

CHAPTER VII: SO THAT'S HIS PLAN!

"Are you sure you want to do this?" Red asked.

Reeve nodded.

They stood in an open field not far south of the City of the Ancients. They had seen no sign of the one they were pursuing. For some reason Red could not pick up her scent, and they had spent the last two days in a fruitless search of the surrounding area. It was all starting to look quite hopeless, but Red seemed convinced that she had not left the area.

Barret had contacted them earlier that morning and explained to them what was happening back at Cosmo Canyon. Red had agreed to go back, and now they stood waiting for Cid to come pick them up in the Slipstream.

Reeve had volunteered to remain behind.

He wasn't sure why he did it. Actually it seemed kind of pointless to him. The chances of his finding her were minuscule without Red's help, but he felt he had to do something. His friends had been so supportive of him all this time, perhaps if he stayed he could somehow do something for them.

Red looked up, scanning the skies to the south.

"Here he comes," he said.

Reeve looked up, but saw and heard nothing for a moment. But then he detected a low rumbling sound, obvious to Red's more sensitive ears first, apparently.

He couldn't see the jet at first, but then he spotted it high in the sky to the south. It approached rapidly, until the rumble of its engines had turned to a roar. The Slipstream flew over the field, then circled round and came back, slowing down until it hovered almost directly above them. Then it eased down to a landing near the center of the field.

The door slid open, and Red could see Cid beckoning to him.

Red turned to Reeve once more.

"I don't think I can properly thank you for helping me," he said.

"Forget it," Reeve said quickly. "You have no reason to thank me. I haven't done anything yet and it seems unlikely that I will."

Red looked at him thoughtfully.

"Don't underestimate yourself," he said. "I'll be back as soon as I can."

Reeve nodded. Red turned and started toward the Slipstream. But then he turned back.

"Farewell," he said. "Take care of yourself. And do try to stay out of trouble."

Reeve just smiled weakly and waved.

He watched as Red boarded the Slipstream. Then the black jet rose into the air once more. It quickly turned and in a moment had disappeared above the trees to the south.

Reeve stood there watching the empty sky for a while. Then he turned and walked away from the field, back to the trail. He was truly alone now, and he felt it. But he knew if he had gone back now he would have felt even worse. He had caused nothing but trouble so far. This was the least he could do.

He reached the trail and look down it in both directions. It was deserted. Not much of a surprise there. Still, he had hoped...

He glanced down the trail one more time.

He had hoped to see Aeris.

What had happened to her? Barret told them she had left in the early evening the day of Shera's baby shower. Barret had been surprised when they told him she had not arrived here yet. Something must have happened to her.

Just another thing to worry about. Barret had brought them up to date on the happenings at Cosmo Canyon. It seemed like things were falling apart all over the place.

Still, there was nothing he could do about any of that. But he had to admit the fact that Aeris may have been delayed somehow and could still show up here had played a part in his decision to stay. He hoped she was all right.

He sighed and started walking slowly down the trail, back north towards the City of the Ancients once more. He slung his stick over his shoulder. He had decided to hold onto the branch he had used to slay that extremely non vicious dragonfly like creature. Who knows, perhaps it would work as well against something that was a real threat. In any case, it was almost certainly better than nothing.

He wandered down the trail, looking at the forest around him every once in a while. He still couldn't get used to the weird plants.

He had no plan in mind. He had no idea which direction she may have gone in, and he seriously doubted he would run into her now that Red was gone. About all he had going for him at this point was blind luck.

But as he continued down the trail he began to think maybe that was not true. He had followed Red without much thought throughout this whole episode, convinced that Red's nose would find her. Now that that option was no longer available to him he would have to use other means. He would have to think.

Where would he go if he were a red lion like beast wandering around in this ancient forest?

That didn't seem to be helping much. He wasn't Red, he couldn't think like her. But all creatures needed certain things. Food, water, shelter. He supposed she could get food anywhere in the forest, and she could shelter under a tree, for all he knew. But the only open water he knew of was the small lake outside the shell house where they had run into her the other day.

It really didn't seem like much to go on, but it was all he had. For all he knew there could be a stream or another body of water nearby in the forest that he had no knowledge of. Still, if it was either that or wander around without a clue.

He made his way back up the trail until he stood once more beside the shell house next to the lake. He looked around for a moment, then walked off into the woods until he found a comfortable spot concealed in some bushes downwind of the lake.

He sat down, not really expecting much to come of this, but he felt better now that he had some kind of plan. All he could do now was sit and wait.

~*~

Reno led the others up the narrow steps carved into the rock face that led up to Cosmo Canyon. They had lost the trail (again) a few miles north of here, but it had seemed to be headed straight in this direction. He didn't know whether the Swordsman would actually come into the Canyon, but it was worth a look. Besides, they were a little low on supplies.

They walked into the town proper. Reno looked around. There seemed to be a lot more Canyon Guards on the street than he had ever seen before. He wondered if something was going on.

He led them straight to the Inn. The Turks sat down at the bar, while Vincent took a table by himself in a dark corner. Yuffie disappeared.

Reno ordered them drinks. The bartender brought them over. Reno took a gulp and glanced at Elena.

He didn't know what Vincent had said to her, but it obviously had not been an affirmation of his love. They had hardly spoken to each other since, but she did seem to have calmed down some. At least she wasn't acting like a lovesick schoolgirl anymore.

She suddenly turned toward him, noticing him looking at her.

"I told you," he said.

She looked at him with a puzzled expression.

"Huh?"

"Vampires are notoriously unreliable."

Elena shook her head.

"And I told you," she replied, "that you're an idiot!"

Reno chuckled.

"Think what you want, but you're going about it all wrong."

Elena didn't say anything for a moment, just took a sip from her drink. She knew was going to regret it, but she had to ask anyway.

"What do you mean?"

"It's a classic case," he replied knowingly. "He likes you, but he doesn't want to show it. You've got to force his hand."

"And just how am I supposed to do that?" she asked. Since when had he become such an expert on love? Suddenly she just couldn't wait to here this.

Reno glance back at Vincent, then slipped his arm around her and smiled warmly.

"By making him jealous, of course," he said. "Why don't you and I retire to one of the rooms upstairs. That should really get his attention."

Elena looked at him for a moment without answering. Suddenly she smiled warmly.

"Oh Reno, I think that's a wonderful idea," she said, batting her eyes at him shamelessly. Then she burst out laughing. She just couldn't do this with a straight face.

"You really do have a death wish, don't you?" she said, then took another gulp from her drink.

Reno just looked at her for a moment, then let go.

He picked up his own glass and smiled.

"I guess I do," he agreed.

The door to the Inn opened. Reno turned to see Barret Wallace walk in.

Barret looked around and saw the Turks sitting at the bar. He frowned. Then he saw Vincent and walked over to him.

Barret sat down and looked at Vincent.

"What are they doing here?"

Vincent told them what they had been doing the last few days. As he spoke Barret's eyes grew wide with surprise.

"This Swordsman fellow has a weapon just like Cloud's?" he asked.

Vincent nodded.

"And his trail led in this direction?"

Again, Vincent agreed.

Barret whistled.

"I can't believe it," he said. "It looks like Tifa was right all along."

"What do you mean?" Vincent asked.

Barret filled Vincent in on what had happened the last couple of days.

Now it was Vincent's turn to look surprised.

"So you think the Swordsman is this Zack person?" he said when Barret was done.

Barret nodded.

"It seems like too much of a coincidence to be otherwise, don't you think?"

Vincent nodded. He had to agree.

"So what do you think he's up to?" Vincent questioned.

"I don't know," Barret replied. "Red is at the Hall of Records right now trying to figure it all out. Whatever it is, I'm sure we

won't like it."

"There's something else you should know," Vincent said. He told Barret about Aeris rod.

Barret looked troubled.

"I don't like this news at all," he muttered. It was obvious the Swordsman was ruthless. Who knows what he would do with a girl like Aeris. But then he remembered something.

"Hey, didn't he used to be a boyfriend of hers or something?" he said.

Vincent shrugged.

"I haven't the slightest idea."

Barret sat for a moment in thought. Even if there was some old tie between Zack and Aeris, they couldn't depend on that protecting her. Now they had even more incentive to find the Swordsman as soon as possible.

"It looks like we're all after the same thing," he said thoughtfully.

Vincent nodded slowly.

"Perhaps we should pool our resources," he suggested.

Barret looked over at the Turks, a frown forming on his face. But then he shook his head.

"I can't believe I'm saying this, but that would probably be best."

Vincent broke into a grin.

"I can't wait to here what Reno will have to say about this," he said.

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It was nearly dusk when Red burst into the Inn. He looked around and ran over to the others as soon as he saw them.

"C'mon," he said. "We've got to get to Rocket Town immediately."

"What's the rush?" Reno questioned. Red seemed very agitated.

"No time to explain now. Just hurry!" he replied.

He turned and swiftly left the Inn. As they exited Barret almost bowled over Yuffie.

"Hey, watch where you're going, ya big lug," she exclaimed.

Barret ignored her and hurried after Red, who was now traveling so fast they had to run to keep up.

"Hey, where's everybody going?" Yuffie questioned and fell in behind.

Red led them on, disappearing down the steep steps that led out of the canyon. When the others reached the bottem they found him standing beside a buggy.

"Hurry up," he said, indicating for them to get in. "There's no time to lose."

Barret slipped into the drivers seat, the others piling in behind. Yuffie found herself crushed between Vincent and Reno.

"Gawd!" she said, giving Reno a shove. "Can't a lady have a little breathing room?"

Reno considered scolding her for using the term 'lady' so loosely, but then thought better of it.

As they accelerated across the canyon floor, Barret glanced at Red.

"What the hell is this all about?" he questioned.

"I think I know what's going on," Red replied. "And it's not good."

"Why doesn't that surprise me," Reno commented.

"I took a look at the CD you gave me on Cloud," Red said, looking at Barret. "It appears to be a genetic code. It looks like

Hojo made a gene map of everyone involved in the Jenova Project. A remarkable feat, actually. There are millions of genes on each chromosome in a human, to be able to map them all is something..."

"Can we just have the readers digest version?" Yuffie said impatiently.

Red looked at her for a moment.

"Quite," he said. "It looks like Hojo is trying to make a clone of himself."

"What?" Barret said.

"But Hojo's dead," Elena exclaimed. "Isn't he?"

"Indeed he is," Red replied. "But I have found some of his notes about a secret project he was working on, just in case of his untimely death. You see, he had all the materials available to create a clone, but obviously after he was dead, he would need someone else to carry out the project for him. What better people to use than those in the Jenova project, whom he was already experimenting with and had easy access to. So everyone he infused with Jenova cells, he also implanted a bio program that would activate on a amplified signal from a computer program he created for just such a purpose. I, of course, was in the Jenova project, but I was never actually infused with Jenova cells. Of all those who were, only Cloud and Zack have survived."

"So Hojo is controlling them with some kind of computer program?" Barret said doubtfully.

"It appears that way," Red replied. "Though I'm not sure of the exact mechanism."

"And he's going to use them to create a clone of himself?" Reno said.

"Yes," Red responded. "He must have left some of his own genetic material stored in Nibelheim. I guess that must have been what was in that container you saw there," he continued, looking at Barret again. "That must have been what Zack was after. There was obviously another CD with Hojo's genetic code on it as well. Though what he is creating is not exactly a clone. What he has done is created a kind of Hojo virus. If the genetic material that Zack has taken is injected into an unborn child, Hojo's genetic material will slowly replace the child's original DNA. He'll have a clone, but he won't have to start from scratch."

"So he can just take this virus and inject it into any unborn child and we'll have another Hojo?" Elena asked.

"Not any child," Red replied. "The more compatible the child's original DNA is to Hojo's, the greater the likelihood of success. That's why Zack had to come here, to Cosmo Canyon. We've got all Shinra's old records. It turns out that Shinra kept a genetic map of everyone who ever worked for them. Not as complete as Hojo's of course, but comprehensive enough. Zack matched those records against Hojo's DNA CD to rank everyone depending on how well they matched. Then he used the Doctor's and Hospital records stored in the computer to find out if any of the closest matches were pregnant. Whoever that person was, that's who he would go after."

"And you're going to tell us that the closest match was Shera," Reno stated.

Red nodded.

"I'm afraid so. I told Illyanova to try to contact Cid with the PHS, but in the meantime I think it would be best if we got to Rocket Town as fast as possible. I'm afraid both Cid and Shera are in deadly danger."

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"Why are we back here?" Aeris asked as they made their way through the outskirts of Rocket Town.

"I don't know," Altim replied. They were walking near the back of Zack's gang, as they had been for most of the day. Zack had been pushing them all to maintain a fast pace the last few days, with few rests along the way. He was driving them hard, and they were all near exhaustion.

Altim looked at Aeris carefully. He could tell she was tired too, but she kept up her pace and did not complain or lag behind.

At the moment he was in charge of their prisoner, delegated with the responsibility of keeping an eye on her and making sure she did not escape. It was a job he found himself doing more and more now that it was known around camp that he would pay a decent sum of gil for the honor.

Not that he thought she would try to escape anyway. She had marched along with them since she had been caught without making any attempts to leave. To tell you the truth, he suspected the idea hadn't even entered her mind.

Shu had not been happy to hear his interest. He had told Altim in no uncertain terms that even hinting that he might be interested in their prisoner would be the fastest way could think of to a quick and painful death.

Altim had to admit that the knowing glances and whispered words whenever he was seen with Aeris might have made him nervous had he thought the Swordsman noticed, not that it would have stopped him. But even after learning that Aeris knew of his past, the Swordsman had hardly spoken to her, or shown any interest in her at all. It seemed strange to Altim, but he wasn't about to complain.

Now that he thought about it, the Swordsman seemed to have been acting strangely ever since he had taken over. They had been scurrying about the countryside, seemingly at random, with no apparent plan in mind. They had not attacked any convoys, or made any large hauls at all. In fact, the only gil they had obtained since the Swordsman took over was from a few solitary travelers they had run into by chance on the road. Bennis had been no genius, but they had had a lot more gil in their pockets when he had been leading them. Altim had heard a lot of grumbling lately from others wondering if the change in leadership was turning out to be such a good idea.

Still, the complaining had so far been confined to muttered discussions and vague grumbling. No one had said anything in front of the Swordsman's face.

"Do you know what he has in mind?" Aeris asked.

"The Swordsman?" Altim said. "No. All I know is that he's been acting pretty strangely lately. Was he always like this?"

Aeris shook her head.

"No, not at all," she replied. "He's changed. He used to be kind and honorable. He's nothing like the man I used to know."

She looked up ahead. She could see Zack up at the head of the group, leading the way slowly into town. He happened to glance back, and she almost thought he looked at her, but then he turned away.

No, she realized. What she had just told Altim was not completely true. There were some similarities to the old Zack. The way he stood, the tall square shoulders, the air of authority and the look of confidence in his eye. Those were things she remembered of him, things that hadn't changed.

"I don't know why he's acting like this now," she said. "But I don't think it's entirely his choice. I know someone else, someone quite similar, actually..."

Her voice faded into silence for a moment.

"Who seems to be suffering from problems similar to Zack's," she continued. "I think they are being influenced by some outside force."

"To what purpose?"

"I don't know," Aeris replied. "But I don't think it is going to be to his benefit."

The sun was low on the horizon, but still glowed a brilliant red in the dusky western sky. They were walking through the center of town now. Aeris thought this unusual. Up to now Zack had avoided bringing the entire party into any town.

Suddenly Aeris frowned, looking where Zack was leading them. Could he possibly be going where she thought he was going.

She quickened her pace, moving closer to the front of the group.

"Hey, what's your rush?" Altim questioned.

She turned to look at him.

"I need to see what he's doing," she replied. She turned and hurried forward, Altim right behind her. There could be no doubt about it now, Zack was headed straight for Cid and Shera's house.

"Brittany," Shera said.

"Sounds too English," Cid replied.

"Maria?" she suggested.

"Boring."

Shera thought for a minute.

"Okay, how about Jennifer?"

"There's six other kids on the block already named that," Cid replied. He sat back in his chair and blew a smoke ring.

"Besides," he continued. "How do you know it's not going to be a boy?"

"I don't," she replied. "I just assumed if it were it would be Cid Jr."

Cid grinned.

"Yeah, you're probably right."

Shera walked into the bedroom.

"Tiffany?" he heard her call out.

"Too fragile," he responded.

She stuck her head back in the room to look at him.

"So what do you suggest?" she asked.

He sat there for a moment puffing thoughtfully on his cigarette.

"Velocity."

"What?"

"Velocity," he repeated.

She stepped back into the room and looked at him.

"Have you totally lost your mind?"

"What's wrong with Velocity?" he questioned.

Shera shook her head.

"Velocity Highwind. You would come up with something like that."

Cid looked at her and shrugged.

She walked back into the other room.

"Lara?"

Cid rubbed his chin and looked thoughtful.

"That's not bad."

Suddenly they were interrupted by a ringing sound.

"The PHS," Cid said in surprise. "They must have found out something."

He got up and reached for the PHS as Shera came back into the room.

Suddenly the front door burst open. A tall man with jet black hair stepped in, a huge sword in his hand. He was followed by half a dozen other men.

"What the hell is this?" Cid exclaimed. He stepped quickly over to the couch and grabbed hold of his spear.

Zack looked around for a moment, then his eyes fell on Shera.

"Get her," he said.

Cid stepped in front of Shera.

"I don't know what you people want, but take one more step forward and I'll kick your ass," he growled.

One of the men lunged at him. He dodged to the side and struck back with his spear. The man went down with a cry.

Cid turned and looked at the others, anger welling up inside him.

"Get the hell out of my house," he exclaimed and lunged straight at Zack.

He didn't see Aeris suddenly appear in the doorway.

Nor did he hear her voice.

"Cid, no!"

Zack's sword flashed, parrying Cid's blow and almost wrenching the spear from his hand, and throwing him off balance. The sword came back again, faster than he could follow. It slashed across him, and blood flew from it.

Shera screamed.

Cid fell to the ground.

Zack raised his sword again, but suddenly Aeris rushed in between them. She knelt down and looked at Cid, almost gasping at the sight of the gaping wound across his abdomen. His eyes were open, and he looked at her, a soft moan escaping from his lips. She wrapped her arms around him and bowed her head.

For a long moment no one moved. Altim, who had followed Aeris in, saw the Swordsman standing over Aeris and Cid, his sword still poised to attack, but not moving. Aeris kneeling down beside Cid, her eyes closed. He thought he could see her lips moving slowly. The only sound was of Shera crying softly.

A sudden breeze blew through the house. Altim wondered where it had come from. The evening had been still, with no sign of any wind. And besides, this breeze seemed to have come from inside the house.

Aeris opened her eyes. She looked at Cid, who returned her gaze, his eyes clear.

"You'll be okay," she said softly. "I've done what I can. It should keep you until the others get here. Just don't try to get up. He'll kill you, Cid. Please. Just let us go. I'll make sure nothing happens to Shera. You have my word. Just don't get up."

She looked at him with tears starting to form in her own eyes.

Cid looked at her for a moment. He did not move.

"Please," she said again.

Finally he nodded.

Aeris slowly stood up.

She turned to look at Zack. They stood there staring at one another for a long time, but neither one said anything.

Suddenly Zack reached out and grabbed her arm with a grip so tight it almost made her cry out.

"Let's get out of here," he said angrily. He looked at Shera once again.

"Bring her along."

He dragged Aeris roughly out of the room. The others followed. Cid lay on the ground, watching them until the room was empty. Slowly he pulled himself up. He groaned. Apparently Aeris healing had not done a complete job. He looked blankly at the open doorway. He felt his heart was going to burst inside his chest, yet even so his face remained expressionless.

"Shera," he said softly.