

Rufus's Twin
By Jen

Chapter 21: Destiny Calls

Reeve was jerked roughly awake to find himself being hauled from the floor by two black clad soldiers, their hands curled so tightly around his arms, that he felt their fingers biting into his flesh through the fabric of his well-made suit. Startled, blurred brown eyes darted around the room, trying to find Tai and Aeris. The last thing he remembered was being at the City of the Ancients and being surrounded by soldiers similar to these. At Aeris' insistence, they had given up their weapons and went willingly. Further exploration of his mind brought him the memory of a sharp prick in the back of his neck before darkness had swept over him, taking all notion of time and space with it. As his befuddled mind sought to sort out these rapidly returning images, and to restore his alertness, he gathered that they must have used some kind of tranquilizer on them all.

"Where are you taking me?" He rasped, shocked that the hoarse voice leaving his lips belonged to him.

Both soldiers returned his inquiry with impassive stares, and the vacancy he saw in their eyes caused him to wonder if they were really thinking anything at all. It was obvious they weren't going to give him any kind of answer, he realized, as one continued to hold him in place, while the second shackled first his feet and then his hands. As if he posed any real threat without his gun. They had seen to it that he was relieved of that, and aside from a few minor self defense moves (none of which were probably going to be of any use against these two), Reeve was hardly well equipped to fight. He had never seen any use for learning how. Most of his time was spent in boardrooms, not a battle field.

Wincing slightly when the soldier tightened the cuffs on his wrist to the point where they cut into his skin, he turned his face away to hide the way his eyes filled with moisture. Aeris and Tai had still not moved from their positions against the far wall. Either the tranquilizer had not worn off, or the noise this was causing was making very little disturbance, or a combination of both. In any case, he hoped that Aeris didn't worry when she woke up to find him not here. The last thing he wanted to do was cause her worry, or leave her alone in this place. Granted she was with Tai, but Reeve did not know, nor did he completely trust the man. Tai seemed like he could take care of himself, and probably Aeris too... but that did not change the way Reeve felt about being torn away from her and taken to God-knew-where.

Sighing while they made some last minute adjustments to insure he was properly secured, Reeve watched the breath he expelled hanging in the air, a thin trail of mist. It was far too cold in here. A quick glance at Aeris reminded him that she was only wearing a thin dress. If he could have, he would have covered her with his coat before he left. She was bound to be freezing when she woke up. But he seriously doubted these two human robots were going to unshackle him long enough to remove his coat, cross the cell, and give it to a girl they probably could care less about. No, he realized with a tightening of his jaw and a thinning of his lips, he was going to have to trust that Tai was gentleman enough to do it for him.

Without warning, the soldier straightened and yanked him forward, nearly causing him to lose his balance. Biting back a sharp retort, Reeve ignored the pain and stumbled along, wondering how anyone managed to walk in these things. So this was what it felt like to be a prisoner. These things were very effective. They made you feel degraded, less of a human and more like an animal. All the money in the world and an endless reserve of power hardly mattered when you were stripped of all your dignity. These soldiers didn't give a damn if he was the president of a major corporation. They had their orders and were so bent on following them, he doubted anything could sway them. He doubted anything could penetrate the thick fog they walked in either... It was almost as if they weren't human.

The cell door shut behind them with a snap, and Reeve jerked at the sound, swiveling his head around to watch as they locked it, jiggling the handle once to make certain it was secure. Having done that, they pulled him in the opposite direction, down darker halls, where the faintest patches of light made grotesque shapes on the floor and walls. Trying to keep his anxiety at bay, trying not to think about where it was he was going and what would be waiting for him there, Reeve squinted in the dimness, noticing that they were passing what appeared to be more cells. Were the others in there? Had they gotten to his friends too? Whoever they were.

Maybe he wanted to know. Maybe he wanted to confront whoever was responsible for this. The further they walked, the

angrier he got. At the chains pulling at his skin, at the state Aeris had been in, at the thought that it was possible no one was safe. But then, he remembered that there was nothing he could do. He wasn't a warrior like Cloud. He was weak in comparison, and no matter how angry he got, he was the prisoner here. What good could he do locked in chains? He was only going to succeed in getting himself injured or killed by losing control. That left him with only one recourse. To do what he did best, to think. He had to forget about physical solutions and find another way. Even if that meant negotiating. Reeve hesitated to think of just what it was he would be bartering with, but he knew he couldn't stand by and let anything happen to the people he had grown to consider his family.

Pulling himself from his thoughts, he realized they had left what he termed the prison area behind. The light was growing stronger and the air was growing considerably warmer. The soldiers pulled him around a corner without much care, and he tottered along, before finally losing his balance and crashing to the floor. He hit his knees hard, falling to one elbow to brace himself as best he could, the effort jarring clear into his teeth. With impatient jerks, the guards lifted him back up again, and Reeve noted that the knee of his left pant leg had torn. The skin below was stinging from the contact with the air, and he knew he had scraped it up. Unable to help himself, he glared at them. There was no need for them to jerk him around like a rag doll. He had come peacefully and without incident.

"You don't need to pull so hard," he informed them tightly, when they again drug him around a corner. "It's a bit hard for me to walk in these things."

As he suspected, they didn't answer. Their expression didn't even change.

Tempering his annoyance, he concentrated on memorizing the path they were taking. He counted steps, charted turns, and examined the environment. If there was one thing he was good at, it was building maps in his head. After all, he had once worked in Urban Development, and a blueprint of a building was certainly no different from this. If he couldn't fight, he could at least be the living map if luck ever turned and he did manage to find someone that could. He was going to need all the help he could get if he planned on returning to the prison area and freeing anyone that was trapped there... And with a sinking feeling reminiscent of the one he got just before a business deal soured, he was thinking the chances of that were very slim.

The soldiers brought him to an abrupt stop in front of a set of swinging doors. There was faint lettering on it, worn with time and covered in grime. Reeve peered closely at them, trying to make it out. He only caught what he thought was 'lab' before he was shoved hard from behind and forced to walk ahead of the guards. Gritting his teeth, he struggled along at the pace they had set for him, noting as he went that these set of rooms were far cleaner than the rest of this place. As a matter of fact, it bordered on obscenely sterile. What kind of person, or thing for that matter, lived here?

They took him through another set of short halls, deeper and deeper into the lab until finally he came to an open area filled with a few sparse sets of furniture that looked like metal bowels with the centers carved out. They had no arms and rested on a single short pedestal. It was when they rounded they moved further into the room, however, and he caught sight of what lay beyond, stretched across the far wall, that he got his first big shock.

It was a painting of death. Bodies lay strewn everywhere, their victors poised above them, weapon in hand, blood running in rivulets down the sharpened metal. It was war at its most gruesome. Just looking at it made Reeve sick. Why in the world would anyone want to look at someone so ugly? What was so beautiful about war that someone had felt the need to paint it? There was nothing dignified in the way the dead lay, in the rivers of blood that stained the grass crimson. And when a what he was certain was the owner of the picture stepped away from it and turned, he got his second big shock.

Mouth falling open, the only sound that came out was a strangled gasp of disbelief.

The person smiled, and in a move that was eerily reminiscent of the man whose face he wore, he brushed a strand of blonde hair out of his eyes.

Spreading his arms wide, he greeted Reeve. "Welcome, Mr. President, to my humble abode."

Pressing her hand to her forehead, Aeris shook herself in an attempt to chase away the grogginess that made thought and

limbs slow. Blinking bright green eyes, she pushed from the floor into a sitting position and glanced around her lodgings. It was bare and cold. It was obviously some kind of prison cell. The soldiers must have brought them here... Right after... right after... Oh, that was right. They must have knocked them out with tranquilizers. She remembered seeing them do it to Tai and Reeve seconds before the sharp pain just below her ear took her into darkness.

Speaking of Tai and Reeve... Another quick glance told her that the only other person here was Tai. Where was Reeve? Worry filling her, drawing her brows together in concern, she wrapped her arms around herself in an effort to attain some warmth. She could not help but feel responsible if anything had happened to him. After all, it was she that had suggested they go willingly. Perhaps if they had fought them off... No, that would have only got them seriously hurt or killed. As much as it could be, the other alternative had been the better choice.

"You are cold."

Tai's voice and his sudden appearance beside her startled her, and she jerked away. He had been sitting up against a wall so still, with his eyes closed, she had thought he was still unconscious.

"I am sorry. I did not mean to frighten you."

She shook her head, managing some kind of smile. "It's all right."

"Here." He began undoing the sash to his long tunic.

Eyes widening both from mild embarrassment at the thought of seeing him without his tunic, and the fact that his kindness would leave him cold, she shook her head. "No, I'm fine. Really."

Noting the slight flush that had spread out across her cheeks, Tai smiled. "Do not worry, Aeris. I am wearing another tunic beneath this one."

To prove his point, he removed it the rest of the way, leaving a white, sleeveless tunic with an unmistakable v-neckline in its place.

Trying to stave off more embarrassment at having him notice her discomfort, she said, "You'll be cold, Tai. I can't accept it. But thanks for the offer."

He shook his head, draping it across her shoulders and going so far as to push her arm through one sleeve. Unable to turn back the kindness now that he had gone so far, she shrugged into the other sleeve and rose to her feet with his help. Both sleeves fell far past her hands, and the tunic itself went well past the tops of her feet. But, she realized, as she pulled it tightly around her awkwardly, it was warm from his own body heat.

"Thank you," she said softly, smiling.

"You should fold up the sleeves," was his reply.

"Oh."

Doing as he had said, she watched him from the corner of her eye. He seemed so calm. Was he worried at all? They were in a strange place, the location of which was a mystery to them, and Reeve was missing. She hesitated to think it, but she was afraid something terrible had happened to him.

"Tai... Reeve's missing and I'm worried something might have happened to him," she confessed, pulling up the hem of the tunic by the waist, as she walked over to him and settled down next to him against the wall.

Tai folded his arms across the thin fabric of his white tunic. "Guards came and took him away not so long ago. I remained unmoving and they thought that I was still unconscious."

Aeris bit her lip. "They didn't... hurt him did they?"

Green eyes focused on her. "They shackled his feet and arms and took him away. I wish that I could tell you more."

Tai watched her carefully, noting the variety of emotions that crossed her face, ranging from worry, to guilt. He wished that there was something he could have done. But he was more concerned with keeping them safe, and attacking the soldiers while he was still only half awake would not have been wise. Wherever Reeve was going, he doubted it was to be killed or otherwise harmed. If that had been the case, he was fairly certain they all would have been taken away.

"I do not think they intended to harm him."

Aeris sighed. "I hope not... I never should have..." She trailed off, shaking her head.

"It was necessary," Tai said gently, leaving it at only that, and causing her to wonder exactly what he meant by that.

"Maybe."

He smiled then, taking some of the severity from the serious expression he always wore. "It was."

Aeris knew it was hopeless to worry so much. There was nothing to be accomplished from it. It was better to focus on something else.

"Tai, is Wutai your home town?"

Somewhat surprised by the question, he stared at her for a few moment, before answering, "Yes."

"If you don't mind my asking, why did you leave to become a mercenary? It's so beautiful there..."

For a brief moment, his jaw tightened and his expression became distant. Fearing that she was had overstepped the boundaries of their friendship, Aeris was about to apologize when he said quietly, "I was banished."

She looked surprised. "Banished? But..."

Tai smiled, but it was not filled with mirth. "Do not look shocked. We all have our own personal demons. Mine was the foolish mistake of youth."

It had been some time since he had touched on this. It still pained him, even after all this time. Leaving your family, friends, and familiar way of life behind was not something that could leave you untouched. As he had told Aeris, he had been very young and with the arrogance of youth and the false presumption of invincibility, he had done something considered unthinkable.

"I was 16. I was very arrogant and very certain of myself. I fell in love with a Lord's daughter. She was very beautiful. Like you," he added, turning to stare at her.

Aeris had only a moment to be pleasantly touched by his comment before he continued.

"My family was well respected, but I was not high enough to marry a Lady of Wutai. She was promised to another, but in love with me. Or so I had believed. She let me romance her and let me dream. We planned to elope, and the night that it was to take place, instead of her meeting me at the docks, it was her father and the elders. They informed me that I was to leave Wutai, and never to return. I could not say good-bye my family, and if I returned I was to be killed on sight. So I left."

Aeris touched his arm. "Oh Tai, I'm sorry. That must have been hard."

He smiled. She was so kind. "It was very long ago."

"I shouldn't have pried."

He shook his head. "I did not mind telling you. If I had, I would have said so."

Aeris stared at him in silence, only half understanding him still. Unlike Reeve, who was easier to read, Aeris found Tai to be enigmatic, with hidden secrets and motives that were beyond her to decipher. There was something about him that she felt connected to... In a way she had never felt connected to anyone else before. She just didn't know what that was.

Reeve continued to stare at the man in stunned silence, trying to decide whether what he was seeing was actually real. Perhaps it was the tranquilizers. They had messed with his mind and were causing him to hallucinate. Surely that was the only explanation. He was not exactly certain what he had expected, but it was not this. Of course, the last few days had not been what he would call normal by any stretch of the imagination. What was one more oddity? It was getting to the point where he wouldn't have been surprised to see Sephiroth himself.

Eyes moving past the man with some difficulty, he again stared at the painting, grimacing visibly.

"What? You don't like my art?" The man asked, sweeping his hand out to indicate to it.

Reeve drug his gaze back to him and finally managed. "That isn't art."

He shrugged elegantly. "To each his own. I personally find it marvelous. Man is so fascinated with war, so enamored with bloodshed. If they weren't, why has history repeated itself time and time again? There is bound to be wars, you know. Man can't help himself. His need to dominate won't let him live with peace for very long. You're fighting a losing battle if you think otherwise. What does it matter if I speed that process along, if I give man what he is desiring? But to do so, I had to first remove obstacles. Now that, that is taken care of I can carry out the Planet's destiny."

Reeve blinked. "What the hell are you talking about?"

He laughed. "Patience. I'll explain your roll momentarily. Let us talk of other things first. You look surprised to see me."

Pulling himself together as best he could, Reeve replied coolly, "And that surprises you?"

"Ah, the wonders of modern science. Hojo was a genius, you know. Mentally unstable, a bit obsessed, and ugly as hell, but brilliant. Pity he died before he could use me. But his plans are now mine, and I will be the only one to reap the benefits."

Hojo.... Reeve's mind whirled as he tried to understand the implications of what this man was telling him. Not only did he have an entire army at his disposal, but if Reeve understood him right, he also had others here he considered threats. Reeve had the distinct feeling that he had very important part to play in these plans of his as well. Considering the way he talked of war, he gathered it was not something he was going to want to participate in.

It wasn't as if he had any other options, however.

Abruptly, the man's attitude changed. The smile slid from his face to be replaced with a cold, measured look. Reeve had seen this expression many times and had been on the receiving end of it too many times to count. When he was displeased, everyone around him knew it. There had been a danger in him that was not in his father. Had he not made some very costly errors, he would have succeeded where his father had failed, of that Reeve was sure.

Shaking himself free of the paralysis those piercing eyes caused, he reminded himself that he was thinking like this was his former boss. That was impossible. He had died. The man Reeve had known never would have forced himself to bide his time for nearly nine years, only to surface now when his and Cloud's hold on the company was at its most secure. But then, he did not pretend to understand the way this man's mind worked.

"Are you telling me," he said with as much calm as he could manage, "that you're Rufus Shinra?"

Rufus, as Reeve was now beginning to think of him, shifted his gaze back to the painting for a moment, his expression softening. Turning his face back to his prisoner, he smiled, a feral, merciless smile that did not reach his eyes. Reeve had the

distinct feeling that he had just been labeled a target. He wasn't entirely certain he liked that.

"What do your eyes tell you?" He said at length, folding his arms across his chest.

Reeve shrugged, finding the act a bit difficult with heavy chains weighing his hands down. "You look like him, but that doesn't mean you are him."

Rufus had been known for his minor eccentricities, but Reeve had never known him to be fascinated with war the way this man was. Of course, he had not exactly known Rufus very well, and had never made an effort to do so. That left him with having to trust this man's word. Perhaps trust was too kind a word, however. He had never trusted Rufus, and he wasn't going to trust this one either. He just didn't have much choice but to accept whatever it was this man told him.

"You'll just have to take my word for it, won't you?" He replied, almost as if he had read Reeve's mind.

Tossing a glance over his shoulder at the unmoving guards behind him, Reeve realized escape was going to be out of the question. Besides, it didn't pay to underestimate your enemy. Rufus had not been much of a fighter outside of using his shotgun or his pet Dark Nation, but that didn't mean this man was the same. He was going to have to be careful not to merge the images of Rufus before and this man in his mind. If he started thinking of them as the same person, he knew that whatever this man hoped to gain, he had, while everyone else had lost.

"I suppose... What are you planning to do then, start a war?" He probed.

He stared at him a moment before smiling slightly. "Don't think you can get me to tell you anything I don't want to, Mr. President."

Why was it when he said it, it sounded like an insult?

"But if you must know, I have no intentions of starting a war. At least not the kind you are thinking of. I intend to reclaim something that is rightfully mine. If that results in a war, then it will be the fault of those who begin it. I am merely the catalyst."

Reeve froze. Of course. Why hadn't he thought of it as soon as he got a good look at the man's face?

Dammit Cloud, don't you be here too.

"As much as I hate to leave this place behind, it is time I claim the throne. From what I have observed, you have done an excellent job of taking care of it for me. Of course, I will make changes, but that is only natural. It's time to usher in a new era, one where Mako is again at the forefront."

"Mako ruined you once," Reeve said, his tone harsh at the thought of having everything he worked so hard for taken from him in mere seconds, "it'll do it again."

"Don't be so certain. I have had plenty of time to reflect on those mistakes. I intend to live for a very long time, Mr. President. You on the other hand..."

Reeve swallowed hard. "What are you going to do, kill me?"

"Not yet. I need you first."

"Just how do you intend to get the people to accept you after all this time? They didn't even like Rufus."

"People don't have to like their leaders. They only have to respect and fear them. That's quite the combination, don't you think? When you respect what you fear, then you are afraid to do anything but blindly follow."

Reeve shook his head. "There's where you're wrong. When people respect and love their leaders, they are willing to go to great lengths to protect both their freedom and that of their leaders. No man wants to fight for something he doesn't

believe in. He'll only do it with half a heart. But if he loves the cause, loves the person leading him, he will give his all, and win because of it."

Rufus laughed, the sound cold and calculating even to Reeve's ears, nothing like amusement at all. "Such naiveté. It's admirable, really. Why do you think, Mr. President, that all peace comes to an end? It is because people get lax, they get too comfortable with their uneventful way of life. And why not? What is there for them to be concerned about? If their leader is stern, and shows them periodically what will happen to those who stray, then they are poised at all times for an attack. There is less chance of the empire crumbling when its subjects are prepared to fight."

"No one wants to live that way. They'll rebel against you, like they did before, and they'll win again. Your rule can't last forever. You underestimate their loyalty to their way of life, and to the people who brought it to them."

"We shall see, will we not? Or," he corrected with a smirk, "I will see. You... well let us just say you won't be around long enough to appreciate the new era."

One thing was for certain, this Rufus liked making speeches just as much as the other one did. And his words frightened Reeve. They had worked so hard to clean up the mess created by Shinra, Cloud and he, and they still hadn't completely managed it. It was not an overnight process, and yet this man intended to sweep in and change it all. Who would stop him? He had an army of unquestioning soldiers who would keep order in whatever way he deemed necessary. How did you fight that? You killed their leader. But that was easier said than done.

"Fine. But you still haven't answered my question. What part do I play in this grand scheme of yours?" Reeve demanded, his expression tight with worry and anger.

"Ah, to the crux of the matter. You're very focused. It's a pity you lack the drive to back that force up."

Reeve's jaw tightened. He was used to being insulted about his lack of strength. But Cloud had once told him that it was inner strength that truly counted, and Reeve had more than enough. After all, how could he have pulled Shinra Inc. from the gutters and nearly single handedly made it into what it was today? Reeve had of course told him that it would have been impossible without his help. To which Cloud simply shook his head and smiled.

"I think you've insulted me enough," he snapped. "Why not put aside the pomp and grandeur and get down to business?"

"Yes..." Rufus' expression became distant then, and Reeve glimpsed something odd as he focused on apparently nothing. A glazed, almost vacant expression filled his eyes. If those guards weren't here... But then Rufus snapped his attention back to Reeve, his eyes sharp.

"You will call a press conference, Mr. President. Before all of the Planet, you will give a marvelous speech about how you have enjoyed serving the wonderful citizens, about how they have made you proud, and how they have made the Planet a better place to live on. After you have stirred their pride, won their undying devotion, you will then drop the bomb. You will introduce me. You will express your joy at having found me after all this time, hiding away from humanity, atoning for my sins, and go on to tell them how you convinced me that I should be the one ruling Shinra Inc. Or was it Reeve Electric Co...?"

He paused here to smile. "That will of course change. As will your roll. You will announce your resignation, as well as that of your Vice President Cloud. And the company will once again be mine, with the people happily serving a man their former leader puts so much trust in."

Reeve felt himself first go hot, then cold, and then beyond shock. This man actually expected him to do this willingly? To deceive the very people he served and then let Rufus loose on them?

"You can't force me to do that, you bastard! I won't! You might as well kill me now, because I'm never helping you."

Rufus examined his fingernails. "I expected that reaction. That is why I prepared a little incentive."

His stomach lurched, and his heart thudded painfully against his ribs.

"I have, in my possession, each and every person that means anything to you, Mr. President. That includes your esteemed vice president, Cloud Strife. If you fail to cooperate, I will kill them off one by one, and make certain to tell them before they meet a rather painful end that they have you to thank for it."

"You son of a bitch," he bit out raggedly, clenching his fists.

"Now, now, Mr. President, is it really kind to insult my mother?"

Disbelief. This man was completely unbelievable. He was talking about killing the people that Reeve loved without remorse, and making jokes on top of it?

Rufus' expression hardened. "Make up your mind. Now."

Reeve sighed, as he felt the fight drain from him. What choice did he have?

Lifting his eyes from the ground, he locked them with Rufus', a grim, sort of resignation filling his expression and his tone as he said, "I'll do it."

Um, yes, this took five million years. So if no one is reading this I understand. ^^;;;