

Final Fantasy VII: Children of Jenova

Chapter 6:

If anyone had told Vincent Valentine seven years ago that he would someday see Cid Highwind holding Shera close as she let loose a heated tirade against Shinra Inc., he would have suggested that whoever told him go check into the nearest insane asylum immediately. But that was exactly what was happening now. Shera had stomped off the Junon Hydroelectric chopper about an hour before mad as hell (something else Vincent never thought he'd live to see), and Cid had excused himself from their little meeting to collect her from the airport. Now she sat in Reeve's office with the rest of the crew, sans Cait Sith, Zack, and Junior. At first she had bawled about the situation at the Wratt & Pitney plant she'd just quit her job with. Then she'd called Palmer and the other assorted Shinra brass every unkind name she could think of (some of which made even Cid and Barret gasp in shock, especially the ones she concocted for Palmer). Finally, she began to fret about what she was going to do for a living now.

"You could go teach at the university," Cid suggested. "They could probably use someone like you there."

"I couldn't handle it," Shera sighed, and Cid laughed.

"Damn, woman, if you can put up with MY shit I'm sure you can handle a few engineering students..."

"Actually..." Reeve looked thoughtful for a second. "I know it's kind of a long commute but we could work that out easy, and as much as I hate to say it, it'd probably be a bit less pay than what you made at the W&P plant, but I need all the techs I can get. Most of the good ones went back to Shinra. My guys are good, but they ARE a little green and I think I could use someone like you to whip 'em into shape. Ah, yes--" He turned his attention back to the phone receiver he had against his ear. "I'm trying to get in touch with Professor Vail...this is Reeve Brannon at Junon Hydro...yes, I can hold." He covered the mouthpiece and rolled his eyes. "And Shinra STILL has the worst damn hold music in the whole world."

"I--I don't know." Shera managed a quivery smile. "I'll think about it. But thank you anyway." She rubbed her eyes and stood up. "I'm going to go to the cafeteria and check on Junior. I heard about the monster attack and I was a little worried."

Once Shera was out of the room, the group picked up where they'd left off on their discussion of stuff that wasn't right with the world.

"Okay." Cid lit up yet another cigarette and scratched his head. "Red, you think either of these Sephiroth guys are gonna be a threat as they are now?"

"Sephiroth Obscura, definitely." Red mused. "But as we all know, Sephiroth's body was completely destroyed at the Northern Limits. In order to do anything serious, he'd have to find a new one." He paused as if in deep thought. "I think the greatest danger would be to Cloud; he's the only Sephiroth clone that's still alive."

Vincent spoke up then. "Cloud, I know this may be a bit extreme, but I think it should be done if for no other reason than to ensure your and Tifa's peace of mind...you should take Zack to Mideel and have the doctor run some blood work on him to check for Jenova cells."

"Yeah." Barret nodded. "Knowin' that freak, if he had a chance he'd prob'ly pull some shit with our kids just to hurt us."

Tifa did not look thrilled at this prospect, naturally. But she agreed anyway.

"Actually, given the choice I think Sephiroth would rather go after someone that was already fully grown." Red XIII did his little dog-shrug thing again. "Especially if that someone was Cloud."

"Okay." Cloud drew a shaky breath. "Let's get something out on the table right now. Red's right, I AM a Sephiroth clone. So if he IS still around and getting ready to pull something, I think--no, I KNOW--he'd go after me first. And this time he's not liable to let go so easily."

"Get to the point, Spike," Barret grumbled good-naturedly.

"Barret, they do boil people in oil in some places for making puns like that," Cloud replied, and all had a good (if nervous) laugh at Barret's expense. "Anyway...if I start flipping out again I don't want you screwing around trying to talk me down from it, you know damn well it doesn't work. Take me down however you have to. Knock me out, drug me, I don't care. And I hope to hell it doesn't come down to this, but if you have to..."

"It ain't gonna come down to that, kid." Cid patted Cloud on the shoulder. "Like I said last time--if it happens, it happens, and like Barret said, we'll just go upside your spikey white head and bring ya back to normal."

Cloud grinned at Cid's mediocre Barret impression in spite of the circumstances that had brought it forth. "Yeah, I hope that's all it'll take." Then he grew serious again. "Last time I almost killed Aeris. I gave the Black Materia to Sephiroth. I don't want to think about what the bastard could make me do this time--"

"Cloud, stop it." Tifa said in a small voice. "If it happens we'll deal with it. In the meantime, stop worrying about it."

Cloud sighed and put his arm around Tifa's shoulders. "Okay. Subject dropped. Next?"

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Zack eagerly dug into his third banana split; Junior was polishing off her fourth. Shera had gotten a cup of tea and was standing at the window, looking out over the ocean. Naturally, she didn't hear the conversation that was taking place between the two children and Cait Sith (thanks to a new AI program Reeve had concocted in his spare time, Cait Sith was now able to hold a basic conversation on his own).

"Hey Zack." Junior swallowed a bite of banana. "You ever gonna get married?"

Zack pinched his nose and pretended to throw up. "Eww, no! Gross!"

"It is not gross, dillweed!" Junior scowled.

"Is too." Zack stuck out his tongue. "Girls are stupid."

Junior blinked. "You think I'm stupid?"

"Nah. You're not a girl. You're C.J." Zack looked up at Cait Sith, who was pretending to eat a candy bar. "Do cats get married?"

Cait Sith thought about it for a second and shrugged (translation: "I'm not programmed to answer stuff like that without Reeve talking through me."). Zack seemed satisfied with that.

Junior ate another three bites of banana split and looked around quickly. "Hey, Zack?"

"What?"

Junior blushed a little. "Can you keep a secret?"

"Yeah, sure." Zack finished up his split and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand.

Junior stared at him. "You promise you're not gonna tell anyone?"

Zack rolled his eyes. "Yeah, yeah." He went through the time-honored kids' Ritual of Promising, complete with appropriate hand gestures. "Cross my heart hope to die stick a needle in my eye."

Junior seemed satisfied with that, and she looked up at Cait Sith. "You too?"

"Hmm..." The robot cat thought about it. Yes/no question; desirable response appeared to be "yes." Easy enough, and besides that, Reeve was now listening after having grown bored to tears waiting for Vail to pick up her phone. "Sure," Cait Sith replied, swishing his tail.

"Ugh," grunted the Moogles with a nod. Cait Sith hung onto its ears for dear life as its head bobbed enthusiastically.

Junior took another quick look around and dropped her voice to a loud whisper. "I know who I wanna marry."

Zack snorted laughter. "Oh, get real..." Then his curiosity got the better of him, and he whispered as well. "Who?"

Junior told him, and Cait Sith facevaulted and fell backwards off his Moogles, landing headfirst on the cold tile floor.

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Reeve drummed his fingers on the desk impatiently. "Come on, Vail, pick up the damn phone..."

Barret snickered. "How long they had you on hold now?"

Reeve glanced at his watch. "About fifteen minutes. And if I hear one more elevator-music rendition of 'Moon Over Midgar' I am going to throw up." To keep himself amused while he waited, he was eavesdropping on Zack and Junior through Cait Sith's eyes and ears, and he suddenly went through an amazing display of facial acrobatics and turned several interesting colors in response to something he heard there.

"What is it?" Cid was already halfway out of his chair. "You finally get that bitch on the line?"

"No, no..." Reeve cleared his throat nervously. "I...heh...I'll tell you later, Cid," he whispered and added, "And if you laugh I swear I'm going to pound you into the ground."

"Fine by me." Cid shrugged.

"Vail, if you don't get your pale white butt to that phone by the count of ten I'm gonna get really pi--hello there, Vail!"

At that moment, it was as if a Stop spell had been thrown over everyone in the room. A pin dropping would have sounded like a tactical nuke in comparison.

"Vail, this is Reeve. Oh, you do remember me. Well, isn't that nice. Listen, this isn't a social call--" and here Reeve pulled an "ick" face, as if the very thought of making a "social call" to the woman made him want to spew. "Well, to be honest, I ran across some stuff that psycho Hojo was messing with, some notes and things, and I was wondering if you knew anything about it...yeah, he was a loony, you're absolutely right..." He grinned and made a gesture that imitated a fisherman reeling in a record-size bass and Cid let out a chortle, almost spitting his cigarette halfway across the room. "Well, I didn't find much, just some stuff about the old Jenova project. Something to do with some eggs Hojo swiped from the Jenova specimen. Yeah, creepy, huh? That's what I said too. I was wondering if you know anything I don't about this. Why? Well, after the Sephiroth thing and all, it just bugs me that Hojo coulda been messing with something like that...I see...well, if you don't know you don't know. Yeah, I'd appreciate that and I'll let you know if I find anything else." Reeve scribbled something on the note pad next to the phone and held it up for all to read: "Not," it said. Barret and Yuffie fought to stifle their laughter. "Thanks anyway." He hung up and immediately became aware of six pairs of eyes and one single eye fixed on him.

The single eye blinked, and Red XIII spoke. "Well?"

Reeve shrugged. "Well, she wasn't a whole lot of help. Said she didn't know anything but she'd call me if she found out."

"And do you believe her?" Vincent asked.

"Hell, no." Reeve shook his head. "In fact, I have this nagging feeling that she was lying to me about what she knew, but I didn't want to risk pushing her yet. If I do, she'll probably go tattletale to Scarlet. If weird stuff starts happening I'll start playing hardball with her. But at this point I'm not willing to do anything that might piss her off."

"Good idea. The last thing we need is Shinra on our butts again." Yuffie yawned. "Is that all? I'm hungry."

Reeve nodded. "Yeah, unless anyone has anything else I need to know."

Red XIII shook his head. "I should be getting back to the observatory; I want to see if I can track Sephiroth Obscura down. I'm worried about him just disappearing like that." and with that, he padded out of the office. Yuffie followed.

Cloud and Tifa stood up next. "I guess we better go ahead and go to Mideel tonight," Cloud sighed. "Poor kid hates shots. He's not gonna like this."

"We'll call you when we find out, Reeve." Tifa left the office, followed by Cloud.

"Guess we'll be leavin' too," Barret said. Cid started to leave and then reconsidered.

"You and Vincent get Junior and Shera and head on to the Highwind. Reeve here had somethin' he wanted to tell me."

Barret nodded, waved to Reeve, and left. Vincent gave Reeve a strange sort of look as he walked out of the office. Reeve paid no mind.

"Okay, what was it that made you pull all them faces a minute ago?" Cid lit up another cigarette as Reeve fidgeted in his chair.

"Jeez..." Reeve shook his head. "First of all, don't say a word to Junior about this." He sighed and grumbled, "She made Cait Sith promise not to tell anyone. I'm gonna go to Hell or get an anvil dropped on me or something for telling you."

"Spit it out."

"Well...here, listen to this." Reeve fiddled with a tape recorder that was hooked into Cait Sith's control mechanism, and Junior and Zack's marriage conversation was played back verbatim.

Cid listened...gasped...and then burst out laughing. "Oh boy. This is hilarious." And then for added zing, he appended: "Damn, I thought I raised her with better taste than that!"

"It's not funny!" Reeve protested.

"Yes it is." Cid wiped tears out of his eyes. "Reeve, she's six years old. Six-year-old girls get crushes on grown-ups. It happens. They grow out of it."

"But why ME!?" Reeve wailed, and Cid laughed even harder. Just then, the intercom box on the desk buzzed again.

"Sir, Cait Sith is bringing young Miss Highwind up to your office. Her mother sent her up to get Cid."

"Oh great..." Reeve dropped his forehead onto his desk and pretended to cry, but composed himself as Cait Sith returned to the office with Junior at his side.

"Hi, Daddy!" she bubbled. Evidently, the combination of ice cream and Zack's company had done wonders for her mood. "You ready to go?"

"Yup." Cid looked at Junior and back at Reeve. "You gonna say goodbye to Reeve or not?" He took a quick look at Reeve and saw him wince, and he barely suppressed the urge to roll on the floor in gales of laughter.

Junior turned pink, went up to the desk, and gave Reeve a hug and a kiss on the cheek. She then turned bright red and hid behind Cid, giggling.

"Sweet kid," Reeve observed, causing Junior to giggle even more. "I'll call you if anything new comes up, Cid."

"Yeah, I'll do the same. Catch you later." Cid took Junior's hand and led her out the door.

After they were gone, Reeve laughed and shook his head. Well, he was sort of flattered. Yeah, Cid was right. She'd grow out of it sooner or later. He laughed some more, patted Cait Sith on the head, and went back to work.

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In three little words, Archer summed up the current feelings of the new Turks as they sat around outside the Nibel reactor waiting for something interesting to happen.

"This is lame." He drew another tic-tac-toe grid in the dirt with the tip of a sai and passed the weapon to Kain, who drew an X in the center with it. Kain shrugged.

"Yeah, but what can you do? The boss said to guard this stupid reactor and that's what we have to do." Kain picked a small rock out of the grid and threw it in no particular direction. Archer took his sai back and doodled an O on the top right-hand corner of the grid.

"Remind me to bring a book or something next time," Raven yawned. She had cleaned her pistols about thirty times since they'd been stuck here, and having nothing better to do she was now disassembling some wildflowers. Petals, pistils, and stamens littered the ground around her like confetti. "Where'd Stuart go?"

Kain shrugged. "He said he had to go pee a few minutes ago. I think he went inside."

"Hell, there's plenty of perfectly good rocks to go behind," Archer pointed out. Kain spat laughter and placed another X in the lower right corner. Raven wrinkled her nose.

"You know him. He probably gets out of the shower to take a whiz." Kain looked back up at the door of the reactor. "I sure as hell wouldn't want to go in there. Place is giving me the creeps."

"He sure is taking a long time." Archer frowned and looked towards the reactor as well. "Hey! Stuart! You didn't fall in or something, did you?"

Raven dropped a nude flower stem and sighed. "I'll go get him. He probably got lost." She stood, picked a few purple petals out of her black hair, and walked up the stairs into the reactor.

Archer took his weapon back from Kain and added an O in the middle right square; Kain snatched it back and drew his last X. Archer groaned. "I can't believe I did that."

Kain shrugged. "This is getting boring," he announced and lit up a cigarette.

That was when the shooting started.

Archer jumped up, sais in hand. "What the fuck!?"

Kain was on his feet as well, sword drawn. "Raven! What's going on in there?" The only answer he heard was the sharp report of Raven's pistols. "Shit. Let's go."

Kain and Archer ran up the stairs and found something horribly wrong. One of the pods that was supposed to be occupied by Vail's SOLDIER candidates had been utterly demolished, presumably by the thing that was gnawing on Stuart's arm. It was bipedal, hairless, more or less humanoid; its skin was pink like a freshly healed burn and its face was flat and featureless other than two round, glowing green eyes and a tiny bump of a nose; otherwise it was devoid of frills like

eyelids or lips. Its mouth was nothing more than a slit that opened and closed as it gummed on Stuart's arm. Apparently it didn't have teeth either; Stuart was not screaming in pain but he was screaming all the same.

"Oh God oh God get it off get it off GET IT OFF MEEEE--"

Raven opened up with both pistols, pumping hot lead into the creature and driving it back. One quick slice from Kain's sword ended its existence, and Stuart hauled ass outside, babbling and wailing.

"Goddamn!" Archer bent over the creature's body and poked it gingerly with his sai. It twitched a bit, and Archer jumped back as if it had burned him. "What the hell is this thing?"

Kain shook his head. "I don't know."

Raven, meanwhile, had decided to check on the destroyed pod. She took a look inside, turned white, and stepped back slowly.

"What?" Kain sheathed his sword and went up the steps to the pods. "What's in there?"

"Not much of anything now," Raven said softly. "Excuse me." And she too left the reactor. Kain frowned and took a look inside.

Raven was right. There wasn't much left of the SOLDIER candidate that had been in the pod. Not much that was recognizable as such, anyway. The prospective SOLDIER's body had been ripped open; the inside of the pod was slick with blood. Kain staggered back, dropped to his knees, and vomited noisily. He took a few minutes to recover, then he left as well.

Archer's morbid curiosity got the better of him, and he took a peek at the pod. He wasn't sure if his colleagues had picked up on it, and he wasn't sure it would be a good idea to tell them, but he noticed that both the pod and the person inside it had been torn open from the inside.

Back outside the reactor, Stuart had finally calmed down a bit, though he was still visibly (and quite understandably) shaken.

"What was that, man!?" he wheezed, looking quickly around at his comrades. "What the HELL was that!?"

"Dunno." Archer shook his head. "Where'd it come from, Stu?"

"I was in the john when I heard this crash in the pod room, and I went to check it out...and that thing jumped on me." Stuart took a few deep breaths. "I'm okay. That thing just scared the shit outta me."

"Good thing you were already in the men's room," Raven quipped. Stuart groaned and then laughed nervously. "I think we should call Heidegger and let him in on this. How the hell did that thing get in there, anyway?"

Archer snorted. "I think Vail knows the answer to that one." He thought it over for a second and decided to go for it. "That pod that was busted open...that was done from the inside."

Kain paled again. "And that guy inside--"

"Yeah." Archer nodded. "Kain, Stu--when you two were in SOLDIER did they put anything weird in you?"

Kain shrugged. "Back then all the SOLDIER candidates got injected with Jenova cells, including us. But NOTHING like that EVER happened."

Archer looked back towards the reactor. "I don't think I want to know what she's doing to them."

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Author's Notes: Wratt & Pitney, Pratt & Whitney, get it? ahh, never mind. Aircraft geek humor. I have a lot of fun writing about Shera. She kind of reminds me of Kasumi Tendo with an engineering degree, especially the version of Kasumi presented in some of the more entertaining "Kasumi Goes Apeshit" fics (like the Christmas tree angel fic, my personal fave..."Just tell me where to stick it!" bwahahahahha, I forgot who wrote that, I'm horrible with author names...but I digress once more). Do not ask me where the idea of Junior having a crush on Reeve came from. It just sorta popped in there. I personally think he's kind of cute myself; maybe it's just the suit, I dunno. Is Vail telling the truth about what she knows? Three guesses and the first two don't count. Note about Raven: I get this picture of her in my head; it looks like Lara Croft with a blue suit and black hair. Again, don't ask me why. I don't even LIKE Tomb Raider. Honestly, I think if you stuck Lara with a pin she would pop.