

Chapter Thirty-Eight: Sojourn in Wutai I

"...and it is not just because I just watched you nearly fall headfirst into my fishpond." Lord Godo

Yuffie quietly shut the back door behind her, holding her breath and waiting fearfully. Her stomach had wound itself into knots, and her heart seemed to pound annoyingly loud in her chest. So loud, in fact, that she was surprised it hadn't woken up all of Rocket Town yet.

Once she was satisfied that her nocturnal meandering had gone unnoticed, she slowly released her breath and wiped the perspiration off her forehead. Damp night air pressed against her skin like a thick musk, still heavy with moisture from the rain that had blessedly halted for a few precious moments. Yuffie had no doubt the erratic downpours would resume soon, and thus, she had to hurry.

Wrapping her borrowed cloak tighter around her body, she tiptoed through the slick grass of Cid's backyard, trying to make her footfalls as silent as possible. Years of thievery had taught her that patience, perseverance, and quiet feet always triumphed in the end. Yuffie was all for the "quiet feet" bit, but she always preferred a more straightforward approach over the sneaky, roundabout methods most freakishly successful thieves swore by.

Time was teaching Yuffie many things.

Waiting for everyone to return home from their beer-guzzling adventures had tried the very limits of her patience. Yuffie didn't feel comfortable skulking around Cid's house like a traitor with a dirty secret when her friends were still out and about. It seemed Cloud and Reno would never return from their venture to the local bar until she heard Elena yelling at the drunken duo in the living room. Something about kangaroos and Reno running into a telephone pole. And Rude's particularly nasty case of gas.

Yuffie didn't even want to ASK about that one.

But she'd waited on the floor of Tifa's room, covered from neck to toe in a sleeping bag so no one would see that she hadn't bothered to change into her nightclothes. She knew that Tifa was a light sleeper, but the older woman had thankfully remained unconscious while Yuffie tiptoed out of the room and to the back door. It seemed Cloud, Reno, and the other bar-hoppers had passed out in the living room before making it to their bedrooms, and Red the resident bloodhound had fortunately opted to sleep out on the porch rather than indoors.

All things considered, Yuffie had a lucky break, and by Leviathan, she was NOT going to waste it!

Praying that none of her friends had decided to take a late night walk (hey, thirteen people were damn hard to keep track of!), Yuffie made her way across the Highwinds' backyard, which looked a lot bigger without the Tiny Bronco to occupy most of the space. The poor broken plane was probably doing some deep-sea solo surfing by now. Eh, it was hunk of junk anyways. Not that she was going to tell that to Cid or anything.

She nimbly leapt the fence and dared one last glance back at the house. No suspicious lights or shadows had appeared in the past thirty seconds. So far, so good. A loud burst of thunder roared directly above her, and Yuffie nearly peed her pants. She suddenly felt as if the skies had thrown a spotlight on her figure, and the clouds were crying, "Here she is! She's over here!"

//Shutupshutupshutup,// Yuffie chanted in her head as she made a mad dash for the chocobo barn Cid had built a little ways behind his house. //Dammit, I'm gonna get caught! Stupid-ass thunder gave away my position and oh gawd, how am I going to get out of this one? I'm so screwed! Whose bright idea was this in the first place and holy shit, it was mine because I'm an idiot!//

Yuffie's frantic thoughts didn't let up until she practically slammed face first into the doors of the chocobo barn. Her trembling fingers fumbled their way into the small crack between the doors, finding enough leverage to push one to the side. Yuffie eased her slender body into the small gap, and then it was just her panting in the still darkness of barn, surrounded by the smell of greenery and chocobo poop. And ah, how lovely it was!

Sleepy warks issued from the darkness, and Yuffie answered in a squeaky voice she barely recognized as her own, "It's me, choco-butts! Your old friend Yuffie!"

More warks and cheeps. The sound of claws moving over hay and wood. Yuffie was able to pick out two different curious cheeps from the good-mannered golds and one very annoyed squawk that **had** to be Triton - the bluest, meanest, rottenest chocobo Yuffie had ever had the displeasure of being dumped on her ass by. Only Tifa and Cid could ride the nasty birdbrain with any amount of success, but that was fine because Yuffie had NO intention of taking Triton out for a stroll.

"I'm coming, birdies," Yuffie said in a sing-song voice that was meant as more of a comfort for herself than the chocobos. She tried to calm to the pounding of her heart as she fumbled along the wall for the light switch that Mr. Fix-It Cid had cleverly installed in the barn. No flashlights or lanterns needed, no siree. One flick of her fingers, and the entire barn filled with lovely, electric illumination that did wonders for Yuffie's frazzled nerves.

Unfortunately, the light's intrusion elicited another indignant squawk from Triton, and Yuffie hurriedly shut the small gap she had made in the barn doors, lest the light and the chocobo's incessant whining wake the others.

She marched over to Triton's stall and glared at the blue chocobo, who glared right back at her. "Dammit, if I were Cid, I would have cooked you up and served you as dinner a long time ago!" she whisper-screamed at the bird. "What is it with you blues? If I were Butterfly, I'd be ashamed to claim you as my son!"

The mention of Yuffie's much-missed chocobo cooled her temper a little. Cid's stable had eight different stalls, one for each of AVALANCHE's chocobos. It was kind of depressing to see only three of those stalls occupied by the large birds. However, Yuffie was only worried a little about the chocobos they had left at Kalm. The birdbrains loved to swim, and she knew without a doubt that no matter what grudge Butterfly held against her master, if Yuffie went to Kalm and called her chocobo's name, then by golly, Butterfly would come running if she were in earshot. Chocobo Billy still raved to customers about how "them old folks in AVALANCHE" had bred some of the most loyal chocobos he'd ever seen.

Five minutes later, Yuffie crept back out of the barn holding the reins of Zoe, the more mannerly of the two gold chocobos. And the quieter. The elegant bird obediently held still while Yuffie mounted her, shifting on the saddle until she was remotely comfortable. Another glance towards the house that lay ominously quiet against the cloudy night sky, and Yuffie was off with only a minute flick of the reins.

Between Zoe and her twin brother Quinn (also a gold), Zoe was the faster bird, and tonight Yuffie had chosen speed over endurance. Zoe had won them countless races at Gold Saucer, and her much-valued speed did not waver as she brought her rider to the sandy shores outside Rocket Town in a little less than five minutes.

However, Yuffie reined the chocobo in, briefly daunted by the visage of the great ocean stretching like a plain of endless dark before her. Lightning blazed in the dark sky while its reflection simultaneously writhed on the watery surface, as if both ocean and sky conspired to confuse onlookers as to which way was up and which was down. A salty wind tore at Yuffie's cloak and sent locks of chocolate brown hair flying into her eyes, which she pushed away in great agitation.

It was impossible to see edge of the Wutai land mass in the darkness, but Yuffie knew it was out there. All she needed to do was guide Zoe onto the black waters and steer her in a northwestern direction. But...what if, in the darkness, Yuffie got turned around and the two of them were lost at sea? She had never ridden a chocobo on the ocean during a thunderstorm. What if the waves suddenly got turbulent and the two of them were swallowed by the hungry currents?

Yuffie tightened her grip on Zoe's reins until she felt the leather bite painfully into her palms. She was being stupid again. There was no way she could miss Wutai, it was the biggest chunk of land for miles! And if she DID get lost, well, gold chocobos were known to guide lost riders home by following their own innate sense of direction, and Zoe's instincts had yet to fail them. As for Yuffie's bothersome seasickness, if she could ride a jet ski and not toss her cookies, then this should be no problem.

//But that was different,// she argued with herself. //That time I had Vincent with me. And now, it's just me and the ocean, and she's always hated me.//

Zoe warked softly, craning her head to the side to peer worriedly at her rider. Yuffie affectionately patted the crown of golden feathers adorning the bird's head. "It's just you and me, girl. I think we're gonna be just fine, but if worse comes to worst, I'll sink to the bottom with you."

The chocobo cooed encouragingly despite her rider's morbid words. Yuffie took a deep breath and flicked the reins. A few swift steps, a single moment of sickening disorientation as the ground gave way to water, and she was riding the ocean.

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Titus knew the instant the talons of Yuffie's Kisaragi's golden chocobo touched the ocean's surface. He could feel them like small pinpricks along the flesh of his back, needling the skin. The sensations were not as strong as they might have been before the Planet had become ill, but Titus had worshipped age-old gods for longer than Yuffie had been alive. One does not easily forget what it is like to slumber safely in the womb of the Mother of all Life, surrounded by her children, where her watery flesh was your own flesh. It was a total bombardment of sensations that often drove worshippers mad, but not Titus. He had seen and felt far worse things than ships sailing across his chest, or a hurricane whipping the strands of his white-blond hair into a frenzy. Simple things. Such comforting things.

But Titus had not synchronized with the Mother in a long time, and her turbulent waters were not very hospitable at the moment. He soon slipped out of her arms and back to his prison of flesh and bone, mind slowing swimming up from the depths of the trance he had put himself in. His emerald eyes glowed softly as he opened them to find himself once again in the real world: handcuffed to the radiator of Cid Highwind's house, limbs horribly cramped, the air around him permeated by soft darkness.

He let the breath sigh out of his lungs one last time and expanded his awareness to include the entire house, grazing unseen fingers over each of its occupants. Asleep, most of them. Dreaming, some. The only ones that lie awake in the witching hour were the baldheaded Turk called Rude, who shifted restlessly in the armchair he was slouched in, and Shera Highwind, kept from sleep by her husband's snores. But she was not annoyed by this. Such a serene mind, that Shera. Titus briefly contemplated settling his power against her aura, rolling himself in it and absorbing some of her utter placidity. He quickly decided against it, though. Some humans could feel his bodiless presence, and he didn't want to risk exposure if Shera Highwind was one of them. One complaint of strange things amiss, and he knew AVALANCHE would immediately point fingers in his direction.

The other creature that merited some attention from Titus was the one called Red XIII, who never truly slept, it seemed. He dozed often, such as he was doing now on the porch of the house, but that was all Titus discerned before retracting the probing fingers of his power. That one was slightly more sensitive to things of the metaphysical breed, and Titus had known very early on that he had to be wary of the Guardian of Cosmo Canyon.

Titus withdrew into himself as a headache began to form at his temples. He smiled without mirth. His skills were rusty with disuse if he was feeling pain this early on. He opened his eyes once again to the dark living room, raising his hands to rub his aching wrists as best he could with the handcuffs in the way. Such silly things, really. He could shatter them in an instant if he wanted. He had already wormed his way out of them twice today to get circulation running back into his hands, and AVALANCHE had been none the wiser.

He suddenly sensed a pair of eyes on him, and he looked up to find Vincent Valentine standing not five feet away from him, hovering in the doorless threshold that separated the living room and the kitchen.

Titus stared openly, hoping his shock didn't show on his face. //He must have been standing there for a while, or I would have heard him approach. Which means he was right on top of me this entire time, and I didn't even sense a glimmer of his mind.//

After the first time Titus had picked up images leaking from Vincent's mind in Junon, the man had been sealed up tighter than an airless vault. He was like a walking void of emptiness. Not even that, actually. He was simply...invisible to Titus' mind. Disturbing. Most disturbing.

Titus hadn't truly feared a man or woman in a long time, but he was starting to think Vincent Valentine might be worth a little fear.

There was something horribly wrong with the man, that was certain. From what Titus knew of his past, Valentine's body had been...tampered with by a man of evil scientific genius. But there was something else about the dark gunslinger that went beyond having an odd body composition. Something twisted and familiar.

Titus schooled his face into its familiar mask of disinterest as he met Valentine's gaze levelly. "If you're looking for Yuffie," he whispered, knowing that no matter how soft his voice was, the other man would hear it. "She is crossing the ocean to Wutai as we speak."

"I know," Vincent said, voice just as quiet, just as emotionless.

"If you plan to go after her, take a cloak from the hall closet. Another downpour will be arriving in around ten minutes."

Vincent didn't ask why Titus was telling him such things, or how the strange man knew such outlandish information. He merely turned on heel and strode away. A few moments later, Titus heard the hall closet door creak open. A quick rustle of the garments within, another creak as the door was closed, and then the finality of the backdoor disturbing the air currents as it opened and closed almost silently on well-oiled hinges.

"Godspeed, Valentine," Titus murmured.

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Yuffie made it to Wutai safe and sound. No monster-sized waves rose from the ocean's watery depths to devour her. She didn't get struck by lightning or abducted by aliens. Oh, and she didn't vomit or get seasick. That was a definite plus. Sure, it started raining not long after she and Zoe started crossing the ocean, but that was no biggie. She'd been putting up with rain for what seemed like forever; what was a little more?

Once she got back on dry land, she instantly felt better. The monsters of Thunder Valley didn't feel like coming out to play in such abominable weather, not that they would have posed much of a threat to Yuffie and the power of her super mighty Oritsuru in the event that they managed to catch up to a rider on a gold chocobo.

Needless to say, her journey through the rocky terrain at the southernmost tip of the Wutai continent was uneventful save for the clumps of mud now clinging to her and Zoe's legs. Mud was generally not a fun thing, but as soon as the distant visage of her home city appeared in the distance, Yuffie forgot all her physical discomforts. She was home at last!

She left Zoe underneath a rocky overhang with a sincere apology, a bagful of greens, and the promise that she wouldn't have to wait long in the rain. Then, the young woman wrapped herself in the thick folds of her cloak and made her way into Wutai.

In the rain, the nightlife of Wutai was a shadow of its usual teeming self. Tourists still flocked to the city in droves, wanting to be immersed in a living, breathing relic of history where it seemed every building, statue, and street had a story behind it. Now, most of those eager tourists were probably holed up in their hotel rooms. Only the most die-hard bar-hoppers dared to walk the muddy streets, some tottering drunkenly from side to side before falling ass-first in the mud while still others clung giddily to their rain-soaked companions, laughing loud enough to wake the dead.

Yuffie's dark gray eyes picked out one of these inebriated bands, and followed them.

~Go to the bars where the drifters frequent. The nomadic sailors that chase the ocean's tides and only make contact with land a few times a year. They sing the Mother's songs in drunken cheer and then are gone, for She would have it no other way.~

Yuffie wasn't so much hearing voices as feeling a wordless tugging in her mind, and she tried to put its soundless whispers into something audible that she could hear, or think. It was like some latent sense had awakened in her, and she was powerless before its insistence. It was strange, for it almost felt as if the words were spoken in her mother's voice, though Yuffie was fairly certain her mother had never told her to go to a *bar*.

She kept to the shadows, hunkering in the folds of her cloak, face and body invisible within its embrace. For some reason, she didn't want anybody to know she was here. Friends and tourists alike always wanted to swamp around and ask questions of Lady Yuffie of Wutai, and usually the young ninja wallowed in the attention like a pig wallowing in...well, mud, but not tonight. She had more pressing business.

The laughing trio of men steered clear of the overcrowded Turtle's Paradise and instead made their way to one of the less-frequented bars, the Golden Samurai. Yuffie thought it was an appropriate name for the bar, though someone without some knowledge of Wutainese history might not understand the allusion. To make a long story short, the bar was named for one of Wutai's legendary warriors, and said legendary warrior had loved his alcohol almost as much as his Fatherland. Hence, the Golden Samurai.

The jolly guys entered the bar and immediately became lost in the throng of drunken patrons, but that was fine. Yuffie didn't need them any longer.

~The smaller bars will hold the wiser men, as they harbor the unconscious fear that the tender ears of the mainstream crowd will be haunted forever by the words they sing so unwittingly. But you can bear them, can't you?~

"I can," Yuffie whispered to no one in particular as she pushed aside the mat that hung over the door. Light, sound, and smoke immediately washed over her like a giant beast closing its maw with her inside. The pulse of life and the smell of alcohol filled the air like a slightly odoriferous perfume that was tantalizing in small amounts, but overwhelming if indulged too readily. The room was practically packed wall to wall with laughing people, and Yuffie knew why.

The sailors could not sail their ships in such weather, and so they docked in Wutai. But the seagoers became restless on land, and so they had to find oblivion in the drink if they could not get it from the ocean and her limitless waters. Saltwater junkies, her father had once called them.

None of the patrons paid any heed to the small, sopping wet figure that gracefully maneuvered amongst their laughing throng to take a seat at the only empty table in the room. Yuffie settled in her corner, wrapped in hazy shadows and the saturated cloth of her cloak. A frazzled waitress passed by and placed a tankard of ale and a glass in front of Yuffie, not bothering to ask if she wanted the alcohol or not. No one came here for any other purpose than to drink and carry on.

~Mind clear. Eyes unclouded. Ears and mind open. And listen. Just listen.~

And Yuffie did. Water dripping from the hood of her cloak, she listened.

The room swelled with noise as if someone had just yanked cotton out of her ears, allowing the world to materialize in a great outburst of sound and fury. The sailors were singing. Singing so many songs.

And in that bog there was a tree A rare tree and rattlin' tree The tree in the bog And the bog down in the valley-o!

No, that was not the one. It was not even Wutainese in origin. But then again, the song she sought so desperately to hear had most surely originated long before Yuffie's ancestors had established the country she now loved so dearly. Another group of sailors burst into song, regaling in unharmonious tones the adventures of one of Wutai's mythical heroes. No, that was not the one, either.

//Someone HAS to be singing it!// she thought in frustration.

~It is always sung, always there, hidden, just waiting for a pair of desperate, attentive ears.~

Yuffie took deep calming breaths and watched condensation roll down the sides of the untouched tankard in front of her. Slowly, she felt the knot of exasperation in her chest unwind itself, and a great warmth diffused through her limbs, soothing her, almost lulling her into a trance-like state. The noises in the room danced in and out of her attention, like curious children peering into a room after hearing odd noises.

And then, she heard it, a clear aria that soared above all the others like the rainbow-plumed Phoenix gliding over a desolate battlefield, reviving the dead with its fiery touch. A woman was singing it. Fancy that. Female sailors were a true rarity.

Resisting the urge to turn and see from whose mouth the song emerged, Yuffie let the lady sailor's dulcet tones wash over her, drowning her in the embrace of a song her mother had taught her years ago, a song in language that Yuffie could not speak but understood completely. The alien syllables struck her ears and confused the hell out of her mind, but there was no need for worry. She knew what the words meant.

The ravenous Beast The great Hunger The Planet-Eater At the heart of the world it lies Alone in madness, divorced from its Other The minions gather and sing, mindless and scorned Into the darkness they all descend

But now the time to rise is near! Sweet creature of black and white, cry no longer Valiant prince, ascend your throne Unwilling acolyte, care for your reluctant god Lady of cruelest destiny, you must descend Into the dark, into the emerald wreaths of phantasmal toil Past the wall of corpses that guards its domain Into the abysmal lake of the begrudgingly blessed Defeat the minions and feed the beast A heart of beautiful, foulest gold

Over. It was over. The song slowly faded to join the other noises pulsing in the air like the steady thump, thump, thump of a monstrous heart. There were beads of sweat on Yuffie's upper lip, and she realized with a start that her breaths exited in and out of her lungs in thin, reedy pants. Damn, now that couldn't be good. She took a deep breath and promptly hacked as second-hand smoke drifting from the table of laughing teenagers nearby swooped maliciously into her lungs. Bleh.

Yuffie rose shakily to her feet and dropped a few pieces of gil next to the full tankard of ale. She beat a hasty exit from the bar, still feeling lightheaded and just plain weirded-out. The first thing she'd done when she set foot in her homeland was follow a bunch of losers to a bar. She knew it was good to act on pure instinct, and now she had the words of her Mother's old song pulsing gently in her head, but still...bars were nasty! Good thing she had her cloak to veil her identity. If her father found out where she'd gone, the old coot would get his panties in a twist, and what a fiasco that would be!

She high-tailed it out of the loud, smoky bar and back into the annoyingly persistent rain. Mud squelched underneath her shoes as she rounded the corner of the bar and stepped onto the main road, the goal of reaching home and indulging in some dry clothes and a nice, hot soak in the tub clearly ensconced in her mind. Finally, she could get some clothes that actually fit her! Oh, and maybe she would say 'hi' to her dad, too.

Unfortunately, her plans were foiled when she felt an odd presence at her back, a great shadow looming over her like a thunderstorm on the nighttime horizon, soundless yet full of light and conflict. She immediately sent her left elbow flying backwards in the stranger's general direction, but her otherwise superbly efficient attack was hindered by the heavy folds of her wet, cloak. Cold, hard fingers wrapped her elbow in a vice-like grip, and she barely registered a pale arm snaking lightning-fast around her slender body to grip her right wrist as she struggled to free her Oritsuru were she had fastened it to her belt.

"Lemme go, rat bastard!" she shrieked at the top of her lungs, hoping someone would hear her over the rain. If she could delay her attacker long enough then...

"That's a bit of a rude greeting, wouldn't you agree?" a familiar voice asked wryly.

She nearly choked. "Gawd! Stupid Vinnie! I swear if I had 10 gil for every time you've snuck up on me, I wouldn't have to steal materia anymore!"

"You shouldn't steal things anyhow," Vincent scolded, releasing his grip on her arms.

Yuffie turned with every intention of giving her patronizing companion a piece of her mind when she realized that, holy crud, Vincent Valentine was standing in front her. Where he wasn't supposed to be. He was supposed to be back in Rocket Town blissfully a-snooze in his bed, oblivious to her nocturnal meanderings.

"What are you doing in Wutai, Yuffie?" he asked, crimson eyes just barely visible underneath the hood of his black cloak. Strands of wet hair clung to the sides of his pale face, one strand almost touching the corner of his mouth. That irked Yuffie a little. She hated when her hair got into her eyes or mouth, which was normally why she opted to keep it short. Until she had actually started to care that having longer hair might actually be prettier on her.

"Oh me?" she asked in her best innocent tone. "Can't a girl pay a spur-of-the-moment visit to her hometown?"

"In the middle of the night during a thunderstorm?"

"It was spur-of-the-moment, I told you!" she countered heatedly. "And it wasn't thundering when I left!"

"Why didn't you tell anyone where you were going?" he demanded.

Yuffie was starting to get annoyed. "You losers were drunk off your asses! Even if I had told Cloud where I was going, he probably wouldn't have remembered anyway! And he probably would have barfed on my sneakers, to top it all off."

Even through the shadows inside Vincent's hood, she could see his dark eyebrows draw menacingly low over his eyes. Damn, that strand of hair next to his mouth was really bothering her! "You're lying to me, Yuffie. Again."

The muted anger in that last word made her flush with shame. "Am not," she feebly defended her integrity.

"Are to," Vincent deadpanned.

Yuffie through her hands up in frustration, heedless of the flurry of raindrops that struck her exposed clothes as her cloak was untimely flung open by the gesture. "Whatever, Vinnie! I just wanted to come home, okay? I need underwear and clothes and I want to see my mother's kimonos again!"

Vincent cast his eyes to the side, and if Yuffie didn't know better, she would have said he looked apologetic. Ha! Served him right for giving her crap.

"And just what are YOU doing here?" she demanded. "You'd better not be stalking me!"

"You've been kidnapped once, Yuffie. I wasn't going to let it happen again."

She sighed. Stupid Vincent always found a way to douse her anger. "Titus is the one who kidnapped me last time, and he's kind of incapacitated at the moment."

"But don't forget about Jezebel and Montana," Vincent insisted, his voice hardening. Oh great, she could smell a lecture coming on.

"I know, I know, I'm dumb, okay?" Yuffie grumbled, drawing her cloak tighter around her body. "Can we walk and talk at the same time? I'm soaking wet and freezing."

Without waiting for a reply, she turned and began striding purposefully down the road, Vincent wordlessly falling into step beside her. Mud clung to her shoes, hell-bent on miming the impression that she had cement blocks on her feet, but the sight of the pagoda rising in the distance spurred her on. A little mud never hurt anyone!

Though Yuffie had suggested walking and talking, Vincent no longer seemed interested in doing the latter. Fine by her, but she had to admit that it was nice to have him beside her, moving like a dark shadow through the sheets of endless rain, boots leaving swollen imprints in the mud alongside her much daintier ones. For someone who claimed he had a dark, disruptive presence, Yuffie found Vincent's effect on her quite calming. She hated long, awkward silences, but he was one of the only people she'd met in her entire lifetime that she felt comfortable being quiet around.

By the time they reached her father's home, Yuffie no longer had sneakers. She had huge blocks of mud encasing her feet. Good thing they weren't her shoes. She'd have to send the boots back to Kyra with a heartfelt letter of apology. Quickly racing up the steps and into the sanctuary of the overhanging roof, Yuffie kicked her shoes off and left them in the rain.

Vincent clomped up after her, equally muddy boots making hollow, thudding noises on the wooden stairs. "I will wait out here."

"No way!" Yuffie exclaimed. "Come inside."

"I will track mud and water in the house."

"So leave your boots out here so the rain can wash the mud off," Yuffie reasoned. "And water can be easily mopped up."

Vincent frowned, and that little piece of hair stuck to the corner of his mouth frowned with him. "Very well."

He started to kneel to unlace his boots, but not before Yuffie's finger had shot out and gently pushed that lock of wet hair away from his mouth. His eyebrows lifted in question, crimson eyes widening fractionally as he stared up at her.

Yuffie felt her face growing hot, and she damned her quick, impulsive, thieving hands a thousand times over. "It was bothering me! Because your skin is so pale and your hair is so dark and it looked like you were about to start nibbling on it!"

Vincent just continued looking at her oddly, and she made a show of tapping her foot impatiently, still trying valiantly to cover up her embarrassment. Pale fingers made quickly work of the laces of his boots, and soon the dark shoes joined hers at the edge of the porch, the rain immediately sloughing off the outer layers of loose mud. Good to know the damn droplets were good for something other than ruining Yuffie's mood and clothes.

Yuffie dug into her ever-present items satchel and procured a set of keys, fingers immediately feeling out the shape of the correct one and inserting it into the lock on the front door. A satisfying click, and she was carefully opening the door to greet her dark home. Her eyes instinctively scanned the foyer for movement, but all she saw were the scurrying, brightly-colored forms of the goldfish in the humongous fish pond that dominated the entryway.

She quickly ushered Vincent inside, closing the door quietly behind him, lest the noise wake her father. Lord Godo was usually a deep sleeper, but lately she'd heard him making rounds of the house at unusual hours of the night, an annoying habit that only surfaced when he felt troubled by something. Now Yuffie knew where she got most of her weirdness from.

"Give me your cloak," she whispered to Vincent. "These things don't do jack crap for us. I'll find some rain slickers or something."

The dark-haired man undid the clasp of his cloak and extricated himself from the thick layers, depositing the water-heavy garment in Yuffie's waiting arms. She felt the warm, fuzzy edge of pleasure press against her heart when she saw he was wearing the clothes she had laid out for him, the black shirt contrasting sharply with the tarnished gold of his claw and the pale skin left bare on his other arm. The suspenders of the pants dangled against his legs like dark twines of rope.

"Like the way you did the suspenders, Vinnie," she commented with a smile. "Very fashionable."

Vincent made a noncommittal noise and pushed his hair back from his eyes, which were scanning the shadows of the foyer in slow, methodical motions.

"I'll be back," Yuffie told him. "Make friends with the goldfish or something, and if you hear my dad coming, try and hide. I think he might get the wrong idea if he knew I brought a man home at this time of night."

Vincent gave her a sharp glance, but the young woman was already scurrying away down the hall, stockinged feet swift and balanced despite the weight of the two waterlogged cloaks in her arms. He watched the way her hair, the brown color rich with the dampness of the thick tresses, swayed against the tops of her narrow shoulders until she turned the corner and disappeared from sight.

Crimson eyes stared for a second more before shuttering closed, their owner issuing a confused shake of his dark head, hair an annoyingly heavy mass on his shoulders and back. What was he doing? He was already past insisting that his and Yuffie's relationship was normal, or even healthy for that matter. He was old enough to be her grandfather, with a soul besotted with more sins than there were stars and hands stained with the blood countless victims whose names he had long forgotten. Or had never been told in the first place. Turks weren't supposed to ask questions, after all.

Vincent was sorely tempted to leave. To flee into the long-armed embrace of the night and leave such needling intricacies in the timeless vault of this heart, where he locked all things too precious for him to touch. But at the same time, he knew turning his back and hoping the feelings would go away would not help him. Their complicated relationship was not going to simply unravel its twisted loops into an ordered, contained thing that he could easily understand. At this point, the best thing would be to simply try and sort things out later.

He pushed images of Yuffie from his mind and surveyed his surroundings. He had been in Godo's house a couple of times prior to this, when he, Cloud, and Barret had gone on a mad chase to retrieve their materia from Yuffie's thieving clutches. Little had changed, at least in the foyer area. The wooden floor was still clean and spotless save for the wet footprints Yuffie had left while walking around. Vincent's feet left much larger imprints as he moved quietly up to the man-made pond filled with natural aquatic greenery and pure, clear water that shone like an accretion of a diamonds in the small spotlight that kept a constant vigil in the corner of the ceiling, its powerful beam angled downwards to illuminate the pond.

The gracefully flailing figures of the goldfish were vessels of color and motion against the dark brown rocks. Spotted black. Pure orange. Vibrant yellow. And just about every combination of the three, complete with bellies shiny with silver-white scales. He'd never seen so many different varieties. Hell, the goldfish could have all been different species, for all he knew of the water-dwelling creatures.

The rim of the pond hummed lightly underneath his hands as Vincent knelt and leaned against it. Automatic water-filtering system, no doubt. A subtle reminder that the pond was man-made. His shadow danced lazily on the surface of the water and he leaned over the tank, errant strands of ebony hair snaking out of the wet mass on his shoulders to nearly touch the translucent liquid. Yuffie had told him to make friends with the goldfish, after all.

He watched one of the creatures, a stocky black thing with eyes bulging like tumors from the front of its body, swim in and out of his shadow, as if inexplicably drawn back into the darkness like a moth to a flame. It passed into the light, and he saw a patch of color along its left flank, close to its tail. It was probably orange, but for a second, the color seemed as red as fresh...

...blood. Blood everywhere. The aged soil boiled with it, like a churning bog that had moss thinly veiling the surface of monster-infested water. Only in this case, there was no water beneath the surface, only the thick, wet embrace of blood, still hot, still fresh. How bittersweet it was on the tongue. How coppery and satisfying, especially in large amounts such as the scarlet spoils reaped by the warring forces of human and Cetra so many years ago.

Nausea raped his senses, and Vincent would have flung himself away from the disgusting sight in below him if he wasn't certain moving would only cause him to fall beneath the soil's surface and into the scalding, crimson embrace of what lay below. His soul screamed against the voice in his head, hollering nonsensical words and guttural cries.

MONSTER. LOST POWER OF SPEECH?

"Demon!" was the first word Vincent's mind could conjure. The most apt word in this situation.

SHOW YOU NOW.

If such a thing were possible, Chaos' will was even stronger this time, bearing down on him like a relentless barrage of blows from Cloud's Omnislash. He could practically hear the demon, smell it, feel those leathery wings trying to wrap him in a deadly embrace. Vincent could not vanquish the creature, and as he began to fear that his coexistence with Chaos was turning from mutualistic to parasitic, all he could do was stand his ground and fight to maintain his sense of Self.

A clawed hand suddenly wrapped firmly around his arm, and the very idea of that thing touching him was more than Vincent could take. He didn't care if he fell into a sea of blood and drowned in its scarlet depths so long as he was free of Chaos' reign.

He let out a rebellious cry and wrenched his arm free, the suddenly soft digits relinquishing their grip without a fight. Human soft, not the leathery texture of a demon. The nightmare realm abruptly dissolved, and Vincent saw a flash of Lord Godo's surprised face as he stumbled away from the man, a slippery patch of water on the floor sending him careening into a nearby wall.

Cool wood met the damp material of his shirt, sending a jarring wave down the entire length of his metal arm. He leaned heavily against the wall to avoid sliding to the floor in a boneless heap. His throat and nose strained to deliver oxygen to his lungs, to cleanse them of the horrible scent of blood and Chaos. His red eyes focused blearily on Godo, dressed only in a yukata and an overcoat embroidered with battling beasts of legend. One of them looked suspiciously like Water God Leviathan. Yet another bore an uncanny resemblance to Chaos' demonic visage.

//I'm losing my mind.//

"Are you alright, Valentine?" the Lord of Wutai demanded, gaze dark and searching. Or maybe it was merely a trick of the shadows, a play of light on a face becoming heavily creased with age. How Vincent should have been, if Hojo's wickedly ingenious experimentations hadn't left him permanently estranged from the touch of Time.

//Valentine. He recognized me.// Vincent was deeply relieved by that. He was sure he made a perfectly disturbing sight to find in one's foyer in the middle of the night.

"Forgive me, Lord Godo," he murmured. "I have not been feeling well as of late."

//Please don't let me collapse this time.//

The man frowned. "Obviously. You're as white as a sheet."

Vincent almost smiled. "This is my normal skin tone, I'm afraid."

Godo lifted an eyebrow. "Indeed. You know, Valentine, you seem different from the last time I saw you, and it is not just because I watched you nearly fall headfirst into my fishpond."

The gunslinger hadn't the slightest clue how to respond to that, or if the Wutainese sovereign even expected a reply. The man's almond-shaped eyes dropped slowly to where the pond's spotlight danced on the water on the floor. Godo's gaze traveled to the left, following the liquid trail Yuffie's feet had made down the hall.

"Well, I see my charming daughter has returned without as much as a 'hello' to her old dad," he said huffily, but with a faint trace of weary affection. "What am I to do with that girl?" His eyes turned back to Vincent. "I'm assuming she brought you with her."

"She did," Vincent replied, experimentally pushing away from the wall. He wobbled a bit, but it seemed his strength and equilibrium were returning to him.

Godo's eyes narrowed, giving Vincent a soul-searching stare so prolonged that the AVALANCHE member was about to offer to wait outside when Yuffie's father suddenly nodded like he had just realized something. Or had confirmed his suspicions about something.

"Come with me, Valentine," he said, tone that of a man who was not keen on disobedience. He turned and vanished into the shadows of the right-side hall without another word, trusting that Vincent would follow.

And after a moment of hesitation, Vincent did.

~tbc

* The song about the rattlin' bog is not mine. It's a song we sang in elementary school music class. I don't know who wrote it, or I'd credit them.