

Chapter Five: Alas Poor Vincent

“Too much love is the opposite of despair. An overpowering love may consume you in the end...” - *Vincent Valentine*

The setting sun gave way to darkness in the town of Nibelheim. The wind whistled through the trees blowing dust and leaves through the streets. Shutters in houses were locked tightly. Doors were dead bolted shut. The town had escaped inside itself. There were no sounds made by man on this night. But the silence became interrupted by a low rumbling. Then it was broken by the chocking of a large shotgun.

::BOOM::

Like the wrath of God, the explosive fury of Vincent’s Death Penalty echoed through the night air in Nibelheim followed by inhuman cries of agony. The Turk stood with his back to the front door of the Nibelheim mansion, aiming his weapon at the surrounding mutant creatures approaching. One of them lay dead at Vincent’s feet, its overpowering stench threatening to overtake his senses. Reece crouched next to him, his two handguns drawn, ready to hit an approaching target. Suddenly one of the four beasts leapt! Reece fired several rounds from each gun into the creature who fell weakly to the ground, still roaring. The wounded creature howled in rage. It looked similar to a jaguar, covered in thick, green scales. Its enormous teeth almost prevented it from closing its mouth. The other creatures looked similar to this one, although they were in better health. The closest one hissed at Vincent, baring its large fangs. The others snarled in agreement.

At once, the three beasts leapt toward the two Turks, saliva dripping from their maws! Vincent fired his Death Penalty into one of the creatures! Reece hit the two others with each handgun! Vincent’s beast fell dead on the ground, but the two shot by Reece slumped wounded and renewed their assault!

Again Vincent fired, but this time managing to get a shot in at both. Green blood bubbled out of the wounds on their shivering carcasses. The attack was over.

“I must check on Lucrecia,” Vincent turned towards the house and darted past Reece. He frantically struggled with the door knob to no avail. He quickly loaded a shell into one of the barrels of his gun and blew the door from its hinges. He and Reece carefully went inside.

A canyon glowed crimson under the setting desert sun. Ceremonial drums boomed in the distance. The wind gently caressed the canyon walls, and crickets happily chirped for the approaching night sky. On one of the peaks of the canyon stood a large metal observatory.

“What is it you are afraid of, grandfather?”

An old man hunched over some technical drawings on a crude wooden table. His dark glasses and long white beard completely masked the dire expression on his face. But the room’s other occupant did not need to see the old man’s face to know something was amiss. A red puma-like creature proudly sat on the couch behind the old man, slowly wagging its tail from side to side. But its tail was a bright red flame that burned in a very consistent shape.

“Please, Nanaki,” The old man turned his head to the puma, “Be careful with your tail on my couch.”

“Sorry, grandfather,” The beast bowed its head and stopped its tail. “Please, tell me what you have discovered about the lifestream?” The old man turned back to the drawings before him.

“Ho ho hoo. The Shinra are on the verge of discovering the use of the lifestream as a source of energy for their machines.”

Nanaki's eyes widened and he looked up at Bugenhagen. "They have begun exploration drilling in various locations on the Planet. It is only a matter of time before they discover the lifestream and begin siphoning it out of the earth."

"I will stop them myself!" The puma jumped off the couch and headed for the door.

"Hoo hoo hoo! Wait, little Nanaki!" The old man looked up from his papers at the puma. "You are only 18 years old - but an infant, by your race's standards."

"I am not like my race," Nanki spit, "My father betrayed our village. My mother died alone. I will redeem our noble race and save the Planet!"

"Hoo hoo hoo," Bugenhagen laughed. "You will, young one, you will. But not now. Now you must do something even more important."

"And that is?"

"Wait."

Nanaki was shocked, "You cannot expect me to do nothing, grandfather!"

"We will do our part." The old man pushed away from the table. "I have contacted Professor Gast."

"The one who built your machines?" The puma looked up at Bugenhagen.

"Yes. He has rescued the last remaining Cetra from the Shinra. He will take her into hiding and learn all he can about the Planet and the secrets held by the ancients." Bugenhagen went over to an iron-reinforced door on the other side of the room. "Now I must use my machine to monitor the Planet. Please guard the exit, Nanaki."

"Yes grandfather." The puma sat facing the exit, a stern look on his face..

Vincent and Reece ascended the creaky stairs in the Nibelheim mansion. The absence of human inhabitants began to worry Vincent. He looked down the dark hallway towards the guestrooms. There were no lanterns lit, but he was beginning to become accustomed to the darkness. It was ironic since he had spent so much of his life in darkness. No family. No friends, outside of the Turks. His job was all he had. Even the very emotions that would make a man human seemed to be missing. And now that he began to question his job, he felt as if the darkness he felt in his heart may yet consume him. The only flicker of light in his life was in the form of Lucrecia. But she, too, had begun to fade out of his life. And so here he was, feeling his way through the dark mansion just as he felt his way through life.

"Agh!"

Vincent spun around to his fellow Turk, who was hunched over, holding his sides in pain.

"Reece, what is the matter?!" Vincent helped him sit down against the wall. Sweat rolled down Reece's face. He was clearly running some sort of fever.

"Don't.... don't know," Reece gasped after each word. "My shoulder.... hurts..." Vincent looked gravely where the Turk held himself in pain. Right where his suit was torn and covered with dried blood. Right where the first creature had bitten him.

"You must have been infected with some sort of poisonous venom from the creature that bit you." Vincent looked towards the room with the staircase passage that led to the lab. Surely that would be where Lucrecia would be held up if she were still here. "We must find Lucrecia. She should be able to help you."

Vincent helped Reece up and the two headed for the staircase. They quickly descended to the basement and approached the lab. Reece groaned and gasped all the way, and Vincent knew of little he could do to ease his pain. They approached the lab to find the doors sealed shut. Vincent carefully sat Reece down and pounded on the door.

"Lucrecia! It is Vincent! Please open the door!" Silence. No response. Suddenly Vincent heard a deadbolt being released and the door swung open to reveal Hojo. The look of contempt in his eyes could have turned a man to stone. "What is it ...YOU... want?" He curled his lips in a hateful sneer.

"Reece," He looked down to his friend, "Has been poisoned by a creature outside. He needs medical assistance." Vincent looked back up to Hojo and behind him saw Lucrecia. She stood silently towards the back of the lab, her hands folded in front of her. She did not even attempt to meet Vincent's gaze. She stood with her head down, like some lowly servant.

Hojo glared at Vincent for the longest time. "Bring him inside," He finally said.

Vincent helped Reece into the lab and choked at the surroundings that greeted him. The lab was not at all the same as the one he had left. It was as if the project they had begun had taken a completely different turn. Several large glass tubes accompanied the first one, which still housed its original specimen. There were five other tubes after this one. They all seemed to be empty, save their eerie liquids. With the exception of one, which was not vacant. Vincent could barely see through the cloudy green liquid in the tank. He could only make out a small shape, no bigger than an infant. But questions would have to wait. His fellow Turk was seriously injured. He helped Reece over to a cold, steel table. Reece laid down and Hojo began to examine him.

"Hmmm..." Hojo took out a looking device and examined the wounded shoulder. "Interesting." He looked at Reece's eye. "I'll need a blood sample." Hojo padded Reece's shoulder with a small sponge and stuck a needle into him. He drew some blood and took it over to a microscope.

Reece rubbed his shoulder in pain, "You really.... need to work on your bedside manner, Doc."

Vincent was not paying attention to this transaction. He was fixated on Lucrecia. She just looked down, with her hands folded in front of her. She did not move. She made no attempt to greet the room's new occupants. She simply stood silent in the corner, with all the obedience of a zombie.

"Please, mister... Reece," Hojo took the Turk's arm and led him off the table. "You must get to a bed while I test your blood sample further." The two left the lab and proceeded to the staircase.

Vincent approached Lucrecia carefully. "Lucrecia?"

She raised her head in surprise. "Vincent? Vincent!" The Turk's heart soared. It was then that he realized she was no longer pregnant.

"When did you have your child?" Lucrecia seemed to be hurt by these words. She lowered her head in sadness.

"Almost a... a week ago," A tear rolled down her cheek.

"What is it?" Vincent wiped the tear from her face. "Is the baby alright?"

"He - he's fine." Lucrecia bit her lower lip.

Horrible thoughts began to flood Vincent's mind. Lucrecia turned her head and looked toward the glass tank with the small shape floating inside followed her gaze and recoiled at what he saw.

A baby - floating in the green liquid.

Hojo helped Reece up the staircase into the mansion.

"What's... what's happening to... me, Doc?" Reece wheezed under the strain of the mysterious poison in his body.

"Happening?" A wide grin brimmed across Hojo's twisted features. "You say that like it's a bad thing, Mr. Reece." Hojo led the Turk to a room at the end of the hallway. "You've met one of my pets, I see."

"Wha -- t?" Reece's weak eyes widened in terror.

"My first experiments with Jenova cells, Mr. Reece." He sat Reece in a chair in the darkened guest room. "They weren't as successful as I'd hoped, so I set them free." He sneered widely.

"What kind... of animal are you??"

"But one of them has left you with a gift. My beloved Jenova."

As Reece lost consciousness, he thought he heard a strange voice inside his head.

"Lucrecia, what is happening here?!" Vincent shouted with rage at the glass tank before him. It was her infant son. Floating in liquid with tubes running from him to machines and devices around the lab. Some tubes ran through machines and into the original tank containing their first specimen. "What is this horror that you have wrought upon your first born child?!" Lucrecia said nothing. Tears streamed down her face. She closed her eyes and bowed her head.

"I never got to hold him. My Sephiroth." She began to sob.

"How could you allow this- - this nightmare?!!" Vincent was beside himself.

"Now, now," Hojo entered the lab with an evil grin on his face, "That is no way to speak to the mother of my child..."

"Hojo!!" Vincent turned to him and glared with the fire of a million suns. "What kind of monster are you?!!" Hojo calmly walked past Vincent to Lucrecia.

"Are you alright, my dear?" He gently took her hand, "I hope he didn't upset you when he raised his voice..." Lucrecia quietly sobbed.

"You monster!!" Vincent grabbed Hojo's shoulder and turned him around. "There is no limit to your evil! I will personally see you pay for everything you have done here! Every second that helpless child has spent in that tank will be a year in a Shinra holding cell!"

Hojo looked suspiciously into the Turk's eyes before he spoke, "Lucrecia, my dear, would you be kind enough to leave Mr. Valentine and myself alone for a few minutes?" Lucrecia didn't even look up. She simply rubbed her eyes and made her way out of the lab. Hojo still looked into Vincent's eyes. "So you've discovered my side project, have you? Well, reporting me will do no good. THIS is Professor Gast's soldier project. The very first specimen. The very thing the Shinra wants from the good professor's experiment. Only my son will be the first."

"Do not try to hand me your delusions of grandeur!!" Vincent roared. "I do not want to hear it!"

"Professor Gast has been missing for weeks!" Hojo matched the Turk's rage, "He vanished before he could start his program! I have taken the initiative! I have done that which he has failed to do!"

"There is no way the President could have condoned this!" Vincent was flushed with rage. "I know for a fact your career will be through when I report this to headquarters!"

"Oh dear," Hojo looked down in shame. "I see I'll have to take action after all." He reached into his coat and produced a handgun.

Vincent was shocked, "Hojo, what -"

Hojo aimed and fired. Vincent was struck in the left arm!

"Argh!!" Vincent held his arm and gritted his teeth. He fell to his knees and collapsed in pain. Hojo's maniacal laughter was all he heard as he slipped into black unconsciousness.

Professor Gast anxiously hurried past a searchlight in a parking lot outside the Shinra building in Midgar. Smoke from coal stacks filled the night air over the city. He led a figure whose head was covered in a dark sack. The two people carefully made their way past the guards at the front gate as they were changing their shifts. This was the last leg of his escape from Midgar. The gates of sector one were just ahead.

He and his companion hurried around a corner into a dark alley. When he was sure the coast was clear, he removed the dark sack. It was a woman. She had long, dark brown hair and beautiful big blue eyes.

"I think we're safe now, miss." The Professor looked gravely at her.

"Ifalna. My name is Ifalna." She smiled at Gast. "I don't know how to thank you. You saved my life. And I don't even know why."

Gast smiled back at her, "Heh. There are those on this planet that know of your kind and how important you are to this world."

"You have failed me, Vincent....."

"Mother?"

"How could you let me die?"

"I'm sorry, mother, I could not save you..."

“And now you have lost Lucrecia. Her son has paid for your inaction.”

“Please, mother, I could not stop him....”

“You have failed.”

“Nooo!”

Vincent awoke on a cold steel table. He was in the lab. The room was quiet, and in total darkness. And Vincent felt strange. His left arm did not hurt anymore. But it did not feel good, either. It felt nothing. But it was still there. He reached across his chest with his right arm and touched his left arm.

Metal.

He was instantly awake! Vincent frantically sat up and examined his arm. A brass metal claw. His left sleeve was all but tattered shreds resting on its shiny new occupant. The talons gleamed with evil. He flexed his arm in experimentation and the sharp instrument responded. What had happened? It was then he realized his skin had become pale. How long was he unconscious?

He looked around the room. Most of Hojo’s equipment was gone. Only two empty glass tubes remained. The lab instruments were covered in grime from neglect. The large specimen they had removed from the Northern Crater was also missing.

His entire body felt different. He could feel stitched scars under his clothes. What had been done to him? He was not the man he remembered. He was a monster. A monster!!

“Nooooo..... RRRGGHHHHHH.....”

In the empty halls of the Nibelheim mansion, the silence was shattered by the cries of a desperate man, which were in turn replaced by the roar of a beast. A Galian Beast.

The last occupant for some time to come turned back to hear this faint exchange coming from the sub-basement. And with that, a slight smile escaped his lips. And his last act before leaving the Turk to his fate was to leave a note in the front room: “I must get rid of all those who stand in the way of my research. Even that one from the Turks. I scientifically altered him, and put him to sleep in the basement. If you want to find him, search the area. But...this is merely a game I thought of. It is not necessary for you to participate if you don’t want to.”

Hojo had won.

Author’s notes: That Hojo is one mean, hateful SOB!! As if you hadn’t guessed, this chapter takes our favorite Turk out of the storyline for awhile. And Reece... his final fate will be revealed later. Next Chapter, war breaks out in Wutai! Fourteen years after Vincent goes to sleep, the rookie Turk, Tseng, leads the charge as the Shinra begin to pound on the village! Plus: at long last, the highly-anticipated 18-year-old cadet Cid Highwind makes his profane debut! The Shinra air force will never be the same! Be there and be SQUARE!