

HOJO'S LEGACY

By Frank Verderosa

PROLOGUE 1: GHOSTS FROM THE PAST

Buried deep beneath the ruins of Midgar, a rat move slowly through the pitch darkness of a sub basement in Shinra Headquarters. It moved easily through the darkness, having passed this way many times before in it's daily routine. No sunlight could reach this room so deep beneath the earth, but the room was not totally dark. Amid the dark silouttes of the silent machinery that filled the room a single red light blinked slowly beneath a computer terminal. The rat took no notice, for to it the light, blinking with seeming infinite patience, was just part of the room.

But suddenly the rat sensed a change. It stood on it's hind legs and sniffed the air. It could detect no threats, yet it was uneasy. To the rat, any change in the environment around it was a potential danger.

The light was no longer blinking, but glowed steadily.

The rat froze as it heard a soft sound. A faint hum as the fan inside the computer came to life. There was a beep, and the rat skittered across the room in fright. Moments later words flashed up on the screen, a screen that had been blank and lifeless since the fall of meteor.

"Time out Period Exceeded. No User Input."

The rat stopped for a moment by a narrow crack in the wall that served as it's entrance and exit from the room, still unsure of itself.

Again words flashed across the screen.

"Initiating Default Protocol Hojo One"

"Press any key within 10 seconds to cancel"

The rat sank back down onto all fours and paced nervously back and forth by the crack as the number on the screen dropped toward zero. It felt a strong desire to flee, but, unsure of the direction of the danger, did not know which way to run.

The countdown reached zero.

"Initializing program...."

An electrical impulse sped from the machine. It tripped a circuit in a room hidden even deeper below ground. There was a moments pause, then, with a sharp whine, a line of generators hummed to life.

Up above the rat stood bewildered as the once silent room began to fill with sounds. Suddenly the overhead lights flashed on, bringing a blinding light to the room that had been shrouded in darkness for so long. The rat turned and ran through the crack in the wall as if it's very life depended on it.

PROLOGUE 2

The convoy consisted of three trucks escorted by four men on Chocobos. It moved slowly down the road from Costa Del Sol toward Corel. The roads in this area were not in good repair, sometimes dwindling to no more than a rough path through the overgrown grass, which forced them to go much slower than the convoy leader would have liked. Since the fall of Shinra and the destruction of Midgar the cities that remained spent most of their money and efforts within their own borders, and none seemed willing to take responsibility for the roads and infrastructure that lay between them. As a result most of the roads had fallen into disrepair, and some were now nearly impassable. As if to emphasize this point, the convoy came over a low ridge and the road led down to a swift running river, but the narrow wooden bridge that had spanned it just a week ago was gone, with a couple of wooden posts jutting from the water as the only hint that it had ever been there at all.

Not only was no one spending money to keep the roads in repair, there also were no security forces available to patrol the routes between the cities. As a result bands of thieves had proliferated in the area, bent on making an easy buck by stealing from any unprotected traffic that passed through. Unbeknownst to the convoy leader, even as he got out of the truck to discuss the situation with the others in his party, a number of men were watching closely from a nearby stand of trees.

"So what are we waiting for?" Altim asked impatiently. "The convoy is stopped dead."

Shu gave him a look of disapproval.

"For Bennis to give the signal, of course," he replied,

"Well, what's taking him so long?" Altim persisted. The convoy looked completely helpless.

"Shut up and be patient," Shu said sharply. "You're not fooling around with your street gang in Junon anymore. This is the real thing, and we're not playing games. They have to check it out to make sure everything is okay."

Altim looked at Shu darkly, but said nothing.

"And when they do give the signal," Shu continued, "don't go rushing out there like some kind of hero. Stay in the back and use the materia we gave you."

"But all you gave me was 'cure'," Altim protested. "I can't even get into the battle with that. How can I use my knife if I stay in the back?"

"Just shut up and do as you're told!" Shu replied angrily. "You're the new guy in the group, and your job is to help us, not fight. This is nothing like it was in Junon. These people may be fighting to the death, and you have no experience with these kind of battles. If you go running up to the front lines now you're either going to get yourself killed or someone is going to have to waste their time to come and save your neck. You think you know what you are doing but you really don't have the slightest idea until you've done this a few times. So just trust me and stay out of trouble."

"Just because you're my cousin doesn't mean you can tell me what to do," Altim responded.

"It's not that you're my cousin," Shu replied patiently. "We do this with all the new guys. You need some experience before you can be useful in a battle like this, and nobody gets experience if they're dead. Now please do as I say!"

Shu turned at the sound of a high pitched bird call, repeated three times.

"That's the signal, let's go."

As Altim followed Shu out of the trees he saw a dozen other men advancing on the convoy as well. He could see Bennis not far away to his right, a large older man with short brown hair and beard. Beside him walked another, a much younger man with jet black hair whose name he did not know but had been refereed to by some of the others only as the Swordsman. Altim thought the name apt, for the man carried a huge sword strapped to his back, larger than any he had ever seen before. He wondered how the man could fight with such a thing, for it looked much too heavy to be used with any dexterity.

It took a moment for those in the convoy to notice the newcomers, but when they did they quickly gathered together. The convoy leader and another man started towards them. When there were about twenty yards separating them the convoy leader halted.

"That's close enough," he said. "What is your business here?"

Bennis stopped and held up his hand to halt the others.

"I think that's pretty obvious," he replied. "We want what's in your trucks. If you leave without giving us any trouble no one will get hurt. If you oppose us, we will kill you all without mercy."

The convoy leader did not reply but talked quietly to the man next to him.

"I suggest you make up your mind swiftly," Bennis stated. "I'm not known for my patience."

The convoy leader looked at him.

"Very well," he said. "We don't want anyone to get hurt. If you want what is in the trucks, then you shall have it."

He turned back toward the trucks.

"Let 'em have it!" he shouted.

Suddenly the back of two of the trucks fell open and men in black and gold uniforms started pouring out.

"Gold Saucer guards!" the swordsman shouted. "It's a trap."

Altim saw Bennis look toward the trees, but they were too far away to retreat back that way. They had been suckered out into the open. The Swordsman quickly pulled out his sword, holding it with surprising ease. Beside him Bennis suddenly produced a gun from beneath the folds of his cape. Then with a yell they both charged forward.

The rest of the men followed. Altim stayed behind Shu as he ran forward. In moments he was surrounded by the clash of weapons and the shouts and screams of men. He tried to keep up with Shu, but it was difficult in the confusion that swirled around him. One of the guards came at him, but he dashed away and the guard turned toward another. His knife was poised in his hand, but he had not expected the ferocity that he saw from the men around him. He had been in a couple of gang fights, and some of his friends had died in battles, but nothing he had done compared to this.

He stopped and looked around. Shu was nowhere in sight. He was close to the trucks now, and there seemed to be more guards around than his own people. He turned as one of the guards came at him again. He dodged in and slashed at the man with his knife, cutting into the man's arm and feeling it strike bone. With a cry the man sprang back, but then came forward and stabbed at him. He dodged back in surprise, feeling the blade cut his leg. He turned to run but saw three other men coming up behind him.

He looked around quickly, feeling sudden desperation. Where were the others?

Suddenly a figure sprang up beside him. A sword flashed in the air, and two of the men went down before they even realized what had happened. The third turned and parried a blow that struck with such force that it knocked him off balance. The Swordsman's blade flashed again, and the man fell and lay still. The other man, the one Altim had wounded, suddenly turned and began to stumble away, but before he had taken more than two steps the Swordsman was upon him.

The man cried out as the sword fell, and then he dropped to the ground. The Swordsman turned to look at Altim for a moment. Altim looked at him in surprise, for his eyes glowed with a strange light. It was the light that was caused by the infusion of Mako energy, he immediately realized, though he had never before seen it. It marked the man as a member of Shinra's old elite fighting force, SOLDIER. Altim started to speak, but before he did the man turned away and hurried off.

Altim looked down at the gash on his leg, and for the first time remembered the materia he had been given. He quickly took it out and cast cure on himself. He looked up and saw that the battle was just about over, and the Gold Saucer guards had been routed in spite of their surprise. Apparently they had not expected the opposition to have such a strong force.

He could see Shu standing near on of the trucks, with Bennis and the Swordsman beside him. He quickly hurried over, stopping only to cast cure on any of the thieves that had been wounded. As he reached Shu's side another man came up.

"They have over 10,000 gil in the third truck, as well as a dozen materia orbs," the man said to Bennis.

"No wonder they had some protection," he mused. "But they weren't expecting to run into a force like ours, eh?" he continued with a laugh. "Look's like it was worth the trouble after all."

"We captured four from the convoy, " the man continued. "Two Gold Saucer guards, who are wounded but still alive. One of the truck drivers and a laborer. What should we do with them?"

Bennis looked at the man grimly.

"Kill them all," he said unhesitatingly. "I warned them what would happen if they resisted."

That evening Altim sat with Shu by a campfire in the woods far to the south of the scene of the attack. The other thieves were busy setting up camp around them.

"So, you lived through it after all," Shu remarked. "What did you think?"

"You were right, it was different," Altim replied. He looked around and saw the Swordsman nearby, sitting in front of a tent polishing his sword.

"Who is that guy, anyway?" he said softly, nodding with his head toward the man. "He fought like a demon. He probably saved my life."

Shu smiled grimly.

"Yeah, he's different all right. I've never seen anyone as good with a sword."

"What's his real name?" Altim asked.

Shu shrugged.

"Beats me."

Altim looked at him with a puzzled expression.

"Haven't you ever asked him?"

"He doesn't know himself," Shu responded. "It's a real strange story. Bennis found him about, oh, over two years ago, I guess. It was just outside of Midgar. He was just laying on the ground in a pool of blood. He'd been shot about five or six times. I've never seen anyone still alive with wounds that bad. Bennis might be a mean son of a bitch, but he admires toughness. We took the guy in, figuring if he could survive he might be useful. It took months, but he finally pulled through. Thing is, he couldn't remember anything about himself. Not who he was, or where he came from, or even who had shot him or why. He couldn't remember a damn thing about what happened to him before he had been shot. He didn't have a name, but the first time he picked up a sword, we could tell he was good with one. He had the one he's got now specially made, and ever since then that's what we've called him, the Swordsman. I tell you, he's saved our butts more than once in the past."

The Swordsman glanced up at them, and for a second Altim thought he realized that they were talking about him. But after a moment he turned away and continued polishing his sword. He did it every night, sometimes more often if they fought more than one battle. He polished the sword slowly, going over the surface inch by inch, taking his time and not missing a single spot. The sword was more than a sword, it was an extension of himself. Even more than that, he felt an attachment with this sword from the past. Somehow he knew this sword was the right thing for him, though he did not know how he knew.

He looked up once more and glanced around the camp. He knew the sword was right, though he could not remember how it was connected to his past. He couldn't remember anything about a sword at all, but it was not quite true that he remembered nothing at all. Occasionally there were jumbled hints of things that had happened to him that rose near the surface, but he could never quite grasp them. But there was one thing that he did remember clearly, though he had never mentioned it to anyone. It was the face of a woman. A woman with emerald green eyes.