

Final Fantasy VII: Children of Jenova

Chapter 17

Scarlet yawned and stretched as Vail stepped silently into her office. "Well? Good news or bad?"

Vail smiled thinly. "Good, for once. I'm done with that gas you ordered. Three days' worth of it is being hooked up to your gas chamber as we speak."

"Three days!?" Scarlet's jaw dropped. "No pun intended...but don't you think that's overkill?"

Vail resisted the urge to groan. "You said you wanted slow and painful. You've got it." She adjusted her glasses. "Any word on the Strife boy?"

Scarlet frowned. "Well, things didn't exactly go as planned in Branford. Now we're a Turk short, the kid's bugged off to parts unknown, and me and Heidegger are racking our brains as to how the hell we're supposed to cover THIS up." She squinted at Vail. "It's about time you tried a new hairdo. That bun was really starting to get old."

Vail winced imperceptibly. Copying her predecessor's hairstyle had been the last thing on her mind when she'd awakened. "I'll let you know if I hear anything about the boy." With that, she strolled out of Scarlet's office.

"Sure." Scarlet sat quietly at her desk for a moment, then she picked up the phone. "Heidegger?"

"Yes?"

"Did you do what I told you to do?"

"Of course I did. Junon's phone system is completely offline. What now?"

Scarlet grinned. By God, Heidegger was on a roll. "Tell the ships to move out and start getting the jets ready to fly. We're going in."

* * *

Shera set the morning mail down on the kitchen table and sat down with her coffee. As she drank it, she stared at the closed door of Junior's room. She had not been able to open that door since she came home, and wasn't sure if she'd be able to open it when Cid came home from dealing with whatever he'd been asked to deal with. They had talked about it, and decided that when he got home they'd clean the room out...but now Shera wasn't sure if she could do it.

She leafed through the mail idly, grateful for the distraction it provided. There was a sheaf of coupons bundled with a free sample of dish soap; under that was something addressed to "Occupant" that sang the praises of aluminum siding, and under that there was the light bill. Shera tucked the bill in the "Pay These" box on the kitchen counter and headed to the trash with the coupons and the siding pamphlet. As she was about to dump them in, something fluttered out of the coupons and fell on the floor. It was a postcard.

The picture side depicted a little cartoon man riding around aimlessly on a little cartoon chocobo, and a word-balloon popping up from the little man's mouth read "Where the hell is Branford!?"

Shera frowned. She didn't know anyone in Branford. Neither, to the best of her knowledge, did Cid. But sure enough, the card was addressed to Cid and Shera Highwind. The message was short and concise, and there was no signature. It read simply "I'm okay."

Shera reached backwards for a chair and sat down heavily, unable to take her eyes off the card. The handwriting was definitely that of an adult, but the little quirks--the low-crossed "t" in the address, the little circles that dotted the "i's," the little curly-tailed "a's"--

The rational left hemisphere of Shera's brain told her, in its usual calm and collected voice, that someone was playing a very sick practical joke.

The right hemisphere told her, in the voice of someone who had just imbibed fourteen pots of coffee and half a dozen chocolate bars, that she needed to get hold of Cid immediately.

Usually, when the two halves of Shera's brain got into an argument over the proper course of action to take in any given situation, the left was victorious. But not today. Clutching the postcard so tightly that she wouldn't have been surprised to hear the little cartoon man go "oof" and the little cartoon chocobo "wark" in protest, Shera dashed to the phone, snatched the receiver off the hook, and jabbed a string of numbers, tapping her foot rapidly as it rang once, twice, thrice. Then there was the "click" of someone picking up, and Shera opened her mouth to start spilling the story when she was greeted by a cool mechanical voice saying "We're sorry. The number you have dialed is temporarily disconnected. Please try your call again later."

"What!?" She hung up and tried the Junon Hydro office's number; it likewise rang three times and then was answered by the same recording.

"We're sorry. The number you have dialed--"

Shera slammed the phone down in an uncharacteristic fit of pique, with an equally uncharacteristic hiss of "Shit!" By now, she was about to start climbing the walls. She tried, out of curiosity, three more phone numbers in Junon including the pizza delivery number, and got the same message on all counts. She sorely wished she'd gotten the numbers of the Turks' cell phones.

Shera sat back down heavily. Well, there wasn't much else she could do but wait for Cid to come home.

* * *

C.J. gave the Devil Hawg an experimental kick, and it roared smoothly to life. She was a wizard with machines, just like her father, and Annie made note that the Hawg hadn't even run that well when it was brand new. C.J. shut the thing off and filled up both tanks. "I think it's ready to go," she said as she emptied a gas can into the main tank.

"Hate to see you run off so soon," Annie said, a bit sadly. "Lord knows you been a heap of help since you been here. Chopper ain't been that well-behaved in ages." She strapped the pack containing C.J.'s three changes of clothes to the back of the bike. "I got some connections at Fort Condor. Gave 'em a call and they said they'll have a black choco waitin' for you when you get there. Damn things were almost extinct before, now they're runnin' around wild all over the place...hell, I'm ramblin'...C.J., you sure you know what you're doin'?"

"Nope." C.J. grinned as she dumped a second can of gas into the aux tank. "It can't be that hard to fly that thing. I mean, Dad said it practically flies itself with the VOX pod on it...besides, you're forgetting who I am."

"Oh, Lord..." Annie shook her head. "That's right. Another Cid Highwind tearin' up the sky, just what we all need!" With that, she and C.J. both doubled over in gales of laughter. "Take care, girl."

C.J. gave Annie a hug. "You too." She swung her leg over the Devil Hawg's seat, started it up, and roared into the street. Annie watched her go until she was no more than a vaguely motorcycle-shaped speck on the horizon, and then she headed back inside the Hangar where the two Shinras that were still welcome there were huddled over a little computer the woman had.

Raven looked up suspiciously at Annie as the old woman went back behind the bar and started washing mugs, and Stuart did likewise. "What are you doing?" he finally asked Raven.

"I'm playing Minesweeper," she snapped. "Actually, I'm looking for that bouncer's records, by request of Archer."

"Oh." Stuart nodded meekly. "He's really pissed off at her, isn't he?"

"He thinks maybe she was another one of Vail's pet projects, or else an old SOLDIER troop like you. So far, I've got nothing. It's like she just appeared out of thin air." She was about to go back to searching when the ringing of her cell phone interrupted her. She unpocketed it, opened it, and spat "What?" into it. A few nods and "Mmm hmm's" later, she stuffed it back into her pocket, folded up her little computer, and stood up. "It's about damn time. There's a chopper on the way. It's taking us straight to Junon."

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"Hoo boy." Cid glanced warily at Bugs, who still stood at the water's edge. Nobody had been able to coerce the gold chocobo to go back into the chocobo hold, so Yuffie had been posted to keep an eye on him while the others went off to collect Cid. Truth be told, Vincent was surprised not to see Yuffie sitting on the beach with a roaring campfire going and Bugs roasting on a spit over it after the humiliation she'd endured at his hands--wings--whatever. "You been a naughty boy, Bugs."

"Wark," Bugs replied as Cid scratched his head.

"Well, no sense standin' here all day..." Cid hoisted himself up into the saddle and gave the reins a snap. "Giddyap, Bugs!"

Bugs "warked" happily, pleased that the person on his back was his master, and took off at a full dash. He wasn't as fast as the Highwind, but by God he was close and Cid had to hang on tightly as Bugs's clawed feet trod upon the surface of the sea and made little splash-splash noises. The whole trip from the beach near Kalm to Round Island took a little under fifteen minutes, and Cid climbed down from Bugs's back and stared into the mouth of the cave before him.

/This is crazy,/ he thought, standing rooted to that point and looking into the lightless cave. /Oughta just leave that thing alone./

But he knew it wasn't that simple. Zack—Sephiroth--whothehell-- would simply stroll by and pick the damn thing up if Cid didn't, and God only knew what plans he had for the thing this time around. So Cid commanded his feet to move, and move they did, carrying him into the cave. Its walls glowed faintly, stained with thousands of years' worth of trickling Mako energy, and at the cave's far side Cid could just barely make out a dark shape lying half-buried in the loose gravel. It was a round thing, about the size of his fist, and if he hadn't known exactly what it was it wouldn't have seemed like much of anything. Just a round black rock on the ground, that's all it was. He kept telling himself that; otherwise there was no way in hell he was going to muster up enough guts to walk over there and pick the god-pounded thing up.

/It's just a rock./

/It's the goddamn Black Materia./

Cid took one step forward and froze again. /It's a rock. Go get it./

/That's right, just a little black rock. A little black rock that almost killed everyone in the whole wide world./

"Fuck it," Cid said, shaking his head violently. "Didn't drag my ass all the way out here for nothin'." With that, he marched over and plucked the Black Materia out of the loose gravel in which it lay. Nothing extraordinary happened. There were no flashes of lightning or rumbles of thunder as his hand closed around it. He held it up and squinted at it in the faint light. It didn't look very threatening in his hand. It looked—well, like he'd been telling himself, it looked like a rock.

It didn't feel much like one, though. Its surface felt as though it would yield to the pressure he would exert if he squeezed it; maybe it would burst. Cid decided he really didn't want to try that. And it was cold, like dead flesh. /My God,/ he thought. /Why the hell would ANYONE want this thing!?!/ He dropped it into his jacket pocket, unconsciously wiping his hands on the front of his pants afterward. Time to get the hell out of there.

That done, he climbed back up into the saddle and spurred Bugs back toward Kalm. When he got back, he would turn the damn thing over to Vincent and be rid of it. Maybe Vincent would give it to Red XIII, who would put it in orbit around his holographic sun like Bugenhagen had done with the Huge Materia. Maybe Vincent would hand it over to Reeve, who

would stow it in some hidden safe or vault or something. Cid didn't really care if Vincent pulled out a paddle and started playing ping-pong with the goddamn thing. All he cared about was that the Black Materia would soon be out of his hands.

At last, Bugs's feet lit upon solid ground. Cid dismounted and looked around nervously. All eyes were on him.

"Well?" Vincent finally said. Cid reached into his pocket and extracted the Black Materia.

"Here. Take it. It's givin' me the willies somethin' fierce." He handed the black orb over to Vincent, who almost imperceptibly wrinkled his nose in distaste. Cid was a little relieved to see that; it meant he hadn't imagined the clammy feel of the thing. Vincent quickly transferred the Black Materia to his claw, wiping his hand on his cape. "You feel it too, huh?"

Vincent nodded. "They come rarely, but there are times when I'm thankful for this claw. This is one of them."

* * *

"We're sorry. The number you have dialed has been temporarily disconnected. Please try your call again later."

"What the hell!?" Reeve stared at the phone in shock. He couldn't believe it. His favorite pizza place...well, there was always the competition. He leafed through the phone book, looking for the P's, found another number, and dialed. The things a guy had to do to get some lunch...

"We're sorry. The number you have dialed--"

Reeve just slammed the phone down. Argh. What the hell was going on? At that moment, a pale and shaken phone company worker burst into his office. "Sir, we've got big problems."

"I was just about to go check on that myself!" Reeve replied. "What's going on down there?"

The worker just shook his head. "We're not sure. Looks like someone's hit the mainframe that controls the whole phone system with a virus of some kind. In layman's terms, Junon has no phone service until we get it fixed."

"Let me get this straight..." Reeve felt the blood begin to drain from his face. "We are completely without working phone lines?" The worker nodded. "What about cellular? Is that still working?"

"Mostly. The cell customers are complaining about a lot of static, though."

Without a word, Reeve pulled out his PHS phone and attempted to call Vincent. There was indeed a great deal of interference, and when Vincent answered, all Reeve was able to hear was "Bzzbzz?"

"Vincent? Can you hear me?"

"Bzz? Bzzbzz (crackle) hardly hear you, Reeve..."

/Shit.../ "Vincent, I think we've got--hello? There's something fishy going on here. The phones are all dead. Can--" Click. "Vincent, you still there? Hello?" Reeve drew a shaky breath and stuffed the PHS back in his pocket. He prayed that the building's PA system still worked; it did. "Reno, Rude, my office, yesterday!" he snapped, hoping that his fears were unfounded but knowing they weren't.

* * *

At last Shera heard the familiar whine of the Highwind's engines, and she dashed out the front door, still clutching the postcard that had arrived in the morning mail, barely restraining herself from bouncing like Cait Sith as she waited for Cid to come out. After a small eternity, he finally stepped off the ship, and Shera ran to him and threw her arms around him.

"Hey--" Cid stammered, eyes wide. "What's wrong?"

"Cid?" Shera was shaking like a leaf as she pressed the postcard into his hand. "Read this."

"Uh, sure..." Cid's eyes went to the rectangle of card stock. First he looked at the picture side, chuckling at the cartoon. "Do we know anyone in Branford?" he finally asked.

"Turn it over," Shera directed, and Cid did so, his eyes growing wide as he read the two-word message over and over.

I'm okay.

"Cid?" Shera clutched his arm tightly. "Am I going crazy? Is that--is that from--"

Cid blinked a few times, trying to let this sudden onslaught of information sink in. Finally it did, and Cid looked at Shera in utter disbelief. "Shera, that's Junior's handwriting...it's different, but it's hers, I know it is!" He looked at the postcard again. "Branford!? What the hell's she doin' in Branford!?"

"I don't know!" Shera replied, on the verge of hysterical laughter, and Cid held her tightly. "Cid...bring her home...please."

Cid looked up at the assembled crew before him. Yuffie was already bawling, and Elena was close behind, trying to pretend she had something in her eye and not doing a very convincing job of it. Yuffie offered her a hankie, and Elena blew her nose into it with an unladylike honk. Vincent opened his mouth to say something, but the chirp of his PHS phone interrupted him. He took it out of his pocket and flipped it open.

"Vincent..." He frowned. "Hello? I can hardly hear you, Reeve..."

Cid cast a worried glance at him. "What's up?"

Vincent shushed him with a wave of his hand. "Reeve, you're going to have to speak up, there--hello? Hello? Hmph." Vincent shook his head as he put the phone back where it came from. "Cut off. You don't think..."

"Goddamnit to hell, Scarlet, why now..." Cid fumed, letting go of Shera. "Okay. If that crazy bitch is getting ready to pull what I think she's getting ready to pull, Reeve is gonna need all the air power he can get. Vincent, you hang on to the Highwind a little longer."

"Oh, SHIT," Yuffie moaned.

"I think there might be some weapons for the Bronco stocked up at an old airfield by Junon...I'll swing by Branford first and check on Junior, then after we take care of business in Junon I'll bring her home...damn, this is gonna be tricky." Cid rubbed his forehead. "Vincent, whatever you do, do NOT let that goddamn Black Materia out of your sight." And with that, Cid dashed off to the Tiny Bronco II and clambered up into the cockpit.

"You heard him." Vincent nodded back toward the Highwind. "Let's go."

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A slightly modified Hardy Daytona Devil Hawg pulled into Fort Condor right about the same time the Tiny Bronco II took off in Rocket City, and a tall blonde woman swung off the seat of the thing. C.J. had figured she'd spend the night at Fort Condor and head for the old airfield in the morning, but a few miles away from the fort she'd begun to hear the distinct whine of jet engines. That in itself didn't disturb her. The fact that there didn't appear to be airplanes to go with those whines did. She remembered all too clearly the cloaked Shinra helicopter that had taken Zack away. She didn't even bother to eat lunch; she just hopped on the black chocobo Annie's "connections" had provided her with and spurred it into the mountains. This was something she hadn't planned on. If she was going to fly that Viper home now, she needed to do it before the invisible airplanes caught on to her.

The chocobo was fast, and it took less than half an hour for it to scale the mountains and take C.J. to the secret airstrip. She hoped that Vicks wouldn't shoot her...something else she'd forgotten about.

It turned out she hadn't needed to worry about that. Vicks, hearing the "wark?" of the chocobo as C.J. dismounted, came running out of the rusty old hangar and recognized her immediately...well, sort of.

"Jeez, Captain...you gotta get goin' right now! You were s'posed to take off an hour ago..." He stopped suddenly, taking a long look at C.J. "Oh, man...Captain, you better get a haircut...Squadron Leader Wright's gonna be pissed..."

/Play along,/ C.J. told herself, and she cleared her throat and launched into her best impression of her father. "Vicks, you got my damn airplane flyable or not?"

Vicks jumped back a little. "Course I do! Or don't ya trust your crew chief?"

"That's what I wanna hear," C.J. replied, strolling into the hangar. The Viper sat there, right where she and her father had left it.

"Maybe someday when you're bigger we'll come back and you can take it for a spin," he'd told her.

C.J. couldn't help but grin. Dad hadn't counted on THIS.

Author's notes: Yes, things are about to go to hell in a hand-basket for the citizens of Junon. Will Cid make it to the airstrip in time to catch Junior before she takes his old Viper for a joyride? Totally non-fic related: I got my Vincent wall scroll (wai wai wai wai!)...I went back to the place a few days ago hoping to find the damn Cid one the guy keeps promising to get me, and he hasn't delivered yet...but he did have a cool one of Sephy, with the lyrics to "One Winged Angel" superimposed over it...cool, but I'm still holding out for Cid...during my nightly forays into the wonderful world of Japanese FF7 pages I can't read, I've stumbled on another favorite shonen-ai couple--Reno and Rufus O_o And I'm gonna stop right there...