

Final Fantasy VII: Children of Jenova

Chapter 3: A Piece of History

"HALT!"

Cid and Junior spun around to face a very bedraggled-looking man with a long beard, wearing a Shinra flight crew uniform and holding a gun on them. /Shit, shit, shit...I shouldn'ta brought Junior here...Shera's gonna KILL me.../ Cid took a quick assessment of his situation. Their weapons: one toy slingshot and a few rocks. Cid was unarmed. The guy in front of him had a gun. And he had a wild look in his eyes. Not very promising odds.

"Unpack yourself, pal," Cid said, calmly. "I don't have any weapons on me and there's a kid here. Just let us get back in our jet and we'll be gone." He looked out of the corner of his eye and saw Junior reaching slowly into her pocket. He saw that there was something different about her little slingshot; something green flashed on its handle as she pulled it out and grasped it. Materia.

"You are trespassing on Shinra property," the bearded man growled, and he would have fired at this point had a little cry of "Bolt!" and a flash of lightning not stopped him. The man dropped the gun and fell to his knees.

"The hell!?" Cid looked down at Junior. "Where'd you get that Materia?"

Junior shrugged. "Got it with my birthday money."

Cid blinked. "How'd you know what to do with it?"

"I read about it somewhere."

"Remind me to raise your allowance when we get home. You just saved both our butts." Cid grabbed the scraggly-looking dude by the collar and hoisted him to his feet. The odds were back in his favor. "Now what the hell is the big idea holding a goddamn GUN on me and my kid, asshole?" He took a good look at the guy's torn and filthy uniform. On the sleeves were the stripes of a master crewman. The name embroidered above the pocket was "Vicks." Cid's eyes went wide. "Vicks!?"

The man blinked. "Captain!?" He then stood up on his own and saluted crisply. "Jeez, Captain, don't sneak up on me like that!"

"What the hell you mean 'don't sneak up on you?' YOU snuck up on US!" Cid laughed nonetheless, and he gave the old guy a warm handshake. "Goddamn, what're you still doin' here!? Where's everyone else? I thought Shinra shut this place down!"

Vicks looked at Cid like he'd suddenly grown a third eye and started reciting love poetry. "Man, you're late! Squadron Leader Wright's gonna rip you a new one! You got a sortie to fly in ten minutes!"

"What in God's name you talkin' about? I--" Then it clicked. Vicks had been out here all this time. Alone. That weird look in his eyes...the poor guy was out of his head. "Vicks, that damn war's been over for years. The only place I got to fly is home."

Vicks laughed as he took off running for the hangar. "The war's over? Hah! You been bendin' that twelve-hour bottle-to-throttle rule again, Captain? I bet you been seein' pink elfadunks too! Come on!"

Junior watched the old guy run off, and then she tugged on Cid's sleeve. "Who's that?"

Cid sighed. "My crew chief. After the war, Shinra forgot all about this place...they musta forgot about him too."

"He's your friend?" Junior frowned. "Then why'd he wanna shoot us?"

"I don't know, honey. Sometimes folks get all muddled up when they get left alone like this. I don't imagine he's seen anyone for years. The only way anyone can get here is by air or on a black chocobo." Cid patted Junior on the head. "Come on, lemme show you a real airplane."

Sitting inside the hangar was a jet much smaller than the Stingray they had flown there. Its lines were sleeker, more streamlined, and instead of two seats it had only one. It also had only one engine. It was painted a flat gray color, not the candy-apple red Junior was used to seeing on the Bronco. And it appeared to be in pristine condition. Stenciled under the canopy on the jet's right side were two legends. One read, "Crew Chief: Master Crewman Harry Vicks." The other read, "Pilot: Captain Cid Highwind."

"Whoa!" Junior gazed up at the jet. "This is YOURS?"

"Was." Cid sighed and lit up a cigarette. "You know what this is, kid?"

Junior grinned. "Yeah! It's a Shinra Viper!" She ran around checking the thing out from every angle; she of course had a plastic model of a Viper but this was the first one she'd ever seen in the flesh. "How come it's so little? I thought it'd be as big as the Bronco!"

"Here, check this out." Cid stood up and reached into one of the little hatches near the jet's nose, flipped a switch he found there, and smiled as the canopy opened. "Hey, Vicks! Get me a crew ladder here!" The old crew chief obliged him, hanging the ladder on the lip on the cockpit. "Go on, hop in there. Don't touch--"

"Yes sir, anything with yellow and black stripes on it, I know," Junior sighed. She scooted up the ladder and plopped herself in the seat. "Wow," she said reverently.

"Now take a hold a' that stick," Cid said. Junior wiggled it experimentally and frowned.

"It doesn't move very much."

"It don't have to. See, in the Bronco all the flaps and stuff move because they've got all these control rods that move when you move the stick. This whole thing's run by electronics. All you gotta do is nudge that stick and it goes. They call it 'fly-by-wire.' Wires take up a lot less space than rods, so you got a smaller airplane." Cid hauled himself up and sat on the top of the ladder. "Hey, Vicks! You got this thing safe for battery power?"

"You betcha," Vicks answered.

"Fantastic," Cid said and pointed at a switch. "Hit that. You're gonna flip when you see this."

Junior flipped the switch and was rewarded by the hum of machinery coming to life. This was followed by a voice saying, "Battery power on. All weapons pylons empty. Internal fuel tanks full, no wing tanks installed. Egress systems safe. Run preflight check?"

"It talks!" the kid beamed. "Cool!"

"Not understood," said the airplane in its cool female voice. "Run preflight check?"

"Oh, shut up! She wasn't talkin' to you, you hunk a' junk!" Cid snapped at the jet.

"Command 'shut up' recognized. VOX system disabled."

"That's more like it." Cid chuckled. "Did ya see that black pod that was hangin' on the bottom? That's the VOX system." Cid reached down and flipped another switch, and the heads-up display flickered to life. The words "VOX system offline" flashed in green in the lower right-hand corner. Cid tapped that spot with his finger. "You really don't even need the stick in this baby if you got a VOX pod on it. The whole damn thing's voice-operated. Weapons, flight controls, the ejection seat, everything." Cid paused and smiled. "'Course I always had the flight controls on manual. I never liked the idea of some damn computer doin' all my flyin' for me, especially if I was gettin' shot at."

"This rules!" Junior grinned. "Can I fly it?"

Cid almost fell off the crew ladder. "Uh...heh...I don't know if it's in any shape to be flyin'..." he stammered.

"Sure it is!" Vicks yelled up at Cid, and Cid winced as Junior took hold of the stick and started making little "vroom vroom" noises. "Or don't you trust yer crew chief?"

"Help me out here, Vicks," Cid hissed at him. "Maybe we'll come back someday when you're bigger and you can take it for a spin, okay?"

"Aww!" Junior pouted. Then she shrugged, turned off the battery power switch, and followed Cid down the ladder.

"Come on, we gotta get home before your mom has a fit." Cid helped Junior down and looked over at Vicks. "I won't be flying today. I got other orders."

"Oh." Vicks looked at his feet. "Those buttheads got you pulling some lame parade duty again?"

"Yeah." Cid nodded, trying to humor his old buddy. "Yeah, that's right."

"Well, it'll be waitin' for you when you get back." Vicks went back to work with a wave, and Cid and Junior headed back towards the Tiny Bronco II.

Soon the Stingray was soaring west towards Rocket City. Junior was once again doing all the flying while Cid sat in the back seat thinking.

How long had poor old Vicks been stuck up there by himself? Had to be at least ten years. Goddamn Shinra. They'd shut that airstrip down and hadn't even bothered to tell the guy. The whole mess made Cid realize even more that he had it pretty damn good. He'd gotten himself a wife and a kid (though not in that order; he and Shera hadn't bothered to get married till Junior was four, and the wedding day portrait of Junior as the flower girl was the only existing photo of the kid in a dress), he had a good home, he had a pack of friends he could talk to when things got weird. Vicks didn't have squat except that run-down base and that Viper to keep him company. It was downright sad.

"Daddy?" Junior's voice dragged Cid from his musings. "You crying?"

"I got somethin' in my eye," Cid answered. "Are we there yet?"

Junior giggled and then said in her best serious voice, "No, and if I have to pull this plane over you're in big trouble, mister!"

Cid laughed as well. "Yes ma'am," he answered.

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"I sure hope you know what you're doing, Vail!" Heidegger glanced nervously at the pods that filled the chamber. "Personally, I think we can do just fine without SOLDIER--"

"We have our orders." Vail was a young, severe-looking woman with hair that was already going white and pulled into such a tight bun that Heidegger wondered how she kept her face from popping off. "And yes, I do know what I am doing." She studied a few notes scrawled on her clipboard and fiddled with a dial or two.

"That's what Hojo said," Heidegger pointed out. Vail froze.

"Hojo was an idiot." she spat. "Start bringing in the test subjects."

/Icy bitch,/ Heidegger thought, but he did as the doctor instructed. The test subjects had been drugged; according to Vail, part of the problem with the original Mako infusion process was that the subjects had been awake and the incredible pain of the process had driven some of them insane. But that wasn't all. All of the subjects had a neat surgical incision on the backs of their necks. "What'd you do to them?"

"A small implant. That's all you need to know." Vail didn't even look at him. "You wouldn't get it anyway."

Together, Vail and Heidegger cracked open the pods and dumped the limp bodies of the SOLDIER candidates in. After sealing them safely inside, Vail twiddled a few more dials. There was a hum and a whoosh, and the insides of the pods were flooded with green light.

Heidegger looked around, glad to be done with that. He didn't like the way Vail spoke of "implanting" something in the SOLDIER candidates' bodies. Not one bit. "Now what?"

"Now we let them stew for a few days." Vail turned sharply and walked out of the reactor. "The President will be pleased."

"You seem pretty confident about this."

"Of course I am. I hope your new Turks can take care of this place while we're gone."

Heidegger snorted. "They're the best." And it was true. Kain and Stuart had come straight from the old SOLDIER ranks. Raven was a computer whiz and a superb shot with anything that spat bullets (she vaguely reminded Heidegger of Vincent). Archer talked a bit too much and drank a bit too much, but he took his job seriously enough. And Heidegger wasn't lying. They WERE the best. Although he often wondered just where in the world Reno, Rude, and Elena had gone off to.

"I see." Vail cracked a thin smile which looked more like a grimace; it was as if the mere act made her face hurt. "That's what you said about the last batch, if I remember right." With that, she hopped into the Shinra chopper that sat waiting for them.

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A lone figure sat in the window of the old Shinra mansion, looking up at the top of Mt. Nibel. Would they never learn?

A normal man would have seen no more than vaguely human-shaped specks moving around the chopper that sat by the reactor.

But then, Vincent Valentine was hardly a normal man.

He saw clearly that Heidegger and a scientist he had never seen before were milling about, speaking with three blue-suited men and one blue-suited woman about something. A new crop of Turks for a new Shinra. Fitting. The oldest of them was probably twenty at the outside. Was that the best they could do?

Vincent began to wonder exactly who it was that was running Shinra now. Heidegger did not seem thrilled to be there; obviously he wasn't in charge. Reeve had cut all ties with Shinra and was running a hydro plant in Junon. Palmer? Please. Wherever the blubbering tub of lard was, Vincent was sure he had neither the brains nor the guts to revive Shinra. That left Scarlet, and the thought was enough to make even Vincent's skin crawl. So what was the backstabbing bitch planning now? Well, it was pretty obvious. She'd had Heidegger put together a nice shiny new team of Turks. She had Heidegger and some scientist up in that reactor dragging in bodies, meaning they were probably experimenting again. The only logical conclusion: Shinra was about to start busting stuff up again. Did Cloud and the others know of this? He hoped so.

He also knew something else. While scouring the library in the basement he had found two pieces of rather disturbing information. The first was scrawled in Professor Gast's rather sloppy hand in the back of one journal:

"Year [x]. Jenova specimen continues to amaze me. While dissecting the abdomen, I discovered several sacs throughout the body; these sacs contain what appear to be eggs. Whether or not they have been fertilized I cannot say. Most interesting in any case."

He had run across a second, even more disturbing:

"I have no proof, but I am certain that Hojo has been tampering with the Jenova specimen. The egg sacs I noted previously have been excised and removed. Hojo denies it, but I know he is responsible. I must speak to President Shinra about this at once!"

Jenova's unborn children. In Hojo's hands. If the thought of Scarlet heading Shinra made Vincent's skin crawl, this one made it jump up and run. He had to speak with the others immediately.

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Shera opened the oven door and prodded a chicken thigh with a fork. It did not bleed, and she was satisfied that it was fit to eat. Where in the world could Cid and Junior have gone running off to this time? The note left on the kitchen table, written in Cid's almost illegible scrawl, said they had gone to Kalm and would be back for dinner. She'd already heard about Junior's run-in with the class bully; the kid and his father had just come ringing the doorbell to apologize a few minutes before. The kid especially seemed to regret what he'd done, and Shera noticed with a sort of sadistic glee that he was waddling a bit. Junior must have gotten at least one good solid hit in.

Shera had given both father and son a piece of her mind. Cid would have been proud of her. As distasteful as she found some of the vocabulary her husband used, Shera had found herself using a few of Cid's favorite improper nouns as she verbally flambe'd the kid's father. There would be no more problems with this particular bully. Of that, Shera was certain. Between the physical beating Junior had dealt him and the verbal one Shera had dispensed, it would probably be a cold day in Hades before the little hooligan tried anything else with her daughter.

Shera did not like the idea of Junior getting into a fight. Not one bit. She was sure that her daughter hadn't started it, but it vexed her just the same. Still, she was glad that Cid insisted on having Tifa give her lessons. This would probably not be the last problem Junior would have with jealous kids, and as she grew older it could only get worse. /Maybe we should pull her out of school altogether,/ Shera thought as she removed the chicken from the oven and set it on the table. Then she reconsidered. /No...that would just make things worse./ All of Junior's friends, except for Zack and Marlene, were in her class, and Junior needed to be with other kids at her age. Maybe when she was ten or eleven they'd take her out; maybe send her to some of those classes for bright kids they had at the University, maybe hire a private tutor. But not now. Not at six. Sometimes it was easy to forget that Junior was still a child, and at her age she needed the freedom to be one.

Aha! Here they were. Shera peeked out the window and saw the Tiny Bronco II descending into its usual spot in the backyard. Finally. The back door swung open and just as Shera was about to scold Cid for coming home late, he swept her into his arms and silenced her with a long, deep kiss. Junior giggled and scampered off to the bathroom to wash up.

"Where have you been?" Shera finally managed to ask.

Cid didn't answer. Instead, he looked Shera in the eyes. "I forget how damn lucky I am sometimes, you know that?"

"I think we all do," Shera answered. "Is something wrong?"

"Nothing serious. Don't worry about--" Cid paused and frowned. "You hear something?"

Shera listened carefully. Yes, she did hear something amusing floating down the hall, barely audible over the sounds of running water.

"Mama and Daddy sitting in a tree kay eye ess ess eye en gee..."

"Okay," Cid started, struggling to keep a straight face but losing it, "I know I didn't teach her that one..."

"Don't look at me," Shera giggled. "If I remember correctly, YOU'RE the one that taught her that 'greasy grimy gopher guts' song..."

"Hey!" Cid pretended to look hurt. "Gimme a break! Every kid has to learn that song! It's a law!"

"Well, if it wasn't you and it wasn't me, which it most certainly was not, who was it?"

Cid and Shera looked at each other for a while, then it dawned on them.

"Ryan," they said together.

* * *

For once, no demons invaded Cloud Strife's dreams.

Apparently, his son wasn't so lucky. Cloud was rudely awakened at some wee hour of the morning by a small foot nearly going up his nose.

"Hey!?" he muttered as he opened his eyes and saw a small lump burrowing under the covers between him and Tifa. "Zack?"

"Uh huh."

Tifa awoke slowly as well. "What's wrong, buddy?" she murmured, patting the shivering lump.

"Bad dream." Following this, a snuffle issued forth from the lump.

"Aww, come here." Tifa uncovered the whimpering Zack and pulled him up into a hug. "Wanna talk about it?"

Zack sniffled again. "There was this bad man telling me he made me punch C.J. in the nose today. He said something about getting back at Dad too." And with that, Zack buried his face in Tifa's shoulder and began to sob in earnest.

Cloud was instantly awake. "What did the bad man look like, Zack?"

"Cloud--" Tifa shook her head. "Leave him alone."

Cloud ignored her. "I know you're scared, son, but I gotta know."

Zack sniffled once more and unknown to Tifa until later, quietly blew his nose on the sleeve of her nightgown. "I dunno. All I could see was his eyes. They were green."

Tifa went white. "My God..."

Cloud felt the color drain from his face as well, but he shushed Tifa so as not to scare the kid any more than he already was. "It was just a bad dream, buddy. Whatever you saw there, it can't hurt you now." He ruffled the kid's spiky brown hair. "Listen..if you could dream about anything in the whole world, what would it be?"

Zack stopped sniffing. "I dunno...oh yeah, I wanna go flying with C.J.!" His face brightened. "Yeah! And she'd take me up to the Gold Saucer and we'd play G-bike and she'd probably beat me but that's okay...and we'd ride the chocobos and beat Joe and..."

"Okay, okay," Tifa laughed. "You lay there and think about it till you go to sleep."

"Okay. Night, Mom. Night, Dad."

It took less than a minute. Zack was out like a light.

It took longer for Tifa, and much, much longer for Cloud.

Author's Notes: Yet another Vicks! And this one didn't even die within three paragraphs of his appearance! Is it just me, or were FF's Vicks/Biggs and Wedge and South Park's Kenny separated at birth? "OH MY GOD, THEY KILLED WEDGE! YOU BASTARDS!" Heh. I'd do a FF7/South Park crossover but it's been done (I laughed my ass off when I saw it--Vincent was Kenny--the only problem is, I saw it on the Web once and can't find it again, if you know where it is PLEASE FOR GOD'SSAKE TELL ME) ...okay, Rob, quit yer bitching, there's Mr. Bad Ass (that would be Vincent, who I drew tonight and he doesn't look like a sausage in a cape, thankyouverymuch; if you cannot draw I heartily recommend "Draw the Marvel Comics Superheroes" by Klutz Press and "How To Draw Comic Book Heroes and Villains" by Christopher Hart, they have worked wonders for my sorry ass; I may or may not put my Vincent on my web page, but I digress)...of course, one more name excavated from the RPG Cliche Archive: Kain...I'm sure you all know what "greasy grimy gopher guts" song Shera was referring to; we've all sung it at the dinner table to gross out our parents (you in the back, don't lie, I saw you)...ooo, potential major plot point: Vail gets pissy when folks compare her to Hojo! Wonder why that could be? Goin' to bed.