

Final Fantasy VII: Children of Jenova

Chapter 23

Cid sat down on a rock and lit up a cigarette, grumbling to himself about the test run he'd just done on the new and improved cloaking device on the Highwind. At best he figured he could squeeze an hour of invisibility out of the thing. One hour to get inside the Shinra building, save whoever needed saving, and get the hell out before the cleverly concealed airship turned into the world's largest sitting duck. Which meant that they would still have to park the goddamn thing well outside Neomidgar city limits; still, it was better than hoofing it through the mountains the whole way.

/This sucks,/ he thought disgustedly. /This really sucks. Every goddamn time I think I've found the answer to all our problems something has to come along and turn everything on its ass for me./ With a wry smile, he made a small wish that some angry citizens of Neomidgar would decide to revolt and start looting somewhere, or that a sewer pipe running under Shinra Tower would blow (preferably venting directly into Scarlet's office or Vail's lab)...any distraction, no matter how small, would help. On top of everything else, the group would probably have to trickle in one or two at a time to avoid drawing too much attention...more precious time down the crapper, time Reeve probably didn't have.

It was starting to get dark, meaning that Junior would probably be on her watch soon. Cid didn't even want to think about how bad this must be tearing the poor kid up. All the more reason to get in there and get out as fast as possible.

As the sun finally slipped below the horizon, Cid flicked the still-smoldering butt of his cigarette away and stood up. Time to get moving.

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Raven sorely wished C.J. could have picked out a smaller weapon. The monstrosity dubbed the Saturn Glaive had poked a rather large hole in her upholstery that morning, and this time its massive blade was sticking out the window threatening not just to bean unsuspecting pedestrians but to decapitate them as she drove C.J. to work.

"Listen, I thought I should warn you," she began as she rolled up to a red light, "Archer's sharing your watch tonight. There's been some strange stuff going on at night lately, which I have the--ahem--honor of investigating, and we can't very well leave Stuart there after he's been working all day, can we?"

"Great," C.J. replied, staring out the window.

"And as much as I hate to do this...I have to leave him with the controls to your...uh, your collar...in case--"

"In case I do anything stupid, yeah yeah."

Raven glanced over at her passenger as the light changed. "Did you sleep all right today?" She got no reply. "You don't look so good."

"Oh, I'm just swell," C.J. said flatly.

Raven shrugged. "Well, if you say so. C.J., you didn't leave your house all day today. Did you get some food yesterday--"

"Stop with the mommy act, okay?" C.J. spat, and although she didn't see it, Raven recoiled as if she'd been slapped. "I already have one."

"I'm just trying to make this easier for you, okay?" Raven sighed. "Look, I was drafted too. Right after the company built Neomidgar they were pretty short on manpower, and they just started grabbing people to fill up the ranks. I figured I might as well make the best of it and do the best I could at what they wanted me to do, and here I am."

C.J. kept right on staring out the window, giving no indication that she'd heard a word Raven said.

"I'll tell you something. Before your five years are up you're going to have my job. You're too much like I was back then not to."

"I'm nothing like you," C.J. replied, her words hanging in the air between them like a chilly fog.

The rest of the ride was silent.

* * *

/I never did like the Gold Saucer./

Sephiroth Obscura scowled as that thought drifted through his mind. Such a noisy place. Children running around yelling, parents running after them yelling, vendors of cotton candy and balloons yelling over them, imbeciles in chocobo suits offering information...noisy, and idiotic. How much easier it would be to shove his way to the front of the line, grab that infernal sword, and leave. But there was no point in attracting too much attention now. He would get plenty of attention later.

Cloud stood in line in front of him, having shelled out his thousand GP for the two of them to get a chance at pulling the sword from the stone. Between the two of them, the damned thing would surely be in his grasp before his other self could have a chance to get at it.

Word of the Gold Saucer's newest attraction had spread like wildfire, and the line of suckers waiting to give the damn sword a tug wound its way out of Dio's museum, through the Battle Square, and down the stairs outside the arena almost to the transport tube that had brought them there.

Sephiroth Obscura yawned loudly as the urge to start throwing elbows and shortening the line -his- way bubbled up again. A snack vendor in a chocobo suit passed up the line, offering peanuts and ice cream; Cloud dug in his pockets and bought two cones.

"I guess we shoulda ate before we got in line," he shrugged, handing one of the cones back. Obscura took it with a forced smile and murmur of appreciation.

/I have in my possession a weapon of mass destruction,/ Sephiroth Obscura thought grimly, /I have died and been reborn twice. I am practically a god. And here I stand with a bunch of human sheep with someone's ghastly little child screaming in my ear and melted ice cream running down my hand. And I hate strawberry./

He accidentally-on-purpose scooted his left foot back and stepped on that of the screaming child. "Oh dear, I'm so sorry," he said with the same forced smile as the brat started to bawl. Obscura felt a little better after that.

* * *

This was the strangest restaurant Reeve had ever been to. He was sure his waitress was Heidegger in drag, and there were a bunch of guys dressed up as Vikings sitting at the luncheon counter. And there was no menu. "Well, what do you have?" he asked, and the waitress cleared her--his--its throat.

"Well, there's egg and bacon; egg sausage and bacon; egg and Spam..." And here the waitress rattled off a long list of entrees, most of which contained vast amounts of lunch meat. Reeve held up a hand to stop her.

"Um...actually, I'd just like a glass of water, please."

The waitress snorted. "Water's off."

"What!? How the hell can water be off?" He pointed to the Vikings at the counter. "THEY'VE got water!"

"They had reservations. Do you have a reservation?"

Reeve blinked. "Um, no..."

"Then you can't have any water. Right. Spam, egg, tomato, and Spam it is." With that, the waitress turned on her heel and strode away.

With a confused shake of his head, Reeve glanced over at the Vikings, who were spearing bits of meat on their salad forks and roasting them over the flame of one Viking's cigarette lighter. He waited for the waitress to return.

And waited.

And waited some more.

Three hours had passed. The Vikings were still getting fresh glasses of water. He had gotten nothing. No egg. No tomato. No Spam. No water. No nothing. Reeve made a mental note to speak with the manager; the service here was abysmal.

Well, there was one way to get the food to arrive. He'd dined at enough restaurants to know that as soon as you lit up a cigarette, the food would come, in sort of the same way that the waitress would always wait until your mouth was full before asking you if everything was all right. As he drew a cigarette out of its pack and moved to light it with the candle on his table, one of the Vikings glanced over at him.

"Might not be such a good idea, yah?" the Viking suggested.

Reeve ignored him, lit up, and inhaled deeply.

The Viking was right.

The smoke seared his throat like acid and he doubled over, coughing violently, dimly aware that the din of the restaurant was slowly fading away to a soft hiss; in addition, the air was growing hotter and thicker and the light was dying to that of a single weak bulb high above. When Reeve was finally able to open his streaming eyes and look around again, he found himself right back in the gas chamber. /Goddamnit.../ Well, hallucination or not, the restaurant with its dismal service and smart-assed Vikings had been a far sight better than this. He just hoped he wouldn't start raving like a loony while C.J. was watching him. She really didn't need to see that. His stomach gave a loud growl, and he realized sadly that he was very, very hungry; the restaurant hallucination hadn't helped. Visions of chicken pot pie, chocolate covered raisins, and glazed ham danced in his head. Candied yams with marshmallows and pineapple. Hot fudge sundae with whipped cream and a red gummy bear on top. Macaroni and cheese. But he couldn't understand why Spam had come into the vision. He did not like Spam. No sir ree bob. He would not eat green eggs and Spam. He would not eat them in his house, he would not eat them with a--

/Shit!/ Reeve reached up and slapped himself across the face just hard enough to dispel the oncoming fugue. /Got to stay in the real world...not enough oxygen to the brain, that's what's happening...can't be too long now...C.J., I'm so sorry./

He hoped that what he heard then was just a product of his hyperactive imagination, but he feared it wasn't. It was Archer's voice. "Y'know," it said to nobody in particular, "I have this feeling that at, oh, about three in the morning Wondergirl's going to decide to try and get that door open and rescue her widdle sweetheart. No security camera here, nope, good thing I'm gonna be here to see it. Boy, the janitor's gonna be hating life."

* * *

Archer checked his watch impatiently. Ten minutes to seven. He was alone in this drab little room, at least till Wondergirl showed up.

He sat there, rehearsing the spiel he would feed to Heidegger in the morning. "She flipped out, boss. I think all that Mako went to her head and she tried to gut me with that damn spear of hers. I was in grave--" nah, that sounded lame-- "-mortal- danger." Yeah, that was better. Or maybe he would just excuse himself to get a magazine out of his car and oops, push the button on the collar remote instead of his car alarm remote. /Gee, I'm so sorry, they looked SO much alike...ha! Ha! Oh, that's a good one!/ He was still snickering when the door opened to admit Raven and C.J.

"What's so funny?" Raven snapped.

"Oh, nothing...nothing." Archer composed himself as Raven handed over the collar remote. "Had any luck tracking down that hacker?"

"Nah. I think I'll be pulling an all-nighter on this one." Raven sighed. "I've had Heidegger post SOLDIER guys outside every office with a computer terminal in it, and if they see any strange dudes wandering the premises after hours they're authorized to kill on sight."

"Rad," Archer nodded. "Y'know, Stuart looked a little peaked when I came in, like he'd been up all night...you don't think--"

Raven burst out laughing. "Him? No. Hell no. He can't even check his own e-mail without me hanging over his shoulder telling him what to click." She wiped a tear from her eye. "But I'll tell you one thing off the record. I asked for a few extra troops to follow Vail around. I don't think that bitch ever leaves this building. I think she's so worried about her little pet project that she's willing to spill everything she knows to someone if she thinks it'll keep us from taking him out. And she's been acting really weird lately." She noticed the odd look Archer was shooting her and quickly amended, "More so than usual. I think she's finally flipped her lid for good."

"Jeesh. She always did give me the creeps." Archer shook his head. "I guess you better get back to work."

"Yeah, yeah." Raven yawned. "I trust there won't be any trouble here tonight...right, Archer?"

Archer grinned sweetly. "No, of course not!" He turned and gave C.J. His best whipped-puppydog eyes. "Listen, I was a real asshole to you and I'm sorry."

"Oh, you are?" C.J. grumbled, sitting down and opening her book as Raven left. "Look, I was born at night--but not last night. You want something, don't you?"

/Why the hell can't you just buy it you little bimbo--/ "Okay. Tell you what..." He knelt down at C.J.'s feet and tapped his chin with one finger. "Go ahead. Deck me, if it'll make you feel better."

C.J. put her book down in her lap and actually seemed to consider it for a few moments...after which she picked the book up again. "Yeah, right. I hit you and you use that as an excuse to blow me up. Nice try."

/Hmm, I didn't think of that...shit, maybe she -is- some kinda genius./ "Well, okay." He stood back up and took a seat on the other side of the room. "Can I get you anything? Cup of coffee? Candy bar? Crayons?"

"It's not a coloring book, dipstick," C.J. replied.

"Oh." /damnittohell you little.../ "Well, is it any good?"

C.J. sighed. "I don't think you'd understand it. It's got words longer than two syllables in it."

Archer forced himself to smile while, unknown to both him and C.J., Reeve sat in the gas chamber laughing silently.

* * *

The Highwind cruised slowly over the mountains and settled down as close to Neomidgar's outer-most slums as Cid thought safely possible. The trip had taken less than five minutes. Still almost an hour till the cloaking device died.

Rude and Elena went in first, followed about ten minutes later by Cid, Tifa, and Yuffie. For obvious reasons, Red XIII, Vincent, and Barret stayed behind; a guy with a long red cape and a tendency to turn into a rather large winged beast, another with a gun where his right hand should have been, and a big red animal wandering the streets wouldn't exactly be a mundane sight to the locals.

Actually getting to Shinra Tower was easier than any of them could have dreamed; the goddamn bus ran up to the plateau where it sat. Cid sincerely hoped that the rest of Scarlet's security measures were this lax. Sure, they got some funny looks from the other passengers. But none of them really seemed to care. It was as if Scarlet had brainwashed every single citizen of Neomidgar into believing that they were all safe and sound here on their little plateaus and nobody would have the gall to intrude.

Upon reaching the tower, Cid was faced with a difficult decision...how to go about getting IN the building. He had no idea if or how Rude and Elena had done so.

"I've got a really bad case of deja vu," Tifa sighed.

"We ain't got time to take the stairs. We're gonna have to grab an elevator." Cid laughed nervously. "I hate goddamn stairs anyway."

Yuffie just looked at him. "You want we should just barge right in the front with all those SOLDIER guys and shit running around in there?" She craned her neck, staring up at the top of the tower. "What floor's the gas chamber on?"

"Sixty-eighth," Cid replied flatly.

"Oh, gawd."

"And we ain't got time to be hauling our asses up sixty-eight floors' worth of goddamn stairs," Cid appended. "We got about a half-hour left to get in and get back to the Highwind."

"So we go right through the front door?" Tifa queried. "Is that what you're saying?"

"I guess so, yeah." He saw Tifa giving him a funny look. "What?"

"Where's that 'Move out!' you always used to bitch at Cloud for?" she asked.

They stared at each other for a few moments, and then both burst out laughing. "Okay, okay...move out!"

* * *

Two figures in janitor's coveralls strolled through the halls of Shinra Tower's sixty-eighth floor, while two janitors sat on the floor of a locked broom closet in their boxer shorts, hands and feet tied together with heavy-duty garbage bags, a wadded-up handi-wipe tucked into the mouth of each.

The replacement custodians peered into every doorway they passed, pretending to empty trash cans or dust stuff if the SOLDIER standing guard looked at them for too long. Every so often, one of them would peek at a little thing that looked like a pocket organizer.

The little blip representing Junior's tracking collar had not left the room on the sixty-eighth floor since arriving there. Elena hoped she would have enough sense to stay put until help arrived. Right now, she and Rude were working on getting into the cell block where Reno was being held. Two SOLDIER troops, third class judging by the face-hiding helmets they wore, stood on either side of the door leading into the block. Even without being able to see their faces, Elena guessed that they were bored out of their wits.

So, needless to say, they were too shocked to react when two lowly janitors jumped them in the hall. Rude and Elena easily whipped their helmets off, after which they simply brained the stunned SOLDIERS with their mop handles.

"That was too easy," Rude said. "Now where are we gonna put these guys?"

"Toss 'em in one of the cells, I guess," Elena shrugged. "Hey, Rude? You think all these guys are gonna get pissed off about us swiping their clothes?" She dug in one SOLDIER's pocket, retrieved a key card, and swiped it through the lock. The cell block door opened with a hiss, and she and Rude dragged the inert bodies of the grunts through it. Each of them took a

cell, swapped their coveralls for the SOLDIERS' armor (which fit Elena horribly, but it would have to do), and then locked the doors behind them, sealing away two more poor folks in their skivvies.

"How do I look?" Rude asked after emerging from his cell.

"Ridiculous," Elena replied, adjusting her shoulder plates, which were trying to slide down to her elbows. "I'm sure I do too. You watch the door while I get Reno."

"Right." Rude plunked the helmet onto his head and took his place where the real deal had been before...and not a moment too soon. Heidegger was making the nightly rounds.

"Where's your partner?" he asked, glaring at Rude.

"Restroom," Rude replied. Heidegger frowned.

"He didn't check out with me," the fat man said icily.

"I think he's sick," Rude said, trying to sound normal and hoping to God Heidegger wouldn't recognize his voice, and that seemed to be good enough.

"Tell him to go home when he comes back, then." And with that, Heidegger left him alone. "Have a good one."

/Whew./ Rude finally let out the breath he'd been holding. That was way too close.

* * *

The security, or lack thereof, in the Shinra Tower lobby was amazing. A chubby night watchman sat with his feet propped on what was, by day, a receptionist's desk reading a magazine and eating doughnuts. "I don't believe this," Cid said, shaking his head. "Hey. Buddy."

"Huh?" The watchman sat up abruptly, dumping his magazine onto the floor. "Uh...sorry, sir. No visitors allowed in the building after--"

The blade of the Viper Halberd came up over the desk, gently poking the watchman in the chest.

"Visitors-are-always-welcome-sir-have-a-nice-day-sir." The watchman slunk down behind his desk, shivering and babbling.

"That was smooth, Cid. Real smooth," Yuffie sighed.

Cid ignored her. "And you have yourself a nice day too, Tubby." He reached down and plucked the watchman's keycards off his belt. "You don't mind me takin' these, do you?" There was something awfully familiar about the blubbing tub, but Cid couldn't quite place him.

"No, sir."

Cid raised an eyebrow. "You sure?"

"Not at all, sir...I don't need them..."

"Mighty kind of you." Cid patted the watchman on the head and strode toward the elevators. Tifa followed, snickering. Yuffie lingered a moment and peered over the desk.

"Boo," she said before heading off to the elevators as well. "Wow...I didn't think anyone that fat could jump that high..."

The elevator doors shushed closed. It was a full five minutes before the guard realized what had just happened to him...and hit the alarm.

* * *

"Ah, fuck, not again..." Archer groaned, picking up the phone and dialing the front desk as C.J. jumped almost up to the ceiling.

"What's that!?"

"Just our weekly false alarm, probably...okay, Domino. Last time it was the pizza boy. The time before that it was a rat in the air vent. We really appreciate your enthusiasm, but..."

"It's for real this time! Honest!"

"Mmm hmm. Is it a spider? I bet it's a spider. Hang on and I'll come squish him for you, okay?"

"No! Really! I could be wrong, but I think it's Cid Highwind--he just took my keys and he poked me with this big pointy thing and he's in the elevator right now!"

Archer hung up slowly. "Well."

"Well?" C.J. repeated, sitting back down as Archer began to chuckle in a way she really didn't like.

"Well. Looks like I'm not going to have to lie after all." He reached into his pocket and drew out the remote control to C.J.'s collar. "You have been a naughty, naughty little girl. And I am going to enjoy this."

* * *

Elena zipped down the corridor, peeking through the small square windows of the cells. Empty...empty...empty...half-naked SOLDIER...empty... "Dammit! Where the hell did they put him..." She stopped short in front of the third-to-last cell on the right. Someone was curled up on the floor...someone with a crimson ponytail trailing off the back of his head. Elena fumbled her stolen keycard through the slot on the door, and it opened for her. "Reno? Reno!?"

"Muf," Reno said as Elena knelt beside him. She hoisted him up to a somewhat upright position and shook him.

"Come on, Reno, don't do this shit..." She checked the "borrowed" armor she wore and found a Restore Materia slotted in it...a weak one, but it would have to do. It took four Cure spells before Reno finally came around. He blinked, rubbed his eyes, and groaned.

"What's a hot babe like you doing in a place like this?" he mumbled.

Elena opened her mouth to chew him out as usual...then she threw her arms around him and broke down in tears, leaving a very stunned Reno leaning against her.

"Nice armor," he finally managed to say. "You got the whole Amazon thing going there. Very nice."

* * *

"I got it," Cid said, snapping his fingers as alarms began to blare.

"I hope you're referring to how we're going to deal with THIS," Tifa commented.

"Nah. The night watchman. I figured out who the hell he is." Cid chuckled in spite of the circumstances as the elevator screeched to a halt on the fiftieth floor. "Mayor Domino. Well, ex-Mayor, I guess...ah, shit!"

The elevator doors opened, and the three of them found as many very angry-looking SOLDIER troops staring them down.

"Look, guys," Cid began, a hint of annoyance in his voice, "we really don't have time for this shit. Just turn your happy selves around and leave us alone."

The leader drew his massive sword. "Our orders are to kill any intruders." Without further ado, he swung the weapon in a wide arc, barely giving Cid time to parry.

"Have it your way, punk!" Cid barely managed to deflect the slash; he then quickly stepped to the SOLDIER's side and bashed him in the back of the head with the Viper Halberd. Yuffie and Tifa joined in, each of them fighting their very own SOLDIER.

One SOLDIER thrust forward with his sword; Tifa sidestepped the attack, caught the guy's hands, and brought her foot over his shoulder and into the side of his head. Before he could react, she quickly pulled the foot back the way it had come, smashing once more into the SOLDIER's head on the return trip. "Jeez, this guy's a wimp," she muttered, throwing an elbow into his face and watching him stagger backward.

"Brag later, okay?" Yuffie swung her cross at about waist level, leaving a rather painful-looking gash across her SOLDIER's midsection. As he doubled over groaning, Yuffie grabbed a handful of his hair and slammed his face into her knee. "Ooh, that had to hurt!"

"Look, pal, I really don't want to rough you up any more than I have to," Cid sighed, dodging another attack by the leader. "But you are really starting to..." He dodged another slice. "Piss...me...OFF!" The SOLDIER's blade caught him across the arm; painful, yes, but not serious. "That's it, you little son of a bitch, your ass is MINE!"

Having seen Cid go nuclear in battle enough times to know what was about to happen, Yuffie and Tifa wisely got the hell out of the way just as the highly incensed Cid lunged forward, knocked the SOLDIER flat on his ass, and started beating the piss out of him with both ends of his weapon. As he did so, a steady stream of profanity issued forth from his mouth; a large portion of it seemed to refer to the possibility that the SOLDIER's family tree did not branch and that several farm animals were somehow involved in the guy's conception.

"Jeez," Yuffie gasped. "And he got upset about Chibi-Cid saying 'shit!?'"

Cid gave the SOLDIER one last kick in the ribs, spat on his head, and stormed back to the elevator, still mumbling curses under his breath. "Now where were we before we were so RUDELY interrupted..."

* * *

C.J. stared numbly at the remote in Archer's hand. His thumb rested on a large red button; above it were two smaller buttons, red and green ones. Red and green...like the lights she remembered from the stuff they'd put in her head. No...it couldn't be that easy...

"I've been dreaming of this moment ever since you embarrassed me like that in front of all those people in Branford, little girl." Archer's thumb caressed the button on the remote. "You know exactly what's about to happen, don't you? You're imagining what your brains are going to look like splattered all over that wall behind you, I bet." He chuckled coldly as he saw C.J.'s hand tighten around the shaft of the Saturn Glaive. "Oh, go ahead. Give it a try. You'll be dead before you--"

Archer had forgotten one thing about Mako-enhanced humans.

They weren't just stronger.

They were -faster.-

Before he had finished his sentence, C.J.'s arm came around his neck from behind, holding him in a tight headlock. "Now you listen to ME, you son of a bitch," she hissed into his ear. "You go right ahead and hit that button if you want, but come morning the cleaning lady is gonna be scraping you off the walls right along with me." To drive her point home, she tightened her grip on Archer's neck. "Give it here."

"I really don't see what you hope to gain from this," Archer wheezed, but he did as C.J. told him. "Even if you DO get the code right, you're going to be dead as soon as another soul gets wind of this."

"Whatever." C.J. snatched the remote out of Archer's hand, carefully avoiding the big red button and trying to remember the exact sequence of the lights she'd been fed. Red and green, flashing over and over in the same pattern...

C.J. drew a deep breath and punched the small red button...then the green...then green again...then the red.

The collar disengaged with a soft "click."

C.J. pulled it away from her neck, finally remembering to breathe. She snapped it securely around Archer's neck then. "Oh, that's not too tight, is it?" she asked with a sweet smile.

"Just peachy," Archer replied, stepping away. "You are dead meat, bitch."

"I don't think so," C.J. replied, holding her thumb over the large red button. "I'm going to give you to the count of three to get the hell out of my sight. One."

"You wouldn't." Archer edged toward the door anyway, though. "You're not a killer. You're just a scared little kid--"

"Two."

/She wouldn't.../ Archer tried to tell himself that, but the wild look in the kid's eyes would not let him believe it completely. "--and believe me, you are NOT going to get away with this--"

"Two and a half!"

/She's fucking SERIOUS!/ "Holy shit..." Having run out of things to say, Archer turned and ran down the hall as if all the demons of Hell were on his tail.

C.J. tossed the remote into a chair. Now to get Reeve out of the gas chamber...

* * *

"Shit! She's moving!" Elena checked her computer again; sure enough, the little blip was moving down the hall...and doing so very fast.

"Who?" Reno asked, genuinely confused as he followed Rude and Elena to the nearest elevator. "What's going on?"

"Junior! She's heading down this elevator!" Elena reached out and jabbed the "down" button, hoping to stop the elevator and catch the kid before she got into too much trouble.

"Hold it right there, dear."

Elena turned away from the elevator and saw a blue-suited figure in a very short skirt approaching. The elevator dinged and opened, and a very agitated Archer stepped out, looked around, and threw up his hands. "Aw, shit, now what!?"

"Where the hell is C.J.?" Raven snapped at him. "No. Forget it. I'll deal with her later." She snickered softly and glanced at Elena. "Hmm...I think I remember you. You're that little blonde whats-her-name that was always swooning over Tseng, aren't you?"

"I beg your pardon?" Elena huffed. Reno caught her arm.

"Elena, she's trying to get you riled up. Don't listen to her."

"Oh, of course you are!" Raven laughed a bit louder. "He asked you out right before--right before that unfortunate little incident at the Temple of the Ancients, didn't he?"

"How the hell do you know about that?" Elena spat.

"Oh, how -do- I put this, dear..." Raven flashed Elena a sugary-sweet smile. "He had a bit of bad news he wanted to break to you gently. About him..." Raven's smile widened into an evil grin. "And me."

As it had in Junon when little Cid Highwind Junior uttered her first four- letter word, the world seemed to stop moving for exactly three seconds, and in those three seconds, Raven was sure that poor little Elena was going to burst into tears and collapse into a bawling heap on the floor.

It didn't quite work out that way.

"You..." Elena clenched her teeth tightly, and Reno would swear later that he saw puffs of smoke wafting out of her ears. "You..."

"Rude..." Reno gave Rude a little push toward the elevator. "Find Cid and the others. I think things are about to get real ugly here."

"Right." Rude shoved his way past Archer, who still stood there staring at the two women.

"You..." Elena snatched her hand away from Reno and lunged viciously at Raven. "You BITCH!"

"Oh boy..." Reno sighed. "Well, why let her have all the fun..." And with that, he spun around and decked Archer right between the eyes.

"Oh, SHIT." Raven tried to get the hell out of Elena's way, but her feet moved too late and the two women hit the floor; Elena pinned Raven's shoulders to the carpet under her knees and proceeded to pound the beejeezus out of her. Raven squirmed free and kicked blindly; the sharp heel of her shoe caught Elena's cheek. Raven tried in vain to draw her pistols; Elena simply batted them out of her hands, grabbed a handful of Raven's long hair, and threw her into the nearest wall. Raven shook her head violently to clear it, pounced on Elena, and again the two went down to the floor clawing and yowling.

"Damn, Elena," Reno gasped, giving Archer just enough time to catch him in the back of the head with a sai. /Ah shit, not again.../

* * *

C.J. quickly unlatched the three bolts holding the gas chamber door shut. She knew that the gas was still on and hoped she could hold her breath long enough to get Reeve out of there...okay, the bolts were open, why the HELL wasn't the door opening?

"Damn!" C.J. spat, noticing the keycard slot in the door. There were two options: either try to find the right card or blow the goddamn door open. Both options would require her to leave the room. As she thought about that, she became aware of a pair of eyes burning into her back Even before their owner spoke, she knew who they belonged to.

"You. Little. Bitch."

C.J. turned around slowly and saw Scarlet darkening the door to the room. "I do not appreciate this one bit. I was TRYING to get some fucking WORK done tonight, but noooooo, your goddamn daddy and his buddies just HAD to show up and just royally wreck my night." Her eyes went to the collar remote lying in the chair. "I don't know why the hell Archer didn't do this when he had the chance."

She picked up the remote, and C.J. made no move to stop her.

* * *

"I should have finished you off all those years ago when I had the chance," Archer hissed, giving Reno one more kick in the head for good measure. "And I intend to fix that little mistake right now." He rolled Reno over with the toe of his shoe, knelt over him, and raised his sai to strike at Reno's heart...

* * *

"Goodbye, C.J." Scarlet whispered, pressing the large red button on the remote.

Nothing happened.

"What--!?" Scarlet stared at the remote in shock, then she stormed over, grabbed C.J. by the collar, and jerked down, popping the top button off her shirt and exposing her bare neck. "Where the fuck did it go!?"

Now was her chance. C.J. reared back and drove her forehead into Scarlet's nose as hard as she could.

* * *

"Bye, Reno." Archer tensed his hand around the sai, starting to plunge it downward...and a strange beeping noise began to emanate from the collar around his neck. "Wha...oh, shit. Oh, shit! Raven!"

"What!?" Raven shoved Elena off her. "What's your problem?"

"Raven, this thing is beeping!" Archer's eyes were wide with fear. "What's going on?"

"What thing?" Raven spat. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"THIS THING!" Archer pointed angrily at the collar around his neck. "It's beeping!"

"Oh my God..." Raven backed up slowly, then turned and ran down the hall as fast as she could; Elena gave Archer a shove and dragged Reno away in the other direction just as the collar exploded.

* * *

Scarlet stumbled backward, clamping her hand against her bleeding nose. "Oh, I have had it." She stomped back up to C.J. and slapped her across the face as hard as she could; C.J. considered returning the favor, decided she did not have time for this shit, and punched Scarlet right in the mouth.

"Why you little--" With a scream, Scarlet launched herself at C.J., knocking her to the floor. Somehow she got hold of C.J.'s impossibly long ponytail; she whipped it around C.J.'s neck, anchored it with her foot, and pulled as hard as she could.

/I KNEW I shoulda got a haircut.../ C.J. thought as she realized that Scarlet intended to choke her to death with, of all things, her own hair. She had one chance to get out of this...as Scarlet pulled for all she was worth, C.J. reached under the cuff of her pants leg, unsheathed her dagger, and made one quick slice.

Scarlet quite suddenly tumbled backwards, staring dumbly at the three- foot length of blonde hair she held in her hand...hair that was untethered to any human head. She barely had time to utter the words "Oh no," before C.J. grabbed her own hair and slammed her face into the floor once...twice...thrice. C.J. threw Scarlet down one last time, stood up, and brushed herself off. "Where's the keycard, Scarlet?"

"What keycard?"

"What the hell you mean, 'what keycard,' you know goddamn well what keycard I'm talking about!" C.J. pulled her foot back to kick Scarlet in the ribs.

Scarlet caught it, and pulled.

C.J. fell forward, flailing her arms madly in a vain attempt to regain her balance as she fell, and Scarlet planted a knee in her chest, raking at her face with her perfectly manicured, talon-sharp fingernails. C.J. threw her arm up to block the slashes. /If she gets to my eyes I'm history,/ she thought. In desperation, she reached up quickly, closed her fingers around two small metal hoops, and yanked as hard as she could.

Immediately, Scarlet fell away from her, clutching at her ears and screaming like a demon. She staggered to her feet, ricocheted off a couple of chairs, and stumbled out the door.

"Fine, I'll get it myself," C.J. muttered. "Reeve? Can you hear me?" She received no reply, but continued anyway. "I'll be right back, I gotta go get the stupid key...or a bomb...or something. Hang on, okay?"

* * *

"Sixty-eighth floor. Lawnmowers, evening wear, and fine china. Watch your step, please," Cid chirped as the elevator door whizzed open. Yuffie noticed that he seemed to be in a much better mood after he'd whipped the stuffing out of that SOLDIER dude. "Now where's the goddamn gas chamber..."

Tifa opened her mouth to suggest something...and then she saw what was probably the most bizarre sight she'd ever laid eyes on. A wailing figure clad in a low-cut red dress came tearing down the hall. Her face was obscured by blood, and her hands were curled into claws and pressed against her ears; more blood trickled down her neck. "Oh, hi, Scarlet," Tifa said, not quite sure if she was really seeing this.

Scarlet paused to give all three of them poisonous glares before heading into the stairwell. Yuffie turned to follow, but Cid caught her. "Let her go. Looks like someone roughed her up pretty good."

The second elevator opened, and helmeted SOLDIER trotted out of it. "Shit, not another one!" Tifa groaned, spinning around and planting a boot in his gut.

"Oof! Hey! It's me!" The SOLDIER whipped his helmet off. It was, of course, Rude. "Damn, if it's not Reeve zapping me with a stun gun it's Tifa kicking me..."

Cid rolled his eyes. "Shit, Rude, you shoulda said somethin'! Where's Elena?"

"Dunno. I think she's beating Raven up. Reno's okay too."

"That's great news, Rude. Really. Right now all I care about is a) busting Reeve out of that gas chamber and b) finding my kid before any more hell breaks loose around here." Cid checked his watch. "Shit...and we got about ten minutes to do all that and get back to the Highwind."

Rude wiggled his cell phone out of the pocket of his too-small SOLDIER uniform pants. "I'll try to get hold of Elena and tell her to get Reno out of here then. And I think the gas chamber is that way." Rude pointed down the hall, in the direction from whence the bleeding and crying Scarlet had just come.

* * *

C.J. threw open the door to Scarlet's office and looked around quickly, freezing in place as she realized that Heidegger was sitting in the President's chair, typing furiously on Scarlet's terminal. He glanced up quickly, the expression on his face reminiscent of a deer caught in the headlights of a truck, then relaxed when he saw that it was C.J. Who had intruded.

"I take it you're looking for this," he said, handing C.J. a gold keycard. "You may be too late, though."

"What!?" C.J. took the card. "What are you talking...it was you. You're the one who put all this stuff in my head." Heidegger was silent. "Why?"

"Because," he sighed, "Scarlet is insane. Look...the less you know about this, the better. I'm sorry I used you the way I did." He looked around quickly. "Get him out of there. Now."

"Yes sir." C.J. turned slowly and ran back down the hall.

* * *

"We're lost," Yuffie spat as the group passed the same potted plant for the third time. "Aren't we? Someone admit it. We are LOST."

"Shut it." Cid stopped, looked both ways, and continued. "I thought I heard something..." He saw a blue suit and a flash of blonde hair whiz through an intersection about twenty yards ahead. "That way!"

* * *

"Okay, I'm back...just hang on one more minute, okay?" C.J. tried to force her shaking hands to guide the gold keycard into the slot...dropped it...swore...picked it up and tried again. This time it went through, and the door opened with a hiss. C.J. drew a deep breath and held it, and stepped into the chamber. God, it was hot in there! Her eyes stung from the gas that still filled the chamber and her lungs were beginning to complain about the lack of fresh air as she quickly unbuckled the straps that held Reeve in that ghastly metal chair. She half-carried, half-dragged him out, lay him down on the carpet, and shut the door again so that the gas wouldn't follow her out.

"Whew," she finally gasped, letting out the breath she'd been holding. "That was close." She sat down next to Reeve and patted him on the shoulder; then she noticed that the left sleeve of his shirt was stained with blood from the cuff almost to the elbow. "Jeez, what happened?" She unbuttoned the cuff and pulled it back, looking for a wound and finding none. /Oh my God where'd all that blood come from.../ "Hey...hey, wake up. Reeve..." She grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. "Come on, you're scaring me. Wake up."

But he didn't wake up. And, she realized with a cold, crawly sort of horror, he wasn't breathing.

Author's Notes: Well, I hope the wait was worth it. Two cat fights (the Scarlet/CJ fight is probably my favorite fight scene of any of my fics ^_^), numerous other scuffles, and a couple of wild plot twists...Reeve's restaurant hallucination is, in fact, loosely borrowed from Monty Python...show of hands, who thinks Archer finally got what he deserved? heh heh heh...and who guessed the identity of the Shinra leak? I had bets on Raven, Stuart, and Vail; looks like Rarstarr is the only one who hit it right on the head (and he probably didn't even realize it :))...is it too late for Reeve? You're just going to have to keep reading, I'm not gonna tell you. Ja ne. Oh, btw, I never really planned for Domino to appear at all; he just sort of popped in.

--Sailor Solathei

"Ice...snacks...and--fifty gallons of BEER!? What kind of life does she lead, anyway!?" --Shinji Ikari

"Hang on to your drawers and don't piss in 'em!" --Cid Highwind

"A brand new ML to blow up! Wai!" --Zen

"Excuse me, I am a lost little boy. Can you help me?.....well, SCREW YOU TOO!" --Cartman

Happiness is a belt-fed weapon

Sailor Solathei's Cid Highwind shrine (still under very heavy construction)

<http://members.xoom.com/ssolathei/cidshrine.html> and the Cid Highwind Otaku

Ring: <http://members.xoom.com/ssolathei/ring.html>

Sorry it took so long to get this one out. Read my notes at the end for an explanation.