

Rufus's Twin
by Jen

Chapter 9: Barret says, "No!"

Barret stood as tall and unmoving as an oak tree, his arms folded across his middle. The thunderous expression on his face was one that his daughter had seen plenty of times. And once dad made up his mind, there was usually no changing it.

"But dad!" Marlene protested.

"I said no! There's no way you're gettin' holes punched in yer ears!"

Marlene sighed and replied, "But lotsa girls have them!"

Barret shifted his weight to his left hip and stared at Marlene down the tip of his nose, "Oh yeah? Name one I know and approve of."

Marlene tapped her feet furiously as she thought. There had to be at least one girl, or this conversation would be closed until she turned 16. And four years was an awful long time to wait when you wanted something.

Barret waited as patiently as possible. He knew that she would not be able to come up with a name, and it scared him down to the core that she was growing up so fast that she wanted her ears pierced. Pretty soon, it would be make-up and boys and...he did not want to think about what else. It seemed like only yesterday that she was four years old and depending on him for just about everything. Part of him was afraid she would get to a certain age and he would be left behind. Right now he missed his little girl, the one who sat on his shoulders and the one who complained about his scratchy whiskers. Because of this fear he was being a lot harsher on her than he should be.

Marlene looked near tears as she said, "I...I can't think of anyone."

Barret kept his expression neutral, part of him wanting to give in and the other part of him protesting loudly against it. God, if only he could hold on to her for just a few more years, as if forcing her to be little would keep her from growing up.

He felt Elmyra's small hand pressing against his arm and he turned to look at her. He could see by the expression on her face that she understood. It had not been all that long ago that she had to let go of Aeris, to let her grow up and make her own decisions. Now she was going through the same thing all over again with Marlene, only this time she knew better what the little girl and her Father needed.

A parent could never ignore ammunition if it helped him with his case, and he thought about pointing out the fact that neither Cloud or Cid planned on letting *their* daughters get holes in their ears. Cid had adamantly refused to let Mandie put 'those goddamned holes in her little ears' until she was 'damn near 18.' Shera thought that was being a bit extreme, but she had a few years to soften Cid up. Cloud, who had an earring himself, not to mention the holes in Tifa's ears, was going to have a bit harder of a time. Although Cera had shown no interest in make-up, boyfriends, or ear piercing, she was bound to soon; and she would probably use the fact that both her parents wore earrings to support her case.

"Then, it's decided. Ya ain't gettin' no holes in yer ears until you turn 16. I ain't havin' this conversation with you until then," Barret told her.

Marlene, seeing her dad was not going to crack, turned her pleading expression on her mom. Elmyra merely shook her head, supporting Barret on this one. Although she knew Marlene would have to grow up soon, she did think that 12 was too young for earrings.

Marlene's shoulders slumped in defeat, "Then I'm goin' outside."

Barret waited until she had closed the door behind her before he slumped his shoulders in a similar fashion to his daughter. He hated telling her no on anything, but this was not something he considered open for discussion.

"She's growin' up too fast 'Myra. Before long she'll be gettin' married."

Elmyra laughed, "Now don't get ahead of yourself, Barret. Marriage is a long time in the future."

Barret settled down onto his couch and Elmyra came to sit next to him.

"So, Cid an' Mandie have the chickenpox, huh?" he asked, managing a grin.

"Yes."

Barret laughed, someone else's plight taking his mind off of his own, "I wonder who the bigger baby'll be, Cid or Mandie."

Elmyra hit him on the shoulder, "That's not very nice!"

Barret winked at her, "You know it's true!"

Elmyra frowned, "Then that means Aeris will have to wait to come out. Cloud and Tifa were going to stop by, but with Cid having the chickenpox..."

Barret grinned at her, "I'll go get them. Right now, for ya."

She smiled at him, "Thank you."

Cid lay sprawled out on his bed, Mandie in the crook of one arm and a miscellaneous supply of junk food in the other. They were watching cartoon at the moment, Mandie choice taking precedence since she had pointed out the fact that she had more spots than her old man. Cid told her that would not last long, considering he was bound to get millions of the damn things real soon.

Shera came in to check on them, wiping her hands on a dish rag. She had just got done doing the lunch dishes, despite the fact that Cid offered. Which, all things considered, was an amazing event.

Cid patted the side of he bed littered with snacks and motioned for Shera to join them. She cast a dubious glance toward the littered section and crossed her arms.

"Whoops. Yeah, let me move this junk," Cid apologized.

"Hey Mama, watch this. It's really funny," Mandie told her, not taking her eyes off of the TV

Shera sighed, "Mandie, don't you think you should try reading a book? Watching TV all day isn't very good for you."

Both Cid and Mandie gave her an odd look and turned back to the television. Shera shook her head and realized that her husband and her daughter were one of a kind. The only books Cid read were instruction manuals if he needed to, or any other kind of mechanical book he could get his hands on. Not that Shera blamed him, she enjoyed those books too. But she wanted to give Mandie a little bit more culture than mechanics.

"I can see we're going to be here all day."

"You betcha," came her answer from both father and daughter.

Reno tossed back another shot of whiskey and grit his teeth. Although Yuffie could be a real pain sometimes, she did not deserve the lashing he had just given her. He was still smarting from the remarks Reeve had tossed in his face earlier. He

knew that Reeve was upset over his feelings for Aeris, but that did not excuse tearing his friend down.

Yeah right, he thought, aren't you the one playing on his feelings by falling all over Aeris? And he's right, you are a worthless drunk.

"Give me another one," he told the bartender.

The bartender eyed him with a knowing look and slapped down another shot on the bar. Reno downed it easily and then lay his elbows to rest on the bar while the whiskey burned a path down his stomach. A cool draft blew across his face as the door to the bar opened and someone stepped in. The man was tall, bald, and wearing a pair of dark sunglasses. He glanced at Reno and then headed toward him.

"Though I'd find you here," he said, motioning to the bartender to bring him a beer.

Reno glanced at him with a sour grin, "Rude. Yeah, where else would I be."

Rude raised the cold, brown bottle to his lips and took a long drink. He did not answer Reno's question, but merely stared at him.

"How's married life been treating you, bud?" Reno asked.

Rude smiled slightly, "Good."

Reno nodded, "Yeah. Elena's a sweet kid. So when are the kids coming?"

Rude blanched, his hand tightening around the bottle in his hands.

Reno laughed and smacked him on the back, "Relax. I was just giving you a bad time."

"So where's Reeve? Working still?"

Reno's grin faded, "Shit. Reeve and I had it out. He's in a pissy mood because he's got feelings for Aeris and doesn't know the first thing about what to do with them."

Rude raised an eyebrow and looked Reno over. If he knew Reno like he did, then Rude figured he was probably making Reeve a lot more miserable than he would be if left alone. The only reason Reno did not mess with what Rude and Elena had was because Rude packed one hell of a punch.

"Then I come here to drink and be left alone, and who should show up but that damn brat Yuffie! She bugged the hell out of me until I told her to get lost."

Rude would have to say that Reno's face did not look like a man who had gotten rid of an annoying woman. Instead, it looked like a man who was feeling a whole lot of remorse. That was something new for Reno.

"So what are you doing still sitting here?" Rude asked.

"What are you talking about, bud?"

"Why didn't you go after her?"

Reno snorted, "Are you deaf? I just told you I got rid of her on purpose. Why would I go after her?"

"Don't play bullshit games with me, Reno."

Reno sighed; he should have known better than to try to lie to Rude. His friend could see right through every game, every lie, and everything he tried to pull. It was useless to pretend he was not sorry for his treatment of Yuffie in front of Rude.

"What am I supposed to say? Sorry for being an asshole?"

"That's a start," Rude agreed, grabbing a handful of peanuts from the dish in the middle of the bar.

Reno gave him a sour look and snatched the beer out of his hands. He downed the rest of it and slammed the glass bottle on the countertop.

"Shit Rude. She's too young...too annoying...hell, I bet she's never even had a boyfriend, let alone been kissed. What am I supposed to do with a girl like that?"

Rude smiled, "Marry her."

Reno's eyes grew wide and he began to choke on the peanuts he had taken from the bowl moments before. Rude thumped on his back until he swallowed them, not able to suppress a laugh.

"What are you trying to do, Rude?! Kill me?!"

Rude's laughter suddenly died and he grew serious, "Go after her. If you care for her, make her see that. You're 37 years old Reno, how much longer do you think you can keep up drinking and running around with any woman that looks your way? Don't you want to be happy?"

Bitterness crept into Reno's expression and he smirked, "What in the hell do I have to offer her? Besides, what makes you think she even cares?"

"Did you hurt her?"

"Yeah."

"Then she cares for you. So get off of your ass and go get her."

Reno punched Rude in the shoulder and then rose from the bar stool, "For someone that doesn't say a whole hell of a lot, you sure know what to say when you do. Thanks, bud."

Rude just nodded and watched his friend until he left the bar. After a few moments, a familiar blonde woman walked up to the bar and took his hand.

"See. You did that better than I ever could. Reno never listens to a word I say."

Rude squeezed his wife's hand and replied, "Yeah, well, it's a good thing you ran into Yuffie when you did."

"I'm still surprised she even talked to me. She must have been really upset. Bartender, bring me a beer please," Elena asked, turning to the man behind the bar.

"Did you find anything out in Junon?" Rude asked.

"No."

"We'll keep trying. Something is wrong or-" he was cut off as the PHS in his suit rang.

"Rude."

"Rude, this is Reeve. I need you guys to do a favor for me."

Rude looked to Elena's questioning face and mouthed 'Reeve.' Elena nodded and turned back to her beer.

"Depends. Is this free, or do we get paid?"

Reeve tried to keep the exasperation out of his voice as he said, "Of course you get paid. I did hire you after all."

"So, what is this job then?"

"I need you to lead a small outfit of soldiers underneath Midgar. Red told Cloud there's a frightening amount of energy moving under there and he has no idea what it is. I need you guys because you're experienced and I know you won't mess it up."

Rude frowned, "It's Sunday."

"So," Reeve snapped, "I'll pay you double. You **are** working for me."

"No big deal then. We'll do it. Do you want us to take Reno with?"

"I don't care so long as he's not drunk. Head back to Midgar immediately. You'll need to study the maps I've found and get equipped."

Rude placed the PHS back in his suit pocket and said, "Reeve wants us to lead an exploration of the tunnels underneath Midgar. According to Red, there is a large mass of energy moving there."

Elena frowned; the tunnels under Midgar had been sealed off for quite a long time. They were once used to shuttle soldiers out of Midgar without anyone noticing. The tunnels twisted and turned, until they reached the mountains behind Midgar. Once inside there, the soldiers would move along until they came into the caves just off of the Chocobo Farm. After a short trip through there, they could reach the fields just before Junon. There had once been an opening to reach the caves, but it had closed after the rise of Mako reactors. Many creatures had made their homes underneath Midgar, so the tunnels had been abandoned and the exit sealed off.

She shivered, "God only knows what we'll find under there."

Rude place a hand on her shoulder and squeezed slightly, "We'll be okay. It's been awhile since Mako reactors, and there are very few creatures wandering around."

"Should we go get Reno now?" she asked, looking reluctant to do so.

"Nah. Give him a little while with her to straighten things out. Whatever this is, I'm sure it can wait."

Elena feigned shock, "Rude, disobeying a direct order?"

"Family and friends come first," he replied, pulling her into his arms.

Reno stepped out of the bar and onto bridge. If he had to guess where Yuffie ran off to, he would place his odds on Da-Chao. He stared at the enormous mountain, with its ridiculous faces of stone and sighed. He was not good at this sort of thing. He did not apologize, and he most certainly did not have feelings for a woman, especially one like Yuffie, that went beyond a good time. Now, since he had broken both of those rules, he felt a little lost. Hell, he felt like a kid who had just discovered woman existed for things beyond teasing.

He walked off of the bridge and headed down the path to the mountain. He tried imagining what he would say to her, but nothing sounded good enough. She would either laugh off every attempt at an apology, or she would punch him. Of the two, he preferred the later. What would be even worse was if he caused her to break down and cry in front of him. He could never stand to see a woman cry. It made him more nervous than letting someone drive his car.

Exploring the various paths of the mountains in an attempt to find her reminded him of the time he was enemies with her

and her motley assortment of would-be heroes. He still laughed at the look on her face while she hung upside down, suspended by ropes that could be broken by the push of one button. Lucky for her, he and Rude had shown up in time to stop Don Corneo and teach him how to fly.

It was with little surprise then, that he found himself at that very spot. She sat with her back to him on the nearest hand. Her legs dangled over the side and swung back and forth in a childish fashion.

"Don't even try to sneak up on me. Only one person can do that, and it's most certainly not you."

Reno came to sit beside her, so that his hip rested up against her side. She did not turn to look at him, but neither did she pull away.

"So, whose this one person then?" he asked.

Yuffie did not answer him at first. Truth be told, she was surprised to see him up here. Given the way he had just talked to her, she did not think he considered her little more than an annoying pest. She had tried so hard over the last eight years to show everyone that she was not the same bratty teenager that had stolen their materia and driven them insane with her antics. For the most part, everyone accepted that. But there were exceptions, and one was sitting next to her right now.

"Well?" he asked again, elbowing her.

"Vincent, you doofus," she replied, elbowing him back.

Reno suppressed a smile; so she was not too angry with him, or she would not even be talking to him. But she still would not turn and look at him. He cursed the female sex for being so damned hard to read and so stubborn. It never occurred to him that he and Yuffie were actually similar in that respect.

"What are you doing up here?" she asked.

"Looking for you."

"Why?"

Damn. She's not going to make this easy, he thought.

"Listen, I got in an argument with Reeve. It wasn't your fault I was in such a poor mood."

Yuffie rounded on him, "That's your idea of an apology, Reno?!"

Reno looked confused. "What's wrong with that?"

She screamed in frustration and slapped him upside the head. Reno sat in shock for a few seconds before he managed to recover. When he did, he grabbed Yuffie and hauled her into his arms.

"Let me go! God, I hate you!"

"Really?" he asked, and then leaned down to kiss her. She struggled with him for a few moments before she gave in and let him kiss her. By this time, Reno had completely forgotten he was trying to teach her a lesson.

When he finally came up for air, he looked down at her and took in her flushed face with a sort of wonder. This was not supposed to happen to him. Especially not with her of all women.

Instead of slapping him again, Yuffie surprised him by saying, "Do that again."

He flashed her a grin before leaning down to kiss her again, not even considering the consequences of his actions. Yuffie

wound her arms around his neck and plunged her fingers into his hair. Inside, she was confused. One minute she hated him and the next she wanted him to hold her and kiss her like this.

When they broke the kiss off this time, she leaned her face against the warm fabric of his suit jacket and listened to the sound of his racing heart.

"Yuffie...I'm sorry."

Her eyes flew open. Was he apologizing for kissing her? If he was, she was going to give him a beating he would never forget.

"I shouldn't have said those things to you in the bar. It wasn't your fault I was in a lousy mood, Reeve and I had it out today."

She relaxed and kept silent. Maybe if she did not say anything in response, he would open up to her.

"I pissed him off one time too many and he lost it. He's been a little weird lately. I think he has a thing for Aeris."

Yuffie lifted her head and stared at him in amazement. "Reeve and Aeris?"

He shrugged. "Sure. Why not? We aren't exactly a likely couple. Hell, *they* make more sense than we do."

"What are you saying, Reno? Are you saying...?" she asked, softly.

Reno felt panic rise up and he struggled to push it back down. He had never committed himself to any one woman before, and the potential for pain was difficult to overlook.

"I'm not exactly in the habit of kissing innocent women," was his response.

Fire filled her eyes, and she shot back, "Oh! So that is what this is all about?! Tired of all the other ones, so you're moving on to something different?!"

His mouth fell open and he started at her in shock. Why did women always have to twist your words around until they came out sounding nothing like what you intended?

"That's not what I meant! Stop twisting my words! Goddammit, I'm trying to tell you that I care for you more than I've ever cared for any woman before! But you aren't making this easy on me!"

Now it was her turn to be shocked. He was admitting he had feelings for her, and all she could do was stare at him like some little twit.

"Good. Speechless. Just the way I like you," he grinned, leaning down to kiss her again.

"I hate to interrupt this, but we've got a job."

Reno pulled away from Yuffie and stared blankly at the figures behind him. Elena and Rude. Yuffie scrambled off of his lap and straightened her clothing, her face a mass complex of misery.

Reno shook the haze clouding his brain off and asked, "What kind of job?"

Elena struggled to keep the grin off of her face as she answered, "Reeve wants us to go underneath Midgar."

Reno scowled, "Shit. He's still going to do it, even with it being Sunday."

"We have a job to do, regardless of the day," Rude reminded him.

Reno stood up and ran a hand through his hair. "Yeah. Sure. Well, if he's so dead set on having us go down in that shithole, then let's get going."

Yuffie surprised him by suddenly announcing, "I'm going with you."

Boy, you can sure tell who got the spotlight in this chapter. Hmmm, wonder if Reno'll let Yuffie go with? Never can tell, but she might prove to be too much of a distraction for him. :)

Don't worry, the next chapter will have a some more Reeve and Aeris in it. Aeris might just decide she has to go pay him a visit. :) And, we'll see Cloud, Tifa, and Cera coming to pay a visit to Kalm.

Thanks to all of you who have read this far! Compliments and criticisms always welcome.

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