

Final Fantasy VII: Children of Jenova

Chapter 15

"Well." Raven snapped her cell phone closed and shoved it back in her pocket. "A big fat lot of help Heidegger was. We're to stay here for the next three days while he makes up his mind what to do about our sudden manning crisis and how we're supposed to go about covering this shit up. There's a chopper on the way to--uhm--pick Kain up..." She bit her lip, hard.

Archer snorted in disgust. "I don't suppose he's heard about that spiky-headed freak showing up anywhere else?" He was answered by a head shake and exasperated sigh from Raven. "How'd he do that, anyway? How'd he get into Stu's head like that?"

"Don't you get it?" Stuart asked softly, sitting on the curb and staring at his feet. "That guy is Sephiroth."

Archer eyed Stuart warily. "I don't even want to think about it." He gestured towards the bar behind him with his thumb. "Three days, eh? Raven, get back on the phone to Heidegger and tell him that for the next three days I will be in yon local drinking establishment suckin' 'em down. You two are more than welcome to join me." Neither Raven nor Stuart made any move to do so, and Archer threw up his hands and stomped through the door of "yon local drinking establishment," Annie's Hangar.

Stuart looked up briefly. The other patrons he'd seen entering and leaving the bar were not exactly society's creme de la creme. "How long you think it'll be before he gets the crap knocked out of him in there?" he asked Raven.

"He should be fine as long as he keeps his hands off the women." Raven replied. She checked her watch. "Five minutes at best.."

Stuart nodded. "I give him thirty."

They shook hands.

* * *

The Lifestream had left its mark just outside of Branford; a small crack in the earth just wide enough for one person to slip through. The green water rested just a few feet below its lip.

Some thirty or so feet below, Sephiroth Lumina drifted back and forth, back and forth. If he'd had a body and been on dry land, he would have been pacing. Where had she gone? He'd turned away for a moment because he thought he saw something approaching. When he was satisfied that it was only his imagination, he turned back to find the girl gone.

There was a small "splash" above, and the form of a girl in her teens, with blonde hair down to the middle of her back, began to float down toward him. Sephiroth Lumina propelled himself upwards to meet her.

"Where have you been!?" he exclaimed. "I thought something had--"

The girl sniffled. "I'm sorry. I got scared. I tried to call some people. Y'know, tell 'em I'm okay."

Sephiroth Lumina let out a sigh. "I'm sorry as well. I should have thought about that. Did you speak to anyone?"

"Nah. My folks weren't home so I called someone else...he was home but I--I couldn't say anything--" The girl sniffled and rubbed her eyes. "I want to go home. I know I shouldn't have left, but I wanted to go home."

"I know." Sephiroth gave her a gentle smile and touched her cheek. "Just one more day, I promise."

"Okay." The girl chuckled. "Besides, I couldn't stay out there too long with no clothes and all."

Sephiroth Lumina grimaced. That was the other thing he hadn't taken into consideration...

* * *

Besides the fact that it served as a purveyor of various and sundry alcoholic beverages and the occasional plate of hot wings, Annie's Hangar could very well have been mistaken for an aviation museum. Model airplanes hung on wires from the ceiling. Posters and prints depicting numerous aircraft were hung on the walls. One wall was decked with portraits of notable pilots, among them a picture of a very young Cid Highwind and another of a woman in her thirties; the small plaque riveted to the frame identified her as Squadron Leader Annie Wright.

These days, Annie looked like a sweet little old lady...who just happened to wear a leather jacket and ride a motorcycle. Her white hair was cut short and her blue eyes sparkled brightly when she smiled. She was not smiling right now. Chopper and his little band of hoodlums occupied a table smack in the middle of the place, getting shitfaced and making noise and scaring folks and generally raising hell. But he was a good customer.

"Hey, Annie!" he yelled, waving at her.

Annie didn't even look up from her newspaper. "The hell you want now, Chopper?"

Chopper, a rather large, loud, and hairy biker, laughed loudly. "Yew wanna bring us another pitcher over here?"

"Got-damn..." Annie threw her newspaper down angrily. "I'm cuttin' you off after this! You done gone through three kegs!" No, scratch that. Annie pulled back the tap and watched a trickle of foam drizzle into the pitcher. "Damnitalltohell, FOUR kegs...hold yer water, I'll be right back." This was answered by another loud laugh.

"We love ya too, Annie!"

"Stuff it!" Annie stood up and pulled on her jacket. On the sleeve was a patch she'd cut off her old flight suit; it was embroidered with the words "Sq. Ldr. Annie Wright" and a pair of wings topped by a wreath-encircled star. She headed out the back door. The stack of kegs sat out there; near it was a pay phone.

Annie paused and took a good look at that phone. There was a trail of small footprints leading both toward and away from it; they led somewhat in the direction of that damn crack that'd opened up in the ground a while back and given the Hangar a glowing green bath. Some of the footprints were damp with that same stuff. "Hmph," she muttered, then forgot all about it. She tipped a keg over and began to roll it inside. Once inside, she tapped it expertly, hooked it up, and drew a pitcher for Chopper's table. "Here!" she snapped, setting it down in front of the biker. "Here's your damn pitcher...that's another fifty."

"Aw, damn..." Chopper checked his pockets and glanced around nervously. "Any o' you rejects got any money on ya?"

Heads were shaken all the way around the table.

"Damn," Chopper said again. "Hey, can you just gimme a tab?"

Annie scowled. "Sure. You need to go see the Credit Department. The Credit Department is run by Helen Waite. If you want credit, you can go to Helen Waite." Several snickers from other patrons nearly caused her to lose her poker face, but she held it. "Her office is on the roof."

"Aw, c'mon, Annie..." Chopper whined as even his companions burst into guffaws. "You know I'm good for--who the hell izzat pansy?"

A tall blonde man in a blue business suit stepped into the bar, and Annie wrinkled her nose. "I don't like your looks, friend," she said, staring at the new arrival. "Begone or--"

Archer tossed a ten grand note on Chopper's table. "I'll get his. And bring me the strongest thing you got."

Annie shut her mouth, plucked the bill off the table, and held it up to the nearest light to check the watermark. When she was satisfied that the bill was genuine, she disappeared behind the bar again, returning with a shot glass and a bottle. She handed both of them to Archer. "I'd sit at the bar if I was you," she suggested. "Chopper there doesn't care much for Shinras."

Archer shoved the glass back over the bar, uncapped the bottle, and drained half of it in one gulp. He then turned purple and fell off his bar stool. "What the hell is this?" he wheezed.

"Annie, I'll have what the dude on the floor is having," came a voice from the other end of the bar.

Annie snickered. "That would be moonshine, Shinra-Boy. Just like my daddy and his daddy made."

"Damn," Archer coughed, hauling himself back up onto his stool. He did not notice the rather large biker guy approaching from behind until the dude gave him a push and knocked him right back onto the floor. "The hell..."

"My folks was from Corel," Chopper grumbled, hauling Archer back to his feet roughly. "They died 'cause of you Shinra scum."

Archer rolled his eyes. "I am NOT in the mood for this tonight," he hissed, hands resting on his sai.

Chopper shrugged. "Don't give a rosy rat's ass whether you're in the mood for it or not." He wound up and threw a mighty punch at Archer; the Turk ducked just in time and the biker's meaty fist drove into the bar, splintering the rail. He was about to throw another when a loud bang startled him. A chunk of plaster dropped from the ceiling into his beer, and a small plastic model of a Gelnika narrowly missed Archer's head as it fell.

Annie stood behind the bar, a pistol in her hand pointed at the ceiling. "You two cut that shit off right the hell now!" she roared; even Chopper cowered before her wrath. "Ain't gonna be no goddamn fightin' in here! Chopper, I done told you once..."

"Sorry, Annie." Chopper slunk back to his table, leaving Archer shaking in his shoes.

"Got-damn," Annie sighed again, putting the pistol back in its place under the bar. "I'm gettin' too old for this shit. I gotta hire me a bouncer."

* * *

Barely a word had been spoken in the Highwind house since Cid and Shera's return from Junon. Shera had cooked dinner in silence. She and Cid had eaten it in silence. And now Cid sat on the back porch gazing out towards the new lake in silence.

/What am I supposed to do now?/ he thought, drawing halfheartedly on his cigarette. /Give up on Junior? Leave Shera here alone and keep lookin' for her?/

Junior needed him.

Shera needed him.

A sound drew Cid out of his reverie. One word. His name. He turned to see Shera standing in the back doorway. She was pale, and behind her glasses her eyes were red and damp with tears. "Cid...come to bed. Please."

Cid sighed deeply. "In a minute. I promise."

Without a word, Shera turned and went back inside. Cid looked back toward the faint green glow of the lake and went back to thinking.

It all boiled down to one thing. Junior had been counting on Cid to pull her out of there, and he didn't. He'd almost had her. "Almost" meant absolutely nothing. "Almost" hadn't kept her from falling into that goddamn crack. And it didn't make him feel a damn bit better to think that she'd done it to save his life. He should have been the one that fell down that hole in the ground. Not Junior. Not his little girl.

Cid drew another deep sigh. His heart and his gut told him that Junior was still alive, still out there, still trying to find her way home. His rational mind told him she wasn't. And it was getting harder and harder to shut it up.

Again, his musings were interrupted, but this time by something other than Shera's voice. There was a faint rumbling sound, followed by a whoosh as the green lake spat a column of Lifestream-water high in the air. Cid was on his feet before he could stop himself, and his feet were carrying him to the lake as fast as they could. He did not hear the back door open again; he did not hear Shera crying out his name again. If he did hear, he wasn't listening.

He reached the shore of the lake panting and gasping, and some exposed tree root or some such caught his foot, sending him to the ground on his hands and knees in the damp earth. The green water sprayed upwards one last time, thoroughly soaking him, and then died down. Cid raised his head and looked around, still on the ground.

He was alone. Nothing but water had come out of the lake.

Cid drew in a gulp of air and let it out in a sob. "Goddamnit..." He sat down and dropped his forehead into his hands. "You brought Tifa and Cloud back," he began in a shaky voice, pointing an accusing finger at the lake, "You brought Jenova back...you brought goddamn Sephiroth back twice so why the FUCK can't you give me back my daughter--" His voice caught in his throat and he broke down, crying in deep gasping sobs that shook his whole body.

A hand rested lightly on his back, and he looked up quickly. Shera had followed him out here. She was on her knees next to him on the damp ground; her arms went around his shoulders and held him tightly. "I miss her, Shera," Cid whispered. "I miss her so damn much..."

"I do too," Shera sniffled, pressing her cheek against the top of Cid's head.

"I couldn't save her."

"You tried. That's all anyone could ask for."

They sat together by the glowing green lake, clinging together as if there was nothing left in the world except each other. "Cid...she's gone."

Cid nodded. "I know," he said after a long silence. "I know." He held on to Shera for dear life, crying softly against her shoulder, and she stroked the back of his head gently.

"Shh." Shera kissed the top of Cid's head and sniffled.

Cid reached up and wiped one eye. "Shera, when was the last time I told you I love you?"

Shera smiled just a little bit. "I think you just did."

* * *

Morning broke over the town of Branford. The three Turks awoke in their room at the inn and having nothing better to do, decided to spend the day relaxing as best they could under the circumstances.

Annie Wright awoke, swatted her alarm clock against the nearest wall, and dressed. The first thing she did that morning was draw up a sign on a scrap of cardboard that read "Wanted-Bouncer." This she duct-taped in the window of the Hangar right above the one that read "For sale: Hardy Daytona Ninja, runs good, 20K or best offer. Ask Annie."

That done, she went out back to roll in a few kegs. No doubt Chopper'd be in later on, or else that Shinra boy and his buddies. After that she needed to hit the grocery store; her hot wing supply was running a bit low. Annie's wings came in four flavors: mild, hot, extra hot, and nuclear waste. The last were flavored with peppers she bought from the taqueria down the street; the lady that ran it was from Costa del Sol and had a steady supply of the hot little buggers coming from there. The nuclear waste wings were, in fact, so hot that Annie ran an ongoing contest: anyone who could eat an entire plate of twenty got them and however many drinks he or she wanted for free. Nobody had ever gotten the free plate.

A low moan coming from behind the stack of kegs froze Annie in her tracks. "Who's there?" she snapped, snatching up a two-by-four from beside the back door. "Hello?" There came another moan, followed by a whimper and a snuffle. "Don't make me come over there..."

Behind the stack of kegs, there sat a young woman, probably late teens or early twenties, clothed in nothing but long blonde hair that, had she been standing up, would have reached her knees or lower. She sat with her back against the kegs, hugging her knees and shivering.

"God a'mighty, what happened to you?" Annie gasped, kneeling next to the girl. "Where'd you come from--holy mother of--your eyes..." Annie caught a glimpse of the girl's eyes. Bright--no, not just bright, GLOWING green. Annie steadied herself. "It don't matter. Come on in here 'fore you catch your death of cold." She pulled off her jacket and draped it over the girl's shoulders. "You got a name, hon?"

The girl looked up and blinked. "I--"

/flash/

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

/flash/

"I'm C.J.," she finally said. "Where am I?"

Annie chuckled and helped the girl stand up. "Somewhere you really don't wanna be sittin' in your birthday suit. Hmm..." She took a good look at C.J....about five-eight, five-nine, itty bitty feet. "I think I got some stuff that'll fit you. How'd you end up here, anyway?"

"I..." How DID she get there? The last thing she remembered was crawling out of that crack in the ground right before the sun came up...and before that, falling into a similar one..something had happened in that time span that had vanished from her memory. Something had happened to her that... "Ohmigod--" She tried to take a step; her legs were now quite a bit longer than she remembered them to be and she fell flat on her face. "Ow."

"Poor kid." Annie hauled C.J. to her feet again. "It don't matter. What you need right now is some dry clothes and some food in your tummy."

Once inside, Annie vanished up the stairs to her apartment, where she fished out a pair of jeans, a T-shirt with the printed legend "I (heart) Explosives," an old pair of boots, and several pairs of socks. C.J. Donned them gratefully, having to put three socks on each foot to get Annie's boots to fit without flapping around like clown shoes.

"Nice T-shirt," C.J. giggled.

"Got that from some friends of mine when I was in the service, some demolitions guys. Them guys are some nutcases, I'll tell ya that." Annie chuckled. "Here, let's do somethin' with all that hair..." She found a scrap of leather lacing tucked in a drawer, clamped it in her teeth, pulled C.J.'s knee-length hair back, and tied it in place. "There we go. Now come on down to the bar and I'll get you somethin' to eat."

C.J.'s stomach answered with a loud growl, and she laughed. How long had it been since she'd eaten? She cautiously picked her way into the bar (still getting the hang of walking on her new legs) and sat down on a stool as Annie flipped the

Hangar's "closed" sign over to the "open" side. Almost immediately two men in blue suits and one woman in a blue suit trotted in and ordered a pitcher. As Annie drew it, she nodded towards them. "See them?"

C.J. took a look. "Yeah."

"Shinra. I can't stand 'em, but they tip good." She took the pitcher over to the table where the three Shinras were sitting, and they rewarded her with what appeared to be a rather large bill. "See what I mean?"

C.J. was busy looking at the world map that hung on one of the bar's walls. An X marked on a small peninsula directly west of Fort Condor was supplemented by the immortal words "You Are Here." Junon lay a ways to the north. And C.J. remembered that somewhere in the mountains near Junon, there was an airplane tucked away in a rusted-out hangar. She frowned and stared out the window into the street, spotting the two signs Annie had taped to the window. She stepped outside to get a better look, then came back in and took her seat again. Chopper and his buddies came in behind her and took their usual spot, shooting nasty looks at the Shinras. "You selling a motorcycle?" she asked; Annie nodded.

"Yep. I don't need it anymore. You interested?"

C.J. nodded. There were a lot of things she couldn't quite remember; G- Bike was not among them. "I don't have any money, though. What does a bouncer do?"

Annie shrugged. "They beat people up, mostly. Troublemakers and such in the bar."

"I can do that."

"Wha!?" Annie almost fell over. "Take a look at the customers here, girl. Ain't no way."

Meanwhile, the Turks were in the process of getting drunk already. Archer found that he could not take his eyes off the blonde at the bar. He poked Stuart on the shoulder. "Stu. At the bar. Behind you. Is that not the nicest ass you've ever seen?"

Stuart just blushed in reply. Raven raised an eyebrow. "I've seen better," she shrugged and went back to her drink.

"I didn't need to hear that," Archer sighed. He stood up and made his way to the girl, and later on he would realize that this was probably the dumbest thing he'd ever done...but he did it anyway--he reached out and gave the girl a squeeze on the bottom.

She spun around to face him, eyes flaring in anger. Archer didn't seem to care. "How about a kiss, babe?"

C.J. got herself under control. "Sure," she said with an evil grin. "Close your eyes."

Archer did so; C.J. reared back and then slammed her forehead into his nose.

"What the hell!?" he whimpered as Stuart and Raven stood up, jaws hanging. He shook his head to clear it just as C.J.'s fist connected with his jaw and sent him staggering back. "All right, that's enough, sweetheart." He wound up and threw a punch at the girl. BIG mistake.

C.J. made a quick block-sidestep move. As Archer stood there trying to figure out what to do now, C.J. brought the steel-reinforced toe of her boot squarely into his groin.

Archer's response was predictable; he doubled over and whimpered in pain. Taking advantage of his position, C.J. clapped her hands over his ears hard, grabbed him by the hair and slammed his face into her knee. Almost as an afterthought, she reached down the back of his pants and pulled the waistband of his briefs almost up to his head as he lay curled in a whimpering ball of pain and misery on the floor. That done, she picked him up by the back of the collar and hauled him outside.

The other two Turks just stared at her, jaws still dragging the floor, as the blonde bodily threw Archer out the door. "And stay out, you PIG!" she screamed after him. Raven and Stuart looked at each other, wide-eyed, and then ran out to check on Archer.

Annie said nothing. She calmly stepped out from behind the bar, went up to the window, and ripped the "Wanted: Bouncer" sign off it.

- - -

Author's notes: Hahahahaha! Poor Archer...doesn't know when to keep his hands to himself (go C.J. go!)...Squadron Leader Wright--where have we seen that name before?...damn, it's about time we got to see the kind of folks that hang out in Branford. They're kinda ornery. Maybe it's because I moved their hometown around about four times before I finally found a place to put it.