

Chapter 5

Vincent led her down the wooden staircase that dug deeper underground. Stealing a glance at the spot from where they came from, she concluded that they must be thirty feet below the mansion. She could barely see the upper part of the stairs and the door as they have been covered by the shadows.

She gripped her weapon tighter. She was very nervous, and doubts about this mission were forming in her mind. Losing her concentration had a price, she slipped on a broken step of the stairs and lost her footing completely. With loud gasp, she stumbled forward, almost landing painfully on her knee, had she not rammed herself into Vincent's back.

Surprisingly, Vincent did not lose his balance, nor did he budge when they collided. His strong frame absorbing the impact as if he were not hit at all.

"Sorry, I slipped." She said, regaining her balance and grinning sheepishly. Vincent studied her with his usual silence, and then turned back and continued walking.

Eila opened her mouth to say something, then shut it again. Thinking that she'd only annoy him more. She sighed and dug her free hand in her pocket and slung her weapon over her shoulder. She felt more irritated with Vincent's coldness rather than frightened. Yet, she felt some a sense security being with him, though she didn't know why she trusts him to help her.

They reached the landing of the stairs. The ground was damp and soft soil. Their boots dug into the dirt as they continued to follow a cave-like hallway. As they passed, she saw worn-off light sockets and signs that this tunnel was used in the past.

"What was this place before?" She asked herself. Low as a whisper, but loud enough for Vincent to hear and glance at her over his shoulder.

"ShinRa Laboratory." He answered briefly, then looked back at the path ahead of him. "Hojo's playground. When I used to work for them as a Turk, I encountered my first JENOVA beast here."

Those words explained everything for the girl. She had found a treasure spot to her search. Her thoughts were confirmed when Vincent opened a wooden door and entered into a huge laboratory. She followed, noting the different apparatus that were preserved. Thick cobwebs dangled over the test tubes and beakers that were once used to conduct countless experiments. Bottled of evaporated chemicals still in their place inside dusty shelves and cases.

She shuddered when she noticed as syringe set that was by the table's side. The largest one having a needle that was six inches long and was labeled, "Final stage, J-15 formula." Eila dropped the syringe into its case and wiped the dust off her hands. She could imagine someone being strapped down to the large operating table at the center of the room and being injected with the JENOVA cells. It wasn't a very pleasant thought.

Vincent managed to light up the place with torch he carried. Lighting up lanterns that were set inside the facility. She followed him as he went further into the room and noticed that the walls were lined with books. A library, just what she needed! At the end of the hall of books, there was a circle shaped office with more books lining it's walls. More books were laid out carelessly on the heavy table at the center of the office. They appear to have been untouched for years as dust collected on their surfaces.

"You will find what you seek for here." Vincent said, lighting up the last of the lanterns. "All of these books are reports and documentations of the experiments that Hojo and Professor Gast performed for the past thirty seven years." He picked out one book and handed it to Eila. "This book, contains information on JENOVA :the crisis from the sky."

Vincent picked out another similar looking book and handed it to her. "This one, documents the first SOLDIER experiment." He added and turned away quickly as if to search for another book.

Eila scanned over the first book, it was hand-written by Professor Gast, there were diagrams and pictures of the discovery site. Some pictures of him and Professor Hojo and more scientists with JENOVA. Then she picked up the second book and wiped the dust off the cover. The word "SEPHIROTH" was written in thick bold letters. It was a journal by both Professor Gast and Professor Hojo.

"Sephiroth?" She asked herself. The name sounded familiar and it did not bring a very comfortable feeling about it. She opened the journal and read some of the entries by Professor Hojo. "...three hours after his birth, the child was able to

open his eyes which indicated life since he did not cry when he was taken out of his mother. An interesting event happened when one of the Turks tried to play with the child by tickling it's toes. The child retaliated with a kick that broke the Turk's finger." Eila grimaced at the thought of how strong the child was.

She continued reading. "...I wish that they would do something to pacify the Turk, Vincent Valentine, if we are to be successful in this endeavor. I, personally, do not like the idea of someone opposing me. More details will follow shortly." Eila raised an eyebrow and scanned more of the book. There were some photos there of the child, his mother, a very beautiful woman. One picture struck her in particular, the picture of the a man holding out his injured finger and behind him was another man. She looked closer before drawing out any conclusions. Drawing imaginary lines on the face of the Turk who looked so much like Vincent.

She lay the book down on the table and glanced at Vincent. He wouldn't happen to be the same Vincent Valentine Turk, now, would he?

"Vincent Valentine?" She asked him. He looked at her and nodded. "But-- this journal was written thirty years ago--How--?"

Vincent, upon seeing her puzzled face, understood what she had discovered and humored her with an answer. "I have been genetically altered." He said mechanically. "My aging process has slowed down drastically for the past thirty years."

"And--is that how you got your claw?" Eila added.

"Yes." Somewhat relieved that he would not have to explain that part.

She nodded and sat down on the seat by the desk. "I see." She whispered calmly. "I think I'll be able to find a lot of information here." Her face brightened up with a smile. Vincent was surprised at how the girl took everything so calmly. The others would have bombarded him with further questions, if not stare at him in disbelief.

"Thank you, Mr. Valentine."

Vincent blinked in surprise and stiffly nodded twice. "When you are ready to leave, tell me. I shall be in the other room." He took a step forward and reluctantly held out a thin folder. "I don't know if this will be useful." He lay it down in front of her and retraced his steps back to the Laboratory.

Eila gazed at his form for a while before looking at the folder Vincent gave her. She picked it up slowly and read the words "Ancient :Aeris Gainsborough"

Mayor Reeve put down the Midgar Times Magazine on his desk. He never thought that word of Cloud's arrest would spread quickly around the city. He feared that this bad publicity stunt by Scarlet would lower the morale of the citizens who have worked so hard. He wouldn't blame them. Who would want to have an accused criminal as a role model? Then again, everybody is innocent until proven guilty by a court of law.

Law? What law? There was a constitution in Midgar, but then, nobody really cared. When the old ShinRa empire ruled, all that mattered were paying taxes or live in the slums. If you're a rebel, then, die. It was as simple and tyrannical as that.

Knowing Scarlet, she would stop at nothing to destroy Cloud. Reeve knew all too well the humiliation the woman endured in the past, all because of AVALANCHE. She wanted revenge and she knew, she is deadly enough to get it. Without any solid justice system in Midgar, she would use public persuasion to persecute Cloud. It wouldn't be fair. At times like these, when people are recovering from one calamity to another, they could be easily swayed.

It was all a matter of convincing them who is lying and who is not. This event would greatly alter their reputation and credibility. It didn't matter. Should they pull out of this, Reeve hoped, that everything would turn out for the better.

There was still another problem. Maybe more significant than Cloud's trial. The Beast attacks. The unsolved killings by mysterious beasts. They have stopped now. In just four days, there have been 15 casualties and 45 injuries. Reeve feared how much more there would be in the following days. How much longer should the people live in fear.

Questions bombarded his mind. Even if he wanted to use force, so little was known of these creatures to formulate any effective strategies. He knew that his two heads of Security were taking this hard. Blaming themselves for being failures. Especially Elena. He knows how dedicated she is to her job. And she would do anything, even die, to satisfy the demands of duty.

He wouldn't let that happen. They were not going to fail. He was not going to lose hope.

Cloud sat down on the stiff mattress of the prison cell he was being held in. It wasn't the first time he'd been in one. A small metal room with high ceilings, one ventilation shaft that was roughly the size of his head on one wall, it was completely devoid of any other furniture. He was used to it, rather welcomed the room gladly. Craving for luxury was the last thing on his mind right now.

Leaning back against the cold steel wall, he could only continue to pray for Eila's safety. True, he was dead worried about her, in spite of Tifa's efforts to tell him that she would be all right and that they had to focus their attention on winning this case and then the beast attacks. Cloud shook his head. Knowing that he just let another friend slip through his fingers was pain enough.

There was a light tapping on his door, and then a soldier opened it and let a young girl enter. He recognised her as Janise, Eila's red-haired friend who arranged the date. He sat up straight to greet the girl, knowing that she was probably in league with Scarlet and Miss Elmyra.

"Mr. Strife. I want to apologise." Janise started. "I didn't mean for this to happen."

"I know." Was his brief reply. He slumped back on the wall, letting the coldness of the metal seep through his black sweater. He didn't want to talk any further, knowing that anything he says may be used against him. Knowing how Scarlet and Miss Elmyra has twisted every detail of the case to make him appear a cold-blooded murderer.

Janise twiddled her thumbs. Still standing before Cloud as he gazed on something seen only to him. "I know Eila's alive. I want to help you." She said, not knowing whether what she said was right.

Cloud glanced at her from the corner of his eye and nodded. "Thank you." The girl didn't waste anymore minutes. She hastily tapped on the door and let herself out. Once again, he was left alone, though, he wanted to talk. Looking up at the ventilation shaft in the ceiling, there was nothing else he could do but wait and hope that Tifa finds a good lawyer. He has to get out and save the world again.

Cloud whispered to himself. "Aeris...if you're listening to me...please, watch over Eila."

Another cloud of dust rose up from the old book making the poor girl sneeze twice. She covered her mouth and nose quickly and fanned the dust away with her other hand. The cold, musty room, plus hundreds of dusty books was not a good place to remain healthy. Eila rubbed her shoulders to warm her as she continued to read about the JENOVA and SOLDIER projects.

Vincent entered the library carrying a brown paper bag in his hand and a lantern in his metal claw. He entered so silently that Eila was startled to see him in front of the desk. "I brought you dinner." He said, laying the bag in front of her. "It's already quarter to eleven, this is all the food I could find for you."

Eila's eyes widened and blinked in surprise. "It's that late already?"

Vincent nodded.

"Oh my--- I got so carried away with all these--I forgot." She stood up and started stacking the journals on top of each other and placed Nia back on her shoulder. "I'm really sorry for wasting your time like this, Mr. Valentine." She continued fixing the books, glancing at the file on Aeris Gainsborough that she wasn't able to read. "Um, Mr. Valentine, may I borrow this one for the night?"

Vincent nodded and continued to watch her.

"Thanks." She whispered, tucking the file in her coat. She's already learned so much about the JENOVA creatures and SOLDIER. She even took a little time to read on what happened to Vincent. Hojo's journal on his experiment was thrown in some shadowy corner. Torn and even punctured with bullet holes. Somehow, she knew that it was Vincent's doing, but, after reading what she could, who wouldn't be angry. Who would want to have his life written down like some schedule for a lab rat dissection. After reading it, she put it back in the corner. Afraid that Vincent would be upset if he found out.

"Come, now." He said, interrupting her thoughts. "I will accompany you to the Inn." He lifted the lantern in his claw and started to move away from her. Not wanting to be a hindrance to the strange man, nor be left behind in this cold, dark library, Eila grabbed the paper bag, her staff and the envelope and raced towards him. Today, she was getting closer to

accomplishing her objective. She just hoped that the knowledge that she gathered is enough to ensure the safety of Cloud and his friends.

As soon as they reached the town outside, the cold night air pierced through her thin coat and into her skin, making the poor girl shiver. Vincent hardly noticed, continuing to move towards the inn, which was adjacent to the weapons shop.

The town had quieted down. No more nosy people to see her come out of the mansion unscathed. Then again, they'd think that she had help from Vincent, the weapon smith. They probably feared him. His countenance was darker than the bottom of the mansion. Very out of place for this peaceful little town. She Feared him too, she admitted. But then, after he's treated her so nicely and after what she's learned of his torn past, she no longer did. She found great sympathy for him. She wanted to help, but, it seemed that he didn't want to.

Upon reaching the entrance to the inn, Vincent stopped and spun around to face her. "Will you go back to the Library in the morning?" He asked with his deep and monotonous voice.

Eila nodded, the cold temperature making it look more like a shiver. "I still need to find out...where the mako-infused people were kept after their experiment." The words came out in between frozen breaths. After spending some hours in a dark, humid library and coming out in a freezing cold night wasn't good for her. She couldn't allow herself to get ill right now. Not until the mission has ended.

"It's warm inside." Vincent said, holding the door open for her. She nodded and stepped inside. It was indeed warmer, as Vincent had said, and she wanted to run up to her room and bury herself underneath the blankets.

"Thank you once again, Mr. Valentine." She said with a humble smile.

"It's nothing." He said and turned away, disappearing into his weapon shop.

Eila sighed softly and approached the desk. She noted how lonely Vincent must be. Being an experiment himself must make him think that he is different and somehow unaccepted. She suddenly felt an urge to invite him for a cup of coffee or something. But then again, it was late and he probably needed rest. After her mission, she'd try to help him get out of the gloomy state.

Once in the room that Rosh and Adrian payed for, she jumped onto the bed and lay back. Allowing the comfort of the soft cushion underneath her back to pamper her. She placed Nia beside her head on the pillow. The little bird cooed lightly and was soon fast asleep.

A girl was kneeling at the center of a majestic circle of crystal. Her head was bowed down and her hands were clasped together in prayer. Ribbons of light came from the sky, caressing her body . The only source of light in the darkness.

"Don't be afraid. Come near." Her voice echoed in Eila's mind. She obeyed. Floating like a little feather in the wind. She wasn't afraid of this girl. She was familiar to her. Like a sister or a mother is to a child.

As they met face-to-face, all she could see of the girl was her emerald green eyes against her face that seemed to glimmer with light.

"The planet is always with you." She spoke through her mind once more. "Remember..."

As the image spoke, she raised her hand to touch Eila's cheek. Her hand as illuminated as the rest of her body nearly blinded the girl with it's gentle light. When Eila opened her eyes, everything around her was in flames. People were killing each other. Children dead, lying on the streets. No...they were not humans. One of the slaughtered creatures fell on her feet. It's mouth wide open with an unheard scream for mercy. It's eyes, burning white, closed slowly for the last time.

It was one of them...

The creatures that have been attack ing Midgar. Now the people have fought back, in fear and in hatred...

The whole town was covered in blood and flames...

Everywhere, more and more of the creatures were slaughtered like pigs. Even their children were not spared...

"Stop it!" she cried out. But nobody heard her. Nobody could see her except the creatures. They ran to her, asking for mercy and for protection.

Swords and knives were thrown at her, but only harmed the creatures that hid behind her. She was wounded and bleeding. But she felt no pain.

In the midst of all the chaos stood one figure. A man cloaked in black. Silver-white hair billowing in the winds of death and destruction. He turned around to face her. His face covered with blood and the shadows. Except for his eyes. Green eyes that glowed.

She ran to him hoping that he could stop this chaos. But as she ran, he seemed to move farther away from her.

"You!" she cried out desperately. "Do something! Make them stop!"

He shook his head and spoke, "These are your brothers and sisters...do not let them repeat the cycle of vengeance."

The figure rose to the sky that was colored red-like flames. He raised his arms and bent his head backwards. His body glowed brightly, and his silhouette formed a cross at the center.

The light continued to grow. Engulfing the man with the silver hair completely. Then she realized that the light was coming towards the earth. A meteor. A meteor filled with the evil of man. Its hatred, violence and corruption. It was sent by them who claimed to be humans to destroy the creatures. But not only will they destroy their own kind...but the planet as well.

The creatures were once human. Victims of a science that did not know. The science that did not consider the results of experiments. It was the science of exploitation and disrespect for life.

These creatures...are still humans.

They would be destroyed by this bright meteor forever.

Eila found herself crying and screaming for the destruction to stop. The meteor was coming. There was nothing she could do.

Suddenly, a bright light of green and white burst through her. Through her chest from her back. This light grew bigger and bigger. It came from inside her like a sword. It confronted the meteor and everything exploded...

Everything was dark.

Her room was dark and the sky outside was still dark. Eila sat up on her bed vigorously to wake herself up. It was a strange dream indeed and it frightened her. She clasped one hand on her chest and felt her racing heartbeat. Her forehead was covered with sweat and she was breathing heavily.

That girl in her dream must have been Aeris. And the silver haired man was Sephiroth. She recognized him from the dozen pictures she saw in his file. But what did that dream mean. Were they going to summon another meteor and she had to stop it with that white blast? Isn't that what Aeris did? Did she have to do that too?

"Damn..." she muttered and slumped herself back on the pillow, waking the sleeping Nia in the process. The little bird raised its head curiously for a minute before going back to sleep. Eila wished that it could be that easy to sleep. But knowing the dangers ahead, who could?

She turned on the little lamp by her bed and found the Aeris Gainsborough file by her side. She ran one finger down the coarse cardboard folder. The file was about an inch thick, it would keep her busy the whole night until the sun came up. At least, she hoped, that it would keep her mind off the nightmare.

In the morning, she would tell Vincent about the dream. Being a former ally of Aeris, he might be able to help.

With that in mind, she opened the file and began to read Hojo's journal on Aeris Gainsborough.

"The girl is in Nibelheim." Adrian told his superior. "We made sure that she stayed there, and was comfortable."

The blind man nodded once. Pleased with what he's heard.

Another of the creatures called his attention. he was known as King. One of the youngest of the pack present at this meeting. There were twenty of them. Jenova-creatures and the blind man they refereed to as Silver.

"Does that mean,. we can continue on with the plans, Silver?" King told the blind man.

"Yes." He answered. "The bombings should be set into motion in the morning With the girl out of the way, things should be more reckless."

"Silver, tell us why do you care so much for the girl?" Another one asked. They all eagerly awaited for an answer since most of their plans were based solely on the safety of that girl.

Silver smiled. "Adrian and Rosh tells me that she is indeed worth protecting. She is the only one that shows compassion. I will not waste once as good as her."

The others nodded and murmured in agreement. "At least one human is indeed a human."

"What about the other one you claim is one of us?" Another member asked. Silver frowned thoughtfully and fingered the bandages that covered his eyes.

"Let his own people destroy him. He is no longer our concern. At least we know that what the news says is false. The girl is safe. Away from this heartless city." He gripped his long staff which concealed his sword inside. Another of their problems was solved. Humans turned against humans. Now, they did not have to worry about destroying Cloud Strife.

"Why him of all the people, Silver?"

Again, a light frown touched Silver's lips. He's explained that so many times already during their raids. "Because, he is a traitor. He is one of us, yet he works for the enemy."

"How do you know that, Silver? You've just met him a few days ago."

Most of the members glared at the young man that raised that question. As if he weren't one of them., As if the JENOVA cells in his body could not feel the cells in another being. Silver did not have to explain that anymore. The quiet glares and mumbles of his companion warned him that he should know by now.

"Get some rest." Silver ordered standing up. "In the morning, we have to be seen by the people. Their army is weak and confused."

Nobody disobeyed. They all stood and spread out in different directions to rest. Except for Silver. The blind man walked down a path that would lead him to the streets which was empty now. He grinned. He and his friends have frightened the people. They were going to succeed.

The grey morning welcomed her. It was very cold outside as she stepped from the Inn. Eila wrapped her arms around herself and the Aeris file. The people of Nibelheim were starting to wake up. One by one, they opened their houses to proceed with their usual chores.

She saw Vincent's shop still closed. But there was movement inside which indicated that he was already awake. She knew that it would be rude to disturb him about some stupid nightmare. But she had to talk to someone.

As if he were expecting her to come. Vincent surprised her by opening the door as she neared his shop.

"Good morning." She said. "May I come in?"

Vincent nodded and made way for her to pass through the door. It was cold inside the weapons shop and silent. He left the door open and told her to take a seat by the counter. She did and watched him disappear into the back room and reappear moments later. He stood behind the counter and lay out a set of guns which he began to clean.

"Did you sleep well?" He asked her. But she knew that he knew that she didn't. She barely slept after that nightmare. And she wanted to read what was on the file.

"No, not really." She whispered. "I really couldn't sleep...because of a nightmare I had last night."

"I understand." He said without looking at her. "I am afraid that there is something disturbing that you should know."

Eila looked at him attentively and nodded. Her belly doing instant flip-flops. Whatever it was, it sounded important and enough to worry the man before her. "Okay."

Vincent nodded and took out a newspaper from under the counter and handed it to her. He let her read the headline for a few seconds before he heard her gasp. "They don't know you're here, do they?" He said, placing the gun down and watching the young lady shake her head in shock.

"No...I didn't know it would go this far...I didn't know.." She mumbled. Then she looked at Vincent. Desperation and panic in her face and in her teary eyes. "I didn't know they'd blame Cloud for me running away."

Silence overcame the two of them. Then, Vincent turned back to his gun cleaning. "You'd better go back to Midgar and clear everything up. There is no law in Midgar. I know too well how Scarlet deals with her enemies." He paused to place the

first gun in his display case and pick up another one. "This will not be good for Cloud. You have to return as quickly as possible. I know a friend who can provide transportation for you."

"R-right...I'll go back." Eila stuttered. Her hands trembling violently at the shocking news. She'll have to abandon this Jenova research for now and help Cloud. This was all her fault. She should have told them what she planned to do.

"Good luck." Vincent said.

"What? Aren't you coming with me to help Cloud? You could prove that I came her by my own free will."

Vincent shook his head. "I do not want to have anything to do with them anymore." He said silently. Eila could only gape at him in disbelief. Though she did not hold what he said against him. "I will make arrangements for your transportation to Midgar. That is all I can do."

Eila did not press further for more answers. Instead, she nodded. "Okay." Vincent must have his own reasons for not wanting to help Cloud. In time, maybe he'd tell her. Maybe.