

Chapter Ten: Revenge is Sweet

"Do your ancestors proud, Yuffie Kisaragi." Vincent Valentine

"Hey, Vinnie! I just realized something!"

"What is it, Yuffie?"

"My damn headband is missing!"

Vincent didn't bother to reply to Yuffie's insipid chatter. Instead, he gripped the reins of their rented chocobo named Olive and urged the yellow bird faster with a gentle kick of his heel. Olive reluctantly increased her speed to a trot, struggling slightly under the combined weight of her two riders. The bird's large feet sank into the mud that bubbled out between the green grass, leaving a trail of footprints that marked their passing. Vincent wasn't particularly happy about leaving such an obvious trail, or about the fact that the rain and thunder kept drowning out all other sounds, greatly deterring his ability to hear impending danger, which he felt was very near.

Pivoting around in the saddle, being extra careful not to upset the wet and miserable Yuffie sitting in front of him, Vincent took in the entire view of the mountains and hills around him, searching for anything that appeared to be out of place or threatening in nature. Ever since they had departed from Junon early that morning, Vincent couldn't shake the feeling that some unseen enemy was following them. His paranoia manifested itself in a peculiar itch between his shoulder blades that he kept reaching back to scratch repeatedly throughout their homeward journey to Kalm. His head felt unnaturally heavy, a sensation that he had always attributed to a danger that was waiting to surprise him in the near future.

Dissatisfied with the perfectly normal surroundings that he saw around them, Vincent turned his attention back to the trail and scratched his back with his metal claw while firmly gripping the reins with his right hand.

"Why do you keep scratching, Vinnie?" Yuffie suddenly demanded, her sour mood making her words harsh. "You have fleas or something?"

Vincent's only reply was to spur the chocobo into a faster trot, its feet squishing in the waterlogged grass that was filled with the rain the earth had gotten sick of absorbing and decided to spit out. Yuffie had been in a bad mood all morning. All traces of the frail young woman that had shared a bed with him last night and fallen asleep in the crook of his arm after she had shed tears for a monster that loathed his own nature - that young woman had vanished the moment they had started out in the ceaseless rain. Vincent felt another strange burst of emotions as he recalled the peculiar serenity he had felt the night before, falling asleep with her in his arms. The heat of her flesh had seeped through her covering of blankets as he lay curled up against her, feeling that sweet warmth spread to his own body like a wild forest fire. The scent of her clean skin and recently washed hair had haunted his dreams like a most welcome phantom, triggering off emotions that had gone unfelt for years. Vincent was at an utter loss to explain the things he felt, so he locked them up for safekeeping, an addition to the nest of cherished memories that would probably reawaken when Yuffie was already a grown woman with a husband and children of her own. By that time, she would have already forgotten about the morbid, self-loathing man/monster who had held her as she slept against him one dark, stormy night.

"Vinnie!" Yuffie suddenly snapped, jolting him out of his thoughts.

Vincent glanced down at the top of her head, which was resting underneath his chin. "Yes, Yuffie?"

"Are we there yet?"

The dark gunslinger rolled his eyes. "What do you think, Yuffie?"

Her head shifted as she glanced around at her surroundings, which were composed of green, rolling hills that were already starting to overflow with water and huge heaps of mud that the violent rains had washed down during their siege on the earth. At the current moment, the two world-weary travelers were moving through a valley-like depression between two sharply rising hills, rain pounding their already thoroughly rain-pounded bodies like a warrior's battering ram. The bruise on Yuffie's cheekbone was aching something terrible and the beginning of a headache was starting to form at her temples. She was in no mood to be admiring scenery at Vincent's request.

"I don't know where we are," she grumbled moodily, folding her slender arms across her chest. "I wasn't paying attention."

"We just passed the Chocobo Ranch," Vincent explained, red eyes roving over the hills with obvious mistrust as they passed. "We should be coming up on Kalm in a little while."

"Good," Yuffie said with a satisfied tone. "I don't know how much more of this I can take with the rain and this slow-ass chocobo and you all tense and stuff."

"What?" Vincent asked in surprise.

"You're tense," Yuffie announced impatiently, clearly not happy about having to repeat herself.

"How can you tell?" he demanded, not liking to think that he could be read so easily.

Yuffie rolled her stormy gray eyes. "C'mon, Vincent. You may think I'm pretty stupid, but I'm smarter than I look. I'm practically sitting in your lap here, and you're wandering how I know you're worried about something? Your muscles are all bunched up in your stomach, and you're holding the reins too tight. There are knots in your legs too." She tapped his thighs with her palms as if to prove this point. "You need to loosen up, Vinnie. You said yourself; we're almost home."

Vincent didn't reply, silently impressed at how much she had been able to discern about his state of mind just by taking note of his body's condition. No one had pulled that number on him in years...

Yuffie sensed that her dark companion wasn't relaxing and twisted in the saddle so that she could look up at his face. The effort nearly dislocated the upper part of her body, but when she saw the intense look on Vincent's face as he glared off into the distance, trying hard to see something that he knew must be there, she realized that he was more than tense - he was actually *jittery*, a trait she had never seen before in Vincent.

"What's wrong, Vinnie?" she asked softly. "Is there something out there?"

He glanced down at her with those burning eyes of his, searching her face to see whether or not she was sincere. Yuffie stared up at him worriedly, her bad mood evaporating in the face of her friend's anxiety.

Vincent stared at her a moment longer before returning his attention to their surroundings, scanning them relentlessly. "I sense...something. I'm not sure what it is, but I don't like it."

"Is it dangerous?" Yuffie asked, miming Vincent's actions and examining the valley they were passing through.

"I don't know," he answered quietly. "Just keep your eyes open."

Yuffie nodded in agreement, her right hand dropping down to rest on the Conformer, which was strapped to the chocobo's flank. Since Vincent was holding Olive's reins, she had to be on special lookout. If trouble just dropped in on them, Yuffie was ready to react quickly in case her companion couldn't get to his gun in time to deal with the threat.

Another fifteen minutes of riding passed with nothing out of the norm happening. Both Vincent and Yuffie were on high alert, all their physical discomfort forgotten as they kept a constant watch for any impending threats. Yuffie pushed at her hair impatiently as it fell into her eyes, dripping with rain like a waterfall of silent teardrops from the heavens. Her keen gray eyes squinted to keep rain from seeping into them as they roved over the hills on either side of them. Now that she was looking closer, she did recognize this place. She, Tifa, and Cloud had raced chocobos down this valley before (Cloud won because he cheated, that little turd). Yuffie was silently shocked at how different this sun-kissed valley looked in the middle of a thunderstorm that never seemed to end.

The young ninja was so absorbed with her surroundings that she nearly fell off the chocobo when Vincent suddenly reined it in sharply, earning an unhappy wark from Olive.

"Damn," he muttered, so low that his voice could barely be heard over the thunder and rain.

"Crap," Yuffie agreed when she saw what he was looking at.

They had come to a dip in the valley. It was a shallow dip and not very threatening when riding on a chocobo or in the buggy. Yuffie had always enjoyed driving the buggy into this particular depression in the land, making her fellow riders woozy with the undulating motions as she whizzed into the dip going at top speed. But now the dip didn't look so fun, particularly because it was filled to the brim with swampy looking water that made Yuffie's stomach churn with disgust. She didn't even want to think about what might be hiding in those murky depths.

"What a predicament," she grumped, glaring at the water as if she could evaporate it with the fire in her angry gaze. "Can choco-butt here make it across?"

Vincent hesitated, then shook his dark head, oblivious to the strands of hair that were obscuring his vision. "No, I think that water's too deep. Olive's just your average chocobo. She'll probably get stuck in the mud that has to be hiding down there."

"So we're gonna go around it?"

He nodded. "That seems to be the more preferable course of action...unless, of course, you want to try and swim across ourselves."

Yuffie shuddered as she gazed at the gross-looking water. "I think I'll pass on that one. So, how are we gonna get around it?"

Vincent glanced warily at their surroundings. "We'll have to climb up one of these hills and go around the pool from above before we get back on the ground on the other side."

She examined the hills that looked climbable and spotted one that looked friendlier than the rest. She pointed to her right. "How about that one?"

Vincent followed the direction of her finger and nodded in agreement. "Good eye, Yuffie."

The young woman flushed under the unexpected praise, glad that he couldn't see her beet red face.

Vincent managed to maneuver the somewhat apprehensive Olive halfway up the face of the muddy hill before one of her feet got stuck, and she began to wark plaintively. The two riders disembarked and worked the kinks out of their stiff joints before turning their attention to Olive. Yuffie grabbed the reins and tugged while Vincent worked on freeing the chocobo's stuck leg, being careful not to let the bird kick him in the face. Together, the two AVALANCHE members hauled the chocobo the rest of the way up the hill with Yuffie leading the yellow bird and Vincent playing drogue, one hand resting instinctively on the Death Penalty as he glanced with intense suspicion at the land they now stood over.

Something was there; he knew it. All he had to do was wait for the threat to show itself, something that he hated doing. He would have much preferred it if he had the element of surprise, but he also knew that as long as they were ready for danger, their odds of surviving an attack were good. And he had the feeling that the attack would be coming soon; their unseen enemy couldn't stay hidden forever.

Yuffie waited with uncharacteristic patience as Vincent vaulted nimbly up onto the grassy ledge of the hill, which should probably more accurately be called a miniature mountain due to its height. The wide, grass-covered ledge that they now stood on was just one of the many smaller levels that seemed to wrap around the whole hill until the summit, which towered a good one hundred feet above their heads.

Gesturing to his left, Vincent said calmly, "Let's go. If we follow this path, we should be able to come down on the other side, close to Kalm."

"Can we rest under that overhang first?" Yuffie asked cautiously, knowing that he was anxious to get going. "Bird brain here has mud in between her toes."

Olive warked pitifully and held up her right foot, which was caked with mud.

Vincent stared at the girl and bird before answering reluctantly, "I suppose, but only for a little while."

Yuffie nodded, her hair flopping down into her eyes. "Of course."

With Yuffie leading the way, the trio strode to the overhang with their feet sloshing in the wet grass, which was literally drowning with water. The overhang wasn't very big, but it provided a little shelter from the pouring rain despite the fact that the area under it was already soaked from last night's downpour. Yuffie immediately strode over to a large rock and plopped down, narrowly avoiding sliding down its wet surface, and set to work getting the mud from between Olive's toes. The chocobo, which was very placid and obedient for an average "do-do bird" as Reno called them, stood patiently as Yuffie tended to her. Vincent didn't seek the shelter of the overhang, preferring instead to stand outside in the rain to keep watch, his hand resting on the Death Penalty. The path had taken them to a place about twenty feet directly above the swampy pool, which churned restlessly as the rain pounded it with unrelenting ruthlessness. Vincent narrowed his luminescent red eyes, trying to see what lie at the bottom of the pool, but the water was thick with mud and grass, preventing him from catching a glimpse of the murky depths.

Under the overhang, Yuffie finished cleaning Olive's feet and gave the chocobo a pat on the neck, leaving a muddy handprint behind on the wet yellow feathers. Olive warked softly and nibbled Yuffie's hair in some sort of chocobo gratitude. Laughing, Yuffie shooed the chocobo's beak away and pulled out a bundle of greens to give to the bird, which immediately transferred her affections to the leafy greens.

The young woman watched Olive eat for while before glancing over to see that Vincent was standing unnaturally still in the rain, a dark sentry with unsurpassed majesty, a refugee from another life and time. His long hair, dyed an even deeper shade of black from the falling rain, hung down his back like a dark waterfall, showing up vividly against the blood-red cloak that reached to the backs of his knees.

"Hey Vinnie!" Yuffie called suddenly.

"Yes, Yuffie?" he responded without turning.

"Get out of the rain before you catch a cold!"

"I'm fine," he answered.

"If this hidden enemy has remained hidden this long, do you really think they're going to come waltzing out just because you decided to stand like a numbnut in the rain waiting for them?"

Vincent turned to stare at her calmly.

Yuffie patted the rock beside her. "C'mere and sit down. Me and Olive have run out of things to talk about."

Vincent hesitated, taking one last long look at the valley below before giving up and taking a seat next to her on the rock, his leg pressed against hers. Yuffie jumped slightly at the warmth that seeped through his waterlogged pant leg, but soon recovered and leaned against him slightly, her bare arm brushing his. There they sat in a strangely comfortable silence with Olive munching happily on her greens and Yuffie enjoying Vincent's company.

"How's your shoulder?" he suddenly asked, ruby red eyes focused on the falling rain.

"Oh," Yuffie said dumbly, surprised that he was instigating conversation. Her hand instinctively went to her left shoulder, which was still wrapped in his bandanna. "It's a little sore," she replied. "And there's a really gross scar there, but it's not infected or anything. Why, did you want your headband back?"

He shook his head. "No. You can keep it."

"Okay," Yuffie said, strangely pleased. "Thanks. Sort a souvenir of our little adventure together, huh?"

Vincent turned his head to stare at her, and Yuffie flushed when she realized how absurd and wistful her statement had sounded, like she didn't want all this pain and strife to end just so she could keep him around a little longer. The words "our" and "together" made it sound as if her time spent with him chasing the Running Man and being chased by the Faceless Men was among her most cherished memories. And, she suddenly realized with a start, it was, but not because she could go back to the bar and brag about how she had survived through thick and thin. No, the events of the past few days were special to her because she had shared them with Vincent and Vincent alone.

It wouldn't have been the same if it had been Tifa with her, or Reno, or even Cloud. There was something about Vincent that was starting to draw her to him like a moth to a flame. She couldn't stop what she was feeling. Moreover, she didn't want to stop it. Even years from now, if she was married and had kids, and Vincent had disappeared like a shadow into the night, never to be seen again, she would always remember falling asleep in arms as the Black Stinger zipped across a turbulent, hungry ocean that had tried to devour her whole. She would always remember how she had wept for him as she lie next to him in bed and how he had come up behind her, holding her to his body so gently, so sweetly, his chest against her back and his knees touching the backs of hers, his hair tickling her ear...

My God, what's happening to me?

This new string of thoughts deepened her blush, and she looked away from Vincent's burning gaze, staring at her yellow sneakers as water from the ground seeped into them. "Uh, sorry," she stammered, more embarrassed than she ever been in her entire life. "That didn't come out the right way."

But she was lying, and she knew it. The words had come out exactly the way she had wanted them to, at least in her heart. But she couldn't tell *him* that.

Vincent was silent for a long time, and Yuffie was about to hastily suggest that they be on their way again when she suddenly felt his cold, rain-sodden fingers touch her chin and apply gentle pressure, turning her face towards him. Reluctantly, she raised her gray eyes to focus on his face, her heart thundering in her chest with some nameless emotion.

Garnet eyes accented by flowing black hair and pale skin stared down at her upturned face with uncharacteristic tenderness that had virtually no roots in a soul warped and frozen from blood and heartbreak. Yuffie knew that time had

not eased the suffering of Vincent Valentine, nor thawed out the frozen wasteland that had killed his heart and body, trapping him in the guise of a 27 year old man and making him believe that he was a monster, the ultimate crime against a man who had committed many in his life for reasons that were his own. Anyone else would have said that Vincent deserved all that had befallen him.

But Yuffie didn't think that way. If Vincent was cold, heartless, and dead inside, then why was he staring at her like this? His red eyes, usually as cold as the bitterest winter, had a peculiar intensity to them now that made her breath catch in her throat. They bathed her in a gentle light, making her forget about her aching shoulder and soaking wet clothes. His long eyelashes were wet from the rain, tiny droplets shining on the ends of them like miniature crystals.

Yuffie's heart thundered in her ears as that all-too-familiar heat spread across her body. She couldn't stop staring up at him, suddenly as fascinated by the porcelain color of his skin as she was with the unnamable color of his ebony hair. She was shaking slightly, trembling...what was this she was feeling? His face was suddenly so close to hers, his warm breath touching her cheek gently.

A wark suddenly interrupted them, shattering the spell that had been wrapping them together. That one screeching sound of alarm brought the two companions back into the world of thundering rain, missing comrades, and aching pains.

Vincent drew back abruptly, a wall slamming down between them as his garnet eyes froze over again, all the gentle humanity in that gaze wiped out just as abruptly as it had come. Yuffie blinked, trying to discern whether or not what she had seen in his eyes just a few seconds ago had been real or just some fantasy of hers.

She wasn't given much time to contemplate this abrupt metamorphosis, however, because Olive suddenly rushed by in a panic, warking loudly and trailing her reins behind her.

Yuffie instinctively leapt to her feet calling, "Hey, bird-brain! Get back here!"

But as she reached for the dragging reins, Vincent suddenly rose to his feet, narrowly avoiding whacking his head on the top of the overhang, and grabbed her arm in an iron grip. Yuffie looked up at him in surprise.

"Let her go," he said quietly, red eyes distant as he apparently focused on something that Yuffie couldn't hear.

"But-" she started feebly, watching as Olive sped off down the hill like a bat out of hell, flapping her useless wings in fright and running back in the direction they had come from. The bird appeared to be in a major state of panic, and Yuffie was at a loss to explain why.

"Quiet," Vincent ordered softly, squeezing her arm slightly for emphasis. "This way."

He released his grip on her arm and took the Death Penalty from its holster, cocking the rifle with a hollow click that immediately sent Yuffie into instant battle mode. She reached over and grabbed her Conformer from where it had fallen in the mud after that stupid bird had taken off. Walking as quietly as she could and trying to ignore the rain pounding on the back of her head, she followed Vincent to the edge of the hill's ledge, stopping short for some reason as if below the ledge, she would see into the fiery pits of Hell.

Vincent peered over the edge, looking down into the valley. His back suddenly stiffened, and he tightened his grip on the Death Penalty.

"Yuffie," he said quietly. "I think you'd better see this."

Gulping, the ninja walked over to the edge beside Vincent and peered down...

"No way!" she shrieked, her voice rising shrilly even over the sound of the thunder. "No freaking way! This is impossible! Vincent, what are we gonna do?!"

Vincent didn't reply, his mind trying to process the fact that he had failed miserably at his task the night before. A shot missed during a sniping order. A mission failed. Fellow colleagues endangered. Unacceptable.

Five men were climbing up the face of the hill.

Five Faceless Men.

Yuffie's heart leapt into her throat as she beheld her opponents of the night before when they had been blasting across the dark sea on the Black Stinger. Though the faceless freaks were still obviously mobile, they had come up on the short end of the stick. Vincent may not have been able to kill them, but the force of their jet skis exploding from underneath them had certainly crippled them. Most of the flesh on their bodies was now blackened and charred, some skin even falling off as

they stubbornly climbed up the hill, slipping and sliding in the mud. Three of the Faceless Men were missing either their entire or more than half of one of their arms, making their climbing slow but steady as they made good use of their remaining arm and their legs. One of the other Faceless Men was climbing as soundly as his companions in spite of the fact that he was missing a leg. The one remaining Faceless Man had no absent appendages, but was very badly burnt, his dark clothes falling off his fleshly form and taking chunks of charred, pink skin with it.

All in all, they were a pitiful but terrifying sight.

“What are we gonna do, Vinnie?!” Yuffie cried again, fidgeting with her hands, as the approaching monstrosities got steadily closer. “If they can survive having their jet skis blown up from under them, what else can kill them?”

Instead of answering, Vincent aimed downwards with the Death Penalty and fired at the nearest Faceless Man, who was ten feet below him. Vincent’s aim was, of course, flawless and impeccable, but even in its crippled condition, the Faceless Man still managed to dodge the bullet, jerking its entire body to the left while maintaining its balance. As if that wasn’t bad enough, just as Vincent was preparing to fire again, the Legless Faceless Man and the Crispy Faceless Man reached behind their backs in unison and...pulled out their sub machine guns!

Yuffie’s mouth dropped open. “Oh hell no! How did they managed to hold onto those things?!”

Vincent grabbed her around the waist and yanked her away from the edge just as a stream of bullets tore into the spot where Yuffie had been standing a millisecond earlier.

“Come on!” he yelled, running along the ledge with his cape flapping behind him.

Yuffie followed him, rain slapping against her face. “Where are we going? Let’s run to Kalm and get the others! It’s not that far away now!”

Vincent glanced behind him to see that the Faceless Men still had yet to emerge from the valley and climb up on the ledge he and Yuffie were on. “We can’t go to Kalm,” he told his young companion.

“And why the hell not?!” she demanded half in fear and half in anger. “We’re completely worn out, Vinnie! Your bullets aren’t working and I’m going to have to throw left-handed! Cloud and his big ass sword need to get down here and do the work for us!”

“We can’t lead these monsters into Kalm,” he said flatly.

Yuffie shut her mouth, feeling her heart sink to her feet. Vincent was right; they could run away to Kalm and risk dozens of innocents being killed by a stray bullet or by the fantastical strength of the Faceless Men. She and Vincent were going to have to kill these monsters, right here, right now, before they could hurt anyone else. But...god, why did life have to suck to so bad sometimes?!

Vincent turned around a bend in the ledge’s pathway and pressed himself against the wall. Yuffie joined him just as a stream of bullets whizzed past her head, so close that she could hear the air scream as they flew by.

“What are we gonna do, Vinnie?” she asked, pressing herself against the muddy wall next to her companion.

Vincent chanced a look around the corner of the wall before turning back to Yuffie. “This wall should provide us with some cover for a short while. Only two of them have their guns, and they’re remaining in one place to fire them. The other three are approaching us as we speak. We need to engage these things in close combat for our attacks to be effective.”

“Guess it sucks that we both use long-range weapons,” Yuffie commented weakly. “We’re gonna die.”

Vincent suddenly grabbed her by the shoulders and shook her slightly, surprising her so much that all she could do was stare up at him dumbly. “Yuffie,” he said firmly, red eyes boring into hers. “Get a hold of yourself. We are going to end this right here, right now. Now, I’m going to fire around the corner and try to disarm the two with guns. If the other three make it around the corner, you have to deal with them, hand to hand, understand?”

“Why me?” she whined.

“You’re better at close range combat than I am,” he said seriously.

Now *that* surprised her; she had never even thought that Vincent noticed her style of fighting, much less thought it to be better than his. “What makes you say that?”

“You’re a ninja, aren’t you? Of the Kisaragi-Chao bloodline?”

She squared her shoulders proudly at the mention of her family's line of ninjas. "Yes, I am."

Vincent nodded, and released his grip on her shoulders, gently touching her cheek with his gloved hand, an indiscernible emotion in his red eyes. "Do your ancestors proud, Yuffie Kisaragi," he said softly.

She nodded gravely. Vincent nodded in return, then whirled away from her, cocking his rifle and scooting closer to the edge. His face turned grim, cold, and hard - the face of the Turk assassin he used to be 28 years ago. Yuffie glanced wistfully at her Conformer before strapping it onto her back, where it wouldn't get in the way. Her "ultimate" weapon wouldn't be much use in this battle.

Vincent waited only one second before firing around the edge of the mud wall with the Death Penalty, taking great care not to get his arm clipped off in the stream of bullets that flew past the wall like a colony of angry bees. Yuffie waited anxiously, stretching her arms and legs absently to prepare herself to do her part in the upcoming battle.

She didn't have to wait long.

One of the Armless Faceless Men suddenly came rushing around the wall, his burnt clothes and pink-and-black skin glistening with rain. Before he could turn his attention to Vincent, however, Yuffie rushed forward and kicked him in the gut.

"Come on, you faceless freak!" she taunted, not knowing if he could understand her and not caring either way. Battle adrenaline coursed through her body like wildfire, sharpening her senses and quickening her reflexes.

The Faceless Man lurched forward and swung his remaining arm at her head in a right cross. Yuffie ducked easily and swept his legs out from under him just as his two companions came running around the corner, as if sensing their brother's plight.

Yuffie's stormy gray eyes darted coldly back and forth between the two newcomers. "Okay, which one of you bastards is the one that shot me in the shoulder? Or is the prick back there with his little pop gun?"

The Faceless Men didn't respond, but advanced on her even though Vincent was standing unprotected a few inches away from them. Either they weren't the sharpest tools in the shed, or they were ordered to attack whichever of their opponents posed the great threat. Yuffie backed up a few steps as the Faceless Man she had knocked over lurched to his feet and joined his comrades in their upcoming attack on her. Yuffie continued to retreat backwards, trying to draw them away from Vincent while matching their imposing pace step for step.

One of them suddenly lunged for her with a speed that she hadn't, even with her past experience fighting in close range with these things, been expecting. Yuffie let out a cry of surprise and barely managed to evade the attack, doing a couple of rapid back handsprings to increase the distance between her and her attackers. She noticed in passing that she was moving in a sort of uphill direction, but being that she was very busy, it didn't click in her mind that she might be leading herself into a trap.

She held her ground grimly as the Faceless Men bore down on her, looking like matching triplets from hell with their tattered clothes and missing arms. Her eyes hardened. Focusing on the Lightning materia she had fitted into a slot in her Conformer, Yuffie made the conjuring motions, lifting her arms and tucking one of her feet behind the back of her opposite knee.

"Bolt 3!" she cried. No sooner had the words left her lips than Lightning eagerly rained down from the turbulent skies, only too happy to oblige her summons. The magic leapt onto the Faceless Men, super-powered bolts of pure nature's electricity crisping their flesh even more as they staggered underneath the devastating blow that the mastered materia had dealt them.

Yuffie's heart sank when she saw that the attack hadn't even injured the Faceless Men, only slowed them down for a second. They soon were striding towards her once again in that cruel, relentless way of theirs, stonily silent, as always, but possessing an extreme aura of menace.

"Goddamn!" Yuffie cursed angrily. "Don't you guys ever give up?!"

The Faceless Men's only reply was to bear down on her faster.

"I'll take that as a 'no,'" she muttered, backing up.

A quick glance behind her opponents showed that Vincent had succeeded in disarming the remaining two Faceless Men. However, they had decided that the dark gunman needed a lesson in manners and were now engaging him in close range

combat, every bit as nimble and powerful as he was. Knowing that Vincent could take care of himself, Yuffie turned quickly and darted away from her pursuers, wanting to fight them on the open ground she hoped was at the top of the hill.

Stopping only to cast Bolt 3 a couple of more times, to no effect, of course, Yuffie scaled the top of the hill, heedless to the pounding rain and the thunder that was now so much louder than it had been in the valley. Her heart thundered in her chest, filling her entire body with adrenaline and blood, her steady, unhurried breaths pumping in and out of her lungs and fueling her body with their airy sustenance.

"Oh crap!" she cursed as she reached the top of the hill, seeing a death drop into the ocean ten feet in front of her, a plummet to some nasty, jagged looking rocks on her right, and a muddy hillside to her left. Not only were all her escape routes cut off, but the space on top of the hill was not even as big as the front room at Tifa's bar. Yuffie's bedroom at Wutai was bigger than this! How was she supposed to fight three nearly indestructible men in such conditions?

Whirling around and nearly slipping on the wet grass, she saw that the three Faceless Men were still coming on strong, intent on her small but determined figure on top of the hill. Yuffie gulped and quickly cast another Bolt 3 with the vain hope that this one would blow them to smithereens and she would emerge from the battle victorious.

No such luck. The three Faceless Men shrugged off this attack like they had done all her others. They were only ten feet away from her now.

Taking a deep breath, Yuffie fell into a battle stance and screamed, "Come on, bastards! Bring it on!"

The Faceless Men were too happy to oblige. The one in the middle suddenly sprung at her with a feline ease that would have given Red a run for his money. The agility and speed of the airborne attack surprised Yuffie, barely giving her time to leap to the left side of the hill before the Faceless Man came crashing down in the very spot she had just been standing on, landing nimbly on his booted feet in a crouch.

Sobered by her close call, Yuffie wrestled to her feet just as the other two men cleared the top of the hill to join their companion. Together, they started to advance on her in a single, threatening row.

I can't let them back me up too far, she told herself. They'll probably try and force me off the cliff. On the other hand, if I can get them to lunge for me, then they'll be ones to fall off of the cliff and go SPLAT on the rocks! Squashed tomatoes!

Yuffie wasn't given any more time to devise a strategy, however, because one of her opponents suddenly executed the attack she had been dreading. He lunged forward like a football player, with his head lowered for maximum impact. Reflexes kicked in, and Yuffie dodged to the left...just in time to see another of Faceless Men heading towards her in the same lunge!

Letting out a cry of surprise and cursing herself that she hadn't figured that they would attack one right after the other, she rolled desperately across the wet grass, avoiding the second attack by the skin of her teeth. The third one, however, never came, but instead of being suspicious as to why her remaining opponent hadn't attacked her, she lurched to her feet for fear that she would roll off the edge and down the muddy hill.

A huge ball of pain suddenly exploded in her stomach, knocking the wind out of her as she fell to the wet grass, sliding across its slippery surface until she felt one of her arms dangling over the side of the cliff. It took a few moments for her head to clear, and it was only then that Yuffie realized the third Faceless Man had tackled her. She was now lying on her back in the wet grass with the humanoid creature on top of her, inches away from the 50 foot fall down a muddy hill.

"Get off me!" she wheezed, air whooshing back into her lungs. Thrashing from side to side, trying to throw the Faceless Man off of her, she pummeled it desperately with her fists, but, like her Bolt 3 attacks, her efforts seemed to have absolutely no effect on her opponent. Her lashing punches only met slippery resistance on its smooth pink skin.

Yuffie screamed in pain as she felt the Faceless Man's only remaining fist bury itself in her side like a battering ram. Multicolored spots danced in front of her vision, but she viciously shoved them away. Burning with rage, she raised her arms above the monstrosity, laced her fingers together and brought them down as hard as she could on the Faceless Man's bald head. It was like hitting a brick wall. Pain shot up her arms, not stopping until it reached her shoulders. Unfazed by her attack, the creature punched her in the stomach, and this time Yuffie nearly blacked out from the pain.

A gunshot suddenly spit the air, and something wet that was definitely not rain splattered her face. The Faceless Man sagged forward, its nonexistent face striking the wet grass next to her own head, the charred smell of its burnt flesh filling her nose.

She let out a screech of pure disgust and beat on the thing with her fists, realizing belatedly that the creature was dead. Twisting out from under the monstrosity, Yuffie gritted her teeth against the pain in her body and leapt to her feet, giving the dead thing a good kick in the gut as she did so.

Clutching her side in pain, she turned to see Vincent standing a few feet away from her, his cape torn and the Death Penalty trained on the sprawled figures of the other two Faceless Men who had pursued Yuffie up the hill. Some sort of sticky web had bound the two monstrosities together, and they were the process of trying to break free.

"Vinnie!" Yuffie wheezed, relieved to see that he was still alive. He had obviously been the one who had killed her attacker. If he hadn't been there...

Vincent turned to stare at her, and the young ninja was shocked to see that her companion had a split lip that was bleeding freely. His clothes were ripped in several places, exposing his porcelain skin to the elements. Even in their physically taxing travels with AVALANCHE a year before, she had never seen her friend look so ravaged.

"Are you alright, Yuffie?" he asked calmly.

She managed a painful nod, hunched over slightly. "What happened to the other two?" she asked.

"Dead," Vincent said simply, keeping his eyes trained on the struggling Faceless Men.

"Are you sure?" she asked fearfully.

"As sure as I'm going to be," he replied. "We need to get off this hill."

Yuffie glanced around incredulously, not sure she had heard him correctly. There were death drops on three sides of them, and the Faceless Men were blocking the path she had used to get to the top of the hill. There was no way out.

"Are you kidding me?" she shrieked. "We can't get off this hill! We'll die if we go down any of the sides and those freaks will grab us if we try and jump over them to get to the path!"

Vincent looked around calmly, surveying his surroundings. "We can't fight up here," he said. "Eventually, they're going to knock one of us off of the cliff. We can go down that way, however." He pointed behind Yuffie.

Whirling around to see what he was looking at, she saw that he was gesturing to the humongous mud wall that made up one side of the hill. The dark mud was loose and slippery from the endless rain, some of it sliding down the hill in an eager avalanche, reminding her suddenly of the turbulent sea they had braved the night before.

Her mouth dropped open as Vincent came up beside her, studying the mudslide thoughtfully. "No way, Vinnie!" she exclaimed. "I'm not going down that way! Do you see how steep it is?! We'll die!"

He turned to stare at her calmly, red eyes glittering. "We're going down."

Yuffie gulped, glancing at the Faceless Men, who had managed to get most of themselves disentangled from the web. Then she looked back at the mudslide that was her only chance of escape. She couldn't do it; she hadn't the strength or the endurance. But just because she was a coward didn't mean that she had the right to keep Vincent behind due to her lack of valor.

"You go," she said bravely, managing to speak past the lump in her throat. "Go to Kalm and bring the others back. I'll stall them as long as I can."

She turned to see Vincent still gazing at her with a strange expression on his face. For a moment, even with the rain running down his face like silent teardrops and the strands of dark hair plastered across his pale skin, she received the weirdest impression that he was almost smiled.

Then, without another word, he grabbed her around the waist, pulled her against him, and jumped onto the mud wall.

Vincent's feet immediately went out from under him as they struck the sludgy hill, but he had been expecting that. He pulled a still stunned Yuffie into his lap, wrapping his arms around her. Wet mud sloshed against his back and hair as he curled up around the young woman, seeking to protect her fragile form from the ordeal they were about to endure. Vincent made a valiant effort to keep sliding down on his back, but soon their momentum picked up considerably, and he began to tumble head over feet down the muddy hill, with Yuffie held tightly in his arms.

Pain flared in every part of Vincent's body, but he ignored it with the ease of long practice and concentrated on keeping Yuffie from getting pinned underneath his weight as they tumbled down the hill. Mud soon coated every inch of his body like a shroud, weighing down his cloak and seeping into some of his open wounds. He shut his eyes tightly as some of the

foul-smelling substance sought to blind him. Yuffie, amazingly enough, still hadn't made a sound. Her muscles were rigid, though, as she lay curled up against him. He knew he was going to get hell for this later on.

It seemed they rolled down the hill for an eternity, sharp rocks that protruded from the mud cutting into his pale flesh and battering his body. He was in so much pain that he barely noticed when the ground suddenly leveled off, and they began sliding across the mud instead of rolling. Vincent just happened to be sprawled on his back with Yuffie facing skyward. He offered a silent thanks to gods he no longer believed in that their positions hadn't been reversed. Yuffie would have surely been crushed underneath his weight. A small, slender 114-pound girl and a 168-pound man/monster with a metal arm and abnormal resistance to pain just couldn't compare. He instinctively dug his heels into the squishy mud, but instead of coming to a gentle stop like he had been hoping, his right shoulder suddenly struck another one of those damn rocks with enough jarring force to make him cry out in pain. Yuffie went flying from his arms to roll to a muddy stop a few feet from where he was lying on the ground.

Making a point to ignore the pain in his aching shoulder, Vincent wiped the mud from his eyes with his equally muddy right hand and lurched to his feet, wobbling a bit, just in time to see Yuffie scamper up to him, her face as dark as a storm cloud and her gray eyes simmering beautifully with anger even through all the mud caked on her face. Vincent stared at her calmly, blinking mud from his eyes, knowing that she was about to start another one of her angry spiefs.

She suddenly slapped him hard on the face, making his head snap to the side as sharp pain flared in his cheek. "Don't you ever do that again, Vincent Orion Valentine!" she raged, clenching her small hands into fists. "Or I'll kick your ass all the way to kingdom come!"

How did she know Orion was my middle name? Vincent wondered vaguely as he continued to stare impassively down at her.

She suddenly jumped forward, and he braced himself for another assault only to feel her slender arms encircle his waist as she laid her head on his mud-covered chest. She hugged him tightly, and he bit back a yelp as his battered body screamed in protest.

"Thanks for saving me, Vincent," she whispered, so softly that even he could barely hear her over the rain. "That's yet another one I owe you."

Though he was a bit taken aback by her seemingly fickle shows of emotions, he sighed and wrapped his arms around her slender shoulders, holding her close for a few moments before saying, "We're not in the clear yet."

Yuffie shifted slightly in the circle of his arms, as if reluctant to let anything interrupt this moment. "What is it?" she asked.

Vincent released her and stepped back, gesturing towards the top of the hill they had just skidded down. Already the rain was erasing the evidence of Vincent and Yuffie's passage, washing it away as if all their pain and strife were nothing to it. And at the top of the hill, two pink, fleshy figures with charred flesh and the remains of black clothing hanging stubbornly on to their ravaged forms, were rolling down the hill bowling ball style.

"Ah!" Yuffie screamed, burying her muddy fingers in her equally muddy hair. "Just give up!" she called up to the tumbling forms of the Faceless Men. "Don't you bastards ever get tired?!"

Vincent coldly surveyed the approaching Faceless Men with his callous garnet eyes before reaching into his waterlogged pocket and pulling out a Swift Bolt. Pulling his arm back as far as his aching muscles would allow, he launched the orb filled with compressed Lightning magic at the spot he predicted it would impact the rolling Faceless Men. Vincent's aim would have done any major league pitcher proud; the orb struck the first Faceless Man dead on, the Lightning magic exploding out of the orb and erupting onto the figures of their opponents like angry wildfire. The mud all around them simmered with the heat from the electric blast, tendrils of smoke rising up to the stormy sky. The Faceless Men, however, just kept right on coming.

"That crap doesn't work, Vinnie!" Yuffie exclaimed from somewhere behind him. He hadn't even seen her move away.

"Step back!" she urged. "Let me try something!"

Vincent whirled to see orange and yellow lights blazing around her small figure like a fiery shroud, their reflections dancing in her gray eyes. As she pulled the Conformer off her back, he realized what she was about to do and hurriedly backed away, careful not to slip in the mud.

Concentrating, Yuffie spread her arms wide, then crossed them in front of her Conformer, the over-sized shuriken hiding her face from view. Intense purple-red light began to blaze around her intertwined hands.

“ALL CREATION!” she cried, voice rising to a fearsome level as the prodigious iridescent energy, more powerful than any Ultima, a power that every Wutainese ninja dreamed of wielding, exploded from her small figure in a tremendous funnel, blinding Vincent as it blew past him and hit the Faceless Men dead on, engulfing their rolling forms in its otherworldly light.

Then the radiance faded from view, dissipating in the distance as Yuffie lowered her hands and waited anxiously for the afterimage of her Limit Break to stop burning in her eyes so that she could see what its effect had been on the Faceless Men. Even Sephiroth’s One Winged Angel form had shuddered slightly underneath the barrage of pure energy she had just unleashed, and what were two faceless freaks when compared to the might of that megalomaniac Sephiroth? Surely they wouldn’t be able to withstand the intensity of the attack.

But the Faceless Men were unlike any creature ever known to man. They were things out of nature, monstrosities that the Planet had never meant to exist.

All Creation had no effect on them except to burn shreds of their deteriorating black clothes off. On and on, faster and faster, they came, oblivious to the mud and cuts that they received from the mischievous mud hill. They were unstoppable.

Yuffie screamed in frustration when she saw her most powerful attack had barely fazed them. Vincent raised his Death Penalty and started firing wildly, his bullets sometimes striking the mud around their opponents and occasionally piercing their charred pink flesh, opening up new wounds that the Faceless Men paid absolutely no heed to. These creatures were smarter than both of them had ever expected; they knew to keep their heads covered so that the high-powered bullets the Death Penalty spewed forth would be unable to harm them.

Now in a slight state of panic after her ultimate Limit Break and Vincent’s impeccable aim were having zero effect on the Faceless Men, Yuffie mentally racked all the materia she had in her Conformer and her Crystal Bangle, trying to find something that could be of use to them. *Lightening? Nope, been there, done that. Fire? No way. Fire and rain are not friends. Exit? I wish, but can’t do that. Lucky Plus? I think that damn thing is broken, anyways. Haven’t been having much luck. Deathblow? Not from this range. God, this sucks! I’ve got crappy materia!*

Then her eyes fell on the last orb glittering patiently in the remaining slot of her Conformer, rain beading on its ruby red surface. It glowed steadily and proudly, knowing that it was the one materia she had refused to part with, no matter how much Barret had cussed at her and told her she was being a greedy, little thief for hogging it to herself.

If this doesn’t work...

“Stand back, Vinnie!” she cried desperately as she began the conjuring motions, glowing runes of all different colors appearing around her transparent form. Vincent stepped back obediently as his figure too turned transparent and she said the words that would hopefully bring about the...

“ULTIMATE END!!!!!!”