

CHAPTER VII: THE TRUTH IS OUT THERE

If not for a fluke of geography, Cosmo Canyon would not be a desert. The prevailing winds blew from the east toward the continent, picking up moisture above the ocean. The moisture laden winds then traveled west over the continent until they ran into the mountain range that stood like a roadblock down the center of the landmass. To the north of Cosmo Canyon gaps in the mountains provided passage for the winds, allowing them to flow through and bring their renewing rains to Nibelheim. To the south the mountains quickly petered out. But east of Cosmo Canyon the mountains were an unbroken chain. There the winds were forced upward, into the upper atmosphere where the generally colder temperature squeezed the moisture out of them. Most of the moisture fell on Corel, which made it one of the wettest towns on the continent. By the time the winds reached Cosmo Canyon, they had little moisture left for the barren land below.

But even though the red clay mountains of Cosmo Canyon were inhospitable, that didn't mean that life didn't flourish there. Insects and small reptiles abounded, feeding on each other or the tough grasses that grew in the shade of the valley floors, protected from the sun by the steep canyon walls. Larger creatures could be found here on occasion as well, though not in abundance. The largest indigent animal was the mountain deer, a small brown and white beast resembling an antelope. It was astonishingly nimble, and generally could be found high up on the cliff faces, appearing in numbers in areas that looked totally unreachable. But now a small herd stood at the bottom a deep ravine, feeding on the grass that did not grow up on the steep slopes above. There were perhaps a dozen of them, scattered across the floor of the ravine, but not too far apart. Most were adults, but there were a few adolescents and four very young ones, who were positioned in the center of the group. All but the youngest ate nervously, looking up every few moments at the red cliffs around them. They were uncomfortable down in the ravine, and vulnerable to predators.

Nipala crouched about thirty yards away, her yellow eyes fixed on the herd. The reddish hues of her fur blended perfectly with the rock around her. Except for the slight twitching of her tail, she hadn't moved a muscle in ten minutes.

It had taken her almost a half hour to get this close. The herd was wary, especially some of the older adults, but they would have to be to have lived this long in the first place. There was almost always one looking around while the others ate. She could only move when that one turned away.

She surveyed the herd with a sharp predators eye. She already had her target picked out. An older one near the edge of the heard. Ordinarily she wouldn't go for one so seasoned, but she had detected a slight limp in one of it's rear legs, hardly noticeable, but enough to catch her attention. Probably the result of some slip up on the cliffs above. Nothing too serious, but enough to slow the creature down a step, and for a prey species that step could cost it it's life.

The deer in question had been slowly moving closer to her, and she remained still, hoping the trend would continue. She kept measuring the distance. It was almost close enough now, just a few more feet. Almost imperceptibly she lowered her body down in anticipation of the spring.

The grass did not blanket the ravine floor, but grew in isolated tufts where there was the most shelter from the sun. The deer Nipala was watching finished off the grass where it was standing and looked around for more. It looked in her direction. She immediately froze. The deer stood there for a moment unmoving, then turned away, and she could see that it had decided the grass in the other direction was more plentiful.

In a blur of motion Nipala leapt forward. The distance was still a little long, but she hoped the fact that the deer had turned away from her would make up for that. For a split second the herd seemed undisturbed, then a adult of the far side of the herd noticed her. Immediately it started a short barking call, almost like a cough, that signaled danger to the rest of the the animals.

Immediately the herd bolted, scattering in all directions, most leaping directly up the hill to the safety of the steep cliffs above. But Nipala paid no attention, her eyes totally focused on her target. The deer had cast one fearful glance behind it at the warning and dashed away, heading toward the almost vertical hillside on the other side of the ravine, Nipala right behind it. Ordinarily they were almost evenly matched in speed, and even with the advantage of surprise she would not have been able to reach it before it escaped up the cliff face. But Nipala had chosen well, the deer's bad leg slowed it down just enough. The distance closed, and just as it was about to leap upward she lunged forward, one paw sweeping out and knocking it's back legs out from under it. With a bark of alarm, the deer fell to the ground.

The deer lunged to it's feet, and Nipala wondered if it understood that the fall would ordinarily be fatal, and if it was even now, as it scrambled madly to escape, anticipating the feel of Nipala's fangs on it's neck.

But that didn't happen. The deer leapt up onto the rock, scrambling quickly to safety, as Nipala sat back on her haunches, looking at it, a smile of satisfaction on her face.

"Gotcha," she muttered.

Nipala watched the deer for a few minutes as the herd slowly reorganized itself on the slopes above her. They still eyed her warily, even though she could not possibly reach them anymore.

For as long as she could remember, she had been a hunter. And, although the people of Cosmo Canyon now provided all that she needed, the urge was still strong. She no longer needed to hunt to eat, but now only to hone her skills and for the sheer pleasure.

Suddenly her ears perked up as she heard faint sounds coming from deeper in the ravine. She sat there for a moment, listening intently, until she was sure something was approaching. Then she slipped back into the shadows of the hillside, thinking perhaps her hunting fun was not over yet.

She placed herself just up the slope on one side of the ravine amid a jumble of rocks and red clay dust. Thus positioned she had a clear view of anything coming up the ravine while remaining almost invisible herself.

She waited patiently as the sounds came nearer. As they approached they became more distinguishable and she identified them as the sounds of chocobos. A moment later four of the birds appeared trotting rapidly toward Cosmo Canyon. She recognized the riders immediately.

She stood up, emerging from the rocks. The lead chocobo gave a startled wark as the red beast appeared in front of it as if out of nowhere. It shied back until the rider steadied it with a sure hand.

"Hello Nipala," Cloud said, a little surprised himself at her sudden appearance. "Where'd you come from?"

"Right over there," she said with a nod of her head. "Welcome back to Cosmo Canyon."

"Thanks," he replied. "It's good to be here."

"How are things with Red and Ellengio? Have they deciphered that book yet?" Tifa asked.

Nipala shook her head.

"Don't remind me," she replied. "They've been poring over that thing almost non stop for the last two days. But they haven't figured it out yet. Neither one will admit it, but I think they're getting a little frustrated."

"Hmm, you mean the geniuses have found something they can't figure out?" Cloud commented.

"Oh stop," Aeris said from behind him. "I'm sure they're trying very hard. Let's go talk to them. I'll bet they could use a break."

"They probably haven't even noticed we left," Cloud muttered. Aeris gave him a look as her chocobo cantered past.

They rode up the steps and into the town, Aeris and Nipala leading the way. They dismounted in front of the stables and led the chocobos in. A few minutes later they found themselves in Bugenhagen's observatory. Red and Ellengio were in the same room they had been in when Cloud and his companions had left. They were sitting on the floor, with the large book open in front of them. Red stood up as they walked in.

"So what happened with Zack?" he asked.

Cloud explained what had occurred in Ifalna and the fact that they suspected Zack might be headed toward Gongaga. Red nodded when he had finished.

"Seems like a logical conclusion," he observed. "Are you going to be staying here at all, or must you be on your way immediately?"

Cloud looked at the others. They were all weary from hours on the road.

"This is as good a place as any, and better than most, to rest up for a while. But not for long. I'd like to get to Gongaga before nightfall."

"Then I fear you won't have much time," Red said, glancing out the window at the afternoon sun.

"I hear you haven't made much progress with the book," Cloud stated.

"I'm afraid not," Ellengio said, sounding disappointed. "It's a difficult task, and might take years, if it can be translated at all. All languages on the planet are interrelated to a greater or lesser extent, having some words that are similar. But this one is completely alien. We have no base to compare it to. I'm afraid it may be impossible to translate."

"But we haven't given up yet," Red stated. He looked over at Ellengio "We think it might be time to let someone else take a look at it."

"You mean one of the elders?" Reeve asked.

"No," Red replied. "We've already had Illyanova and the most learned elders look at it, and they could not help. No, I was thinking of someone else. A linguistic expert that I've heard of has developed a computer program to help translate languages. In fact, I was just discussing this with Ellengio."

Ellengio nodded.

"I suppose it couldn't hurt," he said. "We've done everything we can here."

"So who's this expert?" Cloud asked.

"Her name is Lai Li," Red replied. "She resides in Wutai. Apparently she's some kind of language prodigy. She could speak five different tongues by the time she was ten. When she was sixteen she helped Dr. Langston translate the ancient Da-Chao tablets."

Ellengio nodded slowly, obviously of an opinion that this was quite an impressive feat. Cloud and the others just looked at Red blankly.

"I'm sure they're not interested in all that," Nipala cut in. "You've been working on this all morning, and Cloud and the others have been on the road. What say we all take a break and have something to eat?"

"That sounds great," Cloud quickly agreed.

They left the observatory and retired to Red's private quarters. He had a meal brought in for them and they quickly dispatched it. All except Aeris, who only picked at her food.

Reeve, who was sitting on her left, looked at the others. Red and Ellengio were still discussing what they might be able to find out from the book, while Cloud, Tifa and Nipala seemed to be concentrating on eating.

Reeve turned toward Aeris and said in a low voice.

"I'm sure he'll be fine."

Aeris, who had been looking down at her plate, turned toward him.

"I'm sorry," she said. "I have been a bit gloomy, haven't I? It's just that..."

She paused, her head shaking just ever so slightly, then she looked away from him.

"What?" he prodded gently. What had happened to Zack had affected them all, but obviously was bothering Aeris a great deal more than anyone else. He told himself it was because Aeris was concerned about everyone, but he couldn't help but wonder if there was more to it than that. He realized it was stupid to be jealous, and silently berated himself for feeling that way, but it was there, just the same.

"Nothing," Aeris said slowly. There was no point in trying to explain it. She had been through this once with him already. She didn't want to see her friends hurt, and she couldn't help but feel it was her fault. She knew that was silly, and that Tifa was right, she couldn't hold herself responsible for other peoples actions. But she couldn't help it. The fact of the matter was, if they hadn't been fighting, over her, then none of this would be happening. She didn't know what Zack had in mind, if he indeed had anything in mind at all, but she did know this, if something happened to him, she would never be able to forgive herself.

Slowly her gaze returned to Reeve. He was watching her, concern etched on his face. She sat there looking at him thoughtfully. He loved looking into her eyes, always so open and innocent, but at the same time the very openness of her look made him uncomfortable. It was almost as if she was letting people look right into her naked soul, baring it for all to see, leaving nothing bidden, nothing concealed. But there was a risk to it, this openness. It was the source of her greatest strength yet left her vulnerable at the same time. He was intimidated by that, for it was not normal. It was not something a *human* could do. He lowered his eyes.

"Promise me something," she said.

He looked up at her again.

"Whatever you wish," he said immediately.

"Promise me that when we find Zack," she paused for a moment, and now she seemed to be staring off into space absently. "That there won't be any more fighting between you two."

Reeve hesitated for a moment. He wanted to tell her that he had never had any intention of fighting about her in the first place. He wanted to tell her that he had just been minding his own business. He wanted to tell her that *he* hadn't been the one that had started the argument, and that *he* hadn't been the one that had threatened anyone. But he had a feeling that none of that would make her feel any better, so all he said was;

"Of course."

Cloud stood up and Aeris saw that the others had finished their meals.

"Well, we better get going," Cloud stated. "Like I said, we'd like to get to Gongaga before nightfall."

"Very well," Red agreed as the others got up as well. He looked at Ellengio. "And we'd like to get to Wutai as soon as possible ourselves."

He turned to Nipala.

"Are you accompanying us?"

"Of course," she replied.

"Well, let's get going then," Red stated.

They all walked back to the stables together. All except Red and Nipala mounted up and they slowly rode out of the canyon again. When they reached the grass covered plain at the base of the mountains Cloud, Tifa, Aeris and Reeve turned to the south, while the others continued westward. About a half hour later they had reached the coast. As part of the stronger ties between Cosmo Canyon and Wutai since the battle with Jenova a ferry service had been established crossing the narrow ocean between the two continents. It had originally run directly across the narrow straight from the beaches west of Cosmo Canyon to the area on the southern end of the Wutai continent that held the only strip of shoreline where boats could land. However just last month they had put the finishing touches on a new harbor that had been dug out on the coast just east of Wutai. Now the ferry ran up the coast from Cosmo Canyon and delivered its passengers almost at Wutai's doorstep. A trip that had taken half a day by land was thus reduced to but a few hours travel in the comfort of the ferry.

They boarded the craft and soon were on their way. The seas were very rarely stormy in this area of the world, but a stiff wind often blew down between the continents from the north, making the water choppy. For seasoned sailors, it was nothing that would even be noticed, but for those unused to travel at sea, it made the ride a bit bumpy.

Ellengio availed himself of one of the seats in the covered lounge, keeping him comfortably out of the sun and the salt spray. Ren and Nipala, on the other hand, stood at the very bow of the ship, letting the cool wind rush through their fur and breathing in the salty air, while watching the white foam of the water as the bow cut through the waves. Red had spent little time in sea travel. In fact, his travels with his companions in Avalanche had been the first time he had been on a boat, but he found that he enjoyed it immensely. There was something fascinating about looking out and seeing nothing but a vast expanse of water all around you. The smells, the sights, the sounds, were all new and exciting. He knew his friends would be surprised to hear it, but he had promised himself more than once in the last few years while sitting in the often sweltering heat of Cosmo Canyon, that if he ever got the opportunity he would find himself a ship and take a long ocean voyage.

This voyage, however, was not a very long one, and soon they saw the new harbor in the distance, with the mountains of Da-Chao and the tall spire of the Pagoda of the Five Gods looming up behind it. The ship docked soon after, and they departed, though not without a wistful backwards glance or two by Red. They walked along a wide paved road running toward the town through groves of oak and cedar trees. The road was well traveled, and they had to step aside on numerous occasions to let a large cart or truck pass by. The ferry wasn't the only ship to dock at the new harbor, and merchants had been quick to seize upon the new opportunities for trade that the harbor opened up for them. Already there seemed to be a sizable amount of merchandise making its way to and from the coast.

It wasn't long before they were in Wutai proper. As usual the streets were crowded with people. Wutai might not be the largest city, but it certainly seemed to be the busiest. But in spite of the fact that the crowded streets often put people in each other's way, the citizens always seemed cheerful and polite. It was a far cry from the far less crowded yet much more sullen streets of Junon, a city where the cab drivers seemed just as happy to run you over as take your fare.

"So where do we find this Lai Li person?" Nipala inquired.

"She's meeting us at Lord Godo's house," Red replied.

They made their way rapidly through the crowds, which thinned out some by the time they reached Godo's residence. There was a small group of people standing by the front door. As they approached one of the figures called out their names and started towards them.

"We've been expecting you," Chekhov said warmly. "Godo is waiting inside. He wished me to express his apologies for not meeting you down at the dock, but he had some business that he had to attend to."

"No apology is necessary," Red replied.

Chekhov nodded and led them inside. They passed down a short hallway and a moment later found themselves in Godo's private quarters. Godo himself was seated on a chair in front of a rather ornate mahogany desk. A young woman stood beside him. There was a computer on the desk in front of them.

Godo stood up and turned to his guests as they entered.

"Greetings, Nanaki," he said cheerfully. "It is good to see you and your companions again."

"It's always a pleasure to visit Wutai," Red replied.

"So kind of you to say so," Godo responded. He looked at the young woman, who was staring at Red and Nipala with a great deal of interest.

"This is Lai Li," he said.

Red greeted her and introduced the others.

"Nice to meet you," she said, her eyes resting on the tome in Ellengio's hands. "Is that the book?"

Ellengio nodded.

"Indeed it is," he replied.

"I'd like to get started on it immediately," she said, making no attempt to hide her enthusiasm.

She walked rapidly over to Ellengio.

"I'm sure you do," Godo said with a smile. "But our friends have just arrived and may be tired from their trip." He looked at Red. "Perhaps you would like to rest up a bit before starting on this, or maybe have a bite to eat."

"No, we are quite rested," Red replied. "The trip on the ferry was very comfortable, and we ate right before we left. Besides, I think we are as anxious as Lai Li here to get started on this."

"Very well," Godo answered. He indicated the computer. "You may use the computer here. It's all set up to go. Lai Li and I were discussing this before you arrived, but I am afraid I am quite behind the times when it comes to the use of computers. I'm afraid the technology has passed me by."

"You do yourself an injustice, Lord Godo," Lai Li replied. "You were picking things up quite nicely."

"The young lady is merely flattering an old man," Godo replied. "I'm afraid I have other business to attend to, but feel free to use my quarters for as long as you wish."

"Thank you," Red said.

Ellengio handed the book to Lai Li as Godo left the room. She took it and sat down in front of the computer. The others gathered round behind her.

"So how exactly does this work?" Ellengio asked.

"It would take me hours to explain," Lai Li replied. "This program is very complicated and took years to develop. I'm going to scan the pages of the book into the computer, and then it's going to try to decipher it using logic and the database of thousands of languages stored inside it."

"Scan the whole book?" Nipala said, looking at the large tome. "That will take hours."

"Yes it will," Lai Li replied, apparently unperturbed by the prospect. "But it's the only way to do it. With each of us taking turns, it shouldn't be too tedious a chore."

"I don't think our paws would be very useful for this job," Red pointed out.

"Oh yeah," Lai Li replied. "I suppose not. Okay, just Ellengio and I, but still, I think we can manage it."

Ellengio nodded and said nothing.

"And once it's in, how long do you think it will take?" Red asked.

Lai Li shrugged.

"Hard to say," she replied. "It's optimized for speed, so it's quite possible we could have an answer in a few hours. But it might take a day or two, and sometimes longer. If we don't have an answer by then, it's likely that we'll never get one, but I'll let it run as long as a week if I have to."

None of the others looked too thrilled with that prospect. Lai Li saw their faces.

"Don't worry. The longest it took with any language we tested it on was 37 hours. And while it's running, we can look it over ourselves and see if we can come up with something. Computer programs are good, and getting better every day, but sometimes all the computing power in the world is still no match for the human brain."

"We've been looking at it for two days and have come up empty," Red commented.

Lai Li looked at them coolly.

"That may be true, but you didn't have me with you then, now did you?"

Red shook his head as Nipala walked over to the window and looked out. This was her first visit to Wutai and she had to admit she found the city enthralling. She could see the crowded square and the colorfully decorated houses lining it outside, their architecture quite different from anything she had seen before, but very beautiful to look at. It was good thing too, because she had a feeling they were going to be here for quite some time.

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The cold wind whistled through the concrete canyons that were the streets of Junon, and Elena pulled her coat tighter around her. The skies were gray above her, and heavy with the threat of the year's first snowfall. Winter was not Elena's favorite time of year, and the forecasters were predicting an especially harsh winter this year. But, of course, there wasn't anything she could do about it.

A car horn blared in the street nearby. She walked on, not even glancing in that direction. The rarity of fossil fuels on the planet meant that most cities had few cars, and in fact had been a major reason most had turned to Mako energy. Since the downfall of Shinra and the discovery of the dangers of Mako, the search for new sources of fossil fuels had become a number one priority of most of the cities, and as it happened, Junon was lucky enough to have stumbled upon a large cache of oil, more through luck than anything else, while drilling offshore. As a result Junon was blessed with a much higher percentage of vehicles than all other towns on the planet. To someone unused to it, the rumbling of engines and the blare of horns would be a distraction, but Elena had been in Junon often enough to have become numb to the sounds of the traffic.

The traffic had jammed up here because of a large truck that had decided to stop in the right lane and unload it's cargo. Elena took the opportunity to slip across the street, not bothering to walk to the corner. She coughed as a huge cloud of black smoke being emitted from a pick up truck enveloped her. One of the other trade offs of having all these cars was the pollution they emitted. She glanced up at the gray skies above her again, recognizing that the color was not wholly due to winters approach.

She reached the sidewalk and walked another two blocks until she came to a large gray building fronted by roman columns. The words Junon Public Library were stenciled in the stone above the entrance. Elena walked inside.

Her shoes clicked on the slate floor as she walked across the cavernous lobby. She looked around. The lobby was crowded but no one seemed interested in her. Still, the noise of her shoes made her uncomfortable. Her Turk instincts told her any sound that gave you away was to be avoided. But she had no reason to be concerned about being detected here.

Even so, she felt better after she walked up to the second floor and her feet fell silent on the carpeted floors of the halls above. She walked slowly down the hall, following the signs until she found a room with a small plaque on the door that said 'publications'. The door was open, and the room contained two rows of chairs and small desks, each one with a computer terminal on top of them. She sat down at one, laying her coat on a vacant chair at the desk beside her. She pulled her own chair closer to the computer and typed quickly on the keyboard. The database in this computer system stored all the newspaper articles from most of the papers in Junon for the last 50 years. She quickly selected 'search' and 'name' and then typed in Victoria Valentine.

The computer paused for a moment, then the names and dates of two articles appeared on the screen, both from the Junon Daily News, the most prominent paper in the town, and both from thirty years ago. She clicked on the earlier article and the information filled the screen:

IJUNON DAILY NEWS

IDAUGHTER OF WEALTHY INDUSTRIALIST MATTHEW VALENTINE KILLED BY GUNSHOT WOUND

IBodine Clemens

IStaff writer for the Junon Daily News

IA 911 call yesterday night brought police to the home of wealthy industrialist Matthew Valentine. There they found Victoria Valentine, Mr. Valentine's 17 year old daughter, suffering from a single gunshot wound to the chest. In spite of paramedics heroic attempts to save the young woman's life, she was pronounced dead just after midnight at Junon Medical Center. Miss Valentine's two brothers, Vincent (18) and Vernon (14) were said to be the only other people in the house at the time of the incident. Mr. Valentine and his wife were at a Shinra Executives dinner at the time the shooting took place, but hurried home upon learning of the incident. Both Mr. Valentine and his wife are said to be distraught over the loss of their only daughter. Police are investigating.

Elena went back and clicked on the next article, which was dated three days later.

IJUNON DAILY NEWS

IVICTORIA VALENTINE LAID TO REST

IAP wire service

IVictoria Valentine, daughter of industrialist Matthew Valentine, was laid to rest during a small private ceremony this morning. After an investigation the police have labeled the death accidental. Victoria was killed by her older brother, Vincent Valentine during some 'horseplay' with a handgun at the Valentine estate. Vincent Valentine had recently been inducted as a member of the Shinra organization, the Turks, and had been celebrating with his siblings when the gun discharged, accidentally killing Miss. Valentine.

Elena quickly scanned the rest of the article, but it contained no other information of interest to her. She returned the main screen and sat back in her chair, looking at the computer while lost in thought.

Everything in the articles seemed to confirm what Vernon had told her. She had spoken to Vincent a couple of times since talking to Vernon, but Vincent had let the subject die each time, only reiterating on the fact that Vernon was a liar and she should not believe anything he told her.

Vernon had told her that they had grown up in Junon, and she had hit upon the idea of coming here and finding out for herself what the truth was. Now it appeared that Vernon had been telling her the truth all along.

Elena shook her head slowly. The more she thought about this the more it disturbed her, especially Vincent's reaction to it all. She could understand him not wanting to talk about it, or even be reminded of it, but the obvious hatred he seemed to carry for his brother did not seem to jib with the facts. Vernon had done nothing wrong, just been there when Victoria had been killed. She couldn't see that as being enough to cause Vincent to act this way. She knew Hojo had done horrible things to Vincent, and it had scarred him for life, but he was strong enough to get over it and get on with his life, no matter how difficult. Shouldn't he be strong enough to get over his feelings about his brother, especially since he had done nothing and so much time had passed?

On the other hand, who was she to judge? She hadn't gone through the terrors Vincent had endured at the hand of Hojo, she couldn't know just what that had done to him. Perhaps this was just his way of protecting himself. There were limits to what anyone could stand, and just maybe bringing back the memory of his sister, after working so hard at shutting it out, was just what it would take to push him over the edge. Maybe his irrational response was the only way he could cope with all this and keep his sanity. She was glad she hadn't told Vincent she was coming to do this.

Elena hung her head. She had been hoping to find some answers here, something that would clear up all the questions she had, but all she seemed to have done was raise more questions, most of which could only be answered by Vincent. And she knew that wasn't going to happen anytime soon.

She lifted her head again and tapped on the keyboard, returning to the search. This time for 'name' she entered Matthew Valentine.

The computer paused again, for a longer period this time. Then a list of dozens of articles appeared on the screen. It appeared that Matthew Valentine had led an interesting life.

Elena starting looking through them, but quickly became disappointed. Most of them had to do with Mr. Valentine's business dealings, which seemed to be quite extensive. But then, near the end, she came upon one article that immediately caught her eye.

IJUNON DAILY NEWS

IMILLIONNAIRE INDUSTRIALIST MATTHEW VALENTINE AND HIS WIFE FOUND MURDERED AT THEIR ESTATE

IGelford Sampson

IJunon Daily News staff writer

IMatthew Valentine and his wife, Serina, were found dead in their bed by servants this morning. Both had been killed by a single gunshot wound to the head. Their younger son, Vernon, as well as the butler and maid, were all at the estate that night, but none of them reported hearing or seeing anything out of the ordinary. The killer apparently came in through an upstairs window, somehow circumventing the burglar alarm, then made his way to the master bedroom, where he gunned down both Mr. Valentine and his wife. Mr. Valentine had made many enemies in his business career and the methods used in this crime suggests this was a professional hit. The Valentines oldest son, Vincent, a member of the Turks, is being sought for questioning but the police have so far been unable to locate him.

The article went into some detail about Matthew Valentines life, but revealed nothing more of significance to Elena. She quickly looked through the remaining articles, most of which dealt with the funeral arrangements and testimony's to the late couple by influential friends and business associates. After she had read the last one she returned to the main menu once more.

She glanced up at the clock. There was plenty more she wanted to look into, but she didn't have the time. She wanted to get back to Kalm before nightfall. She picked up her coat and walked downstairs, slipping it on as she crossed the lobby once again. Outside it was colder than ever, and she shivered for a few minutes even with her coat on, until her body began to adjust.

She didn't know what to make of what she had learned about Vincent's parents. It seemed that his whole life had been filled with just one tragedy after another. No wonder he was so screwed up. She wondered if she should even bring it up when she saw him again. Actually, that would probably not be a good idea. He would be bound to question where she had obtained the information, and she had no desire to get in a fight with him over this. She decided she would talk to Vernon about it instead. She didn't know exactly what had happened all those years ago, but she was beginning to realize that Vincent's life before his encounter with Hojo was much more complicated than she had ever suspected.

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A lone figure with hair as black as midnight stopped in front of a nondescript house among a row of nondescript houses that lined this particular street in Gongaga. He held the reins of a chocobo that stood patiently beside him, both of them looking rather travel stained and weary. The man stood silent in the street for a long time, so long in fact, that the bird beside him began to get impatient and warked plaintively. Eventually, the man led the chocobo slowly up to the door of the house.

Again Zack hesitated, looking at the town around him and the house he now stood before. This was the house, Aeris had told him the number, but none of it looked familiar to him. The town must have changed quite a bit since he had been here last, but even if it had remained exactly the same, he still would not have recognized a single structure.

He had passed a few people on the road on the way in, but none of them had been familiar to him, nor had he seen a glimmer of recognition in any of their faces.

He looked at the door in front of him and paused again. All this time he had shied away from coming back here, avoided the town because he was afraid. Afraid that he would return and there would be nothing here for him. But now he had returned, only to find that his fears were justified. He felt no ties, no attachment to this town, or the people in it. To him it was just like any of the nameless and forgotten other towns he had passed through while known as the Swordsman. And now he stood in the doorway of the home he had grown up in, and still he felt not the slightest glimmer of familiarity. For a moment he almost turned away, knowing that if the door opened he would find himself looking into the faces of strangers, and not sure he would be able to bear it, but the truth of the matter was he had no place left to go.

His hand came up but before he could knock the door swung open of it's own accord. A middle aged women looked up, started. Then suddenly she froze, staring at the young man in front of her, her eyes slowly going wide and her mouth dropping open into an almost perfect 'o'.

Then she swept him into her arms, grabbing him and hugging him so tightly it took his breath away.

"Oh my God," she said softly. "Oh my God, Zack."

She pulled back to look at him again, and he could see the tears in her eyes.

"It's so...it's so good to see you again," she managed, nearly overcome with emotion. "For the longest time we thought you were dead. It's been so long..we had given up hope..."

She pulled him toward her again, holding him silently and almost as tightly as the first time. Slowly his own arms came up and encircled her.

Eventually she released him, grabbing hold of his arm and drawing him inside, a smile on her face now though the tears continued to fall. "Gagnon!" she called excitedly. "Gagnon, come see who's here!"

An older man stepped into the room.

"What's all the fuss, wo..."

His mouth fell open and he stood there staring at Zack for a moment. Then a huge smile appeared on his face and he came over and crushed Zack in a bear hug of his own.

"Zack!" he said. "I can hardly believe it's you. I never thought..."

He let go and took a step back, looking the young man over, and Zack could see that his eyes were moist as well.

"I never thought we'd see you again," Gagnon finished slowly.

Zack was silent, looking at the two people in front of him. It was obvious this was a very emotional experience for them, that they had missed him tremendously, but he did not share the feeling. As much as he tried, as much as he wanted to make himself believe these were his parents in front of him, as much as he wanted to feel that emotion, to have missed them as much as they seemed to have missed him, he did not. He felt nothing, nothing at all. He looked at the faces of the two people in front of him, and all he saw was two strangers. He had told himself this was exactly what would happen, but somehow, deep inside, he had hoped otherwise.

His mother was talking to him, and he heard himself answer, but it almost seemed like it was someone else. He felt detached, and slipping farther and farther away. The whole time as the Swordsman, the only thing that had really kept him going was the hope that he would somehow find the truth about his past, and about the woman who had haunted his dreams. Now he had found the woman, and had caused her nothing but heartache and injury since the moment he had met her. He had learned the truth, but it was a bitter pill to swallow. He had found his past again, but it meant nothing to him. He realized now it was lost, his past could never be returned to him, and what was he without that? What was anyone without their memories? He knew now that when Shinra had shot him they had taken away something that was irreplaceable. Though he had not died physically, they had killed him nonetheless.

His parents talked to him for almost three hours, until the sun was low on the horizon outside. They spoke of how he had grown, and that they would have to get the relatives together for a kind of reunion now that he was back. They also asked him a lot of questions about what he had been doing all this time. He answered all their questions as best he could, but finally he just had to get away. He made an excuse about needing to get a little fresh air. His mother looked at him closely, and asked if he was all right, but he politely brushed off her concern. She reluctantly agreed, saying she had to prepare dinner anyway, and for him not to come back too late or he would miss it.

He assured her he would be back soon, then walked outside.

The sun was sinking and the air was chill. Zack did not have a coat, but he ignored the cold. He started walking slowly down the street.

He should not have come back. It had been a foolish thing to do, just another selfish false hope. It would have been better off for them all if he had stayed away. Though he didn't feel like these people were his parents, he still didn't want to hurt anyone. But now he had raised their hopes as well, which would only make what was to come that much more painful.

He reached the edge of town and kept right on walking. He was heading toward the ocean, but a group of steep hills to the southwest caught his eye and he headed in that direction.

Things were just as he had feared. He had ruined his chances with Aeris. He had acted like a fool, and knew now that he could only cause her more grief, and he did not want that. He realized now that the hope of finding Aeris had been a false hope, just as the hope of finding some memory here in Gongaga had been. His past was gone, and with it all that he had ever been. There was nothing left for him anymore.

Slowly he walked into the deepening twilight, alone.