

Final Fantasy VII: Children of Jenova

Chapter 11

"Well," Cid sighed, lighting up a cigarette and surveying the work he and the crew he'd borrowed from Reeve had done, "I think that should do it."

Vincent raised an eyebrow. "And how exactly did you plan on testing it?" he asked. "I doubt Junon's air force has cloaking devices yet." Cid flinched.

"Shit, Vincent, don't bug me about the details, all right?" He shrugged. "Did Reno ever come back?"

Vincent shook his head. "No, and the way Elena was talking, it's not likely that he will."

"Damn." Cid looked at his watch. "I'm givin' him another ten minutes. If he doesn't show we're takin' off without him. I can't say I blame him after that business earlier. It's a goddamn miracle that thing didn't get hold of a major artery or anything..."

"I don't think it has anything to do with that," Vincent said as he helped Cid pack up his tools. "It has to do with Elena."

Cid whistled softly. "You're kidding. He's still chasin' after her?" He chuckled and started back towards the bridge. "C'mon. We'll go ahead and fire up the engines, and if he's not back by the time we're ready to go, we'll go on ahead. We can't be sittin' around on our asses waitin' for him when Zack's in danger like this." He flicked the smoldering butt of his cigarette over the railing and onto the tarmac and sighed. "I hope Junior's not too pissed at me for leaving her behind like this."

Vincent chuckled. "She knows you're only looking out for her, even if she won't admit it." Then he stopped, and a rare grin broke out on his pale face. "You realize that you've left Reeve in a very awkward position, don't you?"

"Hell, I didn't have much of a choice." Cid lit up another cigarette. "Who else was I supposed to leave them with? It was either Reeve or Elmyra, and Elmyra's got her hands full enough with Marlene over there. Besides, staying at his place'll help take Junior's mind off all this shit that happened." Vincent thought it over and nodded.

"True, and I think Reeve knows it too." Vincent paused for a second. "I always wondered how someone like him could have ever gotten mixed up with Shinra."

Cid snickered, blowing out a puff of smoke. "He was probably too young to know any better. And so were we."

"True again." Vincent said with a small laugh. "We'd better get moving."

* * *

"Vail?" Heidegger, trailed by Raven and the Turks, cautiously stepped inside the Nibel reactor and looked around. Two of his brand new SOLDIERS stood outside the doors of the reactor, which relieved the Turks to no end; no way in hell were they about to guard this place again after what happened to Stuart before. "Vail, where are you?"

Archer took a look inside the pod room and snickered. "I found her." He pointed, and Heidegger poked his head through the door to see Vail either asleep or unconscious, sitting on the floor, head bowed, Masamune at her side. Her back rested against the door in the back of the room, the door with the legend "Jenova" inscribed above it. "What's her problem?"

Heidegger slipped past him and went up the steps leading to the Jenova room door. He shook Vail's shoulder, and she woke with a grunt. "All right, Vail. Where's this fine young SOLDIER you've picked out without bothering to tell me?"

Vail yawned. "In there." She gestured towards the door behind her.

"Why'd you put him in there?" Heidegger frowned. "Forget it." He stepped over Vail's legs and into the Jenova chamber. "I thought you said this was a six-year-old, Raven."

Raven stared, open-mouthed, at the young man that occupied the tank that had once housed Jenova. "But--that's what Vail's report said! Zack Strife, age six...what the hell is going on!?"

"Kid must have taken his vitamins," Archer muttered.

The tank contained what appeared to be a young man about seventeen years old; his brown hair was shot through with white and stood out in little spikes. His body twitched occasionally as the green Mako energy shot through it; instead of the usual shower Vail gave the other prospective SOLDIERS, the green energy was feeding directly into the boy's body through several IV tubes that snaked around him. "God," Heidegger gasped, looking away. "Vail, I hope you know what you're doing!"

Vail snorted and adjusted her position, trying in vain to get comfortable on the hard floor. "I know exactly what I'm doing. Now shut up and let me sleep." With that, she curled up in a ball and began to snore softly.

Kain and Stuart looked at each other; both were thinking the same thing. When they had been inducted into SOLDIER, they had gotten a nice tidy shot of Jenova cells and a few days in one of these little human pressure cookers out in the pod room. This kid--guy--whatever was getting a whole new treatment. Also, it did not escape their notice that the kid lacked the incision they had seen on the necks of the other SOLDIER candidates. There was something Vail wasn't telling them about this guy. In fact, Kain was fairly sure that there was a lot of shit Vail wasn't letting out, about a lot of different things, and he had just opened his mouth to say so when he was interrupted by the distinct whirl of an airship's engine. "I think we've got company," he said and dashed outside, followed by the other three Turks.

Raven squinted up into the sky. She expected to see the Highwind cruising over the mountain; the airship she saw instead was smaller, more streamlined; it was painted black, and the Shinra logo on the tail was covered by a spray-painted red circle and slash--the universal symbol for "no." Above it was the stylized fighter jet that was the Wratt & Pitney logo, and flying from one of the masts was a black flag with a grinning skull and crossed bones emblazoned upon it. "What the hell is that!?" she blurted as the black airship cruised on by and dropped out of sight over the horizon.

"That's the airship the W&P guys stole," Stuart mumbled. "Nice paint job."

Raven rolled her eyes. "Air pirates. Now this is just silly." She glanced over at Heidegger. "You want us to chase it down in the chopper?"

"Nah, you better not. There's no telling what kind of weapons it's carrying. I'll call and send a few fighters after it." Heidegger shook his head. "No wonder Scarlet's pissed."

* * *

/Where...where am I.../

Zack struggled to open his eyes, but it felt as if his eyelids had been super-glued shut. And someone had stuck him with at least three needles and left them there. Zack did not like needles. He wanted to pull them out, but like his eyelids, the rest of him was frozen in place. /I want to go home,/ he thought. /I want Mom and Dad./

And then he heard the voice. It was the voice that had spoken to him in his nightmare just a few nights before. "You want to go home to your father? Do you know what kind of a man he really is, Zack?"

/Shut up!/ his mind spat at it. /Leave me alone!/

The voice seemed to laugh softly, and it continued. "Did he tell you about Meteor? Did he tell you that HE was the one responsible for that?"

/You're lying!/

"Oh, I assure you I'm not. He gave me the Black Materia. Ask him yourself sometime. Let me show you what really happened that day."

In his mind's eye, Zack saw a blinding white flash. When it cleared, he found himself standing in a deep crater. In front of him were several people, among them his mother and father, Cid, and Red XIII. And high above them, in a crystalline cocoon, was the source of the voice that tormented him. Sephiroth. Zack watched as Red XIII handed the Black Materia over to Cloud, and he watched as Cloud passed it through the wall of the cocoon into Sephiroth's hand.

"You see," Sephiroth said, "I am telling you the truth."

As much as Zack wanted not to believe what he saw, he knew deep down that it was true. /Why didn't he tell me?/

"Who knows," Sephiroth's voice sighed. "Perhaps he thought he was protecting you. Perhaps he was simply ashamed of himself." He paused. "Has he ever told you about Aeris? Of course he has. I suppose he told you I murdered her."

/Stop it./

"It's time you knew the truth. Look." There was another flash, and Zack saw a young woman in a pink dress kneeling on a stone altar, hands clasped in prayer. He watched Cloud approach her...he watched Cloud raise his sword to strike her...and then he saw the woman slump forward, dead.

Zack's already precarious hold on reality gave way.

/He lied to me...how could he do that to me!?!/

"He has deceived you, Zack." Sephiroth smiled at him. How could Zack know that he'd just seen a slightly edited version of the events in the City of the Ancients? "I can help you. His deceit will not go unpunished."

Sephiroth held out his hand to Zack...and Zack took it willingly.

Vail snorted and rolled over irritably. She decided it would be a good idea to bring in a cot or something, as much time as she spent in this plant watching her experiments. A loud crash in the Jenova chamber woke her up completely. /Already!?!/

The door slid open and a very angry-looking young man came running out, completely ignoring Vail as he flew out of the plant.

"You forgot your--" she started, holding up the Masamune as the white-haired young man whizzed past her. Then from outside there came a short, strangled yell. And then there was another.

Vail stood up and followed. Stepping outside of the reactor, she found the bodies of the two SOLDIERS Heidegger had left. Both were dead. One had been relieved of his armor and sword. Zack Strife had vanished. And Vail began to fear that her experiment had run out of her control. Calmly, she drew her cell phone from her pocket and dialed. "Scarlet, there's a problem. The two SOLDIERS Heidegger left here were unstable. I had to neutralize them. And it seems the treatment was too much for the Strife boy. He's dead. I've already disposed of the body, and I've taken care of the problem with the regular SOLDIERS. It was an isolated incident with the two pods they were in; I've fixed them now. We will have no more problems."

Vail had learned one thing. Always tell Scarlet what she wants to hear...

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The Highwind took to the air, without Reno on board. He hadn't returned, and Cid decided they just couldn't afford to wait any longer. He figured the best place to start looking was Neomidgar, and he'd just started heading the ship that way when he got the call from Reeve.

"Hey, Cid! I just got a distress call from Nibelheim!"

"What!?" Cid dropped his cigarette. "What's going on?"

"They didn't say for sure, just that some nut came down off the mountain, tore some stuff up, and then holed himself up in the Shinra mansion. They're saying he looks like a SOLDIER troop, but they're not sure."

"Shit." Cid ran a hand over his eyes. "Tell 'em to hang on. We're on our way." He thought about it a bit, and then asked: "Did you get a description?"

"Yeah." Cid heard what might have been a swallow. "Early twenties, short spiky white hair, SOLDIER armor that didn't quite fit with a sword to match."

"Got it." Cid nodded. "We'll be there in a few minutes."

* * *

Reeve set the phone down with a shaking hand. The description of the psycho in Nibelheim almost precisely matched up with the spiky-haired Sephiroth from his nightmare, and the more he thought about it, the more he began to think that Cloud would find his son in Nibelheim, and the reunion would not be a pleasant one.

Reno noticed this, and pulled up a chair near Reeve's desk. "This is bugging you pretty bad, isn't it?"

Reeve nodded gravely. "I'm probably just being stupid, but this is giving me the willies. I don't like it a bit."

"Me either. You think that nut in Nibelheim is Cloud's kid, don't you?"

"I hope like hell it's not, but I keep thinking about the stuff Vincent told us about Sephiroth. He says the Jenova treatments made him grow incredibly fast, so I have to wonder if that's what's happened to Zack." Reeve paused, staring blankly at a spot on his desk. "Or maybe if there's something more to it."

Reno decided this would be a good time to change the subject. "How's Shera and Little Cid doing?" Reeve chuckled halfheartedly.

"Don't call her that to her face. She goes off." He opened a desk drawer, rummaged around in it, and found what appeared to be a very old pack of cigarettes. He found a lighter after a few more minutes of digging, and he lit up a smoke. He coughed. "Damn...Cid's a bad influence on me. I quit these damn things right after the Meteor thing happened. Haven't touched them again till last night." He took a deep drag, turned green, and coughed violently. "God, these are stale!"

Reno snickered. "Where's the cat, anyway?"

Reeve coughed some more, then gave up and put the ancient cigarette out and made a mental note to go buy a fresh pack as soon as possible. "I had him take Shera and C.J. to get some dinner. If you didn't notice last night, I have your typical single-male refrigerator--ice, snacks, and fifty gallons of beer."

"Not anymore," Reno appended. "Between the four of us, I think we cut it down to two or three bottles left in there. Oh, I almost forgot..." Reno opened up his briefcase (Reeve thought Reno looked very funny dressed in a wrinkly suit with his shirttails hanging out and carrying a very businesslike thing like that, but didn't say so), pulled something out of it, and tossed it to Reeve.

"What the hell is this thing?" Reeve asked, holding it up. It looked like a whip with a button on the side of the handle.

"Electric whip. I got it a few weeks ago. It looked pretty cool, but it just didn't do anything for me. I thought you might want to try it out. It beats that little stun gun you're packing now, anyway."

"I think Rude would beg to differ with you on that, Reno." Reeve raised an eyebrow and hit the trigger; little blue-white sparks danced along the length of the whip. "Cool," he muttered, setting the thing down on his desk. "Hope I won't have to use it anytime soon." His hopes were dashed to bits just seconds later, as the intercom box on his desk came to life.

"Governor Brannon! There's a bunch of monsters heading right for us! We've managed to hold them off so far, but there's just too many of 'em!"

"Shit..." Reeve shook his head. "What kind? Can you tell?"

"They don't look too nasty, but like I said there's a pantsload of 'em...mostly Zemzeletts, a few other things mixed in. They won't get past us unless we run out of ammo."

Reno stood up. "I'll get Rude. Tell that guy to hang on." Reeve nodded.

"I'm sending you some reinforcements. Try to hold them off."

"Yes, sir." And the intercom snapped off with a sizzle of static.

Reeve paced around for a few minutes, from time to time glancing at the electric whip Reno had given him...and after some thought, he picked it up and dashed outside. But before he did that, there was one other thing he had to take care of. He grabbed Cait Sith's control box and fiddled with it a bit.

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"Psst." Cait Sith poked Junior on the arm. "I wasn't gonna give you this with your mom around, but I think you're fixin' to need it." He reached behind him, unzipped his Mog, and unobtrusively passed Junior a paper bag.

She opened it, and her face lit up. "Whoa," she gasped. "I never saw a slingshot like this!"

Shera shook her head and groaned. "We're going to have a nice talk later," she whispered at the cat.

"Trust me," Cait Sith replied. "Say, can you use any weapons? Any at all?"

"I have three shotguns at home," Shera replied. "Why do you ask?"

"Because there are some monsters headed this way." Cait Sith ducked into the weapons store they were passing and emerged a few minutes later with a double-barreled shooting iron that was almost too big for him to carry. "And I hope we won't have to mess with them, but we should be prepared just in case. Hey, C.J.--" Cait Sith hopped over to the kid, who was trying to figure out her new "toy." "You put your hand through like this, so that strap goes over your arm, and hold it like this--" He reached down and demonstrated. "That's so you can pull back on it harder. And don't use rocks. I got you some of these." He reached into the bag and handed Junior a pouch of small metal balls. "This ain't a toy, C.J. It could hurt someone really bad, maybe kill 'em. Don't even point it at anything you don't plan on shootin', okay?"

"Kay." Junior took out her old slingshot, removed the Lightning Materia from its handle, and snapped it into the handle of her new weapon. "Hey, there's another one on it!" Shera took a look and frowned.

"Restore?" she asked, and Cait Sith nodded. "I hope we won't be needing it."

Cait Sith stood on his tiptoes and whispered (in Reeve's real voice) to Shera, "Reno and Rude are on their way. So am I. If things get hairy, I want you and C.J. to try to hide and let Cait Sith deal with it. He can be replaced. You two can't. Be careful."

"Here they come!" Junior shouted, pointing up the street. Something that looked like a cross between a bird and a prickly pear cactus was heading straight for them.

"A Zemzelett," Cait Sith muttered. "You two head for cover! I'll take this mutant!" He raised his megaphone and brought it to his mouth. "Sic 'em, Moogle!"

"Ugh!" the Moogle replied. It took off at a full sprint towards the creature, leapt up, and whomped it on the head. The Zemzelett fell backwards, squashing a few of the smaller critters that had followed it. As it raised its head off the concrete, Junior let fly with a projectile that embedded itself in the thing's skull, right between the eyes.

"Wow!" Cait Sith gasped. "Kid, you could give Vincent a run for his money with that thing! Hey--" Something that looked like a large frilled lizard reached up and tugged at Cait Sith's cape, and he spun around and bashed it over the head with his megaphone. "Why you little--Moogle! Kill!"

"Ugh!" the Moogle grunted again, and brought both fists down onto the thing's head. It fell lifelessly onto the street.

Another of the frilled lizards dashed up the street, straight for Junior. She raised her weapon and fired, narrowly missing it. At that moment, the world seemed to cease its rotation as a single word escaped her lips: "Shit!"

Shera turned white and spun around. "Junior!"

Junior shot her a remorseful glance and then let fly with a second shot at almost point-blank range. This one did not miss; the lizard's head exploded into several chunks. "Eww!" she wailed as one of said chunks landed on the toe of her boot. "My shoes!"

"I'll buy you some new ones," Shera mumbled as she took aim and fired into the center of a pack of three or four lizards. Two fell dead to the ground, two remained alive but not for long. Cait Sith promptly conked one with his megaphone and his Moogle conked the other with its bare hands.

"Hurry up, Reno..." Cait Sith muttered as a second Zemzelett came at them, followed by a third and a fourth. "Oh, hell... three of 'em!"

Shera fired again. "Correction; two." One of the things, its cranial cavity now nicely packed with buckshot, flailed its wings and fell over onto its face.

"Oh, man, I wish Cid was here to see this!" Cait Sith raised his megaphone, but this time he did not order the Moogle to strike. "Hey, you! Freeze!" he shouted, and as he did a yellow Materia in his megaphone sparkled. The Zemzelett stopped dead in its tracks, awaiting further orders. "Yes! I got 'im!"

The remaining Zemzelett began to flap its wings, stirring up a filthy little cyclone which it sent hurtling towards Cait Sith, Junior, and Shera.

"Run!" Cait Sith screamed, but the whirlwind had already caught them, knocking Cait Sith off his Moogle and Shera onto the ground. Junior stood her ground for a second or two, and then she flew backwards several feet and landed hard on her bottom.

"Ow," Junior whimpered.

"Hang on, kid, I got you covered!" Cait Sith scrambled back up to his usual perch and raised the megaphone again. "Hey! White Wind! Over here!"

The manipulated monster plodded up the street and flapped its wings; this time the wind it sent flying at them was pure and warm, and Shera and Junior stood back up, none the worse for wear.

"Thanks, you big lug...now go beat on yer buddy there a while!"

The monster grunted and with one swipe of its wing sent its companion sprawling into the street face-first. The second Zemzelett stood up again, utterly confused and wondering why in the world its fellow had just bashed it over the head. While it thought about that, Junior pegged it with a shot to the head. Scratch one more Zemzelett, but there were two

more behind it along with a whole swarm of lizards. Cait Sith shook his head. "Jeez, they just keep comin'...where the hell is Reno? Oh, no--" He raised his megaphone to shout an order to the Moogle, but too late. Three of the lizards hooked their claws into his cape and pulled him off his mount. Two more attacked the Moogle itself. "Shera! Go ahead n' shoot these things!"

"What!?" Shera did a double take. "But I'll hit you!"

"Just do it!" A lizard's claw ripped into Cait Sith's fabric skin and severed a wire or two. "Okay, you little creeps," he muttered, his voice distorted with static. "I'm goin' out in style! Moogle! Slots!" he ordered.

The Moogle nodded and opened its mouth; visible inside were the triple wheels of a slot machine. Cait Sith crawled over and pulled the Moogle's right wing, and the wheels began to spin. One bar. A lizard whisked Cait Sith's megaphone out of his hand and began to gnaw on it.

Two bars. The lizard spat out the megaphone and closed its jaws around the cat's throat.

Three bars. As the lizard succeeded in separating Cait Sith's head from his body, the sky above grew dark and cloudy. Shera grabbed Junior by the arm and dragged her into the nearest building as something descended from the clouds.

It was a huge gray dragon.

The dragon opened its mouth and a ball of energy began to gather within it. The monsters gazed up at it warily. Junior pressed her face against the nearest window to get a better look.

Bahamut released the energy he had gathered, and the pure white beam ripped every single monster that remained to shreds. Then as suddenly as he had appeared, Bahamut flapped his wings and sailed back into the sky. The clouds cleared and the sun shone upon the dead bodies of some fifty lizards and eight or so Zemzeletts.

"Awesome!" Junior gushed. Then she saw Cait Sith.

The Moogle stood in the middle of the street, its fur shredded and torn and some of its wiring clearly visible. Near it lay Cait Sith's body and head, both sparking and twitching feebly. "Oh no!" Junior sobbed and ran out into the street just as Reno and Rude finally arrived, with Reeve close behind. She burst into tears.

"We too late?" Rude panted. Reeve shook his head.

"Nah. Cait Sith took care of it." He sighed as he looked over what was left of his robot. "Poor little guy." He picked Cait Sith up carefully, and Junior sniffled.

"Those stupid monsters did it," she sobbed, and Reeve gave her a hug.

"Hey, don't cry. He'll be okay. Don't you know what they say about cats?"

Junior sniffed again and looked up. "They...they have nine lives?"

"Yep. This was only his third one. He's got plenty left. Just wait a few days, okay?"

"Kay." Junior wiped her eyes.

"You and your mom okay?" Reno crouched down next to her and patted her on the head, and Junior nodded. "Good."

Shera dropped the shotgun and sat down on the curb. Her knees were wobbling just a bit too much to stand up. Junior trotted over and sat down beside her, and Shera put an arm around her. "Junior," she began, "did you say what I think you said a few minutes ago?"

Junior looked at her feet. "Yes, ma'am. Sorry."

Shera nodded. "We'll leave that little detail out when we tell your father about this," she said as she gave Junior a big hug. She still did not like the idea of Junior getting into a fight of any magnitude. But at that moment she was so proud of Junior she was about to burst.

Author's Notes: I know what you're thinking...Cait Sith's THIRD life!? What the hell is the author smoking? For the sake of continuity, let me explain. Cait Sith II was retired soon after the end of the game and replaced with Cait Sith III, which added the aforementioned artificial intelligence program; expect Cait Sith IV to have a significantly improved version of that program...what? Shera owns three shotguns? Again, let me explain. Right after you get Cid in your party, if you go back to his house you will find Shera in the garage working on the old car. I figured if the car was her pet project, those shotguns on the wall of the garage were probably hers too...

I was going to continue on after the battle in Junon to have the rest of the guys meet up with Zack in Nibelheim, but I figured the Zack/Sephiroth scene was dark enough and this chapter needed to end on a happy note (most of the previous chapters have ended darkly in some degree, if I remember right)...cool bit of totally un-fic-related news: I found a FF7 wall scroll with all the characters and a chocobo on it today (tho' I think they shoulda put Sephy on it instead of that stupid chocobo)! Wai wai wai wai wai wai! AND the guy said if I came back on Tuesday he might have one with just Cid on it and definitely one with just Vincent! Wheeee! Twenty well-spent bucks a pop! Of course, I was torn between the FF7 one I got and the one with ALL the Inner AND Outer Sailor Senshi And Chibimoon AND the Starlights...ah well. There's always next payday.