

IC H A P T E R III: S T I L L A F E W B U G S I N T H E S Y S T E M

Calin glanced up from his computer and gave a little jerk of surprise to find someone standing right beside him.

"Damn, Ice, do you have to sneak up on me like that?"

Ice just looked at him humorlessly.

"The boss just told me we have another job."

"That's nice," Calin said, not very excitedly. "So you get to go kill someone else? How nice for you. Now if you don't mind I'm busy with my research."

"That's just it," Ice replied, completely ignoring his sarcasm. "This is a very special hit. The boss wants to use your 'secret project'."

Calin suddenly looked very interested.

"My secret project?" he repeated.

"Yes," Ice affirmed. "He seems to think it would be perfect for the job. God knows where he got that idea from."

"Her," Calin said, looking at him darkly. "Not it, her."

Ice gave him a sardonic smile.

"Whatever," he replied. "Personally I think he's got a screw loose to even consider this. But then again, when 'she' screws up big time, maybe the boss will finally realize what a waste it was to have you and all your annoying projects around in the first place."

Calin looked at him darkly. He wasn't really interested in Ice's opinion to begin with.

"So who's the target?"

"Barret Wallace."

Calin looked at him in surprise.

"Barret Wallace, the Mayor of Corel?"

"The very same," Ice replied. "And a card carrying member of Avalanche, who I'm sure even a hermit scientist like you has heard of."

Calin resisted the urge to snap back at Ice. He knew it was pointless. The man was completely oblivious to such things. He hadn't been given the name Ice for nothing. And anyway, Calin knew he was just trying to bait him.

"Do you still think your project can handle it?" Ice asked.

"Of course she can," Calin replied, with just a hint of indignant. He had to admit he was surprised though, and even a little nervous. The Fog had never gone after someone so prominent before. It would not be an easy undertaking.

"I think she's training in the gym right now," he continued. "I'll go inform her immediately."

He got up and stepped awkwardly around Ice, who made no move to get out of his way. He walked rapidly down the hall, glad to get away from the other man. He didn't understand why Ice disliked him so much, but it was obvious that he did. But that didn't matter. He had the boss' support, and for all Ice's bluster he knew his place. They didn't have to like one another as long as they did their jobs.

Besides, there was another side to the coin. Ice was hoping that this project would fail, that Calin would be disgraced. But on the other hand, if it succeeded, then Calin would finally get the recognition he deserved. He would be on at least equal footing with Ice then, and maybe even surpass him! Maybe when this was all over he would be having meetings with the boss and be telling Ice what to do. Perhaps that was Ice's real concern.

Calin couldn't help but smile at that thought.

He reached the gym and opened one of the doors. Inside he beheld four men with stout wooden staffs in their hands. In the center of them stood a young woman. Though she had long silver hair she appeared to be no older than sixteen or seventeen years of age. She was clothed in a simple grey blouse and black pants. She held no weapon.

One of the men lunged at her. She dodged nimbly out of the way. She kicked at the man, catching him in the shoulder and sending him stumbling backwards. Immediately the man behind her stuck with his staff, but she lept out of the way, even though she was facing away from him, and his staff struck only air.

She whirled around, striking out, most of the time hitting her opponents, then bolting out of the way, dodging the blows again and again. She was constantly on the move, never giving her opponents a stationary target for more than a split second. Her body seemed to move of its own accord, without thought. She twisted round and lunged out from within the circle, then turned and kicked one of the men in the back who was slow to face her. He fell to the ground, his weapon clattering away.

The girl spun around and stopped as she saw Calin for the first time.

"Hello Father," she said cheerfully.

One of the men lunged forward and stuck her in the back of the knee. With a cry she stumbled and fell to the ground. The three men who were still standing rushed toward her with staffs raised.

The girl made no move to defend herself, instead she just lay there, staring off into space.

There was a crack as a bolt of lightning suddenly ripped through the air, knocking all her opponents off their feet.

The girl lept up, ready to continue the fight.

"Enough," Calin stated.

The four men got slowly to their feet as the girl walked rapidly over to him, a warm smile on her face.

"It wasn't very fair of you to do that, Amanda," Calin chided.

Amanda looked at him for a moment.

"Well, it *was* four to one," she defended herself. "And they had me down. What was I supposed to do?"

"You would not have been down in the first place if you had not been so cocky," Calin replied. "You didn't think that man could reach you when you waved to me."

Amanda dismissed his contention with a toss of her head.

"A minor miscalculation," she replied.

"Which could someday get you killed," he stated.

She smiled and shook her head.

"Oh Father, you always take things so seriously."

"That may be true," he replied. "And I have something serious to discuss now. Come."

He led her out of the gym and into a small conference room not far down the hall. He motioned for her to be seated, and she did so, while he remained standing. She looked at him expectantly.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I have some news," he said slowly. "About your *real* parents."

Immediately the smile on Amanda's face faded.

Calin was looking at her closely.

"We found out who murdered them. The man's name is Barret Wallace."

Barret Wallace. Amanda just stared at him. The name seemed vaguely familiar, but she wasn't thinking about that now. After all these years...

"How?" she questioned.

"We kept digging," Calin replied. "We found some old Shinra records. They led us to a person who was an eyewitness."

Amanda brushed a lock of silver hair away from her face, not sure what to say. How long had she been waiting to hear this news? Seemed like all her young life. Ever since Calin had told her how her parents had been brutally murdered, she had a burning desire to find out who had done it, and exact her own form of revenge.

"He's the Mayor of Corel now," Calin informed her. "He's a survivor. Always seems to manage to come out ahead, no matter who gets sacrificed in the process. He was the one who brought Shinra into Corel in the first place. Then when things started to go sour for Shinra he switched sides and became a member of Avalanche."

Avalanche. That's where she had heard the name before. She didn't really pay much attention to the news, but she had heard of them.

"Weren't they the ones who stopped Meteor?" she asked.

Calin nodded.

"Yes, but Barret Wallace actually had very little to do with it. Basically he just joined them to be on the winning side, and I must say, it worked out very well for him. Now he controls Corel, and I'm afraid he has bigger plans than that. He's ruthless, Amanda, he must be stopped."

Amanda just nodded. She didn't need any added incentive. The fact that he had killed her parents was enough.

She looked up at Calin.

"So what do you want me to do?" she asked.

Calin slowly came over and sat down beside her, putting his hand on her shoulder.

"We have a plan."

~*~

"Could you hand me that screwdriver, please?" Reeve inquired.

"Certainly, Reeve."

The large white Mog turned and looked at the table. His hand reached out and then paused.

"Which one?" Cait inquired.

"The smaller one on the right," Reeve replied.

Cait reached out and picked up the screwdriver Reeve had selected. He handed it over and Reeve reached into a small panel that stood open in the Mog's back. The space inside was difficult and confining to work in, but moving carefully he finally managed to get the screwdriver aligned properly. With a few twists he tightened the final screw holding the new circuit board in place.

"That'll do it," he muttered. He closed the panel on Cait's back and handed the screwdriver back.

"Now can I have the other one?" he asked.

"Sure," Cait replied. He picked up the other screwdriver and handed it to Reeve.

"Thanks," Reeve replied. He tightened the two screws holding the back panel on, then let the flap of fur fall back down to conceal it. He slapped Cait on the back.

"All set," he said cheerfully. "How do you feel?"

Cait spun around and looked at him.

"I feel fine," he replied. "How are you?"

"Couldn't be better," Reeve said with a laugh. He stood back and looked Cait up and down. Cait returned the gaze, tilting his head and looking at Reeve.

"What's so amusing?" he inquired.

Reeve shook his head, the smile still on his face.

"It's just so strange," he replied. "I'm used to controlling you through the computer. I'm usually looking through your eyes when I see you move. I'm not used to you walking and talking in front of me like this."

Cait shrugged.

"Well, that's what you designed the new program to do, wasn't it? To let me function independently?"

"Yes, of course," Reeve replied. "But it's still kind of odd to actually see it work after all this time controlling you directly."

Cait did not reply. Reeve had added the new motherboard this morning, and had been testing Cait ever since, and Cait had performed flawlessly. With final auxiliary boards in place to control fine motor coordination, Cait was now fully functional as an independent unit. Reeve couldn't have been prouder if it were his own offspring he was conversing with.

"I can't wait to show you to the others," Reeve stated.

"Others?" Cait questioned.

"The other members of Avalanche," Reeve replied. Since Reeve had controlled Cait directly, there had been no reason for him to retain any 'memories'. However, now that he was on his own Reeve thought he would need that information, so Reeve had added a memory board that contained all the information he thought Cait would need about all the members of Avalanche.

"Of course," Cait replied. "When are we going to see them?"

"Well, Aeris and Zack are here in Ifalna, as you know, so we can see them whenever we wish. I guess we'll have to take a little road trip and visit the others."

"I'd like that," Cait replied.

They both turned as the door to the workshop opened and Zack walked in. He looked around for a moment, his eyes finally resting on Cait.

"Hello Zack," Cait greeted him.

Zack looked at him in surprise, then turned to Reeve.

"What the hell is that?" he questioned.

"It's Cait Sith," Reeve replied. "The robot I used to use when I still worked for Shinra. Remember, we told you about him?"

Zack nodded, then seemed to pay it no more attention.

"Where's Aeris?" he questioned.

"I haven't the slightest idea," Reeve replied.

"Are you sure?"

Something in the way Zack said it caught Reeve attention. Zack was looking at him carefully, a slightly skeptical expression on his face.

"Yes I'm sure," Reeve replied, somewhat testily. "I haven't seen her all day."

"Neither has anyone else," Zack said evenly. "She's gone."

"Gone?" Reeve questioned. "Gone where?"

Zack folded his arms across his chest and continued to look at Reeve closely.

"I thought you might be able to tell me," he said.

Reeve was further put out by the accusatory tone Zack was using.

"I have no idea where she went," Reeve stated firmly, and a bit defensively. "Have you asked Elmyra?"

Zack nodded.

"Yes, and she said she didn't know, but she's not a very good liar."

Reeve stared at Zack, further angered that he would say such a thing about Elmyra.

"What do you want?" Reeve stated, no longer making any pretense of being civil.

"I told you, I want to know where Aeris is," Zack restated. "I've looked everywhere. She's not in Ifalna. Elmyra knows something, but she won't tell me. What's going on?"

"I told you," Reeve said. "I haven't the slightest idea. I didn't even know she was gone until you walked in here just now and told me."

Reeve was not thrilled about being grilled over this by Zack, but he also felt suddenly concerned about Aeris. If what Zack was saying was true, what could have happened to her?

"Have you asked Ellengio?" Reeve questioned.

"He's gone too," Zack stated.

"So they must have gone somewhere together," Reeve mused, for a moment forgetting his anger. What could they be up to?

"Without telling either one of us?" Zack said doubtfully. "It seems unlikely."

"What are you saying?" Cait questioned. They both ignored him.

"She must have told you something," Zack insisted.

"I told you, she didn't," Reeve replied, his anger returning. Who the hell did Zack think he was to come in here and question him like this? "And even if she had, I wouldn't tell you!"

Zack took a step toward him.

"Yes you would."

Reeve did not give any ground.

"Reeve?" Cait said questioningly.

"Or what?" Reeve questioned. "You going to slice me up with that big sword of yours?"

"I don't need my sword to take on the likes of you," Zack snarled.

For a moment they stood there looking at one another. Finally Reeve shook his head.

"You're being an idiot. I don't think we have anything more to discuss," he said stiffly, turning away.

Zack came up behind him and grabbed him on the shoulder.

"We're not done yet," he said angrily.

Reeve twisted back around to face him, but even as he did so a huge white arm shot out and slammed into Zack, sending him careening across the room to slam heavily into the far wall.

For a second Reeve just stood there in shock. But he roused himself from it when he saw Cait charging past him toward Zack once more.

"Cait, no!" he cried out.

Cait raised his arms and smashed them down on Zack again, knocking him to the ground. He hit Zack three more times, Reeve shuddering at the force of the blows. Zack tried to scramble out of the way while protecting his head and upper body with his arms.

"Cait, stop!" Reeve shouted.

The Mog did not seem to hear. Zack tried to get to his feet, but Cait knocked him down again. Zack had been surprised by the initial attack, and stunned by the fierceness of Cait's blows, causing him to remain strictly on the defensive. But now he tried to fight back. He had his sword on his back, but the Mog gave him no time to draw it, even if that was what he was thinking. Zack struck at Cait with his fists, but the huge Mog body absorbed the blows easily. Cait suddenly grabbed hold of him and tossed him across the room again.

"Cait!" Reeve shouted desperately, even though he realized by this time that the Mog wasn't going to listen. He looked around helplessly, his eyes falling on the shotgun propped up against the wall next to the worktable. He stepped over and grabbed hold of it, raising it and turning toward Cait.

Cait charged at Zack again, who was lying on the ground, shaking the cobwebs out of his head. He saw Cait coming at him again and leapt to his feet, pulling out his sword in one fluid motion. Cait aimed a vicious kick at him. Zack lunged to the side and his sword sliced through the air. There was a crackling sound and sparks flew. Cait fell to the ground. He tried to get up, but stumbled again immediately, lunging for Zack. One of his legs was useless, having been nearly severed by Zack's sword.

Zack darted away from Cait until he was safely out of the big Mog's range. He turned to look at Reeve, seething with anger.

"You'll pay for that!" he shouted.

He stepped toward Reeve, sword raised. Reeve stood there for a moment, too stunned to say anything, frozen in place. His eyes were locked on Zack's sword, which stood poised above him. He felt his shotgun in his hands, but he knew he could never use the weapon on Zack. He stepped back against the wall, raised his arms above his head in a senseless attempt to protect himself, and awaited his fate.

Reeve wasn't sure how long he stood there, bracing himself for the blow. It must have only been a few moments, yet it seemed much longer to him. But eventually he realized, much to his surprise, that he still lived.

He lowered one of his arms and looked at Zack, who still stood in front of him, as if turned to stone. But then Zack's arms slowly dropped down to his side, the sword clattering to the ground beside him. His anger was suddenly gone, as fast as it had appeared. For a moment a look of horror passed across his face, as the color slowly drained out of it. His mouth moved, but no sound came out.

Reeve lowered his arms as well, stunned himself by the way he had lost control of Cait.

"Zack...", he started, but his voice failed. Not that it mattered. Even as he spoke Zack had turned his back and deliberately walked out of the room.

Reeve stood there staring down at the shotgun he still held in his hands, an empty feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Oh God," he muttered.

~*~

"This place gives me the creeps."

Vincent did not reply, nor even turn toward her. Not that she had really been expecting any answer. She looked at him. He seemed perfectly at ease walking through the gloom of the dark corridor in front of her. He was difficult to make out, even though she was but a few paces behind him. His unnatural ability to blend into the shadows still made her feel uncomfortable at times, in spite of the fact that she knew him so well.

"I still don't understand what you're looking for," she continued, not letting his inability to hold up his end of the conversation deter her in any way. "The last thing I wanted to be doing today was go stumbling around in the ruins of Midgar. I don't know why we just couldn't go to the beach like I suggested."

Vincent turned around until she could see one red eye, and cast a sharp glance at her.

"We're looking for information," he replied, as if that answered all her questions. "Besides, I'm not really the beach type."

You can say that again, she thought. Even in the gloom the pale skin of his face stood out. He looked away and continued down the debris filled corridor, Elena following behind, trying to keep up and at the same time watch her step in the darkness. She heard a clattering sound, far off from down a hallway as she passed in front of it, like the rattling of old bones, and she felt herself start. She looked around again nervously, thinking how much the building had changed. She could remember how she had been so impressed the first time she had been in Shinra headquarters, soon after becoming a Turk. Impressed with its elegance, impressed with its sheer size. The place had become her home away from home. She had spent nearly all her time here in those days, the days before Meteor fell and Shinra was destroyed.

"A little sun would probably do you some good," she muttered, not in the mood to be very diplomatic. "And information, what does that mean? That could be anything. How am I supposed to help you look if I don't know what I'm looking for?"

"I'm not sure myself," Vincent replied, not turning toward her.

"So how are we going to know when we find anything?" Elena stated petulantly.

Vincent stopped and turned toward her so abruptly it made her jump.

"I'm sure I don't have to tell you that Midgar is crawling with dangerous creatures these days," he said softly but firmly. "Some of them have excellent hearing."

Elena glared at him. She realized that the volume of her conversation had been increasing, and that he was right, but she still didn't appreciate being treated like a child.

"I just want to know what's going on," she said quietly. "After all this time, don't you realize by now that I'm on your side?"

For a moment he just looked at her with that expressionless face. Then he stepped toward her and took hold of her hand.

"I'm sorry," he said, then hesitated, looking down the corridor behind her absently. She turned to glance that way but saw nothing. She immediately turned back toward him. It was the first time he had ever said that to her.

"I'm looking for information on Hojo's experiments," he continued slowly in a hushed voice. "I know Hojo had a lab on the upper floors, but that was destroyed by Meteor. I didn't know until Zack reappeared that he also had a lab down in the basement, where Zack took Shera when he was under Hojo's control. Or the control of Hojo's computer program. At that time I didn't get a chance to look around very much. I'd like to take a closer look."

Elena nodded slowly, feeling better that he had answered her question, with not too much coaxing and in a straightforward manner, for once. She was surprised at him.

"But what do you want to know about Hojo's experiments anyway?" she asked, deciding to test just how far she could go with this. "After what he did to you, I would think the last thing you would want to do is be reminded of him. Unless this has something to do with what he did to you...."

She looked at him carefully, trying to gauge his response. She had never brought up the subject of the experiments Hojo had performed on Vincent before. She had told herself time and again that she never would. She didn't even know why she had said it now. She hadn't intended to, she had just blurted it out without thinking.

Vincent stood there looking at her for a long time. Even in the semi darkness, this close to him she could see his face clearly, though she could not read it. Not that that was anything unusual. What she had just said could have stung him to the core, or it might have had no effect whatsoever. Either way she couldn't tell.

Finally he turned away.

"I didn't want to worry you," he said very softly and with obvious difficulty.

Elena slowly came up beside him and put a hand on his shoulder, her delight at his openness suddenly tempered by concern.

"Worry me?"

He sighed and turned toward her again.

"I'm looking for any research Hojo might have left concerning my transformation into the Chaos beast. I need to understand it, because of what's happening to me."

She looked at him with a puzzled expression. What little delight she got from his openness, as well as her earlier anger, were quickly fading away as her concern grew.

"What is happening to you?"

"I'm not sure," he replied. He paused for a moment before continuing.

"To a certain extent I've always been able to exhibit some control over the transformation. It seems a lot of it has to do with my state of mind. As you've probably already noticed, fierce emotions tend to set it off. But what you might not know is that the urge to transform is always there. It never really goes away, just becomes weaker and stronger. Usually it is easy to control, but lately the urge has been becoming stronger and stronger."

"What?" Elena said, looking at him in surprise. He had never made mention of this before.

"It's been happening slowly," Vincent said. "For a long time I thought it was just my imagination. But I don't think that any longer. I can tell it's stronger now, I can feel it even as we speak. The urge to transform is always with me, but lately it's more urgent than ever. It used to be extremely difficult to start the transformation, but lately almost anything seems to be able to set it off. I've changed five times in the last month, every time for no very compelling reason. It's getting more and more difficult to control."

Elena gave his shoulder a reassuring squeeze. "I had no idea," she said slowly.

Vincent seemed about to shake her arm off, but thought better of it. He was never one who had cared much for sympathy.

"So I'm hoping to find something Hojo might have left behind to perhaps help me learn how to control it. If it goes on like this, if the urge keeps getting stronger, I don't know how much longer I can resist."

He tuned and walked on. She followed him silently. She was glad he had told her what was on his mind, even though he had been right and it would cause her to worry. She had to admit that his ability to transform into the Chaos beast had been a distinct advantage at times, and had probably saved their lives on more than one occasion. Yet, for what it did to Vincent, the ability had always been more curse than boon. And now, if he couldn't control it, what would happen to him? If the transformations were coming more often, when would it all end? Could it be that he might eventually turn into the Chaos beast permanently?

Elena glanced at Vincent, the realization of what she had just thought sinking in. What had Hojo had in mind when he had done what he had done to Vincent? Who could read the mind of a psycho like Hojo, but it was obvious from what she had heard of the tale that Hojo had wanted Vincent to suffer, suffer more than any man had suffered before. But even though he was mad Hojo was no fool. Perhaps he had given thought to the possibility that Vincent might someday escape from the coffin that had imprisoned him. Would it be too much of a stretch to believe that Hojo had deliberately created the Chaos beast inside Vincent knowing full well it would somehow destroy him if he ever escaped from Hojo's snare? Elena had to admit it seemed like just the sort of twisted thing that Hojo would have delighted in.

Quite suddenly she decided she didn't blame Vincent for wanting to come here one bit.

They walked down a narrow flight of stairs, the air around them becoming darker still, until Elena could barely see Vincent walking just a few paces in front of her. It must have been late afternoon outside, but only the faintest hint of light penetrated this far into Shinra headquarters.

She was about to suggest Vincent break out the flashlight she had seen him bring along when they turned a corner and saw light up ahead.

It was a ceiling light near the end of the corridor. The translucent plastic panel concealing it was cracked and filthy, but the bulb behind it still glowed palely. As they approached it they heard a scurrying sound and Elena saw something small quickly dash off into the shadows. Vincent glanced up at the light as they walked by.

"Looks like some of the lights still work from the last time we were here," he commented.

They walked on. Vincent glanced back at her for a moment when she did not reply, but did not speak. Elena was keeping a wary eye on the debris in the corridor around them. She wouldn't be too thrilled to run into any rats, but she could think of a lot worse things they might find.

They entered a large room, and Elena remained remarkably calm at the sight of the worn bones of three skeletons scattered on the floor. Though the bones had been picked clean by scavengers, most of the clothing still remained. She looked around suddenly, realizing where they were.

"Hey," she stated. "This was where I shot you."

He glanced over at her.

"Don't remind me," he said. "C'mon. It's not much farther now."

He led her down another hallway. She couldn't understand how he could remember the way after all this time, but a few minutes later they came upon another room that had obviously been used as a lab at one time. This room was quite bright, with nearly half the ceiling lights still functional.

"Here we are," Vincent stated.

Elena stepped into the room and looked around.

"So what do I look for?" she asked.

"Unfortunately, I'm not really sure," Vincent replied. "I guess look in the desks for whatever notes or papers you can find."

Vincent walked off and Elena went over to a small nearby desk and began pulling open draws. She wasn't really too hopeful of finding anything. What were the odds they'd just stumble on the research notes they needed? But what the heck, stranger things had been known to happen.

They spent the better part of an hour searching carefully through the room. Anything they found that might be even of vague interest they stacked on a large table in the center of the room. Neither one of them wanted to sit here in the ruins of Midgar for hours sorting through it all. They would take whatever looked promising with them when they left, and look it over at their leisure far away from here.

Twice Elena thought she heard something outside the door. Each time when she looked out, gun ready, she saw nothing. She looked at Vincent after the second time.

"Thought I heard something," she said. "Must be my imagination."

He shook his head. "No it's not."

That statement didn't exactly inspire confidence in her, but he said nothing more.

Finally there was but one cabinet in the back of the room left to look through. Elena left it for Vincent and sat down at the table beside their pile of 'keepers'. She stared at the papers in front of her. They had accumulated quite a collection. It wouldn't be an easy task carrying it all back with them.

The room was quiet, so silent that she could hear the faint buzzing of the overhead lights. It was more of a feeling than anything else. Perhaps a subtle change in the shadows was what gave it away, or perhaps senses long trained to detect danger. For whatever reason, she suddenly felt a presence behind her.

She stood up and spun around just as the huge claw smashed down, shattering the chair she had just vacated with a *crack*.

She wasn't sure what it was. It looked vaguely human, except for the crablike head and the huge misshapen claws at the end of its arms. In any case, she didn't have time to stand there inspecting it.

The claw slashed at her again, and she tumbled to the floor to avoid it. The beast charged at her, both arms upraised, but she rolled to the right, directly underneath the table and scrambled to pull her gun out of her jacket.

The claws came down on top of the table, splintering it and sending their carefully collected papers scattering into the air. The table split in two and fell away, leaving Elena exposed once more. She rolled to the side again, narrowly missing the jagged edge of the broken table, then leapt to her feet, finger on the trigger. But suddenly the creature was staggering backwards, blood spurting from its forehead. Vincent fired the death penalty a second time, and the creature fell backwards to the ground. It struggled feebly for a moment, until Elena put two more bullets into it for good measure.

Vincent walked over to her.

"You all right?" he asked.

"Yes," Elena replied after taking a moment to catch her breath. "What was that thing?"

Vincent shrugged.

"All kinds of strange creatures running around here," he replied. "And I'm sure there's more where this came from. I've checked the last cabinet. Let's gather up what we have and get out of here. I think we're beginning to overstay our welcome."

Elena nodded. Together they quickly picked up the papers that the beasts attack had scattered. Then they started back the way they had come. None too soon for Elena.

The corridors outside were darker than ever. Elena wondered just how long they had been down here. Was it getting dark outside already? She wished Vincent would walk a little faster.

Even as she thought this he stopped suddenly. She looked at him, harder than ever to see in the gloom around them. He appeared to be listening intently.

She stood still and listened as well, but heard nothing. But then she did catch something, or thought she did. It was very faint, and she wasn't even sure she heard it, but it sounded like a stealthy footfall from somewhere ahead.

Vincent slowly bend down and placed the papers he had been holding down on the ground. He pulled out his weapon and turned to look at her, holding his fingers to his lips. Then he spun around and started silently forward.

Elena carefully put down her stack of papers and unholstered her gun as well, but she did not follow Vincent. She could barely see in the darkness, but even if it had been fully light she knew she could not match Vincent's silence as he moved along the hallway.

He didn't go far anyway. The corridor turned a corner no more than five meters in front of them. Vincent walked up to the corner and flattened himself against the wall. Elena could just barely make out his dark outline.

For what seemed like a long time he remained there motionless. Elena waited, gun ready, still listening carefully. Once or twice more she thought she heard the sound of a footstep, but it was so faint she could not be positive.

Suddenly there was a flash of movement. She heard a cry and saw Vincent struggling with another dark form. She dashed forward, gun held at the ready, as the two figures battled in front of her. For a moment she thought that Vincent was fighting another of the creatures that had attacked her in the other room, for it was humanoid in shape. But then she realized that it wasn't so. Much to her surprise she saw that he humanoid shape was in fact a human.

She stopped a few feet away from the two, ready to fire, but Vincent had a hold of the man and was trying to pull him down, and they were much too close together for her to get a clear shot.

Suddenly Vincent's opponent twisted round, trying to grab Vincent's leg and knock him to the floor. Vincent shifted his weight to avoid this, but doing so caused them both to overbalance. They staggered to the side and slammed heavily into the wall.

The wall shuddered and cracked, and suddenly a light in the ceiling over their head sputtered faintly to life.

Vincent's fist came around and struck his opponent on the side of the head, knocking him over. But the movement made him lose his balance again, and he stumbled back toward Elena. She saw her opening and stepped forward, bringing her gun up.

But even as she was about to fire Vincent's hand suddenly shot and grabbed hold of her arm.

"Wait," he snapped.

Vincent was staring at the man, who was on one knee, holding his head where Vincent has struck him. The man was looking at them thoughtfully.

"A fine greeting after all this time, Vincent Valentine" the man said, the trace of a smile forming on his lips. "I must say your punches have developed a wee bit of sting since the last time we met. And who's this lovely lass by your side? Not that I'm complaining, mind ya, but you always were a bit of a loner."

Elena lowered her gun and looked at Vincent.

"You know this man?"

Vincent did not reply, just stood there looking at the other man.

"Of course he knows me," the man said, getting to his feet and wiping a bit of blood off his lip. He looked at Vincent.

"Even after all this time, I'm sure you haven't forgotten me, though I think it more'n likely that you would like to."

Vincent shook his head slowly.

"No, I haven't forgotten you, Vernon," he replied slowly.

Vernon walked slowly over to them, casting a long glance at Elena along the way.

"So are you going to introduce us?" he questioned.

Vincent gave him a look that was plainly unhappy, then turned toward Elena.

"Elena, this is Vernon Valentine," he said flatly. "My brother."