

Chapter 19

Scarlet had just gotten word that the first phase of her plan to reclaim Junon was proceeding exactly as planned, with a bonus: Reno. So that was where the little bastard had gone. She figured Rude and Elena were probably skulking around the city as well, but she could wait for them. All she cared about was that Reeve would soon be dying slowly in her gas chamber. Reeve, that lying, conniving, treacherous, double-crossing little son of a bitch would be hers. Just as Elena had once blamed Cloud for Tseng's death, Scarlet blamed Reeve for Rufus's untimely demise. Well, it worked for her. It was because of Cloud that Sephiroth was able to summon the Meteor, and if he hadn't done that, that fucking Weapon wouldn't have blasted Midgar, and Reeve had been working with Cloud in the form of that idiotic robot cat.

Scarlet was the one who had finally found Rufus after all the commotion had died down after the whole Meteor deal. Bruised and bleeding from the mishap with her poor Proud Clod, she'd dragged herself back into what was left of the Shinra tower and found Rufus lying on the floor in the ruins of his office. Several pieces of shrapnel from the exploded window had lodged themselves in his arm, chest, and stomach, and he lay on the floor spitting up blood and shivering and clutching weakly at his stomach trying to keep his insides in. Scarlet may have been the cruelest woman in the word short of Jenova, but she was not completely without some semblance of compassion. She ended his misery with one bullet to the brain, gathered what was left of Shinra, and got the hell out of Midgar. Reeve had vanished. The little chickenshit had run away.

Scarlet never forgot that.

Neomidgar was built in less than a year. Scarlet changed her surname from Alexander to Shinra and made it crystal clear with that one act what her intentions were. And executing Reeve would make it crystal clear to the people of Junon that she was done fucking around. Shinra had ruled the world before, now it would do so again.

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"Goddamnit to hell, Junior--" Cid gunned the Tiny Bronco II's throttle and screamed toward Junon as fast as the old Stingray would carry him, scanning the sky around him for any trace of an old gray Viper. Why didn't she just stay put and wait for him to pick her up? The sound of an explosion drew his attention, and he watched in horror as a small fighter jet exploded just a mile or two ahead. Then horror became slack-jawed confusion, which gave way to joy as he realized that the exploding aircraft was black, and the jet that shot its ass out of the sky was gray and did not vanish. Then the horror returned as he watched three more Banshees uncloak dead ahead of the Viper.

"Oh, shit." Cid goaded the Stingray ahead as fast as it would possibly go, and it shuddered in protest. Realizing he wasn't going to get there in time, he swore softly and fired off both of the heat-seeking missiles Vicks had loaded up for him before the damned things could vanish again, destroying one Banshee and crippling another as the remaining Banshee let fly a heat-seeker of its own. The Viper spat out another flare and peeled off sharply. The black jet cloaked once more and Cid eased the Tiny Bronco II closer to his old Viper. "Junior?" he called out over the radio. "Junior, you in there?"

There was a long pause, followed by "...Daddy?"

Cid let out the breath he'd been holding; it escaped in a small sob followed by a laugh. "Damnit, Junior, are you up here tearin' up my plane?"

He was answered with a laugh. "Trying not to, Daddy...there's still one of those stupid disappearing airplanes around--damnit!" Said "stupid disappearing airplane" uncloaked once more, along with two more of its buddies, and Cid watched with interest as the Viper started popping off rounds of 30-mil at the things, aiming for the funny-looking pods hanging off their bellies. One of the black jets seemed to shiver once before snapping into solid, plainly visible form. "Sorry...that pod's what makes 'em disappear! You gotta shoot that! If they disappear you can't even hit 'em with heat-seekers!"

"I'll be damned!" Cid gasped as the Viper peeled out again, narrowly avoiding another missile. "Thanks for the tip...Junior?"

"Sir?"

"When we get home I'm washin' your mouth out with soap!" Cid tried his damndest to sound serious, but the last word of the sentence dissolved into chuckles anyway. "In your face, you sorry sack of shit!" With that, Cid swooped past the Banshee and peppered it with rounds, doing just enough damage to force its pilot to eject as the poor jet went into a dive; shortly thereafter it did a passable impression of a lawn dart. "Junior, you listen to me and listen good. You put that Viper in full afterburner and get the hell out of here." The response was not what Cid wanted to hear.

"No sir!"

"Junior, I wasn't asking you. I was telling you--" Cid would have continued, but one of the other two Banshees chose that moment to uncloak in front of him. Before either jet could fire upon the other, the sleek gray form of the Viper dashed between them, popping off rounds at the Banshee's cloaking pod. The shots missed their mark, but before the aircraft vanished to regroup Cid saw the Viper spit something that burned white-hot right on top of it. "Junior, what the hell are you doing?" he queried. What the hell was she thinking, dropping a flare right on the thing? He watched the little flaming ball zipping around as the now-cloaked Banshee scurried away none the wiser, and then when he heard Junior speaking to the Viper's VOX system he knew...and he made a mental note to kick himself in the ass later. "I'll be a son of a--why the hell didn't I think of that!?"

"Fire left heat-seeker," Junior ordered the aircraft.

"No target acquired," the Viper replied.

"Override!" Junior snapped at the thing, and Cid grinned evilly as the Viper's heat-seeker began to follow the Banshee around, fixated on the little white flare that was fusing itself to the thing's left wing. "Heh heh...if the missile don't get him, wait till that flare burns through the skin! BOOM!" Junior laughed.

And BOOM it went. The Banshee zigged when it probably should have zagged, and the Viper's heat-seeker caught it right in the intake. Its pilot, realizing at last that something really bad was about to happen, punched out and drifted away on the breeze.

"Okay, two of these sonsabitches left..." Cid looked around quickly for any sign of uncloaking Banshees and saw none. "Hey, ya little chickenshits...come out come out wherever you are..." Cid slowed the Tiny Bronco II to a hover; the Viper was unable to do so and simply circled slowly around him. One minute passed, then two, then five. No sign of the Banshees.

"They buggered off," Junior finally said and began to laugh. "They ran away! Buncha stupid wussy chickensh--"

Cid opened his mouth to scold her, but something was wrong...she'd stopped before the offending word even hit the radio waves in its entirety.

"I think we got a problem," Junior's voice finally said. Looking off to the east, Cid began to see something very large taking shape much closer than he liked. An enormous patch of air began to ripple and waver, revealing a huge gray aircraft; the Viper could have sat on one of its wings and the Tiny Bronco II on the other with room to spare. On each wing there were four weapons pylons, each carrying a full load of nasty things that went bang and boom. Mounted on the nose was a very large gun. And hanging on the belly of the behemoth was a tiny black cloaking pod. During the war, Cid had seen firsthand what a Shinra Hurricane was capable of; namely, wiping out whole squadrons of fighters very quickly. Two rickety old jets wouldn't stand a chance against it.

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Vincent, as usual, didn't show it...but he couldn't remember the last time he'd had such a profound feeling of impending doom as he had at that moment. The Highwind screamed toward Junon as fast as its engines would carry it, and as usual Yuffie was in the engine room doing her thing. Cloud seemed to have adjusted to the not-so-smooth ride somewhat, but he was still unusually pale and gripped the nearest immovable object as tightly as he could. The fact that the Black Materia was only a few steps away from him, nestled in one of the pockets of Vincent's cloak, didn't help his state of mind.

Cloud could imagine the thing sitting there in its prison of red cloth, calling out to him like a lost and frightened child, or a lost and spiteful lover. /Come on, Cloud./ He could picture a sweet smile spreading across its blank black face, a closed-lipped smile hiding a mouthful of needle-sharp fangs. /Come a little closer./ He realized with a sort of sick horror that the voice he put to those words sounded a little like Sephiroth, a little like Zack, and a little like Aeris. Just the right combination to seriously mess with his head. /Cloud...come to me...hold me...touch me.../

"What the HELL!?" Barret thundered as the Highwind quite suddenly veered off to the north, passing close enough to Junon for the crew and party to see the mayhem in progress as Banshees and Hurricanes strafed what was left of the airstrip once more just because they could and started on the rest of the town. Apparently Reeve had been able to raise some sort of alarm; the shields that had protected the city during the Weapon attack all those years ago had been raised over the buildings. "The hell you doin', Vincent!? Where the hell you headed?"

"I don't know!" Vincent snapped back. "I've lost control of the ship! The controls aren't responding!" The Highwind's flight crew scurried around the bridge like ants, and a very green Yuffie staggered onto the bridge in their midst.

"What are you doin', Vincent!? Are you NUTS?" she wheezed, flopping onto a bench. Vincent shot her a pained look. "What's up?"

"We're out of control, that's what's up!" Elena spat at her. "Happy?"

"Well, excuse me!" Yuffie sniffed. "Y'mind if I ask WHY the hell we're out of control?"

"'Cause Vincent can't fly worth shit, prob'ly," Barret replied, and Vincent just glared at him.

"Would you care to try, Barret?" Vincent was unable to prevent his annoyance with the big man from creeping into his voice. Barret gave no reply, and Vincent turned his attention back to the consoles.

Cloud's attention was focused elsewhere. Specifically, on the small roundish bulge in one of Vincent's cloak pockets.

/Cloud/

He thought for a second that if he looked hard enough, his gaze would burn away the cloth that held the Black Materia...and then what? What would he do if it dropped to the floor and rolled to him?

/My servant/

Dread rose like bile in Cloud's throat as he realized that he wasn't imagining the Black Materia's voice anymore; he was hearing it.

/My puppet/

And it sounded just as he had imagined it would. /Oh God oh God something's wrong tell Vincent tell him tell him tell--/

/Hold me/

"No," Cloud whimpered, clawing at his hair. Tifa reached out and laid her hand on his; he snatched it away. /No no oh God stop it stop it.../ He was vaguely aware that the Highwind was slowing to a hover right over the Northern crater. The Black Materia issued forth one final command, and Cloud sprang to his feet. He caught Vincent completely off guard, tackling him and knocking him to the floor, and his hand dove into the pocket where the Black Materia rested. His hand closed around the black orb and drew it out before Vincent could react.

"Cloud! Stop!" Red XIII cried, but it was already too late. Black Materia in hand, Cloud turned and ran off the bridge. Red, Tifa, and Elena gave chase; Vincent came to his senses and did likewise.

They found him standing on the deck of the airship, gazing over the rail at the man who stood suspended in midair above the crater. He wore the same ill-fitting SOLDIER armor he had worn the last time Red, Cloud, and Vincent had seen him, but now he carried the Masamune as well. They recognized him immediately, as did Tifa.

"Zack..."

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Rude liked jogging about as much as Reno did. But he'd done what had been asked of him. Unfortunately, it hadn't been enough. Without air power to back them up, Junon's ground troops were sitting ducks for the Shinra air force's superior firepower.

Now the best he could hope for was to get back to the Junon Hydro tower in one piece to help fend off any Shinra goons that tried to get in. He noticed that something didn't look quite right outside the tower. There was a patch of distorted air sitting there in front of it, and it was roughly the same size and shape as a helicopter. The front door was, therefore, not an option. He took a quick look toward the parking garage and saw that it was deserted. Perfect. As parking garages tended to do, this one had a door in it leading straight into the building's lobby, and Rude took advantage of it. The lobby was likewise deserted, and that rattled him straight to the core. There were two distinct possibilities at that point: a) something really bad was about to happen and b) something really bad had already happened and Rude was about to get caught in the aftermath of same. He slipped into an elevator and jabbed the button for the top floor.

Reeve had done many great things for the city of Junon; changing the elevator music had not, however, been at the top of his do-list. A string-laden rendition of "Moon Over Midgar" oozed cheerily from the speakers as the elevator cruised toward the top floor of the tower, and Rude found himself wanting very badly to dismantle said speakers with a ten pound sledgehammer. Three floors from the top the car stopped. The door opened, and three blue suits stepped in.

"Would you press 'up,' please?" the blonde guy asked with a grin as the doors hissed shut.

They opened again at the top floor of the tower, and the three blue suits disembarked with the blonde one wiping a bloodied sai with a handkerchief.

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"Shit!"

Cid didn't even bother responding when that expletive drifted through the radio. There was no time for that now. He was too busy dodging bullets and missiles, as was Junior. And both of them were dangerously low on fuel. /Can't keep this shit up much longer.../ Cid was out of missiles. Junior still had one Death's Head but dared not use it at this range. All they could do was sneak in shots of 30-mil wherever they could, and it was like shooting Ruby Weapon with a BB gun. The Shinra Hurricane was designed and built for the sole purpose of taking abuse; it was designed to stay flyable with half of both wings and the tail blown off, and it had a hide like a rhino.

The Viper darted in and popped off a few rounds, striking a few of the Hurricane's many non-vital areas, and then darted back out. "Crap...I got a low fuel light, Daddy..."

"I think they're contagious," Cid muttered, glaring at his own warning light. "We're gonna have to make a run for it best we can--"

The Hurricane let loose a volley of its own bullets, striking the Viper's VOX pod. A shower of sparks rained down from the shattered pod, and the radio began to spout a stream of gibberish. The Viper went out of control, twirling merrily through the air; the landing gear came down and back up a few times and the gun fired off a few rounds in random directions.

"Junior, get that goddamn pod off there before it starts doin' somethin' really crazy!" Cid snapped.

"I already tried! It won't let me jettison the goddamn thing! All the weapons controls are locked out!"

"The weapons--oh, shit..." Cid's worst fear was confirmed when he heard the distorted voice of the rogue pod come through the radio one final time.

"Locking on...target locked...firing Death's Head."

As the voice died out for the last time, the Viper's canopy blew off; immediately after that the ejection seat fired. The Death's Head detonated on impact with the Hurricane's nose, sending bomblets flying over Hurricane and Viper alike as the seat's chute poofed open. The blinded Hurricane plowed right into the now-unmanned Viper as the mini-bombs struck the larger aircraft's own two Death's Head missiles.

The explosion was spectacular, but Cid wasn't about to hang around and gawk at the fireworks. He got as far away as he possibly could while the wind carried the Viper's ejection seat to safety toward the woods below. He would have to hunt Junior down later. Right now he needed to land before the Bronco decided to run out of gas and die on him.

As he touched down just outside of Fort Condor, he noticed something odd. The now-uncloaked Shinra fighters were pulling out, heading south at a leisurely pace. At first, Cid thought they'd actually done it; they'd actually run the bastards off. But there was a major flaw in that logic: if they really were running scared, why hadn't they bothered to cloak? And where the hell was the Highwind?

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"Oh my God, they're leaving!" Reeve said to himself as he watched in disbelief. Sure enough, every last one of the jets Shinra had sent was uncloaking and flying away. They were leaving. They were taking a powder, they were making like goalies and getting the puck outta there, they were bugging off. Reeve couldn't believe it. He had to look out the window three times to confirm it. It was true. Shinra was pulling out. Somehow, he'd won. With a heavy sigh of relief, he sank into his chair and dropped his forehead into his hands. That was way too close.

The door to his office swung open, and under his hands Reeve saw two pairs of feet sticking out of blue slacks walking in. He didn't even look up. "You guys are the greatest," he said to the feet as they approached his desk. "Soon as we get this place cleaned up again I'm gonna--" A third pair of feet entered Reeve's limited field of vision, a pair of feet encased in black high heels; nothing but leg was visible above them. The same cold, crawly feeling Reno had gotten earlier hit him, and he looked up quickly just as the butt end of a sai came smashing down on the back of his head.

"Wow, what a haul," Archer smirked, heaving the unconscious Reeve out of his chair. "I vote we get a raise and a vacation out of this one. All in favor say 'aye.'"

"Aye," Stuart echoed softly. Raven just withered the both of them with the same babies-must-play look she'd given Reno.

"Let's get him out of here," she directed.

On the way out of the building, a flyer posted on a bulletin board caught Archer's eye. "Missing Child," it proclaimed, and displayed a picture of a little blonde girl. Something about that picture looked awfully familiar, and Archer pocketed the flyer for future reference.

The chopper, with the inert Reno and Reeve restrained in the back, took off and began to head toward Neomidgar once more. As it flew over the Junon area forest, Raven squinted out the window. There was an ejection seat drifting earthward. Drifting in the breeze around its occupant's head was a nimbus of incredibly long blonde hair. "Hey...look at that," she said, pointing. "You don't suppose..."

"Catch her," Archer snapped, staring at the seat as it sailed lazily toward the trees. "Don't let her get away. I owe her one."

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C.J. sighed as her seat drifted toward the forest. She'd been so close to getting home...but that was okay. Daddy would find her and take her home. It would be okay.

The first hint she got that it would -not- be okay was the whirring sound of a helicopter engine approaching. The second was the uncomfortable yanking sensation of her chute catching on said chopper's skids.

"Got her!" she heard a familiar voice whoop above, barely audible over the din of the chopper's engine. "Nice catch!"

Oh no.

The butt-grabber.

This was not going well at all.

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"Zack..." Tifa croaked, her eyes brimming with tears as Cloud stood motionless at the edge of the deck, Black Materia in hand. "Zack...fight him..."

"Why? Why should I?" Zack--Sephiroth--whoever laughed mirthlessly. "So he--" and here he pointed the Masamune at Cloud-- "can go back to filling my head with lies?" Tifa opened her mouth to protest, but Zack cut her off. "Don't even start. He lied to his friends, he lied to me, he LIVED a lie and YOU LET HIM!"

"That's not true," Tifa whispered, although she knew it was...how many times had she wished she'd cut into the story Cloud had told them all in Kalm with what really happened five years before that? In desperation she tried a different angle. "What about C.J.? Don't you want to see her?"

Zack chuckled again. "I can see her whenever I want. Right now I don't have time. I have more important things to worry about." He held out his hand. "Give it to me, Cloud."

Cloud's feet began to move closer to the edge of the deck.

"Cloud!" Red XIII barked. "Cloud, stop!"

If Cloud heard, he wasn't listening. He held out the Black Materia to Zack, and Zack took it. With the same blinding flash as before, he was gone. There was a long and heavy silence on the deck, followed by a faint rumbling which grew louder and louder every second.

"We've got to get out of here," Vincent said, heading back for the bridge.

Tifa was the first to notice that Cloud was gone as well. "Wait! Cloud's--"

"We're going to have to look for him later. If we don't get out of here now we might not get out at all." Vincent vanished below deck, hoping the Highwind's engines were back under his control. They were, and the airship peeled out and began to make its way back to Junon just as the same energy barrier he'd seen seven years before rose up over the crater.

"Oh shit," Yuffie moaned upon seeing that unlovely view out the window. "Not again..."

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"Woohoo! Damn, this thing's heavy!" Five panting and gasping former Wratt & Pitney employees grunted and swore as they hefted their catch on board their hijacked airship, which they had christened the Blackhawk. At present, they were busy looking for cool treasures they could pawn off to rich weirdos to raise funds to keep the Blackhawk in good working order, and they had hit the jackpot at Mt. Nibel. The thing they heaved on board was at least as tall as the tallest crewman and three times as heavy. It was wrapped in burlap to keep it from breaking. They'd had to blast all around the damn Mako fountain to get the thing out, and even then it was still stuck in the rock, but it would surely bring them a mint. So what if the sword wouldn't come out? It still looked damn cool.

But who would be willing to pay the sort of price the Blackhawk crew would be asking for it?

Of course.

The black airship changed its course and began to head for Corel.

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Author's Notes: Well. Cloud flips out, Rude gets something bad done to him with a sai (top that, you hentai freaks ^_^), Reeve gets bashed over the head and stuffed in a chopper, Sephy gets the Black Materia again, and Junior gets shot down AND abducted by a butt-grabbing Turk (rest easy, Archer is not in any way, shape, or form related to Don Corneo).

Can it possibly get worse than this? Not much worse...what's the deal with Reno and Archer, anyway? You'll find out in Chapter 20...why does the Black Materia's "voice" sound sorta like Aeris? Because, like I said, hers is one of the voices most likely to severely screw with Cloud's gray matter...well, who's gonna buy Excalibur from the W&P pirates? Think...there's only one guy in the world with that much money to blow and a showroom to stick the infernal thing in. Plus, he could charge folks 500 GP (hint) a pop to try and pull it out...