

## Final Fantasy VII: Children of Jenova

### Chapter 26

C.J. was sitting with her back against the leg of the ping-pong table, half asleep, when she heard a quiet beeping sound coming from inside her pants pocket. /Oh great. I forgot all about that thing./ She reached into the pocket and extracted her forgotten Pocket Mog, only to find that the Mogling on the little screen now had a little halo over its digitized head—the most non-threatening way the toy makers could come up with to indicate that it had died. "Crud," she muttered, dropping it onto the floor with a soft clatter.

Reeve's eyes opened slightly in response to the noise. "What was that?"

"Stupid Pocket Mog died," C.J. said, scooting the thing across the floor to Reeve. "I forgot all about it."

"Well, you sort of had more important things to worry about." Reeve picked up the little plastic Mog-shaped keychain and looked it over. "I was going to get one of these, but the toy stores were always sold out." His voice was soft, but almost normal, and the burning pain in his chest had subsided to a dull ache and a slightly uncomfortable tight feeling; his throat still hurt badly enough to give him second thoughts about trying to eat anything other than ice cream or mashed potatoes, though. Maybe the Full Cure Materia had some sort of residual after-effects and was still slowly doing its magic on his body. "Mind if I play with it?"

"Go ahead. I was gonna take it apart to see how it works, but you can have it." C.J. stood up and rummaged through the pantry in search of a palatable MRE for herself, found a pouch marked "Pork and Rice with BBQ sauce," and drew two cups of water from the cooler. She came back and sat down next to Reeve again, handing him one of the cups. "Besides, I don't think we have a screwdriver that small. I think you have to push that little button on the back to reset it."

"I know exactly how it works," Reeve said with a smile, then took a long drink of water. "Thanks. Anyway, it's a little computer. Kind of cool--about fifteen years ago, a computer with that kind of power was about the size of your average refrigerator. Now it's this big--"he waved the Pocket Mog in the air a bit--"and has this little virtual pet program running in it all the time. You sure you don't want it anymore?"

"Yeah." C.J. nodded, again slicing the nigh-indestructible plastic pouch containing her meal with her little dagger. "I got another one at home." She upended the little packet, spilling its contents onto the floor and picking through them for the smaller packets containing the main course and the spork, both of which she opened with her teeth before digging in. "You oughta eat some of this. You only ate two bites of the one I gave you."

Reeve shook his head, then reconsidered. He /was/ pretty hungry. "What else was in that package?" C.J. shrugged and nodded toward the pile of smaller pouches, condiments, and other assorted things like napkins and matches, and Reeve sat up to pick through it. He found a pouch marked "Strawberries." Strange. It didn't /feel/ like strawberries. For one thing, it was too light. But he tore it open anyway, and then stared in disgust at the small pinkish brick of freeze-dried fruit within. So it /was/ strawberries...sort of. "Oh. Yum."

"They're good. Dad says you're supposed to put water on 'em but I like 'em just like that." C.J. reached over and broke the corner off the brick, popped it in her mouth, and chased it with a drink of water to illustrate. "They're pretty sweet, though."

Warily, Reeve did likewise, breaking off a chunk of desiccated fruit and sticking it in his mouth. Then he followed it with a drink of water, which caused the sweet little chunk to puff up into something that tasted--well, like strawberries, only a bit mushier. Mush was fine. He could swallow mush. "Thanks," he said. "C.J...I meant what I said to Barret. I don't think I'll ever be able to pay you back for saving my butt tonight."

C.J. blushed, as expected, and giggled softly. "It's nothing."

"No it's not." Reeve took one more bite of dried strawberries and washed it down with his whole cup of water. "God, I've got cotton mouth from Hell..." C.J. stood, took the empty cup, and refilled it. "Thanks. I think maybe I'd feel better if you just took that spear or yours and whacked me over the head with the blunt end a few times till I passed out." He and C.J.

shared a chuckle at that. "You're really brave, you know that?" /and really pretty--aack stop that no no no C.J. six years old Cid'd kill me/

"Thanks." C.J. finished off her MRE and chucked the pouch and spork in the trash. "You oughta go back to sleep. Have you got enough blankets and stuff?"

"I'm a little chilly," Reeve replied, finishing off his strawberries and settling back against the pillows. "If it's not too much trouble--"

"It's nothing," C.J. said again, opening the cabinet and producing a soft quilt, which she unfolded and tucked around Reeve's shoulders. "Better?" Reeve nodded and sighed. "'Kay. I think I'm gonna get one of my own." She patted Reeve's shoulder, resting her hand there for perhaps a second or so longer than necessary before standing up again, getting another quilt from the cabinet, and sitting back down against the leg of the ping-pong table. "'Night."

"'Night, C.J." Reeve snuggled under the quilt and sighed. /God...what am I supposed to do about this.../

\* \* \*

"They're going WHERE!?"

Stuart rubbed his eyes and continued to try to wish himself awake. He was already convinced that he was dreaming the phone conversation he was having with Raven. The details went something like: Archer had somehow gotten C.J.'s collar put on him and thusly gotten his head blown off, C.J. had bailed out and taken Reeve and Reno with her, Scarlet wasn't lifting a finger to go after her, Heidegger was more than likely dead, Raven was now in charge of the Peace Preservation department, and Stuart was not only the new leader of the Turks--he /was/ the entire Turks force. And now Raven had just said something about Scarlet and Vail bugging off and heading for--the Gold Saucer. /No more chicken, spinach, and pineapple pizza before bed, Stu,/ he thought. /I am going to wake up any minute now with the worst heartburn I have ever had./

"You heard me." Raven snapped back. "Don't ask me what they're doing there. And Scarlet--Stu, she was acting really, really weird tonight. I mean, she just about freaked /me/ out."

"I don't think I want to hear it," Stuart mumbled. "So what are we supposed to do now? Sit around scratching our heads until everything just magically gets back to normal?"

"I don't know yet." There was the sound of a sigh, and then Raven continued. "Just wanted to let you know what's going on. Go back to sleep."

"Oh, gee. Thanks." Stuart hung up on her. Go back to sleep, indeed. How the hell did she expect him to be able to sleep now?

Screw it.

Stuart crawled out of bed and padded down to his living room, where he plopped down on the sofa and switched on the tube to see if there was anything on worth watching--which, being the ungodly hour it was, there wasn't. So he settled for the next best thing--looking for programming that would bore him enough to put him to sleep. As he surfed through fifty seven channels of nothing to watch, a small framed picture on the coffee table caught his eye. It was of himself, Kain, and Archer; Archer was doing that immature little "bunny ears" thing to him, and Kain had an arm draped over his shoulders--probably more to keep from falling down than anything else.

/Two of the people in that picture are dead,/ Stuart thought numbly, staring at it. /Am I next?/

The thought kept him awake well past sunrise.

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The village was unlike anything C.J. had ever seen. She'd heard about it, from Cloud and from Cid, but the pictures their words had conjured in her mind simply did not do the village justice. There were few buildings, but the ones she saw seemed to be composed entirely of giant spiral seashells, gargantuan versions of the delicate little things she'd gathered on vacations in Costa del Sol. She wanted so badly to go and explore them, to sit inside them and imagine that she was whatever huge mollusk that had once occupied them, but her feet were taking her straight ahead, toward a structure that looked a lot like the shelf-like mushrooms she'd often seen growing on trees.

*/I've never been here,/ she thought as she passed under the mushroom-shaped stones and into a small, narrow cave. /But this is too...real./*

The cave opened on the shore of a crystal-clear little lake, and sitting in the center of the lake was an even bigger shell than the ones she had passed. It was a huge thing, with a few uneven spikes sticking out of it, and a narrow bridge led across the water to its mouth.

C.J.'s feet carried her over the bridge and into the shell.

*/Something terrible happened here,/ she thought. /I don't want to go in here./*

The thought was answered by another, in a voice that was not quite hers, a voice she had never heard...a strangely familiar voice.

*/You're safe, child. There's something you need to see here./*

In the center of the "room" in which C.J. stood, she could see a circular railing enclosing something that looked like a giant brightly colored fish nestled in the waving tentacles of a giant sea anemone. As she approached, the fish seemed to melt away into nothingness, revealing a crystal staircase leading down.

*/Don't make me go down there. I'm scared./*

*/It -is- a place full of bad memories, but they can't hurt you. It's all right./*

And again, C.J.'s feet moved, carrying her down the staircase. Once she reached the bottom, she found herself in the deserted city that lay sleeping there, facing another small lake. Several flat, round stone pillars rose out of the water, leading to an elaborate altar of crystal and gold and silver, but halfway across the stepping stones, her feet stopped.

*/Look down./*

C.J. cast her eyes into the depths of the water. Something deep below the surface sparkled faintly...then, almost as if it sensed her presence and her gaze, flared into a brilliant white light.

*/Come and take it,/ the other voice pleaded, an edge of urgency and even fear creeping into its voice. /Take it, before he does./*

*/I--I can't./ C.J. could feel herself turning red.*

*/C.J.../*

"I can't!" C.J. sat down on the pillar she had lit on and sniffled. "I can't swim."

The other voice grew louder, more insistent--and more familiar. "C.J...hey, C.J....wake up..."

"Huh!?" C.J.'s eyes snapped open, then squinted against the light that stabbed at them, then slowly opened again to see Reno crouching in front of her and shaking her shoulder. "Wha..."

"Wake up, kiddo. You're home."

C.J. shrugged her blanket off and rubbed her eyes as her sleep-fogged brain slowly processed Reno's words. "...home?" Exactly three seconds later, she was up and running for the door.

"Wow," Elena muttered, watching the blue and blonde streak whiz past her. "Zero to sixty in about two seconds. That has to be a land speed record."

"Can't blame her," Reeve chuckled, sitting up slowly and a bit painfully, wincing at the stiffness in his muscles. "She was scared to death."

Elena nodded. "Yeah, I would be too. Oh, before I forget..." She reached into her pocket and drew out something that looked a bit like her own tiny computer, and then handed it to Reeve. "I found this in the Shinra building, but I didn't want to give it to you around C.J..."

Reeve held out his hand to take the little object, opened it, looked it over, pushed a few buttons, and closed it with the closest thing to an evil grin he was physically capable of. "The bitch took the bait."

\* \* \*

Cid had given up trying to keep up with his daughter after less than a block.

She'd almost bowled him over on the way off the Highwind, and with just a quick "Sorry, Daddy!" she was off like a shot, sprinting the full half-mile from the airfield to the house. The kid had been fast before, but apparently her little swim in the Lifestream had made her even more so. And damn...she was already booking it up the sidewalk and rattling the doorknob.

"Why's she--always--gotta--run so damn--fast!?" Cid wheezed as he dragged himself down the street.

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Shera sat bolt upright in bed. Someone was trying to get in the front door; it sounded like the would-be intruder was about to rattle it right off the hinges. Thank heaven for deadbolts.

Then the rattling became pounding and incessant ringing of the doorbell. Someone wanted in very badly.

Shera was getting up and throwing on a robe to go to the garage and pluck one of her shotguns off the rack when the yelling started.

"Mama! Open up! MAMA!"

"--what?" /No...that can't be.../ Shera turned around slowly, and after a few numb seconds she managed to make her feet move and carry her to the front door, which still shook rather violently as it was pounded upon. Trembling fingers opened the deadbolt, then the regular lock, then turned the doorknob.

As soon as that last little impediment was gone, the door flew open under the pounding of fist and the rattling of doorknob to reveal a tall young woman in a Turk's uniform standing on the doorstep, fist raised in mid-pound, eyes wide and sparkling with tears.

Yes, she was tall, all right; just as Shera had known she would be.

Shera opened her mouth to say something, but all that came out was "oof!?" as Junior sprang into the house and latched onto her, bawling like crazy. Roughly one minute later, Cid dragged himself through the door and collapsed against both of them. "Junior, do Daddy a favor, okay?" he wheezed. "Look up here."

C.J. did so, picking her head up off Shera's shoulder, and Cid nodded.

"Okay. I just wanted to see your face one more time before I died." With that, he staggered over to the sofa and flopped weakly onto it. "A glass of water would be nice too."

Shera released C.J., sniffled, and wiped her eyes. "You ran all the way here, didn't you?" she asked of her daughter, and C.J. gave a little sheepish nod in reply. With a sigh, Shera turned her eyes upon Cid. "And you /had/ to try to keep up, didn't you?"

"Yes, Mommy," Cid panted. "Not my fault the kid's faster than a speedin' bullet." He sat up, slowly catching his breath. "The others are takin' Reno and Reeve to the hospital to get checked out. Might be a good idea to get you looked at too, Junior."

"But I'm fine," C.J. protested. "I just had a couple of scratches, and Tifa fixed 'em for me."

"Cid...it's late." Shera yawned softly, as if to illustrate. "She looks perfectly healthy to me. It can wait until tomorrow. Oh--I almost forgot." She straightened her robe, pushed Cid's feet off the sofa, and sat in the spot they had occupied. "Cloud called last night."

"What!?" The rest of Cid's body very nearly followed his feet onto the floor. "Is he okay?"

"I guess so," Shera replied with a small frown. "He called from the Gold Saucer, and he said he had Zack with him--"

"Shit!" Cid rubbed his eyes, and C.J. sat down quickly.

"Zack's okay?" she asked, looking to her parents for an answer, and Cid sighed.

"I don't know, punkin," he said. "Maybe he's okay now. God, I hope he is." He rubbed his eyes and yawned. "Get some sleep, kiddo. We didn't mess with your room...you had a rough day. First thing tomorrow we'll swing by the hospital and see how Reeve's doing, okay?"

C.J. fell victim to the contagious urge to yawn, and did so. "Kay." She kissed Shera's cheek, then Cid's. "Night, Mama. Night, Daddy." With that, she padded off to her room, opened the door, and stopped. "I think I got a problem."

"What's up, punkin?" Cid stood up, wobbling a bit with fatigue, and followed C.J. As soon as he looked through the door to his daughter's room, then looked at his daughter, he knew exactly what the problem was.

C.J.'s bed was a full foot shorter than C.J. was.

"Oh, damn." Cid groaned and shook his head. "I forgot about that..."

\* \* \*

Reeve had thought that after what he had been through the last couple of days, nothing else on God's gray earth could possibly frighten him more than the thought of sitting in Scarlet's gas chamber slowly choking to death.

He was wrong.

Doc Murphy had come into his room, made some nice small talk, and then quick as a flash set up an IV rig complete with a very large needle ready to stick into Reeve's poor vein.

Reeve did not like needles. At all.

In his younger and wilder days, he once decided he was going to get a tattoo. He passed out before the needle came within an inch of his skin, and was the butt of a thousand jokes among his college buddies for months.

"Is that thing really necessary?" he asked in a very small voice, of Doc Murphy, who was finishing the preparation of the IV itself and going to work getting Reeve ready for it.

"I'm afraid so," the doctor replied flatly. "You're severely dehydrated. This is the quickest way to get some water back into

your system." He tore open a small packet containing a little alcohol-soaked pad, with which he proceeded to wipe down the inside of Reeve's elbow. "I'll be gentle, I promise," he added with a grin. "You don't like needles, do you?"

"Gee, how'd you guess?" Reeve grumbled, wincing and turning his head away as far as possible so at least he wouldn't have to watch that big honking needle sink into his flesh.

"Well," the doc began, good-natured as ever, "your pupils are dilated, you're breathing a bit too rapidly, I'm fairly sure you'd be sweating bullets if you weren't so dehydrated, and there's that little note in your medical records about two orderlies having to hold you down to get a blood sample when you and your appendix went your separate ways a few years back." He chuckled a bit. "Look over that way for a minute."

"They actually put that in there--hey!" Reeve cursed himself for falling prey to the oldest and dirtiest doctor trick in the book. Good thing this particular doctor knew what the hell he was doing; he felt just the tiniest pinch as the needle slid into his arm. And now he was going to be stuck looking "over that way" for the rest of the night; he sure as hell didn't want to turn his head back and see the damn thing. If he did, he thought, he would lose it for sure.

The doctor was doing something, taping a little gauze pad over the needle or some such, "How about if I just cover the needle up for you so you won't have to see it? Would you be okay with that?"

"I'd be okay with it on the other side of the hospital," Reeve snapped back, only half in jest. "But I guess I could deal with that." Hmm...he was suddenly beginning to feel...a bit...drowsy.

The doc obliged him, suitably covering up the nasty needle with more tape and gauze, and then even going so far as to (loosely, of course) wrap a bandage around it such that there was nothing visible of the IV save for the little plastic tube running under layers of clean white cloth. "Oh," the doctor chuckled, fiddling with the drip just a bit. "I also took the liberty of slipping a mild sedative into the saline. If that doesn't calm you down, nothing will. And you need the rest as much as you need the fluids."

"Dirty Doctor Trick #2," Reeve mumbled, shutting his eyes. He was asleep before the doc left his room.

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Annie Wright was pleased with herself.

She was back where she belonged...on the bridge of one bad-ass airship. True, her "crew" was composed of engineering geeks and gofers and other assorted dops, but she was whipping them into shape in true Battleaxe Annie style.

And, in true disgruntled former Shinra employee style, instilling in them even more of a dislike of the evil empire than they'd had to begin with.

And, it should also be noted that just before the disgruntled Wratt & Pitney employees decided to take the Blackhawk for a joyride, they helped themselves to a large portion of the various munitions that were stockpiled at the plant.

So, naturally, when the Blackhawk's radar began to pick up the telltale "blip" of a Shinra chopper, and when further scans confirmed that said chopper was not equipped with a cloaking pod, Annie and her crew decided it was time to...play.

\* \* \*

"Can't this thing go any faster?" Scarlet snapped, reaching up to smack the chopper pilot on the back of the head.

"He's not going anywhere." Vail reclined in her seat, watching the ground and then the sea slip under the chopper as it flew toward the mainland. "He wants to wait for the others."

"How do you know that?" Scarlet was currently feeling as if she had just drunk ten pots of coffee; her feet seemed to want to crawl out of her ears. Vail just turned her gaze back toward Scarlet and sighed.

/She's not taking it well,/ Vail thought darkly. /Too much, too soon. Should have spaced the treatments out a bit more...too late for that now./ "I know. He's not going anywhere yet."

"Maybe you should have called him," Scarlet mumbled, for once completely without sarcasm. "God, how can you stand it...all this buzzing and whirring in my head..."

Vail looked back out the window...then her eyes went wide in what was, for Vail, the closest thing to abject terror possible. "It's not in your head."

"What!?" Scarlet pushed Vail out of the way and pressed her face to the window to see the stolen airship descending from a bank of clouds. At the same time, a voice buzzed out over the chopper's radio...

"Attention Shinra assholes. You are in unauthorized airspace. Turn your happy butts around immediately or put your heads between your knees and kiss them goodbye."

"What. The. Fuck..." Scarlet's jaw dropped. "Ignore it. It doesn't have any weapons--"

Just as those words left Scarlet's mouth, the airship spat a decent-sized missile in the chopper's general direction; it detonated just close enough to the chopper to throw the pilot temporarily off kilter, and with it the chopper itself.

"That was a warning shot, Shinra. The next missile I fire is not going to go across your nose. It is going to go UP YOUR ASS."

"Shit!" Scarlet held on for dear life, hanging over the pilot's seat and clutching handfuls of the pilot's hair. The pilot whimpered and held on to the stick. Vail just held on to the "oh-shit" handles. "Just GO!" Scarlet screeched at the poor pilot, and God help him, he did.

Well, he tried to.

The Blackhawk spat out another missile...this time, it was a Hellfire heat-seeker. Scarlet herself had designed this missile, and it was perfect. It sailed through the air, inexorably tracking the chopper no matter how much it tried to evade or flee.

Scarlet looked at Vail.

Vail looked at Scarlet.

"Oh, SHIT," they said in unison, and later, when Scarlet and Vail picked themselves up, dusted themselves off, and simply walked (okay, limped) away from a helicopter wreck that completely obliterated the normal human being that had been flying the thing, Scarlet would find reason to chuckle. Finally, something had happened that incited Vail to swear.

\* \* \*

C.J. ended up sprawled on a sleeping bag on the floor of her room. This time, no dreams of seashell cities plagued her. She was home, and she was safe, and that was all that mattered.

She awoke just before dawn, rolled over, and yawned. She was home. Now things would get back to normal. She would take the Baby Bronco for a spin after school--school!?

The little plastic Mog alarm clock read "7:45." /Oh, crap! I'm gonna be late.../

Quietly but very quickly, she jumped up, made herself presentable, grabbed her books, and slipped out of the house...

\* \* \*

While Rude and Elena stayed at the hospital keeping vigil over Reno (who vehemently insisted he didn't need to be there and ended up getting a saline-and-sedative cocktail of his own)and Reeve, the others stayed in the Shanghai Inn.

And sometime around elevenish the next morning, they were rudely awakened by a frantic Cid.

Junior was missing.

The Turks had not seen her at the hospital.

She had not come to the inn.

And, of course, Barret naturally assumed she'd gone running back to Shinra. And in usual Barret fashion, he let the others know what was on his mind. Loudly.

"I TOLD y'all we couldn't trust her no more," he spat, looking rather pleased with himself. "She's prob'ly halfway back to Neomidgar by now wit' a full report on all of us!"

Red XIII just rolled his eye. "I doubt that seriously."

Cid shot Barret some sort of look, ignored him, and shook his head. "All I know is, I woke up and she wasn't there. Nobody's seen her?"

"Did you check out back?" Tifa offered. "Maybe she went flying. She probably missed her plane."

"Her plane's still there." Cid lit up a cigarette and began to pace around. "Everyone split up. I am not letting that kid outta my sight again till she's collecting her pension after this week."

\* \* \*

"Shit." Scarlet slapped at the smoldering ruins of her dress, while Vail did likewise with her lab coat. They had both been injured, badly, but the wounds had healed almost within minutes. Their pilot had not been as fortunate. What was left of him was probably roasted medium well in the flaming wreck of the chopper. There was much to be said for a large amount of Jenova cells in the blood. "Now what?"

As has been mentioned, their chopper was now a gently smoldering lump of twisted metal. Apparently, the pilot had had some semblance of skill; he'd managed to twist around right at the last minute, so that the missile took out the tail rotor instead of more vital areas. Even so, the thing went down spectacularly, right on the beach a bit south of Cosmo Canyon.

Vail looked around a bit and scowled. No roads, hence, no passing vehicles to commandeer. "We walk."

Scarlet sighed. "You think he'll still be there?" There was a buzzing, now definitely in her head, that every so often managed to almost form itself into a coherent

/xxxreunionxxx/

idea, but as soon as it did, it always reverted to the same incessant mental static. "The little shit better be. I'm not hoofing it all the way to goddamn Corel for nothing."

Vail just started walking. "The longer we stand here," she snapped, "the less likely it is he'll be there. Get moving."

\* \* \*

Vincent did not find C.J. at the library. Tifa did not find her at the mall. Red XIII did not find her at the arcade, but that may have been due to the fact that he was escorted out of same very quickly by a large man who rudely pointed at the "No Pets" sign before shooing him out, despite all of Red's protests. And Barret did not find her at the weapons store. Cid went home to wait, just in case she decided to come home.

Just when Cid was about to proceed past "frantic" to "really pissed off," the front door opened...and in came a tearful C.J.

"Junior!" Cid swept her into a hug, and she burst into tears. "Where the hell did you--"

"Nobody likes me anymore, Daddy," C.J. sniffled, and then began to bawl.

"What are you talkin' about, punkin?" Cid reached out to brush her tears away with the end of his scarf. "Who doesn't like you?"

"Everyone at school." She sniffled again, and then let out a loud sob. "They're all scared of me."

Cid drew a heavy sigh as Shera came in to see what had happened. So that was where she'd been...she'd gone back to school. "Honey, what the hell'd you do that for? You shoulda waited till we could talk to the teacher--"

"I'm not going back."

"Besides, you need a couple days--what'd you say?" Cid raised an eyebrow. "Sure you are. Just--"

"Cid..." Shera laid a hand on C.J.'s shoulder. "Junior, why don't you go up to the hospital and check on Reeve?"

"Kay." C.J. wiped her eyes. "Can I get him some flowers?"

"Sure," Shera replied. "Let me give you some money--"

"I still got some." What C.J. was not telling her parents was that "some" translated roughly to "in the neighborhood of ten grand." She gave both of her parents little pecks on the cheek and walked out the door.

"Okay, Shera." Cid sat down on the sofa and lit up. "What's that all about?"

"Cid..." Shera sat down beside him and sighed. "I don't think it's a good idea to send Junior back to school...like that."

"Why not?" Cid scowled. "You ain't seriously considerin' pulling her outta school, are you?"

"We -have- talked about it before. We decided that there weren't enough good reasons to do it until she was ten or eleven. I consider this a very good reason. How do you think she must have felt to go into her classroom and find all the other kids, all her friends, scared of her? Do you think it's going to get any better?"

"Okay, okay." Cid rubbed his eyes. "She can stay out till we find a way to get her back to normal."

"And what if we don't, Cid?"

Cid ground his teeth together for just a second. "We will." He stood up and headed for the door. "I'm gonna ask Doc Murphy to take a look at her and see if there's anything they can do."

\* \* \*

Cid would find his daughter at the hospital, just about to enter Reeve's room with a single pink rosebud in a vase and a small Mog-shaped balloon on a stick. "Hey, kiddo."

"Hey, Daddy." C.J. held up the rose and balloon for Cid's approval. "You think he'll like these?"

Cid nodded. "Yeah, he'll like 'em. Listen...I wanna have Doc Murphy take a look at you first...y'know, just make sure everything's okay."

C.J. pouted and sighed. "He's not gonna give me a shot, is he?"

"No, honey, he just wants to look. Tell you what." He plucked the simple gifts out of C.J.'s hands and nodded toward the closed door of Reeve's room. "I'll drop these off for you if you go up and let the doc check you out. Okay?"

C.J. huffed. "I feel fine..." Then, with her usual little sigh, she replied, "Yes, sir."

"Good girl." Cid gave her a little kiss on the forehead. "Then you can come say hi to Reeve when you're done, okay?"

"Kay." With that, C.J. shuffled back down the hall, and Cid rapped lightly on the closed door before cracking it open.

"Any survivors in here?" he quipped, peeking through it.

"Nope," Reeve replied with a yawn. "Just us zombies. Come on in."

Cid did so with a chuckle. "Oh, Junior got these for you. I've got Doc Murphy taking a look at her right now," he said, setting the rose vase down on a table and sticking the balloon in it. "How you holding up?"

"I'm okay." Reeve thought about it, then added, "actually, that's not entirely true. I feel like shit. This thing--" here he indicated the IV (whose contents were now sedative-free) setup by his bed-- "is not helping my state of mind."

"Ugh...I see your point." Cid sat down in a chair, reached for a cigarette, remembered he was in an establishment where smokers were probably chased out at gunpoint, and grumbled. "You're one lucky dude, you know that?"

Reeve nodded. "Yeah. I don't even want to think about what might have happened if C.J. hadn't hauled my butt out of there."

"Yeah..." Cid fidgeted in his chair a bit. "Listen, Reeve...I need you to do me a favor, okay?"

"Sure," Reeve replied, although he was sure he wasn't going to like the favor Cid was about to ask.

Cid sighed and opened his mouth, coughing as if searching for the right words. "Remember who she is, okay?"

"I don't follow you," Reeve said, although he was pretty sure he did, and Cid gave him a very serious, almost dire look.

"Don't encourage her." The words were spoken under the guise of a request for a favor, but they carried the weight of a threat.

Reeve just sat (or rather, lay) there, letting the full meaning of Cid's words sink in. "Sure," he replied, hoping Cid would not catch the unspoken /I don't know if I can do that/ hidden just below the word.

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Author's Notes: \*pantpantpantpant\* Okay. Here it is. I know, it's been a while. Sue me. Anyway--how about that Blackhawk? ^\_^ Isn't it nice that Annie is getting to have some fun in her twilight years? And I'm already getting requests for a) Reeve/ C.J. lemons and b)teasers for the "secret project" I have set for when CoJ is done. The second is no longer quite so secret: Final Genesis Evangelion will begin production immediately after the epilogue of CoJ is penned, mainly because there is a lot of shit in it that in order to get straight, I MUST have all the CoJ ending stuff down. FGE is one huge CoJ spoiler, and therefore I can't dole out even the smallest teaser yet. Reeve/C.J. lemons will be forthcoming--maybe...speaking of C.J. hentai, some unlovely person had (I stress the past tense) a site with several pictures of that very subject, along with some H art from other peoples' FF7 fanfics. Let me be the first to say that I DON'T MIND if you do that shit, but please for god's sake have the common decency to ASK ME FIRST. The site seems to have gone baibai, thanks to some nasty comments from others.