

Final Fantasy VII: Children of Jenova

Chapter 16 (the real one)

Deep in the Nibel mountain caves, a lone Mako fountain sang contentedly as its light glistened on something that now stood within it.

The Planet had finished its creation. The spiraling streams of Mako energy that had spent the last few days weaving and welding themselves into something a little more tangible straightened once more, drifting skyward as they had before the Planet started its project.

The odd cylindrical object that had first begun to poke out of the chunk of raw Materia a few days before now had a definite shape. It seemed to be perfectly molded to fit inside a grasping hand, and at the very end of it was something that looked like a setting for a very large gem. It was empty. The gem it was designed to hold lay elsewhere, safe in the keep of the spirits of the Ancients. On the other end, several inches of bright silver metal vanished into the stone; the stone held the remainder of this blade tightly.

In other words, the Planet had spent the last four days making a sword. And it wasn't about to relinquish its creation to just anybody. It had a specific pair of hands in mind when it sculpted the handle. It had also given its creation a name: Excalibur.

* * *

"The hell you mean Cid ain't comin'!?" Barret spat. Vincent and the remaining Highwind crew had come to pick him up, and he did not seem terribly thrilled with the idea of Vincent flying the airship. "What's wrong with him?"

"Step off, Barret," Elena snapped in reply. "In case you didn't hear what Vincent just said, Cid and Shera have just lost their daughter. You think it's unreasonable to give the man a few days off to deal with it?"

Barret snorted. "Cloud and Tifa's boy just up and turned into goddamn Sephiroth, an' you don't see THEM runnin' off mopin' about it. Shit, he oughta at least be out lookin' for her--"

"He spent three days looking for her," Vincent replied. "He didn't find her. He knew the rest of us needed to get back to the tasks at hand, but he needed to spend a few days at home with his wife before he could help us with that. I'm sorry if you have a problem with that, Barret, but that's what he wanted and we have no right to tell him he can't do it."

Barret opened his mouth to argue the point further, but snapped it shut again when he looked up to see Vincent's red eyes drilling into him. "Fine," he huffed. "So what are we s'posed to be doin' now?"

"Well..." Cloud scratched his head. "I think Sephiroth's going to go after the Black Materia again, and I think I know where it is."

"And I think you think too damn much, Spike," Barret replied. Cloud pretended not to hear, but couldn't prevent a small chuckle from passing his lips. "So where'd it go?"

"You remember that cave where we found that Knights of the Round Materia?" Cloud asked, and Barret nodded. "This is gonna sound crazy, but I had this weird flashback thing--I saw what happened when Holy blew out of that crater, and somehow it managed to spit the Black Materia all the way over to that cave on Round Island. I figure since we're here, one of us can just saddle Bugs up and go grab it before Sephiroth does."

"Sounds good to me." Barret nodded. "Who's going?"

"Not me," Cloud said flatly. "Whatever happens, I don't want to have that thing in my hands. You all know what happened before. And we only have one gold chocobo. Whoever goes is going to be on their own."

"Isn't that nice," Barret sighed, rubbing his eyes. "Ah, what the hell. I'll go get it."

It turned out that Bugs had other plans.

Barret managed to get the gold chocobo out of the Highwind's chocobo hold without much fuss, and he managed to get the saddle on Bugs's back with a similar lack of resistance, but as soon as he climbed on all hell broke loose.

"WARK!" Bugs screeched, and then he proceeded to buck wildly and throw Barret into the grass below. To add insult to injury, the chocobo kicked backwards with his left foot, then his right, peppering Barret with a fine spray of soil and torn grass blades.

"Well." Barret stood up slowly, brushing himself off as the others stifled hysterical laughter; Vincent simply shook his head and covered his mouth with his hand. "Same to you, ya walkin' hot wing platter..."

Yuffie patted Bugs on the head. "It's not his fault you weigh so much!" She scratched the back of the chocobo's head. "Aww...poor widdle choco...almost got his widdle back bwoke, huh?"

"Can it, Yuffie!" Barret spat, causing even more laughter from the others. Vincent was turning an odd shade of reddish purple and laughing as silently as he could, hiding his grin behind his hand and his cowl. Red XIII was making some sort of wheezing, snorting noise, which Barret guessed passed for laughter among Red's kind. "You too, ya mangy mutt! Let's see YOU climb your four-legged ass up there!"

Red wheezed again; one tear tumbled from his good eye. "Very well." He padded up behind Bugs, stood on his back legs, and braced his forepaws against the chocobo's back. Bugs burst forth with another cry of "Wark!" and jumped away, probably thinking that Red intended to eat him. "Steady, Bugs..." Red tried to hop up on the chocobo's back once more and actually made it, holding on for the full eight seconds needed for maximum scoring before Bugs spun around three times and dumped the beast onto the ground.

And that wasn't all.

Bugs began to chase Red around, "wark"ing angrily and pecking Red right at the base of his tail, relieving the beast of a portion of his fur but doing no serious damage. Now Barret rolled on the ground in gales of laughter while Red XIII growled softly.

Vincent had to sit down. Still he made no sound, but all could see that under his cape, his entire body shook with laughter.

"So much for that," Red sighed, padding off to lick his wounds. "Anyone else care to try?"

"Sure," Tifa snickered, taking hold of Bugs's reins. "This is a job that requires a woman's touch, I guess." She stuck her right foot in a stirrup and began to swing her left leg over Bugs's back; Bugs bucked again and sent Tifa sprawling into the grass next to Red XIII. The rest of the crew was watching this so closely that they did not see Vincent slip away and vanish behind a nearby tree.

"Oh, GAWD!" Yuffie rolled her eyes. "Do I have to do EVERYTHING around here?" She likewise grabbed hold of the chocobo's reins, likewise swung her leg over his back, and sat there triumphantly. "There!" she grinned, patting Bugs's wing.

"Warr-rrk?" Bugs cooed.

"I don't believe it," Barret grumbled.

"Believe it, chubby!" Yuffie replied, giving Bugs's reins a snap. "Giddyap!"

Bugs took off at a dash, heading straight for the water as Yuffie held on, laughing and yelling happily. And then it happened.

Bugs slammed on the brakes just as his toes entered the water. The law of inertia states that a body in motion will tend to remain in motion until it is stopped by some outside force, and thusly Yuffie remained in motion until she was stopped by an outside force--namely, sea water, three feet deep. She came up spluttering and hacking, and as she sloshed her way back to terra firma, she shot an incensed glance at Bugs.

"Warkwarkwarkwarkwark," Bugs said softly, as if he were laughing at Yuffie's misfortune.

"I know what we're having for lunch," Yuffie spat, glaring at Bugs. Bugs stopped "warkwarkwark"ing. "Where'd Vincent go?" she wondered aloud. Cloud looked around.

"I dunno, he was just here a minute ago...what's that noise?" Cloud looked over toward a nearby tree, as did the others. Hysterical laughter issued forth from behind it. Yuffie turned purple, stomped off behind the tree, and returned a few moments later dragging Vincent by the front of his shirt. He was still snickering softly, and his eyes were brimming with tears.

"Look who just volunteered to be the next victim," she announced, and Vincent stopped laughing.

Vincent's attempt was feeble at best. He managed to get up on Bugs's back, but the chocobo just walked right out from under him, dumping him on the ground. That left Elena.

"Forget it," Elena spat. "I'm not getting on that thing."

"Elena, you're the only one left. Just hop on," Yuffie sighed, rolling her eyes.

"No way." Elena shook her head. "I'll help you chase Sephiroth down. I'll hack into Shinra's computers for you. I'll clean up after Yuffie if I have to."

"Hey!" Yuffie whined. Elena ignored her.

"But I am NOT getting on that damn dirty bird!" With that, Elena folded her arms across her chest and sniffed.

Barret and Yuffie looked at Elena, then at each other...and then each of them grabbed one of Elena's arms and hoisted her up into the saddle. "Oh yes you are!" Barret snapped as Elena wriggled between him and Yuffie.

"Lemme go!" Elena screeched as Yuffie stuffed her left foot in the stirrup. "I am NOT going to--" She stopped. Bugs craned his head around and looked her in the eye.

"Warrk?" he said. He kicked up dirt twice and bucked, sending Elena flying over his head into the water.

While the others laughed and Elena fumed, Vincent scratched his head. "You know, I should have thought about this...this is Cid's chocobo, isn't it?"

"Yeah..." Cloud replied.

"I shoulda known," Barret grumbled. "Well, there's no way around it. We're just gonna have to go get him."

* * *

Chopper was at it again.

After C.J. persuaded Archer to leave the Hangar in her own special way, the biker had been left with nobody to take his aggression out on. The chick with the black hair was packing heat, and the little scrawny guy with the weird eyes didn't look like he'd be much fun to pick on. So Chopper simply settled for harassing another biker that had popped in. Annie and C.J. pretended not to notice; nothing physical had come of it yet and if it did, Annie was certain that C.J. would deal with it. That was one tough kid. She'd wiped the floor with one of Shinra's finest. And she looked damn familiar. The kid, Annie

noticed, spent a lot of time looking at the wall of fame, where all the portraits of the famous pilots were displayed; she spent a lot of time looking at one portrait in particular.

The confrontation finally entered the physical mode. Chopper threw a punch at the other biker, who countered with a punch of his own. C.J. calmly turned, walked over to the pair, grabbed them both by the hair, and knocked their heads together. They sat down in the nearest chairs they could find, whimpering and rubbing their foreheads. That done, C.J. turned her attention back to the portrait that had captured it earlier.

"Lot of brave folks up there," Annie said, coming over to stand beside the kid. "I flew with most of 'em in the war. Watched a couple get shot down." C.J. just nodded in reply, not taking her eyes off that one photo. "Now that guy--" Annie tapped the frame of the portrait. "Cid Highwind. Never seen a kid with so much damn attitude in my whole career. I wanted to deck him a few times, lemme tell you. But he could sure handle a Viper." Annie looked at the portrait and back at C.J. "You some kin of his? You sure look like him."

The only answer C.J. gave was a soft snuffle. She blinked, and one tear spilled from her eye.

"You ever gonna tell me what C.J. stands for?"

C.J. wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "Cid Junior," she finally whispered, and Annie did a double take.

"Can't be...naw, no way. Not unless..." Annie scratched her chin. "Unless that weird water did something to you, and you're not as old as you look...is that it?" C.J. nodded again. "How old are you, girl?"

"I just turned six," C.J. answered. Annie gasped and swore.

"Good Lord. So that's why you need my bike? You tryin' to get home?" C.J. sniffled and nodded again. Annie patted her shoulder. "Well...go on out back and fire it up." She smiled, and C.J. gave her a little hug and took off.

A few minutes later, Annie heard the sputter of a not-too-recently started motorcycle engine, followed by three backfires and a wheeze as the thing died. She poked her head out the back door to see her none-too-pleased bouncer straddling the seat and scowling at the hunk of machinery beneath her. C.J. glanced up at Annie.

"I thought that sign said 'Runs good,'" she said slowly. Annie sweat-dropped.

"Well...it did, last time I fired it up."

"Which was when?" C.J. prodded, and Annie shuffled her feet.

"'Bout six years ago, before I got the other hog in front."

C.J. whimpered and dropped her head onto the handlebars. "Wonderful."

* * *

Archer was not thrilled. He was officially persona non grata in yon local drinking establishment, which meant that until Heidegger decided it was time for the Turks to get off their butts and do something, he was stuck in this nasty little burg sans alcohol, not to mention sans his best buddy. God, it sucked.

But Archer had had some time to think while he sat there in his crummy little room at the inn; some time to think about the sweet young thing that had beaten the living shit out of him back at the bar. Those eyes. Mako eyes. Inspiration struck, and Archer took his cell phone out of his pocket and called Heidegger up.

"What do you want now?" Heidegger answered. No hello, no how are you, no go to hell, no nothing. Typical.

"Hey, boss, I need you to check on something for me. Do we have any female SOLDIERS still AWOL from before Meteor?"

"Hold on." There was a tapping of keys. "No. Why do you ask?"

"There's a young lady here in Branford working as a bouncer in the local watering hole. Kid wiped the floor with me, plus she's got the eyes. I just thought maybe she was one of the old batch." Archer sighed. "Never mind. I'll keep you posted." He hung up and frowned. Something fishy was happening here. Was this kid another one of Vail's botched experiments?

Archer decided he needed to get drunk very badly, and realized that getting back into the bar would mean begging forgiveness from the bouncer he'd hit on. On second thought, maybe he could do without that drink for now.

* * *

Reeve woke up with a start as an unpleasant beeping noise began to assault his eardrums. He noted that he had fallen asleep on the keyboard of his computer, which meant that the memo he'd been typing now read something along the lines of "We seem to be having the most trouble with Turbines 3 and 4; pleaseekjs79dnavbs kjs wh5v k a';kjh..."

"Ugh," he muttered, jabbing the "backspace" key to fix the mess. Coffee. He needed coffee. As if by divine intervention, the door to his office opened and in came Reno and Rude, both laden with coffee and pastries.

"Good morning, sunshine." Reno grinned, setting a cup and a danish down on Reeve's desk.

"Tell me again why I'm still here," Reeve muttered, rubbing his eyes.

"Because you were sick of sitting around the house doing nothing, and you wanted to sit at your desk and do nothing instead?" Rude offered, and Reeve groaned. "Did they ever find Cid's kid?"

"Nah." Reeve sighed.

"It doesn't look too good for her, does it?"

Reeve shook his head. "As long as she's been in there, no." At that moment, his phone rang. He picked it up, rolling his eyes. "Hello...hello...look, whoever you are, I am not amused. You can say 'hello' or you can say 'good morning' or you can even say 'Governor Brannon, I think you're a jackass,' but this has got to stop!" He slammed the phone down with a soft growl. "Who the hell is that!?" he asked nobody in particular, stirring five packets of sugar into his coffee.

"Someone prank-calling you?" Reno asked around a mouthful of chocolate donut. Reeve nodded in exasperation.

"They don't say anything. They let me sit there saying hello, hello, hello, and then they hang up on me."

Reno nodded. "I can put a trace on it for you next time if you want. Probably just some smartass kid, but I don't think you want to take a chance on that."

"Thanks." Reeve rubbed his eyes. "You have no idea how much this is freaking me out."

* * *

C.J. jumped and quickly hung up the pay phone as Annie came out back hauling a bag of tools and various motorcycle guts. "All righty. You ever worked on a hog before?"

"No, but I've worked on my mama's car and Dad's airplane before." C.J. smiled proudly. "I changed the cross-feed valve on his plane all by myself a few weeks ago," she added, and then appended, "Dad kinda had to start loosening up the bolts for me, though."

Annie snorted laughter. "Don't think you'll have no grief with stuck bolts now, girl...not after you pasted that Shinra boy like you did! Anyway, looks like all this pig needs is the plugs and the oil changed. Can you handle that?"

C.J. nodded. "Yes ma'am, I think so." She crouched down next to the bike and examined it closely. "I was wondering if there was a junkyard around here. I was thinkin' about some other stuff I could do to this thing."

"Sure, right down the block." Annie pointed east. "What kinda stuff?"

"Oh, I dunno," C.J. said innocently. "I saw Chopper's bike and I got a few ideas."

"Oh, hell," Annie laughed. "You're scarin' me." She laughed a bit more, then she shook her head. "I gotta go back in. I'll yell if I need ya, okay?"

"Kay."

Annie was right about one thing; C.J. had no trouble getting the old plugs out of the bike. A few of them were rusted in place, but several squirts of 1010 oil and a few mighty grunts and twists later, they popped right out. Changing oil was normally an easy task, but the old oil in the crankcase was the consistency of cold pancake syrup and black as the ace of spades; she had to flush the crap out with still more 1010 oil before pouring in the new stuff. She was done in about three hours, and Annie informed her that her shift was over and she was now free to do what she pleased with the rest of the day.

C.J. strolled off to the junkyard with her day's pay in her pocket, forked over a wad of it to the junkyard's proprietor, and left with a little red wagon full of miscellaneous parts and pieces. She deposited the wagon behind the Hangar and made two more stops: one to the local hardware store for several cans of red spray paint, and one to a clothing store where she picked up a few pair of jeans and a few T-shirts. She was a little saddened to find that they stocked no pink Mog T-shirts in her size, but made do with one plain pink one, one black/white/gray camo pattern one, and one black one decorated with a rather scary-looking bird of prey diving in for the kill. Finally, having no more money to burn, she returned to the Hangar, went out back, and went back to work on the bike.

* * *

Cid opened his front door and found Vincent staring at him. "Havin' problems with the ship?" he asked, and Vincent shook his head.

"The ship is fine. We need some help with your chocobo, though." Vincent kept right on staring at Cid. "How are you doing?"

"Been better. What's up with Bugs?" Cid lit up a cigarette and puffed on it halfheartedly.

"Well..." Vincent shuffled his feet a bit. "We need to ride him to Round Island. Cloud thinks the Black Materia is in there. Anyway, Bugs won't let any of us ride him. I know this is a lot to ask of you right now, but..."

"You want me to go get that goddamn thing, don't you?" Vincent nodded, and Cid sighed and rubbed his eyes. "And then what am I s'posed to do with it?"

"We haven't really thought about that," Vincent mused. "I suppose we could leave it at Bugenhagen's observatory, like we did with the Huge Materia. Or maybe Reeve's got somewhere he can lock it up. For reasons I don't need to remind you of, it would not be advisable to keep it with us."

"Right." Cid nodded. "Well, if I gotta do it I gotta do it. I'll be right there soon as I let Shera know what's going on." He stopped. "You didn't screw up my damn ship too bad, did you?"

"Of course not," Vincent replied. "Although I don't think Yuffie and Cloud were too pleased with my piloting abilities..."

"Oh shit," Cid said with a weak laugh.

Vincent nodded. "Yeah. Both of them were in the engine room during the whole trip from Junon to Kalm and then from Kalm to here. I'm not cut out to be a pilot," he said with a faint smile.

"Well, you know what they say," Cid called as he disappeared into the house to collect his weapon. "Any landing you can walk away from is a good one."

"I think Cloud and Yuffie would beg to differ with you on that," Vincent replied, and Cid snickered.

* * *

Later that night, Annie found C.J. curled up in a ball on the ground next to the bike, which had been covered with a sheet of plastic. "Damn, girl..." Annie knelt down and shook C.J.'s shoulder gently. "The hell you doin' sleepin' out here? You could come inside, y'know."

C.J. yawned. "I just kinda lost track of time," she said. "Is it opening time already?"

"Naw, not even close. Y'better come on in and have some dinner." Annie eyed the plastic-covered bike suspiciously. "Whatcha been doing to that thing?"

"Go ahead and take a look if you want," C.J. replied, heading into the Hangar for a bite to eat.

Annie chuckled and shook her head, then she pulled back the plastic and gasped. The bike in front of her looked only remotely like the Devil Hawg she'd ridden six or so years ago. It sported a new paint job, an auxiliary gas tank, and a little flag rising from the aft end of the thing; the flag was drawn with markers on a scrap of handkerchief and depicted a Shinra logo with a large black X drawn over it. "Hoo boy," Annie said, shaking her head again and covering the bike back up.

- - -

Author's Notes: Yes, there have been Excaliburs in other Final Fantasy games, so why not this one?...I can picture the whole chocobo fiasco as a doujinshi; I imagine it'd be cute drawn with little SD characters—hmm, I'll have to work on that, and Red XIII's ordeal was inspired by that endured by my old cat every spring (she was likewise tormented daily by an angry bluejay)...if anyone wants to see C.J.'s bike, there is a picture of her and it in the CoJ art gallery; it's the CG done by the Captain, not my lame attempt...I finally got Cid to ride a chocobo last night, and yes, the chocobo DOES have to be S class...is it just me, or do a LOT of folks in Japan like the idea of Vincent and Cid--erm--hooking up o_O;;!? While sifting through tons of Japanese web pages I can't read in search of new Cid pix for my shrine, I keep running across borderline yaoi fanart of that particular pair (one really cute one had Cid and Vincent sitting on the floor and Cid taking an oil can to Vincent's claw ^_^)