

IC H A P T E R X X I : C H A O S F I N A L R O U N D

The sun was setting over the plains to the west of Rocket Town. The sky to the west had turned a deep shade of purple, the red disk of the sun, just sinking below the horizon, back lighting the clouds that hung in the air there. It was a magnificent sunset, the type of which was only seen a few times a year.

Yuffie turned away from the window, looking instead at the hospital bed that lay before her, and the man lying on it. She sat on a small stool beside the window, had been sitting there for what seemed like hours, and in fact it was.

The beauty outside held little interest to her. She hardly noticed it, in fact. Her mind was on something else. She still couldn't believe Reno had done that, had thrown himself on top of her to protect her from the Chaos beast. It was a crazy, insane, totally stupid thing for him to do and she had been praying since it happened, praying that he would open his eyes, that she would see that Reno smirk on his face once more, just so she could tell him that!

There was no smirk, however. His eyes were closed. A monitor on the wall above him registered his heart rate and pulse. That and the slow rise and fall of his chest were the only indications that he was still alive.

The doctors had told her he was in serious condition. They had stopped all the bleeding but he had lost a lot of blood. They wouldn't be able to tell how well he was going to recover until he woke up.

If he woke up.

No one had ever done anything like that for her before.

She was a pest. A nuisance. She knew that's what most of her friends thought of her. No one took her seriously. Yes, she had grown since she had met these people, but she really didn't think their opinion of her had changed much. Maybe a little, but not much. She hadn't thought any one of them would do something like that for her, especially not Reno.

She knew he liked her, a little anyway. He always complained but it was more teasing than anything else. She wasn't stupid. She could tell the difference. Still, she hadn't expected him to risk his life for her like that...

Now... now she wasn't sure what to think.

She felt responsible. It should be her lying there in that bed. He didn't have to do something like that. She was a big girl, she could take care of herself. If the Chaos beast caught her off guard, it was she who should have to pay for it, not someone else. Even so, she was grateful, of course. Even though she wouldn't have wanted him to do it, would have stopped him if she could. That was why she chose to stay when the others had gone to get Elena. She couldn't leave him after making such a sacrifice for her.

Or at least, that's what she told herself.

She was grateful, yes, but she had to wonder if that was all there was to it. She and Reno had been friends for a long time now. She knew him pretty well. She knew he wasn't the type to make a sacrifice like that for just anyone. Perhaps Rude or Elena, but that was about it, certainly not someone from Avalanche. He must really care for her a lot to have been willing to do something like that for her.

A lot.

And what about her? They'd been kidding and annoying each other for so long now, but she had to admit that deep down inside she enjoyed it, even when he drove her crazy. It might seem like fighting but it was flirting and they both knew it. She was grateful, yes, but was that the only thing that was keeping her by his bedside? Could there be more to it than that? Could it be that her feelings for Reno ran a lot deeper than she thought?

A movement brought her out of her reverie. Ichiero came in the room and walked over to her. He had stayed as well, when she had declared she was going to. He had stayed by her side for most of the time they had been here, but she had hardly paid attention to him.

He stopped in front of her. She lifted her head to look at him.

"I go now," he announced.

She just stared at him for a moment.

"Go?" she said finally. "Go where?"

"Back to village."

Even after he said that, it still took some time for it to sink in. It seemed so out of the blue.

"Huh? Why?"

He looked at her for a moment more, then turned to look at Reno.

"I come here to win your heart, but it's obvious now your heart's already taken," he responded.

Yuffie felt her mouth slowly dropping open.

"Ehh," was all she seemed to be able to manage to say.

Ichiero said nothing more, just looked from her to Reno.

"I...I don't...I mean...I'm not," Yuffie stuttered.

Ichiero leaned forward, looking straight at her now.

"No need to say," he told her. "I see it in your eyes."

Yuffie's mouth opened again, but then she shut it and just sat there looking at Ichiero.

"I was just... worried about him," she finally said.

Ichiero shook his head.

"The others worried too. They won't stay."

"He didn't save their life!" Yuffie retorted.

Ichiero merely shrugged.

"Deny all you want. I see in your eyes. I know what's in your heart. It's as plain as nose on face, as they say, yes?"

Again Yuffie could not reply, just found herself nodding dumbly.

Ichiero pulled himself up.

"I go now. Goodbye."

"Umm...goodbye."

Ichiero turned and strode out the door. In spite of Yuffie telling herself to stand up, to tell him to stay, to tell him he was totally wrong, she found herself just sitting there, paralyzed, as if the motor functions of her brain were not listening to what the rest of her brain was telling them.

She looked over at Reno again, then sat there slowly shaking her head. She didn't feel that way about Reno, did she? Ichiero couldn't be right. So she stayed with Reno and the others didn't. So what? Like she said, it was her life he had saved. She owed him at least that, didn't she?

Yet, when she had pushed him off her, when she had realized just how badly he was hurt, she couldn't forget the feeling of complete panic that had come over her, the feeling that had welled up in her stomach when she thought he might be dead or dying. Would she have felt the same for anyone else there?

She wasn't sure, but she had a feeling the answer to that was no.

She stood up, stretching her stiff limbs, then walked over to the bed beside Reno. She didn't know what she felt at this point. It was just too confusing to think about. She reached down and patted his hand.

"Just get better, okay?" she said softly.

She turned and started for the door. She had been sitting here for hours. She was hungry. Since nothing seemed to be happening here, it seemed like it might be a good time to go grab something to fill her stomach with.

"I'll try."

She spun around, her eyes going wide as dinner plates, to see Reno lying in the bed, looking at her. She felt her heart suddenly thudding in her chest as she ran over to his side.

"You're all right!"

"Well, except for feeling like I got run over with a freight train, I think so, yeah," he replied.

"I was... well, kinda worried," Yuffie stated.

"So I noticed," Reno replied with a smirk.

Yuffie frowned, then stared at him suspiciously.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Well, with you hanging around when everyone else left," Reno continued. "It just warms my heart. And it's nice to see that samurai boy finally took the hint and took off. If I'd have known my getting mangled by Vincent would do that, I'd have done it a long time ago."

Yuffie took a step back, her mouth open.

"You... heard all that?" she stammered.

Reno grinned.

"Every word."

"You... you conniving..."

Reno nodded.

"...sneaky... underhanded...shifty eyed...little *twerp*!"

"Why thank you," Reno replied, sounding quite pleased with himself.

"Uggh! I'm never going to believe you're unconscious again! Next time I'm going to give you a good smack in the head just to make sure!"

"Aww, is that any way to talk to the man you love?" Reno questioned.

Yuffie turned positively crimson.

"I'm *not* in love!"

"That's not what Ichiero seemed to think."

"Ichiero is an *idiot*!"

"Yeah, well that may be true but that doesn't mean he was wrong about everything."

"If you think that, then you're an idiot too!"

"Is that any way to talk to the man who saved your life?"

"You didn't... I mean..." Yuffie stammered.

"Oh good grief, would you just shut up and come here so I can kiss you?"

He reached out, grabbing hold of her hand and pulling her toward him.

"I... you... we..." Yuffie stuttered.

Reno shook his head.

"Looks like there's only one way to get you to shut up."

A moment later there wasn't anything she could say, for her lips were occupied.

It was quite some time before their lips parted. When they did Yuffie looked at Reno.

"You're a jerk," she commented, but this time, her voice seemed to lack conviction.

"You're a pest," he responded.

She lowered her gaze to the bed. She ran her hand along the sheet, suddenly seeming very interested in the texture.

"I'm glad you're all right," she said slowly.

"Me too," he replied.

She just gave him a look.

"So... what's going on?" he asked.

"Huh?"

"With Vincent and all," he replied. "Last thing I remember is him trying to rip my guts out. I take it our attempt at giving him the drug was less than successful."

"You take it correctly," she replied. "After he attacked you the others fought him off, and then he flew away. The others went back to Junon to get Elena."

"Elena? What for?"

"They figure she's the only one who has a chance of getting close enough to him to give him the drug."

"That's awfully dangerous," Reno replied. "Especially after what he did to Lucrecia."

"We know, but there didn't seem to be many other options," Yuffie said. "The people of Rocket Town were forming a group to stop him. I'm sure they won't hesitate to kill him if he shows up again, or try to."

"Hmm," Reno grunted. He could see something like that ending in disaster. "Do they think Elena will come?"

"I don't know," Yuffie said, shrugging. "I hope so. It might be Vincent's only chance."

Reno nodded. There was no love lost between him and Vampire boy, but still, he knew how Elena felt about Vincent and for her sake, he didn't want anything to happen to the guy. Of course, he didn't want anything to happen to Elena either.

"Sounds like they could use my help," he said, pulling himself up in the bed.

Yuffie grabbed hold of him and shoved him back down.

"Oh no, you're not going anywhere," she stated.

"Hey, it's only a scratch," Reno replied.

"Bullshit," Yuffie retorted. "I saw the wounds. Even with cure materia you're still in pretty bad shape. You just regained consciousness. I hate to tell you this but whatever happens is going to happen without you. So you just lay back in that bed and let me take care of you."

Reno gave her a look.

"Let you take care of me? Since when did you become my nursemaid?"

"Since right now," Yuffie replied. "And if I'm your nursemaid it's your own fault."

"How do you figure?"

"You saved my life. To pay you back, I'm going to take care of you, whether you like it or not!"

"Somehow I have a feeling I'm not," Reno said.

"Yeah well, too bad for you," Yuffie told him. "And my first command..."

"Command? Since when do nursemaids issue commands?" Reno queried.

"Since now," Yuffie said. "My first command is that you stay in that bed. And you try to get out of it I'm going to kick your ass right back in. You got that?"

He saluted.

"Yessir!"

She glared at him.

"All right. Now, would you like something to eat? I was just about to get something."

"Sure."

"All right, I'll be back in a minute. And don't you try to sneak out of here while I'm gone!"

"I wouldn't think of it."

She looked at him skeptically for a moment, then nodded. She strode over to the door.

"Hey pest!"

She stopped in the entrance way, turning to look at him.

"I'm glad you stayed," he said after a moment.

She stood there for a second, then smiled.

"I'm glad I did too," she responded. Her smile disappeared. "And don't call me pest!"

~*~

"We found him."

Elena turned and saw Red standing in the doorway. They had arrived in Rocket Town last night, and Red and Rude had been out all day in the Tiny Bronco searching for some sign of Vincent.

"He's heading west, farther up along the coast," Red continued. "Don't know if he'll keep heading in the same direction or what he's going to do. The sooner we get there the better."

Elena nodded.

"All right, I'm ready."

She followed Red out of Cid and Shera's guest room where she had been waiting into the living room where the others were gathered. Shera was in the kitchen doing dishes, Sydney playing on the floor nearby. Lai Li had been sitting on the couch, but stood when Elena entered. Rude stood by the doorway, a scoped rifle in his hands.

"What's that for?" Elena questioned, not liking the look of it at all.

Rude hefted the rifle and slung it over his shoulder, but said nothing. He didn't look at her.

"I said, what's that for?" Elena repeated.

"It's for your protection," Red eventually spoke up.

It had been decided that they were going about this the wrong way. All of them gathering to fight the Chaos beast was just provoking it. They decided that this time the others would stay nearby, but out of the way, preferably out of sight, when Elena confronted Vincent. Hopefully that would make the Chaos beast feel less threatened and, therefore, less inclined to attack. Elena wasn't so sure it would work, seeing as how Vincent had killed Lucrecia when she had been alone, but she thought she was the only one who felt that way. Apparently, however, it had occurred to the others as well.

"You're going to shoot Vincent?" Elena questioned.

"Only as a last resort," Red replied. "We don't know what he's going to do, Elena. There's no guarantee that he won't attack you. We won't be close enough to help if he does. It's the only way."

Elena just stood there. She didn't like this. She didn't like it at all. She didn't want Vincent to die, even if they were killing him to protect her. He wasn't hurting anyone right now. Why couldn't they just leave him alone, let him live in peace?

That was foolish, and she knew it. The Chaos beast wasn't going to be happy just wandering around in the wilderness. Eventually he was going to run into civilization again and someone was going to get hurt. They had to stop him. It was either they do it or let the villagers take matters into their own hands, and she knew the villagers would show less mercy than her friends.

"All right," she sighed. "Let's just get this over with."

The started out. As they did Shera poked her head in from the kitchen.

"Be careful," she said. She was looking right at Elena when she said this.

"We will," Lai Li reassured her.

The left the building, boarding the Tiny Bronco and soon found themselves in the air, winging their way west along the coast. No one spoke. Except for the rumble of the engine the cockpit was deafeningly quiet. Rude flew the plan, the others just sat there, staring out the windows, looking for a sign of the Chaos beast on the ground below them, or in at least Elena's case, lost in thought. Why did it have to come to this, she wondered, for the millionth time, it seemed. They had been at peace, they had bought a store, were settling down. All had been going well and now, now it was all shot to hell.

She wanted to blame Lucrecia, she wanted to blame Vincent, but even if she did, that wasn't going to make her feel any better. She had told Vincent not to go and she had been right, but being right was no comfort at this point. She wished with all her heart that Lucrecia had never shown up, or that Vincent hadn't gone with her but he had. She couldn't change any of that and whether it was right or wrong was now moot. What's done was done and none of them could do anything about it.

Her eyes lowered to look at the syringe that she held clasped in her hands, the syringe Lai Li had given her as they boarded the plane. She held in her hands either Vincent's redemption or his death sentence. No matter how much she wanted this not to happen, no matter how scared she was there was no turning back now. She was determined to get this over with, one way or another. She wasn't eating, hadn't gotten a decent nights sleep since this began. She wanted it to end.

"There he is."

Surprisingly, Elena felt no emotion when Red spoke these words. She didn't even turn to look, as the others did, to see the small outline of the Chaos beast making it's way west through the grassy plain.

"It looks like he's headed in the same direction he was before," Red commented.

"All right," was Rude's contribution to the conversation.

He dropped the plane lower, pulling ahead of the Chaos beast, all of them looking down again, but this time, Elena knew, not for the Chaos beast but for some suitable place ahead of him to spring an ambush.

"There's a stand of trees over that that would offer some concealment," Red stated.

Rude nodded, spotting them as well. He banked the plane, coming around in a lazy loop and bringing it down from the north so that the Chaos beast couldn't see them. The ground was relatively flat here and landing was easy. Elena could see the trees they had mentioned not far away when the plane finally came to a halt.

They departed, making their way over to the trees. It wasn't a very large stand of them, but it was enough, and offered the only concealment on the otherwise flat grassy plain. Rude deemed it acceptable and went off to find a suitable spot to place himself. Elena didn't look at him. She knew if the Chaos beast attacked her Rude would be her only hope, but that was tempered by what he would have to do to Vincent in order to save her.

Red led Elena past the trees, out into the open to the east. They walked until the trees were far enough behind them that he thought it safe that the Chaos beast would not be able to detect those concealed, then stopped.

He looked at Elena.

"All right, you can wait here for him."

Elena didn't answer. Ever since they had landed she had felt her nervousness increase. She looked to the east but saw no sign of Vincent yet. If he turned away they would miss him completely, but she didn't think there was any point in mentioning that.

"Good luck," Red said.

Again Elena said nothing, just nodded curtly.

Red looked at her for a moment, then turned and padded away. She watched him go, then turned toward the east again. She looked down once more at the syringe in her hand. It was filled with a clear fluid. Lai Li had told her that the Chaos beast's neck was the only place where his skin was thin enough for it to penetrate. She looked back at the trees again behind her for a moment. They seemed very far away, seemed a long way to make an accurate shot. If anyone could do it, Rude could. Or Vincent, she thought absently.

She looked around. There was nothing around her but the grassy plain. The sun shone brightly overhead. To her left she could just make out a narrow strip of white and the blue of the ocean beyond it. It was a beautiful day.

There was so much that could go wrong. The Chaos beast might be inclined to attack at first, but maybe she could get through to Vincent, maybe she could make him stop, but if he threatened her, would Rude give Vincent a chance? How would Rude know when to shoot? How would she know herself if his intentions were to kill her or not? If he calmly walked up to her and tore her head off, would Rude even have time to react? Even if she got close, she might not hit the right spot with the syringe. What if she was a little off? What if it didn't penetrate? She had a feeling the Chaos beast wouldn't take her attempt too lightly. Even if she did succeed, she didn't think the drug would work instantaneously. What if he attacked her after she succeeded? Would they have to kill Vincent anyway just to protect her? And what if the drug didn't work at all?

She shook her head slowly. There were a million things that could go wrong, but what was the point of dwelling on them? She had to press forward and hope for the best. There wasn't any other choice, now was there?

She looked to the east again and froze.

He was coming.

At first he was only a small figure moving slowly on the horizon. Soon, however, he came closer. She wasn't sure exactly when he saw her. There wasn't any moment where his movement or posture changed. He was heading right for her from the beginning, and he continued on his present course as if she wasn't there at all. Eventually, however, it was obvious that he had seen her, for it was impossible for him not to. She was standing out in the open.

She waited patiently as he approached, her hands hanging limply by her sides. She was scared, but determined not to let that affect her. She'd been scared before. She'd been in battle. She knew she could fight if she had to.

Still, this was different. If all went according to plan, there would be no fighting. The fact that she wasn't sure what was going to happen, if it would come to a fight at all, was scarier than knowing what lie ahead. Besides, all the other times she had had friends with her, people to back her up. She was out here alone, confronting someone who she knew she wouldn't last a second against if it really came to a fight. Sure, she knew Rude was back there somewhere, even now probably had Vincent in his sights, but she couldn't see him. No one was in sight except for her and Vincent. She had never felt more alone.

He was close to her now. She could see him looking at her. She stared at him, hoping to see some sign of recognition in his eyes, but there was nothing there, nothing at all. No sign of recognition, no sign of emotion. One thing about Vincent, no matter how stoic he seemed, his eyes had given him away to her, had always seemed so expressive, after she had got to know him. She couldn't see that now. She could see no sign that Vincent still resided in the body in front of her. She felt a cold chill run down her back at this realization.

"Vincent!" she called out.

What if he didn't respond? What if he just walked past her, or took off. There was nothing she could do if he didn't get close enough.

He did stop. Perhaps at the sound of her voice, perhaps not. There was no real way to tell. He looked her over for some time, not moving, as if trying to size her up, as if trying to understand what this human was doing standing out here in the middle of nowhere. She couldn't tell for sure. She couldn't read his expression. That at least was not different. Vincent's face had been just as difficult to read.

He still hadn't move. She suddenly decided it was up to her to make the first move.

She took a step toward him.

He growled.

She stopped.

"Vincent. It's me, Elena," she said slowly. She kept her hands at her sides, trying to look as if she were no threat, though why the Chaos beast would ever consider her one was beyond her. Her hand was turned away, her palm toward him so he couldn't see the syringe. She wasn't sure if he would recognize it for what it was or not.

"Please Vincent. I need..."

She stopped. What could she say? I need to come near you so I can stick a needle in your neck? Why don't we both behave like civilized adults and sit down and have a nice little chat? Please don't kill me?

"I love you."

In spite of how he looked, she had to believe Vincent was still in there somewhere. The Chadara cells hadn't taken over completely.

"I know... I know I told you not to go to Lucrecia," she continued. "I know that I said that... I might not be there when you came back. I didn't mean it though. I love you Vincent. I'll always love you. You were just trying to become human again, fully human. I understand that and I don't blame you."

She took a few more hesitant steps forward as she said this. Now they stood no more than ten feet apart. His eyes stared at her and she could feel the malice flowing out of him like an aura. Yet still he didn't move.

Her hands were trembling. She could feel them now. She was scared and she knew she couldn't hide that. She had heard that animals could smell fear, that they knew by the look in your eyes when they had the upper hand, when it was safe for them to attack.

Still, she couldn't help it. She couldn't hide her fear and in this case, she hoped it wouldn't be necessary. She wasn't here to challenge the Chaos beast. Perhaps her obvious fear would make him think she was harmless.

Or perhaps it would make him think she was an easy kill.

He covered the distance between them in a split second. Elena would have gasped at his speed, but she couldn't. She couldn't talk at all, for suddenly she found herself forced backwards, falling to the ground with his claw curled around her throat.

Her eyes widened in surprise, and her heartbeat tripled in a second. She was pinned to the ground by one hand, the Chaos beast looming over her, holding her down as if she were an insect in front of him. He had her by the neck, and she was sure he could snap it like a twig in a moment if he wished, or close his hand and crush her windpipe. Yet neither of those things were happening. She was still alive.

Her head turned, looking over toward the woods, or where she thought the woods lay. She couldn't see them lying on the ground, only the long grass that cocooned her and the massive beast standing over her. She tried to lift her head but the Chaos beast's hand prevented all but the slightest movement. She looked up at the monster standing over her, wondering if at any moment she would see blood spattering from his head as Rude took the shot. She lifted her arm, hoping Rude would see that and see that she was unhurt. There was still time. There seemed no reason for the Chaos beast to have not killed her already yet he hadn't. That gave her a glimmer of hope.

She looked up again, straight into the Chaos beast's eyes. Vincent's eyes. Yes, they were still his. No matter what the Chaos beast did, or how thoroughly he was in control, they were still Vincent's eyes. The Chaos beast could never take that away from him.

Her hands lay at her sides, unmoving, though she could still feel the needle under her right hand. The Chaos beast was holding her at arms length, and since his arms were much longer than hers, she still couldn't reach his neck. She just had to get him a little bit closer.

"Vincent," she said softly. Only that. No other word seemed to come to her. She lay there, not fighting him. That would obviously be fruitless. In spite of Rude, she knew her life was in his hands.

For the longest time nothing happened at all. The Chaos beast remained where he was, as if frozen by a stop spell, staring down at her, staring down with those eyes, those eyes that were so Vincent.

"Vincent," Elena said again, so softly that it was barely louder than the breeze sighing through the grass.

Slowly, almost imperceptibly at first, his head started to lower toward her own. She lay there, hardly daring to breathe, just looking into his eyes, staring at his eyes. If she blocked out everything else and just looked at those eyes, it was almost as if Vincent, the real Vincent, was there with her.

His face was close now, so close she could feel his fetid breath. A low growl escaped him, so low it almost seemed to vibrate in the ground. He bared his teeth, long razor sharp fangs, but Elena didn't see, didn't care. She remained where she was, just looking at his eyes, nothing else, and just for a second she saw a glimmer there, a faint change, a hint of something, she wasn't sure what, but perhaps, just perhaps, it was a tiny trace of recognition.

And with that her hand came up and she plunged the needle into his neck.

The roar that escaped his lips in itself was such that she was surprised she didn't die of a heart attack right then and there. His hand closed on her neck, and suddenly she couldn't breathe. He pulled himself up, the syringe wrenching from her

hand, dragging her along like a rag doll. She gasped for breath, trying to cry out, trying desperately to get some air in her lungs. She beat against his arm with her fists, kicked him in the stomach and torso, trying to break his grip but it was like hitting a brick wall. She did no more damage to him than a fly could do to an ordinary human. She tried to look around, but she was disoriented, didn't know which direction was up, much less where her friends were. She had done it, she had injected the drug. Was her death the price she would have to pay? Where was Rude? Would he be forced to shoot now to save her? They couldn't kill him now, now that the drug was in him.

The world was starting to get hazy around her.

Abruptly the Chaos beast jerked to the side and something wet splashed against Elena's face and suddenly she found herself falling to the ground, finally free. She fell to her knees, gasping for breath, filling her lungs once more, desperately breathing in the life giving oxygen. She looked down at herself and saw her blouse was red, and she knew right away it was blood, and just as certainly she knew it was not her own.

She looked up to see the Chaos beast staggering away from her, a trail of blood on the ground between them. Vincent was facing away from her, walking away slowly, but then he stumbled. He took a few staggering steps more, then fell to the ground.