

Final Fantasy VII: Children of Jenova

Chapter 13

/Return.../

The hideous form of what had been Test Subject XIX, Code (V), twitched feebly on the floor of the Nibel reactor. It was not dead yet. It had one final task it had to perform.

/Return.../

It slowly and painfully dragged itself along the floor, out of the pod room, and onto the catwalk where its brother had first met Death twelve years ago. Craning its serpentine neck over the railing, it saw the green waters of the Lifestream churning and foaming far below.

/Return to Mother.../

With a grunt, the creature hauled itself over the railing and hurled itself into the depths of the Lifestream.

This action did not go unnoticed by the Planet.

\* \* \*

"I was going to tell him," Cloud said softly; these were the first words other than "I'm sorry, Zack" he had said since finding his son here in the old Shinra library. "When he was older I was going to tell him everything."

"It ain't your fault, Cloud." Cid sat on the floor, his back against a wall, the spent butts of about half a pack of cigarettes littering the planks around him. "Quit thinkin' like that."

"He's right." Cloud shook his head slowly, staring into nothingness. "Cid—I don't remember what happened..the City of the Ancients...is he right? Did I--"

"No!" Cid snapped. "Goddamnit, Cloud, me and Vincent were there. We saw that bastard do her in. Yeah, you were acting like you were gonna do it, but you snapped out of it! Shit, Cloud, what's wrong with you?"

"There are still a lot of--a lot of blank spots," Cloud whispered. "A lot of things I don't remember about those days. Mostly little things, I guess...but stuff like that too."

"Cloud," Vincent said quietly, looking up. "You told me Zack had a dream where Sephiroth told him he was going to get back at you. Think about it. He's stolen your son's body. He's trying to break you down as slowly and as painfully as he can." Vincent's maroon eyes met Cloud's blue ones. "Don't let him."

A low rumble rippled through the floor and the surrounding earth; several books wobbled on the shelves but did not fall as the small tremor subsided. "What the hell..." Cid looked around nervously. "The hell was that?"

"Earthquake," Red XIII said simply. "We should get out of here."

Cid shook his head and hauled Cloud to his feet. "You don't hafta tell me twice. Hey, Vincent...please tell me you got rid of those Ying-Yang weirdos..."

Vincent frowned and shrugged. "I haven't seen them since I came here. Just the bats."

"That's not making me feel any better," Cid muttered, dragging Cloud out of the library.

Halfway up the spiral staircase, Cid's eyes lit upon a most welcome sight; Tifa's group was bounding down the stairs to meet them. "What happened?" Tifa cried out as another tremor passed through the building, this one stronger than the last.

"This ain't a good time to discuss it," he replied. "Let's get the hell outta here first." He looked up the stairs and caught a glimpse of Yuffie's torn and blood-stained shorts. "Goddamn! You guys okay?"

"We found Vail," Elena answered as she turned around and started back up the stairs. "Let's just say she won't be running any more experiments." The building shuddered once more. "Um...I'm not a carpenter or anything, but I think some of these steps are dry-rotted--"

As if to illustrate her point, the stair that Barret stood on made an unpleasant creaking noise. "I always hated damn stairs," he grunted as he hopped off it quickly. "Now I got a good reason..."

"Well, stop flappin' your jaw and move!" Cid snapped, pushing him up the staircase. Barret didn't argue.

The group stepped outside the mansion just in time to see a torrent of glowing green water shooting out of several cave openings on Mt. Nibel. "That would explain the tremors," Red XIII mused. "Is everyone all right?"

"Oh, just swell!" Yuffie spat. "Do you have any idea what we just went through? Well, I'd be more than happy to tell you!" Yuffie parked her bottom on a nearby rock. "That crazy bitch did something to Zack up there! At least, that's more or less what she told us before she turned into this big fugly snake woman from Hell and just about took my goddamn leg off--"

"Get a grip, Yuffie," Elena snapped, then she cleared her throat. "Vail did something to Zack. She wouldn't say exactly what. I don't suppose you guys have a clue? He -was- here, wasn't he?"

Cid nodded grimly. "He was messed up somethin' terrible. He said Sephiroth'd been showin' him things, and from what he was goin' on about I don't think I wanna know exactly what kinda things--"

"He said he saw me give Sephiroth the Black Materia that day," Cloud said softly, barely above a whisper. "And he saw me killing Aeris."

Tifa felt the blood drain from her face, and she sat down next to Cloud and held him tightly. "Oh, God." She bit her lip to stave off the tears that wanted to come. "Where is he now?"

"I don't know." Cloud shrugged weakly. "He disappeared. Just like Sephiroth used to do."

"So what are we supposed to do now? Wait till he freaks out and shows up in some other town and starts tearing stuff up?" Yuffie asked; her voice cracked noticeably on several syllables. Whatever had happened in the reactor had freaked her out more than she was willing to admit.

Barret looked at the ground. "Uh...I know this prob'ly ain't a good time for it, but...all this business about Zack and all..." He rubbed his forehead and let out a weary sigh. "Cid, can you drop me at Elmyra's? I wanna see Marlene..."

Cid drew a sigh of his own and nodded. "Sure...not like we can do much of anything till we figure out where Zack's headed. The rest of us'll head back to Junon, see if Reeve's been able to get hold of Scarlet and see what the hell she thinks she's doin'...and I'd be a liar if I said I don't wanna see Junior and Shera."

"It's okay, Cid." Tifa gave a thin smile, still holding Cloud in her arms. "I think we can all understand that."

\*\*\*

/Return to Mother.../

The faint voice came from above, growing nearer and nearer as a dark form sank slowly into the depths of the Lifestream, and Sephiroth Lumina watched it with trepidation. He knew that voice. "Vail?"

/Return...what?/

"Vail, what have you done?"

Silence. Then: /What are you still doing here? I thought...the boy.../ A pause, and then a low, rasping chuckle. /Complications. He said there had been complications. Must have meant you. Doesn't matter./

The boy...his other self had settled into its host, then. "What do you mean, 'return to Mother?'"

/Doesn't matter./ Vail's voice drifted past him and into the abyss below; toward the waiting arms of Jenova's spirit-body...

"NO!"

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Apart from the usual whirring of machinery, the only sound heard on the bridge of the Highwind was the clicking and beeping of Elena's little computer as she tried again to delve into the recesses of Shinra's vast network. Cloud still stared numbly at some random spot on the floor as Tifa rested her head on his shoulder. Red XIII lay on the floor with his head on his forepaws. Vincent sat silently on one of the benches; Cid was up on the deck. Vincent had gone up a few minutes earlier to check on him and then returned without a word. Barret stood at the window watching the ground pass beneath the airship. And Yuffie was in her usual spot in the engine room. At length, Elena snapped her computer shut and switched the cell phone off. "I can't find a damn thing in there," she muttered, stowing the whole setup in her briefcase. "I think Scarlet knows something's up. She just had a whole new security system put up."

"Elena?" Cloud looked up from the spot on the floor he'd been staring at. "When you were in the reactor, did you go into the room with the pods?"

"Yeah." Elena nodded. "That's where we found Vail."

"Did you see anything in the pods?"

Elena frowned. "Not that I remember. I thought I heard some scratching or something out of a few of them, though."

"SOLDIERS," Cloud murmured. "I think I know what Vail was doing with those eggs. That's how she was making new SOLDIERS. She'd put the eggs in people...they'd hatch...they'd take on the shape of whoever they'd hatched in." He shivered, and Tifa held him tighter. "Sephiroth told me something once. Jenova carriers had the power to change their bodies, their voices..."

Barret glanced at him. "How the hell you know that's what's happenin'?"

Cloud shrugged. "I don't. It makes sense, though...doesn't it?"

"I don't wanna think about it," Barret replied as the airship began to descend outside of Kalm. "I'll call you if anything happens, okay?"

Tifa nodded silently as Barret left. A few moments later, Cid returned to the bridge and took his usual place over the pilot's shoulder. "I just talked to Reeve," he sighed. He reached up for a cigarette, found the pack empty, and cursed softly. "Junon's been attacked, but it's all clear now."

"Are Junior and Shera all right?" Red asked, and Cid nodded.

"Yeah, but Cait Sith isn't." Cid dug through his pockets, hunting for another pack of cigarettes, and at last found one in one of his jacket pockets. "By the time Reeve and the other Turks got there he was..." Cid stopped suddenly, shaking his head. "Goddamn, what am I gettin' all mushy about? He was just a damn robot cat...hell, Reeve's probably buildin' a new one

while I'm up here goin' on about him..." He chuckled a bit. "Anyway, when Cait Sith went down he took the whole mess of monsters with him."

The Highwind lifted off again and headed west toward Junon and although he didn't show it, Cid was about to start climbing the walls. He didn't like those earthquakes in Nibelheim, not one bit. Silently he begged the airship to get its ass in gear and go faster.

\* \* \*

"NO! Stop!"

Sephiroth Lumina propelled his spirit-body downwards, hoping to catch Vail before she reached Jenova. He knew now what Vail had meant. Return to Mother. The Reunion was happening all over again.

\* \* \*

Evening began to creep over Junon, and it found Cid Highwind Jr. sitting on Reeve's sofa, pecking halfheartedly at a slice of pizza and watching a video Reno had gone out and bought her after the battle to take her mind off the events of the day. It was about five teenage girls that wore really short little sailor outfits and went around busting up ugly monsters, and while it wasn't the sort of thing Junior went for (she would rather have gotten a documentary about airplanes; she didn't care much for magical girl stuff, but didn't want to hurt Reno's feelings), it was okay. Two of the girls had cats that talked, and they reminded Junior of Cait Sith.

Shera sat next to her, likewise picking at the pizza that sat between them. It occurred to her at length that she wasn't hungry, and she put her slice back in the box. Reno wouldn't tell her what had happened to Aidan, or how he'd gotten that horrible wound in his shoulder. Actually, by now he probably didn't remember himself; as soon as the Turks had seen Reeve home, they promptly trotted off to the nearest bar to get thoroughly pissed. Reeve didn't join them; when they'd invited him he simply turned green and shook his head "no." At present, he was in the garage. From time to time Shera and Junior heard odd little whirs and clicks and clinks and the occasional grunt of "damn!" coming through the slightly opened door, but neither of them felt much like investigating. Then they heard the distinctive ring of a PHS phone, and both Shera and Junior froze, straining to hear what was going on.

Reeve emerged from the garage a few minutes later, wiping his hands on a rag. "That was Cid. He's dropping Barret off to see Marlene right now and he'll be on his way here as soon as that's done." He sighed and rubbed his eyes. "I'm afraid the news isn't good about Zack. They found him at the Shinra mansion, fully grown, and in pretty bad shape up here--" He tapped his head to illustrate. "He sort of went off on Cloud. I don't know all the details, but Cid said he was going off about some pretty spooky stuff. This has got to be hell on Cloud and Tifa."

Junior blinked and sniffled. "I miss Zack," she said softly, and Shera set the pizza box on the floor and gave her a big hug.

"I know." She patted Junior's head gently. "We all do."

"Well, at least it won't happen to anyone else's kids. According to Cid, Vail finally got what was coming to her."

Shera looked up quickly. "Is she--"

"Dead," Reeve finished with a nod. "Yeah. They got her."

Shera nodded slowly. "I'm glad. I never thought I'd feel that way about anyone, but her--I'm glad she's gone."

\* \* \*

/Return to Mother.../

Sephiroth Lumina pursued Vail's hideous form as it sank ever deeper into the green water, but he knew it was too late.

Already, Jenova's spirit-body was coming into view.

/Return.../

/Yes, Vail./ Jenova seemed to smile. /To me./

\* \* \*

"Goddamn." Cid shook his head as he surveyed the cleanup efforts in Junon. He'd had to circle the airstrip for about half an hour before he could land; the carcasses of three Zemzeletts were parked where the airship should have been. After several attempts by enthusiastic cleanup crews to drag the monsters away by hand, a bulldozer was finally called in to shove the critters off the edge of the airstrip and into the ocean. With that done, the Highwind was clear to land. "Reeve wasn't kiddin'."

Yuffie whistled softly. "Gawd, what a mess."

The group piled into the van that awaited them at the airport; the van dropped them at Reeve's doorstep and then returned to wherever it had come from. Cid raised his fist to knock on the door; before his knuckles even brushed the wood the door flew open and Junior came running out, leaping up into his arms and hugging him tightly.

"Daddy!" Junior sniffled and hung on for dear life. Cid began to turn an unusual shade of blue.

"Honey, Daddy can't breathe," he croaked. Junior loosened her grip a little, and Cid gratefully took a deep breath, ignoring the snickers coming from several of his companions as his color returned to normal. "I'm glad to see you too, punkin. You okay?"

"I wanna go home," Junior replied as Shera and Reeve stepped out the door as well. Shera opened her mouth to say something, but a small sob slipped out instead. Cid shifted Junior to the side a little to free up an arm, which he put around Shera's shoulders; he held her close and kissed her forehead. After a while he put Junior down and let Shera go.

"You ever get hold of Scarlet?" he asked Reeve; the latter shook his head in disgust.

"I finally got through to her office about an hour ago. She laughed and hung up on me before I could even say one word." He sighed. "God, my ear is still ringing from that. Cid, I swear if I ever get my hands on her I'm gonna make her listen to an endless loop tape of herself laughing for about a week."

"Cruel and unusual punishment," Red XIII commented.

"Not if it fits the crime." Reeve reached into his pocket and pulled out the fresh pack of cigarettes he'd gotten on the way home; he extracted one for himself and offered one to Cid, who shook his head.

"You know I can't stand those goddamn menthols," Cid said, lighting up one of his own. "But thanks anyway."

Reeve shrugged and took a look at Cloud. Cloud wasn't staring at the ground now, but he still looked pretty badly shaken-up. "Cloud, I don't know what to tell you except that I'm sorry about all this. What are you going to do now? Any ideas?"

"We were hoping you'd have some," Cloud said with a shrug. "Scarlet's just done something to the computer system, and now Elena can't get in at all."

"Give me some credit," Elena said. "And a few hours."

Reeve chuckled and looked up at the reddening sky. "You know, it's a nice evening and there are three pizzas in there getting cold. I ordered extra because I figured Reno and Rude would be doing their human garbage disposal routine tonight, but they're out at the bar getting plastered. How about I bring 'em out here...mainly because there's not enough room for all of us to eat comfortably in my humble pad."

"Sounds like a plan." Cid nodded. "I could use a cold one too, matter of fact."

"Sorry," Reeve called as he disappeared into the kitchen. "Fresh out, thanks to the Turks."

Elena rolled her eyes. "Pot. Kettle. Black."

\* \* \*

"No, no, no--" Sephiroth Lumina repeated the word over and over as if it were some magical charm that could freeze Vail in place and prevent her body from reaching Jenova. But he knew he was too late.

/Return to me, Vail./

Vail reached out to Jenova with one taloned hand, and as Jenova grasped it, the enraged Planet went berserk.

A second reaction was triggered by this reunion. In a hidden chamber of the Jenova room in the Nibel reactor, a pale female figure sat up and rubbed her eyes. There was a tattoo on her arm: (V) II.

\* \* \*

"Shit, not again!" Cid jumped out from under the oak tree in Reeve's front yard just in time to avoid a medium-sized branch that had been broken off by the earthquake that was passing through Junon at that moment. Even so, he was still peppered with falling acorns. The tremor passed and returned again, even stronger. Shera grabbed Junior by the arm and started dragging her towards Reeve's house; Reeve, who was just coming out the door with three pizzas, staggered and dropped them onto the porch.

"What the hell's going on!?" Reeve yelled over the rumble. Another branch dropped from the oak and almost squashed Red XIII; the beast leapt out of the way just in time. Again, the quake subsided; in the distance the crest of another Lifestream geyser poked up over the trees. "Everyone okay?"

Tifa nodded. "I think so. What's happening?"

"Looks to me like the Planet is pissed," Yuffie replied, dusting herself off.

Cid nodded gravely. "Looks like the worst of it's over."

He spoke too soon.

There was another rumble, this time accompanied by an unpleasant creaking noise, and Cid became aware that his feet had just moved in two different directions with no input from his brain. The world went into slow-motion as he looked down to see a small crack open in the earth between his feet. The crack widened a bit, threatening to throw him off balance. The ground heaved again, sending everyone else sprawling, and a tiny spray of green water gurgled out of the crack between Cid's feet.

Junior saw it.

She remembered a similar crack in the ground she'd seen opening up from the Baby Bronco on her birthday. That crack had gotten very big. And her daddy was standing on one right now.

Junior snatched her arm free of Shera's grasp and took off at a dead sprint, tears streaming from her eyes.

"Junior--?" Shera was caught off-guard, and by the time she saw what was happening it was too late. "Junior! NO!"

"C.J., GET BACK HERE!" Reeve screamed before another tremor knocked him down.

Junior didn't seem to hear, and with a banshee's scream she launched herself into the air.

Something slammed hard into the small of Cid's back, and he was forcefully thrown forward. He landed face-down on the ground, painfully cracking his forehead against one of the fallen oak branches as he heard a whoosh and felt a spray of warm liquid on the back of his neck. He rose groggily to his knees, rubbing his forehead. A tiny trickle of blood dripped into his eye, and he wiped it away. "What the hell..." Then he heard the scream behind him.

Junior.

Cid scrambled to his feet just in time to see her sliding below the lip of the crevasse in the ground, and he hit the dirt next to it, reaching out a hand to her as her fingers dug into the crumbling earth. "Come on, Junior," he pleaded. "Reach up here, baby...come on, you can do it..."

"Daddy...I can't--" Junior sobbed loudly. "I can't reach--" The chunk of earth her left hand was dug into gave way, and she slipped down another two or three feet.

Cid whipped his scarf off, tied one end around his wrist, and dangled the other as far down the side of the crevasse as he could reach. "Grab on to this, Junior...come on..."

Junior's hand stretched up and began to close around the scarf.

The earth heaved once more, and a torrent of green water shot up out of the crevasse. The spray eroded the walls of the crack even further, and before Junior's small hand could securely grasp the scarf, the earth gave way under her fingers. "Oh God, no--"

"DADDY!" Junior screamed again as her precarious handholds fell away from the wall of the crevasse, sending her plummeting into the glowing green waters deep within the Planet.

"Junior--" The geyser went down, as they all had before. The ground was still. The only sound that broke the heavy silence in the air was that of Cid panting and gasping as he lay at the edge of the crevasse, his hand and scarf still hanging limply down the side. "No..." He sat up slowly and looked around him. Vincent, Yuffie, Cloud, and Tifa were crouching low to the ground near the oak tree. Elena was on her knees halfway between the tree and the crack in the earth; apparently she'd been trying to get there in time to help, as had Red XIII, who stood on shaky legs next to Elena. Reeve appeared to have knocked his head against something when he fell; he was sitting up rubbing the back of his head and grimacing in pain. Shera just stared at the crevasse, pale and wide-eyed and shaking.

"Cid..." she whispered, not moving.

Cid looked up at her, numbly. "I almost had her, Shera," he said, shaking his head slowly. "She..." A look of horror spread slowly across his features as he realized exactly what had knocked him off his feet and away from the crevasse. "Oh, God. She just...she...GODDAMNIT!" He slammed his fist onto the ground, dropped his forehead onto his knees, and drew a long, shaky breath. "That should have been me...goddamnit, Junior, why the hell did you do that!?" A sob worked its way out of his throat. Shera stood slowly and went to him, and as soon as her arms went around him they both broke down.

\* \* \*

There was nothing more that Sephiroth Lumina could do. Jenova's spirit was now firmly ensconced in Vail's body, and he decided that getting as far away from her as possible would be the best course of action, for now. In this disembodied state, he was powerless against her. So he was retreating, running blindly through the Lifestream, trying to find a place to wait and think and plan.

A splash far above interrupted his thoughts and he looked up. Another body had entered the Lifestream and was heading straight for him, a small body. A child.

As Sephiroth Lumina tried to figure out what to do about this, a dark form whizzed past him, chuckling.

/What have you here?/ Jenova mused, wrapping one of her tentacle-arms around the child's waist.

"Let her go," Sephiroth Lumina growled.

/I think not./ Jenova tightened her grip. /Listen to me, and listen well. If you leave the Lifestream, she dies. Is that clear?/  
With that, she drifted away, carrying the child with her.

"You've gone too far," Sephiroth hissed, but Jenova was already too far away to hear. Something drifted past him, something so small the human eye could not have possibly seen it, especially in the depths of the Lifestream.

One short blonde hair.

A plan began to form in Sephiroth Lumina's mind.

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Author's notes: \*sigh\* Not much to say here, except that writing this one really got to me. I usually don't get terribly emotional about stuff I write, but I did find myself sniffing as I wrote that scene with Junior falling into the Lifestream. \*sigh\* I lied. THIS is the darkest chapter of the whole fic. 'Night.