

Final Fantasy VII: Children of Jenova

Chapter 24

"Oh no. Oh no." C.J. choked back a sob. /Stupid Scarlet screwed everything up coming in here stupid fart face barf brain chocobo poop Scarlet I hate her I hate her I hate her.../ There was a short but deep cut on her right cheek, thanks to Scarlet and her claws, and it stung horribly. She ignored it. Gritting her teeth and letting the stream of kiddie-swears rattle on in her head, she pressed her fingers to Reeve's neck, seeking a pulse; it was faint and erratic, but it was there. Good enough. He was alive...but just barely.

With the toe of her shoe she dragged the Saturn Glaive within reach and grasped it tightly; then she laid her free hand on Reeve's shoulder and croaked "Cure Two..." The Materia sparkled and then faded; nothing else of note happened. She cast the spell a second time, and then a third. Still nothing. Her brain processed this information, sifted through the store of first aid knowledge that had been dumped into it, and came up with the only possible solution...a solution that caused the six-year-old within to stop talking trash about Scarlet long enough to exclaim, /Ohmigod, I can't do THAT!/ Already C.J. felt herself blushing all the way to the tips of her ears at the thought of what she was about to do.

/And if I don't do it he's gonna die! Is that what you want?/ she asked of the yammering internal child as she pried Reeve's mouth open, pinched his nose, and took a deep breath. She got no reply, took that as a "no," and did what she had to.

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"C'mon, dude, you pulled five times and it's not going!" Cloud rolled his eyes as the 90-pound weakling immediately in front of him in line grunted and strained in a pathetic attempt to wrest the sword from the stone.

"Get bent!" the runt spat, tightening his skinny fingers around the sword's handle and giving another not-so-mighty tug. "It moved! I felt it!"

"It did not!" Cloud retorted. "Come on, we've been waiting for hours!"

"You waited for nothing! I'm taking this sucker home!"

Sephiroth Obscura sighed, resisted the urge to unsheath the Masamune and skewer the shrimp on it, and stepped quietly over to the little man. He then proceeded to grab the guy by the back of his collar, carry him over to the Weekend Clock, and hang him off the hour hand of same by the back of his collar. "It's all yours," he said to Cloud, returning to his place in line.

Cloud shook his head and sighed. "That wasn't very nice, Zack...but thanks." And with that, Cloud stepped up to the stone, spat on his hands, and tightly closed his fingers around the handle of the silver sword. He took a deep breath, closed his eyes, and yanked as hard as he could.

The sword did not budge in the slightest.

Cloud laughed nervously. "Damn, it's in there good..." He braced himself, adjusted his grip, and gave it another heave. He pulled, tugged, grunted, and swore; tiny beads of sweat began to pop out on his forehead and the rest of his face was beginning to take on an interesting purple hue. "Oh, screw it, I can't even make it wiggle," he finally panted. "How the hell'd this thing GET here to begin with!?"

Sephiroth Obscura frowned. He'd been sure that Cloud was the sword's intended holder; evidently, he had been wrong. "My turn," he said as Cloud stepped aside, panting and wiping his brow.

"Be my guest," Cloud replied.

With one last smirk at the poor chap that dangled by his collar from the hour hand of the Weekend Clock, Sephiroth Obscura strode up to the sword and stone, gripped the sword's handle with his right hand, and gave a nonchalant jerk, expecting the thing to slide right out like a hot knife from a tub of butter.

It didn't.

"What..." He scowled at the sword, gripped it in both hands, and pulled up hard. Not even the slightest jiggle rewarded him. Now thoroughly incensed, he hopped up onto the stone, braced his feet against it, and pulled for all he was worth. "Give it to me!" he hissed at the stone through tightly clenched teeth; a single vein was beginning to stand out on his forehead. "I command you to release that blade!"

"Command all you want, pal," came a voice from the midpoint of the line, "it ain't lettin' go!" This was followed by a few chuckles and three peals of uproarious laughter, all of which ceased the second Obscura cast his caustic eye upon the sources.

He gave one final, mighty tug; his hands slipped and he toppled backwards off the stone onto his posterior. This time nobody dared laugh. In his fury, Obscura drew the Masamune and swung it full force at the stone, hoping to shatter it. Steel struck crystal with a sonorous "clang" and a shower of sparks. The stone was unblemished.

Sephiroth Obscura uttered three words he never thought he would hear himself say.

"I give up!" he spat, throwing up his hands and storming out of the museum. Cloud looked around nervously, aware that every eye in the place was trained directly on him.

"Sorry," he said sheepishly. "Kid's had a rough couple of days. I think he needs a nap." He turned and left as well, leaving a long line of stunned onlookers behind.

"Excuse me," came the small voice of the equally small man hanging at high noon on the Weekend Clock. "If someone's not too busy I'd like to get down from here..."

* * *

Oh God, not that damned restaurant again.

"Do you have a reservation this time?" the waitress chirped. "Can't have any water without a reservation."

Reeve groaned. "No, I do not have a reservation. And I never got my goddamned Spam, egg, tomato, and Spam."

"Oh." The waitress scribbled something on her pad. "Right." She turned in the general direction of the kitchen, drew a deep breath, and screeched, "Hank! Number Two on a shingle and burn it!" Before Reeve could regain his sense of hearing, the waitress was gone again.

He wanted a cigarette very badly. He dug in his pockets and found: a catnip mouse, a bottle of glue, a screwdriver, half a chocolate bar, a pair of fuzzy dice, Cait Sith's megaphone (/Hmm,/ he thought, /I should take this back, he might need it.../), a rubber chocobo, a polka-dotted bow tie, a trombone, three #2 pencils, and a light bulb, but no cigarettes. "Damn..." A thin cloud of smoke wafted past him, smelling of cloves, and he turned and tracked its source to a young blonde woman in a Turk's uniform sitting at the next table over.

"Hi," she said. "The service really sucks here, you know that? I've been waiting three hours for a glass of water."

"You don't get water around here without a reservation," Reeve sighed. "Look, can I get a cigarette off you?"

"Sorry. This was my last one." C.J. shrugged guiltily and put the smoldering butt out. "Can I sit with you?"

"Of course, yeah..." Ever the perfect gentleman, Reeve stood up, pulled out a chair, allowed C.J. to sit, and pushed it back up to the table before taking his seat again. Before he could stop the words from coming out, he found himself saying, "I know what you were going to say to me when I asked you why you wanted to come back. You were going to say you love me, right?" /Aargh! WHY did I say that.../ He expected her to blush, hide under the tablecloth, cry, or all of the above. She just shrugged and smiled.

"Yeah." C.J. scooted her chair over right next to Reeve's and rested her head on his shoulder.

Reeve sweat-dropped and looked around nervously, having noticed that one of the Vikings at the luncheon counter looked suspiciously like Cid in a horned helmet. "Um...C.J...I don't think this is such a good idea."

"Why not?" Oh no. Not the puppydog eyes. "Don't you like me?"

"Uh, sure...of course I like you, but..." /Oh God how to put this without coming off like a complete and total asshole.../

"I'm a grown-up now. It's okay." She snuggled up closer, and Reeve swallowed audibly. "Y'know...you can kiss me if you want to."

"C.J...this...this isn't right, okay?" Gently, he scooted his shoulder out from under C.J.'s head. The hell if it was, he really -did- want to kiss her...God, she was beautiful--/Dammit to Hell, I shouldn't even be THINKING about it!/ "I mean...your outside's grown up, yeah, but not inside...right?" /Oh no, please stop with the puppydog eyes.../ And what beautiful eyes they were...slowly but surely, Reeve was losing himself in the luminous green depths of them; the only thing that kept him from giving in to the maddening urge to kiss her was the repeated reminder to himself that this was C.J., little six-year-old C.J....

...who stood five foot nine and was probably strong enough to throw the portly waitress across the room like a shotput.

"This is wrong," Reeve whispered, as much to himself as to C.J. "I can't..."

And then he felt her lips on his, and as much as it horrified him to admit it, C.J. was a wonderful kisser. Their lips parted just the tiniest bit, and Reeve made a shocked little "mph!" noise as he felt the tip of C.J.'s tongue softly flick against his lower lip just once before it retreated. One of her hands rested gently on his shoulder, the other was...

Pinching his nose!?

/Hey, wait a minute--!!!/

By the time Reeve realized exactly what was happening, it was too late. The gentle touch of a woman's soft lips on his gave way to the unpleasant sensation of a breath of secondhand air being forced into his lungs, and the pain that followed was excruciating. As it had before, the restaurant's constant murmur of conversation slowly faded away, revealing the sounds of the real world (at least, he noted through the murk that still clogged his senses, someone had found a good classical station on the radio for him). He opened his eyes, whimpered softly, and shut them again; the fluorescent lights in the room stabbed into them like lances.

That one tiny sound caught C.J.'s attention, and she sat up quickly. "Reeve? Can you hear me?"

Quite suddenly, Reeve realized that he was lying on his back on the floor, meaning that he was no longer strapped into that ghastly chair. He nodded, tried to draw a breath, and was immediately seized by an uncontrollable fit of coughing. He curled up into a ball, one hand over his mouth, the other clutching weakly at his chest. The air-conditioned room he now lay in felt like the inside of a meat locker compared to the sweltering gas chamber, and he was shivering violently. C.J. Unbuttoned her jacket, pulled it off, and tucked it around his shoulders.

"God, I'm sorry," she whispered, brushing a few damp curls of Reeve's hair out of his eyes. "I woulda got you out of there sooner, but--" Her sentence trailed off into a gasp as she noticed the narrow trickle of blood that had seeped through the fingers of the hand that covered his mouth. "What the hell..." Gingerly, she took Reeve's hand and eased it away from his mouth. The palm was smeared with blood; another thin stream trickled from the corner of his mouth. That was where all the blood on his sleeve had come from. /Oh, yuck!/ the six-year-old voice in C.J.'s head commented.

/Shut up,/ she snapped back at it, extracting a handkerchief from her pocket and gently wiping the blood from Reeve's hand and mouth. "Here, hang on to this," she offered, tucking the cloth into his hand. He took it gratefully and held it to his mouth, still fighting to catch his breath and not having much luck.

Again C.J. grasped the shaft of the Saturn Glaive and laid her hand on Reeve's shoulder to cast the healing spell upon him. She was only able to work the magic twice; her third attempt left her with no magic and a severe headrush. The spells eased the pain slightly, just enough to let Reeve take in a few shallow gulps of air. Even with C.J.'s jacket over him he continued to shiver; his eyes seemed to be trying to focus on some invisible speck floating in midair about three feet in front of them. /He's in shock,/ C.J. thought, stroking Reeve's forehead and murmuring reassuring little words to him. /Got to get him out of here./

As C.J. sat there wondering if she should go get him a cup of water or something, she heard the door open again. Glaive in hand, she leapt to her feet ready to slice and dice whoever dared interfere this time...and then, seeing Reno and Elena come through the door, she relaxed.

If one could call bursting into tears and hugging Reno so tightly that he began to turn blue relaxing.

"Whoa!" Reno staggered backwards and gently pried the girl's arms off him. "Friend of yours, Elena?"

"Reno..." Elena put her arm around C.J.'s shoulders and eased her away from Reno enough to let him breathe comfortably again. "This is Junior."

Reno's jaw fell down about to his knees. "No way."

"Way." Elena took a look at the scratches on C.J.'s face. "Honey, are you okay? Who did that to you?"

C.J. sniffled and wiped her eyes on her sleeve. "Don't worry about me. We gotta get Reeve outta here. He's messed up real bad."

"Okay, honey. Take it easy." Elena patted C.J.'s shoulder and crouched down next to Reeve. "What'd that stuff do to him?"

"I dunno," C.J. said softly. "When I got him out of there he wasn't breathing...now he's all shivering and stuff and he's hacking up blood and I think he's still gonna die--"

"No he isn't," Elena said softly. "He's going to be all right. But we have to get him to the Highwind right now. Reno, how many hours did you log in the choppers back in the old days?"

"Um..." Reno shifted his weight nervously as he and Elena dragged Reeve to his feet. "Two or three. After that little incident with that fountain in Sector 2, Heidegger told me if I ever sat in the pilot's seat of a chopper again he was going to shoot me on sight. You?"

Elena shook her head sadly. "You've got more experience...than...me..." She trailed off, staring at C.J. "Hey."

"Huh?" Reno replied.

"Junior's flown all kinds of stuff...right, Junior?"

"Uh, just airplanes." C.J. fidgeted a bit. "They didn't train me on the choppers."

"Oh, hell, it can't be too different, can it?" Reno laughed. "Her old man can fly anything and so can she. It's in her goddamn DNA."

"Oh gawd," C.J. sighed, but she took off down the hall anyway; Elena and Reno followed, half-carrying, half-dragging Reeve between them.

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"Damn." Rude stopped dead in his tracks to wiggle his ringing cell phone out of the pocket of his snug pants once more. He jabbed the "talk" button and held the phone to his ear as the others stopped behind him. "What's up?"

"Hey, Rude? Tell Cid and the others to get their butts up to the roof and grab a chopper. We gotta get out of here--oof--" There was a short pause as Reno grunted and strained, as if carrying something heavy. "Damn, Reeve, I think you ate a few too many cold chicken legs while you were here. You know dark meat is supposed to be really fattening--"

Barely audible in the background, a weak mumble sounding something like "Eat my shorts, Reno," followed.

"Right...are Reeve and Junior okay?"

"Junior's fine. Reeve's not. We gotta get him to a doctor yesterday. Junior's gonna fly us out of here. I guess we'll meet up with you at the airship."

Rude raised an eyebrow. "Are you sure that's such a good idea, Reno?"

Reno laughed briefly. "Sure I'm sure. See ya."

Rude shook his head and stuffed the phone back into his pocket. "Cid, I hope you know how to fly a helicopter."

"Scuse me?" Cid laughed loudly, almost sending his ever-present cigarette sailing through the air. "The hell you think you're talkin' to? Of course I do! Just point me to it."

Yuffie was already turning an interesting shade of green at the thought of it, but she followed anyway as Rude led the group up to the roof.

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"Damn," C.J. sighed. She knew there would be some sort of lock on the helipad door, and she'd hoped the gold keycard would unlock it. But the lock had no card-swiper thingybob on it. Just a small keyboard.

"Oh, hell." As C.J. stared at the keypad, Elena extracted her little computer from her pocket and went through a few files. "I got a list of passwords here, but I don't know what works where. We're just gonna have to try all of them."

C.J. grunted in assent as Elena started punching keys.

"Hmm...well, the old Scarlet standby first... 'Rufus?' ...nope... 'chocobo flotilla?' ...nope... 'shabon spray--' what the hell is a shabon, anyway!?"

"Beats me," Reno replied. "Did it work?"

"No. 'Star gentle uterus--' God, I don't even want to know--nope."

"Try 'raven bear,'" C.J. piped up.

"What!?" Elena spluttered, but punched it in anyway. "Nope."

"Hmm." C.J. frowned. "I thought that was it. I got some passwords, but..."

"Hey," Reno said. "Remember who we're talking about? Scarlet? Scarlet who never lets her bed get cold? Maybe it's not bear as in big hairy animal but bare as in bare-ass nekk--"

"Okay! Okay! I get the picture! And speaking of pictures, Reno, thank you very much for putting that disgusting one in my head!" Elena typed in the words "raven bare" and the door slid open. "Ugh. Does that mean what I think it means?"

"I think so," Reno replied. "And I think I could have lived happily ever after without knowing that."

"What the hell are you two talking about!?" C.J. spat, heading through the door.

"You really don't want to know," Elena replied. "Pick a chopper. Any chopper."

C.J. trotted up the the nearest helicopter and opened the door. "I don't know about this," she said in a small voice, but she made ready to climb into the pilot's seat anyway. As she did, a voice came from behind her.

"You are all under arrest. Step away from that helicopter and put your hands on your head."

With a sigh, C.J. stepped away from the chopper, still holding the Saturn Glaive. The voice had come from a redheaded woman C.J. recognized as SOLDIER First Class Donna Matrix, who often hung around the door to Scarlet's office; which meant she was probably one vicious bitch. Behind Donna stood four more lower-ranking SOLDIERS; all five of them were brandishing their massive swords, ready to start lopping off heads at a moment's notice.

"We," C.J. began, rolling her eyes, "do not have time for this. We are taking this chopper and we are leaving right now so kindly get the hell out of our faces." Behind her, Elena and Reno were busy hauling Reeve into the chopper. "Don't make me madder than I already am, Donna."

"Is that an order, ma'am?" Donna smirked, twirling her blade.

"That is a warning."

Donna's thin lips curled into a sickly-sweet smile. "Oh. Well, in that case--" With no warning, the SOLDIER charged on C.J., sword swinging; C.J. barely managed to throw the Saturn Glaive in front of her body in time to block the huge blade. Donna's flunkies followed her lead, advancing on Reno and Elena in a similarly unfriendly manner. Again Donna wound up and slashed, this time C.J. did not dodge quickly enough and the tip of her sword hissed across C.J.'s shoulder, leaving in its wake a painful gash.

C.J. staggered backward, watching the sleeve of her shirt slowly turn from white to red. And that was all the crap she was willing to take.

Her world turned red. Fueled by pain, rage, and Mako, C.J. crouched and then launched herself into the air toward Donna. She landed feet-first on the SOLDIER's chest, knocking the wind out of her, and then proceeded to beat the piss out of her with both ends of the Saturn Glaive, much as her father had done to some poor unfortunate SOLDIER earlier.

"I told (wham!) you (wham!) we don't (slash!) have (slash!) time (wham!) for this (slash!) BULLSHIT!!" With one final (wham!) C.J. brought the butt end of the Saturn Glaive down hard on Donna's head, cracking the SOLDIER's helmet and putting her to sleep quite nicely; C.J. could almost hear and see little chocobos "wark"ing as they circled Donna's head. "Nighty night."

"Junior, we could really use a hand here--"

/Shit!/ C.J. turned and saw an unarmed Reno trying to fend off two SOLDIERS and Elena trying to pick them off with her pistol and not having much luck while trying to evade two more. /I wonder what this Materia does.../ C.J. glanced at the red Materia tucked into her weapon and as she did so, words began to flow into her mind and out of her mouth.

"Goddess of darkness, Goddess of the moon, I invoke and conjure thee! Hecate, come forth!"

There was a soft rumble of thunder, and the sky directly over the roof of the Shinra building seemed to crack open. From this crack descended a creature that looked pretty much like a normal woman...well, besides the fact that she had three heads and that she stood some thirty feet tall. One of the heads was that of a young girl; another, that of a woman in her thirties or so; the third, that of an old crone. Hecate's three faces turned up to the sky, toward the moon, and she raised her arms to the pale orb; rays of moonlight swirled around her hands, coalescing into an eerily luminous sphere. Her hands curled into claw-like hooks as the power she drew approached its zenith, and the ball of energy she held exploded into four precisely aimed rays of silver light; each ray struck a SOLDIER in the chest or the back depending on which way they were facing and knocked them to the ground, unconscious and whimpering as if in the clutches of a nightmare from which they could not awaken. And then as suddenly as she had come, Hecate was gone.

Reno found that this small exchange had reduced his vocabulary to a single word.

"Wow." He took a look around, taking in the whimpering and moaning SOLDIERS lying on the rooftop and shook his head. "Wow," he said again.

"Pick your jaw up and let's get out of here," Elena snapped, shoving him into the chopper and climbing in behind him. C.J. hauled herself up into the pilot's seat and surveyed the instruments.

"Okay, let's see if I can get us out of here in one piece," she said with a nervous chuckle and hit the engine start switch.

It turned out that all her worrying had been for naught. The chopper took off as the Tiny Bronco II did; that is, straight up. Once she got used to the stick and the pedals, flying it was a breeze.

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"Looks like we just missed 'em," Cid grumbled, puffing away on a cigarette. "Boy, look at her go!"

Tifa drew a sigh of relief as she watched the chopper presumably containing Reno, Elena, Reeve, and Junior sail smoothly off toward the Highwind. Then she got a look at the peacefully sleeping female SOLDIER and her not-so-peacefully sleeping underlings sprawled about on the rooftop. "We're actually going to pull this off. I'm amazed."

Cid had already pulled himself up into the pilot's seat of a chopper and started the engine. "All aboard!" he called out, and Yuffie, Tifa, and Rude piled into the back. "Hang on to your shorts--"

"And don't piss in 'em," Yuffie and Tifa finished.

"Damn smartasses..." Cid pulled up sharply on the stick, and the chopper lurched off the pad, yawing crazily to the right and dumping Rude into Yuffie's lap. "Goddamn piece of Shinra horseshit, fly your rickety ass straight, dammit!"

The words "operator error" flashed grimly into Tifa's mind as Yuffie shoved Rude off her. Rude, meanwhile, was quietly crossing himself; Yuffie was now hanging on to the back of the pilot's seat wailing "Oh shit we're all gonna DIE..."

"Would someone please..." Cid wrestled with the stick, and the chopper began to move more or less forward, swaying back and forth as if someone had dumped a gallon of Ripple into its gas tank, "shut her the fuck UP!?"

The chopper dipped sharply and finally leveled off; as it did so Cid heard the now-familiar sound of retching in the back, immediately followed by a weak cry of "Aack! My shoes!" from Rude.

"Never mind," Cid said cheerily as he got the helicopter under control at last and pointed it toward the Highwind.

* * *

Heidegger sat behind Scarlet's desk, knowing that what he was about to do would most likely mean death. It didn't matter. Because of Scarlet's gross negligence, two of his Turks and a load of his SOLDIERS were dead. He turned the disk in his hand over and over, wondering if it would even do a bit of good. He inserted it into Scarlet's computer, poked a few keys, and watched as the deadly bytes of the virus thereon made their way into Scarlet's hard drive and from there to the mainframe where they would wreak havoc on the heart and brain of Shinra Incorporated. When the door opened, he knew it would be Scarlet, and he did not care. He had personally gone to Junon after the raid, he had personally inspected the Junon Hydroelectric building, and he knew what Reeve had left hidden in his office. "It's over, Scarlet."

Scarlet, her face a mess of bruises and blood, cackled weakly. "You don't know anything, donkey boy. I'm just getting started." She sat down on her desk, eyeing the progress bar on her terminal with detached amusement. "A virus, huh? You think that's going to do anything?" Calmly she reached down and unplugged the network cable from the back of her computer. "Nice try. But I've got big plans. Too big to let a fat git like you get in the way."

Something in the tone of Scarlet's voice made Heidegger wonder if world domination was all she had on her mind, and he wondered just how far off the deep end she'd gone. And her eyes. There was something very, very wrong there. "I'm not going to be part of this anymore, Scarlet."

Scarlet nodded sagely, sliding off her desk and walking slowly behind the chair in which Heidegger sat; her shadow fell over the desk like the darkness of an eclipsed sun. "Well, you're right on that one. I don't need you anymore. I don't need the Turks. I don't need SOLDIER. Vail has given me everything I need."

"Vail--" Heidegger opened his mouth to expound on this, but the words fled from him as he watched Scarlet's shadow change...just slightly. And by the time he found them again, he was already dead.

With a smile, Scarlet smoothed her dress and gazed fondly at her bloody hand, a hand that sported fingers eight inches long tipped with razor-sharp claws. With some effort, she willed it to return to its normal shape and size, wiped it on the back of her chair, and left the office.

Author's Notes: Sorry! Sorry! I know I took way too long with this. Let me explain. A few days ago some lovely personage shattered the window of my car and stole a few scratched-up CD's; on top of that, I'm just getting over some weird infection that seemed to have no effect on me at all except to make one of the glands in my neck swell up to the size of a large marble. A few days of sleep and a lot of echinacea/goldenseal pills cleared it up quite nicely; I do not trust Western medicine and I will not pay good money to be filled with chemicals that will just make me sicker in the long run.[rant off]...anyway, about the fic...SOLDIER First Class Donna Matrix is, of course, an Aeon Flux cameo. She's one of my favorite characters from that series (even if she DID only appear in one lousy short), second only to Aeon herself...looks like Scarlet got herself a little dose of Jenova cells there, now what exactly does she plan to do with them? Stay tuned.

--Sailor Solathei

"Ice...snacks...and--fifty gallons of BEER!? What kind of life does shelead, 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>