

CHAPTER II: AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE

"You should have gone you know."

Vincent did not answer for a moment. He stood on a footstool counting boxes of ammunition on the shelf above him. Elena stood on the floor below, looking up at him with a clipboard in her hand.

"Twenty two, twenty three, twenty four. Twenty four," he stated.

She wrote the number down on her clipboard as he looked down at her.

"I thought you wanted help doing this," he said. "The gun shop is opening tomorrow. It would have taken you all day to get this inventory done by yourself."

"I know, but still..." she said hesitantly, tapping her pen on the clipboard. "Zangan only turns one once."

"People only turn any age once," Vincent pointed out.

"Well, yeah, but one is special."

"Why is that?" he questioned.

Elena just stood there for a moment.

"I don't know, it just is," she finally stated with impeccable logic.

He gave her a look, then turned back to the shelf.

"Can't argue with that," he conceded. "We should be done in an hour or two. It's not too late. If we leave as soon as we're done we should get there before nightfall. The party will probably be over but we could stop by to say hello. Of course, we'd get back late..."

Elena made a face. She wasn't anxious to do that herself. If they went today they certainly wouldn't be back before midnight, and they had the grand opening tomorrow so they couldn't stay over. Tomorrow was an important day, and she didn't want to spend it trying to keep awake.

"Nah, you're right, that probably wouldn't be a good idea," she said. "I'm glad you stayed with me. We can drop in on them another time. I'm sure they won't mind."

Besides, it wasn't like Cloud and Tifa were their best buddies, she thought. She may be willing to put it behind her, but she wasn't about to forget what they had done to the reactors in Midgar. True, they were Vincent's friends, and as such she had gotten to know them a lot better, even if she hadn't wanted to particularly. She had to admit they weren't all bad. Even Aeris was tolerable once you got to know her. And the *had* been the one's that had found Vincent and released him from his coffin. If they hadn't done that, he'd probably still be there and she'd never have met him.

Vincent started counting the next row of boxes on the shelf.

She wouldn't have wanted that. She couldn't imagine where she would be right now if it wasn't for Vincent. She had to admit things couldn't be going better. They loved each other. Vincent seemed to be in control of Chaos. They were opening their own store, it had even been Vincent's idea. She was surprised at that. She had thought him too caught up in his poring over Hojo's papers to get involved in anything that had to do with real life. However, even Vincent had to eat. He had admitted that his gil had been starting to run short of late. Not surprising considering he had had no source of income since they had defeated Sephiroth. He had finally faced reality and decided he had to do something.

And she was glad he had. They had pooled their resources and bought out the old Junon weapon shop owner who was moving to Gongaga. I had taken most of what they had but it seemed like a good investment. Plus she liked the idea of both of them having a stake in something. It made her feel closer to him.

And him closer to her, or at least, she hoped. She had to admit she was a little jealous of Tifa. She and Cloud were married, they had a son already. Elena looked down at her own unadorned left hand. It had been almost a year and a half since Vincent had told her he loved her. Though Vincent seemed much more open to her than he had been, she had long ago faced the fact that he would never be Mr. Sensitivity. Looking back on the last year it didn't seem they had made much progress. Vincent seemed in no rush to take things to the next level, in spite of her broad and obvious (at least to her) hints that she was ready to do so herself. The problem was, as usual, that he was so hard to read. She was well aware that a lot

of men got cold feet when it came to commitment. She didn't know if he was deliberately ignoring her hints because of that or if he was just oblivious.

"Fifteen," Vincent announced.

Elena dutifully recorded the amount.

"Seems like Cloud and Tifa are very happy together," she commented.

Vincent did not reply.

"I envy them," she continued.

Vincent paused for a moment.

"Why's that?" he questioned, not looking at her.

"Because they seem so happy," she repeated. Wasn't he listening at all? "Being married and all," she added.

He shrugged.

"Well, that doesn't surprise me," he replied. "They have been friends since childhood. I guess it was only natural they got together."

"Yeah, but you never know," she stated. "Love is a strange thing. You can never tell what's going to happen."

"True," he commented. His own love life was ample evidence of that. He hadn't exactly followed a linear path.

Apparently assuming the conversation was finished, he went back to his counting.

"I wonder what's going to happen to us," she mused.

He stopped again.

"I'm never going to be able to finish counting if you keep interrupting," he stated.

Elena glared at him, but she managed to stifle the anger she felt. That was a typical Vincent answer. They had plenty of time to get the inventory done. There was no rush. It was almost finished in fact. Sometimes he made her so mad, and yet she couldn't show it because she didn't know if he was just thick headed or being deliberate. What did it take to get through to him?

She looked at him for a moment.

"Let's get married," she suddenly blurted out.

Immediately her face reddened. It wasn't like her to be so blunt!

Vincent just stared at her.

"What?"

Elena felt embarrassed, but she didn't turn away. She had dropped enough hints and he had ignored them all. Maybe it was better to just put her cards on the table.

"You heard me," she said slowly.

He stood there for an agonizing long time not saying anything at all. She felt butterflies in her stomach. She stared at his eyes, trying to find some hint of his thoughts, but, like always, there was nothing there. She hadn't the slightest idea what he was thinking. She could understand him being surprised, she was surprised herself by her boldness. She took the fact that he hadn't run screaming from the room to be a good sign. He hadn't rejected the idea outright, nor had he made light of it. On the contrary, he seemed to be seriously considering it. She felt her excitement rise inside her.

At that very moment, the door to the shop suddenly opened.

Elena spun around, her excitement instantly replaced by anger. The shop was closed, the sign on the door plainly said so. Who could possibly have such incredibly bad timing?

"I'm sorry, but we're not open til..." she began.

And fell instantly silent when she saw who it was.

For a moment the sound of a pin dropping would have been deafening. Then the click of Vincent's heel on the wooden floor broke the silence as he stepped down from the footstool.

"Lucrecia," he said slowly.

Lucrecia's eyes slid past Elena and fell on Vincent. She took a slow step forward.

"Vincent. I think I know how to get rid of it."

Vincent's brow furrowed.

"Get rid of what?" he questioned.

"Chaos," she said. "I think I may be able to remove Chaos from you."

Once again the room was permeated by silence. Vincent just stood there, showing no reaction while Elena beside him could almost scream, and for any number of reasons. That they had been interrupted at such a key moment, that, against all hope, it might be possible to rid Vincent of Chaos, and yes, not least of all that it was Lucrecia, Vincent's long lost love, who stood before them telling them this.

"How?" Vincent's simple one word query seemed almost laughable in its simplicity compared to the multitude of questions trying to force their way from Elena's lips.

"It's...complicated," Lucrecia replied.

Elena frowned. Had Lucrecia looked at her when she said that?

"Try," Vincent said.

"I'm not sure how much you know already," Lucrecia continued.

"It's my understanding that Hojo infused me with the cells of a two thousand year old Chadara," Vincent said. "Much like he infused others with Jenova cells."

"That's more or less correct," Lucrecia acknowledged. "Although saying someone was infused with Jenova cells is not quite right. Actually the process was to remove some of your own cells, replace your DNA in those cells with specially engineered Jenova or Chadara cells, then re-implant them in your body. The engineered cells acted like a virus, spreading the alien DNA throughout the rest of the cells in your body, but it never worked perfectly. Most of your cells managed to remain unaffected, otherwise you'd have turned permanently into Chaos long ago."

"And Cloud into a Jenova," Vincent said.

"Yes," Lucrecia agreed. "Anyway, I found some notes on an experimental procedure that may be able to reverse the process."

"Where could you have found them?" Vincent questioned. "I've gone all through Hojo's notes, both the one's from the Shinra mansion and the one's we salvaged from Midgar. Nothing I saw made any mention of that."

"Yes, and what do you mean by experimental procedure that *might* reverse the process," Elena spoke up.

"One thing at a time please," Lucrecia replied. She turned her attention to Vincent. "You didn't find anything about it in Hojo's notes because he they weren't in his notes. He wasn't interested in reversing the process. He was only interested in accelerating it. He was only interested in turning people into twisted creatures in his vain search for the perfect warrior. He had no interest in correcting any mistakes."

"So where did you find this then?" Vincent asked.

"The notes were Prof. Gast's," she replied. "The both worked on the Jenova project. In fact, it was Prof. Gast who made the real breakthroughs, before Hojo had him killed, of course. I found them in the library at Icicle Inn."

"In the library?" Vincent said in surprise.

Lucrecia nodded.

"Believe it or not yes. When Prof. Gast was killed and Ifalna and Aeris taken prisoner, Hojo took what papers he was interested in from their home and left the rest. Since no one in Icicle Inn knew what to do with them and they looked too important to throw away, they were put in storage in the attic of the library. I was searching for more information on Hojo and Gast and the librarian mentioned them to me. It was pure luck, really."

Elena was wondering what Vincent was thinking about all this. The whole thing sounded too good to be true to her. She looked at him but his expression did not give away what he was feeling.

"So what do these papers say?" Vincent questioned.

"I'll try to keep it in laymen's terms. In the early stages of the Jenova experiments, Prof. Gast was working on a way to reverse the process, in case something went wrong. I'm not sure exactly what happened. Either he was taken away by more important work or maybe he was killed before he was finished. I've looked through it myself and filled in the blanks. It was pretty much complete or I wouldn't have been able to do it."

"So this is just guesswork?" Elena interrupted, unable to contain herself. The more she heard about this the less she liked it.

"No, it's not," Lucrecia replied. "It's based on sound scientific theory. I worked on the Jenova project too you know, and like I said, Prof. Gast had already done most of the work. There's a unique marker on all the alien cells. It was a tag that Prof. Gast added. His plan was to create a drug that would attack the DNA in the cells with the tag, inactivating it. Once the alien DNA is gone, your original DNA should kick in again."

"Should?" Elena said dubiously. "What if it doesn't?"

Lucrecia's brow furrowed.

"There are a number of risks involved," she said. "Prof. Gast worked out the theoretical possibilities, but as far as I can determine, he never did any actual experimentation to see if it would work. The drug could have serious, maybe even life threatening side effects. Even if it does work, if Vincent's original DNA doesn't take over the cell once the alien DNA is inactivated, the cell will die. If enough cells die it could be fatal, and of course there's always the possibility that the drug won't work at all for some reason that wasn't taken into account. Ordinarily we'd test the drug out quite thoroughly before using it on a human, but I'm afraid that's not really an option in this case. Vincent and Cloud are the only two people still alive that underwent this process, at least, as far as I know. With Gast and Hojo's deaths the secret of infusing Jenova cells in the first place was lost to us, so it's not like we can infect experimental animals and then see if we can cure them."

"So by doing this you could kill him," Elena said. Now she was sure she didn't like the idea.

"Like I said, there are risks," Lucrecia repeated. "But they're small. I'll monitor the drug the entire time. We'll start with small doses. Think of it as any other disease treatment. Even with well know drugs used to fight common diseases, there's always a small risk of an adverse reaction involved."

The comparison did not sit well with Elena at all. She felt Lucrecia was glossing over the hazards.

"What will I have to do?" Vincent questioned.

Elena looked at him. Was he seriously considering this?

"Come with me back to Nibelheim," Lucrecia replied. "A lot of Hojo's old equipment is still in the lab there. It wouldn't take long to set things up again."

Vincent stood there for a long time without saying anything. This whole thing was as much as a shock to him as it was to Elena, even though he hid it better. He wasn't sure what to think. What Lucrecia was proposing seemed inconceivable. It had been so long and he was so resigned to his fate. He had convinced himself that what Hojo had done to him was his punishment for what happened to Lucrecia and her son, that he had deserved it. Could it be possible that he could dare hope again?

He had to admit he wasn't anxious to return to the Nibelheim mansion. Not for what she had in mind anyway. More experiments. Even now, just thinking about it, memories began to rear up in the back of his mind, memories he had spent years trying to repress.

Yes there were risks, but that didn't bother him. He would gladly accept the risks. What concerned him more was if it would actually work. After suffering so long, after so many setbacks, he was afraid to even contemplate the possibility of a cure. His hopes had been dashed too many times in the past.

Only this time, it wasn't just him. He stole a glance at Elena. From what she had said already and the look on her face, it was obvious she had some serious reservations. As did he, but there was more at stake now. She had just asked him to marry her, and marriage meant a family. Cloud had been told the Jenova cells inside him were not inheritable, and it was true, Zangan showed no sign of being contaminated with them, but he wasn't exactly normal either. He was a Cetra, though no one could explain it. So were a lot of other children, from what he had heard, but even that didn't rule out the

possibility that somehow there was a connection between Cloud's Jenova infusion and his son being a Cetra. If he could remove that risk, he'd feel a lot more comfortable thinking about marriage. After all, who would want to marry a man harboring a monster inside him, even if Elena seemed not to mind?

No, if there was any chance at all he was obligated to take it, not for his own sake, but for her.

"When do you want me there?" he asked.

Lucrecia pondered for a moment, then shrugged.

"No time like the present," she replied.

Elena just looked at them both. She could hardly believe this was happening. Vincent seemed to be perfectly willing to go along with her. She felt a tightening in her stomach. He wasn't even questioning her. Was he just going to walk out of here with her?

"You can't go," Elena blurted out.

The both turned to look at her.

"The grand opening of the shop is tomorrow!" she pointed out. "I need you to be here!"

"Only one of us needs to be here," he replied. "The inventory is almost done. That was the hard part."

"But..." she sputtered. She turned toward Lucrecia. "How long is it going to take?"

"There's no way to tell," the older woman responded. "It all depends on the drug's effects."

Elena looked back at Vincent.

"This is crazy. We just open the store and you're going to disappear for God knows how long? I thought you were going to stay here with me and help!"

"Yes, that was the plan," he replied, "but we didn't expect something like this to happen, now did we?"

She looked from one to the other. She felt like they were ganging up on her and that just made her even more defensive.

"You can't just *leave*," she snapped. "I still have my job as a Turk, you know. I could be called away at any moment. The plan was for you to take primary care of the shop."

"I know," he said. "But you don't have anything going on with the Turks right now. That was one reason we picked this week to open the shop, remember? I'll be back as soon as I can."

"When will that be?" she demanded.

Vincent stepped toward her. He could see she was upset. He could understand, but there was more to it than their gun shop now. Sure that was important, but this was more important. Couldn't she see that?

"Like Lucrecia said, we don't know."

"That's not good enough!" she exclaimed. "We had plans, plans for you to be here. Lucrecia shows up out of the blue with some cockamamie scheme and you want to run right off with her? You don't even know if it will work. It might even kill you!"

"I'm not going to die," he told her.

"You don't *know* that!" she snapped. "You don't know what will happen. How do you know you can even trust her?"

"What do you mean by that?"

She gave him a look.

"Just what I said," she replied. "She is the one who wanted to bring back Sephiroth, now wasn't she?"

Vincent glared at her for a moment, then looked at Lucrecia, whose face remained impassive.

"Could you excuse us for a minute?" he asked. "We need to talk alone."

Lucrecia nodded, then walked out of the shop.

"I can't believe you're buying this!" Elena snapped as soon as the door closed.

Vincent stared at her. For a moment she hesitated, feeling his eyes boring into her, but she forced herself not to turn away. She was well acquainted with Vincent's ability to stare down others, but she wasn't going to let him intimidate her. Not this time.

"How can you believe anything she tells you? You know from the last time we saw her that she's not all here. Hojo's experiments took their toll. I think she's unbalanced."

"You mean, like me?" he said calmly. "I know I don't have to remind you that Hojo experimented on me as well."

Elena closed her eyes for a moment. She suddenly had developed a pounding headache.

"Yeah, and you're not exactly Mr. Well Adjusted, now are you?"

"There's a difference between being poorly adjusted and being crazy," he told her.

"I know, but maybe you're stronger than she is. This whole thing just seems insane. I don't want you to go."

"I don't really want to leave either," he said. "Whatever you say about Lucrecia, she really is a scientist, and she knows what she's talking about. If she thinks there's a chance this might work I would tend to believe her. Yes, she wanted Sephiroth back, but he was her son after all, and she did come to her senses when it counted, now didn't she?"

"I don't now. I guess," Elena conceded. "I still don't like it though. I don't like the idea of you taking off with her."

"So come with us," he suggested.

"You know I can't do that!" she responded. "Someone has to stay here and take care of the shop. We're opening tomorrow!"

"So postpone it," he replied.

"We can't do that! It's too late. We've already advertised for tomorrow. It's in all the papers. We can't just cancel it. The customers are going to show up and they'll never come back if the place is closed. Plus we'd lose all that advertising. Why can't you just go another time?"

"You're here to cover the shop," he replied. "We don't know if that will be the case in the future."

"It just doesn't make sense," Elena tried again. "All of a sudden she shows up with this wild idea? I don't trust her."

Vincent gave her a puzzled look.

"What, you think she has some evil scheme in mind?" he questioned.

"I don't know! Do you still love her?"

Vincent just looked at her for a moment. Where had that question come from?

"Is that what this is all about?" he said after a moment. "Are you afraid I'm going to run off with her and leave you?"

"Answer the question!" she demanded.

"Lucrecia is very dear to me," he said very deliberately. "Though I don't know if you could say I love her anymore, but I haven't forgotten what we once had, no matter how fleeting or one sided it might have been, but I don't love her the way I love you. Elena, she's giving us an opportunity to get rid of Chaos. Don't you realize what that means? I can be a human being again. I'll never have to look over my shoulder and worry that Chaos may come out at some inopportune moment. I'll never have to worry about him hurting you. I'm doing this for you!"

"He's not going to hurt me," she told him. "Roshnialu taught you how to control it. We've both learned to accept it. Have you stopped to wonder what kind of effect this might have on you, getting your hopes up like this, and then having it not work? I don't want this to set you back years after all we've worked for."

"It's not going to set me back. I can handle it. I'm not going to get my hopes up."

"You don't know that!" she exclaimed. "You don't know what's going to happen."

"And neither do you," he told her flatly. "Can you really stand there and tell me you don't want me to go? Can you really tell me you want me to pass up maybe the only chance I'll have to be human again?"

"No, I don't want you to pass up the chance, if I believed it could happen," Elena replied. "But I don't. I don't think it's going to work."

"But you don't know that."

"No, I don't. It's a feeling, okay? I've got a feeling something bad will happen. I don't want you to go!"

"You're not being rational," he stated.

"Oh you men and your rational! Why does everything have to be rational? Why does everything have to make perfect sense? Don't you feel anything at all? There are some things that you just know are wrong, in spite of any evidence to the contrary."

"I'm sorry but this just does not strike me as being particularly wrong," he commented.

"That's because it's Lucrecia," she said.

"Which is the real reason you're not happy with the idea, isn't it?" he replied. "You mean to tell me you're going to pass up a chance for me to human again because of jealousy?"

"You mean you're going to just go along blindly with her because you used to love her?" she countered.

"It's not the same and you know it," he replied curtly. "She's not making this up."

"Are you sure? What was she doing, snooping around at Icicle Inn? How did she come across this stuff in the first place? What was she really looking for?"

"I'm sorry but I don't see anything sinister here," he told her. "I've been searching through Hojo's papers for years myself, now haven't I? Is it that hard to believe we were both looking for the same thing?"

"Yes it is!" Elena shot back. "She never mentioned she was doing anything like that to you. How do we know this is not some twisted plot to bring Sephiroth back again?"

"What? How could that be?"

"I don't know! Look, they needed a Cetra or someone infused with Jenova cells to bring him back, right? Well, what if Chadara cells will do as well?"

Vincent blinked.

"That's totally off the wall," he stated. What the hell was wrong with her? Where did she ever get an idea like that? "There's no link between the Chadara and the Cetra, not like there is with Jenova. And she'd need the crystal material and that was destroyed on Grouchoon."

"I don't want you to go!" Elena repeated.

He just looked at her for a moment. What had gotten into her? He had seen her act irrationally before, but never like this. From what she had said and how she acted he had to conclude this was a reaction to Lucrecia. If she was going to let her emotions get in the way like this, how could he trust anything she said? It seemed almost impossible to believe she couldn't see the benefit of this if it worked, for both of them.

In any case, in this state, he didn't see how he could argue with her. It was obvious she wasn't going to listen to reason.

"I have to," he said.

He started for the door.

"I don't want you to go!" she shouted. She couldn't believe it. He was going to go? He was going to leave her in spite of her protests?

"I can't argue with you when you're like this," he said, continuing toward the door.

She stood there, waiting for him to stop. He had to stop. *Please stop!* The door was open now. He had opened it. He was really doing it. He was really leaving.

"If you go, don't expect me to be waiting when you come back!" she cried out.

For just a moment he hesitated, then the door closed behind him and Elena found herself alone in the gun shop.

She fell to her knees and began to sob.

"Hold on, I've almost got it."

Rude stood behind Lai Li as she tapped quickly on the keyboard of the computer in front of her.

"She's almost got it," Rude relayed, looking over at Reno, who was seated in a leather chair not far from them, leaning back with his feet up on his desk.

"I'll believe it when I see it," Reno stated.

Lai Li's fingers continued to tap on the keys.

"I can almost taste that steak now," Rude commented.

"Hey, you haven't succeeded yet," Reno pointed out. "Don't count your steak before it's hatched, or whatever."

"I'm in," Lai Li announced triumphantly.

"You're in?" Rude repeated.

"She's in?" Reno thirderd. He got up and walked over behind her.

"Yup," Lai Li confirmed. "Here we are, the Avalanche website file manager."

"We did it," Rude commented.

"You mean Lai Li did it," Reno corrected. "Maybe I should just buy *her* dinner."

"Hey, don't try to weasel out of it," Rude said. "It's a package deal."

"Yeah, yeah, whatever," Reno replied.

"I'm putting it up right now," Lai Li told him. She used another program to pull of a graphic.

"That's the one you want to use, right?" she asked.

"Yeah," Reno said.

"All right, I'm uploading it."

They waited a few minutes.

"All right, that should do it," Lai Li said when it was done. "Now let's go to their homepage."

She typed in the URL and a moment later the Avalanche website appeared on their screen, but instead of the usual Avalanche logo they saw a large banner that said 'Turk's Rule'.

"Perfect," Reno said, laughing evilly. "This is worth the cost of a steak dinner."

"Enjoy it while it lasts," Lai Li told him. "I imagine Reeve will correct it pretty quickly. They're going to know it was us."

"Of course," Reno replied. "That's the idea."

"You are so bad," Lai Li told him.

"Me bad? You're the one who did it!"

"If anyone asked, you forced me to," she said.

"Yeah right."

Their conversation was suddenly interrupted as the phone rang.

Reno picked it up.

"Talk to me."

He stood there for a moment listening.

"What's wrong?"

His tone of voice instantly sobered the others.

"Elena, calm down," he continued. "I can barely understand you."

Lai Li looked at him curiously from her seat.

"Yeah. Uh huh. Take it easy would ya? I know, but that's no reason to...all right. Just relax. I'll be over there as soon as I can, okay? Yeah, I won't be long. I promise. Now chill out, would ya. Okay. Bye."

He hung up the phone and looked at the others.

"Elena's had some kind of meltdown," he told them. "She's hysterical. Something to do with Vincent, as if that's a surprise. I'm going to go over there and try to calm her down."

"She has a crisis and she wants to talk to you?" Rude said with a look of surprise.

"Well, yeah, what's wrong with that?" Reno shot back. "It's not like she's got a wealth of friends to chose from. You think she wants you to come over, Mr. Conversationalist?"

He headed for the door.

"Mind the store."

"That shouldn't be a problem," Rude said. "It's not like people have been tripping over themselves trying to get in here lately."

"Yeah, well, every business has it's slow periods," Reno said. Just as he reached for the door it suddenly swung open. A young man in full samurai gear and a large katana hanging from his belt barreled in, nearly running right into Reno.

"Whoa, what's the rush Samurai boy?" Reno said, a little annoyed at having to dodge out of the way in order not to be trampled.

"I'm here for my bride," the young man announced with a heavy Wutai accent. "I've been told she hangs in here a lot."

"I think you're shootin' for, hangs out," Reno straightened him out. "And who the hell are you talking about?"

"Why the flower of Wutai of course," the young man responded reverently. "Lady Yuffie Kisaragi."

For a moment they all just stood there looking at one another, then Reno slowly turned toward his companions.

"My, but isn't this turning out to be one helluva day," he muttered.