

Chapter 14

In the three days following Cid Highwind Junior's plunge into the Lifestream, the Highwind circled the globe several times, lighting somewhere each time another geyser popped up...and it was popping up a lot. In fact, Rocket City now boasted a brand new lake right outside the city limits for that very reason. It wasn't terribly large, somewhere in the middle between the "lake" and "pond" classifications, but it was there all the same. During the day it sparkled like a pale emerald; at night its faint glow could be seen from the city, casting an eerie green light over the nearest houses and shops. Cid had taken the Highwind here upon hearing of the new lake's formation in hopes of finding Junior washed up on the shore; he had taken it to Mideel for the same reason; he had taken it to old Midgar for the same reason again. Each time he came up empty.

Three days. /How long could someone survive in there?/ Cid wondered, standing on the deck of the Highwind and watching the world slide by beneath his feet. /Cloud and Tifa came out okay, but they were only there for a few hours.../

No.

Junior was alive. Cid would not allow himself to even consider the possibility that she wasn't. He refused to believe that she had saved his life at the expense of her own. Especially not with Shera sitting in Junon bawling her eyes out. Giving up on Junior was simply not an option.

Surprisingly, Cloud and Tifa felt pretty much the same way. Cid had figured they'd want to try to track Zack down first, and truth be told, he thought it was damn selfish of him to be flying all over the world to every godforsaken burg on the map hoping his daughter had washed up somewhere and done so alive when poor Zack had that...that thing in his head. But they understood. And they were willing to help. Even Elena was torn up over Junior's disappearance; she had indeed been trying to get to the crack on the ground to help pull the girl out of there and she hadn't gotten there in time. Cid wasn't sure, but he thought he might have heard a sob or two coming from the blonde ex-Turk an hour or so after the accident.

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The first thing she needed was something to wear. The lab coat she found in the pod room would have to do for now...no shoes, nothing to wear under it. Her predecessor had left nothing. But the coat would do. In its pocket, she found a pair of dark glasses which she perched on her sharp little nose. As soon as she did that, the cell phone in the pocket of the coat began to ring. She pulled it out and stared at it for the space of three rings, then she flipped it on. "Yes?"

"Vail?" Scarlet, as always, sounded rather pissed. "I thought you told me that kid was dead. Some fruit loop matching his description is wandering around in Branford with Sephiroth's goddamn sword and looking dazed and confused as we speak. Is there something I should know about this guy, Vail?"

The new-and-improved Vail swallowed audibly. "I thought I'd taken him out of commission." She took a quick look around and saw that the Masamune was not where her predecessor had left it.

"You thought wrong." Scarlet snickered. "You're a chip off the old block, Vail. You and your old man both, losing control of your goddamn experiments. I'm sending the Turks out after that nut and when they get done with him, you're going to be scraping his remains up with a spatula. Got it?"

Vail sighed. "Yes, of course."

Scarlet was silent for a few minutes. "Vail, I want you to do something special for me. If you do, I'll forget about this little business with your botched experiment."

"Name it."

"Well, I have a perfectly good gas chamber here, I have someone I want to stick in it, and I've got nothing good to use on him."

Vail frowned. "What's wrong with cyanide?"

Scarlet laughed, and Vail winced and held the phone a few inches away from her ear until the cackling subsided. "Too quick, too painless. I want you to whip something nasty up for me to pump into that gas chamber. I'm talking slow and agonizing death stuff. Right up your alley."

Vail raised an eyebrow. "Send someone to pick me up and I'll get right on it. Out of curiosity, who is it you're planning to execute?"

Another round of "kya ha has" burst forth from the phone, and Vail grimaced again. "I'm planning a little experiment of my own. I want to see how much more cooperative Junon's citizens will be with Shinra once their beloved governor goes down for a dirt nap."

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Raven did not particularly look forward to beating on Archer's door to tell him the Turks were needed. On one occasion she had walked in through his unlocked door just in time to see a very drunk Kain and an even more inebriated Archer dragging a passed-out Stuart off to the john to give him a swirley. On another visit, she had not paid attention to where she stepped; she unwittingly brought the rather slim heel of one of her pumps onto the neck of an empty beer bottle, which rolled quickly out from under her foot and her foot, in turn, flew out from under her. She had hobbled around with a sprained ankle for a week after that little mishap...and of course she had worn her usual short skirt that day. When she came to her senses again some ten minutes later, Stuart had been sitting in the corner holding a paper towel to his bleeding nose and blushing. There was some nameless force attached to Archer's domicile that seemed to compel people (mainly Raven, sometimes Stuart) to inadvertently make complete asses of themselves.

Today it was unusually quiet at the Archer residence, and that scared the hell out of Raven.

She knocked softly on the door, and when she got no reply she tried the knob. Unlocked. /I'm probably going to regret this later,/ she thought as she opened the door and stepped inside.

Archer sat sprawled on the couch, wearing nothing but a pair of sweat pants, with a magazine over his face. Soft snoring emanated from under the magazine, and Raven heaved a sigh of relief. Asleep. No Kain and no Stuart in sight. "Hey, Archer. Wake up."

"Mph," Archer replied and began to snore again.

Raven's gaze drifted to the coffee table, where there sat a glass of ice water. An evil grin spread over her face. Silently, she crept up between the sofa and the table. With one hand she picked up the glass, and with the other she gently pulled the waistband of Archer's pants as far as she could without waking him...and then she dumped the contents of the glass, ice and all, down the front of Archer's trousers.

"YAAAAAAH!!" Archer seemed to levitate for several seconds, after which he leapt up off the sofa and danced a ludicrous jig around the living room trying to shake ice cubes out the legs of his pants. "What the hell was that for!?"

"I tried to wake you up the conventional way," Raven replied, unable to mask her amusement as Archer continued to hop and prance around, kicking wildly and sending ice cubes skittering across the floor. "Look, I gave you a chance. Where are Kain and Stuart?"

Archer shook his right foot, dumping an ice cube onto the floor. "Home, I guess. Why? We got a job?"

Raven nodded. "Vail's little pet busted out of its jar the other day, and now Scarlet wants us to hunt it down and get rid of it."

"You mean that kid!?" Archer stopped hopping and looked at Raven like she'd grown a third eye. "And Scarlet's putting US on it? Jeez."

"Yeah, well. That 'kid' wasted two SOLDIERS at the Nibel reactor and now he's wandering around in Branford scaring the straights."

Archer could have made some snide remark about those last few words, but he thought better of it and closed his mouth at the last possible second. "And what's Vail doing about this? Sitting on her pale white butt?"

"Actually, Scarlet's got her set on some top-secret project at the moment. I'm sure I could get her to spill it to me, though." Raven grinned evilly. "Let's go get Kain and Stuart."

Archer nodded and headed off to his bedroom to change into some dry boxers and throw his suit on. He really didn't want to think about how Raven might intend to convince Scarlet that the Turks had a need to know about Vail's side project. Sure, he'd laughed like a hyena when he'd found Heidegger strapped to a chair with Raven's holster belts, but later on he realized what Heidegger must have been expecting her to do...and that thought made his toes curl up and his skin crawl. Yeek.

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For once, Heidegger had done something right.

Not only were there sixteen highly trained SOLDIERS awaiting his orders, there were some two hundred regular army troops, two rather large gunships floating around off the coast of Neomidgar, and since Palmer's little accident, two squadrons of fighter airplanes. Some of them were old Stingrays and Vipers that had been brought out of retirement, a few were the experimental jets Palmer had been working on. All of them had been fitted with cloaking devices.

For once, he had done something right and for once, Scarlet took notice. She seemed to be in a very jovial mood lately; ever since she had made final her decision to reclaim Junon she appeared much happier. Of course, this meant that she laughed a lot, which meant that Heidegger spent a lot of time plugging his ears and wincing. She laughed even more now that she had Vail concocting some sort of chemical weapon in her labs. Heidegger didn't need to ask who Scarlet intended to use it on. The screams of Vail's guinea pigs told him all he needed to know about that; there was only one person in the world Scarlet hated that much.

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Vincent found Cid on the deck of the Highwind as it cruised over the ocean toward Junon once more. He stood there, staring out over the blue water, gripping the railing tightly. His hands were, as always, covered by thick leather gloves, but Vincent was sure that under them Cid's knuckles were white.

"The Lifestream seems to be calming down finally," Vincent said as he stood beside Cid, who merely nodded at his words.

"She's out there somewhere, Vincent." Cid drew a deep sigh. "She has to be."

Vincent blinked and tried to think of a way to phrase what he was thinking. "It's been three days. We've looked everywhere. She's an intelligent girl. If she does come out, the first thing she'll do is try to contact you."

"You're leadin' up to somethin'," Cid muttered. "And I don't think I'm gonna like it."

"We need to get back to looking for Zack." There was no response from Cid other than a furrowing of the brow, and Vincent continued. "It's been three days. He could be anywhere. We have no idea why Sephiroth came back or what he's planning, and the longer we wait to resume our search for him--"

"You want me to give up on her already?" Cid snapped, angry fire flaring in his eyes. Even Vincent had to take a step back in the face of such wrath. "How the hell am I supposed to do that when it's 'cause of me she's--" Cid snapped his mouth shut as Vincent continued to stare him down.

"Is that what this is about?" Vincent asked softly, and Cid just ground his teeth in reply. "You blame yourself for this?"

"Vincent, I have one nerve left," Cid said, teeth still grinding. "And you are getting on it."

Vincent pretended not to hear. "What about Shera?" Cid flinched as Vincent's words struck that very tender last nerve. "She needs you."

Cid ground his teeth a bit harder. One of his hands drew up into a fist.

"What do you think she's doing while you're--"

"Shut up, Vincent."

"--running all over the world looking for a daughter that might already be dead--"

A red haze obscured Cid's vision for a fraction of a second, and he spun around and did something he never thought he would do to any of his friends...especially not to Vincent. When he came back to his senses, Vincent was holding one hand over his bleeding nose and trying to shake the cobwebs out of his head. "Shit," Cid wheezed, unable to believe that he'd just decked the guy he considered one of his closest friends. "Oh, shit. I'm sorry. I'm really sorry, Vincent."

Vincent shook his head. "Don't apologize. My words weren't exactly kind ones." He dug in his pockets, found a handkerchief, and wiped his nose on it. "But I still think it's time we returned to our search for Zack."

"I can't do it." Cid sighed deeply again. "When we get to Junon I'm getting off the airship and me and Shera are going home. I can't think straight enough to do much of anything besides get in the way. I want you to take care of my ship."

"Cid--"

Cid held up a hand. "Don't try to talk me out of it. You guys don't need me slowin' you down. I just--I need some more time."

Vincent nodded. "Should I tell the others?"

Cid thought about it a minute. "Tell 'em after I'm gone."

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Kain raised an eyebrow. "How'd he get loose, anyway?"

Raven just shrugged. "Busted out, apparently. Vail says she heard a commotion in the Jenova room, and when she opened the door to check on the kid he bolted and took that sword she'd been hauling with him."

"You don't believe her, do you?" Stuart asked, and Raven shrugged again.

"I wouldn't trust Vail any farther than I could throw her with my pinky. I think she's got some agenda of her own with that kid, and Scarlet's looking the other way as long as she gets good results everywhere else." Raven smiled thinly. "Honestly, I think Vail is nuts. But she does what she's supposed to and she does it well."

"I don't think 'nuts' even begins to describe her." Stuart frowned. "What the hell's she doing with Sephiroth's sword, anyway? You--" He looked thoughtful for a second. "You don't think she cloned him, do you?"

"I don't know and I don't care." Raven replied. "What I do know is that her pet project is roaming the streets of Bradford and freaking people out, and we're supposed to go take him out before the shit hits the fan and we end up having to launch another cover up like the one in Nibelheim all those years ago." She swept her gaze from Stuart to Kain to Archer. "Any more questions?" A collective shaking of heads answered her. "The chopper's waiting. Let's move."

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Night was falling in Branford. A lone figure sat in the alley between a Materia shop and a bar called Annie's Hangar. Resting in his lap was the handle of a giant sword. Scattered around him were various and sundry Materia. He had gotten them for free; one glance at the storekeeper and he'd gotten all he wanted, taking one of each while the shopkeeper sat gibbering in his chair. Now Zack sat in the alley trying to fit them into the slot in the sword's handle, without much success.

Gravity? "No..." He tossed it aside.

Deathblow? "No..." Toss.

Lightning? "No, no, no..." Toss.

He growled softly and took a good look at the slot. It hadn't been there before. These Materia didn't fit. They were too small. The Materia that went here was different. A different Materia. A special Materia. A...yes. That was it.

Zack smiled. There were certain advantages to living in this body. Certain ties were strengthened. His servant. His puppet. His father.

Sephiroth Obscura chuckled softly and sat back against the wall, closing his eyes.

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Deep inside Mt. Nibel, there was an unusual natural phenomena known as a Mako fountain. Basically, it was a pretty rock that sat there putting on a nice light show and making pleasant noises. The "pretty rock" in question was actually a large hunk of Materia in its infancy.

About a week before, the streams of Mako energy that had once drifted aimlessly upwards had begun to shift. They now swirled in a tight clockwise spiral above the raw Materia. At the center of the swirling energy, something was beginning to form. A slender object was beginning to take shape; a long, thin thing that vanished into the stone.

The Planet was building something. As it worked, the stone hummed contentedly.

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A weary and frazzled Cid stepped onto the bridge of the Highwind as it drew nearer to Junon. He sat heavily on a bench and lit up a cigarette. "How's your nose?" he asked Vincent, who chuckled softly.

"I've had worse." He looked up at Cid. "Have you reconsidered--"

"Nah." Cid shook his head. "Anyone got any ideas where Zack's holed up?"

"I finally got back into Shinra's computer system," Elena said with a tired sigh. "But I can't make heads or tails out of anything. The stuff I -am- digging up is encrypted. It could take a while to crack. My gut tells me they're getting ready to pull something big. There are an awful lot of messages bouncing back and forth between Scarlet and Heidegger and Scarlet and Vail but like I said, I can't read them. Now this is scaring the hell out of me, because Vail is dead. I saw her go down. But she's firing off e-mail just as nice as you please."

"She was a clone," Cloud replied. "Maybe she saw this coming and built a spare, just in case."

"I wouldn't put that past her, Cloud." Elena rubbed her eyes; they were tired and red from staring at that little screen for too long. "I'm going to need some time to crack this code they're using. And I have a bad feeling I'm not going to have that time."

"What about Zack?" Tifa said. "Any ideas where he went?"

Cloud just shrugged. He had some nebulous idea what Sephiroth Obscura was up to, but it floated just beneath the surface of his consciousness, barely unreachable.

"He may be trying to finish what he started seven years ago," Red XIII offered quietly. "We don't know what happened to the Black Materia after he called Meteor. I hope not, but..."

Cloud's head snapped up all of a sudden.

/Cloud.../

"What?" Cloud snapped, shaking his head. He waited a few moments, but the voice did not come again. Red XIII and Cid watched him warily. Tifa laid a hand on his shoulder.

"What is it?"

Cloud shook his head again. "Nothing...nothing. I thought I heard...nothing."

/Cloud.../

An image came into Cloud's mind. The walls of the Northern Crater collapsing after Sephiroth's defeat. The wave of Holy energy exploding from the crater. A small black orb sailing high into the air, borne on the shock wave of the explosion, coming to rest far away and rolling into a cave on a small round island.

Round Island.

Cloud opened his eyes. "I know where the Black Materia is."

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Sephiroth Obscura opened his eyes and scowled as four shadows fell into the alley where he sat. He did not appreciate the interruption, although two of the shadows' owners had the eyes of his mother's puppets. He took note of this; it might be useful.

The woman spoke first. "Look what we found. Vail's pet project."

The second, a blonde man with two strange-looking knives, rolled his eyes. "Let's just get this over with."

The puppets just stared at him. They knew who he was. Oh, yes. They knew. The woman drew her firearms and leveled them at Sephiroth Obscura's head. "Fine with me." Her fingers began to tighten on the triggers...and then both pistols were knocked out of her hands by the slash of a long sword--but not the Masamune. The sword in question was long, broad, SOLDIER standard issue, in the hands of a thin man with short, neatly combed brown hair.

Archer's eyes bugged as he watched Raven drop her pistols. The sword had caught the back of her right hand, leaving a shallow but painful-looking gash in its wake.

Kain dropped his sword in shock. "Stuart...what the hell are you doing?"

Stuart swallowed dryly, sword still held out in front of him, ready to strike again. "Get out of my head," he whispered, eyes still locked with Sephiroth's.

"Oh, shit." Archer groaned. "C'mon, Stu, pull it together..."

"Can't--" Stuart shook his head fiercely. The blood-red eyes in front of him would not release their hold on his brain or on the Jenova cells drifting through his body. His hands raised the sword once more and began to swing it directly at Archer's head...and stopped just as the blade touched the top of his hair. Kain's hands had clamped down on Stuart's, trying to wrestle the huge sword away from him as Raven scrambled for her pistols. Archer's knees gave out as he realized that he'd been just millimeters away from having his head split in two like a coconut and he dropped to the ground, shaking.

"Goddamnit, Raven, shoot that son of a bitch!" Kain screamed as Stuart's hands began to slip out of his, pulling the sword back.

"No, no, no--" Stuart whimpered, trying to make himself release the sword he held. His fingers would not listen, and he sobbed weakly as his hands drove the blade forward.

Raven trained both pistols on Sephiroth's head once more and pulled both triggers.

Kain lost his grip on Stuart's hands.

A blinding flash filled the alley.

When Archer's vision finally cleared, he took a look around him. Raven still stood there, aiming at empty air, smoke rising from the barrels of both pistols. Two roundish chunks of masonry had been blown out of the wall in front of her. Stuart stood staring at the ground in front of him, shaking and whimpering "no, no, no" again. His sword lay at his feet, its blade stained with blood from the tip almost to the hilt. Archer followed Stuart's gaze and saw Kain...

Kain lay face-down on the pavement, one hand clutching his stomach, blood soaking the ground around him. His eyes were open, but they saw nothing.

"Oh, shit," Archer croaked again. "Oh, God."

Raven slowly slid her pistols back into their holsters and turned around, paling at the sight that greeted her. "Stuart...what the fuck did you do!?"

Stuart just stared at the body in front of him. "No, no, no..."

"I think he's lost it." Archer stood up unsteadily. "Now what?"

"Now we go home." Raven bit her lip. She would not cry. Not here. Not now. "Someone has a lot of explaining to do."

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The Highwind touched down in Junon. Again, a van was waiting to carry Cid to Reeve's house, where a deep crack in the front yard was cordoned off by yellow DANGER streamers tied to waist-high wooden stakes. The oak tree was gone; a knee-high stump sat where it had been. Cid averted his eyes as he passed the crevasse and stepped inside.

Reeve sat on the sofa idly fiddling with a metal skeleton, roughly the size and shape of a cat's. He looked up at Cid and sighed. "Shera's in bed. She finally fell asleep about five this morning and I didn't have the heart to wake her up."

Cid nodded. "Workin' on the new Cait Sith already?"

"Yeah. I think right now trying to get him up and running again is the only thing keeping me from going bugshit." He set the skeleton down on the coffee table. "Any luck?"

Cid just shook his head. "I need a favor."

"Sure." Reeve nodded. "Name it."

"Can you have a chopper give me and Shera a ride home?"

"Of course--it's probably not my place to ask, but why not just take the Highwind?" Reeve felt in his shirt pocket for his cigarettes, drew one out, and lit it.

"I need to go home for a while." Cid rubbed his eyes. "I got a lot to think about, and I'm no good to the others like this."

Reeve nodded. "I don't know what to say."

"Don't worry about it." Cid started to head for the bedroom, then he paused. "I thought you should know this. Elena thinks Shinra's up to something, but she can't figure out what. You better keep on your toes. Anything weird starts happening, you get on the horn to Vincent right away."

"Believe me, I will."

After Cid left with Shera, Reeve picked up the metal cat skeleton and went back to adjusting the hip joints. It had been a long time since he'd had to build a whole new body; the upgrade from Cait Sith II to Cait Sith III had been nothing more than a swap of the "brains" of the robot. He almost had it perfect when the phone rang, jarring him out of his concentration and causing him to drop the tiny screw he'd removed from the joint. "Ahh, hell..." He knew he wouldn't be able to find that thing in the carpet without a flashlight and a magnifying glass, and he made a mental note to buy a magnetic screwdriver as soon as possible. He picked up the phone and cradled it between his chin and shoulder as he hunted for the missing screw. "Yeah?"

No reply.

"Hello?" Reeve scowled at the phone. "Is someone there?"

Click. Dial tone.

"Damn kids," Reeve muttered. He slammed the phone back down and resumed his search for the screw.

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Author's notes: Who's crank-calling Reeve? Wrong number? Maybe, maybe not...will poor Stuart ever be the same again? I don't know about you, but if some asshole made me do one of my best buddies in I'd be pretty well messed up for life...speaking of the new Turks, I've added a new Archer pic to the CoJ art gallery (can be reached in roundabout fashion from my Cid shrine, URL as always in long-ass .sig)...Archer=bishounen ^_^...sorry it took so damn long for me to write this, RL was interfering :}