

Final Fantasy VII: Children of Jenova

Chapter 7:

Cid found Junior standing on the deck of the Highwind leaning against the railing with her arms stretched out and the wind blowing her hair into an assortment of crazy styles, and he chuckled as he took a spot beside her and ruffled her hair. "What ya doin', kiddo?"

"Flying," Junior replied simply. "Daddy, where's Mama gonna work now?"

Cid shrugged. "I dunno. She's thinkin' about going to work for Reeve, though." At the mention of that particular name, Junior turned light pink. "Hey, kid...I got a question for you."

"Okay."

"How come you got all giggly and stuff back there when I asked you if you were gonna say goodbye to Reeve?"

Junior blushed even more furiously and looked at her feet. "You better not tell him."

Cid nodded. "I promise. You can beat me up if I do."

Junior found that image extremely funny and laughed. Then she scratched little circles on the deck with her toe. "'Cause he's cute," she answered bashfully.

Cid repressed the urge to burst out laughing once more. "You like him, don't you?"

"Uh huh." Junior was silent for a minute. "Is he married?"

"Nope." In fact, Cid thought, he probably hadn't even been on a date in a few years, having always been tied up at the plant. He worked his ass off, that was for sure, and Cid found he had a lot of respect for the former Shinra exec, and if Junior had been, say, fourteen years older he would have gladly told her to go for it. "What about Zack? I thought you liked him."

Junior shrugged. "Zack says girls are gross. Besides, I don't wanna marry a guy I can beat up."

This time Cid did burst out laughing. "Those are pretty high standards there, girl! You keep thinking like that and you're gonna end up like the cat lady down the street!"

Junior laughed and made a face. The "cat lady" was pushing eighty, and she shared her house with about thirty to fifty cats, most of which were about two steps above feral and a few of which were probably rabid. As far as anyone knew, she had never been married, and her dealings with neighbors were limited to shouts of "Get off my yard!" and "Don't you be teasin' my cats! I taught 'em to bite!" "Eww," Junior declared. "I don't like her cats. They stink. And they don't talk like Cait Sith."

"That's 'cause they're not magic cats like he is." Cid lit up a cigarette. "Did you get him to tell your fortune?"

"Oh yeah!" Junior pulled a slip of paper out of her pocket. "'Visitors bring gifts, your lucky color is blue.'" She scratched her head. "I think this is an old one. I already had visitors with gifts on my birthday."

Cid nodded. "Yeah those fortunes of his are worth about what you pay for 'em," he laughed.

Junior stuffed the fortune back in her pocket. "Why do we have to take Zack to the doctor? Is he sick?"

"I hope not, honey." Cid put an arm around her shoulders. "They just want to take a look at him."

"Okay." Junior was silent for a few minutes. "Daddy?"

"Yeah?"

"We gotta go home. I gotta do my homework."

Cid looked down, and the worried expression on the kid's face was priceless. "Aww, don't sweat that. Besides, I think school's gonna be closed for a few days till they get that wall fixed."

"Oh." Junior looked a bit sad. "Bummer."

"Bummer!? Hell, when I was your age I woulda been turning flips all over the house if my folks told me school was closed!" Cid laughed and gave Junior a hug, and Junior giggled as well.

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Vail scowled at the ruins of the pod. What had gone wrong with this particular subject? She took a look into a few other pods and was pleased to see that the rest of the SOLDIER candidates looked just as they should have. She decided not to worry too much about the one failed subject, and she opened up a row of pods. The SOLDIER candidates inside them were in perfect condition and a few were even ready to come out. The rest would wait until tomorrow as scheduled, but the few Vail took with her back to Shinra tonight would surely make Scarlet a happy woman.

They were a bit disoriented; that was to be expected. One did not remember his name. That was fine. Vail herded the three SOLDIER troops she would be taking with her onto the chopper and headed back into the plant. She wished she had an assortment of underlings like Hojo had; this would be a truly distasteful task. But she would endure it.

Vail donned rubber gloves, hauled a bucket of soapy water up the steps, and set about the grisly task of cleaning up the pods for the next batch of candidates. She certainly wished the process wasn't so messy. It hadn't been for her, but she was an imperfect specimen; intelligent but physically weak and frail. The egg that had become Vail had been fertilized and incubated in test tubes and glass boxes. Vail had hoped to overcome that by implanting the Jenova eggs into human hosts to incubate, and her experiment appeared to be a complete success. Scarlet would be pleased. Hojo would roll over in his grave. And that was all Vail asked for in life.

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"Okay, Zack. Just roll up your sleeve for me and we'll be done before you know it." Dr. Cooper smiled gently and handed Zack a stuffed bear to hold on to during the unpleasant process of drawing blood. Junior was also in the room, reading a motorcycle magazine she had found in the lobby, as well as Cloud and Tifa. The other grownups had waited outside.

Zack frowned. "This is gonna hurt, isn't it?"

The doctor shrugged. "Yeah, a little. It won't take long, though." He poked and prodded Zack's arm, at the inside of his elbow, until he found a vein. "Zack, why don't you look over at the G-Bike poster for a minute?"

"No way," Zack replied. "As soon as I look over there you're gonna stick me."

"C'mon, Zack." Junior looked up from her magazine and rolled her eyes. "It's not a shot. Shots hurt worse. It's just a little needle."

"You're right." Dr. Cooper nodded at Junior. "Shots do hurt worse because of the medicine in them. This won't be bad at all."

"Yeah, right." Zack looked up at Cloud. "Do I HAVE to do this, Dad?"

"Yeah, buddy, I'm afraid so." Cloud nodded. "Tell you what. If you let that nice doctor do what he's gotta do I'll take you to the Gold Saucer next weekend. Okay?"

"Oh, okay." Zack sighed and resigned himself to his fate. He turned his head away, and the doctor inserted the needle. "HEY! That HURTS!" Zack wailed.

"Sorry," he muttered. "Almost done." He slid the needle out of the poor kid's arm and applied a bright green band-aid to the puncture mark. "Hold that on there tight and count to ten, then you can come in here and get a balloon."

"Whoopee doo." Zack did as told as the doctor left the room with the vial of his blood. "He lied to me. That hurt!"

Junior shrugged. "They do that. I kicked mine in the teeth once when he tried to give me a shot."

Tifa helped Zack out of the chair and laughed. "What did your dad say about that?"

Junior grinned. "He said it was his fault for trying to sneak up on me with that stupid needle. Mama was pretty embarrassed, though. I got a real long lecture about it."

Zack laughed. "Good for you, C.J.!" And he and Tifa walked out into the lobby to collect his balloon. Cloud and Junior followed and got into the lobby just in time to hear the doctor tell Tifa that he would call with the results of the blood work tomorrow. With that, Cid herded everyone back into the Highwind to drop them off at their respective homes, and the day's festivities were officially over.

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"That slimy little son of a BITCH!"

Scarlet was on the rampage to begin with, having heard of the mishap in Nibelheim from the new Turks. Now Vail was standing here telling her that Reeve had called her up to shoot the breeze about the Jenova eggs. "How much does he know?"

Vail shrugged. "Not much. He knows they exist. That's all." She chuckled and added, "And he believed me when I told him I knew nothing. I don't know what President Shinra ever saw in him, personally."

"It's bad enough that he's running that little power plant of his out of MY building," Scarlet spat. "That's it. I have HAD IT with that little bastard. As soon as you wake those SOLDIER troops up tomorrow I want them suited up and ready to fight. I'm taking Junon back."

"I think you're overreacting." Vail peered at Scarlet over her glasses and sighed. "There's already an uproar over the Wratt & Pitney plant incident. A lot of their best engineers walked off the job there as soon as Palmer walked his portly little posterior through the door. Can we afford to lose more face by tearing things up in Junon?" She allowed herself a little smile then and added, "And let's not forget, Reeve doesn't just run a little power plant anymore. He is the governor of Junon, meaning he practically runs that entire continent now that Midgar is dead. Any attempt to take back our building by force would most likely be met with strong resistance, from both the air and the ground. Remember, he does have a rather powerful airship at his beck and call."

Scarlet growled. Vail was right. She was absolutely right. "Since when are you my PR agent, anyway? Forget it. Okay...what the hell am I gonna do here..." Scarlet rubbed her forehead. "What about the Turks? Couldn't we have them pay Reeve a little visit?"

"I don't think Heidegger would go for that, but he doesn't have much choice but to go along, does he?" Vail smiled sweetly. "It might have to wait a while, though."

"Why?"

Vail shrugged. "Last I heard, Stuart still had the full-body shivers, Archer was still busy trying to get drunk enough to forget the whole mess, and Kain was still throwing up." She snorted. "Heidegger certainly knows how to pick them."

"Yeah, well." Scarlet shot Vail some sort of nasty look. "Did he mention that Raven filled one of your little monsters with bullets before it even knew what was going on?" She took a moment to savor Vail's facial expression and continued. "I think she should be able to whip them into shape quick enough."

"Hmm. Judging from some of the rumors that are going around, your metaphor is appropriate." Vail snickered. "I don't suppose Heidegger ever told you where those bruises came from? The ones you noticed the day after Raven was put in charge of the Turks?"

Scarlet held up her hand. "Stop right there. Don't EVEN put that image into my head. Ugh."

"You're right," Vail mused as Scarlet squirmed. "That IS a disturbing thought."

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Reeve found himself walking on the sidewalk that ran beside one of Junon's parks. It was a perfect day. The sun was out. It was neither hot nor cold. Birds were flitting around and singing and doing their business on various cars and sometimes on people who were unlucky enough to pass under the wrong tree. And there was a little blonde girl in a pink Mog T-shirt sitting under one of those trees, reading a book about airplanes. She looked up and grinned. "Hi!"

"Hi, C.J." That was probably part of the reason she liked him so much. The rest of the grownups called her Junior. Reeve called her C.J., just like her friends did. "What are you doing here?"

"Reading." C.J. scooted over a little. "Wanna sit here?"

"I better not." And then for no apparent reason, he added: "You better go home. It's dangerous here--" Dangerous? This was the park, for crying out loud. The only danger C.J. could possibly be in was that of a bird pooping on her library book and her having to pay for it. /Why did I say that?/

The little girl sniffled, closed her book, and stood up. "Fine." She turned on her heel and started to walk away. As she did, a chill wind blew; this was accompanied by thick black clouds filling the sky.

"Wait!" Reeve started to run after C.J., but found that he couldn't move. He could only watch as a dark shape descended from the sky above, holding a terrible sword pointed downwards. "C.J.! Run!" he screamed as the dark shadow came closer and closer.

The little girl looked up just as the dark man drove his sword through her back.

The dark man's eyes met Reeve's; they were probably supposed to be brown, but the weird glow within them was the color of dried blood. His white hair stood out in spikes and points; his features were sharp and his face narrow and thin, almost feminine; and he wore Sephiroth's black armor and cloak. But it had not been the Masamune that had ended C.J.'s short life.

The dark man smiled wickedly as he pulled the blade out of the little girl's lifeless body, and Reeve realized with horror that it was the Ultima Weapon.

"NO!"

Whump!

Reeve picked himself up off the floor of his office. "What the hell..." He took a quick look at his watch and deduced that he had once again nodded off at his desk; apparently he had also fallen out of his chair. "I gotta go home someday and get some real sleep," he said to himself. The office was dark and quiet and unbearably hot, and Reeve peeled off his sport coat and loosened his tie.

/What brought a nightmare like that on, anyway?/ he wondered, and decided that this was one of the rare occasions when he really needed a drink, and a stronger one than the twelve beers Cid had poured down him to trick him into sending Cait Sith to entertain the kids at C.J.'s birthday party.

Yes, this would be a good time to go home. Reeve definitely didn't like being in this building by himself, which at present he appeared to be. Leaving his jacket in a rumpled heap on the floor, he stood a bit unsteadily and stepped out into the dark hallway. The sound of footsteps at the end of the hall made him freeze. "Who's there?" he called out. There was no answer. "Shit." He ducked back into his office and opened a desk drawer, finding a strange little device which he crammed into his pocket; it looked something like a remote control, except it had two prongs on the end that produced crackling miniature lightning bolts when he pressed a button on its side. He headed back into the hall and saw three figures approaching, and he quickly ducked behind a large potted plant. As soon as one of the three was within reach, Reeve leapt out from behind the plant, shoved the business end of the stun gun against the back of the intruder's neck, and hit the switch.

"Urk!" The intruder dropped to the floor twitching, and Reeve hit the lights.

The guy he had just zapped was none other than Rude.

"What the HELL!?" Reno and Elena came running up the hall to check on their buddy, and Reno roughly hauled Rude to his feet and waved three fingers in front of the bald ex-Turk's face. "Hey! Rude! You in there? How many fingers am I holding up?"

"Fourteen," Rude muttered. Reno shrugged and slapped Rude on the back.

"Close enough for government work. Reeve, you really need to switch to decaf."

At that moment, Reeve felt very much like a deflated balloon. "Jeez! What the hell are you three DOING here? You scared the CRAP out of me!"

"Did we catch you at a bad time?" Elena asked. "We thought you might have gone home, but Reno said you've been pulling some all-nighters lately and we figured we'd check and see if you were still here."

"Nah. I'm okay. I just fell asleep at my desk and had this really messed-up dream." Reeve rubbed his eyes and yawned. "And I was on my way to the bar to have a drink. Feel free to join me."

"Well, we'd like to, but I think we better keep an eye on Rude till he quits smoldering," Reno quipped.

"Oh, shut up," Rude mumbled, shaking his head. "What the hell did you hit me with, anyway?"

"About 7,000 volts if the manufacturer's telling the truth," Reeve shrugged. "Stun gun. Don't leave home without it. Reno, is this another friendly visit, or did you want to talk business?"

Reno laughed. "Well, I talked it over with Rude and Elena."

"And?"

"Well...we can't take you up on it right now. But we'll give you top priority if you ever need to hire us on for a job or two. We'll even give you a discount."

"I see." Reeve sighed. "Ah well. It's okay. Gentlemen, Elena, I'd love to stand here all night and shoot the breeze with you, but I have just had a nightmare that scared the living shit out of me, there is all kinds of weird stuff going on at Shinra, and there is a bottle calling my name down the street and offering to help me forget about all this long enough to get a good night's rest for the first time in about two weeks. You can stand here all night flapping your jaws or you can come get schnocked with me. Which is it going to be?"

"Depends." Reno grinned. "Who's buying?"

Reeve rolled his eyes as he remembered exactly how much Reno alone was capable of putting away. /D'oh...there goes my paycheck./ "It's on me."

"In that case, we'd be glad to join you." Reno handed Rude his sunglasses (which had fallen off when he'd hit the floor) and started down the hall.

"Reeve, before we get too inebriated to care I'd like to show you something I ran across while I was taking my daily cyber-stroll through Shinra's corporate e-mail system. Normally I charge a pretty penny for this kind of stuff but this one's free." Elena opened her bag and extracted a few pages of files, which she handed to Reeve. "You wouldn't believe how easy it's gotten to hack into their system since Scarlet took over. Every password she has on every single part of the system is 'Rufus' except for some high-level stuff I haven't figured out how to get into, like the master password list for the rest of the flunkies there. Still, I got some pretty useful stuff here."

Reeve leafed through the printouts and frowned. "Something got into the Nibel reactor?"

"Nope. It was already in there, from what the new Turks reported. Well, their leader anyway. I don't know if you remember her. Chick named Raven. Black hair, packs two pistols, looks like she stuffs her bra with cantaloupes." Elena grimaced. "I can't stand that broad. Nobody's ever seen her without makeup. She's the biggest tramp in the world--second only, of course, to Scarlet."

"Oh, GAWD." Reeve's jaw dropped. "I remember her all too well. So she finally slept her way to the top, huh?" He laughed and shook his head. "She never really bothered with me or Palmer, I guess I just didn't have anything she wanted although I can recall a couple of very racy e-mails popping up on my terminal-- and Palmer, well...ugh, I don't blame her there...but I was always hearing all these rumors about Raven and Heidegger, and Raven and Rufus, and Raven and Hojo, perish the thought, and Raven and Ts--" Reeve caught himself just in time and hoped Elena hadn't noticed. She hadn't. "...hell, I heard once she even came on to SCARLET!" He laughed harder. "And all these rumors had certain things in common, you see... namely whips, chains, and hot oil, among other things..."

Elena pulled a face. "Eww. Do NOT go there. Just the thought of ANYONE doing it with Hojo makes me want to barf. Now I REALLY need a drink to get that out of my head."

Reeve started to head on down the hall, then he reconsidered. "I'll meet you guys outside. I got a phone call to make before I get out of here."

"Sure." Rude shook his head one more time, clearing out the last of the cobwebs, and he and Elena took off.

Reeve went back to his office and flipped the lights on, then he picked up the phone. He dialed Cid's number and after two rings was rewarded with Shera's voice. "Hello?"

"Hi, Shera, it's Reeve. I just wanted to make sure you three got home okay."

Shera laughed. "We're fine. Junior's still a bit wired, though. I take it Cid told you what happened at school today."

"Yeah. That was terrible. At least nobody got hurt."

There was a pause. "Reeve? Now I might be wrong about this, I'm not an expert on Materia, but the news on TV tonight said that several of the monsters that attacked the school had been done in with lightning spells."

"And?"

"Well...I just happened to notice that Cid doesn't have any Lightning Materia on his weapon, and Junior is taking great pains to hide that infernal slingshot of hers from me. Now like I say, I could be wrong, but--"

The pieces fell into place in Reeve's mind, and he barely restrained himself from bursting out laughing. "I think Vincent has one. Don't jump to conclusions."

"I guess you're right." Shera chuckled again. "Oh, by the way, Junior loves your birthday present. That's the only stuffed animal she keeps on her bed."

"Aww. Listen, I've got to run. Tell Cid and C.J. I said hello, okay? And that job offer stands if you want it."

Shera paused a bit. "I'd still like to think about it a bit, okay? It IS an awfully long way off."

"That won't be a problem. I can have a chopper haul you back and forth, but take as much time as you want to think it over." He swallowed. He was probably going to regret what he was about to do, but he went ahead with it. "Hey, you mind if I talk to C.J. for a second?"

"Not at all." Shera called the girl to the phone.

"Hi," C.J. said.

"Hey, you." Reeve smiled a bit. "I think your mom's on to you about that Materia you got."

"Uh oh." C.J. giggled. Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I better find somewhere else to hide it. Mama's gonna throw it away if she finds out."

"I bet your dad can hang on to it for you. You doing okay now? You looked pretty shook up when you got here today."

"Uh huh. Is Cait Sith okay? He fell down and hit his head while we were havin' ice cream."

"Heh...yeah, he's fine. Listen...I just wanted to tell you we're all very proud of you. You did something very brave today at school. I mean, you saved your teacher. That was pretty cool."

Reeve could almost hear Junior blushing. "Aww...it wasn't a big deal."

"I bet Mrs. Cole thought it was. Tell you what...next time you come see me I'll have something for you. What would you say to, oh, I don't know... a little more firepower? I saw a really cool slingshot at the weapon store the other day."

C.J. giggled. "Don't tell Mama."

"I promise." Reeve smiled. "I gotta go, and you need to go to bed. You be careful, okay?"

"Okay. 'Night."

"Night, C.J." Reeve hung up and headed out for the night. The image in his head of the spiky-haired Sephiroth running C.J. through with Cloud's sword was almost out of his mind. A few drinks would banish it completely.

At least he hoped so.

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Late that night, Dr. Cooper was double and then triple-checking what he'd found in the little Strife boy's blood. After careful comparison with the sample he already had, he was sure. Jenova cells. And they were active; not only that, they were multiplying.

He stepped away from the microscope, not sure if it would be a good idea to wait until morning to call Cloud or to just ring him up now.

He would have spent more time thinking about it, but his train of thought was interrupted by the blade of a very long sword being driven into his back.

"Thank you, Doctor. You've done my work for me." Vail sat down, huffing and puffing, and dropped her brother's sword. God, it was heavy. She proceeded to help herself to the vial of blood labeled "Strife, Zack", slipping it into her pocket. Just for the hell of it, she peered into the microscope. "Almost time," she muttered, scratching absentmindedly at the Roman numeral tattooed on her arm. "Almost time."

Vail caught her breath. As a Sephiroth clone, she had left much to be desired. For one thing, she had turned out to be female, which Hojo had regarded as a complete failure. Still, he'd kept her and numbered her and studied her. She was physically weak; another failure. Still, she had the gift of Jenova. She concentrated, and her body began to change, growing taller and heavier, her long white hair changing to silver and shortening, her voice deepening. Perfect. Now to ditch the body. Well, that wouldn't be a problem. There was an incinerator out in the back of the clinic. After much straining, grunting, panting, and wheezing, that little problem was solved. There had been very little blood spilled, so that part of the cleanup was easy. One of the few things Vail liked about that big damn sword...it certainly was clean.

She flipped through the doctor's phone file, found the right number, and dialed. After four rings, a very sleepy-sounding female voice answered.

"Wha?"

"Hello, Tifa. This is Dr. Cooper in Mideel. I want you to bring your son back here first thing in the morning. There are some more tests I need to run on him."

Author's notes: Are you sick of reading these damn notes yet? Are all those rumors about Raven really true? Apparently the one about her and Scarlet doesn't have much merit, but isn't it fun to watch the Shinra corporate rumor mill at work? And were Elena's comments a bit of foreshadowing, predicting a Raven/Elena cat fight in the future? Especially she finds out about those rumors that Raven was boinking Tseng...I don't know yet, but it seems like a hilarious idea... I have added a kawaii pic of Junior sighing over Reeve to my CoJ fanart gallery which can be reached in a roundabout fashion from my Cid shrine (url as always in long-ass .sig) Boy, Vail is one evil bitch, ain't she? Starting next chapter, things are gonna start escalating fast and a lot of shit is gonna start hitting the fan. Stay tuned. Oh, one more thing. Writing fiction places one on a level right up there with Zeus and Odin and company, i.e. one can take whole cities, move them around, and have their citizens go on as if nothing had happened. My point? Since I haven't made much mention of Neomidgar's location yet, I've decided to move it. Originally I had it pegged just north of Gongaga. It now sits on the Wutai island, on the plateaus with the bridges running between them. Branford is still east of the Gold Saucer, on that little peninsula. One of these days I'm going to upload a CoJ-world map to my website.