

Rufus's Twin

By Jen

Chapter 15: Look Out Below!

Aeris gripped her staff tightly, thankful that Barret had given it to her before they left the house. Much of Midgar had been cleaned out over the years as far as she could see, but it seemed creatures lurked in the barren darkness of Sector 6 still. At least, that was the warning she had received while traveling through the city. It was amazing the amount of people that stopped to talk to her. It reminded her of the days she had spent selling flowers, and left a small pang of loss for that time of innocence.

She made her way over the pieces of rubble and raised sections of street, stopping only once when she snagged the hem of her dress on a jagged piece of metal. She had to admit it felt wonderful to be in her own clothes again. Not that she wasn't grateful to Shera for the articles of clothing she had loaned her, it was just that hers fit better.

Leaping up slightly and balancing herself on the large, rusted section of piping, she could see the stairs that would lead her to the Sector 5 playground. Her destination was Reeve's building in Sector 8, but a part of her felt drawn to her church and her house in the slums of Sector 5. She knew that she would have to go there first.

She was very nearly to her goal, when three creatures leapt out in front of her. They had long, sharp claws, and equally long, jagged teeth. Their bodies were fairly long as well, and they balanced themselves on four legs. She stared at them, determined to pass, no matter how difficult it became. One immediately rushed her, and she leapt aside, barely dodging the slash of its claws. Spinning around, she brought her staff down hard on its head and was rewarded with a satisfying thud.

The creature fell back, but the other two rushed her simultaneously. Swinging her staff wide, she caught them both as she brought it around and back up in front of her. However well she might be doing at the moment, she knew she wouldn't be able to kill them without the help of materia. Raising her staff in front of her, she closed her eyes and cast Ice. When she opened them again, she found that she had felled one, but two still remained.

Becoming aggressive, she darted in and brought her staff down upon one's head with all of her strength. It hissed, and slashed out with its claws, catching her on the bare underside of her arm. Pulling back, she winced at the pain, but knew she would have to ignore it for now. But it had been a long time since she had been in a body with physical limitations, and just the short amount of battling she was doing here had caused her to lose her breath and grow slightly tired. She had never been overly strong to begin with, as she had no need for fighting, and had not enjoyed it.

She held back another cry of pain as one spewed forth a hot, gaseous substance that burned when it hit her ankles. Reaching up to wipe the sweat trickling down her brow, she raised her staff high and leapt in-between them again. She swung wide, and managed to catch one in the stomach but as she was turning, the other swept out with its claw and hooked in the hem of her dress. She felt to the ground hard, and tried to roll away. When she realized that she was trapped, and had no where else to turn, she brought her staff in front of her to try and ward them off.

Just as one creature reached out to slice her, something leapt in-between them. At first, she thought it was another creature and felt dismay wash over her. But as the dark form whirled around, she saw that it was a man, and he was carrying a large sword, with a long, narrow blade. She watched in amazement as he slashed out at the first creature, slicing it nearly in two, and then neatly flipped backward so that he stood behind the other. He struck out swiftly with his foot and she heard the creature cry out in pain. As it was moving back to attend to its wounds, the man brought his sword up over his head and down upon it.

When he was certain they were dead, he placed the sword back in the scabbard at his side. With long, measured strides, he made his way over to her and then bent down, offering her his hand. She took it, letting him pull her to her feet, and then stared up into his face. The first thing her eyes fell on was the nasty scar that snaked its way down from the corner of his eye to curve beneath his chin. It was plainly visible, because his shoulder length, black hair was pulled away from his face by a dark strap of leather. But she had to admit, his most noticeable feature were his intense gray eyes.

"Are you all right?" He asked, his voice deep and even.

She nodded. "Thank you."

He frowned. "You should not have been traveling through here alone."

She smiled. "I used to do it all of the time."

He didn't take the time to ponder what she meant by 'used to' and instead, moved forward to gently take her arm in his hand. The wound wasn't very deep, but he knew that it must have stung. Given her delicate features, feminine dress, and lack of skill while fighting, he considered her to be very out of place. Though, for all he knew, she might have lived in the slums all of her life.

"You are injured."

"It doesn't hurt very much. I can--"

But before she was given the time to finish, the gentle glow of a Cure materia was washing over her. As he lowered his hands, she saw the soft sparkle of materia in the simple bangle on his wrist.

"Are you traveling alone?" He asked.

Aeris gripped her staff a bit tighter at his words, but when she met his gray eyes with her green ones, she saw no hostility there. Instead, though she read nothing in the cloudy depths of his eyes, his gaze felt almost personal. She dropped her eyes from his, unsure why the contact caused her to feel vaguely uncomfortable when she was certain he meant no harm. After all, he had just saved her from certain death. Surely he wouldn't save her only to attack her.

She found herself staring at the three, gold buttons near his right shoulder that held his tunic up. It was a fascinating ensemble, actually. The last time she had seen an outfit like this, was years before in Wutai. This one was black, with a high, gold rimmed collar and a long hem that brushed the tops of his ankles. It was belted at the waist by a gold sash and she could see where it overlapped at the side to allow him the ability to move about freely. As far as she could tell, he wore matching pants beneath it and by dropping her gaze even lower, she saw what appeared to be a cross between slippers and sandals on his feet.

"Yes, I'm traveling alone," she finally answered, bringing her eyes back up to meet his.

She thought she saw a flicker of disapproval on his face before he said, "Where are you going? I will take you there."

"Oh, I don't need a guide. I know my way around here very well."

He almost smiled at her misinterpretation of his words. Surely she had someone who cared for her, and would not allow her to travel alone like this. He hesitated to think it, but he knew that if he had not come along, she would have either died or been seriously injured. From his experience, people rarely rushed in to help others if it meant getting injured themselves; especially not for people that looked as out of place or frightening as he did.

"I meant as protection for you," he replied.

Bodyguard. "Really, I appreciate your help Mr...."

"Hataka. Tai Hataka."

"Mr. Hataka. I appreciate your help, really I do. But I don't need a bodyguard."

His eyes fell on the slain creatures at her feet and then back up to her, as though to make a point. Aeris pushed aside the frustration and bit back a retort. As much as she loved all of her friends, they had a tendency to forget she had lived in the slums all of her life. She didn't like being coddled and treated as a young girl.

"Tai. And it would ease my mind to provide you with assistance."

Aeris realized she hadn't given him her name. "Oh, I'm sorry, I forgot to introduce myself. My name is Aeris Gainsborough."

He bowed slightly. "Will you allow me to assist you, Miss. Gainsborough?"

Aeris let her hand rest against her neck. Vincent was calm, composed, and quiet like this man, yet, even his manners weren't this impeccable. Nor, did he exude quite the same aura, a mixture of strength and gentleness. She had to admit it intrigued her, and she couldn't see any harm in getting to know him until she reached the Shinra building.

Smiling, she returned, "If you call me Aeris, I'll call you Tai." She walked forward, taking one of his arms, "Now, what brings you to Midgar?"

Tai stared down at the tiny female who had slipped her hand around his arm, and was now steering them out of Sector 6. He had been walking toward the Wall Market only minutes before, intent on taking care of some business there, when something had caused him to turn around and retrace his steps. There was no reasonable explanation for it; something inside had told him to go back, and he had learned not to ignore his instincts. When he had come upon the girl, lying on the ground with the creatures above her, he had understood why. Without a second thought, he had drawn his sword and leapt upon the creatures.

But now, he wanted to know why. What connection did this girl have to him? He was certain he had never seen her before, and though she was pretty in a delicate, feminine sort of way, he had no need for female companionship. It had to be something else then. He suppose with patience, he would soon find out. He held a strong belief that there were things beyond his explanation, things that pulled him in the direction he was meant to go. Something then, that was akin to fate and destiny. If she was a part of his destiny somehow, then he would accept it.

"I have business here."

She looked up at him as she walked. "What kind of business? If you don't mind me asking."

"I am what you could call a mercenary, I do things for money," he replied, conceding only that much.

Mercenary. "Oh."

For Aeris, this whole thing has such a strange feel to it. It reminded her of all those years before, when Cloud had fallen into her church. He was a mercenary then, protecting her from the Turks, and acting as her bodyguard. She shoved the thoughts aside, telling herself she was just being overly sentimental. This man and Cloud were nothing alike. For all his manners, Tai seemed to her, a hardened man, a man that had seen far more than perhaps even her friends, who had faced down Sephiroth and Jenova.

"Do you not approve?" he asked, noticing that they were coming up on the old, ruined church in Sector 5.

She shook her head. "Oh, I didn't mean it that way."

She stopped talking, letting go of his arm and starting toward the church. It had been so long since she had seen it; her sanctuary, the only place of beauty among the darkness of the city. She had spent so many afternoons there, tending to the flowers and trying to understand the voices that floated around her. When she was here, she felt like she belonged, and she felt at peace. It didn't seem to matter that she was different from everyone else, an Ancient wanted by Shinra because they wished to attain a place that only existed within one's heart. For them, it was supposed to be a place where they could find God-like stature, something physical. For her, it was a place within her heart, something she couldn't see, but could feel. Even Sephiroth had made the mistake of thinking that it was physical, a place that would offer supreme happiness. But those things weren't found around one, they were found within one.

Pushing past the door, she walked inside, forgetting that Tai was just behind her. To her surprise, there were flowers blooming there still. They were sitting in a flower box near the stained glass window, soft rays of sun scattering a colorful

pattern across the golden petals. She walked up to them and reverently stroked the very tops, a soft, faraway smile on her face.

"I used to come here everyday, to tend to the flowers and to be alone. How nice that someone else kept them up..."

"It does not cost very much. The children were eager to do it. They say that the woman who came here was wonderful, and that she would give out flowers for free, even though they knew she needed the gil to live," Tai said softly.

Aeris turned away from the flower box to find him standing just behind her. He was so quiet, she hadn't even noticed him approach.

"You mean...you did this?" She asked.

He looked almost uncomfortable for a moment, before saying, "I passed through here eight years ago, and found children inside of the church, struggling to keep flowers alive in the crushed box. They told me about the girl and why they were trying to keep them alive. In exchange for them taking care of the flowers, I bought them what they needed to do it. Where you...that girl?"

"Once."

His gray eyes focused on her with an intensity that made her feel as though he were physically touching her. "Why did you leave if this place meant so much to you?"

"It was my destiny."

He looked somewhat startled. "Destiny? You believe in that?"

She looked puzzled. "Yes. Why, don't you?"

"Yes." His eyes passed over her again. "That was nine years ago; you look as though you are not a day over 20."

To his surprise, she laughed. "It's a long story. One you might not even believe."

He glanced around him, and then found a large beam to sit on. "You might be surprised what I will believe."

Reno followed behind Elena and Rude, ever aware of his damp clothing, and the thick, musty smell of the underground. He supposed he had smelt worse than this, but at the moment, he really couldn't think of anything. So far, they had been traveling for nearly a half an hour, wading their way through the stagnant water and maneuvering around large chunks of things, some of which he didn't even want to attempt to put a name to. It was hard for him to imagine this was once the city of Midgar. The closest they had come to anything that remotely resembled an identifiable object was a downed street lamp.

Trudging along behind Rude, Elena wondered if they were going to be able to find whatever it was Reeve was looking for. A large mass of energy wasn't exactly much to go on. For all they knew, it could be a large colony of mutants. Not that she would ever give Reno the satisfaction of hearing her say that aloud. Though she knew Rude had a near photographic memory, she wondered how anything down here could resemble the maps they had studied in Reeve's office, and then later, over the kitchen table. But then, Rude did tend to amaze even her at times, and she trusted him not to lead them so off course that they go lost.

The underground was dark, and so thick with the smell of mold, that it was a wonder they could even breathe. It was almost like being drowned in a sense, and if it weren't for the occasional break in the surface above them, there wouldn't have been any fresh air to mingle with the stale air. Large pieces of debris were strewn everywhere, and there were numerous different paths for them to wander off on. Though it was difficult to tell exactly where they were, the manhole in Sector 7 served as a starting point and moving east from there took them in the direction they were seeking.

At one point in time, this city was above ground, and teeming with life. No one had suspected that it was built on a fault line, a mistake that produced terrible results even though it was supposed to be dormant. That had been the fault of the Urban Development department of that time. Shinra had existed for many generations, and at one time, the company had been stationed at the hydroelectric plant in Junon. The idea to build the city of Midgar around the construction of the Shinra Headquarters had been merely a dream until the president decided to make it a reality. It was up to the Urban Development department to find a suitable location for it. And their choice had led to disaster years later and to the rebuilding of most of the city.

That event had taken place so many years ago, that it wasn't common knowledge anymore. The fact that Reeve had known was no great surprise, as he had once been the head of Urban Development himself. From the few rumors that had circulated, he had been in charge of Shinra's latest glory, Neo-Midgar. Only, with the destruction of Shinra, that project had never gotten off the ground.

"Are you sure you know where you're going, bud?" Reno asked.

"Yes. I studied the maps."

"Every goddamned thing we come across looks the same."

Elena was inclined to agree, but she wasn't going to whine along with Reno.

Rude saw the maps in his mind as clearly as if they were in front of his eyes now. He was excellent at looking at things even only briefly, and remembering them in near detail. He didn't know how it was he was born with this talent, but he didn't question it. To say the least, it was an asset; both on and off the job. It was also the reason why it made sense to have him lead their small group.

Despite the fact that Reeve wanted them only to locate the mass of energy and then report back, Rude wondered if it would be that easy. Some inner feeling, some instinct, told him that it would not be that easy. His years spent as Turk had taught him that. Therefore, he was prepared for whatever might arise.

"Don't worry, Reno," Rude replied, amusement evident in his tone. "I'll protect you."

Reno snorted. "It isn't my safety I'm worried about."

"What's that supposed to mean?" Elena demanded, turning slightly so that she could pierce Reno with a glare.

Reno grinned at her. "Nothing."

"I'm just as good of a Turk as you are, if not better!" Elena retorted hotly.

Reno raised his hands in front of him as though to ward off an attack. "I didn't say anything."

Elena was so intent on making sure Reno received the full extent of her glare, that she wasn't watching where she was going. Her legs bumped into a hard object, and she fell backwards with a scream before either of the men could react quickly enough to catch her. While Rude bent over to help her to her feet, Reno crossed his arms and laughed at her.

"Elena, you're such a klutz."

Yuffie watched the proceedings from her hiding place behind a large slab of concrete. Though she felt somewhat bad for Elena, she had to admit that it was hilarious to watch her fall over. But even more amusing, would be to watch Reno fall over. From what she had gleaned from pieces of their conversation that had floated to her as they walked, she had learned that Reno had already taken one tumble. His sopping wet clothing attested to that. Still, it wasn't enough, as far as she was concerned, to make him pay for using her like he did.

The worst part was, that she was actually beginning to have some feelings for him, and the fact that he had openly

admitted to having feelings for her, and then backpedaled as soon as she was not around angered her. Not only angered her, but hurt her as well. Though it pained her to admit it, she had never felt more hurt in all of her life. The last nine years had mostly been spent restoring Wutai to its former glory, and she hadn't really had time for relationships. But then, maybe it was her fault in a way, for ever thinking Reno, a self proclaimed womanizer, could ever have genuine feelings for someone.

"Shut up, Reno!" She snapped, rubbing at her backside.

Reno, having caught a glimpse of something out of the corner of his eye, strode forward and bent over to pick it up off of the ground. It turned out to be a very dirty piece of glass with the words 'Scientific Re' written on it. Whatever else had once been there, had worn off long ago.

"Hmm. Looks like it was part of the door to the Scientific Research lab," Reno mused.

Elena made a face. "Yeah, even then, they had a place where scientists like Hojo could carry out their twisted dreams."

"They weren't all like Hojo," Rude replied quietly.

"Yeah. From what I heard, Gast wasn't all that bad."

"They all are, in some way or another. Most have no regard for human life when it comes to their brilliant scientific hypothesis," Elena rejoined bitterly.

Reno set the glass back on the ground, looking over at Elena. Though none of them had been fond of Hojo, he couldn't see why she was so upset over him, that she was putting down scientists altogether. As far as he knew, she had, had no personal experience with him that would make her feel that way. Of course, Elena was often times funny about things and he had just accepted it as the way she was.

"Well, it's nothing important anyhow, so if you're done falling ass over tea kettle we'll get moving again," Reno replied.

Elena favored him with a sour look and then spun around to follow after Rude. Reno smiled at her stiff, now wet back, and began whistling. At least he wouldn't have to be wet alone. Besides, it served her right for not breaking his fall earlier.

They traveled on for an indeterminable amount of time in silence, the scenery not changing much as they trudged along. Even knowing his friend's excellent memory, Reno still wondered how he managed to make anything out the dark mess. It all looked so much the same, they might as well be going in circles. Finally, they came to the enormous wall Reeve had been talking about; the one that would require climbing equipment of some kind, considering it was too smooth to give them any footholds.

"It looked much smaller on the map," Elena sighed.

"Things usually do," Reno replied, smartly.

"Reno, just shut up, okay? I swear..." she trailed off, muttering something incoherent, but suspiciously negative.

To Yuffie, the slab of rock looked like nothing compared to rounded, smooth faces of the Da-Chao mountains. She had a lot of experience where climbing was concerned, and would have no problem making it up the concrete after the others were a safe distance away. As a matter of fact, she would relish the experience. It had been a few days since she had gone climbing.

Rude reached into the pack on his back and retrieved three ropes with sharp, metal claws at the ends of them. After instructing Reno and Elena to move back, he swung upward with all of his strength and watched as the claw clung to the top of the concrete. Pulling back swiftly, he was satisfied to find that it was secured. After throwing both Elena's and Reno's up there, they gripped the ropes with their gloved hands and began climbing.

"How far does this thing go up?" Elena asked, unable to see too well in the darkness. Somehow, she had managed to get

ahead of both Reno and Rude.

"Slow down will you? If you're too far away, I can't catch you when you try to fall and break your neck," came Reno's reply. A very distinct, 'shut up jerk' floated down to him from above.

Elena moved faster, thinking that the whole experience was far easier than she had ever expected it to be. As a matter of fact, she didn't know what was taking Reno and Rude so long. A few more steps and she would be to the top. She had to admit that it was a fairly exhilarating feeling, climbing like this. She didn't get too do very many physical things like this as a Turk. Truthfully, she hadn't been one very long before Shinra had collapsed. Over the years, Reeve had managed to create a fairly peaceful existence, and the need for physically taxing jobs didn't arise very often.

"Hey guys, I found the top."

"Wait for us there," Rude instructed.

Elena laughed. "At the rate you two are going, that'll take all day. I'll start down and wait for you on the other side."

Rude jerked suddenly, as if he had been slapped. "No Elena. Wait for us."

"Oh come on Rude, I'm already starting."

Reno, noticing by the tense set of his friend's shoulders that something was wrong, added, "Elena. He's serious. Wait."

"I'm not taking orders from you," she replied. "This is really easy."

There was a moment of silence, and then a sharp scream filled the air. Elena's rope skidded down between them and fell into the darkness below. It all happened within a few seconds, yet to Rude and Reno, the claw made an unbearable screeching sound that lasted for eternity as it slid down the concrete. They looked down, and then up, disbelief numbing them both for one second too many.

"Elena!" Rude yelled.

"Shit!" Reno said, nearly losing his grip on his rope as the impact of what just happened hit him.

Both men began scrambling frantically to the top, Rude calling Elena's name over and over again in an anguished tone that frightened Reno with its intensity. In all the time that they had been friends, Reno had never heard him sound like that. Rude was always the quiet one, the one that didn't let his emotions slip through his dark glasses or leak out in his tone.

"You morons are never going to make it at that rate. You don't know the first thing about climbing," a voice snapped, and then suddenly, Yuffie was between them, climbing at a rapid rate. Reno hadn't even remembered seeing her throw up her own rope.

On the outside, Yuffie was calm as she passed both of them and continued upward. She had been climbing for years, and knew by the slant of the concrete, that descent would be far different from ascent. But Elena, in her ignorance and enthusiasm, didn't. At the moment, it didn't matter that she had just given herself away. She knew she was better at this than both of them combined, and that wasn't just ego talking. She had been climbing since she was old enough to understand what it required; and it had been a part of her ninja training as well. Not to mention, she was smaller than both of them and would be able to get down the other side faster than they could.

Reno had no time to really absorb the fact that Yuffie was here. In retrospect, he wasn't surprised; it seemed exactly like something she would do. He wasn't thinking about argument they had, had when he refused to let her come, nor the names she had called him. He was only thinking about Elena, and the fact that she could be dead. None of them knew what was over the other side of concrete. They had only looked at maps that showed the city as it once was, not as it was now. There were far too many dangers, for them to go running around like amateurs, and he damned Elena for being so careless and headstrong.

Rude wasn't certain when he had stopped calling her name, or even if he had stopped. He could feel nothing; he was numb inside. For so many years, they had worked side by side, as Turks, friends, and then finally as lovers and life long companions. He didn't want to lose her so soon after finding her. Fate could not be so cruel; he had to cling to the hope that she was all right, even if she hadn't answered his cries.

Yuffie reached the top first, and crouched down on the jagged pieces of rock, staring down into the darkness below. It took a while for her eyes to adjust, but she could barely make out what appeared to be a large hole in the concrete. Could there be more than one level to this thing? She supposed it was possible, and trust Elena to find it. There was only one thing to do then, she needed to go in after her and make sure she was all right.

Making certain that her rope was secure still, she took the straps that had helped her climb up and strapped them to the belt at her waist. After testing them to make sure that they would stay put, she leapt over the side. Moments later, Reno and Rude made it to the top.

"Yuffie! Where the hell are you!?" Reno called down after her and received no answer. "Goddammit! We've lost them both."

Well, sorry it took so long to get out! Time just gets away from you when you're busy. I didn't get quite as far as I wanted to, but at least the groundwork is starting to be laid for the plot I have in mind. I'm just slowly working my way there. And it seems, I sure have a lot to write for simple happenings!

As always, I appreciate you reading and all comments.