

CHAPTER VIII: ON THE EDGE

The light was fast fading when Cloud and the others arrived at Gongaga. They had been riding hard all afternoon since they had left Cosmo Canyon, and were all bone weary, but no one mentioned stopping to rest as Cloud led them back out into the street.

"I guess we should check his parents house first," Cloud stated. "If he hasn't been there we'll split up into groups and search the town. If he's here he could be just wandering around at random, perhaps looking for something that might be familiar."

"Or he might not be here at all," Reeve pointed out. "What do we do then?"

Start all over, Cloud thought, although he did not say it aloud. If they didn't find any trace of Zack here, it was unlikely they would ever find him. In that event, it would be up to Zack to reappear on his own.

They reached Zack's house and saw someone standing in the front yard. The sun was already below the horizon, and the first streetlights had come on, but as they approached Aeris realized it was Zack's mother.

The woman saw them and immediately walked rapidly over to them.

"Have you seen Zack?" she and Aeris both said at the same time.

They paused awkwardly for a moment.

"Has he been here?" Cloud questioned.

"Yes," the woman said, obviously upset. "He came by earlier this evening. We were talking for hours, but then he said he needed to get some air. He said he'd only be gone for a little while, but now it's been over an hour. Dinner is starting to get cold..."

She ended helplessly.

Aeris laid a reassuring hand on her shoulder.

"Don't worry, he can't be far. We'll find him."

She turned toward the others.

"C'mon, he's got to be around here somewhere."

She started down the street, the others right behind her.

"Spread out," Cloud suggested.

They nodded and all took off in different directions. Tifa followed Cloud for a bit, then turned off toward the center of town, but she hadn't gotten very far when she heard Cloud call her back.

She saw him beckoning and trotted over to him.

"This way," Cloud stated. She followed him back the way they had come. She saw Aeris walking down the road ahead of them.

"What's up?" Tifa questioned.

"Aeris told me Reeve spoke to someone who said they saw a man fitting Zack's description heading south out of town," Cloud replied.

Tifa nodded but said nothing. Cloud was walking rapidly, and she was having difficulty keeping up. She looked ahead and saw Reeve standing on the road ahead of them. Aeris came up beside him and stopped, looking back at Cloud and Tifa.

"The man said Zack went this way," Reeve stated as they reached him, pointing to the hills to the southeast of town.

They started off once again. In spite of Cloud's rapid pace, Aeris took the lead. She didn't know why Zack would come here and then suddenly take off again. It really didn't seem to make much sense. A lot had happened in his life lately, and it was obvious he was having trouble adjusting to it all. She was hoping he had left because he was confused and wanted to sort things out for himself. But her gut instincts told her it was more than that. Though she had no real reason, she had felt a

kind of dread ever since Zack had run off, and she thought it was of utmost importance that they find him as soon as possible.

About fifteen minutes later they had reached the base of a steep hill that jutted up above the plain. The hill was covered with tough thick bladed grass, but a narrow trail snaked through it up toward the top. They could see the ocean not far to the south, and hear the distant roar of the surf.

"Which way?" Tifa questioned, looking from the trail to the ocean.

They hesitated, eventually turning to Aeris, who, though she was staring up the slope, seemed not be to seeing at all, but instead listening to some sound that only she could hear.

"Up there," she said, nodding toward the hill. "Hurry."

They scrambled up the trail. It was very steep, and they often had to use their hands to help pull them up. Tifa, who was last in line, glanced back nervously a few times, worried that a slip would send her tumbling down the hill. Or worse, a slip by someone up front would send them all tumbling down. But a few minutes later they reached to top and they came out onto a wide grassy plateau.

The sun had set, and the first stars had now appeared in the sky. The world around them had faded to grey. They looked around. The hill looked out over the ocean. The side they had come up on was steep, but the ocean had cut into the hill on the opposite side, eroding it and leaving a sheer drop a hundred meters straight down to the beach below. At the very edge of the precipice they could barely make out a lone figure.

Aeris rushed over. The others followed more slowly. Zack half turned toward them as they approached, but other than that he seemed to ignore their presence. He was looking down at the ocean below. Aeris slowed down when she was a few feet away from him. She could tell he saw her, but he said nothing, nor did he turn toward her.

"Zack," she said.

He did not move. Aeris could hear the waves crashing on the rocks below. He was so close to the edge.

"I really wish you hadn't come," Zack spoke, his voice holding no hint of emotion.

"Zack, please get away from the edge," she said softly.

He did not move.

"I'm sorry Aeris," he said. "I've been such a fool. I thought you were the only thing I had left. And because of that, I tried to hold on too hard. I was afraid, afraid that if you didn't love me I'd have nothing left. But it was all just an illusion. Just my desperate attempt to believe that there was something still here for me. But that's not true. Your love isn't going to bring back the past, bring back my memories. Nothing can do that. All I managed to do was cause you and your friends grief, and for that, I'm sorry."

"You didn't do anything so horrible," Aeris said.

"Maybe not this time," he replied. "But who's to say it won't happen again, and with a much worse result? I told you once before living as the Swordsman taught me to take whatever I wanted. I'm not sure now I can live any other way."

"It hasn't been very long," Aeris replied. "Give yourself some time."

Zack just shook his head.

"No, there's no point in that. I thought you were the solution, but that was naive and selfish of me. I never stopped to think about how it was affecting you, and your friends. But I finally realized it, and when I did, I didn't know what to do. So I thought I'd come here, back home to Gongaga. Home, if you could call it that. I thought maybe something here could spur some memory in me, but it didn't work out that way. My home, my parents, none of it belongs to me. The Zack you knew is dead, he was killed the day he was shot near Midgar, and he can never return. It was just by some twisted fluke that I stand here now before you. An accident. Something that should not have happened. I truly believe I was meant to die that day."

"Zack, don't say things like that," Aeris said nervously.

"There's no need to be afraid, Aeris," he said, raising his eyes to her for the first time. "I'm not. Not anymore. I cheated death once. I'm not afraid of it."

"So did I," Aeris reminded him. "We both came back. I'd like to believe that was for a reason."

"Maybe for you it was," he said. "The world would be a poorer place without you here. I'm afraid the same can't be said for me."

"You don't know what the future holds," Aeris replied. "Even if you can't get your past back, that doesn't mean you can't start anew. That doesn't mean there's no place for you anymore."

"I'd like to believe that," Zack said. "But my recent actions have made me feel otherwise. I don't want to go back to being the Swordsman, wandering with no purpose, and I don't want to hurt you or your friends. My last hope was here in Gongaga, and it proved false. I'm afraid there's nothing for me at all now."

"Zack, please," Aeris said pleadingly.

"You shouldn't have come, Aeris," he said. "I really do love you, and I wanted to spare you any further hurt. But at least it gives me the opportunity to say goodbye, something I never got a chance to after Nibelheim."

"Zack, please don't..." Aeris said, feeling tears running down her cheeks.

"Zack," Cloud said, suddenly stepping forward. "C'mon man, listen to her. I know things have been tough, but no one's going to hold it against you. We've all had our problems. Christ, Aeris has told you what I went through when we were fighting Sephiroth. I fell apart completely. I nearly killed Aeris myself, and gave Sephiroth the black materia, even though I knew he was going to use it to destroy the planet. Hell, you can't get much more messed up than that, right? But I managed to pull through it, and no one abandoned me. And we won't abandon you either."

"Thank you for the kind words," Zack said. "But the truth is you were being influenced by Sephiroth, and were too weakened from what had happened to you to fight it. But there is no one influencing me. What I've done I've done of my own accord. When Sephiroth died you were set free, but I'll never be free."

"What about your parents, Zack?" Tifa spoke up quietly. "After all this time, you've finally come back to them. When we came into town looking for you, your mother was distraught that you had disappeared again. For the first time in a long time you've given them hope. Do you really want to take that away from them now?"

Zack turned his eyes toward Tifa.

"I don't like to see them hurt, but the truth is their hope is false as well. They think their son has returned, but the person they are looking for is the old Zack, but that's not who I am anymore. If I remained here, they would soon realize that I'm as much as stranger to them as they are to me. No, their son died long ago, and now it's just a matter of me taking the final step."

He turned away from them.

"Zack!" Aeris exclaimed, her voice nearly choking with tears. "Please don't. Please Zack. I..."

Zack's foot started to take a slow step forward, and Cloud matched it, preparing to lunge forward, even though he knew he was too far away to save his friend.

"I love you," Aeris cried out.

Zack's foot stopped in midair. The others stood there, rooted in silence, all of them staring at Aeris. The only sound for many seconds was the sound of the surf below them.

Slowly Zack drew his foot back. He turned around, looking straight at Aeris, though in the gathering darkness he could not make out her face clearly. They stood there for a long time locked in one another's gaze, and finally Zack smiled ruefully.

"I know you well enough now to know that you would do anything in your power to stop me," he said, very slowly and deliberately. "But would you be willing to live out your life with a man not because you loved him, but just to save him from himself? Can you really look me in the eye and tell me you love me?"

For a long time there was silence once more. Tifa glanced over at Reeve, who was standing as if turned to stone.

"I...I don't know," Aeris said finally. "But I do know it would hurt me terribly to see something happen to you. You tell me you don't want to cause me any more pain. If that's true, then don't do this. I thought I had lost you for so long, and all that time something was missing from my life. And now I've found it again, and it's so precious I never want to let it go. Please don't take it away from me. I don't know whether I love you or not, but I do know that I never want to lose you again."

Again there was silence, and for the first time, Zack seemed hesitant.

"Please Zack," Aeris said yet again, reaching out her hand. "Come back to me."

A light breeze wafted through the night air, stirring their hair and bringing the salty tang of the sea. Still Zack did not speak. He had been so sure of what he wanted to do when he had come up here, but now Aeris words filled him with doubt. He had thought for the first time since he had met Aeris he was being unselfish, thinking of them instead of himself, but now he realized that wasn't true. He had seen the grief he could cause by remaining with them, but hadn't really thought about the grief that would come from the course of action he was now following. He looked into Aeris tear stained green eyes, and his heart ached in his chest. This was not what he wanted at all.

"She's right Zack, we'd all miss you," Cloud spoke up. "You saved my life. And you were my best friend once. I'd like to think that you still are."

Zack did not reply. Aeris took a slow step toward him, then another. She was right in front of him now. She reached out, and then his hand gripped hers. They stood there for a moment, hand in hand, looking at one another as some silent exchange took place between them. And then Aeris slowly turned and led him away from the cliff, walking without a word back toward the path and down the hill, the others following silently behind.

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"Yuffie! If you want to eat, you better get up!"

Yuffie grunted something unintelligible and turned away from the door, pulling the blankets closer about her. Marlene waited a moment, but there was no further response. She shrugged and walked back to the kitchen.

"I don't think she's gonna get up," she remarked.

Barret, in the process of placing a large platter of pancakes on the table, did not seem particularly concerned.

"Her loss," he muttered.

Marlene sat down beside Amanda and started forking pancakes onto her plate.

"Hey, better eat all those," Barret commented, looking dubiously at the pile that was quickly forming in front of her.

"I will," she replied. "I love pancakes. Especially the way you make them, Dad."

"Well thanks pumpkin," Barret replied. He sat down and grabbed a fork himself. Between the three of them, the stack of pancakes quickly disappeared.

Barret pushed his plate away and stood up. He looked at Amanda.

"So what are your plans for today?" he inquired.

Amanda shrugged.

"I think Aunt Yuffie wants to go shopping," Marlene replied. "She said something about it last night."

Barret nodded, not looking in the least bit surprised.

"Well, I better get ready to go," he said.

"I really wish you didn't have to work on Saturday," Marlene stated, looking at him unhappily.

"I know," he replied, placing a hand on her shoulder. "I wish I didn't either, sweetheart, but at least it's only for half a day. And I promise when I get back I'll take you to the park like I said I would."

Marlene's face brightened as she got up to clear the dishes away.

"Okay," she said cheerfully.

They had gone back to the warehouse yesterday after Barret had come home, just like Yuffie had predicted, and also just as she predicted, they had found nothing. Barret had apologized to Amanda that they could not track down the people who had done this to her, and had promised he would use the full power of his office to try to find these people and what they had been planning for her.

Barret smiled suddenly and reached into his pocket.

"If you're going shopping you might as well have some gil to spend," he said. He handed Marlene some bills.

Marlene took the gil, looking happier than ever.

"Thanks, Dad. You're the best!"

"You know it," he replied. He leaned over and held out some gil for Amanda, who looked at him for a moment, then slowly took it, feeling more than a little embarrassed. Barret had made no mention of his credit cards, and as far as Amanda could tell, he was still in the dark about it, and if he didn't say anything, she certainly wasn't going to be the one to bring it up. Nevertheless, she took the offered gil.

"Thank you, Mr. Wallace."

"Call me Barret," he replied. "Mr. Wallace sounds way too formal, and I have to hear it everyday from a bunch of jackasses at work. I'd rather not listen to it at home as well."

Amanda nodded but said nothing.

"Okay," Barret continued. "I better get going. Behave yourselves. Don't let Yuffie get you into any trouble, and if you know what's good for you, you won't tell her I gave you any gil."

"Goodbye Dad," Marlene said, getting up. Barret came over and gave her a hug and a smooch, then he disappeared out the door.

Amanda helped Marlene clear away the dishes. They had just finished the job when Yuffie made her appearance.

"You missed breakfast," Marlene told her.

Yuffie yawned and shrugged.

"I'll just have some juice," she said.

An hour later they were once more in downtown Corel. They wandered around for most of the morning, cruising into various shops along the downtown strip. Marlene, who usually went shopping with her father, was thrilled to be out with the other two girls. Yuffie was a relentless shopper, moving rapidly from shop to shop, never seeming to tire, but it was soon obvious that Marlene could not keep up, and by mid-morning they found themselves eating an early lunch in a small and, Amanda made sure, not too expensive cafe. The restaurant had a few tables under brightly colored umbrellas along the street in front, and even though the weather was a little chilly, they decided to sit outside.

Though it seemed Yuffie was perfectly at ease, relaxing and not paying much attention to her surroundings, in fact the opposite was true. Even when in the middle of an argument with a salesclerk trying to haggle down the price of some clothing, she still was alert to everyone and everything around them. She found it gratifying that she hadn't seen Reno or Rude today, even though she realized that didn't mean much. She didn't know what Reno had in mind, but she found it highly suspicious he would be hanging around Corel right now. She couldn't help but think back to the million gil the man had offered for Barret's life. That was a huge amount of money, and even though Reno had refused when she had been listening, that didn't mean that he hadn't had second thoughts later on. She knew that everyone just thought of her as a spoiled brat who was only interested in herself, and when they first met her that might have been true, but in spite of that she still cared about her friends, and was not about to let Barret be killed if she could do something about it.

Amanda saw Yuffie discreetly watching the people strolling along the sidewalk in front of the cafe. Without really thinking about it, she found her eyes straying to the street as well. In mid afternoon in the middle of downtown Corel, there were quite a few people filling the streets. Amanda glanced idly at the faces of the people walking by, then shifted her sight to the other side of the street. Her face paled momentarily as she saw a man standing in the doorway of a small shop. He stood there looking right at her for a moment, until it was obvious she had seen him, then he stepped onto the sidewalk and walked rapidly down the road.

Amanda composed herself in an instant, but even so she suddenly saw Yuffie give her a sharp look.

"You okay?" she asked.

"Yes, I'm fine," Amanda replied after a moments hesitation, and as calmly as she could. Yuffie looked at her for a moment more, then seemed to shrug it off and her eyes wandered back to the street.

Amanda breathed a silent sigh of relief. Sometimes Yuffie was a little too observant for her own good.

For as long as she could remember, Amanda had led a very structured life. She had always had a personal tutor, and had spent almost all her free time in training. She had never had an opportunity to interact with people her own age. But now, hanging out with Yuffie, and yes, Marlene too, it had become painfully obvious to her what she had been missing all this time. For the last few days she could almost have believed that she was just an ordinary girl having fun with her friends, but the sight of Ice watching her brought back to her just how untrue that was. She was not just an ordinary girl, she never had been. And this was not just a simple outing with some new found friends. No, this was something much more than that. She had to admit she had been enjoying herself, but she couldn't let that interfere. She couldn't forget that this was all just a charade, a ruse with only one purpose in mind, and that everything she had told them was a lie. She couldn't forget what it was that she was really here for.

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Elena aimlessly stirred the swizzle stick in her gin and tonic. The ice had long since melted, but the glass was still nearly half full. She had already had two, and she wasn't in any mood to get drunk.

She had been here almost two hours. She lifted her head and looked around the bar. It was quite crowded, not surprising for a Saturday night. She was sitting by herself at a table tucked away in a dark corner of the room, her eyes roving towards the entrance every few minutes, but so far she had seen no sign of Vernon. She had returned to Kalm in the late afternoon, and after she and Vincent had had dinner, she had helped him sort through the papers they had obtained in Midgar. They were almost finished looking through them now, but had found nothing pertaining to Vincent's condition.

Around nine he had gone out, giving no explanation, and she had not asked for any. He often wandered off at night, and she was used to it. She could picture him aloft on the rooftops, or wandering through dark alleys, shrouded in his cape, contemplating the universe and scaring the shit out of anyone he happened to run into.

In her angrier moments, which she had to admit seemed to be coming with greater frequency lately, she told herself she should leave him. After all, looking at it objectively she didn't seem to be getting much out of this relationship, and things didn't look like they were going to get any better anytime soon. In spite of her not so subtle hints, he still refused to talk about what had happened or to even see his brother. On top of that, there was this whole transformation thing They had found nothing in the notes from Hojo's lab to indicate they could stop or even slow down whatever was happening to him. Did she really want to go out with a man who at any moment could permanently change into a raging beast?

No, objectively, it didn't look good at all. But there was more to it than that. He had his share of problems, more now than ever, it seemed. And even though he didn't show it, she felt he needed someone to be supportive now more than he ever had. It wouldn't be fair to abandon him now, but even more important was the look she had seen in his eyes on those rare occasions when he had held her in his embrace. He had never told her he loved her, but she had seen it there, in his eyes, she was sure of it. No one had ever made her feel the way he did when she was in his arms. She wasn't going to give up on that easily.

But even knowing that, she still wasn't going to stop trying to find out the truth on her own. She had come downstairs shortly after Vincent had left, but had seen no sign of Vernon. The thought had come to her that perhaps he had given up and left, driven off by Vincent's obvious enmity. But she had asked at the desk and he was still checked into a room. She had gone up and knocked on the door, but had received no answer. So now she was at the bar, hoping he would show up. This whole thing with Vincent and Vernon's parents, it was just too weird. She needed to talk to someone about it all.

She glanced at her watch. Almost 11:30. She was starting to get tired, and didn't think she could wait around much longer. Vincent was usually back shortly after midnight, not that it mattered. She could tell him she was at the bar, which would be the truth. She didn't have to mention who she was talking to. He might guess, but she didn't care.

But there was another reason she would have to leave soon, and that was that she was just plain tired.

She took one more sip from her drink, then pushed it away. Leaving a half full glass behind would seem like a tremendous waste to Reno and Rude, but it wasn't going to trouble her. She stood up, and even as she did so, she spotted Vernon walking into the bar.

He saw her immediately and walked over as she sat down again.

"Hi," she said as he pulled up a chair. "I've been looking for you. For a while there I thought you might have taken off."

"I had some business to attend to," he replied.

"Sounds like something Vincent would say," she replied.

Vernon laughed.

"I assure you my brother and I are nothing alike. So have you spoken to him about me?"

"Yes," she replied. "And I'm afraid his opinion is not going to change."

"That doesn't really come as a surprise," Vernon commented. "So why were you looking for me. Just wanted to know more about our past?"

Elena nodded.

"Specifically about you parents," she replied.

He gave her a penetrating look. But before he could say anything she explained her trip to Junon and what she had found out there.

Vernon nodded when she had finished.

"My, aren't you the spirited one," he commented. "I'm sure Vincent wouldn't be at all pleased to hear about this little excursion."

"Vincent doesn't tell me what to do," he replied with a hint of defiance. "Besides," she continued in a conspiratorial tone, "I'm not going to tell him."

"Well, he won't hear it from me," Vernon assured her. "But Vincent has a way of finding out things. And he also has a way of dealing very harshly with people who cross him."

Elena looked at him skeptically.

"I'm not crossing him, I just want to know the truth," she replied. "Besides, he wouldn't hurt me."

Vernon returned her skeptical look. He seemed perfectly serious. Was he actually suggesting that Vincent would do her harm?

Before she could say anything he spoke again.

"So what exactly do you want to know?"

"I'm curious to know exactly what happened the night your parents were killed. The newspaper report was pretty sketchy. I'd like to hear more about it, if you don't mind."

She wasn't sure how painful the memories would be to Vernon. But he did not seem disturbed.

"Well, it was a long time ago," he said. "I've learned to live with it. Unlike some people, I can move on with my life."

Elena ignored his jab at Vincent and waited patiently.

"There really isn't much I can tell you," Vernon continued. "My parents retired to their bedroom about ten o'clock that night. I stayed up until just past eleven, then went to my room myself. I sat up reading a book for perhaps a half hour, then fell asleep. The next morning at eight the maid found them in their room. Whoever it was must have used a silenced gun, because my bedroom was right down the hall from theirs and I didn't hear a thing. The butler and maid had separate quarters in the house as well, but they were downstairs, at the other end of the house. Someone had gotten in the window in one of the quest bedrooms. It was very well executed. Whoever it was probably wasn't in the house more than ten minutes."

Elena pondered this information for a moment.

"And they never found who did it?" she questioned.

Vernon shook his head.

"My father had a lot of enemies. Someone could have been hired by anyone of a dozen people. The gunman could have been out of the country before the bodies were even found."

Elena nodded slowly and took another sip from her drink.

"What about the butler and maid?" she asked.

Vernon shook his head.

"Old friends of the family. Above reproach. Besides, they loved my parents, and were treated quite well. They were almost more members of the family than hired help."

"Even family members have secrets," she said pointedly.

Vernon gave her a hard look.

"Indeed," he replied. "But the butler and maid checked out. Believe me, I looked into it. My parents were very dear to me, and it was very difficult after they died. The police had nothing to go on, no fingerprints, no physical evidence. They kept the case open, of course, but without any clues there wasn't much they could do. But I made a vow to myself that if it took me the rest of my life, I would find the killer and bring him to justice. I've spent the last twenty years, and a considerable portion of my parents fortune, on just that goal. I looked into every detail of the maid and butler's lives, and I am convinced they had nothing to do with it. I investigated all of my fathers old business partners, and as many of their employees as I could find. I posted a multi million dollar reward for information on the crime, and spent huge sums of money following up tips, but after all this time, I found nothing to indicate that any of the men my father was doing business with had anything to do with the killing."

"So after all this time, you've come up with nothing?" she questioned. She had to admit she admired his dedication, and wondered if she would have had the same perseverance if she had been in his shoes. It seemed unlikely now, after all this time, that he would ever be successful.

Vernon nodded then looked at her for a moment, a thoughtful expression crossing his face.

"I've run down every lead, no matter how wild. I've just got one theory left that remains to be explored, though I've been reluctant to pursue it."

"Why is that?" Elena asked.

Vernon hesitated for a moment.

"The house had a state of the art burglar alarm. Yet it never went off. The police believe the man came in the window because they found marks on it indicating it had been forced upon, but it was not actually open. They found no other way for someone to get in. But maybe there was."

Elena took another sip from her drink and made a sour face. Gin and tonic did not taste very good warm.

"How?" she asked.

"Through the front door," he replied.

Elena looked puzzled.

"But you said the alarm was on," she pointed out.

"True, but that wouldn't stop someone who knew how to turn it off."

Elena looked at him sharply. Suddenly she had a feeling she knew where this conversation might be going.

"Where was Vincent during this time?" she asked suddenly.

"Supposedly at Nibelheim," Vernon responded. "It was right before he disappeared."

Elena frowned.

"Surely you're not going to suggest that Vincent did it?" she blurted out.

Vernon just sat there for a moment looking at her silently.

"It's not something I'm anxious to believe myself," he replied. "But there are certain things about it that force me to consider it. Vincent and my parents had a falling about because of Victoria's death. Whether rightly or not, they blamed him for it. And he couldn't understand why they couldn't forgive him for the accident. He and my father fought constantly after that. Vincent had always been strong willed, and had always been difficult, but I'm afraid after that he was impossible. The two of them almost came to blows one night, and Vincent stormed out of the house, vowing never to return. And he kept his word. He never did come back, even though I tried to talk him into it a number of times. He was bitter about the whole thing, and told me more than once that he never wanted to see them again. That he hated them."

Elena sat there unmoving, shocked and upset by what Vernon was telling her. She knew Vincent was a dangerous man, but to think that he could do something like that to his parents was just beyond belief, no matter how he felt about them.

"Even if that was true, that doesn't mean he killed them." she said.

Vernon nodded.

"I know, but it makes you wonder, doesn't it? Perhaps Vincent returned to Junon that night, knowing that everyone thought he was in Nibelheim. He climbs to the upstairs window and makes it look as if it were tampered with. Then he walks in the front door, turning off the alarm. Now all he has to do is walk upstairs and into my parents bedroom. Then he comes back down, turns the alarm back on, and leaves. You have to admit it's a plausible scenario, and the only one I've been able to come up with that fits all the facts."

Elena was slowly shaking her head.

"I don't believe it," she stated.

Vernon shrugged.

"To tell you the truth, I don't want to either, but like I said, I vowed to find out the truth, no matter where it would lead me. The police had suspicions about Vincent too, and they wanted to talk to him, but they never got the chance. They went to Nibelheim to question him but Hojo told them he had disappeared. It was eventually assumed he had died, and the matter was dropped, by me as well as everyone else. But then, after all these years, I heard he had reappeared. Ever since I found out, I've been searching for him, to see if I could finally find the truth."

Elena tapped her finger on her chin.

"So that's why you're really here?" she questioned.

"Yes," he replied. "I've followed every other lead I could. He may be my brother, but regardless of that I intend to find out if he had anything to do with this."

Elena bowed her head, a little overwhelmed by all this.

"I still don't believe it," she said again. "He wouldn't do something like that to his parents."

"He was a Turk," Vernon replied. "They have a reputation for ruthlessness, as you well know."

Elena looked back up at him again.

"Yes I do," she replied. "But we kill to do a job, not out of maliciousness. We're taught to keep our emotions under control, and from what I've seen, Vincent is very good at that."

"Is he?" Vernon questioned, leaning closer. "Is he good at keeping his emotions under control, or just hiding them? How well do you really know him?"

Elena paused at the question. It was obvious that she hardly knew him at all, but she really didn't want to admit that.

"Well enough," she stated.

"I hope so," he replied. "I really do. I lived with him for a long time, and I couldn't really say that I know him. But one thing I do know is that he's a dangerous man. He's killed many people, Elena, probably more than you could imagine. Don't make the mistake of thinking you'd be immune if you got in his way."

For the first time Elena felt herself becoming angry.

"I told you he wouldn't hurt me," she said testily.

"Like I said, I hope so, for your own sake," Vernon replied, undisturbed by her anger. "If what I'm saying is true, and I'm not saying for sure that it is. Right now I just have suspicions. This could easily turn into another dead end. But if it did happen the way I suggested, he'll obviously want everyone to let it lie. If you start poking around in this and he finds out, you may find out more about him than you could ever want to know. The truth could come with a very high price tag."

Elena frowned again. She didn't like anything Vernon was telling her, and no matter what Vincent had done in the past, she couldn't bring herself to believe that he would ever do her any harm.

"I think I've had just about enough of this conversation," she said slowly.

Vernon nodded.

"Very well," he replied. "But no one said finding the truth would be easy, or that it wouldn't be unpleasant. Like I said, right now I have no real proof, and it could still be that Vincent is perfectly innocent. I'd rather not have you involved in this at all, but after your little trip to Junon it seems to me that you probably won't listen to any advice to that effect. But at least heed this advice. Watch yourself. Even if you trust him, it couldn't hurt to be a little cautious. If he's got nothing to hide, it will do no harm, and if he does, it could just save your life."

Elena stood up slowly. She didn't believe for a minute that Vincent could have done what Vernon was suggesting. In fact, she felt a little defensive about it. But he had said it was just another theory, one he hoped was not true, and could she really blame him for following all possible leads?

"Well," she said slowly. "I think you're completely wrong, and if you've come here to find some proof of his involvement I think you're just wasting your time. But I will keep my eyes open, and I will be cautious, not that I think it's necessary. But I'm afraid when all this is over, you're going to be no closer to the truth than you are now."

Vernon nodded.

"I hope so myself," he replied, standing up as well. "If you need to talk to me again, you know where to find me."

"Yes I do," Elena replied, then hurried off.

Vernon watched her until she disappeared up the stairs. Then he walked over to the bar and ordered a drink, realizing that he had never ordered one when he had come in. He took the drink and walked up the stairs himself. It was after midnight now, and the halls were quiet. He slipped the key in his door and pulled it open. He stepping inside and flicked on the light. Vernon jumped when he saw Vincent was sitting in a chair by the window.

"Damn!" he muttered, recovering immediately. He was tempted to ask how his brother had gotten in, but picking the lock would have been a simple matter for a Turk.

"What are you doing here?" he opted for.

"I could ask you the same thing," Vincent replied calmly.

"This is my room," Vernon observed.

"Why were you looking for me?" Vincent questioned.

"I told you," Vernon replied. "I heard you were alive again. It had been years since I saw you. I just wanted to see how you were doing."

Vincent slowly stood up, his gaze locked on Vernon.

"Since when did you become so interested in my welfare?" he asked coldly.

"Look," Vernon said. "I know we didn't see eye to eye, but that was a long time ago. I've done a lot of thinking since then. I thought you were dead, when I found out you weren't I thought maybe we could...I don't know, maybe patch things up between us."

Vincent took a slow step toward him.

"Patch things up? That doesn't sound like the Vernon I knew."

"Well it's been almost thirty years," Vernon stated. "Don't you think a guy could change in that time?"

Vincent took another step toward him, and now he stood right next to his brother, staring at him.

"Maybe some people, but not you. I know you too well, Vernon. You'll never change. Change isn't in you. I don't know why you're here, but you're certainly not here to make amends. No, you've got your own selfish reasons, and to tell you the truth, I don't really care what they are, just as long as you stay out of my way."

"How quaint," Vernon replied sarcastically. "After all these years you're still giving me brotherly advice."

"Advice it would be well for you too heed," Vincent stated simply. His voice was firm and emotionless, but his eyes burned with fire. "Whether you've changed or not is irrelevant, but quite a bit has happened to me. Some very unpleasant things, as a matter of fact. Things that have made me view the world in a much harsher light than I used to. Things that have left

me bitter and vengeful. I'm afraid that if you push me this time, the fact that you are my brother may not be much value to you anymore. So do yourself a favor, stay away from me, and stay away from Elena."

Vernon looked up at him at the mention of her name.

"I'm a grown man," he stated. "I can talk to whoever I please. If the lass..."

He never got to finish the statement as a clawed hand suddenly shot out and enveloped his throat. Vincent lifted him up and slammed him heavily against the wall. Vernon looked at him, suddenly gasping for breath, but the claw had his windpipe closed off.

"This is not negotiable," Vincent said, his voice suddenly filled with menace. "I'm not asking you to do me a favor, I'm not giving any advice. A long time ago you crossed me and I let you live. That has never happened since. Don't make the mistake of thinking I will be lenient again. Leave Elena alone or I will kill you. Do you understand?"

Vernon made gagging noises and motioned desperately that he could not breath.

"Do you understand?" Vincent said once more.

Vernon stared at him for a moment, his eyes bulging in his head. Finally he nodded.

Vincent let him go and he fell to the floor, sucking in huge lungfuls of air. It took him a few moments until he could finally speak.

"That's the trouble with you, dear brother," he gasped out. "You were always the first one to resort to violence to get things done, now weren't you?"

He received no answer, and when he looked up, he was alone in his room.