

Rufus's Twin
By Jen

Chapter 14: Ghosts of the Past

"Now where the hell is the manhole?" Reno demanded, his words stirring up little clouds in the icy air.

Elena sighed. "Have some patience. We'll find it."

Rude continued on, poking the stick he was holding in the hopes of hitting something metal. Reno stood, leaning against a light pole, looking very much like he had just crawled out of bed, put yesterday's clothing on, and set out. Elena adjusted the pack on her back and shifted her weight to her other foot. None of them looked particularly thrilled to be given this assignment, though the only one to voice that opinion so far had been Reno.

Yuffie rubbed her hands on the thin fabric of her pants and wished she had brought something warmer, at least for the first few hours of their traveling. At the present moment, she was crouched down behind a large pile of scrap metal, and her calves were beginning to ache intolerably. She was afraid to let them out of her sight though, because they were speaking in whispers. She had, had all night to dream up the pain and torture she could inflict on Reno, and she wasn't about to lose her chance.

Reno rifled through his pocket and was rewarded a few seconds later with a battered, but whole cigarette. Taking out his lighter, he lit it up and savored the bitter flavor. Getting up early was not his specialty, and he hadn't even had the time to fix a decent cup of coffee. The one thing he did manage to grab before practically being drug out his door by Elena, was an overly ripe banana, which he promptly tossed in the nearest trash can. His one hope at the moment was for an early lunch.

Elena wrinkled up her nose. "I thought you quit those."

"I did."

"It doesn't look like it to me."

He stared at her over the tip of his cigarette. "Oh yeah? Well you try being woke up at the crack of dawn by your annoying friend, miss coffee and breakfast, and then tell me how you fare."

Elena pulled her jacket closely around her and answered with a glare. Though she loved Reno like a brother, she really wished that he could have been left at home. His penchant for staying up late made him a completely unworthy companion come morning, especially if he had been drinking the night before.

Rude caught the scent of Reno's cigarette and turned to look at his friend momentarily. He, himself, had once enjoyed a few packs a day, until Elena had broke him of that habit. He almost thought it an insult that Reno was smoking in front of him, considering he knew it was torture for Rude to be forced to smell it. But given the time of day, he let it pass without comment. Reno, after all, was not a morning person.

"I think I've found something," Rude said, pushing down harder and coming against resistance.

Reno pushed away from the pole. "Great. Now we can leave the cold and get eaten by mutants."

Yuffie rolled her eyes. Reno complained too much. It seemed like he was never happy with anything, unless it was serving his needs somehow. As far as she was concerned, he was a manipulative jerk who deserved whatever he got. She could hardly wait to see the look on his face when he realized she had trailed him. For Turks, they were completely incompetent. She knew she would have realized by now that she was being tailed.

Rude reached down with his gloved hand and pushed away the dirt and grime that covered the object he had hit. After a bit of scraping, the mud gave way and revealed a rusted manhole with the word 'Shinra' inscribed in it.

"This is our entrance," he remarked.

"What're we waiting for then?"

Elena glanced at Reno. "I sure hope your mood improves as the morning progresses."

He grinned. "That's funny, I was having the same thought about your looks."

"Bastard," she snapped, punching him.

"Aw come on El! I was only joking!"

"Just get moving," Rude ordered.

"Ladies first," Reno said, sweeping his arm out.

"How gallant of you," Elena muttered, slipping into the manhole with a little trepidation.

Her gloved hands gripped the rusted ladder tightly, as she tried to see over her backpack to the ground below. It was too dark to tell what waited at the bottom, but she could make out a few large objects. Luckily, they didn't appear to be moving.

Flicking his cigarette to the pavement, Reno smote it under the heel of his boot, and turned to continue after Elena. Rude came last, but not before he glanced down to the smashed cigarette, and then, surprisingly, to the pile of metal where Yuffie hid. With a small grin, he moved forward and bent over the manhole, waiting until Reno and Elena were far enough down for him to continue.

Yuffie nearly gasped aloud when Rude looked in her direction. There was no way he could have seen her, because she was well hidden behind the pile of rubble. She was fairly certain she hadn't made a sound either. Had he really seen her, or was he just checking the sector to make sure no one was around? Maybe they weren't as senseless as she thought. But if that was the case, then why didn't he say something?

Elena shifted her body slightly and felt around with her foot for the last rung. At least she was fairly certain it was the last rung. Her eyes were beginning to adjust a bit, and it appeared that the objects she had spied earlier were closer to her now. Carefully lowering herself, she felt both of her feet touch the pavement. Glancing down, she saw that she was standing in half an inch of water, and gave thanks for her thick soled boots.

Reno moved down as quickly as he dared, worrying about stepping on Elena's head and worrying about whether the ladder was actually going to hold much longer. He wasn't exactly certain of the date when the manhole had been installed, but it appeared to be far too old for use. With his luck, the whole thing would come undone from the wall and he would be sandwiched between his two best friends.

"I've reached bottom!" Elena called up. "There's a bit of water down here and what looks like...an old truck and a few packing crates."

Rude, who was at the very top, reached through the hole and pulled the cover back into place. The last thing he wanted was for some kid to come along and fall in.

Yuffie waited in the freezing temperatures, trying to time how long she thought it would take for them to climb down. She was tired of crouching down behind the pile of metal, but she didn't want to run into them just as their journey started. She had a few pranks she wanted to pull before she revealed herself, particularly ones that would leave Reno as scared as a newborn baby.

Just as his foot touched the last rung, it gave away and he slipped, knocking his head against the ladder and falling into the water below. Elena, who had excellent reflexes, had just managed to dodge out of the way in time.

"Shit." he mumbled, rubbing his forehead.

"Reno?! Are you all right?"

He looked up at his fellow Turk and demanded, "Why the hell didn't you catch me?"

Deciding that he was all right and not liking his tone, she snapped, "Oh right! Like I want all 200 hundred pounds of you lying on top of me! You'd probably crush my lungs!"

"Help me up would you? And I don't weigh 200 pounds."

"Whatever," she muttered, reaching down to pull him up.

Reno grasped her hand and then jerked back roughly. Elena fell hard, sprawling halfway across his chest and halfway into the stale water.

"You son of a bitch!" she sputtered, throwing her fists out wildly and hoping that they caught him somewhere.

Between harsh laughs, Reno said, "Hey, El, get off! Your going to give Rude the wrong impression."

Elena grunted, as she heaved herself up so that she was kneeling next to him. Bringing her fist back, she caught him full in the jaw and watched with satisfaction as his head glanced off of the pavement.

"Goddammit Elena, you hit hard!"

Rising to her feet, she smirked, "Serves you right."

She turned and ran right into Rude's chest. His arms went around her to steady her and then he asked calmly, "Are you two finished?"

"We are now," she replied, stepping away from him so that he could help Reno to his feet.

Reno popped his jaw and then sighed as he realized the whole back of his suit was soaked. "What a great goddamned morning."

"According to the maps Reeve gave us," Rude said, "we need to head that way," he added, pointing past the carcass of the old truck Elena had mentioned earlier.

Reno, who was in the lead at the moment, turned and began walking. Elena and Rude followed behind him, eyeing the truck as they went.

Yuffie crouched down beside the manhole, and then lifted it aside, grunting with the effort. Looking down, she could only make out a few shapes. They didn't look like they were moving, so she decided it was safe to continue. Making sure her Conformer was secured at her side, she climbed down onto the ladder and pulled the cover back over the hole.

"Ya sure ya wanna do this? It's only seven in the mornin'. And it might be dangerous for ya ta go alone."

Aeris smiled at Barret. "Thanks for the concern, but I'll be all right. I won't be alone anyhow, Reeve will be with me."

Barret rolled his eyes. "That damn Reeve is helpless without Cait."

"Oh Barret, give the poor man some credit," Elmyra said, her robe wrapped tightly around her as she stood in the doorway.

Barret leaned his bulk against the side of the buggy and crossed his arms. It wasn't that he didn't like Reeve, he was simply

stating a fact. Reeve was executive material, not fighting material. Without Cait Sith, he wasn't much in the way of protection for Aeris. He had half a mind to go with, but he couldn't leave the shop unattended. Besides that, everyone else had jobs they had to get to as well.

"Ya ought ta go with Spike."

Aeris shook her head. "You know he can't fly a chopper, Barret. Reeve's pilot is sick with the flu, and he's the only other one that can fly me there. This is really important."

Barret scratched his head. "If ya say so. Well, ya ready?"

She nodded, walking forward to give Elmyra a quick, fierce hug before heading toward the buggy. Just as she was getting in, Marlene flew out of the house and launched herself at Barret. He caught her in his enormous arms and squeezed her tightly.

"Bye dad! I'm not going to get to see you before I have to go to school, so I came to give you a hug an kiss goodbye. "

To prove her words, she leaned back and kissed him on the cheek. Barret ruffled her hair and then held out his other arm for Elmyra. With a smile, she moved away from the front porch and went to him. He hugged her softly, kissed her, and then let both of his girls go, leaning down and climbing into the buggy.

Elmyra and Marlene moved back and began to wave, as Barret started the buggy and backed out of the driveway he had installed. As they started onto the road, Aeris looked back, watching as the town of Kalm faded from view, and her mother and sister became nothing more than soft blurs.

"Oh," Barret said, reaching into his pocket and pulling something out. "Myra wanted you to have this for good luck."

Aeris took it, her breath catching when she realized what it was. She reached up and fingered her throat just above her shirt, realizing that it wasn't there. Staring down at the thin, black chain, she smiled softly. Ifalna had given that to her shortly before they had escaped from the Shinra building. Cloud must have taken it off of her before lowering her into the water, she realized. Gripping it tightly, she thanked Barret and then reached up to place it around her neck.

"How're ya feelin'?" he asked gruffly, as though it was difficult for him to do so.

"Mom made you ask that, didn't she?"

Barret flushed slightly and scratched the back of his neck. "Well...I do care how yer doin', but yeah."

Aeris laughed. "I thought so. But I'm fine."

Barret lapsed into silence, concentrating on the road. He really wasn't much of a conversationalist anyhow. The night before, out of worry, Elmyra had accidentally blurted out Aeris' problem. She looked so stricken after that, that he had promised not to breathe a word to Aeris that he knew.

He hadn't really understood the Cetra very well, or what it was exactly that they heard, but he knew Aeris was a pretty level-headed girl. If she thought this trip was important, then it must be. Besides that, she was 30 years old, and could make her own decisions, even if she still looked like a young girl.

Aeris leaned her head back to rest against the seat and recalled the atmosphere and the beauty of the Ancient city. It had been over nine years since she had been there, but she could still picture it as though it were yesterday. But she wondered if it would feel the same when she arrived.

Before, she had heard the voices of her ancestors swirling around her, projecting a comforting blanket meant to protect her from harm. They had warned her of Sephiroth, but she had kept on anyhow. She knew that if she didn't summon Holy, that the Planet would be in danger of dying.

She honestly hadn't expected to die, though if she thought back on it, she had known that he was near. She could sense his presence the same way she could another Ancient. The Jenova cells in him called out to her in dark voices, trying to seduce her away from her goal and into the hands of danger. But with the help of the Cetra that had come before, she had managed to ignore her longtime nemesis and bring hope while kneeling on the altar.

At the cost of her life, she had helped to save the Planet. But looking at all of her friends, so happy and full of life, she knew that it was worth it. Though she would have liked to have been here with them the last nine years, sharing their joy and their pain, she knew that it wasn't meant to be.

"Ya know what time yer gonna be back?" Barret asked.

Aeris shook her head. "I'm not sure. Please tell mom not to worry. I'll be fine. It might end up taking nearly all day though."

"Knowing Myra, she'll worry."

Aeris smiled, watching as the enormous shape of Midgar came into view. From here, she would have to enter the city herself, since Barret's buggy wasn't licensed to drive there. But with the way things were so crowded, it was just as well that everyone went by foot.

Pulling up as close as he was allowed, Barret leaned over and gave her a piercing look. "Ya be careful. And I hope ya find what yer lookin' for."

"Thanks Barret," Aeris said, and leaned over and hugged him on impulse.

Barret started when he felt her slender arms go around his neck, but he recovered soon enough and hugged her so hard, he nearly cracked her ribs.

Pulling away, Aeris smiled again and said, "Thanks."

Barret nodded, and watched as she climbed from the buggy and entered the gate to sector one.

She awoke with a start, lifting her head and looking about frantically. The room was dark, save for the green and red lights on the machine next to her bed. Her arms and her legs were held down by some kind of restraints, and she found that she couldn't move, nor attempt to break them.

The small, thin tube was running from her arm to the lighted machine again, and it glowed a faint neon green. She shifted slightly, and then winced as pain radiated up her whole right side. They had been poking her with needles again, and the strange looking instruments for which she had no name.

Closing her eyes, she bit back a sob and then blinked rapidly as tears slipped from her eyes and ran down her face. She wanted so very much to be away from here. It seemed the more time she spent here, the less she remembered of her life before. Her life now, consisted of machines, tubes, and pristine white rooms with the antiseptic smell of the hospital. Except, this was no hospital, and he was no doctor.

All at once, the lights flickered on, and she closed her eyes tightly, trying to stave off the sting. She was in the dark for long periods of time, and any form of light after that caused her eyes to ache severely. When the pain subsided enough for her to open them, she found herself staring at the back of a white lab coat. Trailing her eyes up further, she found what she had dreaded. They fell on a long, black ponytail, pulled haphazardly together so that wisps of hair lay like strings against his back.

"No more tests," she managed weakly, through dry, cracked lips.

He made no move that he had heard her, but simply continued to prepare the shot in front of him. She watched with growing trepidation, and even though she knew it was futile, she struggled against the restraints. Already, she had rubbed

her wrists and ankles raw. Crying out softly in pain, she lifted her head as far as she could and tried to see what it was he was working with.

"You'll only harm yourself more if you struggle," he said mildly.

"No more tests. Please, no more tests," she pleaded, tears stinging her eyes and slipping down her cheeks once again.

"The tests are necessary, you know that," he replied calmly.

"No!" she screamed. "No! I want to go home! I want to go back to my Mother and my Father! I wasn't doing anything wrong! I was selling my fruits, that's all. I didn't deserve this. I don't deserve this. I hate you, I hate you!" she whimpered.

He turned and smiled at her in approval. "So strong, even after I've tried again and again to beat you down. It's good. It means you will get to be part of the glory when it is time. But if you prove me wrong, you will be discarded along with the rest," he added, his smile fading to be replaced by a hard, cold expression.

She wasn't sure what being discarded meant, but she had a fairly good idea that it might be death. Death would have been preferable to this torture, if she were the kind to give up. But the will to fight was too strong, and she wasn't going to let this man see her break. She still harbored the hope that she would be able to escape.

He moved toward her, the needle held high in one hand. She didn't know what was in it, and she didn't want to know. He and his assistants had already given her so many shots now, that she had lost count. And asking what they contained was futile. They wouldn't tell her.

He slipped the needle into the skin of her arm, and depressed the top. She bit her lip to keep from crying out in pain. The liquid that was within the cylinder burned as it was pumped not her veins. As it spread further, her whole right side felt as though it were on fire. Closing her eyes, she felt herself wavering in and out of consciousness. She hoped that darkness would claim her, but fate wasn't that kind.

Finally, after the burning sensation spread to her throat, she screamed aloud, pulling herself up and struggling against her restraints. It was strange, but her fists were somehow free and they struck at the solid form that held her down.

"It is all right. Stop struggling, it was nothing but a nightmare. You are safe now," a calm voice whispered in her ear.

Safe? At first she didn't believe him, and continued to push away. But something cold clamped down on her wrists and held them tightly together. Her eyes flew open, and she found herself staring into two blood red orbs. Her heart leapt into her throat and throbbed there painfully, until she realized that they were only eyes and that they belonged to Vincent.

"I know, I am not a pleasant sight to wake up to after a nightmare."

Her mouth fell open, but no words came out. She wondered if he was making a jest, or if he was serious. His claw, which had been keeping her fists from harming him any farther, let go of her wrists and fell to his side. She found that his hand was wrapped around her waist, and that he was close enough for her to smell the faint scent of peppermint. Odd, but that was not something she had ever expected to associate with him.

Beneath that, was a darker smell, a masculine smell. One that she knew was his, and his alone. Instead of frightening her, or repulsing her, it caused a faint tingling sensation at the back of her neck. Without thinking, she reached back and rubbed there.

"Are you hurt?" he asked, not even a flicker of emotion crossing his face.

She shook her head, but her dreamed returned with vivid clarity, and she knew it was another memory. There had been so much pain in that nightmare, that it had felt real. She had to resist the urge to look at her wrists and ankles just to see if there were marks.

Vincent watched the myriad of emotions crossing her face. She was so expressive, and to someone who was used to

looking for signs of another person's thoughts in their eyes and face, she was open for him to read easily. He wasn't certain of the nightmare she had, had, but when her screams had woken him, he had come to her room to find her thrashing in her bed, her face twisted up in such a look of intense agony, that he had felt the immediate need to soothe her. The only way he knew to do that, was to awaken her. Though he knew she wasn't afraid of him, her expression upon awakening had most certainly been one of fright. And for a brief second, it had bothered him, until he remembered it was better for her to think him a monster.

He sat on the edge of her bed now, her small form tucked safely between his knees and almost resting against his chest. Her blows earlier hadn't hurt him, but they had startled him in their urgency. It was as though she were trying to escape from the very devil himself. She had been putting all of her strength behind each strike of her fist, and the look on her face was frantic with the need to get away from whatever it was that was holding her down.

It reminded him of the time when he had felt the same.

It was dark. And if it were at all possible, he was freezing and burning up all at once. His lids felt too heavy to move, so he couldn't use his eyes to discern his surroundings. As he struggled weakly to move his arms and legs, he realized they were being held down by something.

The air around him was musty and stale, the scent of old books in the air. He had spent a great deal of time in the extensive libraries of Shinra, so he could identify that smell easily enough. The others were sharp, and tangy, almost antiseptic in the way they invaded his nostrils and increased his grogginess. He knew he was in the basement of the Nibelheim mansion, and the reasons why rushed back to him with vivid clarity.

He had come down here to confront Hojo. Though it hurt him deeply, he had respected Lucrecia's wish to marry Hojo and become his wife in more than name only. As the months drug on, he realized that she was pregnant with Hojo's child. Just recently, he had overheard she and Hojo discussing plans when they thought he wasn't listening. It appeared that Hojo wanted to inject her with some kind of cells, even knowing that it might kill her and the baby.

Meekly, she had agreed, and then brushed past his hiding spot, to walk from the room, her head bent low. It seemed that impending motherhood should be something she wore like a badge of honor, something that left her skin glowing and her eyes sparkling. But each day, she only seemed to grow more distant, until he thought she would simply fade away.

He had followed her to the inn, and tried to talk to her, but she had refused to see him. He stood at the door for a long time, just listening to her softly pace the floor. He knew that he could break down the door and force her to talk to him if he wanted to, but he couldn't treat her that way. He cared for her too much. So instead, he had stood there, hoping that she would relent and let him in, even though a part of him knew she wouldn't.

After some time had passed, he heard a crash and a cry. Turning, he grasped the knob and wrenched it. But she had locked it, and he couldn't get in. Pounding furiously on it, he called, "Lucrecia?! Are you all right?! Open up!"

"Go away, Vincent. I don't want you to see my like this."

Was that her voice, so drained and meek? Anger rose up in him, ripe and hot, erasing all his usual composure and cool. If this was what Hojo did to what he claimed to love, then he had a lot to learn. And because she had asked him to leave her, he would. But he would go straight to Hojo and force the bastard to leave her. No matter what Lucrecia thought, Vincent planned to take her far away from Hojo, so that he could never find her to harm again.

"What...a fool...I was..." he muttered aloud, a bitter laugh escaping his lips. "Should...have known...better..."

He had rushed through the mansion so quickly, that the scenery had been a blur. His one goal had been to reach the basement and Hojo. With each step he had taken, his fury had burned brighter, and he could all but feel Hojo's scrawny neck between his hands, could almost see his eyes bulge with fear, and could imagine the way that he would struggle as his life ebbed away.

"Vincent," Hojo had said, as he walked in, almost as if the man had expected him.

"What have you done to Lucrecia, Hojo?" he demanded.

Hojo had smiled then, and odd, twisted smile, his eyes bright and alive with some secret knowledge. Now, Vincent knew he should have been wary, but at the time, anger and concern for Lucrecia had caused all instincts to flee. So when Hojo raised the gun and fired, catching Vincent just below the joint in his left elbow, he had been unprepared. Collapsing to his knees in pain, he wrapped his hand around the wound and stared up at Hojo in hatred.

"It doesn't matter what you do now, Vincent," Hojo had told him, "I have won."

Vincent's hand left his wound and closed around the butt of his gun, but Hojo raised his and fired again. There was a sharp flash of pain, and then thankfully, blackness.

He had no idea how long he had been out since then, his disorientation destroying all hopes of regaining his bearings or a sense of equilibrium. He didn't know if it was night, day, or even months from the moment Hojo had shot him. For all he knew, Hojo had left him alone in the basement to die a terrible death from starvation.

"You're awake Vincent, don't try to deny it. You're breathing isn't as even as it was before."

"Hojo!" he hissed, ashamed when it came out as a mere squeak.

Hojo laughed. "What? Did you think I had left you? No, no, Vincent. Death is too great for you. I want you alive and suffering an endless torture. I want you remembering every year of your miserable life how she chose me over you. You are pathetic, weak, and only half a man. I don't ever want you to forget that."

Vincent again struggled weakly against his restraints, the need to strike out at Hojo far greater than the need to keep himself from any further pain. But it was useless, and Hojo's laugh as he moved closer to him proved that. He wished that he was strong enough to at least open his eyes, for he wanted Hojo to see the hate burning there like acid, and wanted the other man to feel the searing heat of his gaze.

"When you awaken Vincent, nothing will be as it was. You will be a monster, a freak, and no one will ever want you, least of all your precious Lucrecia. That is...if you ever awaken," he added harshly.

"For you see, I plan to give you the ultimate punishment. A life condemned to hellish nightmares, and remembrance of your failure. You'll be locked within a prison of your own making. And it won't even take me to put you there," he said, laughing.

Visions of darkness and dreams of Lucrecia as she had looked when she rejected his proposal for Hojo's, rose up and threatened to choke them with their vividness. An inhuman wail rose from his throat and he battled against the restraints, not caring when they tore into his flesh and cut nearly to the bone. All he cared about was getting away from the sense of emptiness within and Hojo's triumphant laughter.

But the ghosts of the past didn't show in his eyes as he looked down at Morgan, noting that a bit more color had returned to her cheeks and that she was no longer struggling to breathe. Instead, she was staring at him with her clear, green eyes, as though she were trying to see deeper into his. He nearly warned her to give up her efforts, for she didn't want to see into the dark reaches, where he kept all of his pain and his rage hidden. It was something he had to keep a tight reign on, so that he wouldn't change. The last thing he wanted to do, even in his quest to keep her wary of him, was to frighten her with his inner demons.

In a move that was as unlike him as it was motherly, he reached up and smoothed her damp hair away from her forehead. Then realizing that he still held her in his arms, he gently moved her away and lay her back against her pillows. All the while, she said nothing, only stared up at him. Though he knew there was strength in her, she seemed so young and fragile, even more delicate than Lucrecia had appeared to him. Lucrecia, who had bonded with science, and who had been as untouched and as pure as the lifestream.

"Are you hungry?" he asked.

She touched her stomach as if she needed to test the question, and then nodded, rising to a sitting position. Vincent rose suddenly, and left the room, to return moments later with a clean set of clothing.

"I picked these up yesterday. I hope that they are your size. While you clean up and change, I will fix you something to eat," he told her, setting the articles at her feet.

"Thank you," she told him, getting only a brief nod in return before he turned and exited the room, leaving peppermint in his wake.

I really must admit I'm enjoying Vince and Morgan quite a bit, as I'm sure my chapters have been reflecting. But I also got a big kick out of Yuffie and the Turks, and I promise to give a bit more into their adventure down below, as well as the start of Aeris and Reeve's trip next chapter.

Until then, thanks for reading!