

Chapter Six: The Prisoner

"He's no good to me dead." The Running Man

Silence now the sound

My breath the only motion around

Demons cluttering around

My face showing no emotion

Shackled by my sentence, expecting no return

Here there is no penance, my skin begins to burn

"My Own Prison"

Creed

Reeve awoke in a world of darkness and light, of hot and cold, a place where murderers murdered the innocents for noble causes. But Reeve did not know these things. He did not know where he was or even how he had gotten here. All he knew was that he was in pain and he had no balm in Gilead to ease that pain. His muscles felt weak and watery, as if all the strength had been leeches from them by invisible parasites. All of his heavy limbs were aching and sore, and he felt as if someone had pounded him from head to toe with a sledgehammer. But worst of all was the pain in his head, the pain of all pains. He had the mother of all migraines that no human medicine could hope to cure. It beat against his temples like a mind's demon trying to burst free of his skull and spread its disease to the rest of the world. Hot and cold raced across his scalp, pulsating like a thing alive.

All these physical sensations, were, of course only the half of it. A hellish fever was engulfing his entire head like a fiery shroud, and somewhere in the back of his agonized mind, Reeve knew that the madness that so many old people succumbed to in their fugue, the madness that had destroyed Sephiroth, the madness that Hojo had fed on like a hungry man on food, was now threatening him with its chaotic touch. All of his thoughts and memories were a jumbled mass of puzzle pieces that could never hope to be put together again. Memories of the past, thoughts of the present, and predictions of the future were all flung carelessly together in one haphazard pile in Reeve's brain, a mess beyond help. Nothing made sense to him anymore.

Opening his eyes, the man struggled to make some sort of logic appear in what he saw yet did not see. His eyelids were as heavy as lead, and his black hair was soaked through with sweat and hanging into his eyes like a protective veil. The first thing Reeve saw when his bleary, crazed eyes came into focus was a strange world filled an outlandish breed of light and darkness, looking like an offspring from a coupling by the colors of midnight and the otherworldly green light of the Lifestream. He was hanging in the middle of dark void with thick wisps of green mist floating all around, not allowing his teary eyes to see more than a few feet in front of him - not that he could have made sense of what he saw anyways. The pain in his skull was so supernaturally intense that his vision kept blurring and distorting, just like his memories, thoughts, and emotions. The scenery ran together until all Reeve could behold through the hammering in his head was a massive blur of black and green.

An unwitting moan escaping his parched throat, Reeve shut his brown eyes tightly and waited anxiously for a sudden bout of unbearable nausea to pass. His head pulsed with madness and heat, and for a moment, he relapsed into unconsciousness, the darkness becoming whole and complete for a few precious moments before the odious realm he was imprisoned in yanked him back to reality, forcing him to bear witness to the torturous silence that it taunted him with.

Gritting his teeth as if the pain could bring his thoughts back into something resembling order, Reeve forced his eyes open and made them focus with the sheer force of his will. His long inactive neck muscles screamed in protest as he lifted his head slowly until he met some sort of strange resistance from behind. His feverish mind whirled, feeding him dozens of words at a time for the thing that was behind him. One stuck out beyond the rest.

A wall. There's a wall behind me.

His head lolled to the side, and Reeve saw that his right wrist was pinioned to the stone wall by some sort of metal cuff that cut rudely into the tender flesh of his wrist. Though he couldn't feel his hands (the blood had long since drained from them), he instinctively flopped his burning head to the left to see that his other hand was bound in a similar fashion, with another metal cuff. Racking his jumbled brain, he struggled to come up with a word...

Shackles! That's what they are!

It took a moment for Reeve's wasted mind to clank the thoughts together that being shackled to a wall with a high fever in a room that was completely black except for strange wisps of noxious green mist was a very bad thing. A very, very bad thing.

Reeve's heart began to pound in his chest with a fervor that matched the insanity threatening to beat his brain to a pulp with its chaotic weight. *What am I doing here?* he wondered wildly, trying to focus his eyes so he could discern something familiar in the world around him. *Who put me here?*

Phantoms of the recent past suddenly rose up in response to his soundless query, leaping like mnemonic demons out of the whirling maelstrom in his mind to reveal the cold, hard truth to him. Visions whizzed past him like an out of control slideshow, there and gone so quickly that he barely had time to grasp them, much less make sense of them.

Files. Papers. Lights. His office.

Shadow on the opposite wall. A presence behind him.

Man! Dark clothes. Ski mask. Can't see his eyes! Run!

Hitting the floor hard. Pain from his bleeding lip. Did the man hit him?

Something slamming against his head. Darkness coming. Reno's voice in the hall?

The man hovering over him! Who?

The Running Man.

Reeve was jolted out of his tumbled memories by the undeniable sound of voices somewhere in this room of light and dark. Jerking his chains - he belatedly realized that his feet were shackled, too - the President of Neo-Shinra opened his eyes wide and tried to pinpoint the source of these new voices. Somewhere in the back of his rational mind, which was buried deep beneath all the madness, Reeve knew that he should be afraid of what was developing. What if these people were here to hurt him? Chances were they were in league with the Running Man, the kidnapper responsible for his being here. But the tattered remains of Reeve's common sense were just that - tattered remains. All he knew was that there was something else in here other than darkness and light, and he might be able to get answers regarding where he was and why he was here.

Try as he might, however, the man couldn't lock down onto the voices that seemed to originate from the thick mist itself. He could definitely hear them, however. Footsteps of several people echoed in the solitude of his prison, slicing through the heavy silence like a hot knife through butter. Their voices gained in volume as they apparently got closer and closer to where Reeve was chained to the wall. In a slight panic now and unnerved by the disembodied voices that would probably be deciding his fate, he squinted into the misty green and black gloom, trying in vain to see who his mysterious visitors were.

The footsteps abruptly came to a halt, and Reeve's blurry and distorted vision suddenly caught a brief glimpse of shadowy figures standing fearlessly in the exotically scented mist, wearing it like a protective cloak. Then he blinked, and they were gone. Their voices, however, remained, and, given their proximity, he was able to now make the scantest bit of sense from their words.

"...disappointing subject," one - a man - was saying, and his voice sent a sudden stream of shivers coursing down Reeve's spine. He had heard cold, heartless voices before, and until this man's words reached his ears, he would have said that Vincent and the late Sephiroth were in the lead as far as deep, icy, callous-sounding voices went, but this new man made Vincent sound like a peppy cheerleader by comparison.

"I expected much better results," the Cold One said, his terrifying voice reaching out from its covering of mist and darkness to pierce Reeve's ears and penetrate his consciousness, making the prisoner's heart freeze in terror.

"There something wrong with him? Why is he all weak and wobbly like that?" a woman's voice with a thick accent of some sort asked.

"Nothing I'll concern myself with," the Cold One replied tonelessly. "Just an unfortunate result of the interrogation. He's as raw as an exposed nerve and probably insane, too. Given his current state, death would be a mercy for him."

Reeve shuddered violently.

Another man's voice, low and calm with some sort of rasp to it, spoke up. "No death will be issued," it said firmly. "I went through great lengths to bring you this one. You make sure to keep him alive, at least. There are some bounty hunters who will pay a good price for the President of Neo-Shinra. He's no good to me dead."

The Running Man! Reeve realized with a start.

"Sounds like he wasn't much good alive either," the woman snorted condescendingly, her nasal voice making Reeve grit his teeth. "I can't believe that Mr. Big Shot President here didn't know anything."

"I repeatedly told you two the same thing," the Running Man said coldly. "He may be President, but that's all he is. And he's only a normal human being, to top it all off. I knew obtaining him would produce no result, and now I have the entire crew of not just AVALANCHE, but the Turks, out for my blood."

"Turks," the woman suddenly said softly, then let out a high-pitched laugh as she apparently shared some inside joke with herself.

The Cold One ignored the woman's outburst and addressed the Running Man. "Capturing this one was easy enough, wasn't it?"

"All too easy," the Running Man agreed flatly.

"Then I will hear no other complaints from you," the Cold One deadpanned. "Your job is to hunt out the people that I tell you to."

"You don't control me," the Running Man snapped.

Unfazed, the Cold One replied, "No, but I did once. It wasn't that long ago. Do you care to recall?"

No answer.

"I didn't think so," the Cold One said tonelessly with no hint of pride or triumph in his voice. "You were a good acolyte, Titus, and now you make a good hunter even if you don't work solely for the values I represent."

"Values?" the Running Man echoed acidly. "You represent *something*, I'll give you that, but they are not *values*. Nothing that goes on down here has any value to anyone. You and your followers are soulless, mindless, and heartless. You aid the Burrower, the Hungry One, the very thing that is the source of the Planet's disease. But you are no loyal worshipper. I know you intend to slay the monster you've idolized as a god for hundreds of years. I'm telling you, this ill-timed mutiny of yours won't work."

"What makes you say that, sugar?" the woman asked in an amused tone.

"The Burrower is thousands of years old," the Running Man deadpanned. "The last of the Beasts. Killing him isn't going to be as easy as you both seem to believe. Chances are more likely of the Planet dying all around us and withering away before you devise a fiendish plan to slay him."

"As I was saying," the Cold One continued, as if the Running Man and the woman had never spoken in the first place. "You're a good hunter, but tonight your work was...most displeasing."

Silence.

"You were followed," the Cold One continued, icy voice never wavering. "Two members of AVALANCHE were able to track you and follow you to the deep sea complex. What if they had discovered our underground lair? Most humans would have run scared from the vibes of the complex. These two, however, did no such thing. AVALANCHE and the Turks are going to be formidable opponents."

"They wouldn't have made it to the subterranean tunnels," the woman interrupted haughtily. "The fear would have gotten to them eventually."

"I wasn't expecting the likes of Vincent Valentine to show up," the Running Man said coldly. "He's more monster than man." A sly tone entered the hunter's deep, gravelly voice. "He's almost as bestial as you, my ex-Lord."

"Vincent Valentine," the woman repeated with demonic thoughtfulness, as if tasting the name as it fell from her lips. "An ex-Turk, am I right?"

"You do know your Turks, don't you?" the Running Man grumbled.

"You bet, darlin'," the woman cooed, a nasty undertone prevalent in her nasal voice. "Who was the other one with him?"

"Just some ninja girl," the Running Man said flatly. "A thief to be exact. She is not-"

"Her name is Yuffie Kisaragi," the Cold One suddenly interrupted, silencing his two companions. "She is the daughter of Lord Godo of Wutai."

"Wutai..." the woman pondered thoughtfully.

"I want that girl," the Cold One deadpanned.

"What about Valentine?" the woman asked suddenly, a pouting tone entering her voice.

"Oversexed whore-bag," the Running Man suddenly snapped. "Vincent Valentine will not offer you the carnal pleasures that you seek from every man. I'm sure he would rather die first than submit to your feminine wiles."

"Jealous, honey?" the woman taunted cheerfully. "Are you trying to say that you want to be *friends* like we used to be?"

"Valentine will be next to impossible to catch," the Cold One interrupted. "The girl is our next best bet."

"Why?" the woman pouted. "She's just some ditzy teenybopper. What has she anything to do with Valentine?"

The Cold One ignored her and addressed the Running Man. "Titus, you will bring us the girl."

Yuffie! Reeve thought wildly. *No! She's only seventeen! What would they want with her?*

"Easier said than done," the Running Man seethed coldly. "She will be flanked on all sides by AVALANCHE and the Turks. Besides, how much do you think one teenage girl can tell us?"

"You're just a bounty hunter now," the Cold One deadpanned. "You're not meant to ask questions; it is not your right to do so. All you are is just more mindless brawn to be dispatched at the slightest gesture of my hand. You've fallen from grace, my old friend. My opinion of you, once so high, has been greatly hindered by your rebellious acts of several years ago."

The Running Man ignored all these jabs. "And what if I refuse to bring you this girl?"

"It may be easier that way," the Cold One responded flatly. "One of my other hunters may have better luck catching her. After all, AVALANCHE and the Turks do think that you are the mastermind behind the kidnapping of their friend here. You're all they have to go on; they'll be on the lookout for you. How long do you think you can run around freely without me to protect you from the combined might and fury of both AVALANCHE and the Turks?"

Silence.

"You are beginning to see reason, then?" the Cold One asked. "Will you bring us the girl?"

A long pause, then, "Yes. I shall."

"I'm comin' with you, honey. This will be a fun way to pass the time," the woman said suddenly.

"You are most definitely not coming," the Running Man snapped in a low, dangerous voice, apparently not at all pleased with the situation.

"She goes," the Cold One said simply.

Another heavy silence followed, lasting so long that Reeve began wondering if he had been hallucinating about the voices this entire time. But then the Running Man - whose name was Titus, apparently - answered flatly, "Very well. It is as you wish."

"Get on it then," the Cold One deadpanned.

"What about him?" the Running Man abruptly asked, and Reeve suddenly felt three pairs of eyes focus on him from the cover of the misty darkness, unseen beacons of sinister light in this forgotten and unheard of place. He squirmed slightly, just a mere jerking of his limbs, jangling the chains slightly. He hadn't the energy to do anything more. Did they know that he had understood all of what they had been saying?

"I have not yet decided his fate," the Cold One said shortly, his soulless voice chilling Reeve to the bone. It was truly terrifying to know that this man held his life in his hands.

"His allies will not rest until he is found," the Running Man commented in a neutral tone, but Reeve thought he heard some strange double meaning in the hunter's deep voice.

The woman with the accent apparently heard it, too. "Are you saying we should return him to his friends?"

"No such thing will be done," the Cold One interrupted. "He shall remain here in his prison until I decide his fate."

No! Reeve thought wildly. *Don't leave me in here alone, not with the fever and madness! Please!*

But the footsteps had started up again, only this time they were moving away, getting softer and softer, taking Reeve's hope of escaping by some act of mercy with them. He jerked as hard as he could, which was not very hard, against his shackles, but that got him nowhere. The fever in his brain was making his eyesight blurry, and the dark realm of unconsciousness was suddenly returning to take him back. His limbs grew increasingly heavy as the pounding in his skull crescendoed to an insane degree, almost obliterating all other sounds.

Yet, the last things he heard before the darkness took him under were the fading voices of the Cold One, the Running Man, and the mysterious woman.

"Indulge me, big guy," the woman said amicably, addressing the Cold One in a conversational tone. "Just what exactly to you intend to do with Mr. President back there?"

"Kill him," the Cold One deadpanned.

"Wouldn't that be a bit rash?" the Running Man asked flatly.

"Then I'll just feed him to the Hungry One," the other man replied in his icy tone of voice. "The Burrower is always up for the taste of modern flesh."

Then they were gone, and Reeve was left alone, hanging limply from the shackles that bound him to the wall of his prison.