

Final Fantasy VII: Children of Jenova

Chapter 21

"...never happened before..."

"...the hell weren't you monitoring..."

"...told you this was a stupid idea..."

C.J. opened her eyes and found the faces of the other three Turks hovering over her. Raven and Stuart looked genuinely worried. Archer had a sneer on his face that C.J. wanted to slap off. "What happened?"

"We're not sure." Raven was in the process of undoing the straps that held C.J. to the chair. "Some kind of bug in the training program. You passed out. Are you okay now?"

"I think so." C.J., grateful to have her hands free again, reached up and rubbed her eyes. "My head feels weird." She attempted to stand up, but her knees wobbled crazily and had Stuart not caught her, she would have fallen flat on her face. Yes, something had happened that didn't quite seem right, but C.J. just couldn't put her finger on it. When she tried to think of what happened right before she passed out, all her mind would offer up was a fleeting image of red and green lights.

"You're gonna feel a little woozy for a while," he advised, pulling her back to her feet. "Should I take her somewhere, or what?"

Raven nodded. "Yeah, they're putting her in Kain's house. Which is a good thing--I don't think anyone's fed his cats since he--since the last time he did. I'll be by later with her clothes."

"Cool." With that, Stuart led C.J. out of the room.

"I still think it's a bad idea to have her living by herself," Archer shot. "If you leave her alone she's gonna--" He stopped as Raven withdrew a small remote control from her pocket and drew it across her neck in a slicing motion. "Oh! In that case, no problem!" He snickered. "I'd feel really sorry for the guy that had to wipe her up if you hit that, Raven..."

"Shut up, Archer." Raven slipped the remote back into her pocket. "I don't want there to be any problems with you two. If you have a personal problem with her, I'm sorry. Cope with it. If you try anything with her I -will- step back and let her beat the living shit out of you again."

Archer snorted. "You're really getting off on this, aren't you?"

"You're a caveman," Raven replied. "Like I said, she's six years old. And besides, she's not my type."

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Reeve stirred and grunted as his half-asleep ears picked up the now-familiar scraping sound of food being pushed into his cell. Hmph. Another chicken leg. For a moment, the image of some creature that was a cross between a chicken and a millipede popped into his head; he wondered where in the world all these chicken legs were coming from. Well, at least this one was still warm.

He was now extremely worried about Reno. The latter hadn't said a coherent word since his visitor had done whatever he'd done to him, and Reeve feared the worst. His other neighbor had not returned from wherever they'd taken her. He had no way of knowing that at that very moment she was walking in the front door of her new home in Neomidgar.

He wished Scarlet would hurry up and get this over with. He was sick of wondering if every cold chicken leg he got would be his last meal. He wasn't even all that scared now; he was just irritated. He did, however, intend to deck Scarlet right between the eyes before she did whatever she was going to do to him.

Reeve set the now-nude leg bone down on the tray and shoved the damn thing back out the door, hoping someone would trip on it and break their goddamn neck. Hopefully Scarlet. If not Scarlet, then Archer or Raven. That done, he stretched out to try to get some more sleep.

The door to his cell opened a few hours later. Well, that was one mystery solved: which cold chicken leg would be his last.

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"Um..." C.J. stood on the sidewalk of a rather large two-story house, jaw hanging limply. "How much of this place is mine?"

"All of it," Stuart replied, tossing her the keys. "We'll probably need to clean out the fridge...nah, maybe not. All he ever kept in there was beer and lunch meat anyway."

"Who?" C.J. asked as she opened the front door.

"The guy you're replacing." Two cats stepped out onto the porch to meet C.J., and she reached down to pet them. One, with short black fur, recoiled and scampered away from the strange new human. The other, identical to the first except for its long, thick coat, tried to climb up the leg of C.J.'s flight suit. "Those are the cats. Their names are Precious and Dammit. Three guesses which is which and the first two don't count."

"Dammit?" C.J. picked the unfortunately-named cat up and held it at eye level. "Why'd someone want to name their cat Dammit?"

"His name used to be Shadow," Stuart replied, stepping into the house and scratching Precious behind the ears. "But Kain was always following him around going 'Dammit, stop climbing on my speakers!' and 'Dammit, quit biting my feet!' and 'Dammit, stop bugging Precious!'...well, he figured the cat thought his name was Dammit anyway..."

C.J. set Dammit down on the floor, and the long-haired cat immediately set about chasing the short-haired cat all over the living room. "I think I see what you mean." She took a look around. "Ugh, what a mess."

By a normal person's standards, Kain's house wasn't terribly messy, but to neatniks like C.J. and Stuart, it looked like a demilitarized zone. A pair of jeans hung haphazardly over the back of the sofa, accompanied by a T-shirt. An empty soda can stood on the magazine-littered coffee table; beside it sat a glass that had probably once contained said soda and some ice. It now contained a liquid that was clear at the top and brown at the bottom and beginning to spawn mold, as it had been left unattended for several days. And there wasn't a coaster under it. That, in a house usually cleaned by Shera Highwind, was tantamount to blasphemy; C.J. remembered the sort of glares her mother shot at her father when the latter dared set a glass down on the coffee table without a coaster under it.

Mess aside, the place was pretty nice. And it was all hers.

Stuart opened a pantry in the kitchen and withdrew two tins of cat food, which he opened and dumped into bowls on the kitchen floor. Precious and Dammit came running immediately and began to devour the yummy stuff as Stuart threw the cans away. "Poor little guys. They were starving."

"What happened to him, anyway?" C.J. asked.

"Who?"

"The guy I'm replacing." C.J. picked up a framed picture off the mantel; it depicted the three Turks she knew (all obviously drunk, with Archer wearing a baseball hat embroidered with the words "Designated Drinker"), along with a grinning man sporting a long black ponytail. She tapped this fourth person. "Is this him?"

"Yeah." Stuart sat down heavily. "I don't even like to think about it."

C.J. put the picture down. "He died, didn't he?" Stuart nodded slowly, and C.J. sat down on the sofa as well. "What happened?"

"I--I did it. I didn't mean to." He rubbed his eyes. "You know a kid named Zack, right?"

"Yeah..." C.J. didn't like this. "What about him?"

"Have you seen him lately?"

"No." C.J. remembered all too well the last time she had. "Some lady took him away."

"Yeah." Stuart nodded. "That's Vail. The same lady that gave you the shot in the office. Don't trust her. She does things to people. She did something to Zack and he sort of went crazy."

"My dad told me he might have had Jen--bah, what's it called..."

"Jenova cells," Stuart offered. "Yeah. I've got 'em too. So did Kain. We were both in SOLDIER, and that's part of what they did to make us stronger. And that's how Zack was able to get in my head and make me--make me do what I did." He paused and sighed. "He and Archer always used to pick on me. Kain didn't do it to be mean, though. He told me one time he wished I'd get mad at him and deck him for it. After this happened...that was all I could think about. I keep wondering if he thought I finally snapped before he died." He stood up and headed for the door. "Um...don't tell anyone I told you about this, okay? I don't think you were supposed to know."

"Sure," C.J. replied, and Stuart left quickly.

Once left alone, C.J. set about cleaning the place up. It wasn't too bad; once she threw out the magazines and the trash and cleaned all the spoiled stuff out of the fridge, all that was left was the dusting and stuff. Once or twice Precious came out from under the sofa, watching her curiously but not allowing C.J. to pet her just yet; Dammit seemed to enjoy flopping on the floor right in front of C.J.'s feet, especially when she was carrying an armload of clothes or something.

While cleaning off the nightstand next to her new (and rather large) bed, she found a few packets of what appeared to be balloons. She wondered why a grown man would have a bunch of balloons lying around, and promptly threw them out. As she finished with that, the doorbell rang.

Raven stood on the front porch, carrying a few blue suits and a pair of sensible shoes. "I brought your uniforms," she said. "Why don't you try one on and see if I got the right size?"

"Sure..." C.J. took one of the uniforms into the bedroom and emerged a few minutes later, fumbling with her tie.

"Let me help you with that." Raven tied the tie and tugged at it a bit. "That's not too tight, is it?" C.J. shook her head although the tie was a bit snug against the collar Raven had put on her earlier, and Raven plucked maternally at her lapels. "It looks good on you. Does it fit all right?"

"It's a little itchy," C.J. replied. "And the shoes are too big."

Raven took a look. Sure enough, the shoes she'd brought were a full three or four sizes too big. "Sorry. I was going by those boots you had on. Well, that doesn't matter. I figured you were going to need some food here, so I had Heidegger petty-cash you a small advance on your paycheck." She handed C.J. an envelope. "You can go buy a pair that fits if you want."

C.J. opened the envelope, looked inside, and nearly fell down. "This is a SMALL advance!?"

"Did I forget to mention that Shinra pays us very well for our work?" Raven smiled as C.J. continued to sputter and babble about the contents of the envelope. "Well, I'll be by in the morning to pick you up for work. A little hint--don't untie your tie every night, just loosen it up and pull it off. Saves a lot of time. I'd drive you to the store, but there's some things I need to do at work so call a cab. Bye."

"Bye," C.J. replied numbly, still staring at the fat wad of thousand gil bills in the envelope. She barely heard the door shut, barely heard the sound of Raven's car starting up and driving away. This was quite, as her father had once said, a chunk of change. She sat down, found a notepad and a pen, and began to make out a shopping list. She told herself she would buy only things she needed, and began to write: cereal, TV dinners (she had, unfortunately, inherited Cid's cooking prowess...or lack thereof), toothbrush, shoes. She didn't care for the plain sheets on her new bed, and she added "pretty sheets" to the list. She idly glanced over the former occupant's music library and added "CD's" to the list...

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The Highwind touched down near Wutai, as Cid decided attempting to land the thing within Neomidgar city limits would be a bad move in the extreme. Upon seeing the sprawling metropolis, Cid wondered why the hell Godo wasn't raising a bigger stink about it--where there had once been unmolested plateaus connected by rope bridges, there were now towers of glass and steel and strip malls. The valleys below were Neomidgar's slums, and like a seventy-story middle finger directed at them, the Shinra tower stood on the central plateau.

The group, minus Yuffie, now sat in the Turtle's Paradise quaffing cold ones and formulating a plan of action. It had been pretty much unanimous that they should spend the night in Wutai. They weren't sure what they were going to do in the morning, though.

Yuffie had gone home. Mainly because she needed to pick up a few changes of clothes and the three Materia she'd found during her travels after Sephiroth's defeat. She tiptoed into her room, hoping the old man wasn't home, quietly pulled the poster concealing her secret stash aside, and withdrew a small wooden box from the hidden alcove. She opened it...and found it empty. "Damn!" she hissed.

"Looking for something?"

Yuffie looked up quickly, and found her father staring at her with a hint of amusement. "Um...no, not really, just picking up some clothes and--" Godo opened his hand to reveal two small red orbs and one green one. "Um, and those too..."

"Yuffie, how many times do I have to tell you..." Godo drew a deep breath, and Yuffie braced herself for the butt-chewing she was sure she was about to receive-- "Materia doesn't do you any good sitting in a box like that!"

"Okay, Dad, I shoulda have given them to you, I'm--huh?" She looked up, puzzled. "Dad, are you drunk?"

"Of course not!" Godo snapped. "I mean, you found these rare Materia and you've got them gathering dust here...anyway, I took the liberty of playing with them a bit." He handed the three little orbs over to Yuffie. "Put them to good use."

"Um, I was planning to. Thanks, Dad...I think..." Yuffie pocketed the three Materia and gathered her changes of clothes. "Shinra hasn't been messin' with you, have they?"

"They leave Wutai alone most of the time," Godo sighed, sitting down on the futon. "I think they believe they have no use for us anymore. But I still don't like them building their city so close to ours."

"Neither do I." Yuffie stood up and headed toward the door. "Don't worry, Dad. If they mess with you I'm gonna shove this cross so far up their--"

"YUFFIE!"

"--noses it'll take three weeks and the Jaws of Life to get it out!" Yuffie blinked at Godo, who was shaking his head and groaning. "What? What'd you think I was gonna say?"

* * *

Perfect.

C.J. stepped back from the bed and smiled. The plain old ugly sheets that had come on the bed were gone; in their stead were pink sheets topped by a comforter with a bright-colored star pattern. She had changed out of the itchy blue suit into the T-shirt and jeans she had bought on her shopping trip, and her refrigerator was full of frozen dinners, cream soda, ice cream, and various snacks. Downstairs, Precious and Dammit played happily with the assortment of new catnip mice and jingling plastic balls their new mistress had given them. A large pillow in the shape of a Moogles sat at the head of her bed, surrounded by smaller stuffed animals, and a newborn Pocket Mog sat in the front pocket of her jeans. And she had barely made a dent in her "small advance."

Maybe this wouldn't be so bad after all. But five years...hell, five years was almost her whole life up to now. She would be old when it was over. Eleven. Almost over the hill.

Something she hadn't thrown away caught her eye--an almost-empty pack of cigarettes sitting on the dresser. Experimentally, she lit one and tried to inhale, but ended up sputtering, coughing and fanning the air. These were different from the cigarettes Dad and Reeve smoked; they were black and smelled of cloves. Not bad, as long as she didn't inhale.

The phone began to ring, and it took about four rings before C.J. remembered that this was her house and it was her phone that was ringing. She picked it up. "Hello?"

"Hello, dear." It was Raven. "Listen, I wanted to let you know you've got your first assignment. You'd better take a nap; I'll be by to pick you up at seven. You're going to have a long night ahead of you. You might want to start developing a taste for coffee."

"Sure...why?"

"You've got night guard on the gas chamber. Easiest job in the world...and the most boring. Bring a book or something."

"Okay." C.J. scratched her head. She thought she would be guarding an empty gas chamber, which sort of made sense; it just wouldn't do to have people wandering into something like that. Dammit hopped up onto the bed, catnip mouse clenched in his teeth, and C.J. stroked his back. "Sounds easy enough."

"Believe me, dear, you couldn't possibly mess this one up. See you at seven." With that, Raven hung up.

C.J. set the phone down and sighed. She scooted Dammit out of the way, pulled back the sheets, and crawled under them. It wasn't until her head hit the pillow that she realized just how tired she was, and she was asleep almost immediately.

* * *

While the others drank their cares away at Turtle's Paradise, Elena lay cupped in the hand of one of the Da-Chao statues, gazing up at the huge stone face she and Yuffie had once been tied to. Next to her sat her whole computer setup, hooked into Shinra's mainframe once more with little scout programs running around trying to extract something worthwhile. While she waited for them to do so, she lay back and stared up at the statue above her.

/Why did I come here?/ she thought, looking up at the half-closed eyes of the stone face. Not a site full of pleasant memories. She still believed that by dropping that fat old pervert off the side of the mountain, Reno had saved her from a fate worse than death.

"D'oh! Sorry, I didn't know you were up here too..."

Speak of the Devil. The annoying little elf herself was trotting up the mountain. "Go away, Yuffie."

Yuffie pretended not to hear. "Jeez, I figured you'd never want to see this place again, after that old fart hung us up there..."

"What do you want?" Elena snapped, and Yuffie looked a bit hurt.

"I dunno. I just thought I'd come up here and hang out a while. I didn't mean to piss you off or anything." She turned and started back down the mountain.

"Wait a minute," Elena finally said, and Yuffie turned back around. "I thought I wanted to be alone. I guess I don't."

Silently, Yuffie turned back around and flopped down in the statue's hand as well. "You're worried about Reno, huh?"

"I'm worried about all three of them," Elena replied, sitting up. "Especially Junior."

"Aw, c'mon." Yuffie grinned. "Chibi-Cid's a tough kid. I bet she's already kicked Heidegger in the 'nads at least once."

"You're crude," Elena scolded, but she giggled anyway. "Though I WOULD pay good money to see that..." She drew a sigh. "Okay...okay. I -am- worried about Reno...a lot."

And once that thought had worked their way out of Elena's mind and into the realm of the spoken word, others followed in a sudden flood of words and then tears. Her uncertainty about having gone to Nibelheim instead of staying with Reno and Rude in Junon. Her fear that the last words Reno had heard her say were those unkind ones on the Highwind. And worst of all, the fact that even after seven years she still missed Tseng so badly that she wouldn't allow herself to so much as think about taking Reno up on his numerous propositions.

Yuffie was genuinely flabbergasted. Not knowing what the hell else to do, she awkwardly reached out and drew Elena to her, letting the older woman sob against her shoulder as the flow of words was overcome by that of tears. "C'mon, Elena, cut it out...it'll be okay. We'll find him." She patted Elena on the head as the sobs tapered off into sniffles and then silence. "It'll be oka--what the hell is that?"

"Huh?" Elena cast red eyes toward her computer setup, which was beeping crazily. "I--I don't know!" She scooted over and took a peek at the screen. "What the--someone's sending something! That's impossible!"

"Oh, great! Cut it off!" Yuffie began to paw through the messes of cables and wires hooked to the numerous components of the system. "C'mon, shut the friggin' thing off!"

"Hold it!" Elena brushed Yuffie's hand out of the nest of cable and stared at the screen in disbelief. "It's a personnel file...Department of Administrative Research..." The color drained from her face as she opened the file and took a peek at its contents. "Oh my God. Oh my God. Yuffie, look at this!"

Yuffie peered over Elena's shoulder and almost fell over backwards. "No way!"

"Come on!" Elena whipped the whole mess of technology into her briefcase and started down the mountain with Yuffie in tow. "Cid needs to see this right now!"

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"Those aren't too tight, are they?" Archer asked with a smart-alecky grin, referring to the thick canvas straps that now secured Reeve's wrists to the arms of the gas chamber's rather uncomfortable chair.

"Oh, they're just peachy." Reeve replied with an equally smart-alecky grin. "How very considerate of you to ask." Actually, his left hand was already starting to develop that pins-and-needles feeling of falling asleep, but damned if he'd say anything about it. "Are you going to bother with my feet, or what?"

"I think Scarlet wanted to do that herself," Archer replied. "I'd like to hang around and watch, but I've got things to do. Later." With that, he turned and walked out of the gas chamber. Almost immediately after, Scarlet came in looking sleazy as ever.

"Oh, the gates of Hell have opened," Reeve shot as Scarlet shooed the two remaining grunts out of the gas chamber. Great. Alone with the she-devil. "So what nastiness do you have planned for me, Scarlet?"

Scarlet grinned and crouched at Reeve's feet, resting a hand on his knee, and snickered as he recoiled. "Vail really came through for me this time. If you're planning on taking a few deep breaths and keeling over dead, think again." She pulled the strap around his right ankle. "A nice strong man like you..." Scarlet finished with the strap, reached up, and drew her fingertips down his neck, down the front of his shirt, almost to the waistband of his slacks before going to work on Reeve's left ankle, and Reeve clenched his teeth so tightly he was sure he heard enamel cracking under the strain. "You'll last at least two days." She strapped Reeve's left ankle in and sat back, again placed her hands on his knees, and wantonly slid them up almost to his hips. "Any last requests I could take care of for you?" Scarlet whispered, still grinning like a cat.

Scarlet's words and actions disgusted Reeve almost to the point of losing his lunch...but maybe there was a sliver of a chance here. "As a matter of fact, Scarlet," he said with a forced smile, "There -is- something you can do for me to make my last moments alive a wee bit brighter..."

"Oh, really?" Scarlet purred, resting her chin on Reeve's knee.

Once again Reeve's gag reflex tried to kick in, but he fought it back. "Really. But I need you to undo one of my hands first. Preferably the left. Archer did it a little too tight and now my hand's asleep..."

"Why not," Scarlet shrugged. She reached up and unbuckled the wrist restraint--

--And toppled backwards onto her ass as Reeve snatched his hand free of the strap, reared back, and decked Scarlet right between the eyes, just as he'd prayed and hoped he'd get to do before he ran down the curtain and joined the choir invisible. "Thanks," Reeve grinned as Scarlet shook the cobwebs out of her head. "Was it as good for you as it was for me?"

"How dare you!" Scarlet spat. "Striking a lady--"

Reeve looked around. "I don't see any ladies here." The shocked expression on Scarlet's face struck him as extremely funny, and he began to laugh.

"That's right, sweetheart." Scarlet stood up and tugged at her skirt. "You keep right on laughing. We'll see who's laughing this time tomorrow when you're begging me to come in here and shoot you in the head to put you out of your misery." With that, she spun on her heel and walked stiffly out of the gas chamber, not even bothering to re-secure Reeve's hand. The door was shut and bolted thrice behind her, and for a small eternity the gas chamber was silent. The only sound Reeve could hear was the pounding of his heart.

Then there came a soft hissing sound, barely audible but just enough so to send a slow chill down Reeve's spine. Gas.

Scarlet had said two days, maybe. He could do one of two things. He could try holding his breath as much as possible and only breathing this shit when he had to in hopes that Cid would show up and bust him out of this hell-hole. Or he could just get it over with as quickly as possible.

Reeve drew in a shallow, experimental breath of the stuff and coughed softly. No apparent ill effects other than a slightly uncomfortable prickly feeling in the back of his throat, along with a rather bitter and unpleasant taste in his mouth. He took another breath and sneezed loudly. "My kingdom for a Kleenex," he mumbled, noticing with some alarm that the faint itchy sensation in his throat had grown more intense. /Oh God,/ he thought. /What if Scarlet's right...if this keeps getting worse.../

He tried not to think about that.

* * *

Tifa cast a glance toward Cid and Vincent, who were sitting at a table halfheartedly picking at a platter of some appetizer or another and talking...well, it appeared Cid was doing most of the talking while Vincent just sat and listened as he always did. She had a fair idea what the conversation was about: Junior. Poor kid. She had come so close to finding Cid again, only to be plucked out of the air by the goddamn Shinras. She figured Cid was feeling something close to the way she felt when she'd found Cloud in the basement of the Shinra mansion, staring into space and mumbling about Zack.

Somehow she knew Cloud was all right, at least for now, and that he would come back to them; he would come back as he had before, and he would bring Zack back with him. Everything would be okay.

Sure it would.

Wouldn't it?

"Screw it. I'm not hungry." Cid let fall a small egg roll onto the platter from whence it had come, and Vincent watched it drop. "Vincent, what the hell are we gonna do tomorrow? We can't go flyin' the Highwind right into Neomidgar and it'll take too damn long to go by foot."

"We could try to catch some more chocobos," Vincent offered.

"Damn chocobo field here's gone. The bitch built a parking garage over it." Cid lit up a cigarette and puffed on it angrily. "I saw it on the way in. And ain't no way we can stuff enough chocobos for all of us in the pen on the Highwind--"

The door of the bar flew wide open, its hinges nearly ripped out of the door frame, and Elena tore through them with Yuffie in tow. "Cid..." she panted, flopping down in a chair next to him, "you gotta see this like right now..."

"Damn, girl, you scared the crap outta me!" Cid picked up his cigarette, which had fallen dangerously close to the appetizer platter. "What'd you find?"

"Look at this!" Elena whipped out her little computer, popped open the file she'd been sent, and shoved the thing in front of Cid. "I don't believe it either."

Cid slowly set the cigarette down in what he thought was an ashtray, but was actually his beer mug, and squinted at the words on the screen.

[ShinRa Inc. Personnel File #A2096-98]
[Department of Administrative Research]

"That's you, right?" Cid asked, looking up at Elena. "Er, was you..."

"Yeah, the Turks. Keep reading."

Cid did so, and as he did his eyes grew wider and wider.

[Highwind, Cid Aerin Jr., Captain]

"Must have been some kinda field promotion. That's the minimum rank considered for--"

"Shut it, Elena..." Cid fixed his eyes on the next line.

[Awards/Decorations: None]

[Note: Operative displays Mako-enhancement characteristics (i.e. distinctive luminous green eyes, enhanced physical strength, etc.). Conscripted as sentence for crimes against the Company; operative is therefore required to wear a tracking collar until her supervisor can be convinced of her loyalty to the Company.]

"The hell's a tracking collar?" Cid spat.

"Pretty much what it sounds like," Elena began, trying to put this delicately. "It's equipped with a homing device so they can track her wherever she goes...along with a packet of high explosives in case she does something she shouldn't, or she tried to take it off without the key."

Cid ground his teeth quietly as Elena reached over and scrolled the screen down a bit, and he drew a sharp gasp as he saw the ID photo attached to the file. For a moment he thought Shinra had an old photo of him in Junior's file. The eyes were

Shera's, just as Cid had always known they would be someday...but apart from that, the resemblance was uncanny, right down to the piss-off-and-die look Junior had been shooting at whoever had taken this picture. "Elena...is that..."

"Yeah." Elena nodded. "It's Junior. They drafted her as her sentence for some bullshit charges they pinned on her, and she-- Cid, we gotta get her out of there. There's no telling what those assholes could be making her do."

"Goddamnit..." Cid rubbed his eyes and sighed. "We gotta figure out how the hell we're gonna get IN there first."

Yuffie fidgeted around in her chair a bit. "I think maybe I could help you with that."

"No way," Cid replied quickly. "Last time you said you were gonna help us get around here we almost ended up scrapin' you and Elena off the bottom of the damn mountain to get our friggin' Materia back!"

"Fine," Yuffie sniffed. "I guess you just want me to disappear, huh? No problem." She grinned a bit. "Inviz!"

One of the green Materia socketed in Yuffie's cross flashed...and Yuffie vanished.

"What the fuck!?" Cid came out of his chair...reached out to feel the space of empty air where Yuffie had once been...felt something--

"Hey!" Yuffie's voice yelped, and Cid realized in shock and horror exactly where his hand had landed. Something grabbed hold of his arm and threw him onto the floor, and his beer mug seemed to levitate, rising into the air and stopping right over his head, where it tipped over and dumped its contents right in his face. "Hentai!"

Yuffie rematerialized, standing angrily over Cid, holding an empty beer mug on one hand. "Think before you grab next time, dammit!" she spat, sitting back down.

"How the hell was I supposed to know I was grabbing your...uh, your..." Cid turned crimson and sat back up, noticing that the bar had gone silent and that every eye in the place was trained on him. "How'd you do that?"

Yuffie plucked the green Materia out of her cross and tossed it to him. "Illusion Materia! Kickass, huh?"

"Wait a minute..." Vincent frowned in deep thought. "Yuffie, would that spell work on something bigger?"

"I dunno," Yuffie replied. "How big?"

"Vincent, what are you..." Cid stood up and followed Vincent's gaze out the window. "Hey...you think it'd work?"

"It's worth a try, isn't it?" Vincent replied, and Cid grinned widely.

"Shit, we can't be sittin' here scratchin' our butts like this!" He went around the bar, rounding up Tifa, Rude, Barret, and Red XIII. "We got work to do!"

* * *

C.J. yawned as Raven led her into a small room on the top floor of Shinra Tower. "Make yourself comfortable," she said. "The snack bar is downstairs, just follow the signs. Ladies' room is down the hall, turn right, first door on the left. I don't know whose radio that is over there, but go ahead and blast it if it'll keep you awake. Nobody hangs around here after hours except security and Vail, and Vail's down in her little cave--er, lab--so she won't hear it, and you outrank the security grunts so you can tell them where to stick it if they whine. Stuart comes in at six in the morning. Any questions?"

"Nah," C.J. replied, settling into a chair and extracting a book from her bag. "I think I can handle it."

"Lovely, dear. See you tomorrow." Raven waved and walked off, leaving C.J. alone.

The clock on the wall pointed to seven-thirty. This was going to be a long and dull night indeed. C.J. stood up and found herself a decent station, then she settled back into her chair with her book. She never did get to finish it, and she wondered what happened to the big blue chocobo...

"Excuse me," came a soft, very familiar male voice, and C.J. looked up quickly. She was still alone.

"I'm losing it," she mumbled and continued to read.

Then once more: "Um...hello? Is someone--" The voice stopped in mid-sentence, interrupted by a short coughing fit, and continued. "--someone there? Would you mind finding a classical station?"

"What!?" C.J. dropped her book. She had not imagined that. But there wasn't anyone else there. There wasn't anyone in the gas chamber...was there? Only one way to find out. She stood up slowly and crossed the room, walking toward the triple-bolted door set in the far wall.

/It's empty. There's nobody in there./

/They wouldn't lock it if it was empty./

C.J.'s feet froze, and she willed them to move again. They did.

/Raven didn't say there was anyone in there./

/She didn't say there wasn't, either./

There was a small window in the heavy door, much like the one that had been in the door of her cell, and she squinted and peered through it.

The gas chamber was not empty.

The light inside it was dim, but she could see a man strapped into the chair that was the chamber's sole furnishing, save for his left hand which was free...dark, slightly wavy hair that was just long enough to pull back into a short ponytail...neatly trimmed beard...dark slacks, light dress shirt. She couldn't see his eyes, but she knew they were brown, and she let out a loud gasp.

"I guess you're not going to change the station," he sighed, and C.J. fell away from the door biting her lip hard enough to draw blood.

/omigod omigod oh no oh no nonono.../ Once more the six-year-old within attempted to break free, threatening to do so with an ear-shattering scream and a torrent of tears. /Mommy Daddy help someone help please help help/

Author's Notes: *runs whimpering from angry hordes prodding her in the ass with a cattleprod* Awright, awright, sorry this took so damn long...as I said, the end of Chapter 20 was bugging me too much and I couldn't start this till I finished that...once again, Scarlet lives up to her reputation *coughsleazybitchcough*...rest assured, she WILL get hers...well, now we know what one of Yuffie's mystery Materia does (Inviz was used pretty well in at least one other FF game, why not FF7?)...sharp folks will pick up on the fact that the other two are of the Summon variety, and you can count on them being rather impressive ones...and at long last, the Elena/Yuffie friendship thing appears! I kinda picture their friendship as similar to that of Usagi and Rei; they act like they can't stand each other if anyone's watching ^_^...is C.J. going to snap, or is she going to hang in there?...Things aren't looking too hot for poor Reeve. At least his last request was granted, heh...later.