

Chapter Five: Vincent and Yuffie's Great Escape

"Oh my god! I almost fell in the water with the sharks!" Yuffie Kisaragi

Action boy now

Action girl now

Be prepared to surf across the ocean

Be prepared to take a hit

Be prepared to go for it

Be prepared for a sneak attack

Be prepared

Just don't look back

"Are You Ready?"

Devo

"Whoo-hoo!" Yuffie cheered even as seawater sprayed her in the face and went up her nose. "Having fun, Vinnie?"

"Loads," Vincent answered dryly, holding onto her slender waist for dear life as the Black Stinger blasted its way across the turbulent sea with a kamikaze Yuffie Kisaragi at the controls. Though she was seasick as a dog on ships of any kind, driving the jet ski apparently didn't faze her the least bit. She had sailed out of the tunnel and into the pouring rain going at break neck speed with a severely uncomfortable Vincent hanging onto her. Now she was squeezing every ounce of speed out of the engine as she skimmed and barreled her way on the ocean's surface, oblivious to the angrily churning thunderclouds and flashing lightening that seemed close enough that they could reach out and touch them.

Vincent, however, was not having such a good time. Though he could see perfectly at night due to Hojo's twisted experiments, several factors, namely seawater, raindrops, and Yuffie's flapping hair, kept flying into his eyes and obscuring his vision a great deal. And he had also been given the dubious honor of sniping out the small squadron of Faceless Men that had obtained jet skis and were following them in the same relentless way in which they had pursued the two travelers in the tunnels.

"Vinnie!" Yuffie suddenly yelled, trying to spin around to look him in the face. "Are you gonna shoot those faceless freaks or just let them catch up to us?"

Instead of answering, Vincent twisted around and took in the layout behind him. In between the churning waves, he could catch glimpses of the Faceless Men riding jet skis identical to the one Yuffie was piloting. Because of the abominable weather conditions, he couldn't tell how many of them there were, but from what he could see of them, he didn't like. They drove the jet skis quickly but expertly, weaving around waves and sometimes even submerging for a few minutes to reemerge much closer to the Black Stinger that Yuffie and Vincent were fleeing on. Nevertheless, they were closing the distance and closing it fast.

Vincent's only consolation was that the Faceless Men hadn't used their sub machine guns, which they had strapped to their backs. A bullet wound now would knock the two escapees into the water and leave them helpless prey for the Faceless Men...if a shark didn't get them first. If Vincent was going to shoot them, he would have to do it now before they closed the gap.

"Yuffie!" he cried, removing his right hand from her waist. "Hold this thing steady!"

"Easier said than done!" she yelled back, trying to be heard over the thunder and the roar of the Black Stinger's engine. "Have you seen some of these waves?!"

"Just do the best you can!"

Removing the Death Penalty from its holster, he raised it and took aim along its long barrel. Vincent was an excellent shot even back when he was human, and the Death Penalty was the most powerful gun he had ever handled, but he doubted even the bullets it discharged could pierce a ten foot wave and kill a target on the other side of it. Like Yuffie, however, he was just going to have to do the best he could.

In a break between waves, he quickly centered a Faceless Man in his sights and fired, but it was that instant that the Black Stinger hit a wave, and the bullet went wild. Unfazed, Vincent reloaded the Death Penalty and aimed again, blinking seawater out of his eyes. This time the bullet flew straight and true. But even though the Faceless Man had no eyes, it somehow saw the bullet coming and suddenly veered to the left, the metal slug sailing harmlessly past.

After attempting to take down the same Faceless Man in five more shots and failing each time, Vincent began to realize that his attempts were in vain. A mixture of the bouncing jet ski, the tall waves, the needle sharp raindrops and the preternatural reflexes of the Faceless Men kept him from getting off a clear shot. The need to reload the Death Penalty every time he fired was also slowing down his progress. Finally, after his tenth attempt, he managed to strike one of the Faceless Men - he no longer knew if it was the same one he had been firing at all along - in the chest, directly where its heart should have been if it were human. But like Yuffie's low blow in the Green Room, the injury seemed to have absolutely no effect on it. The Faceless Man jerked back from the force of the bullet, and a dark substance that Vincent assumed to be blood flew from its chest and splattered the churning waves all around it, but the monstrosity gripped the handlebars of its jet ski and just kept on coming.

Tossing his hair out of his eyes, the dark gunslinger grimly lowered his rifle. Vincent's suspicions were finally confirmed. In the battle of the Green Room, he had managed to take down the Faceless Men at close range with an almost point blank shot to the head or a surprise attack from behind. Any other attacks he had made had seemed to have no effect on them. And now shooting them from a long range gave the Faceless Men too much time to sense the bullets coming, providing them with an opportunity to evade the attack. Whatever these creatures were or once were, he now knew that head shots were maybe the only way to kill them.

This new information severely limited his options. A head shot would be nearly impossible to pull off in these conditions. He could try using his materia, but he thought that if bullet wounds in the chest didn't even slow them down, then magic might not have much of an effect either. Besides, most of the powerful materia had been distributed to the others under the belief that their missions might be considerably more dangerous than the one he and Yuffie had agreed to undertake. For a moment, he entertained the notion of morphing Chaos and attacking them from above, but with monstrous waves grabbing at him constantly and a torrent of rain plummeting from the sky, he knew that such an assault would probably be in vain.

Things were starting to look bleak.

"Hey Vinnie!" Yuffie suddenly called, jerking the handlebars right to avoid taking the full brunt of a wave. "Did you get them all?"

"No," Vincent said, still watching and waiting for one of the Faceless Men to emerge. They had all disappeared behind the waves for a moment.

"How many are there left?" Yuffie demanded, nervous that Vincent had fired so many shots and hadn't been able to get them all. She knew from experience that even when blinded, Vincent rarely missed his target.

"As many as there were to begin with," he answered flatly.

Yuffie's mouth dropped open. "What?!" she echoed incredulously as the Black Stinger crested over one of the smaller waves. "You mean you didn't even get a single one of them?!"

"You have to shoot these things in the head."

"So shoot them in the head!" she exclaimed shrilly, holding her breath as a wave washed over them. "Blow their nonexistent faces off!" she continued, spitting water out of her mouth.

"They keep using the waves as cover."

Yuffie studied the watery terrain in front of her and tossed her sea and rainwater sodden hair out of her face. "Well, they won't be able to do that any longer. The wind is calming down. No more big, big waves to deal with."

Vincent didn't reply, only kept his eyes focused on the waves he felt were hiding the Faceless Men. In a matter of seconds, the wind had died down almost entirely, and the ocean stopped rolling so angrily and retracted its towering waves sheepishly, exposing the Faceless Men's positions.

There were only five of them, spaced evenly out in what was probably some sort of strategic formation. Vincent wondered dimly if these things had some unseen way of communicating with one another or if they were being manipulated by some other force greater than them. He didn't take long in his reverie, however, because the Faceless Men suddenly did something that made the human part of him, the one that felt fear and emotions, shudder and freeze with a sense of foreboding.

In unison, each of the five Faceless Men reached behind themselves and took their sub machine guns out of their holsters while holding their jet skis completely steady with only one hand and little effort. Vincent's heart began to pound in apprehension as they all raised their guns in perfect timing with each other, taking aim...

The stormy night was suddenly alive with a constant barrage of gunfire. The dark waters all around Vincent and Yuffie spat little exclamatory streams of seawater up into the chill air as the bullets struck their raindrop battered surfaces. The bursts of yellow fire leaping from the barrels of the Faceless Men's guns flashed like lamp lights on the road to Hell, intending to guide and deliver the two would-be escapees into damnation.

"Oh my god!" Yuffie exclaimed fearfully, chancing a glance behind her. "Are they shooting at us?!"

"Yes," Vincent said distractedly, crouching down calmly and fumbling with something on the inside of his metal boot.

"What are you doing dragging your ass, Vinnie?!" Yuffie demanded, watching fearfully as the explosions of water began drawing eagerly closer. "Return fire! Return fire!"

Vincent straightened up again, and Yuffie pivoted around to see that he had the Outsider clutched in his hand. "What the hell are you doing with that puny ass gun?!" she yelled shrilly, thinking Vincent must have left his brain back in the tunnels. "Use the Death Penalty, you idiot!"

"Don't call me an idiot," he ordered flatly, keeping his eyes trained on the Faceless Men with their sub machine guns. "Keep this thing steady."

"No way!" Yuffie exclaimed. "We'll be easier targets that way!"

"If you want to live, Yuffie Kisaragi, you'll do as I say."

Yuffie shut her mouth and did as he said, holding the handlebars as steady as she could and trying to ignore the stream of bullets that kept getting closer and closer. Seawater stung her eyes, temporarily blinding her, only to be washed out by the blessed rain and her own tears of terror. Her heart thundered in her chest, obliterating even the equally thunderous roars of the jet ski and the churning clouds overhead, as she heard Vincent fire off several rapid shots into the night, lone staccato sounds of hope that had their salvation riding on them.

Suddenly, there was a great explosion behind her that lit up the night like the fires of Hell, blazing afterimage painting the dark waters with new demonic shades of yellows and reds. For a moment, Yuffie's heart stopped in her chest, as she was sure that the Faceless Men had started throwing bombs at them. But the gunfire started to slack off, and hope with its fragile wings began to flutter in her soul.

"Vincent!" she cried. "What the hell happened?! What are you doing?!"

"Blowing up their jet skis," he said calmly. The Outsider barked twice more, and another explosion rocked the night.

Yuffie resisted the urge to laugh at the simple solution and the simple way he said it. Leave it to Vincent to figure it out! The Outsider may have been a puny gun but the shots it fired were powerful - though not nearly as powerful as the Death Penalty - and more rapid than most of Vincent's other guns. Good thing *she* had let *him* come with her on this mission. She suddenly had the urge to spin around and give him a good, hard kiss on the mouth for being so smart, but logic kicked in at the last moment, making her keep her grip on the handlebars and keep her eyes trained on the water in front of her. She couldn't help smiling, however, when she thought of how Vincent might have reacted to such a thing.

Two more well-placed shots and two explosions later, Yuffie was daring to think that they were going to get away after all. Then the inevitable happened. There was, after all, still at least one Faceless Man left, and that one Faceless Man still had his submachine gun, and that one Faceless Man was still firing at them. It was only logical that he would hit something at some time or the other.

Unfortunately, that something that he hit was Yuffie Kisaragi.

White-hot pain suddenly exploded in her left shoulder, quickly engulfing her entire arm like a hungry mouth that feeds off of suffering. Red rainwater splattered her face as she screamed and sagged to the side, the Black Stinger miming the motion as she automatically released her grip on the left handlebar. Her head was feeling lightheaded and fuzzy, and the night was rapidly getting darker than it should have been. Shades of yellow and red suddenly ran across her vision as the ocean seemed to tremble underneath her. Her skin was briefly blasted with heat from an unknown source, but was quickly vanquished by the needle sharp raindrops and stinging saltwater that won the battle for domination. Somewhere in the background she dimly heard Vincent calling her name, but she couldn't get her mouth working correctly to tell him that

she was alright. She suddenly realized with a start that the rainwater that had hit her face wasn't rainwater at all, but blood. *Her* blood. She had been struck in the shoulder by the Faceless Man's stream of bullets.

Vincent's claw suddenly tightened on her stomach, producing sharp pains that didn't hold a hair next to the soaring agony generated by the wound on her shoulder, but they brought her back from the brink of unconsciousness with the strange sort of urgency that they possessed. The world all around her reemerged into sharp focus. Saltwater stung her eyes. Blood ran down her shoulder in rivulets. The Imps of Pain were doing insane dances on her delicate nerve endings. Vincent Valentine was shaking her and calling her name.

"Yuffie!" he cried in a voice so panicked that she scarcely recognized it as his own. "Are you alright?! Answer me!"

She gritted her teeth against the pain, and managed to force out, "I'm fine. T-The bullet just grazed the skin. No big deal."

As if to prove her point, she ignored the pain in her injured shoulder and reached up to grip the left handlebar once again, determined to show Vincent that she was just fine. Halfway there, however, the pain suddenly became so intense that she nearly blacked out again. With a short but loud cry, she dropped her arm back to her side.

Vincent's metal claw suddenly released its somewhat painful grip on her waist and snaked out to grab the left handlebar, steadying the Black Stinger.

"Hey!" Yuffie yelped, her voice coming out harsher than she had intended. "I'm driving here! You just focus on killing the bastard that--"

"Hush now," Vincent said with surprising gentleness, his deep voice a balm to her nerves. "All the Faceless Men are no longer a threat. I'll drive now."

"You got them all?" Yuffie asked, still stubbornly keeping her grip on the right handlebar. She had been holding onto it so tightly that she had a feeling that her fingers had locked into that position permanently.

"Yes," Vincent said calmly, his mouth next to her ear. His gloved right hand suddenly appeared in front of her, the dark Outsider replaced by his red bandanna, which was dangling from his pale fingers and flapping in the wind. "Here," he explained. "Use this to bandage your wound. I don't have a Restore materia."

"I told you," she snapped, viciously spitting saltwater out of her mouth. "I'm perfectly fine. I'm not a worthless baby made to be coddled every step of the way."

"Take my headband," he ordered calmly, unperturbed by her unexpected angry outburst, which had come as a sort of surprise to her as well as him.

"I don't want your damn headband!" she yelled, as the Black Stinger hit a wave and more saltwater was flung into her mouth and eyes. "And take that nasty claw of yours off the handlebar! I said that I'm driving, goddammit!"

It was just then that the Black Stinger struck a wave in an awkward way, pitching violently to the right side. Saltwater found its way under Yuffie's tightly clenched right hand, and it slipped off the handlebar completely. Her legs suddenly went limp as wet noodles, the adrenaline from their great escape disappearing and leaving her as weak as a newborn kitten. To her absolute horror, she felt her feet losing their already slippery traction on the floor of the jet ski. Her body suddenly sagged to the right side, heading straight towards the dark water that was eagerly waiting for her...

Vincent's right arm fastened around her slender waist with inhuman strength, yanking her back against him while straightening the jet ski with his left arm. In a matter of seconds, they were zipping smoothly across the gently rolling sea with Vincent driving the Black Stinger one-handed and holding a stunned Yuffie in the crook of his right arm.

The young ninja suddenly snapped out of her shocked trance as a loud burst of thunder crackled overhead and lightening shot across the sky, splitting into a million different branches and glinting off of Vincent's metal arm.

"I-I-I almost fell off the jet ski!" she shrieked, her voice sounding shrill and wavering.

"But you didn't," Vincent said clearly, tightening his grip on her waist and resting his chin on the top of her head, which was an easy thing to do, considering that she was nearly a foot shorter than he was. If Yuffie hadn't been in a major state of panic, she would have noticed that Vincent was hugging her.

"Oh my god!" she continued ranting even as her hair, heavy with water, fell over her eyes. "I almost fell in the water with the sharks!"

"But you didn't," he repeated calmly.

She managed to twist around and stare up into his face, which betrayed none of his emotions and was facing forwards. "I almost died, Vinnie!" she cried again, her gray eyes wide with some warped form of post traumatic stress.

He glanced down at her, ruby red eyes taking in every aspect of her terrified face that was so close to his. His midnight black hair, unbound by his bandanna and soaked with water, clung to the sides of his pale cheeks, a few wayward strands snaking forwards to touch her face, as if seeking to offer her the comfort that their owner couldn't because of his nature.

"But you didn't die, Yuffie," he said softly, oblivious to the rain pounding against his head and the seawater spraying his face. "You're safe here...with me."

Yuffie was now experiencing a whole new type of shock. She was suddenly aware that, in spite of the fact that both of them were soaked to the bone with rain and seawater, she could feel the warmth of his body pressed against hers. Raindrops clung to his long dark eyelashes, and his face was suddenly very close to hers, his beautiful garnet eyes never leaving hers.

Once again, it was Vincent who broke the spell, turning his face away and back towards the open sea on all sides of them. "Take my headband and bandage your shoulder," he clipped shortly, without looking down at her. "It's not a deep wound; all we need to do is stop the bleeding."

"Oh," Yuffie said, suddenly feeling a profound sense of disappointment and incompleteness. "Okay, Vincent."

Facing forwards again, she slipped his red bandanna out of his right hand, which was still locked around her waist, and quickly tied it around her left shoulder. Though she was sure that plenty of saltwater had gotten into the wound by now, the skin around the cut had already gone numb, and she barely could barely feel the pain as she wrapped the red headband around her shoulder with her numb fingers.

With her job done, she sagged warily against Vincent's body, her head resting against his chest. Satisfied that she wasn't going to fall off the jet ski anymore, Vincent removed his hand from her waist and gripped the right handlebar, taking full control of the Black Stinger as it continued across the dark sea, going nowhere and getting there fast. It was then that the full effect of the emotionally, mentally, and physically taxing night caught up with her. Salty tears flowed down her already dripping face, mingling with the rain and seawater on her cold skin. She wrapped her arms around herself, colder than she had ever been in her entire life. Vincent unconsciously scooted forward so that his warm body was pressed more fully against her back, and Yuffie leaned on him gratefully. She felt Vincent's chin come to rest on the top of her dark head, a gesture that she found most comforting even if it had been unconscious on his part.

Even though the thunder and engine of the Black Stinger were still roaring in her ears, and rain and seawater were still pelting her body, Yuffie, nestled against Vincent, felt her eyes grow increasingly heavy. Soon, even given the impossible conditions, she was drowsing against Vincent's tall figure with Mother Nature raging around her.

The next thing she knew was that somewhere in a world of raindrops and rolling thunder adding to the deadly countenance of a murderous ocean mother with dozens of secrets long unspoken hidden in her womb, a man whom tragedy had immediately taken as a lover was calling her name, and the air smelled of salt and dead things.

Yuffie snapped out of her uncomfortable drowsing state, greatly disturbed for some odd reason. She couldn't remember if she had been dreaming or not. If she had, the Sandman had been in a cruel mood and given her a nightmare instead of a vision of euphoric bliss. That damn Sandman could be a real bitch sometimes...

"Yuffie," Vincent said again, looking down at the sleepy girl nestled in between his arms.

She blinked her gray eyes, now red and irritated from the salt water. "Oh!" she exclaimed. "Sorry Vinnie. Were you calling me?"

"Yes," he replied, reverting his attention to the endless ocean that had finally shown an end, and to the recovering but still diseased city in the distance. "We'll be getting off soon."

"Okay," Yuffie said distractedly, rubbing her eyes. Then she jerked violently in surprise. "What?! We're still in the water!"

"Not for long," Vincent answered patiently. "We're coming up on Junon."

Yuffie leaned forward, wincing as her stiff neck gave a loud protest, and squinted into the distance. She could just make out the now expanded city of Junon Harbor in the near distance even through the pouring rain, which had apparently refused to let up in the time she had been drowsing. The lights of "Upper Junon" pulsed brightly like a beacon in the darkness for weary souls like Vincent Valentine and Yuffie Kisaragi to latch onto. The equally bright but fewer lights of "Lower Junon" hid

humbly but respectfully underneath their superior, a child prodigy that dreamed of grandeur and knew that it would have it one day.

Yuffie had never seen a more beautiful sight in her entire life...besides the little light bulb in that room in that deep sea complex or whatever they called the place she had Vincent had just escaped from.

Ten minutes later, the jet ski named Black Stinger plowed up on the sand of Junon's narrow beach, and the two world weary travelers shakily disembarked, forsaking the vessel that hadn't failed or betrayed them once in their strenuous journey overseas. Meekly and dejectedly it sat there on the beach, watching wistfully as its passengers climbed up into the city of lights. It sat there all alone until the ocean mother, whose perfume Yuffie loved but whose waves and children sickened her, extended its tendrils of tides and claimed the jet ski named Black Stinger as one of her own, its boldly painted black and yellow surface sinking meekly beneath the watery terrain of the ocean, never to be seen again.

Then the beach was deserted.