

Final Fantasy VII: Children of Jenova

Chapter 10

The Highwind was getting very full.

It now carried the entire Highwind family, Cloud, Tifa, Vincent, Yuffie (who was in the engine room hurling as usual), Red XIII, Barret, the usual flight crew, and Aidan, who was huddled in the chocobo hold where Junior had been before. Nobody was sure what to make of Aidan. Since he'd boarded the Highwind he'd said three words: "hurts," "help," and finally after much coaxing and pleading, "Vail." Great.

"At least now we have some idea what's happened to him." Vincent sighed after the bunch finally decided to leave the shivering Aidan alone. "One of Vail's experiments, there's no doubt." Red XIII grunted in assent.

"As soon as we arrive in Junon, Cid and his crew will get the tracking device set up. After that, I think we should find Vail first." Red looked up at Cloud and sighed. "I'm sorry, Cloud. I know you want to find your son, but if we give Vail any more time to do these things..."

"I know." Cloud muttered. "If we find her we probably find Zack anyway. Let's just get her before she...before something happens." He looked back towards the chocobo hold and shivered. "That guy gives me the creeps."

"Somethin' tells me he'd look right at home in a black cape runnin' around wailin' about Sephiroth," Barret quipped. It didn't sound as funny as he thought it would. "We gotta get that dude to a doctor."

Cloud nodded. "Cid's already let Reeve know about him, and there'll be one waiting at the airport. The sooner we get him off this airship the better." The fact was, Aidan scared the shit out of him. His eyes were glowing. Mako eyes. And that scar on his neck--what was that from? There had been a bump underneath it, as if something had been inserted under Aidan's skin and maybe it was Cloud's imagination, but it appeared to have moved at least once. Creepy. Cloud wasn't sure he wanted to know what it was, but he had his suspicions. And he hoped to God he was wrong. "Whatever Vail did to him is killing him. He needs help."

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Scarlet snapped her head up sharply as someone strode into her office without so much as knocking. That was really starting to get on her nerves. "You know, Raven, I close my door for a reason."

Raven smirked and sat on the edge of Scarlet's desk. Unlike Elena, she wore a skirt with her Turk ensemble. A rather short one, to boot. She nonchalantly crossed her legs, causing her already revealing miniskirt to reveal a bit more, then she reached down and plucked a leaf of paper off the top of the stack Scarlet had been pushing around. "I guess you know we lost another SOLDIER."

"He must have bailed out in all the confusion when that other thing broke loose." Scarlet rubbed her eyes. "I guess Heidegger filled you in on the details." Had anyone else sauntered into her office, parked their ass on her desk, and started playing with her paperwork, Scarlet would have gone positively nuclear. But then, few of her employees looked as good as Raven; twice already Scarlet had found her eyes traveling up Raven's long legs. No, damnit...Scarlet was the one in control here. She would not let Raven forget that.

"Yeah." Raven yawned. "There's no trace of him. He probably fell off the mountain. Even if we did find him, we'd probably spend all day blotting him up with Handi-Wipes. How're the rest of the SOLDIER kids coming along?"

"Better than Vail expected, and she just called in saying she's got some super troop getting locked in a pod as we speak. I can't wait to see this guy. He must really be something." Scarlet pushed her chair back. "Are you just here to shoot the shit about SOLDIER with me, or is there something else you want?"

Raven shrugged. "Oh, nothing really." She slipped her jacket off and dropped it on the desk, right on top of Scarlet's paperwork. "I think Vail's gone off the deep end, though."

She loosened her tie, pulled it off over her head, and before Scarlet knew what was happening, Raven had secured it around both of her wrists and pulled it tight; then she tied the loose ends behind Scarlet's neck. "I did a little eavesdropping last night. That 'super troop' of hers is a six-year-old boy that's full of Jenova cells she didn't put there. Now she wants to do her little trick on him and see what happens. I think she's fuckin' nuts, if you'll pardon the expression."

"She's doing a good job so far. I don't see any reason to interfere yet." Scarlet tried her damndest to act like Raven's actions weren't affecting her, but her voice cracked on her last few syllables. "She hasn't screwed up yet."

"'Yet' is the operative word here." Raven kept her pistols holstered under her jacket, and she unbuckled both holsters, first setting her pistols on Scarlet's desk. "What's she doing with that sword, anyway? She can hardly lift it." She knelt down and secured Scarlet's ankles to the legs of her chair with the holster belts. "People are starting to talk about her."

"People have been talking about you for a long time," Scarlet pointed out, and Raven just laughed.

"Including you? And no, in case you were about to ask, I didn't get any...friendlier with Heidegger than I had to in order to get my promotion. I didn't even have to touch him, thank God. And in case you've forgotten, I'm not a mad scientist. I just do what I have to in order to get what I want." Raven finished securing Scarlet to her chair, taking special care not to touch her more than necessary, and Scarlet couldn't stand it. She decided that if, IF, she were somehow able to squirm loose, she was going to have Raven right there on the desk; screw the paperwork, that's what copy machines were for.

So at least one of the great corporate rumors was true.

Raven stepped back to admire her handiwork, leaving Scarlet panting in her chair. "So what -did- you do?" Scarlet finally asked.

The black-haired Turk leaned down close enough that her lips just barely brushed against Scarlet's ear, and Scarlet strained at her bonds to no avail. "This," she whispered, and she turned, picked up her pistols and her jacket, and walked out of Scarlet's office leaving the President securely fastened to her chair.

The phone rang several times in the space of time that followed, and Scarlet could do nothing more than glare at it. It probably wasn't important anyway, but it was the principle that mattered.

Heidegger found her some three hours later. He didn't laugh. No shrill bray of "Gyaa ha ha" passed his lips. He simply shook his head and sighed. "Raven?"

Scarlet's silence spoke volumes.

"It could be worse," Heidegger said, unbuckling the belts that held Scarlet's ankles to her chair. "At least Archer didn't find you. I didn't think he'd ever stop laughing."

"Oh, shut up. I don't want to hear it," Scarlet spat.

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The Highwind touched down in Junon, and as promised, there was a doctor waiting at the airport along with Reeve and the old Turks. The five of them boarded the airship; the doctor took off to the chocobo hold to examine Aidan while the rest made their way to the bridge.

"Cid, here are those plans Elena dug up for you. I've told the mechanics to help you out if you need it, and they're more than happy to." Reeve took a look around and spied Junior, still covered with Vincent's cape and her head on Shera's knee. "Poor kid. Is she okay?"

Cid nodded. "She'll be fine. She's upset about Zack. We all are."

"That was a terrible thing Vail did," Reno started, "and for what it's worth coming from me, I'm sorry. If we didn't have a reason to be pissed off at Shinra before, we've got a good one now."

"Thanks." Cid lit up a cigarette and puffed on it nervously. "I don't suppose you've tried to call Scarlet up and ask her what the hell she thinks she's doing?"

Reeve shrugged. "I tried right before you got here, several times. She's not answering her phone. I guess she's tied up with something else right now."

"Bah. Figures." Cid scowled. "You think she's behind this?"

"I don't know." Reeve sighed. "I wouldn't put it past her, but I don't think so. I think Vail went out on her own and did what she did." He fidgeted a bit. "I don't suppose I could bum a cigarette from you?"

Cid snickered. "I thought you quit years ago." But he lit up a second and passed it to Reeve anyway; Reeve took a shallow drag off it.

"You know what they say; quitters never win, bleah bleah bleah. You know, I consider myself something of a gentleman, and I think I would rather dye my hair orange and green than strike a lady...but if I see that broad in person I think I might just have to haul off and bust her one. I can't stand her." He shook his head. "I've got half a mind to come with you in person on this one." Reeve took another halfhearted drag, blew out smoke, and coughed. "I don't see how you can stand these unfiltered things." He ground it out on the sole of his shoe and tossed it over the railing.

"No way." Cid said firmly. "Who's gonna run Junon if you're out running around getting your white-collar ass kicked with us?"

Reeve shrugged again. "Actually, I've got Cait Sith standing in for me today because I called in sick this morning--"

"He was on his deathbed," Rude added with an emphatic nod. "Really."

"At least I was conscious, unlike SOME people."

Rude snickered. "Do I need to tell them what happened to your favorite tie?"

"All right, you two, knock it off or I'll stand you both in the corner." Cid rolled his eyes, then he grinned evilly at Reeve. "Put away a few last night, did we?"

"Don't remind me." Reeve rubbed his eyes; his headache was starting to come back. "If I spend enough time in therapy I MIGHT just be able to repress most of what happened last night."

"That'll teach you." Cid lit up another cigarette. "So what is it you were trying to make yourself forget?"

"Huh?"

"Look, Reeve. I know you. You hardly touch that shit unless there's somethin' eating you."

Reeve sighed. "I'd rather not discuss it around C.J., if that's all right with you, so I'll give you the edited-for-television version. I had one hell of a nightmare and I couldn't get it out of my head."

"Good enough for me." Cid nodded and started to say something else, but a sound from the chocobo hold silenced him: a very loud, shrill, and terrified "WARK!"

Junior snapped awake instantly. "Bugs!" She jumped up and started to run for the chocobo hold; Cid caught and held her.

"You stay here, Junior. I'll go check on Bugs." Cid took off at a run, followed by the Turks and then by Cloud and Vincent.

Yuffie was already in the chocobo hold when Cid and the others arrived, and she was on the verge of hysterics. "What

the hell's wrong with that guy!?" she shrieked, pointing at Aidan. Or, more precisely, the thing that was clawing its way out of Aidan's body. The doctor was hiding behind a crate of greens; Bugs was kicking at the creature with his clawed feet and squawking loudly.

The thing looked up at Yuffie with its lidless green eyes and made some sort of gurgling sound, then it went back to pushing and tearing its way out of its human prison. Then it seemed to give up, its body going limp. Aidan let out a little choking gasp, dropped to his knees, and then fell onto his back, dead.

"Holy shit!" Reno stammered. He gingerly reached out with his nightstick and prodded the thing's arm. It reared back up, hissing and gurgling at Reno, and with no warning broke free of the mass of flesh that had held it; it launched itself across the chocobo hold with amazing agility and went straight for Reno's throat with its lip-less mouth. Both went down in the struggle. "This fuckin' thing's stronger than it looks! Someone get it OFF ME!" Reno cried, blindly throwing punches at it as it sank its sharp little teeth into his shoulder.

"Reno!" Elena screamed, diving forward and throwing her fist into the thing's ribs. It let loose a little cry, then it lashed out with one clawed hand, catching Elena's cheek with one or two of its sharp little talons. One of the thing's claws fell off as it did so.

"What the hell!?" Cid couldn't risk swinging at the thing with his spear; he'd more than likely decapitate Reno in the process as much as he was squirming. "Hold still, Reno..." He brought his foot back and then forward, planting the steel-reinforced toe of his boot into the creature's midsection. Its mouth was forcibly removed from Reno's shoulder, taking with it a large bite of blue fabric and a smaller bite of flesh.

Reno cried out through gritted teeth as he felt the creature's teeth rip through his suit and his skin. Several of its teeth remained embedded in Reno's shoulder, and he picked them out grimly. "Jeez, I hope this thing's shots are up to date..." Reno scrambled to his feet as the thing stood up woozily, and he swung at it full force with his nightstick. He connected as well, sending the creature sprawling into Bugs's lunch. It stood up once more, bits of greens sticking to its body, and charged at Reno a second time. This time it did not arrive at its destination. There was a sharp crack and a scent of burning gunpowder, and the thing fell in a lifeless heap onto the floor. A single bullet hole between its eyes oozed green blood onto the planks, and Reno turned to see where the bullet had come from. Vincent stood in the doorway, firearm still raised and wisps of smoke trailing from the barrel, and Reno laughed nervously.

"Holy shit," he wheezed again. "Vincent, why the hell couldn't you do that while the goddamn thing was snacking on me!?" He sat down hard on the floor. "Oh, shit. What the hell was that thing!?" He looked down at his shoulder, which was bleeding profusely. "Damn...the little son of a bitch got me good." Elena whipped her tie off, wadded it up, and pressed it against Reno's wounded shoulder to try and get the bleeding under control.

"That's what Vail's doing to them," Cloud whispered hoarsely. "The eggs. She's implanting them in people. Oh, God--Cid, we have to get Zack back before she does it to him!"

Cid surveyed the damage in the chocobo hold. Bugs was scared shitless but otherwise unharmed; the doctor was in much the same condition. "Is it gone?" the latter asked in a small voice, peeking out from behind the crate of greens. Cid nodded.

"Guess we won't be needing you after all, doc." Cid said flatly. "We gotta clean this mess up."

"Forget it," Yuffie spat. "I'm not going near that thing."

"Oh, for God's sake, it's DEAD." Elena rolled her eyes. "I don't suppose there's a mop on board..." She poked at the dead creature with one gloved finger; it twitched feebly and was still. "Oh, yuck."

"Fine, I'll do it." Vincent sighed, shaking his head. "I've seen worse."

"Did anyone notice that thing dropping teeth and claws all over the place?" Reno asked, holding up a few of the bloody little fangs he'd plucked out of his flesh. "Looks like baby teeth or something. God. Talk about your problem children."

"We better get you and Elena patched up." Cid looked back over at Vincent, who was busy cleaning up the mess their battle had left behind. He really didn't want to know what Vincent could have possibly seen that was worse than this.

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Two of her children were dead. She had felt both of them die; their silent cries of agony rang through her mind like some unearthly church bell. Her children. Her poor murdered children.

But she still had her daughter and her puppets, and soon her son would be reborn as well.

Jenova reached out with her mind into the green water around her and felt that strange creature's presence again. It was watching her. Plotting against her, probably, but lacking the fortitude to carry out its plans. It had the audacity to wear her son's face, no less. No matter. It was helpless, wracked by guilt and self-loathing, and even if it did attempt to move against her it would fail.

So why did its presence fill her with dread?

"Go away," she hissed at it, and it did so, watching her all the while. It was almost out of her sight when it spoke.

"I will not let you do this," it said.

"You don't have much of a choice," Jenova shot back. "Just how would you stop me? Would you steal the body of one of my puppets?" There was no reply, and Jenova smirked. "I thought as much. Pathetic."

"Pathetic? That would be you. Only a coward would use a child like you would."

Jenova screamed in rage; at that exact moment yet another Lifestream geyser shot up right off the coast of Junon.

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"There it goes again." Reeve stood on the bridge looking out over the sea, watching the glowing green water spurt up higher than ever. "What's going on down there, anyway? Those guys have been gone a long time...I hope they're okay."

Right about then, Cid returned to the bridge. Following him was a pale and shaken Cloud, the chewed and clawed Reno and Elena, and Rude. "I wouldn't go in there right now if I were you," Cid advised.

"What happened!?" Barret exclaimed, his jaw hanging. "Is that guy okay in there?"

Cid looked over at Junior nervously, then he stood close to Barret and whispered, "Aidan's dead."

"Shit." Barret shook his head. "How?"

"I don't think this is a good time to discuss it." Cid lit up a cigarette with shaking hands; whatever had happened down there had been enough to rattle even him, and that scared the hell out of Barret. "Tifa, could you give Reno and Elena a hand here?"

"Sure...oh my God, what happened?" Tifa gasped as she took a good look at Elena's wounds, and then at Reno's. "Did a monster get on here somehow?" She took care of their injuries via Cure spells; the ragged hole torn in the shoulder of Reno's jacket and shirt remained, serving as a mute reminder of the grisly event he had just been part of.

Cid nodded. "Something like that. I'll tell you all about it in a bit." He sat down next to Shera and Junior. "Everything okay up here?"

Junior nodded. "Is Bugs okay?"

"Bugs is fine, punkin." Cid put his arms around Junior and Shera and held them both tight. "You two better go ahead and scoot. I got a bad feeling about all this." He kissed Shera's lips and Junior's forehead. "I'll be back for you as soon as I can."

"Hurry." Shera stood and picked up the two bags she'd packed. "Come on, Junior."

Junior didn't move. "Daddy..."

"Junior, please go with your mama..." Cid tried to nudge her off the seat; she still wouldn't move. "Come on, I'm not taking you with me this time!"

Junior bit her trembling lower lip, crossed her arms, and huffed. It was obvious that she didn't plan on going anywhere, and Cid tried one last desperate plan. He stood, walked over to Reeve, and whispered, "Help me out here."

Reeve sighed, sat down next to Junior, and patted her on the head. "I know you want to stay with your dad, but it's going to be really dangerous. He just doesn't want anything to happen to you." Junior huffed again in reply, and in desperation Reeve took her tiny hand and held it tightly. "Okay...if you won't get off the airship for your dad, will you do it for me?" Jackpot. Junior stood up slowly and looked up at Cid.

"Sorry, punkin." Cid picked her up and hugged her tight again. "I'll be back. I promise."

"You better," Junior grumbled, trying to sound brave. "I can't start the engine on my plane by myself. Someone's gotta do it for me."

"Yes, ma'am." Cid kissed her forehead one more time and set her down; she shuffled over to Shera and took her mama's hand. "You take care."

"Bye, Daddy." And with that, Reeve led Shera and Junior off the airship. The Turks remained.

"You three lug nuts going or staying?" Cid asked. Reno shrugged.

"I dunno yet. How long is it going to take to get that tracker set up?"

Cid frowned and looked over the plans Reeve had given him. "It doesn't look too complicated. Give me about three hours."

"I'm going," Elena said. "You two can do what you want, but I'm going. After what I saw in there just now, I can't just sit around waiting for Vail to do that to someone else. Especially not some little kid."

Rude shrugged. "I think I'm going to stay. I wouldn't be surprised if Scarlet started sending SOLDIERS over here real soon, and Reeve needs all the muscle he can get to keep 'em out."

"Damn." Reno shook his head. "I'll let you know in three hours, then." With that, he and Rude left the bridge. A few seconds later, Reno poked his head back in. "Elena?"

"Yes?"

"Could I talk to you for a minute?"

Elena shrugged and followed Reno into the engine room. "Need something?"

"Nah." Reno scratched his head nervously. "Listen, I just wanted to thank you for helping save my ass in there."

"Oh, that." Elena shrugged again. "It was nothing."

"Yeah, well. It wasn't 'nothing' to me. I owe you one." Reno coughed. Damn, he wasn't any good at this stuff..."Maybe I could take you out to dinner or something."

Elena stared at him for exactly four seconds, after which she burst out laughing. "Oh no. I know what you're pulling, Reno! It didn't work before and it's not gonna work now!"

At that moment, Reno felt about two inches tall. "I didn't mean...oh, never mind. Be careful, Elena." And he turned and left.

Elena stood there, shaking her head as she watched Reno and Rude go. "What's up with him?" she wondered aloud.

"Duh," Yuffie's voice shot back from the other side of the engine room. "It's pretty obvious. He thinks you're hot."

"Duh, yourself. Any idiot could see THAT. He's been trying to score with me forever. But he's never told me to be careful or any of that stuff...wait, what the hell am I telling you this for? It's none of your business."

"Well, maybe he really likes you. Give him a chance." Yuffie sat down, swinging her legs over the side of the catwalk she was perched on. "I mean, you don't have to be so rude to him."

Elena shot her a pained glance. "Don't you have Materia to steal or people to rip off or something?"

Yuffie thought about it a second, then she shrugged. "Nope."

"Great," Elena sighed, rolling her eyes.

Author's notes: Well, well, well! Show of hands: who saw the Raven/Scarlet lime scene coming (no pun intended!)?...so I lied about that particular rumor being false. Sue me. And it's such a shame that Reeve will never know just how true his words were...y'know, I had half a mind to name the doctor "Wedge" and have the Jenova critter rip him to shreds, but that would have been just plain silly...possible Elena/Yuffie friendship in the works? It could happen...that's all for tonight.