have done better if he had at least made some sort of noise, maybe a muffled grunt or growl. Just because he didn't have a mouth didn't mean that he didn't have vocal cords, right?

She was so unnerved by her opponent that she allowed her guard to slip. The Faceless Man swooped in with amazing speed and swung his gun at her head. She jerked back at the last moment, avoiding a blow to the temple, which would have knocked her unconscious, but took the brunt of the blow to her left cheekbone. The force of the impact made her head snap to the side and she fell backwards, dropping her Conformer in the confusion. Pain, clear as daylight, assaulted her senses. She tasted blood in her mouth and for a moment, she feared that she was going to black out, but then she

flopped over onto her back and caught sight of the Faceless Man looming over her, raising his gun to deliver the final blow that would send her falling into darkness.

Yuffie lifted her right leg and struck him as hard as she could between the legs, a blow that probably would have left any human man crouched on the floor in complete agony. The Faceless Man, however, didn't seem to feel her blow. As he raised his gun, Yuffie closed her eyes tightly and waited for the pain to come. Instead, she heard the sharp crack of a gunshot and the sound of something hitting the floor with a hollow, thumping sound.

Silence fell. *Wow*, she thought, *I never knew that the path to the Lifestream would be so...quiet and boring.* Maybe she had missed the scenic route somewhere.

"Yuffie?" a deep voice asked.

Hey, that sounded an awful lot like...

She opened her eyes. An ominous but familiar figure loomed over her, concern in its red eyes and a huge mass of midnight black hair spilling over one shoulder.

"Vincent!" she cried happily, ignoring the pain in her cheek. "You're okay!"

She immediately hopped to her feet and tackled him with a hug, flinging her arms around his neck. Vincent grunted in pain, apparently trying not to let her hear.

Yuffie hurriedly backed away, cheeks flushing with shame. "I'm sorry!" she gasped. "Are you hurt?"

"I'll live," Vincent said dismissively. He reached out and grasped her face gently with his claw, turning it to the side so he could examine her cheek.

"Am I bleeding?" she asked dumbly. "Is the wound fatal?"

One corner of his mouth turned up in a "Vincent" smile. "No. But the Brother of Battle has blessed you with a kiss."

"What?" Yuffie asked, totally confused.

Vincent released her, satisfied that she was okay. "Nothing," he murmured. "I'll tell you later. We need to get out of here. Where there's three of these monstrosities, there could be three hundred more."

Yuffie shuddered and picked up her Conformer. "Typical Vincent mentality. What do you think they are...or were?"

Vincent looked impassively at the three corpses, all who sported bullet wounds from the Death Penalty. "I don't care to find out," he said flatly. "Let's just get out of here."

Yuffie looked around the room. "How? The stairs went bye-bye, and I sure as hell am not going through either of those tunnels!"

"Then we'll go through the door they came out of."

"B-But that ludicrous!" she sputtered, appalled that he would even make such a suggestion. "You said there could be three hundred more just waiting for us!"

Vincent stared at her. "Would you like to try the tunnels then?"

Yuffie's heart stopped at the very prospect. "No!"

"Then let's go."

With a whoosh of his cape, he strode over to the Faceless Men's secret entry and took a step in, apparently listening for any sounds of approaching feet. Yuffie scampered up behind him, her paranoia returning now that the adrenaline from the battle was ebbing. To her right, the light from the left tunnel pulsed suddenly, calling to her, beckoning to her. She unwittingly let her gaze drift into the Mako-colored light that seemed to reach out its arms easily to welcome her, to accept her. A wave of that strange odor hit her face, and her hair ruffled in an unseen breeze. With an enormous act of will, she turned her face away and followed Vincent into the secret tunnel, making sure she stayed close behind him.

Unlike the other two tunnels, there was no strange green light contorting and dancing for her. Embedded in the ceiling, there were your normal everyday electric lights like the ones in Reeve's office. Yuffie was grateful for that at least, and for the fact that this secret tunnel was not made of the same eerie stone as the Green Room behind her had been. Instead, it was made of brown rock on all sides and looked like the coal mines underneath Corel.

"Hey Vinnie!" she said as they continued to run along. "How deep in the earth are we?"

"Deep enough to fall out the bottom," Vincent commented.

"Not funny, Vinnie," she growled, panting for breath even though they had only been running for a few minutes.

"You asked," Vincent responded flatly.

Yuffie wanted to come up with some snappy comeback, but instead she decided to concentrate on breathing and keeping her feet running. Normally, she liked to think of herself as being in good shape, but tonight had been emotionally and physically taxing. Her legs were covered with bruises from the Faceless Man's counterattacks and her cheek was hurting like a bitch. All she really wanted to do was curl up and rest for the next forty years.

After five more minutes of running, her side began to develop a pain that rivaled the one on the left side of her face and she called out to Vincent, "Can we rest for a little while? I'm about to collapse!"

"We're running on an incline," Vincent answered, sounding only slightly winded. "If we keep at this pace, we should make it to the surface."

"Easy for you to say, Mr. Daddy Long Legs," she snarled, though she really wasn't in the mood to argue.

After another five minutes of nonstop running and nothing to do but stare at the rocky walls or watch Vincent's dark hair flop around his back, Yuffie's side was one mass of agony. She was about to just leap on Vincent's back and have him piggyback her out of here when suddenly he came to a halt. Yuffie crashed into his back and almost fell over, heaving for breath.

"What is it?" she gasped, her legs feeling numb and watery.

"Decisions," he said simply.

Confused, Yuffie peered around him and saw that the next part of the tunnel branched off in three different directions, each path looking the same.

She let out a long string of curses that would have made Cid proud and kicked the nearest wall with her yellow sneaker, earning her an aching pain in her foot for her troubles.

"I've had it with this place!" she snapped after she was done ranting. "I'm just going to sit here and wait for God Almighty to send down one of his angels to escort me down the right path. And I'm going to have a word with Mr. Cloud Strife if I make it out of here sometime in the next year!"

"Would any of those angels you were talking about happen to be lacking faces?" Vincent suddenly asked, his eyes locked onto the tunnels.

"Cut the mystical crap, Vinnie!" she snapped, then quickly shut her mouth when she saw what he was talking about. What appeared to be an entire army of the Faceless Men was running straight towards them down the first and middle tunnels. Only the last one was clear.

"The third tunnel, Yuffie!" Vincent cried. "Run!"

The ache in her legs forgotten, she took off like a shot with Vincent only a step behind her. The stretch in front of her was blessedly clear of any of the faceless monsters, but that small comfort was negated by the fact that she and Vincent had an entire army of the little boogers right behind them.

"Hey Vinnie!" she called over her shoulder. "Why didn't they just shoot us? They had guns!"

"They must want us alive," he answered breathlessly.

Yuffie didn't reply, needing all the breath possible just to keep air flowing in and out of her lungs. She couldn't help but wonder who sent the Faceless Men after them. Or had they come after the two intruders themselves? They sure seemed more like mindless machines than sentient creatures that thought for themselves, but she could be wrong. And what part did the Running Man have in this? So many questions and so little answers.

It seemed as if they ran for hours with Yuffie in the lead, Vincent behind her, and an entire legion of Faceless Men following them relentlessly, never seeming to tire. Yuffie's face and back were soon soaked with sweat, and behind her, she could hear Vincent's labored breathing. And to make things worse, ten minutes into the third tunnel with the incessant pounding

of the Faceless Men's feet roaring in their ears, the lights above them went out and the entire tunnel was plunged into darkness. And with the darkness, came the paranoia and terror.

But just as Yuffie was about to start freaking out, she felt a cool, salty breeze hit her sweaty face.

"We're almost out!" she cried to Vincent, getting a second wind. "I can see light up ahead!"

Vincent only grunted in response, but Yuffie didn't care. They were going to get out! She forced her arms and legs to pump faster and heard Vincent's harsh breathing as he too picked up speed.

Yuffie burst free of the dark tunnel going full speed and narrowly avoided taking another dive into yet another pool of seawater. She skidded to a halt and examined her surroundings. They were in another tunnel, only this one was made of concrete and had a ceiling that towered above her head. To her right, the tunnel opened up into the deep blue sea. She could see the dark nighttime waters of the ocean tossing and turning in the storm that had finally blown in. Wind whistled through the concrete tunnel, and as Vincent burst free of the tunnel behind her, a flash of lightening suddenly illuminated the room as bright as day.

Sitting in the pool of seawater that served as a minuscule docking bay was a black and yellow jet ski with the words Black Stinger emblazoned in bright letters on its flank.

Yuffie turned to Vincent and smiled evilly.

He stared at her, his red eyes shimmering in the darkness. "Oh no," he said.

"Oh yes!" she exclaimed, leaping agilely onto the jet ski and exalting, "Yes! Some doofus left the keys in the ignition! We're out of here! Climb on Vinnie!"

"I'm driving," he said firmly, refusing to board. Sitting between two crates for two hours with a seasick Yuffie was annoying, listening to her gripe for one more hour was even more annoying, but Yuffie with a new toy that moved at very high speeds was just flat out dangerous.

Yuffie rolled her eyes at how stubborn he was being. "Quit being an ass, Vinnie," she snapped. "Get on unless you *want* them to catch up! Besides, you have to shoot those freaks with your little pop gun if they decide to follow us."

Vincent boarded the jet ski with great reluctance and slipped his arms around her narrow waist. "Do you even know how to drive one of these things?"

Yuffie shrugged, her dark hair bouncing on her slender shoulders. "How hard can it be?"

God help me, Vincent thought silently as the jet ski called Black Stinger roared to life.