

CHAPTER IV: RETURN TO NIBELHEIM

Vincent awoke to find himself staring at a wallpapered ceiling and the sound of birds singing. He stared at the ceiling for a minute. The wallpaper was of a blue background filled with clouds with little cupid-like angels flying around them. Once upon a time the colors must have been vibrant, but they had long since faded, almost to a monotone. The wallpaper had cracked and peeled in one corner, revealing the plasterboard beneath. Who put wallpaper on ceilings to begin with? He had always wondered about that, but the Shinra Mansion in Nibelheim was old, older than any building still standing in Nibelheim, maybe older than *any* building. Maybe that was the fashion at the time.

It wasn't like he wasn't used to it. He'd seen the inside of this building often enough.

He lifted his head, blinking his eyes. Bright sunlight shone through the half open window, the yellowed curtains billowing in the breeze that blew in, bringing with it the sounds of the birds. The sound was loud and raucous. It didn't sound like one or two birds, but dozens. Curious, he pulled himself to his feet and walked over to the window.

The bedroom was on the second floor of the mansion. A huge willow tree grew right outside the window, and perched on the slender branches of this tree was the source of the noise. Looking out, he realized he had underestimated the ranks of his unsolicited serenaders. There weren't dozens, there were hundreds. Or so it seemed. The tree's limbs were weighed down with them, and he couldn't tell where the branches bent because of the mass of birds perched upon them and where it was part of their natural curve. The birds were completely black. At first he thought they were crows, but they were too small. He didn't recognize the species. Some kind of blackbird, he supposed.

He pushed the curtain aside and leaned forward for a better look.

At his movement the birds suddenly exploded into flight, startling him. For a moment the sky was darkened as they blotted out the sun, their shadow passing across the face of the building. Then they were gone, vanished over the roof with not a single one tarrying behind.

Vincent stood there for a moment, looking at the now empty tree. He didn't remember ever seeing birds like that around here before. Then again, he wasn't really much of a person to pay attention to such things, and most of the times when he had been here before, he had spent his time down in the basement.

The basement...

He quickly pushed those thoughts away. He had been down there often enough since his friends in Avalanche had opened up the coffin that had been his prison for almost thirty years. The ghosts were still there. They were impossible to shake. He knew he would never be free of them, but he had learned long ago he could tolerate them, that he wasn't going to let his old memories of the place control him.

That's why he had been down there last night, helping Lucrecia work on the chemical concoction he was to imbibe. The magic elixir that, if all went well, would make him human once more.

If all went well. How many times in the past had all gone well for him? He could count them with the fingers on one hand. Throughout his whole life nothing had ever worked out. Something had always gone wrong. Every time he had thought he had a chance at real happiness, his hopes had been dashed. Why should this time be any different?

The problem with that was, it made it too easy. If he was cursed by the powers that be, if he could never be happy no matter how hard he tried, then why try? Believing things like that could be a self fulfilling prophecy.

So he had tried to believe. He had tried to change his attitude. He had tried to be just a little bit optimistic. It had even seemed to work. He thought he could never love again, and then he had found Elena. She had taught him that maybe there was hope after all. She had stuck by him. She hadn't run off, and she hadn't died.

If you go, don't expect me to be waiting when you come back!

He couldn't get her last words to him out of his head. Why were things always so complicated? Why couldn't she understand? She was the one who had tried to get him to see beyond his gloom and doom, to take a chance again on having a life. She was the one who had tried to get him to be optimistic and yet when Lucrecia had walked in the door offering him a chance to be human again, about as optimistic an event as Vincent could imagine, Elena had been the one dead set against it. He could only conclude that it was because of Lucrecia that she had been so reluctant. She was jealous, plain and simple, and that had blinded her to the possibilities.

He had gone over and over it in his head but he still wasn't sure if he had done the right thing. He was hoping Elena would come to her senses, would realize this was something that he had to take a chance on, for both of them, no matter how slim the possibility of success. Thinking about it, he suspected he should have stayed there with her until he had convinced her, no matter how long it had taken, even if they had to talk all night. He had gone about it all wrong, as usual but he had seen her in moods like that before and knew that her obstinate might prevent her from *ever* agreeing with him, no matter how long it took. Usually when she got like that he just left her alone, gave her time to cool off, but he hadn't had that option this time. Perhaps if he had stayed and argued, it might just have made matters worse. He didn't know. Maybe he'd be in this same boat no matter what path he took. God, why did things have to be so complicated?

He didn't want to lose her. He had thought he lost her once already, on Grouchoon, when she had fallen and they'd all thought her dead. It had made him feel dead inside himself, just like he had in the bad old days when he had first been released from his coffin. If it was really a choice between becoming human and her, he would pick her.

Maybe he should have told her that...

But he didn't think it would come to that. He didn't think at all, apparently, but she hadn't either. She had had no good reason to object, and he knew that. She had only bad ones. Jealousy, fear. She had to come to her senses, she had to see that he had to take a chance here. She just had to!

Didn't she?

How would he feel if it worked and she rejected him, if she wouldn't take him back? He couldn't imagine it happening. He couldn't see her doing anything but be joyously happy if this should succeed, but he wasn't very good at reading woman. Elena was emotional and totally incomprehensible to him some times, most of the time actually.

A couple of months ago he wouldn't even have worried about this, he wouldn't have questioned his own decision, or thought about how Elena felt about it. He would have just gone blithely on his way, oblivious. Everyone seemed to think his concern for her feelings was a step in the right direction for him, but seeing how he felt about it right now, he wasn't so sure.

He looked back at his bed. He had only gotten a few hours sleep. Lucrecia had kept him up helping with her witches brew, explaining to him the theory behind what she was trying to do though he hadn't been able to grasp much of it. He wasn't a scientist, but she had seemed obsessed. She had still been down there when he had gone to bed.

Obsessed. He had used that word before for another scientist he had known...

He pondered that for a moment. Perhaps obsessed was a poor choice of words. Dedicated might be better. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't picture Lucrecia being anywhere near in Hojo's league.

At any rate, he wasn't tired. He might as well get cleaned up and see if Lucrecia was about. They had come here to do this, he figured the sooner they got started, the better.

Lucrecia wasn't in her room, in fact, her bed didn't even look slept in. She had the bedroom that contained the entrance down to the basement, so he just went right on through.

He wound his way down the stairs. They creaked and groaned with nearly every step. It was a wonder they hadn't collapsed years ago.

He felt the fingers of a cold draft work their way up his arms as he reached the bottom. The dark long narrow hallway. How well he remembered it. Had it really been necessary for her to do her experiments here? The lab hadn't been used in years and years. She had had to bring in all new equipment. Had she chosen this because it was necessary, or just because she was so comfortable with the place. He couldn't see how that could be true. This place must hold as many painful memories for her as it did for him, if not more so. Hojo hadn't been kind to her either, when he found out about their love. He'd experimented on her child, taken Sephiroth away from her. She'd never gotten to know him, or even hold him. He'd turned her son into a twisted monster who believed Jenova had been his mother. Surely she had as many reasons to stay away from this place as he had himself.

Yet here they were.

As Vincent walked forward two doors came into view on opposite sides of the corridor. The room on the left he was well acquainted with. In there still lay the coffin that had confined him for so many years. The door to that room was closed now, and he was thankful. He never wanted to see the inside of that room again.

To his right was the entrance to Hojo's secret lab. The door to this room, once concealed, now stood open. Vincent could hear the sounds of movement within. In spite of the early hour and their late night, it appeared his suspicions were correct and Lucrecia was already at work.

He walked up to the entrance of the room. Lucrecia sat with her back to him, working carefully on a large worktable in the center of the room. It was exactly where he had left her the night before.

He walked up behind her.

"Have you gotten any sleep at all?"

"Well, no, not really," she replied without turning.

He hadn't made any noise. He knew he had a knack for walking silently. He had been right behind her when he had spoken. He had a feeling anyone else would have been startled by his sudden appearance, but she hadn't been surprised at all. It was as if she had somehow known he was there all the time.

He came up beside her. Still she did not look at him, her attention fully on the work in front of her. That didn't prevent him from looking at her, however. She looked tired. It was obvious she had been up all night. Her hair hung limply down around her face. Her eyes were red. She looked so different from the girl he had known. She had aged thirty years. Thirty years while he had been in limbo. She was nearly twice his age now, and she showed it.

Was that why it hadn't worked out between them? She wasn't the girl he had known then. She was old now. Was that why he wasn't interested anymore, he just didn't want an old woman.

Was he really that shallow? He remembered when she was all he could think about, when her face was all he saw, when a simple touch from her could make his day. He had never loved anyone before her. He had been a Turk, he had dedicated himself to his job, and a relationship was not part of that job, was a disadvantage, in fact. Any emotional attachment was a disadvantage. Love was a dangerous thing to a Turk. He had held onto that belief all through his early years on the job, but she had somehow managed to get past his guard. He still wasn't sure how. And when she did, it was like his body wanted to make up for lost time. He had loved her with a passion that burned twice as brightly as any other, a passion that he thought would consume him. A passion he thought would never ever die.

Yet somehow it had. No, it wasn't her age. To him she was still that young girl he had met. The lines on her face, the graying of her hair, that meant nothing to him. He could still see the girl he knew through that. It was something inside that had changed. Something inside both of them. Somehow there was no going back. Too much had happened to them both. They couldn't go back to being that young couple with eyes only for each other. There was nothing left for them to say, nothing they could do. Sad as it might be, there were some things in life that you only got one shot at.

"You should get some rest."

She shook her head.

"I'm almost done. Not much longer and we'll be able to give this a try. You want to get started, don't you?"

He shrugged. It was true, he did, but he didn't want her to exhaust herself. They weren't in that much of a rush.

She glanced at him, but when he did not reply went back to her work.

"I'm sorry," she said.

"For what?"

"For what happened with Elena."

Vincent didn't reply for a moment. She had already apologized last night, more than once.

"I told you it's all right," he said. "She'll come around. I'm sure of it."

"I hope so. She seems to care for you very much."

"She does, and I her."

Lucrecia looked at him again.

"I'm happy for you," she said, sounding sincere. "I really didn't mean to get between you, you know."

"Yes, I know," he said, and he believed it. "Don't worry. It'll work out."

Lucrecia just continued to look at him.

"What?" he questioned.

"Nothing," she replied, turning back to her work. "Once we've synthesized the drug, you don't really have to stay here. Well, I'd like you to stay a few days at least so I can monitor things. If you're going to have any serious adverse effects they'll probably show up in that time frame. It would be better for you to be here in that case. But afterwards, it shouldn't be a problem for you to be gone for a while, only coming back when you need the next dose. Or maybe we could set up another lab in Junon. You may be able to go back and see her in a week. Maybe less."

Instead of immediately agreeing, which she assumed would happen, Vincent didn't reply for quite some time. And when he did reply, it was with a seemingly unrelated question.

"How long will it be before we know if this is going to work?"

"Umm, I'm not sure," she said. "This is an experimental thing, as I've already told you. We really can't set a timetable."

"So you don't have any idea at all?" he pressed.

"Well, umm, it's not going to be quick, if that's what you mean. To completely cure you will probably take months, but if you just want to know if it's working or not, we should have a better idea of that in a few weeks, I would guess."

Again Vincent was silent. She looked at him curiously.

"No," he said eventually. "I'll wait."

"Wait?" she said, puzzled. "Wait for what?"

"Until I'm cured, or at least we know for certain it will work."

She frowned.

"Didn't you hear what I just told you," she said. "That could take weeks, maybe months."

"Whatever it takes," was all he said.

"You're going to stay away from Elena for that long?" Lucrecia questioned.

He nodded.

"Why?"

He shrugged.

He had her full attention now.

"That's all you're going to give me?" she questioned.

"What do you mean?"

"No explanation? You run off leaving Elena in tears. You tell me you love her and here I give you a chance to go back to her and you pass it up, and all you can do is shrug when I ask for an explanation?"

He just looked at her for a moment. He had a stare that could curdle milk. He knew it and he knew how to use it. He had used it effectively many times before to cut off any line of questioning, or to scare the bejesus out of an enemy, but somehow, he just brought himself to use it on her.

"She said she didn't want to see me again," he said slowly.

"You know she didn't mean it!" Lucrecia exclaimed.

"Maybe," he replied. "I'm not sure what will happen if I go back. I'm not sure if she'll take me back. She's so hard to read. All you women are. But if I go back cured, or at least certain I will be..."

He left the rest unsaid, though it was obvious where he was going.

"She'll be so overjoyed she'll forget all about how you left," Lucrecia finished for him.

"Correct. Or at least, I hope so."

Lucrecia sighed.

"Very logical, and incredibly stupid."

Vincent just glared at her.

"Call her. Go back there as soon as possible. Don't let it fester."

"I can't go back now. She hates me," he muttered.

"She does not. Don't be an idiot. She loves you. If she didn't she wouldn't have been so upset in the first place. You have to talk to her."

"What if she doesn't want to talk?"

"Well, you'll never know til you try, now will you?"

He just stared at her for a moment. Now she was going to argue with him too? Even after he'd done what she'd wanted? Women! There was no pleasing them!

"Why don't we take this one step at a time," he suggested. "Let's get started on the cure. That's what we're here for right? Let me worry about Elena."

She just sat there for a moment, then rolled her eyes and went back to her work.

"Suit yourself. It's your funeral," she muttered.

Vincent just glared at her. True to her word she said nothing more about it, which was fine with him. He was more than happy to see the subject dropped. He had enough on his mind.

In less than an hour she sat up in her chair, holding a vial of clear liquid in her hand.

"All right, I think that should just about do it," she said with satisfaction.

"That's the drug?" he questioned.

"Yes," she replied. "We're just about ready to get started now. I just have to take some blood first."

"Take some blood," he said dubiously.

"Yes, blood," she confirmed. "I need a baseline. Comparing this to blood taken later will tell me how well the drug is working."

She couldn't help but notice the look on his face.

"Don't tell me a macho guy like you is squeamish about having blood taken?"

"No it's not that, exactly," he replied. More needles. The last time he had been stuck was when Hojo had been doing his thing. It practically screamed of being experimented on.

He held out his arm.

"Do what you have to do," he said.

She looked at him for a moment. It was obvious he was holding something back, but she'd known him long enough to know he didn't like people prying, and as long as he was willing to cooperate, she didn't think it was worth the trouble to try.

Vincent looked away when she stuck the needle in his arm. The sight of blood didn't bother him at all, and it didn't hurt, but still the memories came back to him. The cold steel table underneath him. The uncaring jab in his arm, sometimes a dozen times a day, Hojo's face leering over him...

"Are you all right?"

The memories faded with the question. He realized he had tensed up without even thinking about it. He nodded and forced himself to relax.

She pulled the needle free and taped some gauze over the wound.

"There, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

He didn't bother to respond.

"All right. I'm afraid I have to stick you one more time. This time to inject the drug. Pull up your sleeve, I need to get you in the shoulder for this."

He reluctantly pulled up his sleeve. He felt frustrated. He hated feeling like a laboratory rat. He wanted nothing more than to get this over with. Everything she was doing reminded him of all the terrible things that had happened to him here.

"I'm still not sure about the dosage," she said as she prepared the syringe. "That's going to be the hard part. I'm going to start with as little as I can that I still think will be effective. We can raise the dosage later if it isn't doing the job and doesn't have any serious side effects."

"Whatever," he said. "Just let's get this over with."

She nodded, looking at him and realizing he was still tense.

"Just relax, we're almost done."

"Good!"

"There's no need to get irritable about it."

He looked at her uncomfortably.

"I'm sorry," he said. "This isn't easy for me. Just being here is bad enough. I spent enough years being a guinea pig."

Lucrecia hesitated. She hadn't realized just what she was putting him through.

"Oh, no, I'm sorry," she said. "I hadn't realized what this might do to you. Stupid of me really. I should have found someplace else..."

"This is fine," he cut her off. "Just get on with it!"

She nodded, trying not to take offense at his tone. She had been stupid. She had been so anxious to get on with this she hadn't realized what effect being back here might have on him. Or the fact that once more he was being experimented on. What had she been thinking?

She administered the injection.

"All right, that's it," she told him as she removed the needle.

She saw him visibly relax.

"I don't know what effect this will have on you," she said. "It's possible it might make you quite sick, for a while anyway. Nausea, vomiting, things like that. Or it might not bother you at all. We'll just have to wait and see."

"Yes, you've already mentioned the less than pleasant possibilities," he said. "I'm willing to take the chance."

"All right then," she said. "We're done so there's no reason to be down here anymore. Why don't we go outside and get a little fresh air? It's always so stuffy down here."

Vincent looked around.

"Yes, it is stuffy down here. Always has been."

~*~

"Ichiero."

"Lady Yuffie!" The young samurai strode forward, stopped in front of Yuffie and bowed low. "I knew you wouldn't forget me! How long have I yearned to see your lovely face? It is more beautiful than ever. The sun, the stars, pale in comparison."

Barret frowned.

"Where'd this guy come from?" he whispered to Tifa.

"Shush," she admonished softly.

"Ichiero. What...what are you doing here?" Yuffie stammered.

"I have come for you of course!" he replied, standing up again. "My training is complete. I left a boy and return a man. Now we can fulfill our vow."

"Our vow?" she questioned. "What vow?"

"Why, to get married, of course!" he said proudly. "Surely you haven't forgotten?"

Yuffie just stared at him. She couldn't believe he was standing in front of her. She couldn't believe she even remembered who he was. It had been so long since she had last seen him. He had been neighbors. They had played all the time together. He had been the first friend she had, that she could remember anyway. They had been inseparable, but then his parents had moved away, up into the mountains. That had been sooo long ago.

The vow... The vow. She did remember. Right before he had left. He had said he would come back. They had said when he did they'd get married...

"Ichiero, we were six years old!" she blurted out.

"Yes, and I have not forgotten! Through all the years I never forgot about you, or our pledge. And now I am back!"

Yuffie stood there, obviously at a loss for words. The others looked on, most with amused expressions on their faces. It wasn't often they caught Yuffie with nothing to say.

"Ichiero, I...I'm sure you're a very nice person and all but I don't even know you now," she finally said. "Surely you can't expect me to marry you because of some vow we made when we were kids."

Ichiero frowned.

"Why not?" he questioned. "Vowing betrothal as children is a time honored Wutai tradition."

"Yeah, well...that may be true in some cases, but...I can't...I mean...I'm not going to..."

Ichiero just looked at her, waiting patiently for her to actually finish a sentence.

"I...uhh...don't think I'm ready to get married!" Yuffie came up with. "I don't know if I can handle that kind of responsibility. I'm kind of wild, you know? I like to run around, steal things, live the wild life. I get in a lot of trouble. I'm too immature! Just ask Godo!"

"I have already spoken to your father about this and he has given us his blessing."

Yuffie's face drained of all color.

"He *what*?"

Ichiero took a step back, obviously surprised by her response.

"He gave us his blessing," he repeated. "He did say you were wild but he thought I would be just the right person to calm you down."

"Oh he did, did he?" Yuffie said, obviously fuming. "Just what'll I get my hands on him..."

"Lady Yuffie, that's not a very respectful way to talk about your father..." Ichiero began.

"Don't tell me how to talk about Godo!" Yuffie snapped. "I get it now. He probably set this whole thing up! He probably had you hunted down just to do this to me."

"Lady Yuffie, I don't know what you're talking about," Ichiero said. "I came back on my own. My Sensei said it was time."

"Yeah, and Godo probably had a long talk with your Sensei before he told you that," Yuffie said. "I think I better get back to Wutai and set Godo straight."

She turned toward Cloud.

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to pass on the Goblin hunt, at least for now."

Cloud nodded.

"I don't understand why you are so angry with your father," Ichiero said. "This isn't some kind of plot. No one forced you to make that pledge, did they?"

"No, no one forced me," Yuffie returned. "But I told you, we were just kids. I'm not going to marry you. I don't even know you!"

Ichiero's face clouded.

"I don't understand..." he began. Then his eyes suddenly narrowed. "Is it someone else? Tell me who it is! I will challenge him in honorable battle for your hand!"

"Oh good grief," Yuffie said impatiently. "No, there is no one else. I just don't want to get married right now. I'm too young."

"You're nineteen years old, the same as me," Ichiero informed her. "That's well within marrying age."

"Yes, but I told you, I'm immature for my age," she replied. "Once you get to know me you'll hate me. I'm just a big spoiled brat. Ask anyone, they'll tell you. Barret, aren't I a brat?"

"She most certainly is," Barret said helpfully. "Though I'm surprised she admits it."

"See!"

"Lady Yuffie, I don't understand why you disparage yourself so," Ichiero responded.

"Because it's the truth?"

"I don't believe it," he said firmly.

"Fine, stick around with me long enough and you'll find out for yourself. Cid, can you take me back to Wutai?"

"Sure," Cid said. "And I can drop everyone else off while I'm at it. Cid's transport company at your service."

"Oh Cid, you mean a lot more to us than just someone who flies us around," Aeris spoke up.

"I know, I'm just kidding," Cid replied. "All right, let's get going." He looked at Cloud. "I have to stop at Rocket Town to see Shera and the kid and make sure everything's okay. I'll come back tomorrow morning to pick you guys up and we can get started on our search."

"All right, sounds good to me," Cloud agreed.

Cid looked at the others.

"Let's move out!"

Barret, Yuffie, Red, Nipala and Reeve followed Cid as he started back to the Slipstream. Ichiero stood there for a moment, then ran after them.

"Lady Yuffie, wait for me!"

Yuffie turned to look at him.

"If you want to tag along fine," she said. "I guess you should be there when I talk to Godo, but don't be a nuisance. And stop calling me Lady Yuffie! It's just Yuffie."

"Yes, Lad...Yuffie."

Cloud watched as they boarded the Slipstream. A few moments later it was in the air. Tifa stood right beside him.

"Well, that was interesting," Cloud commented. "When did he show up?"

"Just a little while after you left," Tifa said. "That sure was a surprise."

"I'll say. Quite amusing though. I can imagine what Yuffie is going to say to her father. I'm sure the sparks will be flying. Almost makes me wish I was there to see it."

"I don't know," Tifa said slowly. "I think it's kinda...romantic."

Cloud took her hand.

"Yeah, I guess so," he replied. "Though it's hard for me to think of Yuffie and romantic in the same sentence."

Tifa chuckled.

"So, did you find out anything useful at the Chocobo Sage?"

Cloud filled her in on what had happened, and their plans. After he was done he looked at her carefully.

"I take it you don't want to come with us."

"It's not that I don't want to," she said. "You have no idea how long you're going to be?"

"No," he replied unhappily. "It could be days, weeks or months, though I hope it's not that long."

"I hope not too," she replied. "You know I can't leave Zangan alone for that long."

"He won't be alone," Cloud told her. "Elmyra will be here."

"Elmyra's not his mother," Tifa pointed out.

"Yeah, I know," Cloud said unhappily. He didn't like the idea of leaving Tifa behind, no matter how much sense it made. He was so used to her being part of the team, fighting beside him.

"You'll have the others with you," she said slowly.

"Cid, Aeris and Cait," Cloud said. "That's not exactly a full team, but I guess it will do. The goblins aren't that formidable a foe, and we're going there to talk anyway, not fight."

"Will the goblins go along with that?" she questioned.

"I don't know. If not, we'll just beat some sense into them," he said with a grin.

"That's your answer to everything, isn't it?" she said. "Just don't forget I won't be there to save your ass if you get in trouble, so watch what you say!"

"You'll only be a call away," he reminded her.

"I know, and don't hesitate to do so if something does happen," she said.

"Don't worry, I won't. I've got a feeling we might need the whole gang together again before this is done."

They walked back toward the entrance to Lower Ifalna, Aeris a short distance behind, seeming to realize the couple had some things to talk about in private. Tifa's grip tightened on Cloud's hand as they walked. She didn't want to be left behind, not at all. It made her feel left out, but what choice did she have? Life had changed, and her main concern was her son. She was beginning to realize just how Shera must feel. She didn't like it, but there wasn't anything she could do about it. She just hoped they found what they were looking for as quickly as possible. Ever since Zangan had spoken she'd had a bad feeling about this whole thing.