

CHAPTER I: ANYBODY GOT AN ASPIRIN?

A number of people stopped and stared as the red beast walked slowly through the streets of Kalm. Though Red had been here a number of times in the past, there were still some who had never seen the legendary guardian of Cosmo Canyon. He was used to having people stare at him, however, and ignored the looks.

He reached Tifa's bar and walked inside. This early in the day there were only a few customers. He saw Aeris and Reeve sitting at a table nearby. They looked up as he came in.

"Hi Red," Aeris said, smiling pleasantly.

"Greetings," Red said, coming over to their table. "How is everyone?"

"Good," Aeris replied. "How are things back in Cosmo Canyon?"

"Rather hectic," Red replied. "They're planning some major expansions, and they're constantly coming to me for suggestions or advice, even for things I know absolutely nothing about. They seem to think that just because I'm the guardian and Bugenhagen's heir that I have all the answers. I have to admit it's a bit overwhelming. I've been so busy, it seems like I have no free time at all anymore. You don't know how difficult it was to get away."

"I don't think they're coming to you because you are the guardian of the Canyon," Aeris commented. "I think they're coming to you because they know you're smart."

"Sounds like you're turning into a bureaucrat," Reeve observed. "I know how tough it is to run a city. If you need any help, just let me know."

"Thank you both," Red responded. "I may just take you up on that, Reeve. Where's Cloud?"

"He's in the back with Tifa," Reeve responded. "They should be out in a minute."

"I'd like to thank you all again for agreeing to come with me," Red continued.

"You don't need to thank us," Aeris said. "If there is another of your species out there I'm as curious as you are to find him, or her."

Red had told the others he had seen another red beast shortly after they had finished their previous adventure. He had gone back to Cosmo Canyon with the intention of immediately returning to Icicle Inn to hunt for this creature, but as he had mentioned, his duties had kept him busy. For months, as it turned out. Although he longed with all his being to go start searching, he still felt honor bound to put the Canyon's concerns ahead his own.

His friends had agreed to help him with the search if they could, but now that he had finally gotten to it, not everyone was available. Still, he would have gone alone if necessary.

"Her," he said.

"Huh?" Aeris looked at him.

"Her," he repeated. "It was definitely a female."

Aeris eyes widened, and she smiled.

"How can you be so sure?" Reeve asked. "I thought you only got a glimpse."

"Would it take more than a glimpse for you to spot a female of your species?" Red replied. "Besides, I could tell from her scent. It was undoubtedly a female."

"Cool," Reeve said. Aeris gave Red a knowing glance. No wonder he was so anxious to start the search, she thought.

"Is Cait ready to go?" he asked, looking at Reeve.

Reeve paused for a moment before answering.

"Now that you mention it, I think I might want to go with you myself this time."

They both looked at him in surprise.

"Reeve, I didn't think you were the adventurous type," Aeris said, looking at him thoughtfully.

Reeve shrugged.

"I'm not, really. It's just that when I use Cait I feel...well, like a voyeur sometimes. I'm always watching what everyone else is doing but I'm never really participating myself. It makes me feel left out sometimes."

"I didn't know you felt that way," Red said slowly.

"Oh course you can come if you want," Aeris said quickly. "We'll be glad to have you."

Reeve face brightened.

"Thanks," he said. "And it's not like we're going to be in any danger. I mean, we're just searching for this other creature, or person, if you will. The worst that could happen is we get a little cold, right?"

Aeris and Red just looked at one another. They both knew how these things had a tendency to snowball.

"I suppose," Aeris said dubiously.

"Okay then," Reeve answered, apparently undaunted by her doubts. "I'm ready to go!"

Red shrugged. He looked at Aeris.

"How's Shera, by the way?" he asked.

"Doing fine," Aeris replied. "The baby shower is in four days."

"I still can't believe they're having a baby," Red said, shaking his head.

"Yeah," Reeve agreed. "They certainly didn't waste any time. I just can't picture Cid as a Dad."

"Stranger things have happened," Aeris commented.

Reeve turned and looked back toward the kitchen.

"Hey you two, get a move on," he called out. "Red's here and we're ready to go."

"Be there in a minute," Tifa called out. She put the last of the mugs she had on her tray up in the cabinet beside her and looked at Cloud.

"Seems like they're in..."

She stopped when she saw the grimace on Cloud's face. His arms came up and clutched his head, and the mugs he was holding crashed to the floor.

"Cloud, are you all right?" she said, hurrying over to him.

He did not answer, but continued to hold his head, in obvious pain. She led him over to a chair and he sat down. She looked at him in silence, filled with concern. He hadn't had a headache like this in ages.

Not since before Aeris was resurrected.

The others had heard the crash of the mugs hitting the floor and now entered the room.

"What happened?" Reeve asked.

Tifa did not reply, but stood looking at Cloud.

"Cloud," she said softly.

He lowered his hands slowly and looked around.

"Just a... headache," he said. "I'm all right now."

But the look on his face told Tifa another story.

"Maybe you should lie down for a little while," she suggested.

"I'm fine," he said with a touch of anger. He got up and looked at them sharply, as if daring anyone to challenge his statement.

"Okay," Reeve said slowly. "Then shall we be on our way?"

"Yeah," Cloud replied. He took a step forward but then stopped and gripped his head again. He stumbled and would have fallen if Tifa had not grabbed him for support.

"Cloud, you're not okay," she told him. "Maybe we should take you to see a doctor."

"I don't need a doctor," he said, not looking up at her. "It's just a headache. All I need is some rest and I'll be fine."

He lifted his head.

"I'm going up to my room. I guess I'll have to pass up this little excursion. You all go on without me."

"Are you sure you'll be all right?" Aeris asked.

Cloud took a deep breath.

"Yes, I'll be fine. It's just a headache."

"I'll stay with you," Tifa volunteered. "C'mon, I'll help you to your room."

"I don't need your help," he said rather harshly, pushing her arm away. "I'm perfectly capable of taking care of myself. You go on with them, I'll be fine."

He walked slowly out of the room, not even looking back to see the hurt look on her face.

Aeris stepped over to her.

"It's all right," she said. "He didn't mean it. He's just not feeling well."

Tifa said nothing, but stared at the doorway Cloud had just retreated through. Finally she turned toward them.

"You go on," she said slowly. "I don't care what he said. I'm staying with him."

~*~

"He's not going to show up," Reno stated.

Elena gave him a look but said nothing. They and Rude stood near the center of Wonder Square at the Gold Saucer.

"Can't really blame him though," Reno continued. "I've heard that vampires are notoriously unreliable."

"Reno, you are such an idiot," she said. "Vincent is not a vampire."

"Believe what you want, babe," Reno replied, unmoved. "But if you're going to hang out with him, I suggest you stock up on your garlic."

Elena shook her head.

"I don't know why I even talk to you two," she said.

"Hey, I didn't say anything," Rude protested.

Elena did not respond. She knew the best thing that she could do would be to ignore Reno's little jabs.

"Well, you can waste your time standing around here if you want," Reno continued. "I'm going to see what Dio has to say."

They had come to the Gold Saucer because they had been told that Dio might have a job for them.

"I'm going to go play some video games," Rude said, pointing upstairs.

"Fine," Reno said. He didn't have anything against mixing a little pleasure with their business. "Just don't get lost."

He looked at Elena.

"I'm sure you'll still be here when I get back," he said. "Alone."

Elena ignored him. She went over to a bench near the stairway and sat down. He looked at her for a moment, then turned and walked down the hallway.

Why did he have to be so irritating, she thought. He always seemed to know just what to say to get under her skin. Lately he had been bugging her unmercifully about her relationship with Vincent. It wouldn't have bothered her so much if she wasn't troubled about it herself.

She sat back in her chair and watched the river of people flow by.

They had been seeing each other occasionally for months now, and Vincent was always attentive and polite when they were together, but things had not gotten any further than that, even though she had dropped some pretty obvious hints that she wanted them to.

The problem was that she just didn't know how he felt about her. The problem was that she really didn't know how he felt about anything. The fact that he was mysterious was one of the things that had attracted her to him in the first place, but now it seemed to be getting in the way. Trying to divine his thoughts was as useless as trying to read the thoughts of a brick wall.

Even when they were together he never talked about himself. She could understand him not wanting to talk about his past. She knew that Hojo had done unpleasant things to him, and though she was curious she had never asked him about it. If he wanted to tell her, he could, but she wasn't going to force him. Not about that. But she wanted to know what was going on in his life now, but he never said anything about that either. Even when she asked him, his answers were always vague or obscure. She didn't even know what he did for a living. She couldn't get a straight answer out of him with even the simplest of questions.

"Elena."

She turned around, startled, to see Vincent standing behind her.

He couldn't even walk up in front of her like a normal person.

"Must you do that?" she said, getting up.

He shrugged in reply.

She just looked at him for a moment, and he returned her gaze in a cool dispassionate way. He had the deepest darkest eyes, and his gaze could be incredibly uncomfortable when he set his mind to it. A gaze that could wither a plant, Rude had called it. But he was not looking at her that way now, and when he suddenly smiled she quickly forgot all about her doubts. She was the only one who could make him smile like that.

"C'mon," she said, taking his arm. "Let's take a walk."

"I understand you may be taking a job from Dio," Vincent said as they walked down the corridor.

She looked at him in surprise.

"How do you know that?" she said.

"Never mind that," he replied. "The job will be very dangerous. I want you to be careful."

"We can take care of ourselves," she answered quickly and with more than a touch of pride. But she immediately regretted it. Her face softened. "What, are you worried about me?"

He did not respond.

She looked up.

"C'mon," she said, pointing to the sign to Round Square. "Let's take the Gondola ride."

They made their way through the crowd. The Gold Saucer seemed busier than ever, and it took them a little while to reach the Gondola. Vincent paid for their tickets and they got in.

"I've heard the view is spectacular," Elena commented as she sat down beside him.

Vincent nodded.

There was a slight jerk and the gondola began moving.

"I was thinking about coming with you," he said.

She looked at him, not sure what he meant at first.

"You mean on this job?" she said in surprise.

He nodded.

"I don't have anything that needs my attention right now. Do you think Reno would mind?"

"Who cares," she answered immediately, surprised and pleased at the same time. Vincent had never suggested such a

thing before. Was he that worried about her, or did he just want to spend more time with her? Either way she thought it was a good sign.

Looking out the window she could see the Chocobo racers rushing by below them. They could both hear the roar of the crowd cheering on their favorites.

She knew Reno wouldn't be pleased to have Vincent come along with them. Which was yet another reason for her to be pleased. She couldn't wait to see the look on his face.

"I'd love for you to come," she said, sliding closer to him on the seat.

He smiled again but said nothing. He turned to look back out the window.

They sat in silence for a few minutes, looking at the attractions through the gondola window. The view really was terrific.

They had reached the very top of the Gold Saucer now, and saw the entire amusement park below them. Elena leaned closer to Vincent to get a better view outside. Their faces were very close now. She looked at him but he was looking out the window.

"Vincent," she said softly.

He turned to look at her, but she said nothing, just looked into his eyes. Those dark red eyes, so inhuman, and yet so much human at the same time. Others had mentioned how cold his eyes were, but when she looked at them now, she thought they were the most beautiful eyes she had ever seen.

Their faces were inches apart now, but he made no move. She thought she was being very obvious about her intentions. but sometimes men just didn't see things the same way. Hard as it was for her to believe, maybe he didn't see just how attracted she was to him. Quite suddenly she decided that it was time to do something that would make her feelings unequivocally clear.

She leaned forward and kissed him.

For a moment she was sure she had done the right thing. For a moment she felt like he was glad she had done it, had wanted more than anything for this to happen. For a moment she felt his arms reaching around her to embrace her.

But then he suddenly pulled back and turned away.

She stared at him, shocked and surprised by the sudden change. She just didn't understand.

"Vincent," she said again, but this time her voice could not conceal the hurt she suddenly felt.

He shook his head and did not look at her.

"I'm sorry," he said softly.

For a moment she found herself at a loss for words.

The gondola suddenly slowed to a halt, and she saw that they were back in the station. The ride was over.

"Vincent, please tell me what's wrong," she said pleadingly.

He looked at her, and his face was suddenly impassive. His eyes no longer holding even a hint of emotion. She could almost hear the wall slamming down between them.

"My problems are my own," he answered, slowly but firmly. "There is nothing you could do about them, even if you could understand them, which you could not."

He got up and opened the gondola door, then started walking down the corridor. She followed, but he did not turn back to look at her.

"Are you still going to come with us?" she asked, though suddenly she found she could barely speak.

He did not reply, but kept on walking, getting further ahead of her by the moment.

"I thought you cared about me!" she called after him, tears starting to form in her eyes.

He walked on until she was lost behind him in the crowd. She never saw the look of anguish on his own face, or heard the words he muttered slowly as she disappeared behind him.

"I do," he said softly. "More than you know. And that's what scares me."