

Rufus's Twin

By Jen

Chapter 10: Vincent Makes a Discovery

Vincent stepped off of the ferry and onto dry land. He had never been overly fond of boat rides, for he preferred to have his feet on solid ground. The thought that one was suspended above oceans fathoms deep with only a few boards between the water and one's feet, was not altogether a comfortable one.

Up ahead, the enormous monstrosity that was Midgar loomed like a dark streak in a cloud of light. He supposed that given his disposition, it ought to appeal to him, but it did not. Midgar made him feel trapped, much like his years spent in the coffin.

He was well aware that those around him stared at him much in the same manner they did Red. People were more than likely to be afraid of what they considered an oddity, rather than tolerant or curious of it. But he had long ago ceased to dwell on other's opinions. The only people whose approval he needed, he had.

At an almost inhuman pace, he strode up to the front gates of Midgar and used the keycard given to him by Reeve. He still wasn't overly sure what drove him to Midgar, but he had learned a long time ago to follow his instincts, for they were rarely wrong. And, if this was one of those rare cases where they were, he would pay Reeve a visit.

He swept through the first few sectors seeming as if he paid no attention to his surroundings, but in fact, he took in everything with a slight shift of his eyes.

Midgar hadn't really changed overly much. It was still crowded and somewhat dark in the slums due to the plates. Reeve had been working hard the past eight years to clean it up the best he could, but things, especially ones of this magnitude, took a great deal of time to accomplish.

When he reached the Sector 5 slums, he knew the reason why he had come to Midgar. A small girl lay on the ground, her hands in front of her face as if that would shield her from the two men standing over her. They were obviously harassing her, and it amazed him that the citizens of the slums just stood around and watched.

Quickly, he disappeared into the shadows and moved quietly along.

"P-please...just go away...I don't have anything to give you," the girl cried, pushing ineffectively at one of the two men's legs.

The larger of the two chuckled and leered, "There's where you're wrong missy, it looks like you got a whole lot to give us."

The other man leaned down and reached out to grab at her, but her hand shot up with amazing speed and slapped him away.

"Oooh! A feisty one! Grab'er George!"

"Sure thing Smith," the smaller one replied.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," a soft, deadly voice said.

"Huh?" George said, freezing in mid-bend.

Vincent suddenly appeared from the shadows like a demon from hell, his ebony hair streaking around his face and down his shoulders like a mask. But the blood red eyes that drilled into the two men were plainly visible, as was the Death Penalty he gripped in his right hand. With ease, he swept the girl into his arms and set her behind him.

George was still shocked, but Smith had recovered enough to snarl, "What the hell do ya think your doing?!"

"Taking away your fun. Now, if you do not want to die, I suggest you leave."

George had obviously thought out the logic of the situation and was agreeing with Vincent, for he backed up a few steps and cast a furtive glance toward the exit. Smith, however, reached into his pocket, and then let out a strangled scream as Vincent shot the hand clean through his coat.

"Jesus!" George yelled. "Y -ya shot him!"

Smith pulled his hand from his pocket and stared at the wound as if he couldn't believe that it had happened. From his hand, a small pistol fell to the ground and was kicked away by one of Vincent's boots.

"L-look man, n-no more, w-we're leavin'," Smith stuttered, and took off at a dead run, George not far behind him.

Vincent placed the Death Penalty in the holster at his side and turned to examine the girl behind him for any sort of injuries. She was nearly a foot shorter than him, with long, glossy black hair that had come undone from its confinement. Her clear, green eyes stared up at him with a mixture of wonder and relief, and she wore some sort of black bodysuit, with knee-high lace up boots. The only injury he could see, was a long bruise that discolored her right cheek.

He wondered why she hadn't fought the men off, because the speed at which she had batted one's hand away suggested that she had some sort of experience with fighting. But then, her stance wavered, and she reached out to grip his claw for support. She was obviously too fatigued to attempt to defend herself.

Her head still hurt enormously, but her vision had cleared enough for her to see the man standing in front of her. He seemed so tall and so broad, that he blocked out everything around her. His pale face was grave and framed by long, black hair that slapped against him like a whip. But his eyes...they were so red, and he seemed to her, like a cross between a demon and an angel; dark, yet beautiful in some way.

"Thank-thank you sir. I'll be on my way now..." she said, trying to step away from him.

Vincent had no intentions of letting her leave, he was fairly certain that the same circumstances would befall her again. He reached out and grabbed her arm to stop her, unaware that it was with his claw that he did so.

She stared down at the hand that held her, feeling the cool metal of it through her sleeve. Then she glanced back up at his face and found him watching her, and seeming to weigh her reaction to his limb.

"You do not look like you are in any shape to journey on your own," he informed her.

She let his soft, deep voice wash over her and looked up to him to smile. Although she was terribly confused, because she couldn't remember how long she had been asleep...or even what her name was, she felt safe and comfortable with this man. And since she had no where else to go, she would go with him.

"What is your name?" he asked her.

she frowned, "I...I don't remember."

She didn't remember her name?

"Where are we?" he asked.

She looked around, frustration evident on her face, "I don't know! I can't remember who I am, or where I am, or how long I was asleep! Nothing makes sense anymore!"

Vincent nearly stepped back, shocked when she dissolved into tears and collapsed at his feet. He wasn't very good at offering comfort to others, because he did not comfort himself. But he couldn't very well leave her to sob on the ground, so he knelt down and pulled her into his arms.

She immediately wrapped her small arms around his neck and continued to sob into his chest. He held tightly to her, at a loss to explain the feelings that were bubbling up in him at having her so close. It was almost...no, he labeled them as protective instincts. It was only natural to want to protect something that was smaller than you and obviously defenseless.

She heaved a sigh and peered up to look at him, her eyes moist and red with the effort she spent crying. It was then that he noticed something he hadn't before, her eyes had an unearthly glow much like Cloud's. Could it be possible, that she was one of Hojo's abandoned experiments? It didn't seem that unlikely, considering he, himself, was once one.

The only problem was, she couldn't remember anything. But if he took her back to his mansion in Nibelheim and she got a decent amount of food and adequate rest, perhaps she would be able to tell him something of the circumstances that brought here. Clearly, she was too distraught to be able to tell him anything at the moment.

"I am Vincent Valentine, and you are safe with me. I will take you where no one will bother you and you can rest."

She nodded and then lay her head to rest against him again, promptly falling into an exhausted sleep.

Cid left Mandie where she slept on his bed and ventured to the kitchen. Shera had been puttering around in there for the last half hour and he wanted to know what she was up to.

Already, especially on his arms and neck, he could see small clouds of spots getting ready to break through his skin and rise up. Damn. He really was not looking forward to all the itching.

When he entered the kitchen, he found her leaning over the counter, her hand pressed to her back. He rushed over to her, concerned.

"Shera, what's wrong?" he demanded, worry coloring his tone.

She allowed herself to be pulled into his arms and deposited in a chair.

"It's nothing really, just a little back pain. Our baby is giving me trouble already. Definitely another Highwind."

Cid plopped into the chair next to her and then pulled her onto his lap. Shera leaned wearily against him and let out a soft sigh of contentment.

"You need to quit takin' on the whole world, woman. Your gonna wear yourself out."

"Things won't get done all by themselves, Cid."

He snorted. "They can wait. The damn dishes ain't gonna get up and walk out of the house, nor is the laundry gonna go on strike. 'Sides, Mandie and I can fix dinner every now and then."

Shera tipped her head back to look up at him in amusement. "Macaroni and cheese is the extent of your cooking skills, dear."

Cid looked hurt. "You don't like my macaroni?"

She grinned and patted his cheek. "Of course I do. I'm just not too keen on having it night after night."

"I can make peanut butter and jelly sandwiches."

Shera laughed aloud. "Sandwiches are not a good, nutritional dinner."

"Hmph. Who needs nutrition."

Shera held tightly to his arms wrapped around her waist and appreciated that they were there at all. Still fresh on her mind, was the fact that she could have lost him. She really didn't know what she would have done had Vincent and Aeris not been there.

Aeris. After eight years, the girl was once again alive. She wasn't sure what this signified, but it gave her an uneasy feeling inside, almost as if Cid's near death was a prelude for what was to come.

For these past years, they had managed to live in harmony. She knew it was foolish, but she had been hoping that it would last. She didn't want her child or those that she cared about exposed to evils like the ones that Cid and the others had faced.

"Shera?"

She sighed. "Cid. I'm scared. I don't think...that what happened to you was an accident. And I'm worried that there is more to come and someone might not make it this time."

He squeezed her tightly. He wanted to offer words of reassurance, but he, himself, felt that his brush with death was only the beginning. What frustrated him the most, was the fact that he didn't know what he was dealing with here. How could he keep his family and friends safe when he was unsure of what they faced?

"Doesn't matter Shera. Whatever happens, I won't let nothin' happen to you and Mandie. I'll die first."

Shera sighed. "That's what I'm afraid of."

"Hey woman, I'm made of tough stuff. I ain't survived this long just to die before my next baby's born."

"I suppose you're going to teach this one how to fly to."

Cid grinned. No kid of his was getting by without at least getting introduced to an airplane. If they didn't take to it, that was fine with him. It would probably make Shera sleep easier at night if that were the case.

"Cid, what do you want the baby to be?"

Cid shrugged. It didn't matter to him whether this baby was a boy or a girl. His Mandie was more than a match for any boy her age, and he figured that the same would probably be true for this baby.

"Doesn't matter. You know that. Why?"

Shera shrugged. "I was just curious. I thought you might like a boy this time."

Cid grinned. "You want two male Highwind's on your hands?"

Shera laughed. "Mandie might as well be male, so what's the difference?"

"Got a point there."

"Oh," Shera said, changing the subject, "I called Dr. Thomas in Mideel about your and Mandie's chicken pox."

"What for? I thought we were stuck with'em."

"Well, it seems he has been working on a cure. The only thing is...it contains Mako."

Cid shot up in his chair, nearly smashing Shera against the kitchen table. "No way in hell he's puttin' Mako in my little girl! I saw what it did to Cloud, no way dammit."

"Now Cid," Shera said, twisting in his lap and resting her hand on his arm, "it isn't a large amount. It won't poison either of you. It's a small shot that will clear up all the spots within a few hours. "

Cid stared into her eyes, alarm and worry evident in his eyes. "Dammit Shera, I don't want Mandie's eyes glowin' and havin' her labeled a freak or somethin'."

Shera smiled softly. "That won't happen. Dr. Thomas has assured me that there are no harmful side effects. He's been testing it for years."

"Can he be one hundred percent sure? If anything happened to Mandie..." he trailed off, knowing he didn't need to continue because she would understand.

Shera framed his face with her hands. He was so stubborn at times, but she knew he only did it to protect her and Mandie.

She leaned in to press a soft kiss to his lips. "He's been testing it for the last ten years. He said he is absolutely sure that there won't be any side effects. As a matter of fact, he said that there might be some benefits. You both are more than likely to keep from getting sick so much."

Cid remained silent. His mind was taking in everything she said and sorting it out so that he could make his decision. His major concern was that Mandie was safe. He didn't want anything horrible happening to her ever. But he couldn't ignore the fact that Shera said the drug would have benefits to Mandie beyond curing her chicken pox.

"So when're we gonna go do this?" he asked gruffly.

"Dr. Thomas said he would stay late so that we could fly over when it got dark. This way, your skin won't be irritated by the sun."

She saw the concern still there in his eyes. "Don't worry, Cid. Every thing will be just fine."

"It'd better be."

Cera was the first to leap out of the buggy and she ran as fast as her little legs could carry her, to where Marlene sat on the steps leading to the shops.

Cloud allowed Tifa and Aeris to get out first, and stood back with Barret while they walked toward Barret and Elmyra's house. Cloud turned to his friend and eyed him shrewdly.

"What's wrong, Barret? You've been quite the whole trip."

At another point in time, Barret might have told Cloud to mind his own business, but Cloud was a parent too and Barret was pretty sure he could understand. He closed the door to the buggy and leaned on the hood, while Cloud settled across from him.

"Marlene's growin' up to damn fast. Today, she asked me to get her ears pierced. I almost bit her head off, Cloud," he added, his face reflecting his self disgust.

Cloud grinned slightly and crossed his arms. "You mean you controlled yourself?"

Barret gave him a dirty look. "This's serious stuff, ya spikey headed ass. Don't know why the hell I bother talkin' to ya." But he was grinning too.

Cloud glanced over to where Cera and Marlene were playing. "If I could, I'd freeze time right now. I don't want Cera getting a minute older. I don't want her dating, wearing make up, getting her ears pierced, or going off to college and leaving me and Tifa."

Barret grunted in response, his feelings mutual on that subject.

Cloud sighed. "But they all grow up, just like we did. What makes a difference, is how you handle it."

Barret scratched his head. "I ain't lettin' her get her damned ears pierced."

Cloud threw his head back and laughed. "I didn't mean for you to. I wouldn't let her either. Just give her what she needs when the time comes."

Barret nodded, and the two men exchanged knowing glances.

Aeris followed Tifa into the house and they found Elmyra sitting on the couch, reading a book. When she saw it was them, she set the book aside and stood up with a smile. It was so good to see Aeris again, even if it had only been the night before since she had last laid eyes on her.

"Mom," Aeris said, hugging her.

Elmyra motioned for the couch. "Sit down you two. Let's get a bit of piece and quiet while the men stand outside."

Tifa grinned. "No doubt discussing serious, manly business."

"Don't they always?" Elmyra replied with a grin of her own.

Aeris glanced around the room. "It's lovely here, Mom. But you always did take good care of things."

Elmyra beamed. "I try. How are you feeling today?"

Aeris shrugged. "Fine. I felt okay yesterday, just a bit tired was all. I'm still no closer to finding the answer to why I've come back after all these years, though."

Tifa removed her shoes and folded her legs beneath her. "There has to be a good reason, and I'm afraid it might be because something bad is about to happen."

Aeris sighed. "I know. I was afraid of that too. I would rather not come back at all if it meant everyone would be safe."

"But you're here now, so there's no reason to dwell on that," Elmyra pointed out.

Aeris eyed the two before her seriously. She had been up nearly all night trying to find answers to all their questions, as well as hers. But she couldn't seem to find the answers she needed from herself, or any other source. It was odd, but since she had returned, she hadn't been able to hear the Planet crying. She wasn't sure if it was because the Planet wasn't in danger, or if it was something far more serious.

"I...I need to tell you both something, but I don't want it to go past this room. Can I trust you?" Aeris asked them.

Tifa frowned. "Of course."

Elmyra nodded.

"Since I got back, I haven't been able to hear the Planet cry, nor have I been able to hear the voices of my ancestors. I'm worried."

Tifa reached out and gripped Aeris' hand while Elmyra gripped the other.

"Maybe that means the Planet isn't in danger," Tifa suggested.

Aeris nodded. "I've thought of that. But I'm worried it's something more."

"Like you might have lost contact with the Cetra?" Elmyra questioned.

Aeris bit her lip and nodded her head. She just couldn't see why her people would abandon her when she needed them the most. The really awful conclusion she had drew from this, was it was her own will that brought her back and she was being punished for it.

"Oh no! Aeris, don't think that!" Tifa replied.

Aeris blinked. She wasn't aware she had spoken aloud. "But it's true, Tifa. All the time I was in the Lifestream, I couldn't cross over completely and reach the Promised Land because I kept trying to hang on to all of you. What if that pushed me back even though I wasn't supposed to go?"

Elmyra sighed. "And it didn't help that none of us could let go of you."

Aeris smiled. "Mom..."

Tifa shook her head vehemently. "No. There has to be another solution. Even if you brought yourself back, on purpose or not, your people would never abandon you."

"She's right. There's another reason, and we'll find it," Elmyra declared, her expression fierce.

"I love you guys, and I missed you so much," Aeris replied.

Outside, Cera and Marlene sat on the steps leading to the shops. Marlene was picking at the sleeve of her dress, and Cera was swinging a yo-yo back and forth.

"C'mon Marlene, tell me what's wrong. Is it because Mandie couldn't come?" Cera asked, blowing an enormous bubble with her strawberry gum.

Marlene shook her head swiftly.

"Then what?!" Cera demanded, clearly exasperated.

Marlene stopped picking at her sleeve. "Okay, okay. Dad said I couldn't have my ears pierced."

Cera wrinkled up her nose. "Why'd you want to do that anyway? Getting holes in your ears would hurt! Besides, Mom says you have to keep the earrings in for a long time after you get them pierced."

Marlene looked interested. "How long?"

Cera stopped chewing her gum and thought. "A whole year," she finally said.

Marlene looked skeptical. "A whole year? No way!"

Cera placed her hand on her chest. "I swear."

"On your gold chocobo?"

Cera nodded so hard, her pony tail bobbed up and down furiously. "On my gold chocobo."

Marlene jumped up grinning. "Why'd I ever want to do a stupid thing like that? C'mon. Let's go play knights."

Marlene got up and started running for the field.

"Hey! Wait up! I get to be the king on the gold chocobo!"

Cloud looked up from his conversation with Barret and grinned. "Looks like Marlene isn't too hurt by your refusal to let her get earrings."

Barret shrugged. Whether he knew it or not, he had Cera Strife to thank for keeping Marlene a little girl for just a few years longer.

Yay! Cid and Mandie don't have to worry about having the chicken pox anymore. I thought, and thought of a way for them to get out of it, and finally I came up with something! But you have to admit Cid's reaction to getting them was well worth it. ^_^

Well, the next chapter we'll probably see what a few of the other characters are up to. And, Cid and Mandie'll get their shots. Mwa ha ha!

Thanks to everyone who's reading this fic. It means a lot!