

Final Fantasy VII: Children of Jenova

Chapter 9

"So where'd that chopper go?" Cid muttered as he took the Highwind into the air. "Goddamn thing just disappeared like that...can't pick it up on radar, can't pick up any radio signals, can't pick up any exhaust, can't pick up shit on it." He motioned one of the crew over to the controls and walked off the bridge; Junior had run straight to the chocobo hold bawling as soon as she'd set foot on the ship, and she needed her daddy.

"I can think of two possible destinations." Vincent said after a long silence. "The Shinra building in Neomidgar, and Nibelheim."

Tifa looked up quickly, eyes red and still full of tears. "You don't think they're going to--experiment on him, do you?" Vincent shrugged.

"I wouldn't be surprised." He sighed. "I think we all know the results of the blood work Dr. Cooper did last night. It wouldn't be so far-fetched to think Vail would have a scientific interest in that."

"Vail," Cloud repeated, almost dreamily. "What do you know about her?"

Again, Vincent shrugged. "Next to nothing."

"She looks familiar." Cloud stared blankly at an invisible spot a few feet in front of him. Then he took out his PHS phone and dialed a number as Tifa and Vincent looked on.

"Who are you calling?" Tifa asked.

"Reeve. Maybe he can dig up some dirt on that crazy bitch we can't."

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"Oh no, not again! Leave me alone and let me die in peace, PLEASE!" Reeve threw a pillow over his still-pounding head as the yammer of a telephone once again assaulted his tender eardrums and resonated painfully in his skull. He thought perhaps if he hid under the bedding and stayed very, very still the person that was calling would give up and leave him alone, much like a boogeyman in the closet or a monster under the bed would. He thought wrong. Two rings became ten, and ten became twenty, and so forth until Reeve angrily snatched the receiver off the hook.

"WHAT!?" he wailed. Two sounds greeted him: first, the dial tone emanating from the receiver and second, the continued ring of another phone. The PHS. He fumbled around on the nightstand until he found it (running across the bottle of aspirin again, he gulped down three more just for the hell of it before he did anything else), and flipped it open. "Whoever you are this better be life-or-death!"

Now Reeve had had just enough time while rummaging for the PHS phone and swallowing three aspirins sans water to prepare a suitable tirade against whoever was inconsiderate enough to be calling him in his state, and he had just opened his mouth to deliver it when the other person spoke.

"Reeve, it's Cloud." There was a pause and a long shuddery breath. "I need your help. "

Reeve shut his mouth; the timbre of Cloud's voice wiped the incendiary words he had so carefully chosen right off his tongue. "You okay?"

"Zack..." There was another long silence. "They took Zack away."

"Oh, God." Reeve was instantly and totally sober and hangover-free. "Who?"

"A goddamn Shinra chopper. They were hiding outside the clinic this morning. They've got some kinda thing that makes it invisible, and Vail came in there and took him away, and Vincent thinks they might have taken him to Nibelheim to do SOMETHING to him--"

"Okay, Cloud. Take a deep breath." Reeve sat up and rubbed his eyes. "How's Tifa, first of all?"

"Better than I am, I think. Which isn't saying much. I think Junior's taking it hardest, though. Poor kid hasn't stopped crying since it happened. You know what she said to me right after that chopper took off?" A pause. "She said 'Maybe I shouldn't have been so mean to him,' and then she started bawling. Cid's with her right now."

"Oh, man. Cloud, I'll do whatever you need to help get him back. What can I do?"

"For starters, we need everything you can dig up on Vail. Everything. And see if you can find out anything about that cloaking thing they've got on their chopper. If there's a way to get through it I want to know."

Reeve thought about it a moment. "That's a little beyond my abilities...but you're in luck. I've got someone right here that might just be able to pull it off. Good thing the old Turks decided to come visit again...I didn't tell you this, but it seems little Miss Elena's become quite the hacker since you last saw her. I'll set her on it right away."

"Thanks, Reeve." Cloud sighed. "Do you trust those guys?"

"I've got no reason not to. They may be hired guns now, but they're honest hired guns." He snickered. "And they hate Shinra."

"Good enough for me. Call me the second you find something out." And Cloud hung up.

Reeve set the PHS phone back down on the nightstand and went back to his living room; he was pleasantly surprised to see that the Turks had cleaned up after themselves and were now sitting on the sofa watching TV and eating pizza. "Look who's back in the land of the living!" Reno exclaimed as Reeve entered, and the other two Turks clapped and whistled.

"I've got a job for you," Reeve said. "Elena, I need you to go digging around in Shinra's computers and see what you can excavate on one Doctor Vail. She's the head of the Science department now, and she's just done something terrible. She's kidnapped a six-year-old boy and she may be planning to experiment on him...that's the other thing I need. Find out where they took him." All three former Turks gasped and swore.

"She did WHAT!?" Rude sputtered. "Man. Even Hojo wouldn't sink that low..."

"Hojo..." A light bulb flashed on in Reeve's brain. "Elena, I think it would be a good idea to try to find some connection between Vail and Hojo. I remember that she wasn't too fond of him for some reason...in fact, she hated his guts. Call it a hunch, but I think it could be important."

"I'm on it." Elena opened her briefcase and began to extract a number of odd devices: a small black box she plugged into an obviously modified cell phone ("obviously modified" meaning that it had apparently been cracked open and fiddled with, and was now held closed with duct tape) numerous lengths of cable and wire, and a tiny computer that almost looked like the little pocket organizer Reeve carried around with him. Once she got her hardware straightened out, she began typing furiously.

"Aren't you even going to quote me a price?" Reeve asked with a hint of amusement.

"Are you kidding?" Elena spat, not even looking up. "I don't give a damn about the money. Anyone that'd take a little kid in like that deserves to die slowly and painfully. Chickenshits..." She frowned, typed in a few more lines, and sat back, squinting. "Oh, now this is interesting. How old is Vail?"

Reeve shrugged. "Late twenties, I guess."

"This is really odd, then." Elena squinted at her little screen. "Because there's no birth record on her, no school

record, no credit report, no nothing till about seven years ago, right before the No. 1 reactor got blown to kingdom come. Let's see her medical record...damn!"

"What?"

"I don't like this. Her medical records are sealed under..." Elena furrowed her brow as she stared at the screen. "Aegis 29...what the hell is that? Let me cross-reference that and find out what the hell we're dealing with."

As Elena worked, Reno fidgeted with his nightstick. "You want any heads busted yet, Reeve?"

"Not yet," Reeve answered with a nervous laugh. "'Aegis 29' does sound familiar."

"Oh boy." Elena shook her head. "Nope, I definitely don't like this."

"Did you get into her medical records?" Reeve asked.

"No, but I found out what 'Aegis 29' is. And as I said, I don't like it one bit." Elena looked up from the computer. "It's the Jenova Project. And it's still running."

Reeve thought for a second that he was going to be sick again, and he sat down quickly. "Oh my God."

"Well," Reno said, "at least now we know what her problem with Hojo is. The bitch is a clone."

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Cid found Junior in the chocobo hold, curled into a sobbing and whimpering little ball of misery on the soft bed of hay that was normally occupied by Bugs, the gold chocobo. The displaced Bugs stood in the corner, pecking away at a mess of greens and not seeming to mind a bit. Occasionally he would nudge Junior's shoulder with his beak and "wark" softly at her; she didn't seem to notice. The sight was enough to pierce even Cid's heart.

He sat down next to Junior and scooped her up into his arms. She hid her face against his shoulder and continued to sob. "Honey, you got Bugs worried sick about you."

"Warrrk," whined Bugs in assent.

"Why did that lady take Zack away?" Junior sniffled. "He didn't hurt anyone. Well, he punched me in the nose, but Tifa fixed it so he didn't really hurt me...Daddy, I wanna find Zack."

"I know, punkin." Cid patted her back. "I know. Some really bad people took him away, though. I don't wanna take you along. We're gonna go home and pick your mama up, and then I'm gonna drop you both off in Junon. You'll be safe there."

"No!" Junior wailed. "I wanna stay with you!"

"Junior--"

"What if they take you away too?" Junior bawled, and then started crying even harder. Cid held her tight.

/Shit, that's what this is about.../ "They're not gonna take me away, honey." Cid rocked her back and forth and kissed her forehead. "And if they try to, I'll just call Ramuh's crazy old ass down on 'em." Ah, there it was. A tiny smile on the kid's face. "Don't worry about me, okay? I'll be fine."

"Okay." Junior wiped her eyes and threw her arms around Cid's neck. "I love you, Daddy."

"Love you too, punkin. Now why don't you come on back up here and let Bugs have his bed back?" Cid smiled and ruffled Junior's hair.

"Okay." She stood up, followed by Cid, and waved at the chocobo. "Bye, Bugs. Thanks for lettin' me use your bed."

"Wark," Bugs replied and went back to his brunch.

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Reeve watched Elena with a trepidation that mounted every second she stayed on the line. "You know, they CAN trace all accesses to the system."

"Pfft." Elena waved her hand at Reeve. "What do you think this little black box is for? If they put a trace on me, it could point to any number of cell phones I've managed to clone." She grinned. "I've got some pretty interesting peoples' security codes...Palmer, for one, among an assortment of unsavory characters who've pissed us off in the last few years." She then launched into a torrent of technical babble about what the black box and the cell phone were capable of and how they worked together, and Reeve nodded and pretended he understood what the hell she was talking about.

"In other words," Elena concluded, "as far as cyberspace goes, I'm invincible!"

"Oh, shit." Reeve sputtered laughter. "You're starting to scare me, Elena."

"She's been scaring us for a long time," Rude blurted, and he ducked as one of Elena's shoes came flying at his bald head.

"Hush, you! I STILL can't get into the Jenova Project files, but I have managed to dig up some other stuff. You say the chopper that took the boy was invisible, right?"

"Yeah." Reeve nodded. "Not entirely, though...according to Cloud, it looked like the air was sort of waving where the chopper was."

"Well, I sort of figured Shinra would have to be able to keep an eye on their own choppers, right? Right. Obviously they've got something that lets 'em track the things. Something like this." Elena hit a key, and the little printer she had spat out a few leaves of plans. "You'll want to get this to Cid yesterday. At least it'll let him figure out where to go."

"I could kiss you, Elena, but I don't feel like getting slapped today." Reeve grabbed the PHS phone and called Cid.

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"Elena found WHAT!?" Cid frowned. "I'll be damned. You tell her I'm gonna take back some of the shit I said about her. Listen, I need a favor if it's not too much to ask...could Shera and Junior crash at your place for a while? I'd feel better if I had someone I trust keepin' an eye on 'em and besides, the only chance in hell I got of gettin' Junior off this ship is tellin' her she gets to stay at your house..." Cid grimaced and held the phone about a foot away from his ear; indistinct wailing and yelling could be heard issuing forth from the earpiece. "Well, it is! Hell, it's not my fault all the chicks dig you...anyway, did she dig anything else up?" Cid listened intently for a few minutes, then suddenly turned white. "Shit. Is she sure? Oh, man. This is bad. You better call Red XIII up and let him know what's going on...that crazy bitch was haulin' Sephiroth's sword. It makes sense now."

"What?" Tifa was practically listening through Cid's other ear.

"Yeah, we'll be there in a couple hours after I pick Shera up. Later." Cid hung up and shook his head. "Goddamn. I shoulda seen it. Vail's a freakin' Sephiroth clone, at least that's what the evidence is pointin' to. I'm gonna get Barret and Yuffie on the horn and we'll swing by and pick them and Red up on the way to Junon. Reeve's got a little present for me, courtesy of Elena."

"Oh?" Cloud raised an eyebrow. "What sort of present?"

Cid grinned evilly. "A way to get past that cloaking shit Shinra's got on their choppers. Soon as I get that set up, we go after that goddamn chopper and take Zack back." He put an arm around Tifa's shoulders and gave her a little hug. "You two hang in there. We'll get him back safe. And then we're gonna take Vail's pale white ass out."

Tifa sniffled once more, then she wiped her eyes and looked over at Junior, who was sitting next to Vincent; they appeared to be having a pleasant conversation, and Tifa smiled. "I'm glad Junior's feeling better. I imagine she was scared to death that she'd get taken away too."

"Nah, it wasn't that." Cid sighed. "She was afraid of 'em takin' ME away. Can you believe that? She didn't say a word about her. Just that she didn't wanna go to Junon because she was afraid they'd get me too. Shit, to be honest it made me want to cry."

"She'll be okay." Cloud cast a glance over at Junior and Vincent. "I'm glad to see she's not scared to be around him after what happened in Mideel."

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The truth was, Junior -was- a bit scared of Vincent. After all, he looked like a vampire most of the time to begin with and that claw thing was kind of creepy and when he got mad, well...but he was just so -cool.- And he was her daddy's best friend. That was good enough for Junior.

"I'm sorry if I frightened you earlier, Junior," Vincent said softly. "You know I would never hurt you, don't you?"

"I know." Junior nodded. "Vincent?"

"Hmm?"

"How come you turn into that scary monster when you get mad?"

Vincent thought about it a bit. "A long time ago, something happened to me. There was a man that did terrible things to someone I loved, and when I tried to stop him he did something to me that makes me change like that."

Junior blinked. "Does it hurt?" she asked, and Vincent chuckled.

"It's not pleasant. I get stronger when I change, but when I come back to myself, I'm tired. It takes a lot out of me."

"Oh." Junior looked up at him. "You okay now?"

"Of course." Vincent patted her on the head. Junior leaned against him, closed her eyes, and dozed off, leaving Vincent sitting there with a funny look on his face and a small child using him as a pillow. Oh well. Vincent unfastened his cape and tucked it around Junior's shoulders, and she snuggled up under it. Cid found them like this a few minutes later and wished he had a camera.

"How's she doing?" Cid asked, sitting down next to Junior's feet.

"Looks like she was pretty worn out," Vincent replied. "Can't say I blame her." Junior mumbled and shrugged his cape onto the floor, and he picked it up and draped it over her again. "Cid, has she been having nightmares as well?"

Cid frowned. "Not that I know of. Why?"

"It could be nothing, but Cloud told me this while you were checking on Junior. Zack was also having some rather unsettling dreams about Sephiroth; he said a man with green eyes told him he was going to get back at Cloud somehow."

There was an uneasy silence. "Vail is Sephiroth, isn't she? The evil Sephiroth?" Cid finally asked. Vincent shrugged.

"It appears that she is, but I'm not certain. Did you see how much she was struggling to get Zack outside, even after she drugged him? It doesn't make sense."

"None of this shit makes sense, Vincent." Cid lit up a cigarette and inhaled deeply. "Not a damn bit of it."

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Scarlet was busy thinking of painful things to do to Palmer after he got out of the hospital when someone knocked on her door. "What?" she spat, and the door opened. Heidegger stepped through it and approached her desk. "This better be good news. After what happened with Palmer and the W&P plant today I am NOT in a good mood."

/When are you ever in a good mood!?!/ Heidegger thought. "We've got the first platoon of SOLDIER troops out of Nibelheim, and the second batch ready to go into the pods."

"I'll be damned. Someone managed to do something right today." Scarlet smirked. "How many of them made it?"

"Eighteen. That's the twenty we originally took up there, minus the one that attacked Stuart, minus another that must have escaped in the night. His pod was clean. I don't think whatever Vail was doing to them took." Heidegger scowled. "She said she's implanting something in their bodies. That and the messes in the rest of the pods really scare the hell out of me."

"Another one broke out? Damn." Scarlet thought about it a bit. "Well, it looks like your new SOLDIERS have their first job lined up. Think they're up to chasing down an AWOL troop?"

Heidegger facevaulted. "All of them!?"

"Why not?"

Heidegger shrugged. "That's kind of overkill...I mean, the guy couldn't have gotten too far. Besides, I think the Turks are better suited to that kind of thing."

Scarlet yawned. "Do it however you want. Just catch that guy."

"Yes, ma'am." Heidegger turned to leave, then he reconsidered. "Scarlet...did Vail tell you exactly what she's doing to these guys?"

"I don't know and I don't care." Scarlet sighed and went back to her paperwork. "All I know is that it's working."

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Shera sighed. She'd just gotten off the phone with Cid and now she was packing bags for herself and Junior. Things were getting very crazy very fast; first the Lifestream and Cid's nightmares, then the monster attack, and now that mad scientist from Shinra kidnapping Zack. Terrible. She took a look out the window; the Tiny Bronco II and the Baby Bronco sat side-by-side in their backyard-turned-flightline, and that sight was enough to lift her spirits just a bit.

Opening a dresser drawer, Shera found several of Junior's t-shirts, which she stuffed in Junior's little pink suitcase. Poor Junior. She had taken Zack's abduction especially hard, and Shera couldn't fault her for that. While she thought about that, she heard a sort of shuffling sound outside. /What in the world is that?/ she thought, and she opened the front door to take a look. "Hello? Is someone there?"

She was answered by a low groan in the shrubs around the front of the house, accompanied by a slight rustling of branches. "Excuse me? Can I help you with something?" Shera cautiously approached the bushes. It sounded human enough, but with the sort of monsters that were roaming around, she couldn't be sure. "Hello?"

"Help...me..." the voice replied, weakly. "Hurts..."

Shera reached out with a shaking hand and pushed a few branches aside and gasped. Huddled among the leaves was a pale, shivering, and naked human being with what looked like a fresh surgical scar on the back of his neck. "What happened to you?"

The man shook his head. "Hurts..."

"We'll get you a doctor, all right? Can you tell me your name?"

The man looked up, confused. "Name...Aidan? Aidan..."

Shera nodded. "Okay. Stay there for a minute while I go get you a blanket or something, Aidan. I'll be right back." She turned quickly and went back inside; after locating a spare bathrobe she picked up the phone and called Cid again. "Cid, it's me again...listen, you have to come right away. Why? There is a naked man hiding in the bushes in front of the house, and he--no! No! It's not like that! Calm down!" Shera rolled her eyes. "He seems disoriented, and I think he's been hurt in some way. He needs a doctor. Yes, yes, I'll be careful. Hurry." She hung up and went back outside. Aidan was still quivering in the bushes, and Shera handed him the robe. "Here, it's not much, but it'll keep you warm."

"Hurts," Aidan said again, but he clumsily donned the robe and crawled out of the bushes.

"There you are. Can you tell me what happened to you?" Shera helped the poor man sit down on the steps, and he shook his head.

"Don't know. Green light. Couldn't get away." He dropped his forehead onto his knees and said no more, and Shera sat silently beside him and wished that Cid would hurry the hell up and get there.

Author's notes: Starting next chapter, the Shinra execs (including Reeve) will have something they never had in the game: last names (except Heidegger and Palmer, who will have first names ^_^)...well, looks like I'm gonna move Branford after all, directly east onto that funky-shaped little peninsula southwest of Junon. I swear, it's a wonder any of the poor folks in Neomidgar and Branford can live in peace, what with me scooting their hometowns all over the world map like this...ah well...damn, I usually have more to babble about than this, but I guess I must be tired or something. Later.