

CHAPTER XVII: ON THE ROAD TO ROCKET TOWN

Nibelheim had never had any big city aspirations. The fall of Shinra and the destruction wrought to Midgar by the coming of the meteor had left the field open for other cities to step up, to fill the economic and political hole that the abandonment of Midgar had created. There was no lack for takers. Junon, the largest city left, had continued to grow, but it was by no means the only candidate vying to take over the role of most important city on the planet. Wutai was more than willing to step up as well now that its old rival was out of the way. Corel had seen explosive growth over the last few years, now that its coal was suddenly in demand again all over the planet and was quite proud of the fact that it was the city that had undergone the largest population increase since the fall of Shinra. Even Gongaga, though still behind these others, was growing rapidly. The people of Nibelheim, however, were unimpressed by all that, and in fact, were just as proud that their city had grown the *least* since the fall of Shinra. Anytime an entrepreneur or businessman came up with some big plans for the town they were pointed in the direction of Gongaga or Rocket Town and politely sent on their way. Nibelheim was a small town and the people who lived there liked it that way. The people lived quietly and contently in their homes, and visitors were few and far between.

So it was that a small plane coming in to land on the outskirts of the town drew quite a bit of attention.

Shera stepped out of the Tiny Bronco as the crowd gathered. It was mostly a group of children who had been playing football in the field nearby, but a few adults as well. She waved and smiled and walked into town. As she did so more adults appeared, most of them gathering up their children and taking them home when it became obvious that Shera was not part of a flying circus, nor bringing supplies to the town, but was instead involved with 'those people' up at the Shinra Mansion.

By the time she reached the mansion, she was alone. Which was fine with her. She wasn't here to make friends, she was here to get the others and go. Cid had told her to get Red and Elena and Lai La and bring them to Rocket Town, where Reno and Yuffie were already headed. She had been flying practically nonstop back and forth to the island where the Slipstream was for the last two days and it had been hectic. The Tiny Bronco wasn't the roomiest plane in the world, and she was tired and sore from sitting in that cramped and very uncomfortable pilot's seat. The others were going to take the Bronco and look for Vincent once she got back to Rocket Town and she would be more than willing to hand it over. She could think of nothing that would make her happier than getting Sydney from her sisters and bringing her back home and just being Shera the Mom again.

At the moment she felt more like Shera the ping pong ball. Shera, go get Tifa and Reeve on Round Island, no, Shera, go take the Tiny Bronco to Reno and Yuffie in Rocket Town, no, wait, go get Red, Lai Li and Elena in Nibelheim. She really needed to give a long talking to whoever was the mastermind behind all this planning.

She walked into mansion and looked around for a moment. She had never been here before, but Cid had said it wasn't hard to find and she had to admit he was right. Well, he had actually said it was so easy to find that even she couldn't miss it, to be precise. He had also told her where the basement was. Straight ahead, up the stairs, turn right, the entrance was in the back room on the right hand side. Not difficult instructions, yet he'd looked at her as if there wasn't a chance in hell she'd find it without getting lost.

The air was filled with a musty odor. The place looked uninhabited. Uninhabited for a long time, in fact. The paint was peeling off the walls, and the colors of the curtains, which she suspected had once been bright and varied, had faded to a uniform dull gray. The floorboards creaked as she walked on them.

She reached the room leading down to the basement only to find not a stairway but instead a gaping hole in front of her. Funny, for some reason Cid's directions had failed to mention that. On closer inspection she the remnants of a staircase still attached to the walls below, but hardly usable. More promising, she also saw a rope ladder hanging down into the abyss. With some misgivings, mostly about the sturdiness of the ladder, she started down.

She made it to the bottom without mishap. Cid's instructions had ended there, but all she saw in front of her was a long corridor. The walls were bare rock, and the place seemed more like a cave than a basement. There were lights spaced along the walls, but they were far between and seemed to give off little actual light. The musty oldness of upstairs seemed to have abruptly been replaced by damp and darkness, giving this lower chamber of the building a distinctly creepy atmosphere.

Shera hesitated, not sure what to do, wondering how big the place was and how unpleasant it would be to get lost down here. The corridor only went in one direction, however, so there really wasn't much to think about. To make things even

simpler, while she stood there contemplating she heard voices coming from somewhere not far ahead. Reassured, she continued forward.

The voices were coming from a room on the right. She walked in and saw Red and Lai Li standing in front of a table filled with lab equipment. Elena sat in a nearby corner, reading some papers. No one seemed to notice Shera's entrance.

"I'm here," she announced.

The others looked up from what they were doing.

"Oh hi Shera," Lai Li spoke up.

"I understand you need a lift to Rocket Town," Shera said.

"Yes," Red said. "We've altered the drug Lucrecia was giving to Vincent enough that the Chadara cells in him should be susceptible to it again. We hope that if we give Vincent one massive dose of it, that it might kill all the Chadara cells at once and turn him back into a normal human being."

"You hope?" Shera questioned.

"There's no way to tell for sure if it will work, and unfortunately we don't have any test subjects to test it on. It's extremely risky. Even if it does work, the shock of losing all those Chadara cells could kill Vincent, or the human cells he has left might not be enough to keep his body functioning."

"It's kind of a desperation thing," Lai Li stated gravely.

Shera didn't really care for the sound of that. She glanced over at Elena, but the girl hardly seemed to be listening.

"There's no other way you can help him?" she questioned.

"No," Red replied. "Lucrecia's experiment increased the amount of Chadara cells in him, so much so that the Chaos beast has become dominant. I don't think there's any way Vincent can regain control without this. It's really his only chance."

"So what, you have to inject whatever you've made into him?" she asked. "Or does he have to drink it or something?"

"Drinking it wouldn't work," Red said. "The drug would be broken down in his digestive tract. Injection is correct, but either way it's not going to be easy. I don't think Vincent is going to sit still for whatever we may attempt. I don't know if he'll let anyone get close enough to him to give him the dose."

"So why not use one of those dart gun thingies? You know, like they do on those animal shows?"

"Unfortunately we don't have one of them handy," Lai Li replied. "That's not something you'll find for sale in your average store. We could probably find one eventually, but who knows how long it will take."

"Yes, we have to stop Vincent as soon as possible," Red added. "So far he's remained in remote areas, far from any population centers, but if he heads for a town it could be a disaster. We have to stop him before he hurts anyone else."

Shera nodded. She could see the wisdom of that. Still, it sounded very risky, both for Vincent and whoever the poor fool was who got to try to stick a needle in him.

"So who is it who's going to try this?" she questioned.

No one answered. Red and Lai Li both looked at Elena, who lifted her head when she realized that. She turned to Shera. She opened her mouth, then hesitated. It was obvious she had something to say but was having a hard time getting it out.

"I'd like you to... take me back to Junon," she said finally.

The others just looked at her as if they hadn't heard her right.

"Back to Junon?" Shera said after a moment.

Elena hesitated. It was obvious she was still very upset.

"Yes," she said. "Back to Junon. We have a store to take care of. I can't... I can't go gallivanting around. I have... responsibilities."

Shera looked at the other two, but the expression on their faces told her this was as big a surprise to them as it was to her. Vincent was in trouble, he needed help and she wanted to go back to Junon? What had gotten into her?

"Are you sure?" she said slowly.

"Yes, I'm sure!" Elena snapped. She stood up suddenly, tossing the papers she was reading onto the ground. "Why does everyone question what I do? Why can't you just leave me alone!"

And with that she turned and ran out of the room.

Shera just stood there, stunned at the sudden outburst. She looked at the others once more.

"What's gotten into her?"

"I don't know," Red replied. "She's been like that since she got here. She's barely talked at all, and she doesn't seem to be all that interested in what we're doing. I don't understand it."

Shera looked at Lai Li but the linguist just shook her head. The truth was she hadn't really been paying that much attention to Elena, being too engrossed in working on their drug.

It was obvious to Shera she wasn't going to get any answers from these two.

"I'll go talk to her," she said.

It took Shera a few minutes to find Elena. She was not familiar with the layout of the basement and ended up in a room with some coffins in it before finding the young Turk in the library, sitting in a chair and crying softly. Shera came up and stood beside her.

"What's wrong?" she asked gently.

She waited patiently for Elena to speak.

"I didn't want him to go," she said eventually. "I told him not to. I knew it. I knew... something wasn't right. He wouldn't listen. I even told him... I even told him that if he went, I might not be waiting for him when he came back."

She lifted her head and looked at Shera.

"He didn't listen to me. No one listens to me!"

"That's not true," Shera replied.

"Yes it is!" Elena shot back. "He told me he loved me. We bought a store. I thought things were going to settle down. I thought we could have some peace! And we could have. We could have if he just would have listened to me. But no! He had to run off with some stupid idea of becoming completely human again!"

"It wasn't a stupid idea," Shera responded. "You know he was doing it for the both of you?"

"Was he? Were things really so bad the way they were? He was in control, he came to terms with what he was. Or at least I thought he had. I loved him! I didn't care about Chaos. I was happy with him the way he was."

"Can you really blame him for wanting to be human again?" Shera asked.

"No, of course not, but I told him it wouldn't work. I told him it wouldn't and he didn't listen. Everyone keeps saying he was doing it for me, for us, but that's not true. He was doing it for himself. I was perfectly happy with him the way he was. Now things are all messed up and it's his own stupid fault!"

"Elena," Shera said slowly.

"I know," Elena cut her off. "No one's going to believe that. No one ever believes me. Everyone is going to think he did it for us, because he wanted to be human again and how can I be mad at him for that? They're going to say he needs me now. How can I just abandon him? How can I be so callous? That's what everyone's going to think, isn't it? Well you know what? I don't care anymore. I don't care what anyone thinks. Just take me back to Junon. I just want to go back."

Shera really didn't know how to respond. Elena was distraught, that was obvious. She didn't think the young girl *really* wanted to go back to Junon, but she didn't know what to say that might convince her otherwise, not when she was in the state she was in, not when she was so upset.

She walked over and put her hand on Elena's shoulder.

"If you really want to go back to Junon then I'll take you," she said. "Maybe... maybe it would be better if you just stepped away from this for a bit. I don't think anyone is going to think the less of you for that."

"I don't know. I don't care," Elena said doubtfully. "I just... oh Shera, I don't know what to do! I don't want to abandon him but I'm just so mad! He didn't have to do this. He didn't have to go. It was all so unnecessary. I just wish he would have listened to me."

"It's all right, Elena. We'll work it all out. I guess I might feel the same way if I were in your position. Unfortunately saying I told you so isn't going to help matters any. I do have one question for you though. A moment ago you said you loved him. I couldn't help but notice you used the past tense. Do you still?"

"Love him?"

"Yes."

Elena sat there for a moment, then bowed her head, looking down at the floor.

"I... I don't know," she said in a small voice.

Shera had nothing to say to that. Elena was right about one thing at least, this had sure turned into one fine mess.

"I'll take you back whenever you're ready," she said.

Elena nodded. Shera wanted to say more, but she didn't think talk would help much at this point. This was something Elena was going to have to work out on her own. She returned to the other room. Red and Lai Li looked at her expectantly when she entered.

"She wants to go back," Shera announced.

"Do you really think that's a good idea?" Lai Li questioned.

"I don't know," Shera replied honestly. "But she's a big girl. None of us can force her to go to Rocket Town if she doesn't want to. Are you two ready to go?"

Red and Lai Li looked at each other, then the red beast nodded.

"All right," Shera replied. "You might as well come with us back to Junon, then I won't have to stop here again on my way back."

"All right, just give us a few minutes to get things packed up," Lai Li said.

Shera nodded.

"All right, I'll meet you all outside."

She walked out of the room, heading back toward the ladder. Now she had to go back to Junon, and then Rocket Town. Another delay before she got to see Sydney. Looks like Shera the ping pong ball was on the road again.

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"I'm hungry."

"Good for you."

"Oh shut up Reno."

"Maybe I would if you did. You've been whining about one thing or another practically since we left Nibelheim," Reno replied caustically.

"It's not the situation, it's the company," Yuffie shot back. "I'm not whining. This is a legitimate complaint. We haven't had anything to eat in *hours*."

"It hasn't been that long," Reno replied. "Besides, it's stupid to stop now. In a couple of hours we'll be in Rocket Town and you can eat all you want."

"But I'm hungry *now*," Yuffie countered, sounding even more whiny than usual, something that Reno did not doubt was quite deliberate.

Reno didn't bother to reply, instead he looked at Rude, who just shrugged. The problem with having such a stoic partner was that he never had an opinion even when you wanted one, and he wasn't about to ask Ichiero for his.

"Fine!" Reno gave in. "If you want to eat we'll stop and eat. And if we get to Rocket Town and Vincent has already torn it apart, well, don't come crying to me."

Yuffie made a face at him.

"I'm beginning to think I'd be better off facing the Chaos beast then spending a minute more with you!"

Seeing that they were indeed taking a break from their trip Rude sat down on a nearby rock.

"Are you two ever going to stop?" he questioned.

"I'll stop if he will," Yuffie retorted.

"Oh yeah, that's mature," was all Reno had to say.

Rude just had to shake his head.

"Let's just eat, shall we?" Yuffie suggested.

Reno pulled his pack off while the others plopped on the ground nearby. He rummaged through it for a moment but then stopped.

"Oh boy," he muttered.

"What?" Rude questioned.

Reno lifted up his pack and looked at the outside of it, fitting his hand into a large tear along the seam.

"My pack must have torn open in our little scuffle with Vincent. Most everything that was in it is....," he looked back the way they had come. "Back there somewhere."

"Too bad for you," Yuffie commented.

"Too bad for you too," Reno replied. "I think all the food was in my pack."

Yuffie just stared at him.

"You packed all the food into one pack?" he questioned finally.

Reno shrugged.

"It seemed simpler that way."

"You jerk! That's the last time we let you get the supplies!"

"Oh chill out," Reno replied. "We're only a couple of hours from Rocket Town. No one is going to starve to death."

"But I told you, I'm hungry now!"

"Oh well, what do want me to do, conjure something out of mid air?"

"Wait a sec," Yuffie said suddenly. She pulled open her own pack and rooted through it for a moment, then cried out in triumph as she pulled out a package.

"Ah ha, I got a few things myself before we left. There were a couple of items in the store that I wanted to bring back to Wutai with me."

Reno looked at what she was holding.

"Won Ton soup?"

"Yes. I can make Wutai Won Ton."

"Wutai Won Ton?" Reno questioned.

"Yes, Wutai Won Ton," Yuffie repeated.

"What's the difference between Won Ton and Wutai Won Ton?"

"Wutai Won Ton has some special herbs added," she replied. "It's an ancient Wutai recipe."

Reno didn't look to thrilled with this idea.

"Great, so you're going to add grass to our soup?"

"Not grass, you idiot. Herbs."

"I didn't know you knew how to cook," Reno said.

"Hey, I'm not incompetent," Yuffie retorted. "I know how to boil water. I used to make it when I was a kid. It's delicious."

"Boiled water is delicious?"

"No, Wutai Won Ton you jerk!"

"Where are you going to get herbs around here?" Reno questioned.

"I'm sure I can find them if I look around a bit," she stated. "They're pretty common."

"Common around Wutai, you mean," Reno said. "That doesn't mean you'll find them around here."

"You're such a pessimist," she told him.

"Maybe I've got good reason to be," he said. "Anyway, it doesn't matter to me. I don't have to eat it anyway."

"Fine, miss out if you want. More for us!" Yuffie said before starting to stalk off.

"Wait, I'll come with you," Ichiero piped up.

"Have you had Wutai Won Ton?" Yuffie asked, stopping.

"Of course," Ichiero replied. "My mother used to make it for me all the time when I was little."

"All right, come on then," Yuffie said. She glared at Reno for a moment, then smiled at Ichiero.

Reno ignored her, lying down on the ground, flat on his back, staring up at the sky as she and Ichiero wandered away.

"Finally some peace and quiet," he muttered.

It didn't take long for Yuffie and Ichiero to return, the samurai holding what looked a lot like grass to Reno in his hands. Taking out the cooking gear, which fortunately had been stored in Rude's pack, Yuffie soon had a pan of soup simmering on a small fire.

Ichiero knelt down beside the pan and took a deep breath.

"Smells very good," he said.

This seemed to please Yuffie immensely.

Reno just rolled his eyes.

Yuffie slowly added her herbs, stirring in between. Finally declaring it was ready, she poured it into small cups for all of them. Rude declined, stating he wasn't hungry. Yuffie looked at Reno, who shrugged and took one of the cups, eyeing the contents suspiciously. Ichiero was the first to take a taste. He hesitated for a moment, then nodded his head and smiled.

"It is good," he said.

Something in the way he said it made Reno think he wasn't as enthusiastic about it as he let on. Yuffie turned and stared at Reno.

"Well, are you going to eat?" she questioned.

Reno sniffed at it. He wasn't about to admit it, but it smelled pretty good. He took a little sip.

He grimaced.

"Oh man, that's disgusting!"

"It is not!" Yuffie protested.

"It is too!" Reno shot back. "Are you trying to poison me?"

"I wish I had!"

"It tastes like sewer water!"

"It does not! Ichiero likes it!"

"He's just saying that!"

"He is not!"

"Is too! Just look at his face when he takes a sip. He hates it."

"Then why did he say it was good?"

"Because he's kissing up to you, that's why!"

"Ichiero, is that true?"

"No, Miss. Yuffie."

"See?"

"He's lying!"

With that Ichiero stood up and pulled out his sword.

"You insult me more times than you should!"

"Oh good grief, this again?" Reno retorted, sounding bored. "What are you going to do, stab me?"

"No, I teach you a lesson."

The sword flicked out and Reno felt a sting on the side of his cheek as the flat of the weapon hit it.

"Ouch!"

"Apologize!" Ichiero demanded.

"Screw you," was Reno's instant retort.

The blade flashed again, hitting Reno's other cheek.

"Dammit!" Reno snapped. He brought his hand up to his cheek and it came away with some blood on it.

Ichiero advanced, the sword flicking out and catching Reno on the side, the shoulder, the leg, anywhere that was left undefended, the flat of the blade leaving behind a nasty sting but doing no real damage. Reno stumbled backwards under the onslaught, trying to pull out his nightstick while keeping his balance. He succeeded at the former but failed at the latter, and suddenly found himself landing hard on his rear end in the dirt.

Even as he did so, however, his nightstick came to life. The flash of light struck Ichiero dead in the center of his chest. He jerked backwards and fell to the ground as well, though he did not cry out.

Instantly Yuffie was beside him. Ichiero just lay there, stunned. Yuffie lifted his head into her lap and turned toward Reno.

"Reno you *jerk*!" she shouted.

"Me?" Reno snapped back. "Me? What about him? He was the one who started it!"

"He wouldn't have done anything if you hadn't been so insulting!"

"What are you talking about? You're at least as insulting as I am and nobody attacked you!"

"Oh just shut up!"

Ichiero's eyes fluttered open.

"Are you all right?" Yuffie questioned.

The young samurai did not reply for a moment, just lay there, staring off into space. Then he shook his head slowly to clear it.

He looked over at Reno, then reached out and picked up his sword, pulling himself to his feet.

Yuffie grabbed hold of him.

"Stop it," she said. "It's stupid to fight with him. Forget about him Ichiero, he's just a moron."

Ichiero stopped. He stood there for a moment looking at Reno darkly.

"He insulted me. And worse, he insults you," he said after a moment.

"Just ignore him," Yuffie replied. "That's just Reno's way. He insults everyone. He's not worth bothering with. Besides, we have a job to do. We have to find Vincent, remember?"

Ichiero hesitated for a moment more before finally giving in.

"Very well," he said. "I will leave him alone until after we have accomplished what we have set out to do. After that, beware!"

He glared at Reno for a moment which Reno ignored.

"C'mon, let's get going," Yuffie said, tugging at the samurai's arm. "We've wasted enough time here. If we don't start out soon it'll be dark before we reach Rocket Town."

Ichiero looked at the soup that Yuffie hadn't touched yet.

"But I thought you want to eat."

Yuffie glared at Reno.

"I lost my appetite. C'mon."

Ichiero merely nodded, and without waiting, or further speech, the two walked off.

As they walked away Rude came over and crouched down beside Reno, who was still on the ground.

"Smooth," his companion commented.

"Smooth? What's that supposed to mean?" Reno asked.

"You know, you have a very strange way of showing affection."

"Affection? What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about you and Yuffie."

"Me and Yuffie? What about us?"

Rude gave him a knowing look.

"You know it's shameless the way you flirt with her."

Reno turned and looked at him.

"What?"

"I have to admit I've never seen you act like that before. It's not like you at all to be so smitten with someone."

Reno sat up.

"Smitten? You think I'm smitten?"

Rude didn't reply, just looked at him.

"What kind of a stupid word is smitten anyway?" Reno continued.

"Trying to change the subject?"

"I'm not trying to change the subject," Reno replied. "I just think smitten is a silly word. Anyway, I am *not* smitten with Yuffie, okay? So stop it. You're starting to sound like Elena."

"Elena noticed it too?"

"There's nothing to notice!"

Rude raised his hands.

"Fine, fine. If that's the way you want it to be. But if you ask me..."

"I didn't!" Reno cut him off, pulling himself to his feet and quickly brushing himself off. "Geez, for a guy who hardly talks you sure can come up with some strange conversations when you want to."

Rude, realizing the futility of arguing, just looked at him but said nothing further.

Reno looked up. Yuffie and Ichiero were already out of sight ahead of them.

"C'mon, let's get going," he said, anxious to drop the subject. "No sense standing around here. Can't wait to get to Rocket Town so we can get some real food. And a drink. I need a drink. All this walking is thirsty work."

He started off. After a moment he glanced back to see Rude following. He looked at his friend for a moment, then turned away, looking ahead once more.

"Smitten," he muttered, shaking his head. "Sheesh!"