

Final Fantasy VII: Children of Jenova

Chapter 20

In the beginning, God said "Let there be light." And there was. And it was good.

But it was too damn bright.

Reno groaned and quickly shut his eyes again as angry rays of said light stabbed them like tiny white-hot spears. His head ached fiercely, particularly at the base of his skull. He reached back and rubbed the spot gingerly, wincing as his fingers brushed against locks of hair stiff with dried blood. Raven had clocked him a good one, all right. Carefully opening his eyes once more, he took in his surroundings: four plain white walls, cot bolted to the floor topped with a mattress about as thick and as soft as the average comic book, stainless steel sink and toilet likewise secured to the floor, single door with one wire-reinforced window about six inches square and a slot at the bottom through which meals would be shoved whenever his captors felt like feeding him. His nightstick, of course was gone, as were his belt and his shoelaces. As if there was anything in here he -could- hang himself from.

Reno grumbled and laboriously hauled himself up onto the cot. No blankets, no pillow. He had no idea what time it was, as there were no windows to the outside world in his quaint little room; besides that, someone had lifted his damn watch. Archer, probably. Again.

A soft groan and whimper of "Oh, my head..." from his next door neighbor startled him, and he sat up and pressed his ear to the wall.

"Hello?" he called.

"Ugh..." There were a few seconds of silence, and then: "Reno?"

"Oh no." Reno felt as if his stomach had dropped into his shoes. "Oh shit. I'm sorry, Reeve. I tried--"

"It's okay." There was another short silence. "Did they get Rude too?"

"I don't know. I never saw him again after I left the building." Reno swallowed, winced, got up, and took a quick drink from the sink. The water was lukewarm and metallic-tasting, but it was water. "I hope he's okay. How'd they get you?"

"I feel like a real dumbass now that I think about it." Reeve snickered softly. "Like an idiot, I didn't even look up when I heard 'em come in my office. I thought they were you and Rude. Then I saw Raven's legs."

"Ugh. I'm surprised your eyeballs didn't melt out of your skull."

"Cute. Anyway, someone conked me on the head with something very hard. Next thing I know I'm a guest at the Shinra Hilton. Um--" There was the sound of footsteps approaching, followed by a scraping sound, and the footsteps went back from whence they came. "Thanks, I think."

"What was that?"

"I dunno. Looks like a cold chicken leg and a warm soda." Reeve snickered again. "Room service."

"I wouldn't eat that if I were you," Reno advised. "Remember who's running this place."

"Nah, she wouldn't poison me in my cell," Reeve said around a mouthful of chicken leg. "Ugh--yep, cold as hell--I suppose she's going to have me drawn and quartered, or put in front of a firing squad or something. And however it is she decides to off me, I'm sure it'll be on national television."

"Don't say that--" Reno began, but Reeve cut him off.

"Come on. You know as well as I do that's why I'm here."

An uncomfortable silence covered both cells for a few minutes.

"So...who got you?" Reeve finally asked.

"Raven. First she shot me, then she pistol-whipped me." Reno took a look at his arm; the wound had been healed but the spot still ached faintly. "How about you?"

"I didn't really see. Like I said, he hit me with something very hard right when I looked up. Blonde guy, I think."

"That son of a bitch." Reno shook his head in disgust. "Archer. I hate that guy."

"You know him?"

"Yeah." Reno swallowed dryly again and wondered when the hell he was going to get a cold chicken leg and warm soda of his own. "He's some relation to Rufus, I know that much...third cousin twice removed or some such shit. Not really close, but...y'know. Enough to pull some strings."

"I take it you two weren't exactly best buddies," Reeve commented.

"Right. Anyway, in the old days he was an officer in the regular army, like me, and he was always going around bragging about how he was going to get into the Turks. When they picked me instead of him...well, he wasn't too happy about that. I ran into him at the tower one day and he just gave me this little smile and said he wasn't about to give up that easily."

"And?"

"And," Reno continued with a sigh, "I'm on my way home from the bar that night drunk off my ass, of course, and someone jumps me in the alley, swipes my watch, and gives me a few slashes with a big freakin' knife before he knocks me out. Oh, that's how I got these scars on my face, in case you were wondering."

"Don't tell me--"

"Yeah. I was out of work the next day, but when I went back the day after that I saw him and some of his flunkies in the hall shooting the breeze, and right when I walk by he goes 'As a matter of fact, I do know what time it is,' looking at me the whole time, and sure enough he's got my goddamn watch on."

"Shit!" Reeve gasped. "And they never caught him?"

"Nah. It would have been his word against mine and I -was- drunk at the time it happened. Besides, I figured he'd shoot himself in the foot sooner or later. I guess he never did."

"Jeez, Reno, you should have told someone about that...huh?"

"What's up?"

"Shh..." Reeve was silent for a minute, and over the hum of the fluorescent lights Reno could faintly hear a cell door a bit farther down opening and then shutting. "Hey...they got someone else."

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"Blackhawk. What the hell kind of name is that?" Raven rubbed her eyes tiredly.

"Not her real one, probably. We'll get something good out of her later on." Archer, just as tired, sat down and pulled the folded lost-kid flyer out of his pocket. "I'm bored. I wonder if I'll catch hell if I go pay Reno a visit--"

"I don't give a shit," Raven sighed. "What have you got there?"

"Something I found in Junon. That kid looks familiar." Archer handed the paper over to Raven, who studied it closely. "Hey...can you scan that picture?"

"Sure. Why?"

"I just want to see something."

"I hate it when you say stuff like that," Raven replied, but she slapped the leaf of paper into the scanner anyway, pecked at some keys on her computer, and sat back to wait for the scanner to do its thing. "At least all the pilots she shot down managed to eject. One of 'em's dead, but that's just because his chute didn't open. Okay--" Raven tapped a few more keys, and an image of a small blonde child appeared on her terminal. "Now what?"

"You got one of those things where you can make her look older?" Archer queried, and Raven shrugged and nodded in reply. "Cool."

Raven did her thing again, and the image changed to a ten-year-old, then a teenager. "Are you going to tell me what you're up to or--" Raven shut up quickly. "Oh my God."

"Well, I'll be damned." Archer grinned widely. "I'll be damned." The image on the screen, if one added glowing green eyes, was the face of the woman who had wiped the floor with him in Branford.

"I don't believe it," Raven said softly, but the proof was right there, etched in glowing phosphor on her monitor. Then she too grinned evilly. "You got your ass kicked by a six-year-old!" With that, she doubled over in gales of laughter. "Oh, wait till I tell Stuart about THIS--"

"I--oh, shut up!" Archer turned purple as Raven cackled on. "So what are we going to do with Wonder Girl there?"

"I don't know." Raven snickered a bit more. "You got any ideas?"

"A few," Archer replied, cracking his knuckles. Raven stopped laughing and glared at him.

"You're not to touch her unless I say otherwise. Got it?"

"What?" Archer threw up his hands. "Why? You--you--no. No. don't even think about it, Raven..."

"She's six years old, for God's sake! I do have SOME morals, y'know. And if I remember correctly, I'm not the one that was grabbing her ass in Branford." She smiled sweetly at Archer.

Without a word, Archer stood up quickly and stormed off toward the cell blocks, probably to take out his aggression on Reno.

Raven turned her attention back to the terminal. She had an idea what to do with the Highwind girl, but not of the type that would normally be associated with Raven. It was an idea Archer would be unhappy with, but one he would just have to live with. She picked up her phone and called Heidegger up to see what he thought. Of course it didn't really matter what he thought. Raven had ways to change his mind if he didn't like the plan.

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Junon's airfield was a total shambles. There was no way the Highwind could land there, so it touched down just outside the city. Yuffie, grateful to be back on solid ground after the wild ride to the Northern crater and back, disembarked first, fell to her knees, and kissed the ground. "Thankyouthankyouthankyou," she sighed as the green tint left her features.

"Oh, get up." Elena stepped off behind her, fighting back the urge to kick Yuffie in the behind. "Sure is quiet out here now." She took a look around. "I don't see any troops running around...you think Cid ran them off?"

"I hope so." Tifa said quietly, Behind her, the rest of the crew plodded off the airship. "It -is- quiet."

The group made its way through the wrecked streets, pausing every so often to survey the destruction, which was extensive. "I hope Reeve's okay," Elena said, watching two men try to push a fallen tree off a car. "Looks like they didn't hit his building."

The Junon Hydroelectric building was still deserted as the party stepped through the front doors. "Power's still on, at least," Barret remarked, punching an elevator button and then turning his back to the doors. "I mean, I like Reeve n' all, but I ain't goin' up them goddamn steps for his ass..." The elevator door shushed open behind him, and Elena let out a little cry. "What?" Barret turned around and let out a gasp of his own. "Oh, shit."

Rude half-sat, half-lay on the floor, his head and shoulders propped against the elevator wall. At first, Barret wondered why on earth he was wearing a red shirt with his usual blue suit. Then it clicked. "Oh my God. Tifa--" Barret waved her over frantically. "Tifa, get over here right now! Rude's hurt bad!"

"What happened--oh, God." Tifa knelt at Rude's side and laid her hand on his shoulder. "Full Cure!"

Rude grunted and struggled to sit up. "Ugh."

"Rude, who did that to you?" Elena scooted to her fellow Turk's other side and took his hand. "Where's Reno?"

"I think they were the new Turks," Rude said, shoving himself up to a sitting position and rubbing his head. "I was on my way up to Reeve's office--" he trailed off. "Have you seen him? Is he all right?"

After a moment's silence, the whole group piled onto the elevator, nearly trampling poor Rude. Yuffie wondered grimly what the combined weight of herself, Barret, Tifa, Elena, Rude, Red XIII, and Vincent was as she eyed the placard stating "Max Load 3000 Lbs." on the way up to the top floor of the building. The way the elevator creaked and groaned as it carried them, she figured it had to be close, and she was on the verge of adding another form of conveyance to her "Things That Make Me Hurl" list. The only thing that kept her from completely freaking out each time the elevator squeaked or shuddered was the thought that if she did in fact spew, she would do so on Barret; and that thought amused her. "Air...need air..." she gasped, gulping like a beached koi.

"What, you don't have enough in your head?" Elena shot, speaking into the back of Tifa's head.

"Someone just trod on my tail," Red XIII muttered angrily.

"Sorry," Vincent replied, shifting his left foot a bit.

"OW! That's my finger!"

Vincent rolled his eyes and moved his foot again. "Sorry, Rude...uh, why don't you get up?"

"I can't now, thank you all very much."

"Yuffie, get your damn cross outta my ribs--"

"Well, excuuuuse me, Barret! It's not my fault you're taking up half the elevator by yourself--"

"You know, there IS more than one elevator," Tifa commented. "We didn't ALL have to get on this one." Nobody had a suitable rebuttal to that.

Finally, mercifully, the elevator doors opened at the top floor of the building. Yuffie shoved her way to the front of the pack, calling out "'Scuse me" and "Comin' through" as she elbowed folks out of her way. "Gawd, it's about time..."

Elena and Rude were already in Reeve's office. "He's gone," Rude said simply. "Chair's been knocked over...looks like a struggle..."

Elena wordlessly picked up a strange-looking implement she found lying on the floor near the desk. It was a whip.

"What are they going to do to him?" Tifa asked quietly, and Elena threw the electric whip down on the desk in disgust.

"Kill him, most likely, if they haven't already." She looked around the office. "Looks like they got Reno too...damnit!" In a sudden fit of pique, Elena kicked the overturned chair as hard as she could, and the chair tumbled over onto its side. "I should have stayed here!"

"Oh, quit bitching!" Yuffie spat at her. "What if you did stay here and they got you too? Huh?" She was answered by nothing but a confused stare from Elena, and she took that as a cue to continue. "Instead of standing here throwing a temper tantrum, you oughta be thinking about how we're gonna get 'em back!"

"I hate to admit it," Rude began, ignoring the nasty glance Yuffie shot at him, "but she's right. We need to get to Neomidgar in a hurry if we're going to stop Scarlet before she does whatever she's going to do." Rude took a look at his blood-stained shirt and added, "and I really need some clean clothes..."

"Reeve! Hey! You okay--what the HELL!?"

All assembled spun around to see a very agitated Cid Highwind staring at them, puffing away on a cigarette. "Where the hell's Reeve?" he asked, looking around.

"Gone. Shinra got him," Elena replied.

"Shit." Cid shook his head angrily. "I think they got Junior too. Caught her chute on the way down, I think--"

"Cid, what the hell you talkin' about? Chute!?" Barret cut in, and Cid glared at him.

"Forget it. There's no time to explain. We're going to Neomidgar." With that, Cid turned and stormed out the office door.

* * *

Reeve had tried, without much success, to get his new neighbor to say something to him. Judging from the timbre of the sobs that passed through the wall, said neighbor was female, but beyond that he knew nothing about her except that she was very, very frightened.

Once more, the sound of approaching footsteps echoed in the hall outside, and Reeve listened carefully as they stopped right where he guessed the door to Reno's cell was. The door opened, the feet clomped in, the door shut.

Reeve could only guess what happened next. Some unpleasant words were exchanged, followed by the sound of a struggle and a loud "wham," and then the door opened and slammed once more. The footsteps came back toward Reeve's cell and then back down the hall.

When he was sure that Reno's visitor was gone, Reeve sat back down next to the wall their cells shared. "Reno? What happened?"

No reply.

"Reno? Reno!"

This time he was answered by a soft groan, and that was good enough.

Having nothing better to do and not knowing when the next cold chicken leg or egg-salad-on-styrofoam or what the hell ever was due to arrive, Reeve stretched out on the uncomfortable cot once more and tried to take a nap. Instead of the

soft classical music he was used to falling asleep to, he had the girl's sobs and sniffles on one side and Reno's occasional grunts and moans on the other. At least he could turn the lights off in his cell. For some reason, his captors seemed to want him as healthy as possible before they did whatever they were going to do with him.

Sometime before he drifted off to sleep he heard the door to his other neighbor's cell open and shut again, and after that the cell was silent. They'd taken her away. Reeve guessed he would probably be next.

"Hey, Reno?" he called; although he knew Reno probably couldn't hear him, it was better than talking to himself. "I know I'm supposed to be some kinda pillar of strength for the folks in Junon and all, but..." He swallowed dryly and drew a heavy sigh. "I'm scared to death, Reno...I don't want to die."

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One of the blue-suited guys C.J. had seen at the Hangar was now leading her down the hall. Fortunately, it was the little skinny guy and not the pervert. This guy actually seemed like a decent human being.

At length they arrived in some kind of conference room. "Have a seat," the guy said. "They'll be here in a minute to let you know what's going on."

C.J. said nothing, and Stuart just shrugged and sat down.

After a minute or so, the other two blue suits came in (the pervert was, as expected, shooting her all sorts of go-to-hell looks), followed by a fat guy in a green uniform and a bimbo in a low-cut red dress. Charming.

"So," started the bimbo, "this is the Highwind kid?"

C.J.'s jaw dropped. "How..."

"Amazing what you can do with computers these days," Raven said with a smile.

"Anyway," Scarlet continued, "it seems you've been doing some things you shouldn't have...theft and destruction of Shinra property, namely one Viper aircraft and several of my planes...attempted murder, specifically, that of my pilots...and assault and battery, specifically, beating up one of my Turks." Scarlet yawned. "Now normally, I'd have someone like you thrown in the lockup for a very long time."

Archer snickered softly.

"However," Scarlet went on, "we currently find ourselves in a bit of a crisis, manning-wise. Since I found out who you really are, I've been going through every scrap of information I can find on you and I'm impressed, to say the least."

Archer stopped snickering.

"Genius-level I.Q., hand-to-hand combat skills advanced enough to thrash Archer over there--" Scarlet seemed to be fighting back giggles as Archer shot her a go-to-hell look-- "and on top of that, during your little swim in the Lifestream you basically got the same treatment our elite troops used to get."

"I don't like this," Archer hissed, and Heidegger told him to shut up. Archer did so begrudgingly.

"So," Scarlet continued, "I'll be doing something a little different with you. You are hereby sentenced to no less than five years compulsory military service, effective immediately, assigned to the Department of Administrative Research."

"What the hell does that mean?" C.J. spat.

"It means," Raven said with a sigh, "that you're a Turk."

"Oh, that's it!" Archer came out of his chair, pointing an angry finger at C.J. "I am NOT working with this bitch!"

"You're just pissed because she wouldn't put out," Raven replied.

C.J. looked at the two of them in utter confusion. "Put out?"

Raven glanced at C.J., wincing. Oh yeah. She was six years old. She didn't know about that stuff. Duh. "I'll explain it to you some other time, dear." She pretended not to notice Archer and Stuart both grimacing at that statement.

"That's really smart, boss," Archer spat, glaring at Heidegger. "First thing she's gonna do is get on the horn to Daddy--"

"We'll be taking care of that momentarily," Heidegger replied. "Due to the special circumstances of her conscription, certain measures to ensure her loyalty to the company will be taken."

Scarlet poked him on the shoulder. "When did you learn all those big words?" she whispered. Heidegger ignored her. "Raven, Stuart--take her downstairs."

"Now wait a minute--" C.J. protested as the two Turks each grabbed one of her arms and hauled her out of her chair. "Hey! Put me down, you--you--you buttheads!"

"If you don't calm down I'm going to call Dr. Vail up here and have her sedate you," Raven said calmly, tightening her grip on C.J.'s arm. "This isn't going to hurt."

"Bullshit!" C.J. spat. "That's what the damn doctor always says before he gives me a shot!" It was ironic that she chose that particular example; Scarlet was already putting the phone down and some thirty seconds later, Vail came through the door armed with a hypo which she jabbed into C.J.'s arm. She fought the effects of the drug off as long as she could--about another thirty seconds--before going limp in the grasp of the two Turks.

"Thanks," Stuart said quietly. "I was afraid she was gonna rack me like she did Archer."

"Don't YOU start," Archer hissed at him as Stuart and Raven dragged the unconscious C.J. away. "This is just great." Archer rolled his eyes and sat back down. "So what do we do with her after they get done with her down there?"

"Oh, I don't know." Scarlet shrugged and yawned. "Put her up in Kain's place."

"What!?" Archer was absolutely livid. "Are you nuts? We haven't even cleaned his stuff out of there, for God's sake! Have a little respect, will ya?"

"It's not as if he needs it now, is it?" Scarlet spat at him. She leveled a caustic gaze at Archer and continued. "I'm going to tell you this one time and one time only. You are not to lay a hand on her unless you're told to. Is that clear?"

"Sure," Archer grumbled, crossing his fingers behind his back as he did.

* * *

Some time later, C.J. awoke to find herself strapped into an otherwise comfortable chair, with some kind of weird goggles over her eyes. They were not altogether unlike the ones she had worn for the Viper's built-in flight simulator. /Now what.../

She felt hands whispering around her neck, and heard a soft "click" as something was fastened around it. "Can you hear me?" Raven's voice asked.

"I'm awake," C.J. replied. "What did you just put on me?"

"Something I sincerely hope I won't have to use. There were two possible ways we could have made sure you stay on our side. Brainwashing was one of them, and it just wouldn't do to have a mindless little robot running around with the Turks now, would it?" Raven chuckled a bit and continued. "That leaves this. Potentially very messy, though. That little collar I just

put on you is packed with explosives. Highly stable ones, mind you, there won't be any blowing yourself up if you trip over your shoelaces--you do know how to tie your shoes, right?"

"Shut up."

Raven laughed again. "I know you do, dear. I was kidding. Anyway, the only way that collar will blow is if I tell it to blow, or if you try to take it off. I won't tell it unless you give me a reason to; say, if you do something foolish like try to call your daddy out here. When the boss and I are one hundred percent certain you're loyal to us, I'll take it off. You have my word on that." Raven lowered her voice and leaned a bit closer to C.J. "If you want to beat Archer up some more, I'll pretend not to see it. He's a good Turk, but as a human being he's worthless."

An evil little voice in the back of C.J.'s mind rejoiced at that statement, and she was barely able to suppress a giggle. "So what are these stupid goggles for, anyway?"

"Well, normally your training would last about two months. Since we don't currently have that luxury, we're just going to dump it all into your head at once. Don't worry, it won't hurt. That's how they had to do it with the rest of us. We were picked out on sort of short notice. Actually, it's kind of relaxing. You might like it."

"Just get it over with."

"Fine."

Another bodiless voice spoke, mumbling something about "training program...upload" and something interesting happened. Colored lights inside the goggles began to flash in a strangely soothing pattern. Raven hadn't lied; this wasn't bad at all. Except for the fact that it seemed like someone was opening up C.J.'s head and this time putting stuff in it...first aid, unarmed combat, armed combat with several flavors of weaponry, night operations, interesting tips and tricks related to making weapons out of normal everyday objects, and a variety of other potentially useful tidbits of information. The voice then said something about "...go out and burn one" and there was the sound of shuffling footsteps. C.J. got the unpleasant feeling that she was now alone with this thing that was dumping stuff into her head.

The stream of information continued for a while and then abruptly came to a halt. /What.../ A new program started running...computer passwords...map of the uppermost floor of Shinra Tower...and several other things she felt she wasn't really supposed to know.

The lights in her goggles began to flash in a steady pattern: red, green, green, red...over and over, faster and faster, until something in her brain gave under the stress and darkness came over her again.

Once that was done, the original program picked up where it had left off, and a lone figure crept out of the room.

* * *

/What is this?/

Sephiroth Obscura blinked as an odd vision came into his mind...a vision of a sword much like his own, embedded in a glowing stone, came into his mind. That in itself wasn't so odd. The fact that it appeared to be located in some sort of amusement park and the fact that there were people lined up out the door to try to wrest it from its stone were extremely odd. And Sephiroth Obscura got the impression that these people had paid good money to do so.

He racked the brains of his host in an attempt to determine the whereabouts of this odd place and came up with "Gold Saucer." He did not know what this blade was, but he did know that it was imperative that it not be allowed to fall into the hands of his other self.

"Dad," he said in his best cute-son voice, "you said you'd take me to the Gold Saucer if I let the doctor take my blood...remember?"

Cloud stared at some invisible speck some three feet in front of his face. "Oh yeah," he said dreamily. "I did."

"I'd still like to go," Sephiroth Obscura said with a sweet smile.

"Sure."

Author's Notes: After some thought, C.J.'s induction process has been revised. I like this a lot better.