

Of Suits and Mermaids

Von Ixana

Elena always felt there was something **wrong** with her, something she needed to fix. She had tried to push that nagging feeling out of her mind as she climbed her way to the top of Shinra's Military Academy, eventually earning her a place in the General Affairs Department.

Although becoming a member of the Turks was never her goal, even loathing them as a teenager, she was eager to excel at her new position and not disappoint her seniors. There was just one major issue: her clumsy nature. Elena's clumsiness managed to get her into tight spots in the past, including making some embarrassing rookie mistakes in front of Tseng.

Now, she was a full-fledged Turk, more than capable of doing her damn job right. Even if she did catch herself wondering if the Turks were still needed at peaceful times like this. Following her encounter with Sephiroth's Remnants at the Northern Crater, where she and Tseng were tortured and almost killed, Cloud and his friends saving the world yet again, had been calmed down for a bit. Edge had been rebuilt and flourishing more than ever before.

There most certainly was. After all, people - no, monsters like Professor Hojo were still out there.

"Elena, you in there?"

Reno's muffled voice, of course. She had been daydreaming instead of working on her latest reports regarding Old Corel.

Elena blinked and everything started coming back to her. She wasn't at the familiar desk in Healen Lodge anymore, it was an aquarium tank filled with seawater, and it most certainly wasn't Reno's voice she had heard.

Staring through the clear, thick, glass right at her was an unfortunately familiar set of eyes that belonged to none other than Professor Hojo. If only she would have been more careful, things wouldn't have escalated the way they did. For once, Elena wished to not have inherited any clumsiness whatsoever, mainly because that's how it all started. Had she not gone overboard during that boat trip and had Hojo not gotten wind of what transpired somehow, she wouldn't even be here to begin with.

Elena didn't want to look at her slightly webbed hands as she made her way toward the wall of glass, making a fist and trying to pound against the walls holding her captive, but she couldn't avert her gaze.

She wanted to scream at this madman to let her out this instant, yet nothing happened. Not even a single sound despite her almost desperate attempts. Then again, she couldn't lose her cool here, she had to stay...bah, to hell with trying to stay calm. She hated nothing more than cages of any kind and as she sank to the bottom of her new prison, she swore to herself to resist anything this mad scientist was planning on doing to her.

It couldn't be worse than what he had done to Vincent Valentine, or could it?

Right at that moment...her alarm went off and she almost fell from the edge of her bed. It had just been a dream. As if mermaids were actually a thing...then again, those Remnants were very much like mermaids, unicorns and all the other fantastical beasts brought up in fairy tales for children. And yet they had been quite real, like a living nightmare of sorts.

Groaning, Elena shoved those thoughts aside and got herself ready for another day. If it weren't for another supernatural encounter in her bathroom mirror, she might have thought nothing else of this most curious dream. And yet...as she saw her reflection, she almost shrieked in horror.

It wasn't her usual self looking back, but what exactly was it? The creature had her brown eyes and her same shade of honey blonde hair done in her signature style, but something was off. The creature sported black fins where its ears should be and bore red, triangle shaped markings on its cheeks. Elena thought that those red markings looked like blood splatters against the creature's pale complexion. Elena swore those markings looked like scales of some sort instead of her smooth skin.

And...was there a second eyelid covering the eyes?

When Elena opened her mouth, so did the creature, revealing a set of razor sharp teeth and some kind of glands on the inside of its mouth, but the moment she leaned in closer toward the mirror, the mysterious creature just vanished, being replaced by the usual face staring back at her. Sighing, Elena took her hairbrush to get a severe case of bedhead out of the way, then went on with her morning routine as usual, not really being able to get that creature out of the back of her mind. In order to keep herself from thinking about it and holding her up more than necessary, she tried to focus on other things instead.

After all, mermaids were not real, were they?

Making her bed neatly was a luxury she often couldn't even dream of, but she loved coming home to a neat and tidy apartment after a long day or an exhausting assignment. It gave her some sort of comfort, as she often had little else but her job to look forward to. Sure, she had fallen head over heels for Tseng, even more so after what had occurred at the Northern Crater and the resulting aftermath. Some of it still persisted until this day, mainly because she had refused to talk things out with a professional. Sometimes, the pictures of Tseng clinging to consciousness while being tortured by Kadaj came back to haunt her in vivid nightmares, his piercing glare through it all making her cry all over again - even after she had jolted awake with tears streaming down her face.

Getting lost in her own thoughts never was a good idea, looking at her PHS brought her back to reality in a flash - mainly because the device rang loudly while vibrating

across the coffee table Elena had been sitting down at. Could she not enjoy her morning coffee in peace anymore? Had she been lost in her own head for too long? Startled, she grabbed the device, without bothering to look at who was calling her. After all, only five or six people had her number at best - and Elena knew each one of them.

"Elena speaking."

"Elena, do you know what time it is and where you are supposed to be right about now?" That deep, clear and yet almost monotone voice made pretty clear who it was, and Elena froze almost immediately. It was none other than Tseng.

She was supposed to be meeting with Reeve Tuesti before showing up at the office today. The WRO chairman had some intel on strange sightings in Old Corel and near Costa del Sol. Why exactly Tseng had ordered her to visit Tuesti in person she didn't truly know but had an idea that the Wutaian was on an all-time-high of paranoia, or maybe he was just careful. Elena knew better than to ask stupid questions, though.

"I'm not sure I follow, Sir. I still have time left" she replied stiffly, albeit sounding a tad bit confused while getting up to rinse out her empty mug.

Why're you calling me in the first place?, Elena thought to herself. *I'm not a Rookie anymore, no need to hold my hand.*

"Your meeting with Tuesti got canceled on short notice, head to the office instead. Now." Elena couldn't put her finger on it, but Tseng's voice had some odd, unusual strain in it. Something was terribly wrong. Before she was even able to respond, her boss ended the call and she put her PHS away, hurrying to get into her boots and fetching the keys before heading out only a minute later. Luckily, she lived close by in a small apartment on the outskirts of Edge.

Elena arrived at Healen Lodge to find Tseng waiting for her outside. It was only now that she recalled the haunting tone in his voice. Tseng himself looked disheveled despite his best efforts to look calm and collected.

"There you are. Good, follow me."

Elena didn't bother asking him how he was, the answer was obvious. Instead, she followed Tseng to their office. He ushered her into the room before closing the door behind her.

"Tuesti was found dead in his apartment last night. At least we assume it's Tuesti, the body was mutilated to an almost unnatural extent. Someone...or something must have held a deep grudge against him."

Tseng and Elena shook their heads in disbelief. Tuesti wasn't exactly the definition of a picture-perfect chairman due to his past ties to Shinra, even so he had no real enemies and it was hard to imagine someone had hated him enough to not only kill him, but viciously mutilate him too. At least none they knew of, making his unexpected death even more of a mystery.

"He had no real enemies to speak of, save for...maybe Rufus Shinra - or so I heard. Furthermore, nobody would even dare lay a hand on him with Valentine around. This sounds kind of fishy to be honest. What's next, mermaids being displayed in aquariums?"

Then again, what about her supernatural encounter with her reflection in the bathroom earlier that day? Either there was more to Reeve's death than met the eye, or someone carried out a pretty elaborate and cynical prank playing dead. Or maybe,

just maybe...the sightings Tuesti had been wanting to talk about were responsible for him winding up dead in his apartment.

"Elena, Rufus Shinra would never dare lay a hand on Tuesti. If that were the case, we wouldn't even be here to begin with. However, we will take a look at his belongings as soon as Reno and Rude arrive to take over here."

Rolling her eyes and biting her tongue, Elena swallowed the back-handed comeback only waiting to be blurted out at the worst moment possible. Her past, bubbly Rookie self would probably have spoken her mind right about now, earning Tseng's disapproval with a week's worth of desk work on top of that to learn her place. But she wasn't a Rookie anymore, she was a full-blown Turk, and she had to act like the professional she considered herself to be, especially while in the line of duty.

However, Tseng still shot a warning glance in her direction. A glance that made her both gulp and blush in short succession. Elena would probably never admit to it, but she still was head over heels for that emotionally constipated idiot. He could be the most skilled of them all, yet he still fell short in anything even remotely involving showing some sign of romantic interest...or any emotion to begin with.

She had only seen that stoic exterior crack once-back at the Northern Crater after endless hours of excruciating torture and questioning. The harrowing memory still kept her up some nights.

"Gaia to Elena, are you daydreaming about Tseng again? Hello?"

Reno's all too familiar, teasingly playful voice broke her confused train of thought – and secretly she was more than grateful for him doing so, since this day felt somewhat off in general. Maybe this was just his way of helping her focus...nah, no way.

Still, she blushed fiercely at the mention of Tseng's name.

"Fuck off, Reno", she pouted, almost frantically straightening her attire in an attempt to hide her face. "I won't be doing your fucking paperwork anymore if you keep this up y' know. Gah! Forget it. See you later!"

Without even asking what had been said in the meantime, or asking how long she had apparently been daydreaming again, she slammed the office door closed. Tseng had already left it seemed, and Reno had nothing better to do than tease her instead of just being a decent human for once.

Maybe Tseng was waiting for her outside, like he did before?

There was no harm in at least looking, since the Lodge seemed empty as usual, and her hunch proved to be correct, Tseng really seemed to be waiting for her – again.

"I'm sorry, Sir, I-", she began as soon as she was close enough.

"Has something been on your mind regarding what I told you earlier? You know you can always talk to me, right?"

Okaaaay, what's gotten into **him** all of a sudden?

Was Tseng trying to show that he cared about her after all? If so, that was the most awkward show of affection she'd ever seen. Would it be wise to tell him what really was on her mind besides that mirror encounter earlier that day? Would he even be able to take that sort of hint?

Probably not.

"I'm **fine**, Sir. It's nothing, really. Just a rough start this morning."

Staring at her intently, Tseng arched an eyebrow. It almost felt like he was attempting to read her mind – or trying to evaluate whether she was lying.

An awkward silence hung over Elena and her superior. She sure as hell didn't want to talk about her private life during office hours. Thankfully, Tseng didn't make an attempt to pry anything out of her and the two quietly got into his car to start the long journey back to Edge.

"So, do we have any more specifics on Tuesti's death, Sir? A murder weapon, any evidence? Is it even our job to deal with this? Why doesn't the WRO handle their chairman's death themselves?"

As far as Elena was concerned while blurting out those questions, the WRO's job was to provide Edge's law enforcement among a variety of other things – most of them military or science related.

"Normally, this would be the case, but Valentine actually came up with it, he said something was fishy about Tuesti's death and he doesn't want WRO staff to get involved too much", Tseng replied stiffly as they entered the city on its brand-new highway, heading straight for Reeve Tuesti's private residence.

Crossing her arms, Elena stared blankly out through the windshield, thinking.

Vincent Valentine was usually not the type to meddle with anything going on in Edge as a whole. Either he had a hunch of some sort or maybe he himself was responsible for Reeve's death.

"So...he's either paranoid about one of their staff having something to do with Reeve Tuesti's death or sort of worried he himself might be the culprit, is that it?"

Over in the driver seat, Tseng arched an eyebrow, giving her a quick glance, only to nod shortly afterward.

"Yes. Plus, we do owe him a favor or two."

Elena just nodded in response. No point in dragging on that conversation. Vincent had rescued them after all.

They arrived at one of many concrete apartment buildings only a short while later, parking Tseng's car on the side of the road. Two WRO vehicles were parked there too, and the third floor had been cordoned off to prevent civilians from entering by accident.

White markings on the floor still showed where the body had been found and Elena slowly started getting nauseous. Even though she of all people should be used to seeing blood on a daily basis, it still kind of made her sick to the stomach.

Some WRO staff were still out and about, combing through Tuesti's apartment, taking pictures and bagging everything they thought important. It served its purpose of distracting the female Turk from all the blood on the floor. While she was still contemplating whether or not she would even want to set foot inside this mess, she already heard her boss talking with one of the staff present – apparently the one in charge of all this.

"That's outrageous, you can't just **ban** us from the scene! We're not done yet.", a female voice spoke, clearly enraged already.

"I can, and I will. Gather your staff and leave. Now."

"But...Sir..."

Elena couldn't help but smirk on the inside, putting on her leather gloves and walking

up behind Tseng in an attempt to look intimidating. The smile she was putting on while looming behind her boss almost looked creepy as a result.

"You heard him. Leave already, chop-chop! And don't dare taking anything with you, that's our territory now." Cracking her knuckles, Elena's smile broadened just a tiny bit and without even another word of resistance, the middle-aged, brown-haired WRO lady gathered her staff one by one, leaving the premises.

"Elena, there was no need.", Tseng reprimanded after the last staff member, an elderly man with greasy hair, had left and the door was closed. The only item they left behind was a crate full of already bagged evidence, cameras and so forth.

"I was just speeding things up. So, did Valentine say anything else, something useful by chance?"

Shaking his head in response, her superior fastened his gloves and she let out a groan of frustration. This was the most bewildering situation she had ever been subjected to. Not that she hadn't seen any crazy things happen in all her years as a Turk, but the more she thought about the whole setup, the less it seemed to make any sense to her. Something definitely was off here – fishy, so to speak, but she couldn't quite put her finger on it yet.

"Great, just great.", Elena mumbled under her breath as she and Tseng began combing through Reeve Tuesti's apartment. Tuesti had said something about strange sightings. Maybe, just maybe, there happened to be photo evidence of it - at least a written note, a report, anything would be helpful. She wanted to get out of the apartment as soon as possible, knowing what had just recently occurred within these walls creeped her out and she just couldn't shake the feeling of uneasiness.

After turning the whole apartment upside-down, searching every nook and cranny the WRO might have overlooked, their search proved fruitless.

"We're taking that crate back to Healen Lodge. Maybe we'll find something of use there.", Tseng ordered, letting Elena pick up the crate while he pulled out his phone to make a call. Who he was calling she didn't know and she would be lying to herself if she said she wasn't at least a little bit curious. However, she knew better than to pry. "Valentine? ...no, nothing so far. We'll be taking a closer look at his belongings, the apartment was clean."

Elena desperately wanted to know exactly what Tseng and Valentine were talking about but unfortunately, she had to stay focused on taking the crate full of the bagged evidence and some cameras back to the car – only to almost trip over her own feet and stumble against the back of said car. Her boss would have been livid if he found out she almost tripped and fell on all the precious evidence they were supposed to look at back at the Lodge.

Cursing under her breath, Elena waited for Tseng to finish his call and join up with her – which he did only five minutes later, sporting his signature, deadpan stare.

The ride back to Healen Lodge went much like the ride they had taken to Edge - silent. It was almost a relief when the car finally stopped and they could finally unload the crate from the trunk, that is until Elena remembered how heavy it was. Upon entering their office, they were greeted with a familiar scene: Reno with his feet crossed and

resting atop his desk, while Rude worked on his reports in silence.

Tseng cleared his throat and the loud noise made Reno almost lose his balance and land on his back.

"Reno, feet on the ground and gloves on, you will be helping us – as will Rude. There's much to look at.", Tseng commanded, not leaving any room for insubordination.

"I was working, I swear!", the redhead complained – only to be largely ignored by their boss.

"We are looking for photographs, reports or notes about strange sightings of some sort near Old Corel and Costa del Sol.", Tseng continued while Elena put the crate down at her organized, tidy desk.

Carefully, she pulled out one of the cameras the WRO staff left behind, handing it to Rude, the next was handed to a pouting Reno and soon, they were knee-deep in evidence, looking at crime scene photos and bagged notebooks, jotting down anything out of the ordinary.

Turns out, there was not much to go off of. At least not until Reno almost toppled over in his chair again because he seemed to have found something.

"That's interesting, seems like Tuesti was into some questionable shit", he thought out aloud, making Elena look up from her set of journals.

"Read something about the origins of mermaids and how they mate.", he continued, earning a good smack on the back of his head by Elena who was sitting at the desk next to him.

"That's not important, Reno! Mermaids aren't real, we're looking for a very real, vicious killer here." Elena huffed, her voice carrying a slightly irritated subtone, while Tseng only arched an eyebrow, wordlessly staring at the two from his own desk.

Rude seemed to be too busy bothering with the ruckus his partner was causing, he only cleared his throat.

"Then how about this: He also seemed to be into Valentine and...y'know...the rumors about him. Sounds very important to me. The stuff about Valentine and mermaids...in a way."

Elena just rolled her eyes at that explanation, snatching the camera away from under Reno's nose and mumbling to herself while browsing the photographs.

"Why did they snap photos of the books he's been reading? That's highly-"

She couldn't even finish her sentence, as one could almost sense a certain doom looming over them – in the form of Tseng.

"It is pretty common, Elena. That could be linked to his cause of death, the killer, a possible motive, or all of it. Everything could possibly be. Reno, jot that down and keep looking."

Elena just hung her head briefly in response, trying her best to mask her disappointment. She had been learning everything by the book so far, this had to have slipped past her somehow. Then again, she wasn't a forensics expert or whatever, maybe they just did things differently – and Reno just happened to have good eyes for this type of thing. It could have been a lucky guess, too, but there was no point thinking about it now.

"Why the long face, Laney?"

She didn't answer, just sat back down at her desk and continued working. No need to give Reno any fodder now, she thought.

Hours passed in an instant. The moon shone brightly through the slits on the plastic curtains Elena passed by as she went to brew a round of coffee for everyone. The light made her stop by the window for a moment. This would prove to be a long, long night, even with all four of them.

Just a few days later, Elena found herself aboard a small cruise ship, trying to mingle with some of the guests aboard. This was far from a vacation, though—the evidence she and Tseng had collected at Reeve Tuesti's apartment had led her here. There had been reports of mysterious disappearances and an empty container ship full of unmarked, sealed containers near the northern half of Costa del Sol straight up vanishing overnight...and one name repeatedly appearing amidst all of it: Professor Hojo.

For some reason, the nagging feeling that some of the WRO staff were involved in all this, even actively destroying evidence despite clear instructions right before basically being banned from the crime scene.

That, and something going on within the ruins of the Mako Reactor in Old Corel. For some reason, the notes – if there ever had been any – were gone without an ounce of a trace.

Elena held back a deep sigh, barely even listening to what nonsense she was trying to make small talk about. It just wasn't her cup of tea mingling with other women, they were too chatty, too shallow and way too overdressed. Her focus lay solely on keeping an eye on Rufus Shinra while Tseng was busy going through some of the guest's and staff cabins. The one and only reason they were even here to begin with wasn't just the evidence they found, but a torn sticky note mentioning this very ship.

Elena casually leaned against the metal railing. She was already regretting her choice of footwear – crimson high-heels. And it didn't help that the stupid, silky dress she was wearing wasn't exactly comfortable, it wasn't even a particularly nice-looking dress but this was high society with all its outlandish standards and haute couture dress codes that Elena couldn't have cared less about if she weren't attempting to blend in.

Unfortunately while she was focusing on her own appearance, she neglected to notice a figure using her inattention to her surroundings to eject her from the yacht.

Before she could absorb what was happening she was falling, plunging down into the darkness of the sea, it was almost as if the water was swallowing her whole, dragging her down even deeper despite every effort she made to free herself from the ocean's grip.

Elena could swear she heard voices calling her name. She chalked it up to hallucinations, after all she must be close to the end. It should be only a matter of time before she would lose consciousness and drown. Or it should have been, but somehow Elena didn't black out, she merely felt strange as her body seemed to change on its own, making her gasp for air in surprise.

Still floating beneath the ocean surface, water began to flood her lungs. Upon realizing this, Elena started to panic, her mind flashing back to the Northern Crater. But this was different. It almost felt second-nature to her, just like breathing air. Air that she'd eventually have to come up for.

Elena had been so preoccupied with panicking, that she didn't notice the metamorphosis her body had gone through ever since falling overboard.

She tried to move her legs to swim upwards toward the surface, she was sure she was moving in the right direction, but it felt strange somehow – almost like her legs had been magically glued together, just like a- no, that would be utter nonsense, wouldn't it?

She most certainly would not have turned into a fish, right?

For a brief moment, she glanced down and opened her mouth to silently scream, the endless darkness of the ocean had absorbed what would have definitely been a blood curdling shriek had she been on land. Elena looked down in horror. Her lower body had been replaced with a fish tail, the remains of her dress floating through the water like a grotesque robe.

Instead of sound, air bubbles gushed out of Elena's mouth and she tried pinching herself to make sure this wasn't just a result of her having lost consciousness.

So this wasn't a dream, but mermaids weren't real, they were merely figments of imagination, the stuff of fairytales. Had she just really turned into one or was this part of the drowning process, too?

No, Elena already had ruled out that possibility, even still it seemed so surreal that she almost felt bad for reprimanding Reno regarding the mermaid topic.

Taking a second look at her body, she discovered that she now had gills and developed slightly webbed hands. How in the name of Gaia was that even possible? Humans didn't just transform into mermaids out of the blue.

Whatever might have caused her of all people to suddenly grow a fishtail, gills and webbed hands, it had saved her life – even though it was rather difficult to move around. Maybe she could have managed to come up for air without any supernatural shenanigans going on, but what then? How was she supposed to get anywhere in either situation? Her phone was probably still on its way to the ocean floor, along with the small handbag she'd been carrying around.

Elena managed to push her way to the surface to come back up for air, not realizing that a small boat was heading her way. She was way too busy coughing, spouting and spattering up the water that had previously entered her lungs. She didn't register the bewildered expressions of her rescuers as they dragged her aboard, her mind was too much of a mess to make any sense of anything.

The link between her supernatural mirror encounter and her rather fishy transformation didn't occur to her until much later, when she was back in her bunk. Perhaps what she had seen in the mirror was a subconscious warning to herself of what she would become, or always had been. Whatever it might have been, there would probably be a logical explanation for it.

Unfortunately her fears were confirmed when she sat down for the mission debrief with Tseng.

"You actually did turn into a mermaid. The crew that rescued you told me as much. They also reported having had to restrain one of the passengers, apparently they were interested in snatching a scale from your tail." Despite his cool composure, Tseng looked like he couldn't even believe the words coming from his mouth.

How do you think I feel?, Elena thought to herself, still trying to process the events of what felt like half an eternity was one thing, acknowledging being a creature straight out of fairy tales was a wholly different subject. It was too much and she found herself lost for words and too tired to think or inquire about the strange passenger.

"Pretty sure they were just curious, Tse- Sir. No need to get jealous." Telling her superior to not get jealous wasn't exactly what Elena had imagined she wanted to say, it was almost like way back when she was still a Rookie. Instead of getting reprimanded, however, Tseng showed off the faintest edge of a smile before pulling her into a brief hug.

"I...was worried.", he whispered in hushed tones, quickly pulling himself away as Elena blinked in surprise – once again at a loss for words. Hearing him of all people say that made her heart flutter.

"We'll talk more later, I will accompany Rufus for the rest of the day while you get some rest."

Instead of arguing, Elena complied silently as he walked out the door, leaving her to her own devices as she sat down on her bed. She knew full well that as a Turk, she had to function properly in order to achieve the best results possible, but she just couldn't get herself to really get up and do something useful. Her mind was still in the process of understanding what had happened to her – and what about that strange person wanting to snatch a scale from her body?

She didn't believe herself to be that special, it happened to people all the time, right?

Wrong.

It turned out to be a rare occasion – so much so, in fact, that people had felt the need to write stories about those fabled creatures. Sometimes, they were depicted as blessed and beneficiary beings, even revered as gods in parts of the Wutaian culture, other tales revolved around a much darker note. According to those, mermaids had brought nothing but disaster to mankind on Gaia, luring countless sailors and their ships to their untimely deaths. Those stories said all mermaids needed to be exterminated – and some even claimed that there were, in fact, no more mermaids left on this world.

Elena had never had the time to think about this kind of stuff despite hearing about it quite a lot, her job always came first – and that wouldn't change anytime soon. However, now she was inevitably going to get involved with those myths one way or another. After all, people loved their gossip regardless of income or wealth and the moment they had docked at Costa del Sol, Elena had wished she was just an ordinary human. She just wanted to do her job properly, for Shiva's sake!

Had Tseng not threatened the Turks to come after them, those people probably would still be around gawking and taking their pictures. It was a relief to have peace and quiet to do her job, those folks had been worse than a sack of fleas.

Keeping an eye on Rufus who mingled with high society at a nightly beach party, she leaned toward Tseng standing right beside her, wind brushing over the palm trees. It was a refreshing breeze coming directly from the ocean, right before the sun would finally set.

"Thank you, Sir." He just shook his head briefly in response, probably to keep himself focused on the task at hand. Surely, they weren't exactly built to be bodyguards, but a Turk was full of surprises, as Reno would probably put it. Fooling people into thinking you weren't a threat while you actually were one was part of that, a skill Elena had been honing despite all her clumsy shenanigans over the years.

If it weren't for some of her more nastier scars, shallow idiots would even consider her attractive, not the type to break people's fingers during an interrogation, let alone shooting them in the head with deadly precision.

Despite the Turk suit, people still would tend to not take her seriously at all, mainly because of her petite figure and being a woman in general. Her newest achievement of having become a mermaid by mere accident would not make this any better, let alone easier in any way. At least that's what Elena thought to herself while scanning the party for potential threats as Tseng kept his eyes trained on Rufus who visibly enjoyed himself – a little bit too much for Tseng's liking, but he wasn't the one to judge here. The more he drank, the uglier it would be the next morning, that much was for sure.

"We should urge him to leave this party shortly", he murmured, glancing sideways only to find that Elena seemed to have disappeared. Sometimes, he failed to understand her even after all they went through together. Still, in light of recent events, Elena disappearing into thin air just wasn't sitting right with him, and so he made the decision to get Rufus back to the hotel. Rufus wasn't a toddler by any means but he wasn't exactly as capable of holding his own in a combat situation these days, and Tseng wasn't about to leave the President's safety to chance, least he disappear as well.

Breathing a sigh of relief now that Rufus had been safely escorted back to his room, Tseng could now focus on locating Elena. Tseng started discreetly asking around for her or anyone matching her description, but came up empty - maybe the consequences of him threatening people earlier? Possibly. Had he not acted so rashly, there would be a slim chance of somebody having seen something. Since she didn't have her PHS on her anymore, there was no other means of contacting her.

Tseng cursed internally.

The disappearances they uncovered while looking through Tuesti's belongings were no joke, they were very real and faintly reminded him of reading a report about Elena getting caught by Don Corneo in Wutai. She had a tendency to get swept away by the current, so to speak, and either disappeared or ended up being in trouble - or both. He needed to find her, and quickly. Only Minerva would know what she had gotten herself into this time. His instincts told him it wasn't going to be a tea party, so he called Reno, ordering him and Rude to get a helicopter.

"No way there's gonna be one available, boss."

"We're Turks, Reno. Steal one if you have to, and be here asap. Time's of the essence."

His harsh voice almost gave Reno whiplash.

"You got it, loverboy. We'll be there and rescue your princess together", Reno replied cheekily, hanging up on Tseng before he was able to get back at his second in command.

Tseng continued looking around even though he was sure he had checked every nook and cranny already. If his feelings for Elena were made clear, right now wasn't the time to be worried about that.

Elena couldn't help but ruminate about what had happened over the course of the past week. Reeve's sudden demise, Professor Hojo's name repeatedly coming up, her going overboard and turning into a mermaid. She couldn't help but wonder if there was a link to all these happenings.

Maybe Hojo had gotten wind of the Turks being on his trail and was trying to get them out of the way one by one. It could be possible, and yet there was no real evidence of that anywhere, just a nagging feeling in her gut. She was just about to reconcile with Tseng as she was being knocked unconscious without even being able to put up a fight. Normally, Elena was way too paranoid to let anyone sneak up on her like that, but now she was out cold, and probably would be for the time being.

"Elena, you in there?"

Reno's muffled voice, of course. Had she been daydreaming instead of working on her latest reports regarding Old Corel?

Elena blinked once, twice...and then everything started coming back to her. She wasn't at her all too familiar desk in Healen Lodge anymore, it was an aquarium tank filled with seawater, and it most certainly wasn't Reno's voice she had heard.

Staring through the thick, clear glass right at her was none other than Professor Hojo. Elena wished to not have inherited any clumsiness whatsoever, mainly because that's how it all started.

Had she not gone overboard during that boat trip and had Hojo not gotten wind of what transpired somehow, she wouldn't even be here to begin with.

Elena didn't really want to look at her slightly webbed hands as she made her way toward the wall of glass, making a fist and trying to pound against the walls holding her captive, but she couldn't avert her gaze.

She wanted to scream at this madman to let her out this instant, yet nothing happened. Not even a single sound despite her almost desperate attempts. Then again, she couldn't lose her cool here, she had to stay...bah, to hell with trying to stay calm. She hated nothing more than cages of any kind and as she sank to the bottom of her new prison, she swore to herself to resist anything this mad scientist was planning on doing to her.

It couldn't be worse than what he had done to Vincent Valentine...or could it? Would she even want to find out? Rather not, but whatever could she do in this state, other than...oh, right. She still had her teeth, hadn't she?

Or was her throbbing head playing tricks on her? Maybe, but if memory served, she had seen her reflection possessing a set of razor-sharp teeth.

On top of that, she would most certainly not give in so easily anymore, or let herself

get caught off guard.

"You're the perfect specimen, mermaid. Yes, yes...how about we take a closer look at that tail of yours? You must be curious yourself." Hojo stopped talking briefly to nod and giggle to himself.

He was no scientist anymore, just a madman who had completely lost it, that much was for sure and even though she had to admit that she was curious about her fishtail, she would not let him touch it, much less cut it open to do Shiva knew what.

Unable to speak, Elena shook her head violently, moving into one of the farthest corners away from the professor, presenting her teeth in an aggressive fashion.

Hojo's face lit up with anticipation as he murmured under his breath, probably cooking up his next insane idea inside that greasy-haired head.

"There's no need to be scared, this is happening in the name of science. You should be honored to be part of my newest line of experiments, little Turk. I will analyze every last string of your mermaid DNA, and write a detailed report about your anatomy. Yes, that's brilliant!"

Have you lost it, old man? I want no part in this in case you didn't notice!, Elena thought. If she'd been able to speak, she certainly would've screamed those words to Hojo's face.

Elena put her hands over her ears, continuing to try and threaten the scientist with what she had left. She could see her Turk uniform and pistol neatly lined up on a table in the background, but there was no chance in hell she'd be able to get her weapon in order to shoot Hojo and end this nightmare she had stumbled into. Other than that, a heavy metal door and test tubes filled the room, she had no idea where she was.

Elena then had a horrible realization. With her PHS gone, how would anyone know where she was?

But she had clearly underestimated Tseng's skillset, as the door was blasted wide open only seconds later. Judging by the force of it, this was either Reno's or Rude's craftsmanship at work.

Since her sense of time was all fucked up, she couldn't tell how long she'd even been here to begin with, but did it really matter? Not as long as Hojo got what he deserved.

"Yo, what the fuck even is this bullshit? That's crossing the crazy line way too much, buddy. Not only did you mess up Tuesti, you were responsible for the people disappearing in Costa del Sol and planned on hurting...wait...Laney, that you?" As impressive as Reno's entrance and speech was, cat got his tongue at the sight of Elena squeezing into a corner way too small for her mermaid body.

As Tseng proceeded to wrestle the professor to the ground even though there was no reason to keep him alive at that point, Rude and Reno looked through Hojo's notes, bagging them for later.

Freeing Elena from her watery prison was no easy feat. As water gushed out of the blasted aquarium, Elena tried her hardest not to get swept away, too, barely managing to stay in her corner until most of the water was gone.

As if on cue, Tseng jumped right inside the broken prison, water flooding his shoes as

he made his way toward mermaid Elena, who finally got a chance to at least briefly look at her honey colored scales before she finally allowed herself to be as weak and vulnerable as most people perceived her solely based on her looks.

"I'm sorry Tseng, I got careless." Hanging her head, she coughed up some remaining water.

"You're safe and Hojo will answer for what he did. That's all that matters.", the Wutaian responded as Elena slowly seemed to turn back to her human form.

It was finally over, at least for the time being.