

Final Fantasy VII: Children of Jenova

Chapter 18

"Okay, boss," Reno chirped as he and Rude strolled into Reeve's office; Reeve himself was pacing around his desk and chain-smoking. "We didn't do it, nobody saw us, you can't prove anything..." Reno frowned when the expected chuckle didn't come. "Jeez. This is serious, isn't it?"

"Big-time." Reeve lit up another cigarette on the still-smoldering butt of the last one and threw the latter in the nearest ashtray. "I don't suppose either of you two has tried to make a phone call in the last couple of hours?"

"No," Rude replied. "But I hear there's some kind of problem with the lines."

"Yeah." Reeve nodded gravely. "Scarlet's done screwing around with me. She's serious. I suspect there's a lot of firepower on its way here as we speak."

Reno shook his head and swore softly. "We can't be standing around here scratching our butts, then...first thing we do is get you out of here--"

"No way." Reeve said. "I'm staying right here."

"But--"

"Don't argue with me, Reno." Reeve drew a shaky sigh. "Since the phones are out, I need you to haul ass to the airfield and tell the fighters to start scrambling. Rude, you get word to the ground troops."

"Right." Rude, never a man to waste time flapping his jaw, was out the door in a second. Reno started to follow, then took a look back at Reeve.

"You don't think we have a chance in hell, do you?" he asked.

"I think it might already be too late," Reeve replied. "But I'll be damned if I sit up here and do nothing. We're going to take as many of them with us as we can."

Reno nodded and took off, and Reeve sat down heavily in his chair. Ever since he'd gotten the word that Scarlet was running Shinra, he'd feared this day would come. And now it was here, and worse than he could have imagined. He had no way to get hold of the Highwind, no way to call for reinforcements from Fort Condor--hell, he couldn't even get hold of his own troops without having someone physically run out and alert them. Again the thought occurred to him that he should have taken over Shinra when he had the chance, and again he wondered if, had he done so, he would still be alive today. Either way, it didn't matter.

He opened the bottom right-hand drawer of his desk; the electric whip Reno had given him was still there where he had left it, and his hand closed around its handle. He figured trying to stop Scarlet's flunkies with that thing would be like trying to cut down a redwood with a grapefruit spoon, but it was better than sitting there waiting for them to shoot him in the head or whatever the hell they had planned for him.

Not much better, though.

* * *

C.J. had been pleased to discover that the VOX pod, with its wondrous assortment of bells and whistles, offered a built-in simulator. While Vicks scurried around getting the Viper ready to fly, C.J. was up in the cockpit plugged into the thing; a pair of special goggles that hooked up to the jet gave her a sort of virtual-reality sim thing, and besides giving her a bit more confidence that she would actually be able to fly this thing it was a lot of fun. She spent some time pretending to fly around (complete with "vrooom vrooom" noises) shooting down bad guys (the "bad guys" in question were rather blocky and poorly-rendered masses of polygons and angles, but that was good enough) and executing a few basic evasive maneuvers

on her own, and she wished that the Gold Saucer had something like this. Secure in the knowledge that in the unlikely event that her VOX pod got trashed she would at least be able hold her own long enough to get to safety and make a suitable landing, C.J. Hopped down from the cockpit to get herself ready to go.

While Vicks loaded the Viper up with all kinds of things that went boom, C.J. tried to fit herself into her father's flight suit. She was exactly the same height as he but she was quite a bit thinner than Cid had been, even at the young age he had probably been when he last wore the thing. Truth be told, it fit like a potato sack. It would have to do. Under it, she'd found a flight helmet that fit perfectly; the word "Blackhawk" was inscribed upon it. C.J. guessed that must have been her father's call sign in the old days, and she figured it would suit her just fine and dandy as well. She frowned and swore softly as her hair continued to tangle itself in zippers, snaps, miscellaneous parts of the Viper's airframe, and the corner of Vicks's toolbox, and she decided that the first thing she would do when she got home was make Mama take her to get a haircut. For now she simply tucked it down the back of her flight suit...uncomfortable and itchy to say the least.

Again she heard the whine of the invisible airplanes' engines, and she knew that if she was going to go, she needed to do it now.

The VOX system would definitely have to handle the takeoff. The mountains surrounding the strip were just a little too close for C.J.'s comfort, and her only prior experience with a taxi takeoff was in the Baby Bronco; the Tiny Bronco II was capable of vertical takeoff and C.J. had always taken advantage of that. There was a big difference between taking off in a hang glider with a go-cart engine on it and taking off in a two-ton Viper powered by a Wratt & Pitney F-110 jet engine, and as C.J. had no desire to end up smushed into the side of a mountain today, she decided letting the jet fly itself out of this little airfield would be a prudent choice.

Vicks wiped his brow as he loaded the last missile onto the Viper. Its weapons pylons were full; two of them sported the deliciously nasty little piece of air-to-air weaponry known as the Death's Head missile. Death's Heads consisted of one big bomb filled with a bunch of small bombs. When the big bomb went boom, it sprayed whatever unfortunate soul it was heading for with lots and lots of little bombs which in turn also went boom, and as a result the bomb's target would go boom as well. Apparently, Annie Wright wasn't the only person who [heart]ed explosives; Vicks had been chuckling softly the whole time he'd been loading the damn things.

Finally, everything was ready to go. C.J. climbed up into the cockpit and flipped the battery power switch to "on," just as she'd done before.

"Battery power on. All fuel tanks full. All weapons pylons full. Run preflight check?" the airplane said as it came to life.

"Yes," C.J. replied, feeling a bit silly talking to an airplane. The Viper rattled off a long list of systems and subsystems, each followed by a short pause as the jet checked itself out and then "good" or "operating" or some such.

"Preflight check complete," the Viper finally said. "Start engine?"

C.J. cast a glance down at Vicks, who was giving her a grin and a thumbs-up. She donned the helmet and motioned for Vicks to take the crew ladder off the jet, then she closed the canopy. "Yes," she replied.

At first she really didn't think the engine would start. But start it did, with a deafening roar that tapered off into the signature whine of a finely-tuned jet engine; the white-blue plume of exhaust the thing generated was (fortunately for Vicks) diverted up and out of the hangar by a strategically placed blast deflector. Vicks now stood just outside the hangar, ahead of and slightly to the side of the Viper's nose cone, guiding her out of the hangar and onto the airstrip. C.J. figured she could handle this part on her own, and did a passable job of it; at least she didn't run over Vicks on the way out. That she counted as a definite plus.

Now the running Viper sat parked on the far end of the runway, engine whining in preparation for takeoff. "Auto takeoff," C.J. directed, and the Viper began to roll on its own. As she passed Vicks, she noticed that he was standing at full attention and snapping her a heartfelt salute; after a moment's thought she returned it and Vicks scurried back to the hangar.

"Obstacles detected," the Viper said, seemingly to itself, as it screamed down the runway and began to lift into the air. "Compensating."

"Compensate faster," C.J. hissed as the mountains began to draw much too close for her liking. She hoped to God that the "obstacles" the Viper was bitching about were said mountains and not something piddly like the rabbit that was bounding curiously across the runway.

"Not understood," the Viper chirped, pulling up sharply and missing the tops of the mountains by about twenty feet. C.J. had never been prone to "accidents," but she came very close to having one as the top of a pine tree brushed against the belly of the jet. When she was satisfied that she was in the air and in one piece, she told the Viper where she wanted it to go and let it fly merrily over the mountains while she looked down and checked out the scenery just like always.

She could get used to this.

* * *

The first thing that came to Cid's mind upon landing just outside of Branford was that the town must be to Neomidgar what the slums had been to old Midgar. Wall Market looked like a posh shopping plaza compared to this place. And his six-year-old daughter was running around here by herself? Good God.

Cid didn't want to think about it.

The town was overrun with bikers. Hairy. Foul-mouthed. Unwashed. Who knew what the hell these humanoids were capable of? Determined not to let Junior stay in this human cesspool any longer than absolutely necessary, Cid stormed into the first building he came to--the Materia shop. He marched up to the counter and leveled his gaze at the proprietor. "I'm lookin' for a little girl," he said calmly. "Six years old, blonde, green eyes, pink Mog T-shirt."

"Ain't seen no little girl," the man said softly, and Cid noticed that the guy was shivering and sweating. "I ain't seen nothin'. Just like he said."

"Like who said?" Cid resisted the urge to grab the guy by the collar. "Who the hell you talkin' about?"

"Ain't seen nothin'," the man repeated. "'S'what he told me to say if anyone came lookin' for him." Then he groaned. "Uh oh."

Cid rolled his eyes. "I ain't lookin' for a damn man, I'm lookin' for a little girl! You seen her or not?" The Materia seller shook his head.

"Ain't seen no little girl. Really."

"Thanks a heap," Cid hissed, spinning on his heel and stomping out of the store. Next stop: the bar next door. Annie's Hangar? Cid frowned as he looked up at the sign that hung precariously above the door, held up with two rusty nails and a length of bailing wire. Roughly seven to ten motorcycles sporting spiked fenders, front-mounted gatling guns, and jolly roger stickers, among other mechanical impossibilities, were parked haphazardly around the front. Cid's opinion of the fair village of Branford was rapidly going down the crapper...that is, until he opened the door and stepped into the bar.

The bar was, to him, like a verdant oasis in a parched desert. It was aviation heaven to say the least. And he was beginning to get some vague idea who the Annie in "Annie's Hangar" was. Five particularly unsavory bikers watched him intently, some with interest, some with apprehension, and one with outright disgust. Cid pretended not to see them as he approached the bar, where a white-haired old woman in a leather jacket had his back was filling a pitcher, her back turned to him. "Excuse me--" he said to the old lady, and when she turned to face him whatever words he might have said departed from his brain and left him a staring, slack-jawed, wobbling wreck. The last time he had seen this woman, she had vehemently chewed his butt out for being late for a sortie. At that point, actually, it had been a wonder that the younger Cid had HAD any butt left to chew out, the way the old battleaxe had ripped on it almost daily for three years prior to that. Cid did not need to see the patch on the old lady's sleeve to know that he was once again in the territory of Squadron Leader Annie Wright.

"Holy shit," he wheezed as Annie's eyes widened in recognition. "Holy shit!"

"Cid Highwind, what the HELL are you doin' here?" Annie thundered, causing Cid to flinch. "Ain't a goddamn thing changed! You never could get your ass in the air on time before and you sure as hell didn't now!"

"What're you talkin' about?" Cid asked. "I came here 'cause I got a postcard from my kid and this ain't no place for a little girl to be runnin' around--"

"Your little girl--shit, Highwind, I don't know how to tell you this without soundin' like a nut, so I'm just gonna tell you." Annie drew a deep breath. "Your little girl ain't little no more. You been runnin' around here askin' folks if they seen a little girl, it's no wonder you ain't got shit to go on. Now if you'd asked 'em if they'd seen a lady with blonde hair damn near to her feet and got-damn glow-in-the-dark green eyes, THEN you mighta got somewhere."

Cid felt behind him for a chair with a shaking hand. "Oh my God."

"On top a' that," Annie continued, "she come in here and beat the crap outta one a' Shinra's best n' brightest for tryin' to put the moves on her, she turned the bike I gave her into the Devil Hawg from Hell, and she ate a whole got-damn platter of my nuclear waste wings and didn't even break a sweat." Annie chuckled a bit. "Sure was sorry to see her go."

"Go!?" Cid spluttered. "Where the hell'd she go? Why didn't you keep her here!?"

"Well, if you get off your ass and back in the air, you might still be able to catch her!" Annie bellowed, eliciting another flinch from Cid. "She had her mind made up that she was gonna fly home in your old Viper, and she just took off a couple hours ago on the bike. I reckon she's at Fort Condor takin' a rest right about now."

"Oh my God," Cid said again. Annie just stared at him.

"Are you gonna sit there takin' the Lord's name in vain all day or are you gonna go catch her? Damnitalltohell, Highwind, you ain't changed a bit..." Annie shook her head. "You best get your ass in gear and head up to Fort Condor if you wanna catch her. I'm havin' some guys up there hook her up with a black chocobo to take her up to the old base. That's the only chance you got of catching her. You know how damn fast that Viper can move."

"Shit..." Annie was right. Cid remembered all too clearly the ass-chewing he'd gotten from her about cruising around making sonic booms just because he could in that very jet. "I gotta get goin'."

"Damn right you gotta get goin'!" Annie hauled Cid up out of his chair by the back of his collar and started shoving him toward the door. "And when you find her, you tell her to get herself back here as soon as she can 'cause Chopper over there's startin' to act up again."

"Thanks, Annie," Cid said, coming to his senses and breaking free from the old lady's iron grasp. "I'll give her your best when I catch her."

* * *

Reno never could understand why the hell people ran for fun.

There was nothing pleasurable about sprinting down the street with a barking dog of the ankle-biter persuasion at your heels, a stitch in your side, and sweat running into your eyes. Reno failed to see the attraction. He certainly wasn't enjoying this little jog he was taking right now. The ratlike dog chasing him was the least of his worries; he realized that there was a good chance folks would start shooting at him any second now; that, or he would get blown to bits by an errant or not-so-errant blast of air-to-ground artillery. And he was worried about Rude, and even more worried about Elena as he ran down the road toward Junon's airfield. He had not spoken to Elena since she'd gone off on the Highwind in search of the Strife kid, and he'd made an ass of himself then, asking her out when he already knew he was going to get shot down in flames--

It was ironic that such an image crossed his mind at that exact moment.

Reno heard the whine of a jet engine, and he saw no jet accompanying it. A cold, crawly sensation filled his stomach and crept up into his chest as his brain processed this information and came up with an explanation he didn't like. He would not make it to the airfield in time. His feet stopped moving and would not start again, no matter how much Reno begged, pleaded with, or threatened them. By the time he finally got them moving again, it was too late.

The screaming space of empty air directly over the airstrip took on a more tangible form for a few seconds, shimmering slightly as its bomb hatch opened and let fall a number of bombs right onto the airfield, neutralizing Junon's small air force in a matter of seconds as the bombs tore gaping holes in the tarmac, pulverized aircraft, and incinerated any human beings that might have been going about their business there. Its task complete, the Gelnika cloaked once more, the whine of its engines the only proof that there had been an airplane in that space at all.

Reno stared numbly at the plumes of smoke and flame that rose from the airfield as that cold, crawly feeling in his stomach grew still more intense. /Oh my God, where the hell is Rude.../ He tried his cell phone, but upon hitting the "send" key and putting it to his ear, he found nothing but static. /No no no oh God no.../ Operating on auto-pilot, his feet turned and began to carry him back toward the Junon Hydroelectric building, and he tore down the street yelling at the rubbernecks that had come out to watch the fireworks to get the hell back inside. Several of them chose to ignore his advice, taking up arms and pouring into the street to defend their city, and Reno realized there was no way he was going to be able to talk them out of it. He hoped to hell that Rude was having better luck than he was, and as he neared the building he again heard the whining, whirring sound of aircraft engines, a chopper this time. A blast of leaf- and dust-laden wind whipped his red hair into a tangled frenzy, and Reno turned around just in time to see three blue suits stepping out of empty air. He didn't know the little squirrely guy with the SOLDIER sword, but he recognized Raven--and, with the same cold, crawly feeling he'd had before, he recognized Archer and the blood drained from his face. "I should have known."

"Long time no see, Reno," Archer said with a little grin. "I told you I was going to have your job someday, didn't I? Payback's a bitch, buddy."

"Thanks," Reno spat back at him, "but you can keep Raven."

Raven narrowed her eyes and shot Reno a babies-must-play look. "We don't have time for this. Take him."

Immediately, Reno found himself under attack from three sides, and already exhausted from his little afternoon jog he was finding it difficult to fend off Stuart's sword and Archer's sai AND deny Raven a clear shot all at once. He parried a sword slash with his nightstick, but even as he did so Archer caught him in the back of the head with the butt end of a sai. Reno staggered slightly, dropping his nightstick as he shook his head to try and clear out the cobwebs, and just as it occurred to him that he needed to pick his weapon up again he heard a sharp crack and felt a chunk of hot lead tear through his right arm. He dropped to his knees, crying out through gritted teeth, and saw Raven standing in front of him, smoke curling upward from the barrel of her pistol.

"Ready for the action now, danger boy?" she purred, and Reno's world went black as she brought the butt of her pistol down hard at the base of his skull. She motioned to the shimmering patch of air behind her, and two blue-uniformed grunts stepped out. "Cuff him and throw him in the back," she ordered. "We've got business to take care of upstairs."

* * *

C.J. heard the explosions and saw the smoke and fire rising from Junon's airfield, and her mind began to go three ways at once.

/Tell the plane to go full afterburner and get out of here,/ one part said.

/Stay here and help,/ another said.

The third voice that spoke in her mind started out soft but grew louder and more insistent every second she watched the destruction of Junon: /I'm scared and I'm hungry and I want to go home and I want Mama and I want Daddy--/

"Shut up," C.J. hissed, shutting her eyes tightly as the six-year-old within yammered on. "Just shut up."

"Command 'shut up' recognized," the VOX system chirped, jarring C.J. out of her thoughts. "VOX system disabled." The jet began to dive sharply, and C.J. gasped.

"I wasn't talking to you, you stupid airplane!" she snapped at it as she wrestled with the stick and brought the Viper back to level. "Activate VOX system!"

"VOX system enabled," the jet replied, and C.J. heaved a sigh of relief. She'd forgotten about that. She would be very careful what she said up here from now on. But what was she supposed to do? Go running home while the invisible airplanes bombed Junon, or stay here and try dog-fighting bad guys she couldn't see in an airplane she'd never flown?

That question was answered for her when a patch of air ahead of and slightly below the Viper rippled and took on the form of a sleek black fighter jet long enough to send a heat-seeking missile shooting toward her.

"Lock-on alert. Recognize Hellfire heat-seeking missile. Flare deployed." The Viper spat a white-hot flare out of one of the dispensers on its belly, which drifted away and lured the missile off target as the Viper pulled up sharply. C.J. felt as if her stomach was being squeezed into her shoes. "Acquiring target. Locking on." Before the Viper could lock onto the Shinra fighter, the latter cloaked once more. "Unable to lock on."

"Shit," C.J. hissed. Another black jet, or possibly the same one, uncloaked as it swooped down above her, peppering the Viper with a spray of 30-mil rounds. Few hit their mark; the ones that did hit didn't do too much damage apart from cracking the canopy. But now C.J. knew that the invisible airplanes had an Achilles' heel. The chopper in Mideel had uncloaked at takeoff. Both times, the black jet had uncloaked before it attacked. She wondered if perhaps it took too much power to cloak and attack at the same time. How she would use that against them she did not know, nor did she know if it were even possible to do so. She did know one thing: she would have to get this black airplane out of her face before she did anything else.

The Shinra fighter uncloaked a third time, twelve o' clock dead-on, and this time C.J. saw something attached to the underside of the thing; a black pod similar to the one that housed her VOX system, but a bit smaller. Maybe that was where the guts of the cloaking device lived. "Weapons controls to manual," she directed.

"Weapons control manual," the Viper echoed, and C.J. let loose her own spray of 30-mil, trying to aim at the odd pod before the jet could strike a third time. Several rounds hit it, and the wavy form of the black jet snapped into solid reality as the black jet let fly another heat-seeker. C.J. deployed another flare almost too late; the missile detonated a little too close to the Viper for comfort. But that was all right. The black jet would not cloak again, and C.J. turned control of the weapons back over to the VOX system.

"Acquiring target...locking on...target locked."

"Fire left Death's Head."

"Firing."

The black jet, apparently realizing that it was out of heat-seekers and out in the open, tried to turn tail and run, and the Death's Head detonated just behind it, sending several bomblets right up its ass and spraying the rest of its payload over the wings of the thing; they exploded into a fiery bouquet in the blue sky. Seconds later, the black jet itself transformed into a blossom of fire and smoke; what was left of it drifted earthward, trailing black smoke. C.J. let out a triumphant whoop as she watched the debris fall. The pilot of the black jet had pulled the yellow and black handle C.J. had been told so many times not to touch unless specifically told to do so just before his airplane went boom, and the chute on his ejection seat poofed out merrily, sending the pilot drifting toward the woods. Good. Let him land there. C.J. hoped he landed on a porcupine.

"Lock-on alert," the Viper suddenly piped up, and C.J.'s gaze snapped straight ahead. Three more of the black jets were uncloaking.

* * *

Cid wasn't sure what was going on. The guy at Fort Condor told him that the blonde girl had just hopped on the black chocobo and taken off without so much as lunch or a nap, and now he stood in the hangar that was supposed to be housing his old Viper. It was empty. No Viper. No black chocobo. No sign of Vicks. No sign of Junior. And he smelled smoke.

Stepping outside, he saw said smoke drifting from behind the hangar, and he cautiously picked his way back there to see Vicks sitting comfortably on a large pile of black feathers. He had a good-sized fire going, and the nude carcass of a very large bird sat above it, impaled on a spit which the drooling Vicks turned patiently. Well, that solved two mysteries. Vicks experimentally picked a bit of meat off the spit and tasted it. Satisfied that the bird was cooked, he began wrenching a very large drumstick off it.

"Vicks!" Cid yelled, and Vicks dropped his chocobo drumstick right into the embers. "Vicks, where the hell's my goddamn airplane!?"

"Captain!?" Vicks stammered, eyes wide as the chocobo began to go from roasted to blackened. "You're already back!?"

"The hell you mean 'already?'" Cid spat. "Vicks, did you let someone take off in my plane?"

"But you--" Vicks pointed at Cid, a bewildered expression spreading over his features. "You took off--but you're here--but you--" And with that, he groaned and passed out.

Cid found the old crew chief's canteen and emptied it over Vicks's head. The old dude came up spluttering and coughing. "Pull it together, Vicks. I need some ammo for my Stingray."

"Uh, sure..." Vicks stammered. "Can I eat first? The roach coach is late again and there was this perfectly good bird sittin' here..."

"I'll buy you a goddamn restaurant after this is over," Cid replied. "What kinda boom-boom toys you got stacked up here?"

Vicks scratched his head. "Well, I got a couple heatseekers and a buncha 30-mil...I had some Death's Heads but I put 'em on your Viper..."

Cid again fought the urge to grab his fellow man by the collar and shake him like a Raggedy Andy doll. "You sent that Viper up in the air with two goddamn Death's Heads on it!?"

"Well, sure!" Vicks replied. "They're your favorites! C'mon, Captain, how'd you get back here so fast...and where's your Viper!?" Vicks stared blankly at the Stingray that sat on the end of the runway. "Well, at least you got a haircut...what happened, did the old battleaxe catch you?"

Cid groaned. This was not going to be fun.

Author's notes: Things are not looking too good for Junon or C.J., are they? Not to mention C.J.'s poor chocobo. (Homer Simpson impression) Mmm...chocobo...And Vicks STILL hasn't died. I know, I know, I'm screwing EVERYTHING up ^_^...in case anyone gives a damn, pix of Sephiroth Obscura and C.J.'s bike (without C.J.) are up in my CoJ gallery, and all MST's are on the CoJ page along with the April Fool's version of Chapter 16 since I got a few requests for it (can't imagine why; besides the bit with Reeve and the little Ancient dude and some parts of the Spam scene, I now realize that it was incredibly lame and I forgot to mention that Hope the Receptionist from Hell is the same foul-mouthed Hope you sometimes hear on Houston radio station 101 KLOL)