

## Final Fantasy VII: Children of Jenova

### Chapter 8

The Wratt & Pitney plant manager's office had two windows; one that offered a lovely view of the countryside and the hangars where experimental aircraft were kept, and one that allowed said manager to observe what was going on in the plant. Said manager, at that point, happened to be a chubby little man in a beige suit that was about four sizes too tight, with pants that were about two inches too short, and with several grease stains on his tie from the double cheeseburger he was stuffing into his fat little face. Hmph. Work, work, work. Never time for a decent meal anymore.

The phone rang, and Palmer was so surprised he dropped his burger right onto the floor. He looked around quickly to make sure nobody was watching, then he picked up the burger, plucked a few bits of carpet fuzz off, and resumed eating. Then he picked up the phone. "Shinra Aerospace," he said around a mouthful of almost pure cholesterol.

"What the HELL is going on in there, Palmer?" Scarlet screeched, and Palmer had to hold the phone about a foot away from his ear to avoid permanent hearing loss.

"Hey-hey, Scarlet! We've almost got that passenger airship ready to go, all we need to do is run some test flights--"

"Scrap it. I want fighter jets, not fucking flying buses!" Scarlet paused. "And if you say 'Hey-hey' one more time I'm going to reach through this phone and rip your nose off!"

Palmer spluttered, dribbling a few particles of bun down his tie. "But Scarlet--"

"I told you when we took over that damn plant I wanted you to start cranking out fighters for me. How close are we to having an operational squadron?"

"Well, I suppose within a week we can have some prototypes flying, and some of our older jets are still operational..."

"Good enough, I guess. And get RID of that airship. We've still got more than enough Gelnikas to handle all the cargo and troop-carrying crap. I don't need some huge hunk of scrap metal taking up valuable space on my airstrips. Got it?"

Palmer sighed, but unlike Heidegger he lacked the backbone to argue with the new President. "Got it." He hung up, then picked up the intercom. "All right, I want everyone that's not working on the fighter aircraft to get your hacksaws and crowbars and start taking that airship apart!"

"What!?" came several shouts from the plant floor.

"Look, fatass, we've been working on this for five years!" came another.

"If you have a problem with that, feel free to come to my office and submit your resignation notices." Palmer yawned, not realizing that those words had just sealed his fate. "Get to work, now." Boy, he was tired. Ordering folks around all day and night sure took a lot out of a guy. Tucking away the last bite of his cheeseburger, he sat down and propped his feet up on the desk and promptly began to snore.

The next thing he knew, several hours later judging by the sunlight that now streamed through the window, there was a rather loud whirring noise emanating from the hangar where the airship was being stored. Palmer jumped out of his chair and went straight to the window that overlooked the interior of the plant, and what he saw turned his bowels to water.

Spray painted on the floor of the plant, in big red letters, were the words "TAKE THIS JOB AND SHOVE IT, LARDASS."

"Oh dear." Palmer dashed to the other window just in time to see the experimental airship sailing off into the morning sky. Shoved under his door were numerous leaves of paper. Resignation letters from every single worker in the plant. "Oh no." Palmer sat down heavily and began to blubber. "What am I gonna do...I'm gonna lie, that's what I'm gonna do..." He picked up the phone and dialed Scarlet's number. "Hey-h--hi, Scarlet! The airship's all gone!"

"Damn, that was fast." Scarlet sounded mildly amused. "What about my fighters?"

D'oh! He'd forgotten that little detail..."Well, I sent everyone home. They worked so hard getting the airship torn down--"

"Forget it. Just have my fighters flying by the end of the week." And she hung up.

Palmer put the phone down and groaned. He was dead. Absolutely dead. He opened the door of his office and looked down into the plant. "Hey! Anyone here?" Silence. "Oh, great." He bumbled down the stairs that led into the main plant and looked around sadly. "This is bad. Really bad." He made his way through the plant, stopping every so often to "tsk" or shake his head at the abandoned workstations. Soon, he stood outside the plant, staring at the empty hangar that had once held the Wratt & Pitney airship and sobbing. Just then, his cell phone rang. "Hello?" he whimpered. The sound of a truck engine starting not too far away gave him a momentary burst of hope, but that was soon dashed to bits when he found out who was on the other end of the phone.

"PALMER!!" Scarlet screamed. "What the HELL just flew past my window?"

"Um...I don't know." The truck seemed to be coming closer, and Palmer prepared to wave it down.

"Well, I'll tell you. It looked a lot like an airship. In fact, it looked a LOT like that airship you just told me your flunkies had torn apart! Care to tell me what the HELL is going on?"

Palmer opened his mouth to answer, but two things happened that prevented it. First, he ran out around the corner of the building to try to catch the truck's attention. Second, the truck made a sharp turn, right into his path...

As he bounced off the truck's front bumper with a resounding thud, Scarlet heard two words wailed through the phone.

"Not again!"

\* \* \*

Cid let out a grunt as he realized that someone was shaking him out of his well-earned sleep. "Wha?"

"Morning, Daddy." Junior was already up, confirming one of his worst fears: his daughter was a morning person. Damn, she definitely didn't get that from him. "Uncle Cloud just called. He needs you to take Zack to the doctor again."

"Huh?" Cid sat up groggily and felt on the nightstand for his cigarettes; Junior found them and slipped them into his hand. "Thanks, kiddo. What for?"

Junior shrugged. "Dunno. He said that doctor called real late last night and told him to." She sniffled. "There's somethin' wrong with Zack, isn't there?"

"Aww, come here." Cid held out his arms to Junior and gave her a big hug. "Don't you worry about Zack. Would you feel better if you got to go with him?"

"Yes sir." Junior nodded. "Uncle Cloud sounded real worried."

"Okay. Go get your stuff ready." He let Junior go and she padded off to her room as Shera stirred beside him.

"What was that all about?" she asked as Cid got up and started dressing. "Is something wrong with Zack?"

Cid lit up a cigarette. "I hope not, but last night they had Doc Cooper do some blood work on him to check for Jenova cells...if he called 'em that late at night I don't imagine he had good news."

"Oh, no." Shera bit her lip. "That poor boy."

Cid nodded and sighed as he pulled his boots on. "Maybe they'll figure out some way of gettin' rid of it if he does have 'em. Goddamn, though...that's just plain evil...bad enough that Cloud had to go through that shit. Zack's just a little kid." He stood up and threw on his shirt and jacket. "I'm gonna take Junior with me. She's worried sick about Zack."

"That's fine. The school's going to be closed down for a while anyway. I'd rather she had something to do besides shoot pop cans off the fence with that slingshot of hers." Shera looked thoughtful for a bit. "Tell me something, Cid."

"Sure."

"Where exactly did those lightning spells that killed some of the monsters at the school come from?"

Cid shifted his weight from foot to foot a couple of times, and Shera frowned. "Well..."

"Never mind, I already know." Shera sighed. "Cid, promise me you won't let her get into any more of that business."

"But--" Cid started to argue, but the look Shera was shooting at him could have melted steel at a hundred yards. "Okay, okay. I promise."

Satisfied with that, Shera smiled and went back to sleep.

"Daddy?"

Cid turned around and saw Junior standing in the hallway, ready to go. "What's up, punkin?"

"What's Jenova?"

"Well...I don't know how exactly to put it." Cid puffed on his cigarette and sighed. "It's kinda like a germ, I guess, except it makes folks go sick in the head."

"Like Vicks?"

"Sort of." Cid bent down and picked Junior up and gave her a hug. "We're not gonna let that happen to Zack, though. I promise."

Junior craned her neck around, peering over Cid's shoulder, and she sighed in relief. "Good, you didn't have your fingers crossed that time."

"Huh?"

Junior blinked. "You didn't have your fingers crossed like you did when you promised Mama you weren't gonna let me fight anymore," she blurted. Shera stirred and grunted, and Cid flinched.

\* \* \*

Cloud was not looking forward to taking Zack back to the doctor. He already knew that the tests had come up positive; Doc Cooper's late-night phone call had told him all he needed to know in that department even though the doctor hadn't said anything one way or the other over the phone. "Hey, buddy. Wake up, We gotta go see Doc Cooper again."

Zack whimpered and pulled the covers tighter around his head. "I don't feel good, Dad."

"What's wrong?" Cloud reached out and gently pulled the covers back, and he gasped in shock as he looked at his son. They had put a six-year-old boy to bed the night before.

The boy that lay shivering under the blankets now looked about eight or so, about Junior's height, and his brown eyes glowed a dull rust color. "Dad?" he whispered.

"Yeah." Cloud got himself under control. "What's up?"

"My p.j.'s shrunk or something. Lookit this, one of the buttons popped off." Zack held up a small plastic disc in one shaking hand. "This stinks. I don't feel good and my p.j.'s are too small. How'd they shrink so fast?"

"I dunno. Let me check the rest of your clothes. Maybe some moogles got in here and messed with 'em." Cloud calmly opened a dresser drawer, took out a pair of pants, and pretended to study them intently. "Yep. They all shrunk. I think the moogles are playin' a joke on you. We'll see if Junior has something you can borrow that's not pink, and I'll get Cait Sith to rough up the moogles and make 'em fix this mess," Cloud said calmly, and Zack snickered at the thought of a horde of moogles sneaking into his room and shrinking all of his clothes. "Let me go call Uncle Cid again and see. You just hang in there, okay?"

"Kay."

On the way out of Zack's room, Cloud nearly collided with Tifa. "What's going on?" she asked. "Is he ready to go yet?"

"I think you better see for yourself," Cloud replied. "Just don't freak out. I don't want him to get upset," he added in a whisper.

Tifa frowned and stepped into Zack's room. A few minutes later she came out, white as a ghost. "What happened!? Cloud, what's wrong with him?"

Cloud shook his head and took Tifa into his arms. "I don't know. I just hope Doc Cooper can figure out a way to stop it."

\* \* \*

Cid was on the way out the door when the phone rang again. "Look, whoever this is, I'm in a hurry."

"Cid, it's Cloud. Listen, I have kind of a strange request. Can you bring some of Junior's clothes with you? Preferably something that isn't pink?"

"What the hell for?"

"You'll see why when you get here."

"Cloud, what the hell you need Junior's clothes for? What happened?"

There was a short silence. "Something happened to Zack. He--well, he grew."

"Yeah, kids do that. Guess it's time for a shoppin' trip--"

"You don't get it! He REALLY grew! Cid, he put on about two or three years overnight!"

Cid's jaw dropped, and his cigarette plummeted to the floor. Junior retrieved it and handed it back to him. "What the--how?" He paused. "Oh, Lord."

"Yeah. It freaked me and Tifa out too." Cloud sighed. "I can't handle this, Cid."

"Hang in there, Spike. We'll figure something out." Cid hung up and shook his head. "Hey, Junior?"

"Sir?"

"Do me a favor, okay? Go get a T-shirt and some pants out of your dresser."

"Kay." Junior disappeared into her room and came back out a few minutes later with a blue Snow Racer T-shirt and a pair of sweat pants over her arm. "How come you need these?"

"Zack needs 'em." Cid took the clothes and stuffed them in his backpack. "Something happened to him and he kinda got bigger last night. I don't know how so don't ask me. Just don't flip out when you see him."

Junior shrugged. "Okay." She started for the door, then paused. "How much bigger?"

"Dunno. The way Cloud was talkin', about your height."

The kid nodded and processed this information. "I wonder if I can still beat him up now?" she mused, then she shrugged again and headed out.

\* \* \*

Reeve painfully opened one eye and glared at a lump of plastic on his nightstand. The lump was making a horrible racket, and after a few minutes of squinting and eye-rubbing he was able to recognize it as a phone. At this point he realized that he had several options. He could ignore it until it stopped ringing, he could answer it, or he could pick it up and throw it out the goddamn window. The first was simply not an option; it felt like a small nuclear device was detonating inside his skull with every ring the thing emitted. The last would have required too much effort. That left only one option. He reached out and swatted the receiver off the hook, and it landed somewhere in the vicinity of his aching head. Close enough for government work. "Huh," he grunted.

"Sir, this is Conner at the airfield. I just got a call in that there's an unidentified airship flying around. Nobody's ever seen the like of it, but it's got the W&P logo on it. What do you want us to do if it tries to land here?"

"Oh, gawd." Reeve groaned. Thinking about it was making his head hurt even worse. How much DID he drink last night, anyway? "Talk to the crew first. They're probably Shinra, but make sure before you go blowing it up." According to Shera, she had not been alone in her decision to walk off the job; it was possible that some disgruntled ex-W&P employees had decided to voice their displeasure over the new management a bit more dramatically. Or the airship might be full of Shinra troops ready to try to take Junon back. Either way, a new airship could be useful..."Try not to mess up that ship if you can get around it."

"Yes sir."

Reeve hung up on him and hid his head under a pillow, trying to remember how he ended up getting home the night before. He'd nodded off at work and for some reason had decided to go get pissed. He'd run across the old Turks on the way out. He was now lying in bed, fully clothed except for his tie and shoes. Interesting. Oh, and someone was snoring in the living room. Great. He opened the drawer of his nightstand, fumbled a bottle of aspirin out, and swallowed three dry, grimacing as he did. That done, he slowly and painfully eased out of bed, and the room yawed crazily as he stood teetering beside the bed. Feeling his way along the wall, he eventually arrived in the ruins of what was once his living room. Roughly forty empty beer bottles were strewn about the room, accompanied by several mostly empty bottles of rum and scotch. And among this mess, the Turks slept peacefully. Elena looked the most comfortable of the three, having grabbed the sofa. Rude was sprawled on the floor; that was where the snoring was coming from. And Reno was draped over the back of the sofa like a towel, his feet still on the floor.

Ah, yes. It was all coming back. They had at some point been asked to leave the bar and just brought the party (such as it was, Reeve hadn't particularly been in the mood to get drunk and rowdy, just drunk and relaxed, and the Turks hadn't been in a very jovial mood either) back to Reeve's house. Well, at least nobody had thrown up...no, that wasn't entirely true... Reeve winced as a fleeting image of himself having an argument with his dinner came back to him. Ugh. Fortunately he'd made it to the bathroom; after that he didn't remember anything. Evidently one of the Turks had put him to bed following that unlovely incident. And where HAD his tie gone? Something told him that something unpleasant had happened to it, but he wasn't sure what.

Reeve poked Reno on the shoulder. "Hey."

"Huh?" Reno grunted. He attempted to stand up and promptly fell flat on his ass. "Oh, man. Are you hung over as bad as I am?" Reeve nodded in reply, and Reno laughed. "Hey, imagine how bad you'd be feeling right now if you hadn't barfed..."

"Oh, God. Don't remind me. Damn, I've got to get to the office..." The room seemed to execute a series of barrel rolls; Reeve turned white and then green, at the same time breaking out in a cold sweat and leaning heavily on the sofa. "Oh, screw it, I'm calling in." Reeve picked up the living room phone and dialed. "Hey, Rosie? I'll be working from home today...yeah, I think I caught some kind of bug or something...anyway, I'm powering Cait Sith up so you know what to do if you need me for anything. Thanks." He then started to pick his way back to his bedroom. "I'm going back to bed..." He stopped, clutched at the back of a chair to steady himself, and shook his head. "At least, I will be when the floor stops moving. Reno, do me a favor. If I ever so much as suggest doing this again I want you to beat the crap out of me, okay?"

"I was just about to ask the same of you," Reno muttered, sinking back onto the floor.

"Hey, Reno?"

"Yeah."

"How'd I get into bed, anyway?"

Reno snickered. "Elena carried you. She's the only one of us that was still somewhat close to sober at that point. She didn't even pass out. She just finished her last beer, said 'I'm going to bed,' and fell asleep right there on the sofa after she hauled your drunk ass off. Me and Rude just kind of slept where we fell." He cast a glance at the sleeping Elena and shook his head. "She's probably going to wake up perky as ever, you know. I've never seen her get a hangover the whole time I've known her. Hey, maybe I should call out for something to eat, it might help--"

The utterance of the word "eat" triggered a series of unpleasant reactions in Reeve's body. His stomach did some amazing acrobatics, the green color he'd turned a few minutes before deepened, and holding his hand to his mouth he stumbled off to the bathroom from whence Reno almost immediately heard the unmistakable sound of someone tossing his cookies. "Hey, at least this time your tie won't get in the way," Reno called out.

"Ugh...shut up, Reno--urk!"

Elena stirred and yawned. "Oh, gawd! Is he throwing up AGAIN!?"

Reno laughed and nodded as he began the task of clearing the empties from the living room.

\* \* \*

Vincent had been staying in Kalm, and he tagged along for the ride to Mideel. Upon entering the clinic there, he got the distinct feeling that something was wrong, but he didn't think much of it at the time. Later he would curse himself for not warning Cloud and Tifa; for now he simply thought he was being paranoid.

"I'm glad you could bring Zack back on such short notice," Dr. Cooper said, looking over his clipboard. "I'm not absolutely sure of his condition, which is why I've asked you to bring him back for a few more tests. This won't take long." He held out his hand to Zack. "Come on into the other room." Junior stood up and started to follow, but the doctor fixed her where she stood with a look. "Excuse me, you can't come in here."

"You let me in there last night," Junior argued. "Because Zack was scared and..." Dr. Cooper ignored her and led Zack away, and Junior stuck out her tongue at the closed examination room door. "What's his problem?" she muttered.

"He probably just thinks you'd get in the way," Vincent said, patting Junior on the head. "Don't worry about Zack."

For about five minutes, the five of them sat in the waiting room leafing through magazines except for Vincent, who was looking out the window. Suddenly he tapped Cid on the shoulder and pointed to a spot about ten yards away from the building. "Look over there. Do you see something strange?"

Cid squinted. He did notice something that wasn't quite kosher; some of the foliage seemed to be shimmering. The effect was something like heat waves rising from a hot road in the summer. And there were two perfectly parallel trenches in the ground where the distorted air hung. "The hell is that?"

"I'm not sure..." He would have thought about it a little more, but a scream of "HELP!" from the examination room interrupted him. "That was Zack!"

Cloud and Tifa were on their feet instantly, as was Junior, and the five of them burst into the examination room just in time to see a white-haired woman in a lab coat hauling Zack out the back door.

"Vail!" Vincent screamed, raising his pistol but not daring to fire; even with his superb aim he feared that he would hit Zack. "Stop!"

"Can't...stop." Vail wheezed, still dragging the kicking boy. She rolled her eyes, extracted a syringe from her pocket, and stuck it into Zack's arm; he went limp almost immediately. "That's better." She wrapped one arm around the boy's waist, and reached down with her other hand and picked up the Masamune. "Don't worry. I'm not going to kill him. You should be proud of your son, Cloud." With that, she disappeared into the wavering air outside, taking Zack with her.

"Zack!" Junior started to run towards the distortion and it took the combined efforts of Cid and Vincent to hold her back; Cloud and Tifa squeezed past them just as six blue-uniformed Shinra guards materialized out of the odd patch of air and headed straight for them.

"Shit!" Cid hissed, grasping the Viper Halberd. Vincent popped off a few shots at one of the guards, but not before the guard had whipped a grenade into the bunch. Junior studied it for a second, and then threw it right back just before it went off. It detonated, knocking four of the six guards off their feet and as the one nearest to Cid staggered back up, Cid neatly ran it through with the Viper Halberd. Scratch one Shinra guard.

The guard Vincent had drilled was apparently wearing a bullet-proof vest; he had been thrown back by the bullets Vincent had pumped at him but he was still very much alive. The same could not be said for a second guard; Tifa, who was already nearly blind with rage, had Waterkicked, Meteor-driven, Dolphin Blown, and Final Heavened him into oblivion, not to mention into a broken and bloodied mass. Cloud, likewise enraged, sliced and diced a third guard into lunch meat via Omnislash. And Junior was mercilessly flinging Bolt spells at anything in a blue uniform that was still moving. Still, the three remaining guards were putting up a hellacious fight, concentrating mostly on Vincent. Unlike the guards, Vincent wore no bullet-proof equipment and he took a spray of machine-gun fire across his left leg.

And then all hell broke loose. Or, more precisely, Chaos broke loose.

Cloud and Tifa wisely got the hell out of Vincent's way, and Cid grabbed Junior and covered her eyes, whispering "Don't look, honey," into her ear as he did, but he was a little too late. Junior had already seen part of the change, and she whimpered and shut her eyes tight.

"Daddy, what's happening to Vincent!?" she wailed, shivering.

"Remember when you got mad at that bird at school?" Cid held Junior tight and stroked her hair. "I know it looks scary but it's still Vincent, and you know Vincent won't hurt you. It's okay." Junior said nothing; she simply buried her face in Cid's shoulder and sobbed loudly. This was sort of a mixed blessing; she did not see the winged form of Chaos ripping the three remaining Shinra guards to shreds with its talons. Cid definitely didn't want her to see that.

An uneasy silence now blanketed the area, broken only by Junior's occasional sobs and sniffles and Vincent's gasping and panting as he reverted to his human form. Then it was broken by something louder: the roar of a helicopter's engine starting.

As a gust of wind nearly knocked Cid down, the shimmering air began to take on a more tangible form: a Shinra helicopter. The chopper roared to life and took off, vanishing again once it was in the air.

"I'll be goddamned," Cid swore, shaking his head at the spot where the cloaked chopper had been. "I'll be double goddamned! How'd they do that? What the HELL is Scarlet cookin' up over there!?"

Tifa didn't answer. She stood there, staring at the sky and shaking with rage as tears spilled from her eyes. "Shinra," she finally said. "What the hell does Shinra want to do to him?"

"If they wanted him badly enough to lure us here and kidnap him, then I think it's safe to assume he's carrying Jenova cells." Vincent caught his breath and stood up. "But I think Vail has an agenda of her own. You all saw it. She's carrying Sephiroth's sword."

Cloud stared blankly at the grass, trembling, and then he reared back and screamed, "Sephiroth!" at the sky.

---

Author's notes: Poor Palmer. He just can't seem to get the hang of that "look both ways" thing...forget fatboy, poor REEVE! I think we can all sympathize with him (you in the back, don't lie, I saw you on New Year's Eve!)...I just got a shiny new modem; 33.6 kbps of pure screaming Internet-cruising power (insert Tim the Tool Man grunt here) because my old 14.4 met with an unfortunate incident (i.e. lightning strike) and word to the wise, if you own a Packard Hell I mean Bell computer and buy a Newcom modem for it, be prepared to spend some time on the line with tech support screwing with your COM port and IRQ settings and possibly a few jumpers till you just wanna throw the whole 'puter out your window before the damn thing will work; but work it does and does so beautifully...By now it should be obvious where Sephiroth Obscura has taken up residence. I have received a few guesses from readers. One is right on the money, one is close, and one is WAY the hell out in left field (Cait Sith!? BWAHAHAHAHA). For those of you that HAVEN'T guessed it yet, I'm not gonna say a word. 'Night.