

Down the Rabbit Hole and What Vincent Found There.

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Vincent Valentine is a no-nonsense man. However, that isn't something a trip to Wonderland (and a twisted one at that) can't cure....if he survives it that is.

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Chapter 1 - Down The Rabbit Hole

2

1 - Down The Rabbit Hole

Pit-pat, pit-pat. There it was again. The sound that had been echoing through the Shinra mansion for a good five minutes. Vincent had gone into every room of the house to find the source and had yet to find the trace of another living being. When finally he decided he must be going insane, not to say he did not think he was not already, he finally caught sight of a flash of white fur.

He had been in the library when he saw something white zip past the open door. When he followed, he heard a voice in the next room mumbling something in a hurried and very distracted manner.

“Oh dear, my fur and whiskers! Where is he? We shall be late!” Vincent peeked in the door, not wishing to draw the attention of the speaker, and peeked through the crack. There, bouncing around the floor of the room in a flustered manner, was a white rabbit, if it could be called that. Its head seemed almost too big for its body, and its eyes were bulgy and had an almost disturbing green color. It wore an old waist coat and trousers and it held a pocket watch. The rabbit looked down at the watch, then towards the door and rushed to it, still muttering, “I’m late, I’m late...”

Vincent opened the door to confront the small and strange intruder, but found that the rabbit ignored him and rushed right past.

“Come back here,” Vincent said calmly, following the panicked rodent, “What are you doing here?”

“No no no no! I’m over due!” the rabbit continued to mutter to no one in particular, “No time to say hello, good-bye! I’m late, I’m late, I’m late!”

“Late for what?” Vincent asked himself, now rather curious about the strange hare. He followed the rabbit, which wasn’t too hard, for it would stop every few feet to mutter to itself and catch its breath.

This carried on for a few minutes as the rabbit popped into the other rooms on the second floor before huffing angrily to itself, “Well, I suppose I should get going...I’m late enough as it is!”

Vincent shook his head in disbelief as the white rabbit rushed into the corner room. This had to be a dream, or perhaps he really was going insane; Vincent couldn’t really tell one way or the other.

The rabbit went into the room, and to Vincent’s shock, opened the secret passaged in the corner, the passage that led down to the basement.

“Stay out of there,” he growled, rushing for the rabbit, but when he reached for its crooked ears, his hand passed through nothing but air. There was no way it could have been that fast, Vincent told himself.

“Now now, this passage is so drafty,” the rabbit muttered again, as it hopped quickly down the stairs. It pulled out a handkerchief, and as it did, a pair of gloves fell out of his pocket and onto the stairs. The

rabbit blew its nose as it continued down the wooden stairs and into the corridor below. Scooping up the gloves, if for no other reason to prove if this was a dream or not, ad followed the rabbit down.

The stairs ended in a passageway beneath the mansion that led to a laboratory that hadn't been used in quite some time, though Vincent and many others wished they hadn't been used at all. However, the rabbit didn't go into the lab, which was at the end of the hall, and instead went into the first room on the left, an old crypt.

Vincent's crypt.

The door closed behind the rabbit as Vincent put the gloves in his pocket and ran to the door. He wasn't sure why he was hurrying, because the rabbit had nowhere else to go. He opened the door and waited a moment as the smell of decay assaulted his nostrils, and saw the lid to his old coffin shudder slightly as slammed closed. Vincent drew his rifle and prepared to fire if the rabbit ended up being hostile. Despite how ridiculous the statement seemed, the physical appearance of the rabbit was disturbing enough to make Vincent somewhat cautious.

He walked carefully to the coffin and easily slid the lid off with his foot. Preparing to hear the rabbit start to mutter again, he stood back and waited; but the rabbit's voice never came. Vincent stood there for a moment, listening to the silence, and not even the sound of breathing could be heard from the casket. Vincent walked slowly to the coffin and looked in it. What he saw was unnerving.

Instead of the violet, silk lining of the coffin, the bottom of the casket was gone, just gone, and replaced with a black abyss. Nothing but empty, cold, blackness yawned out to him.

"How very...perculiar," Vincent whispered. Something in him wanted nothing more then to leap inside and fin out was in the hole, but his own reasoning told him how unwise that would be. Still, the fact of the matter remained: there was an empty hole that led somewhere in the middle of his home.

"I have very bad feeling about this...." Vincent muttered as he stepped up to the hole, his mind made up. Placing his hand on the casket's brim, he jumped over the wall and into the darkness below.

He fell through the darkness, completely unaware of how time was passing. There was nothing to measure his descent, and the darkness was so absolute that he could not see what the rest of the hole was like. Still, he continued to fall.

Finally, when it seemed an eternity had passed, he felt his feet touch solid ground, though it felt slightly muddy. The darkness still lingered around him for a moment, until it started to fade away, like mists at dawn.

Vincent glanced around at the strange hole he had jumped into. What was this place? Around him were trees, apparently dead, with bare, twisted and curving branches. Dried and black flowers lay strewn across the ground near a small pond full of stagnant water.

Something was watching him. He could feel it, but there was no obvious place for a stalker to hide.

"What are you looking for, Mr. Valentine?" Vincent heard a smooth, deep voice behind him ask. He

turned around quickly to see a face....no, not a face. Just a set of piercing, yellow eyes and a horrible, crooked-fanged mouth. When he saw the `face', he thought that he heard the faint sound of purring, or was it a growl?

"What are you?" Vincent asked calmly, "And how do you know me?" The grin didn't respond, but instead allowed the rest of its body to appear around it. Fur, paws, ears and claws seemed to fade into view slowly out of thin air, and after a moment, Vincent saw that it was a cat. Its fur was ragged and torn, its body terribly emaciated from hunger, so much so that you could see its skeleton beneath. The bones were long and thin, and the tail, which was the last to appear, looked like a chain with fur. The cat's left ear was slightly torn and sported an earring of the symbol of a male, while the right sported a symbol of a female. The whole cat, whose eerie grin was accentuated by its mangy and scrawny appearance, sat calmly in front of Vincent, looking deep into the man's eyes while its tail moved back and forth slowly.

"I know all about you, Mr. Valentine," the cat replied, "Or rather, what you are doing here in the first place..."

"You speak in riddles," Vincent answered, growing irritated.

"And you are rude," the cat shot back easily, "But who's searching for faults?"

"What is this place?" Vincent asked, trying to garner some information out of the strange cat, "And what am I doing here?"

"Where is here, you ask?" the cat replied, smiling even wider, so much so that Vincent thought his face may split in half, "Why....this is someplace that is very close, yet very far. A place where nightmares and dreams coincide but still hide from the other and fight to dominate the idle wanderer. This is Wonderland, Mr. Valentine, and it's a place you know very well..."

"I have never been here before," Vincent answered, looking suspiciously at the cat, who had started to pace around him methodically.

"Of course you haven't," the cat purred, "And no, you have....it really doesn't matter one way or the other..."

Well then, good cat," Vincent growled, "Would you be so kind as to tell me which way I should go to get back home?"

"There is no way from here," the cat replied, "You must go forward to go back, and there are only two ways to go forward from here." The cat stopped in front of Vincent again and waved his paw to the left. "Down that way lives a Hatter, and down that way," he added, waving his paw to the right, "Lives a March Hare. Visit either you like...they're both mad."

"I would prefer to stay amongst the sane..." Vincent replied, "Present company included..."

"My, we do have a tongue, don't we," the cat purred again, "Still, it doesn't matter, for you see, here in this land, we are all mad...I'm mad, you're mad..."

“How can you make such a claim?” Vincent asked.

“You're here, aren't you?” the cat answered coyly.

Vincent didn't reply, but simply looked down the two paths the cat had pointed out. Each one looked just as crooked and twisted as the cat's smile, but inside his heart, he somehow felt at peace about choosing a road.

“You know,” the cat said idly, licking his paw, which looked just as mangy as the rest of the feline, “I would freshen up a bit if I were you...the pond over there is full of scum, but it is cleaner than most of the things around here...”

“What are you up to?” Vincent asked, beginning to understand the crafty ways of the cat.

“Why, Mr. Valentine, whatever makes you think that I am up to something?” the cat said, still wearing his grin, but speaking with a hurt tone. “Have I given you any reason to doubt me....?”

Vincent just shook his head. He approached the pond, though he had certainly no intentions of drinking from the nasty thing. As he drew closer, the scum on top of the water drew aside like green, slim curtains to reveal and almost black water beneath. Still, the reflection on the water was as clear as a mirror, so when he gazed in, what he saw made him jump slightly.

No longer did he see the face of a cold, hard assassin, but instead the face of a younger him; the face of his sixteen-year-old self. He ran his hands over his face and found that both his ungloved hands met youthful skin. That's when the thought struck him. Looking down at his left hand, he saw that he no longer sported his golden claw, and that moving the appendage was simple and painless.

His clothes had also taken on a change. No longer did he wear a cape with a high collar, but instead a black dress shirt, with a blood-red waist coat. The coat was held closed by four chain clasps, each set of clasps a suit from a deck of cards, and in the pockets was a pocket-watch with a silver chain. He now wore a pair of perfectly pressed, black dress pants and a pair of shiny, black shoes. His hair was neatly pulled back into a half-ponytail, and in his left ear was a chain earring. At the end of the chain was a small, black club, also a suit from a deck of cards.

“What has happened to me?” Vincent asked as he looked himself up and down, and he fell silent when he heard that even his voice had taken on a younger, though still quite monotone, sound.

“You were rather distastefully dressed for Wonderland...” the cat sighed, returning to his cleaning, “So, I gave you a new wardrobe, one that fit your surroundings....”

“And who gave you permission to do such a thing?” Vincent spat, “And where is my gun?” When he had been inspecting himself, Vincent found that his pistol, Cerberus, was missing, and so was its holster.

“They're not here,” the cat said plainly, “After all, I can't have you disturbing the innocence of Wonderland...” This last bit was said with a slightly ironic tone, as he looked around at the twisted world they were standing in.

“Well, then, what am I to do?” Vincent asked, “It is quite obvious you want something...so what is it?”

The cat just calmly stretched and continued to smile as if he hadn't heard, but finally looked up at Vincent after a moment of silence and said, “Choose a path...” and with that, he vanished completely, as if he had never been there to begin with.

Vincent grumbled slightly to himself. He knew nothing of this place, nor why he here in the first place.

“That is the last time I follow a rabbit...” he said as he looked at the two paths. “Well, one leads towards a rabbit, and one to a human being, I hope....And since I am through with rabbits, I shall go to the left..”

Vincent started down the black dirt road to the left, keeping his eyes alert to any sort of movement. The landscape of Wonderland was the same as it had been near the black pond, with dead trees and grasses along the road. The sky was a dismal gray, though it to was almost black. Still, a light came from somewhere, and it was enough for him to see. In the distance, he could make out what appeared to be a village of some kind, though the houses were practically falling apart.

“The Hatter must have a shop there,” Vincent said quietly, “I wonder if that mangy cat thought the Hatter could help me...”

“Not at all,” the cat's voice suddenly said, and he appeared in front of Vincent just as he had disappeared a few minutes ago. “In fact, neither one could help you in any way.”

“Then why did you send me to them?” Vincent asked, though his voice didn't carry as much of an edge as it usually did.

“Because, you needed to begin moving,” the cat explained, “It is so tiresome standing in one place for a long time....you know, that is the definition of insanity, Vincent..”

“That's Mr. Valentine, to you, cat,” Vincent snapped, “And what do you mean by insanity?”

“To perform the same action repeatedly and expect different results each time,” the cat purred, still wearing the smile, “But you see, though I like madness as much as the next feline, you would do no good to me if I left you there to wait for when you wake up.”

“So this is a dream?” Vincent asked, becoming actually curious.

“Yes and no,” the cat replied, “But that's not important right now...what is important is what is at your feet...”

The cat vanished once again as Vincent looked down at his shoes. Standing there, about five inches high was a small...something. It looked like a sea anemone, with a dark red stem and flowering top. However, the top was not delicate tentacles, but a ring of very sharp fangs. The beast sprang up at Vincent's leg with a small squealing sound, but Vincent managed to lift it and bring his foot down on top of the thing with a sickening splat.

Wiping off his shoe in the dirt path, he looked around and found that the cat had re-appeared in a tree a few feet to his left. It was perched on a branch, calmly surveying the scene.

“Twas the brillig and the slithy toves, did gyre and gimble in the wabe. All mimsy were the borogoves and the momraths outrabe...” The cat recited this small rhyme as Vincent inspected the ground where he had smashed the thing, and then looked back up at the feline.

“What was that all about?” Vincent asked, glaring at the cat, “And why the rhyme?”

“I must say first, Vincent, that you handled that momrath very well....in fact, one would think you squashed things that tiny all the time.”

“So, the thing is called a momrath?” Vincent asked. He could still feel the crunch under his shoe, as if he had just stepped on another one, but when he looked to make sure, he did not even see the remains of the first.

“Yes, and I would watch myself, if I were you. Momraths have a nasty hunger, but an even nastier sense of group loyalty. Why, stepping on one is almost like signing yourself off to be served at a banquet....” The cat purred again as he inspected his claws.

“What do you mean?” Vincent asked, but before he could get an answer, he heard a muffled squealing, followed by a popping sound. He looked down and saw another momrath shaking itself as it jumped out of a small hole in the ground. He raised his foot to finish of the little beastie, when suddenly, there were two more squeals, and two more momraths joined the first. Then another series of screams, and five more appeared, then six, then twelve, and so on until Vincent found himself surrounded by a large group of the sharp-toothed creatures. They all fell silent and looked at him, though they didn't seem to have any eyes to look with. Then, with one, unified scream, all of them pounced on the man, teeth leading.

Vincent reacted just fast enough, and dove through the crowd of biting things with only a few nicks. He landed on the other side of the swarm, rolled across the ground, and rose to his feet just under the tree the cat was sitting contently in.

“Are you going to help?” Vincent growled as the swarm turned back from gnawing on each other and focused on their main target again.

“Hhmm...no, not really,” the cat replied, though it didn't disappear. Instead, it flicked its bony tail, and Vincent saw something white appear just across from him, on the other side of the road and the vengeful and hungry momraths.

“Those might help...” the cat pointed out calmly, “If you can reach them...” and with that, he was gone again.

Vincent rolled his eyes, and suspected that the cat was up to something again, but did not have time to guess what. With a group shriek, the momraths leapt at him again, missing yet again, though some succeeded in burying their teeth in the dried wood of the tree.

Vincent rushed across the road, and found that his clothes did not slow him down in the least, at least

when it came to quick movement. As he neared the white thing that cat had left, he suddenly felt a horrible pain in his left calve. He glanced back, his eyes watering from the pain, and saw one of the little buggers had latched onto his leg, its teeth burrowing deep into the flesh. If he stopped to pull out the thing, the others, which were apparently not as clever as this one, and were still trying to extract themselves from the tree, or cross the road, would surely catch up and make their own reservations on his body. Fighting through the pain, he scooped up whatever it was that was lying on the ground and looked at it quickly.

The thing or rather, the stack of things, in his hand was a deck of playing cards.

“What am I to do with these!?” Vincent asked angrily.

“Why, they are always good for when you want to play a nice game of War,” he heard the cat's voice answer, though he couldn't see the thing anywhere around him, “Whether it's the game, or you feel like actually waging it...”

Vincent found out what the cat meant a moment later. As he clutched the tightly, his anger bubbling within him, he suddenly felt blood dripping from his hand. He looked at his palm and saw that he had cut himself cleanly, and rather deeply, with the playing cards. Forgetting the pain in his leg momentarily, he looked closely at the card's edges and saw that they were edged like a blade's.

A plan forming in his mind, he crouched down close to the ground as the group finally found him again. Taking one of the cards in his right hand, he carefully aimed the card. He remembered playing this game years ago when he was still in the Turks to help pass the time.

He leveled the bladed card, and with a flick of his wrist, sent the card spinning into the crowd of marching momraths.

The card, an Ace of Spades, spun through the walking teeth, slicing through them like paper. They screamed and squealed as their dark blood flowed, and Vincent felt a sickening satisfaction in his work. The momraths stopped for a moment, all of them looking at the bodies of their fallen comrades. Then they all turned back to Vincent and started to leap and bound towards him with a renewed fervor.

“Ooh, now they're really mad...” the cat's voice echoed, “Little momraths grow so mad, and their bites will leave you sad.”

“Not now,” Vincent growled, jumping sideways to the left and aiming another shot. He drew three cards this time, though he certainly couldn't guarantee any kind of accuracy.

Kneeling again, he threw the cards, and, amazingly enough, they cut straight through, one going forward, and the other two going diagonally. As startled as he was, Vincent watched to see how many momraths the cards would cut down; he wasn't disappointed. The cards sliced through the momraths, who were stupid enough to panic and actually run in front of the bladed cards, and were subsequently killed. Those left standing seemed to have forgotten all about group loyalty, and hurriedly, along with many shrieks, burrowed back into the ground.

Vincent looked around in victory until the sharp pain in his leg returned. He looked down to see that the

one momrath that actually made contact was still holding on tightly, and Vincent methodically sliced the creature in two. As it died, its jaws loosened, and Vincent pulled the head off easily, though with a good deal of wincing.

“Very good, Vincent,” the cat said, clapping its paws together, “That wasn't bad at all....I'm sure anyone else would have gladly killed the little traitors in a heart beat.”

“Traitors?” Vincent asked, looking at the wound. It wasn't too deep, but still looked nasty from where the jaws had torn the skin, right through his pants. “What do you mean by traitors?”

“Traitors to Wonderland, and the old way,” the cat smiled as it sprang down from the tree to stand next to the wounded young man, “You see, that is partially why you're here....Wonderland is so discombobulated that even the ladybugs are joining the Red Queen's side. You must punish them for their conversion....”

The cat said the last order in such a dark and deadly way that even Vincent felt a tingle run across his arms and up his spine. Still, the cat smiled on.

“Why do you smile so much, cat?” Vincent asked, before the cat could slip away again.

“Why do you scowl?” the cat replied, “I find reason to smile, you find reason to frown, so does it really matter? Whatever I say shall seem strange to you, and the same goes for me.....”

“Why must you always speak so cryptically?” Vincent asked, growing frustrated once again.

“Why must you be so dense?” the cat answered, purring loudly. Vincent only rolled his eyes. This new world seemed very strange, it was true. But for some reason that he could not explain, it felt as if, for an instant of contentment, he was at home.