

## Final Fantasy 7: Children of Jenova

### Chapter One: Flight of the Baby Bronco

The second-to-last place Cid Highwind had ever expected to find himself was at the bottom of the Northern crater beating the crap out of Sephiroth.

The absolute last was in a first-grade classroom at the summons of his kid's teacher. Cid had a bad feeling about this. Every time his folks had been requested to shoot the breeze with his teacher, it'd been bad news. And yes, it had happened a lot. So naturally, Cid wasn't terribly optimistic. He sure as hell hated that they'd done it on the kid's birthday. Junior was pulling straight A-pluses, and apparently she'd been just good as gold all year. So why was he here waiting for Miss Grey to come talk to him while Junior leafed through a book in the corner?

"How you holding up, kiddo?" Cid peered over at his daughter and noticed that she wasn't reading a little kid's book. Apparently she had smuggled it in from one of the other classrooms. The goddamn thing didn't even have pictures in it. Junior had just up and started reading at four, almost completely bypassing the picture book stage ("Mog Takes a Walk" and "The Ugly Chocobo" had been the only works in that genre that could hold her attention for any length of time). She may have favored her daddy in the looks department, but she'd gotten Shera's brains.

"Okay." Junior turned a page and frowned, but didn't look up from the book. "How come you gotta talk to Miss Grey? Did I do somethin' bad?"

"Nah. Whatcha readin'?"

Junior shrugged. "Somethin' about some real big guy with a real real big blue chocobo named Babe." She turned another page. "It's pretty good."

Cid laughed; he remembered reading the same damn book when he was a kid. "Yeah, it's okay." At that moment, the classroom door opened. Miss Grey, flanked by someone Cid recognized as one of the other teachers and the principal, strolled in.

"C.J., why don't you go out to the playground for a while?" Miss Grey asked softly.

Junior looked up. "Can I take my book?"

"I don't see why not." Miss Grey smiled. "Go on."

"Yes ma'am." Junior picked up her book and padded out the door. Her teacher shut it slowly behind her and sat down.

"She's a very polite girl. She certainly respects her elders."

"What, the 'sir-ma'am' thing?" Cid chuckled and shrugged. "Yeah, she just up and started doing that one day. Shera swears she didn't have anything to do with it, and I know I didn't either. Junior just said that was the right way to do it." He smiled and looked out the window towards the playground, where Junior was hoisting herself up into the monkey bars, book clamped in her teeth. "She seems too good to be true sometimes."

Miss Grey laughed. "She's a blessing, especially in a roomful of rowdy six- and seven year-olds. You remember Mr. Parker, our principal. This is Mrs. Cole; she teaches the third grade class. I don't suppose you have the faintest idea why we've asked to speak with you," she said.

"Nope. My kid brings home a perfect report card every time and she doesn't act up, so you got me."

Miss Grey nodded. "Yes, that's part of it." She looked at the principal and the other teacher, and then back at Cid. "She's a very intelligent girl, and a pleasure to have in my class. I'm afraid I'm going to have to give her up, though." She smiled, a little sadly.

"What are you talkin' about?"

The principal took a seat on one of those ridiculously small kids' chairs, wobbled a bit unsteadily, and caught himself before he fell off. "I've been looking in on this classroom for a while now. Every time I come in here your daughter is reading a third grade-level or better book while the other kids are trying to deal with C-A-T. She finishes her work so fast it makes their heads spin. I've noticed she's picking up some pretty advanced math skills for her age too." He shook his head. "The other day when we had her stay after school, we gave her some tests. C.J. aced tests that some of our brighter fourth graders are failing, and as crazy as this sounds, she's even able to understand some very basic algebra. I've never seen anything like it."

"Yeah, she definitely gets that from her mama." Cid laughed. "I flunked algebra twice in high school."

The principal nodded. "We tested her I.Q. while we were at it. It's official. Your daughter is a certifiable genius."

At that moment, Cid was barely able to restrain himself from puffing up like a peacock. He wanted very much to go running outside yelling to the world that his little girl, his very own Cid Highwind Junior, was a super-brain. "So why did you need to talk to me?"

"Well..." Miss Grey started, trying to choose the right words. "We don't think first grade is quite the right environment for C.J.--"

The other teacher spoke up next. "If it's all right with you, of course--we'd like to transfer her to a third grade class."

"THIRD grade!?" Cid almost fell out of his chair. "I don't know--she's only fi-- bah, damnit...it's her birthday, she's six, but still--"

Mrs. Cole nodded. "I know, but here's the other problem with C.J. staying in the first grade. She's a very mature little girl, and she's having a hard time making friends with her classmates. Most of the friends she does have are already in my class. I think it would be best for her." She grinned. "Even then, I don't see her being older than nine, ten at the outside, before she outgrows her schoolwork again and needs to be promoted again; I imagine she'll be in college by the time she's fifteen. She's a real prodigy."

"I don't think she'd have any problems adjusting," Mr. Parker added. "We don't normally like to pull students out of their classes in the middle of the year like this, but I believe C.J. needs to be put in a more challenging class, with kids that are more up to speed with her socially, as soon as possible. How would you feel if you were ten or eleven and sitting in a room five days a week doing two plus two and learning your colors and such?"

"I'd get pretty damn bored," Cid mused. "Yeah. You're right. It's fine with me."

"Then it's set." Mr. Parker stood up and extended his hand to Cid. "Starting Monday, C.J. will be in Mrs. Cole's class."

Cid shook the principal's hand. "Boy, her mama's gonna go through the roof when she hears about this." He leaned out the window and saw that Junior was hanging from the monkey bars by her legs, still reading. "Hey kiddo! You ready to go home and get some birthday cake?"

"Yes sir!" She flipped off the bar without even dropping the book and ran back inside. Once there, she replaced the book on its shelf and looked up at Miss Grey. "Am I in trouble?"

"Of course not!" Miss Grey grinned. "Honey, you know Mrs. Cole, right?"

"Yes ma'am. She was givin' me all those tests and stuff the other day." Junior beamed. "She's funny. I like her."

"Well, how would you like to be in her class starting next week?"

Junior's eyes went wide and she looked up at Cid for verification. "Daddy?"

"Yep." Cid ruffled the kid's short blonde hair. "She's not foolin'."

"Wow!" Junior threw her arms around Cid's legs and gave him a big hug. "Cool! Evan an' Ryan are gonna freak out!" The "Evan an' Ryan" Junior spoke of were two of her aforementioned third grade partners in crime.

"Well, we better hurry home before they get there. You got a big party coming up, birthday kid." Cid took her hand and led her out the door.

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"Hey, squirt! Where ya been? We started the party without ya!" A brown-haired kid with freckles slapped Junior on the back as she strolled in the front door of the Highwind house, which that day was decorated with pink streamers and cutout cardboard Mogs. As much of a tomboy as Junior was, she was still partial to pink.

"Me and Daddy were at school talkin' to the teacher!" Junior shot back. "I'm gonna be in your class next week so you better watch your mouth!"

"You're fibbing, half pint!" The boy looked up at Cid, who just grinned and nodded at him. "You're serious? Whoa! That's awesome!" He looked around quickly and whispered to Junior: "You're gonna help me with my math, right?"

"What's it worth to ya, buttface?"

Junior and the kid stared at each other for a second, then both burst out laughing. The brown-haired kid was Junior's friend Ryan. "Who else got here?" Junior peered around the corner.

"Junior, don't say 'buttface,'" Cid sighed, although he knew it was an exercise in futility. Junior may have gotten Shera's smarts, but she got her old man's mouth to go with them. "Let's see...I see Uncle Barret and Marlene, Uncle Cloud and Aunt Tifa, which means Zack's probably running around here somewhere...I think that's it. Hey! Shera! Put that cake down somewhere and c'mere!"

"Cid, there's presents all over the table! There's nowhere to put it!"

"You better find somewhere, 'cause you're gonna drop it when you hear what me and Junior's teacher were talking about!" Cid dashed into the kitchen. A moment later, Shera came running out and gave Junior a huge hug.

"That's wonderful news, Junior!" Shera put Junior down, and the kid stood there beaming as the doorbell rang again.

"I got it!" Junior ran up to the door and flung it open. "Yuffie!"

"Chibi-Cid!" The ninja girl swept Junior up and gave her a big hug. As she did so, she did not notice Junior's thumb and forefinger reach into her back pocket and extract a small green orb. She unobtrusively waved it at Cid, who gave her a thumbs-up. Junior pocketed the Materia herself as Yuffie put her down. Yet another stolen Materia safely recovered courtesy of Cid Highwind Junior! Cid stifled a laugh as Yuffie strolled into the house none the wiser. She always kept at least one Materia on her at all times, just in case...well, not at the moment, thanks to Junior. "I brought ya something cool! You're gonna love it!"

Cid frowned. The package Yuffie carried looked just the right shape and size to be another skateboard. Probably a fast one. Junior already had at least one elbow or knee constantly adorned with a band-aid on a daily basis thanks to the skateboard she already had. Then he smiled a bit, remembering that his present had made Shera turn a distinct shade of purple when he'd suggested it, especially after the incident a few months ago when Junior had taken the Tiny Bronco II for an unplanned solo flight. Let Yuffie give her the wheels. Cid had wings to give her.

"Hey!" A younger boy with spiky brown hair and brown eyes poked his head into the living room. "C.J., aren't you gonna say hi to me?"

"Zack!" Junior promptly forgot about Yuffie and dashed over to the other boy, whom she grabbed and hugged fiercely.

"Eww!" Little Zack Strife grimaced and struggled to break free, but Junior was way too strong. "Get off me! You got girl germs!"

Cid laughed heartily. "You won't be sayin' that in another ten years or so, son! You seen Evan around yet?"

"Ryan said he's not coming." Zack frowned. "I heard he had the barfs."

"Eww," said Junior, wrinkling her nose. Ryan nodded his agreement.

"Yeah, he blew chunks in class today." He grinned evilly at Junior. "Right on his shoes too!"

"Gross! Shut up, boogerhead!" Junior swatted at him.

Zack grinned just as evilly. "Ooo, was it all green?"

Junior stared at Zack and said to him with the cool demeanor of a girl ten years older, "Didn't I already beat you up once this week?"

Zack gulped and clammed up.

Junior wasn't just smart.

Junior was BIG. And strong. And Tifa was teaching her how to fight. And she often used Zack as a practice dummy. Ryan guffawed.

"I'm just kidding, squirt. Jeez."

"That was sick, dill-weed!" Junior glared at him.

"Yeah, but it was funny...poopface!"

"Stupidhead!"

"Butt-nugget!"

Cid rolled his eyes. "Ryan, do you kiss your mom with that mouth?" All three children laughed heartily.

There came one more ding at the door, and Cid answered it.

There stood on the porch a large stuffed cave moogles, topped by a stuffed cat wearing a striped party hat in lieu of his usual crown, and a cape. The moogles held a bunch of balloons in one hand and a present in the other. The cat held its usual megaphone and another present, and it glared at Cid, ears flattened against its head.

"I really don't believe this. This just takes the cake," Cait Sith said softly. "I bust my butt makin' sure the folks in Junon have enough juice to run their houses, and here I am--the entertainment at some kid's birthday party."

"Good to see you too, Reeve," Cid returned cheerily. Cait Sith shook his head.

"You're gonna owe me for this one, Cid."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah. Y'know, you could make a killing doing this on the side." Cid jerked his thumb towards the living room. "Get your stuffed ass in here and be funny already."

Cait Sith sighed, then he drew himself up to his full height and bounced into the house. "Hi, kids!" he yelled, trying to sound enthused.

Cid followed him in and caught Cloud staring at him and shaking his head. "How much of a fight did Reeve put up about this?" he asked. "He's pretty busy now, you know."

"He's the one that suggested it, actually." Cid grinned. Cloud raised one eyebrow.

"How many, Cid?"

"Huh?"

"Don't 'huh' me. How many beers did you have to get down him before he suggested it?"

Cid shrugged. "A few."

Cloud smirked. "Mmm hmm."

"Okay...twelve."

Cloud smiled. "I figured as much. I take it you didn't fill Shera in on that part of the deal?"

Cid fidgeted uncomfortably. "Well..."

At that moment, Shera poked her head into the living room. "Cid? Why is Cait Sith wearing a party hat and making balloon animals in my kitchen?"

"Damn..." Cid coughed nervously. "I knew I forgot something..."

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Although Junior, Zack, Marlene, and Ryan declared Cait Sith's antics "cool" and patiently sat through cake and ice cream, any child will tell you that the one main attraction at any kid's birthday party is the unwrapping of presents. Junior, as is now well known, was a bright child, and she noticed that her folks were taking great pains to keep her and the other children out of the back yard. She'd snuck a glance out the bathroom window earlier and saw something very large covered with a tarp out there, but she couldn't begin to guess what was under it. Oh well. She would find out sooner or later.

Yuffie's present was indeed another damn skateboard. Cid shot her a disapproving glance as Junior ripped the paper off to reveal the monster and the kid promptly began to careen around on the driveway on it. The skateboard was soon forgotten when Junior opened Cloud and Tifa's gift of a complete scale model of the Highwind (the half-naked chick on the side had been given more modest attire, but otherwise it was a perfect reproduction), and THAT was forgotten when Shera lured her back to the living room with a box containing a Pocket Mog (one of those cute virtual pet thingies all the kids just HAD to have; Shera had stood in line at the toy store for three hours and nearly gotten trampled when the proprietor announced that the latest shipment had arrived) and a brand new pink Mog T-shirt; Junior dashed off to the bathroom to put the latter on immediately. Cait Sith handed over his presents; the two boxes he had each contained half of a miniature Cait Sith. And then Barret and Marlene had given her a little toy slingshot...the LAST thing Shera wanted the kid to have, next to a BB gun. Finally, Ryan produced a G-Bike poster.

Cid sat smugly at his end of the table, waiting patiently for the perfect time to spring his little present on the kid. Finally, he set a rather large box down in front of Junior. She opened it, finding a smaller box...then another...then another. Seven boxes later, she came upon a tiny gold pin; a pair of wings. Junior looked up at him quizzically, and Cid grinned and pinned the wings on Junior's new Mog T-shirt. "See, that's why you shouldn'ta taken the Bronco that day, kid. You got to have your wings before you can fly by yourself." He scratched his head, feigning deep thought. "You don't look quite right in the Bronco yet, though. It's too big and ugly for a cute little girl like you. We're gonna have to do something about that..." He gestured towards the back door. "What's that thing out there?"

"What thing?" Junior asked innocently.

"Don't you 'what thing' me, girl, I know you saw that big lump out there. Go check it out."

Junior continued to stare at Cid for a moment...then she was up in a blur of motion and tearing for the back door, dragging wrapping paper and ribbons along in her wake. Zack, Marlene, and Ryan followed her and got outside just in time to hear Junior scream, "WOW!"

Cid had gone outside sometime during the unwrapping of presents to remove the tarp covering the thing in the backyard. What now sat there beside Cid's restored Shinra Stingray appeared to be a hang glider with a seat, some rudimentary controls, and a small engine on it. In the seat rested a small pink helmet. Painted in big blue letters on the ultralight's pink wings were the words "Baby Bronco."

"Whoa!" Ryan stared, slack-jawed, at the thing. "Is that an AIRPLANE!? No way! Your dad rules, C.J.!" Yes, Ryan was impressed. The only time he called Junior any name even close to her given one was when she did something exceptionally cool.

"Yeah!" Zack peered into the seat of the little plane. "Hey, cool! It's got bombs on it!"

"Lemme see!" Junior pushed him aside and examined the underside of the seat. Sure enough, there was something that appeared to be a bomb hold there. She ran back up to Cid, who had led the grownups out to see the Baby Bronco. It must be noted that Shera looked somewhat less than thrilled. "Can I fly it? Please?"

"Okay, but just for a little bit...it's gonna get dark soon." Junior kissed him on the cheek and hopped in the seat, cramming the helmet on her head. "You stay right around here where you can see us, okay?"

"Yes sir!" She strapped herself in and Cid started the engine for her. The Baby Bronco roared to life and Junior took off, soon flying just a few feet above the tallest trees.

"Not so high, Junior!" Shera yelled up at her. Cid patted her arm.

"Relax, will you? She could handle the Tiny Bronco II on her own, she's not gonna have trouble with that little bitty thing."

Shera frowned at him. "What exactly is in that bomb hold you HAD to put on there?"

Cid opened his mouth to answer but as it happened, Junior answered that for him.

The Baby Bronco swooped low, and something rolled out of the bomb hatch and sailed straight for Cloud. It was a blue, more or less spherical object, just a little bigger than his fist and it sort of wobbled as it descended. It detonated on contact, soaking Cloud thoroughly, and his trademark spike began to droop listlessly into his face as the water began to negate the effects of whatever Cloud used to hold his hair in that impossible style. The three children gasped...stared wide-eyed...then burst out laughing.

"She got you, Dad," Zack laughed, wiping tears out of his eyes.

"She sure did!" Tifa chuckled, picked up Cloud's drooping spike between her thumb and finger, tried to pull it back into place, and let it go. It flopped back down and she burst into loud laughter. After a while, Cloud finally began to see the humor in his predicament and laughed as well.

"Good shot, squirt!" Ryan yelled up at Junior, who was circling merrily over the Highwind house.

"That was COOL!" Marlene gasped. "Papa, I want one of those!"

"Oh, Lord." Barret shook his head. "Now look what you started, Cid."

"Sorry!" came Junior's voice overhead. "I was aiming at Ryan!"

As Shera glared at him, Cid scratched his chin thoughtfully. "We gotta work on her aim..."

Another balloon sailed into the midst of the gathered folks, soaking them all nicely. Cait Sith shook off indignantly, spritzing Barret and Cid one more time. "That's it...Barret, if I ever agree to go drinking with Cid again I want you to shoot me, okay?"

Junior sailed along, checking out the scenery. She loved seeing everything from high up. It just looked so cool. Suddenly, she heard an odd rumbling noise, and she imagined that must have been something like the sound the big guy with the big blue chocobo's stomach made when he was hungry.

The people on the ground noticed it too. "Get the kids inside!" Cloud yelled. Yuffie scooped Zack and Marlene up in her arms and ran in the back door; Ryan went under his own steam. Cloud didn't have to tell HIM twice.

In the Baby Bronco, Junior began realize that something was wrong. As she looked at the ground below her, she saw a small crack open up in the earth directly below her, and something told her to get as far away from that crack as she could. She gunned the throttle and banked hard to the left just as a stream of something green erupted from the ground under her and she barely avoided the jet of liquid that shot up into the air where she had been just a second before. "Whew," she sighed. She felt a fine spray of warm water on her cheek. "Just water," she muttered. "Big deal. I've seen water come out of the ground before."

Yes, it did look a lot like the geyser at Cosmo Canyon she saw when Daddy had taken her to visit Red XIII...but the Cosmo Canyon geyser didn't glow green. She decided that this would probably be a good time to land and go inside. She did so, a bit too hard in her excitement, but otherwise perfectly, and Shera picked her up and ran inside with her. Cloud, Tifa, Barret, Cid, and Cait Sith stood and watched as the geyser finally went down, leaving almost no indication that it had ever come. After a long silence, Tifa finally spoke up.

"What was that all about?"

Barret shook his head. "I dunno, but damn man...that was the Lifestream, wasn't it?"

Cloud nodded, his drooping spike flapping lifelessly against his forehead. "It's a good thing Junior got out of the way when she did." Cid stared at the patch of ground where the Lifestream had shot through and drew a shaky sigh.

"I don't wanna think about it." He lit up a cigarette and seemed to inhale half of it in one drag. "She's a hell of a pilot though, ain't she? Damn, I don't think I coulda done that better myself!" Then he sat down heavily and dropped his head into his hands. "Shit...Cloud...if she hadn't gotten outta the way..."

Cait Sith looked thoughtful--as thoughtful as a cat in a party hat can look--and nodded. "It just popped up off the coast of Junon too. I'm gonna get hold of Red XIII and see if he knows anything; and I'll get in touch with Nibelheim and Costa del Sol too and see if the guys there've seen it. I gotta shut Cait Sith down for a sec, though." And with that, the cat drooped limply over the shoulders of the Mog he rode on.

Cloud nodded. "It doesn't feel right," he said softly. Tifa looked up at him.

"How do you mean?"

Cloud shrugged. "It seemed--it seemed like it was angry. The way it just sprang up like that. The Planet is angry about something."

Cait Sith sat back up and blinked. "Costa del Sol hasn't seen anything, but folks are seeing all kinda craziness at Mt. Nibel."

"The Lifestream?" Barret inquired. Cait Sith nodded.

"That...and the Nibel reactor just came back online right outta the blue."

"What about the other Mako reactors?" Tifa asked. "Corel? Fort Condor?"

Cait Sith shook his head. "Nope, they're still dead, and so's the one at Junon. Just that one. There's something else. Right before the reactor at Nibelheim came on, folks reported seein' a Shinra chopper flyin' up there."

"You don't think those dumbasses are gonna fire all those reactors up again, do you?" Cid stomped his cigarette out and lit another as Cait Sith frowned. "Goddamn thick-headed dumbass Shinras..."

"Something's bugging me about this," Cait Sith muttered. "If they just wanted to get the juice turned back on, the reactors at Corel and Fort Condor are a hell of a lot easier to get to." The cat looked up at Cloud. "I don't think they're using it for electricity. You know what's in that plant, Cloud."

Cloud went pale. "Reeve, you get on the horn to every township you can reach and tell 'em to tighten up their security. Whoever's running Shinra now is getting ready to start taking out the competition again." He swallowed. "They're reforming SOLDIER."

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This was a pretty slow-moving chapter, I know. Miscellaneous notes: Throughout the fic, you may notice Yuffie's speech being peppered with bits of Japanese. I figure it'd be appropriate for her, since Wutai is kinda sorta like Japan in the game...Shera will usually be her normal sweet and subservient self, but WILL be copping a bit of an attitude with Cid from time to time, especially where Junior is concerned...in case you didn't catch the giant blue chocobo reference, Junior is reading a modified version of the tales of Paul Bunyan at the beginning...that's all I can think of.