

Final Fantasy VII: Children of Jenova

Chapter 25

The steady stream of profanity issuing forth from the pilot's seat of the chopper had died down to a trickle as Cid more or less got the damn thing under control, but the chopper continued to sway and jerk as it flew. Cid shook his head, blew out smoke, and gazed at the chopper immediately ahead of his. "They musta trained her pretty good on that thing," he mused, watching the chopper flown by his daughter sail smoothly toward the cloaked Highwind, and then launched into an explanation of the differences between flying a regular airplane and flying a chopper; specifically the trickiness of getting the rotor on top and the rotor on the tail to work together to make the damn things fly straight. Rude simply nodded and pretended to understand what the hell Cid was talking about. Actually, he was more concerned about finding a pair of good shoes to replace the ones Yuffie had just hurled on. Halfway through Cid's speech, Tifa decided it was time to shut him down.

"Cid."

"Huh?"

"My husband carries a great big sword to stick into people. I beat the shit out of people with my bare hands. I'm not exactly technically inclined, if you get my drift."

Cid gave a little hurt sniff. "Sorry. I kinda tend to go off on that--"

Tifa grabbed on to what she had come to call the "oh-shit" handle next to the window she sat by as the chopper lurched wildly again. "Have you ever actually flown one of these before, Cid?"

There was a long, uncomfortable pause. "Course I have."

"Are you sure?"

Cid fidgeted a bit in the seat. "I flew a sim once in pilot school."

Three things happened simultaneously in the back of the chopper. Tifa shook her head sadly. Yuffie went into another "we're-all-gonna-die" tantrum. And Rude quickly pulled his feet up off the floor of the chopper.

* * *

"Park it right here," Elena said, and C.J. turned around and looked at her like she'd grown a third eye.

"What!? Where's the air--" As the Highwind's cloaking device began to shut down, the massive form of the ship flickered briefly into view, then faded again. "--ship...whoa! How'd they do that?"

"Get your dad to explain later." Elena snuck a peek out the back window of the chopper as C.J. set it down gently on the grass. "If he doesn't crash first. Looks like there might be something wrong with that chopper."

"Or something wrong with the pilot," Reno offered. "Junior, your dad's never flown a helicopter, has he?"

"I don't think so," C.J. replied, watching the other chopper wobble and sway as it moved toward the airship.

Elena shook her head. "Jeez. Well, if he's made it this far he should be okay." She reached out with one hand, brushing against the hull of the now partly-visible Highwind and seeking an entrance. "Dammit, where is it..."

The moment she spoke those words, the cloaking device gave out entirely, and C.J. pointed silently at the entry hatch.

"Uhm..." Elena looked at C.J., then at Reno (who simply shrugged), then back at C.J. "Thanks...I think. C'mon." C.J. clambered aboard first; Reno and Elena hauled Reeve in behind her. "Hey, Junior? You know if your dad stashes any emergency stuff like food and water and all on here?"

At the mere mention of the word "food," a loud growl issued forth from the stomachs of both Reeve and Reno; the effect was not unlike stereo. "Down, boy," Reno said to his.

"Um, yeah, I think he's got a case of MRE's or something...it's this way." C.J. took off, and the rest followed her into what was once the ship conference room; it had, over the years, been converted into something resembling a galley to be used when the Highwind family decided to go on vacation somewhere. It now boasted a microwave, a small refrigerator, a water cooler, and a ping-pong table where there had once been a stately conference table. C.J. shoved the ping-pong table aside, rummaged through a cupboard, and found a few blankets and a pillow, which she arranged in the middle of the floor. While Reno and Elena did their best to make Reeve comfortable on the floor, C.J. ransacked another cabinet and produced two dark brown plastic pouches. "Most of these things are kinda gross, but these are good...I got one with meatballs and rice and uh...well, it says 'ham slice' but I think it's really Spam..."

"...egg, tomato, and Spam...just wanted a glass of goddamn water..."

C.J. looked down at Reeve, puzzled. "Um...okay..."

"I'll take the Spam." Reno offered, gladly accepting the pouch. He tried to pull it open. Then he tried to rip it open. When that failed, he clamped a corner of the thing in his teeth and worried at it like a puppy chewing up a shoe, complete with head-shake. C.J. laughed, took the packet, and sliced it open with her dagger. "Thanks. I forgot how tough these things were to open." With that, he dumped the contents out on the floor and surveyed them. "Candybar... matches... t.p... spork... woohoo, I got peanut butter in mine...cardboard crackers--gawd, this brings back memories, doesn't it, Elena?...heh, 'oatmeal cookie bar.' Yeah, right. You ever try to eat one of these?" Reno asked, holding the pouch up, and C.J. shook her head. "Looks and tastes like something you'd feed a gerbil...ah! The main course!" Reno triumphantly held up another smaller pouch marked "HAM" and tore into it.

"Dad told me these things have like five thousand calories apiece," C.J. commented, opening the second MRE and emptying the large pouch on the corner of the blanket, sifting through the contents until she found the one containing the meatball-and-rice entree. She tore it open with her teeth and stuck the aforementioned spork in it, then she drew a cup of water from the cooler. "You're supposed to just kind of snack on one all day."

"Screw a bunch of that," Reno said around a mouthful of processed meat. "I'll gladly sit here and eat these things till they make me look like Palmer."

Elena opened her mouth to say something about that, thought better of it, and closed it again. "Didn't they feed you?"

"Nu uh." Reno polished off his Spam slice and tore into the gerbil bar. "And from what Reeve was telling me, I think it was a mixed blessing."

"I never wanna see another chicken leg as long as I live," Reeve muttered as C.J. helped him sit up and handed him the cup of water. Reeve had always been suspicious of those purported "pure spring water from Mount (X)" bottlers who supplied the water for those coolers, and he suspected that in every spring water plant there was a guy out back filling up the cooler bottles with a garden hose. But now he really didn't care. The cool water in the little paper cup C.J. had handed him trickled down his throat and extinguished a great deal of the burning pain there...at least until he got carried away and accidentally inhaled half a mouthful. He spluttered and choked, dropping the half-full cup of water and spilling it onto the floor as his hand reflexively came up to his mouth.

"Damn, boss..." Reno patted Reeve on the back as he coughed and gagged. "You want me to go fill you out a toe tag? Maybe pick a coffin out for you? I saw this cute little oak number with blue velvet lining, it'd go really well with your coloring--"

Reeve glared at Reno, again fighting to regain control of his breathing; he wiped his mouth, spitting blood into C.J.'s handkerchief, and started to say something. Then he paused and looked over at C.J. "Cover your ears," he said, and C.J. did.

The he looked back at Reno. "Blow me, Reno," Reeve said quietly. The two men stared at each other for a moment, and then both burst out laughing. C.J. looked over at Elena, one eyebrow raised.

"What does that mean?" C.J. asked softly.

Elena opened her mouth to say something about that, but two things interrupted her: firstly, the "whump" of a helicopter outside being landed a bit harder than the manufacturer intended and secondly, the galley door being flung open by Barret.

"Everyone okay?" Barret asked, sweeping his gaze over Elena, then Reno, then Reeve, then resting it on the tall woman in the Turk uniform. "The hell...whose big idea was it to bring the goddamn Turk along?"

"Barret." Elena immediately stood up, trying to get herself between Barret and C.J. "Barret, listen to me--"

Barret simply brushed past her, grabbing C.J. by the back of her collar and hauling her up off the floor. "You goddamn Shinra scum, you got a lotta damn nerve...you gimme one good reason why I shouldn't throw your ass right off this ship--"

"Barret!" Elena grabbed hold of Barret's hand and jerked it away from C.J. "What the hell's wrong with you? This is Junior! This is -Cid's daughter!-"

"What--" Barret shook his head, taking another good long look at C.J., who was on the verge of tears. "Elena, you told me Shinra got her. You didn't tell me she was no goddamn Turk!"

Elena rolled her eyes. "And this is exactly WHY I didn't tell you."

Barret ignored her. "Shit, that's even worse!" His gaze pierced C.J., and his words seemed to be encased in ice. "I don't believe this shit. Your daddy's been goin' out of his head tryin' to hunt you down and there you are workin' for Shinra? You forget what those bastards did to Zack?"

"I didn't have a choice!" C.J. spat back at him. "They made me do it! They woulda killed me if I didn't!"

Barret snorted and turned away. "Sounds like you had plenty a' choice to me."

Reeve sat up, glaring at Barret. "Step off her, Barret. She saved my life. And besides, the girl is six years old. How the hell can you expect her to make than kind of choice?"

"She oughta know better," Barret grumbled. "She knows what Shinra is--"

"So you'd rather she end up dead? Give me a break." Reeve shook his head. "So you mean to tell me that if it'd been Marlene falling into that crack in my yard, coming out with a grown-up body, getting caught by Shinra, and given the same choice, you'd expect her to do that?"

"Don't you be draggin' Marlene into this, Reeve," Barret growled. "I ain't gonna hold that against you, 'cause you prob'ly ain't in your right mind right now--"

"Yes or no, Barret?" Barret's silence spoke volumes, and Reeve shook his head in disgust. "You haven't changed a goddamn bit, have you? Take a look down here, Barret. You take a good look at my eyes, because I want to assure you that I'm completely lucid when I say that I owe C.J. my life, and if you know what's good for you, you'll drop the subject. I'm not in a very good mood right now to begin with, for obvious reasons. Don't piss me off any further."

Barret stood a full head taller than Reeve and probably outweighed him by close to a hundred pounds, so normally he wouldn't have been intimidated by a little guy like Reeve, certainly not when said little guy barely had the strength to sit up. But there was something in the tone of Reeve's voice, coupled with some malevolent spark in the smaller man's eyes, that made Barret take an involuntary step backwards and tear his gaze away from Reeve's as he did. "Dropped," he said flatly, turning around and storming out of the galley. "For now."

Reeve sighed and lay down again, shaking his head. "Son of a bitch," he whispered hoarsely, and Reno nodded. "Who does he think he is..." His voice was giving out again, and he coughed weakly and clutched at his chest. "Ahh, shit, that hurts--"

"Easy, boss." Reno patted him on the shoulder. "No need for you to get all worked up about it. Get some rest."

C.J. watched Barret leave, and as soon as she was sure he was out of earshot she burst into tears.

"Shit." Elena wrapped her arm around C.J.'s shoulders and sat her down on the floor again. "Don't cry, honey. He didn't mean that. He couldn't have."

"Yes he did," C.J. sniffled. "He's mad at me. Daddy's probably gonna be mad too when he finds out."

"No he isn't. I got your personnel file. Honey, your daddy already knows they made you work for them, and he's not mad. Okay?" Elena gave C.J. a squeeze. "He's going to be very happy to see you."

* * *

"Shit, shit, shit!" Cid angrily flicked his cigarette out the narrowly cracked window of the chopper as he set it down. "Fuckin' cloaking device already went belly-up, so we gotta move right now." He set the chopper down with a loud thud, wrestled with the door, addressed a few improper nouns to it, and finally opened it. "Everyone out! Move it!"

Cid came out first; Rude came out after him half-dragging a moaning and whining Yuffie out of the seat. Tifa followed behind, shoving Yuffie as well. "Yuffie, we do not have time for this," she said calmly, in the same tone of voice she had once used to explain to Zack that cookies did not belong in the tape player. "Complain all you want after we're on the ship."

Cid didn't bother to wait for them; he simply stormed on board the Highwind just in time to see a very pissed-off looking Barret stomping back toward the bridge from the galley. "Hey! Barret! Where's Junior?"

Barret stopped just long enough to jerk his thumb toward the galley and grumble something about "goddamn Turks" before he started toward the bridge again.

Cid nodded and followed. As much as he wanted to go bursting into the galley and sweep Junior up into his arms, he knew that he needed to get the Highwind the hell away from Neomidgar before he could do anything else. "She okay?"

"Guess she is," Barret replied. "Shinra prob'ly took real good care of her. Bet Elena had to drag her out kickin' and screamin'."

"The hell you mean by that?" Cid asked, then it dawned on him. "Forget it. I know exactly what you meant." He stepped onto the bridge and took his usual position. "And I'm gonna pretend I didn't hear it, least till we get our asses outta here."

"Shit." Barret shook his head as the Highwind began to rise into the air. "Shinra got all kinda brainwashin' shit, Cid. For all you know she coulda run Elena and Reno and Reeve through with that spear o' hers after I left n' not thought twice about--"

"I'm going to pretend I didn't hear that either." Cid's hands tightened on the control stick. "And if you say another word about it, I'm going to smack you upside your head with MY goddamn spear."

"Fine," Barret spat, shut down for the second time that night. "You won't hear nothin else about it...till she turns on us, then you'll hear plenty."

"That's enough, Barret."

The words came from the last source anyone could have expected: Vincent. The tall man strode onto the bridge with Red XIII at his heels. "Junior's fine, Cid. I just checked on her. She's a little shaken up, and very upset--" here he cast a withering glance at Barret-- "but she's fine."

Cid nodded. "What about the others?"

"Surprisingly well." Red XIII did his little dog-shrug thing. "Reno just needs some food and rest, which Junior has already taken care of. Junior has a few minor cuts and scrapes. Reeve's probably the worst off...he's bleeding internally, and I'm willing to bet that he's severely dehydrated; I seriously doubt Scarlet was giving him anything to drink in the gas chamber. He's stable for now, but we need to get all three of them to a doctor." Red sighed softly. "She was asking for you, Cid."

"Okay." Cid nodded again, lighting up another cigarette. "Vincent, once we get outta Neomidgar airspace, I want you to take over the stick again."

"Of course." Vincent replied, and Cid stepped on the proverbial gas, sending the Highwind shooting across the sky.

* * *

Scarlet sighed and sat down in the new chair she'd procured from another office after disposing of both her own chair and the corpse that sat in it. /Long live Scarlet,/ she thought and giggled, a bit hysterically. Yes, she would certainly live long and prosper now. She wondered why in the hell she hadn't had Vail do this before. It was amazing. All of her senses were boosted to an incredible level; she heard Raven's high heels clicking down the hall all the way to her door, could almost hear the fabric of her jacket creasing as she reached up to knock, and before the knock came, Scarlet smiled. "Come in, Raven."

"Wh--" The door opened, and sure enough, Raven was on the other side. "How--forget it. We've got problems."

"No we don't." Scarlet yawned. "I found our leak. You're off the hook. In fact, you just got yourself a promotion. Seems your boss decided he didn't like the way I was running things, so you can replace him."

Raven frowned at her. "That leaves us with one Turk. Archer's dead. C.J.'s gone. I'm going to scramble the fighters to get her back--"

"What you're going to do," Scarlet drawled lazily, "is forget her. We don't need her anymore." She huffed softly. "You need some more manpower? You can have Donna after she wakes up." Scarlet stood up slowly, and it was with no small degree of unease that Raven noticed the blood caked under her fingernails. "Vail and I are going on a little trip."

"Where?" Raven had a sudden and almost overwhelming urge to get away from Scarlet, as far and as fast as possible, and Scarlet somehow picked up on it, coming out of her chair with surprising speed and agility and taking hold of her tie.

"The Gold Saucer," Scarlet replied, yanking on the tie in her hand, which in turn jerked Raven's head down within inches of hers. For a moment, she seemed about to say something more. Instead, she grabbed a handful of Raven's hair, then she violently pressed her mouth to Raven's. "Take care of things till I get back. I'll be damned if I leave Palmer in charge."

* * *

Sephiroth Obscura was bored out of his mind.

/I never did like the Gold Saucer,/ he thought again. For reasons he could not fathom, Cloud seemed to enjoy the hell out of wasting his money on those inane video games in Wonder Square, or zipping around on that idiotic roller coaster shooting at balloons and things that looked like fish, or racing those smelly chocobos.

Ah, there he was. Cloud came back to the hotel room and flopped down on the bed. "You don't know how much fun you're missing, buddy," he said with a smile.

"I'll take your word for it." Obscura smiled again, that same forced smile. "You did get hold of the others, didn't you?"

"They were kinda busy." Cloud yawned and stretched. "I managed to give Shera a call, though. She's gonna tell Cid when he gets home. Bet you can't wait to see C.J."

Obscura chuckled. "I saw her a few days ago." He looked at Cloud, searching for a reaction, and found none. Mind control did take some of the fun out of things, but it was certainly useful.

"Mmm. Anyway, I guess they'll all get here after they get done...doing whatever they're doing...damn, I forgot..." Cloud shook his head as if trying to clear it

/wrong this is wrong what am I doing here how did he get here/

of some cobwebs, then he closed his eyes and sighed. "Man, I'm bushed. 'Night, Zack."

"Hmm." Obscura nodded. "Good night."

Cloud turned off the lamp and fell fast asleep; Sephiroth Obscura sat in his chair, awake, the dim blood-red glow of his eyes like two weak night lights in the darkness.

* * *

"Cid..." Vincent stared out the window of the Highwind, fully expecting a slew of fighter jets to follow the airship all the way from Neomidgar to the ends of the planet, but..."They're not chasing us."

"You're kidding." Cid checked the radar, including that enhanced by the tracker. "I'll be goddamned...wonder why not? Aah, forget it, I got more important things to worry about--take it, Vincent. I'm gonna go see my girl."

Cid didn't even wait for Vincent to take the stick; therefore, the Highwind went into a sharp if brief dive as Cid left the bridge, walking perfectly straight (perhaps accustomed to odd little quirks of air travel like this)while the rest of the poor folks on board staggered and swayed until Vincent wrestled the ship under control again. As he passed Yuffie, who was in her usual perch in the engine room and yelling unkind words at him (punctuated by the occasional "urk" and "blargh") he didn't even look up. All he could see was the door of the galley, and it seemed miles away.

When he finally reached the door and pushed it open with a shaking hand, his eyes flicked over Elena and Reno, leaned against each other, fast asleep...then Reeve, lying asleep on his side in a nest of blankets on the floor...then the blonde woman in the Turk's uniform kneeling at Reeve's side stroking his forehead, who looked up sharply as the door opened. Cid mentally compared the fuzzy little black-and-white photo he'd seen on Elena's computer to the face of this woman...the piss-off-and-die smirk was gone, and there was a deep scratch under her eye, but there was no question about it. "Oh my God..." Cid took hold of the door frame to keep his knees from giving out. "Junior..."

C.J. stared up at him, eyes wide, lip trembling. "Daddy?" she said in a tiny voice. She stood up shakily, carefully stepping over Reeve's legs, and picked her way to the door.

"Oh my God," Cid gasped again, slipping his glove off and laying his hand on C.J.'s cheek. He felt as if he were looking into a mirror, one that reflected his face with Shera's eyes, and he opened his mouth to say so, but all that came out was a soft, choked sob. He threw his arms around her, holding her tight, and she burst into tears.

"I wanna go home," C.J. sobbed against Cid's shoulder, and he stroked the back of her head gently. "I wanna go home. I was so scared, Daddy."

"I know, punkin'," Cid whispered. "We're goin' home right now...you just get some sleep, okay?" He glanced down at Reeve. "He's gonna be okay. Don't worry."

C.J. sniffled. "Tifa used her Full Cure Materia on him and it didn't do anything. Maybe if I'd gotten him outta there last night when I had a chance--"

"He just needs to get some rest, honey." Cid held C.J. tighter. "So do you." He let out a soft chuckle and added, "And that Viper's comin' outta your allowance."

"Huh!?" C.J. looked up quickly, and Cid actually managed to keep a straight face for a full three seconds before he burst out laughing.

"It's okay, punkin." Cid smiled and patted C.J. on the head. "I'm just glad you're okay. I was so worried about you..."

"You're--" C.J. sniffled again. "You're not--mad at me--'cause of--" She plucked at her uniform and looked up sheepishly.

"Honey, how could I be mad at you over that? It wasn't your fault." Cid kissed her forehead and smoothed her hair back. "C'mon. Bugs said you could sleep in his bed again."

C.J. giggled softly, then stopped. "Um...Daddy..." She sighed heavily. "I--I wanna stay in here...in case...y'know..." Her eyes flicked back over her shoulder toward Reeve, and Cid nodded.

"I know." /She's still...oh, man./ "It's okay. We'll be home before you know it, punkin." Cid kissed C.J. on the forehead once more and turned to go back to the bridge, making a mental note to have a serious chat with both Junior and Reeve later.

Author's notes: OKAY! OKAY! DAMN! Here it is already! There were a few RL issues getting in the way of writing this, and I apologize. The good news is, I have a DAMN GOOD reason for getting behind--well, two damn good reasons. I have a little side fic project going--it is, however, a yaoi fic. If you don't know what "yaoi" means, you probably don't want to see this thing. Project #2 is an actual game. With original characters. One of whom is a 58-year-old retired samurai lady who seems to have taken over a good part of my brain. Another is a lady soldier, a bit like Cloud but not quite as messed-up in the head, and she and C.J. like to go out together and blow stuff up a lot. So anyway, this chapter is dedicated to all the people that sent me nasty-grams and prodded me to get off my lazy ass and write.