

Chapter Ten: Weapon

"It appears my feelings vanished into thin air ever since I was in that long slumber..." - *Vincent Valentine*

"Damn! Damn! Damn! Damn!"

Cid Highwind leaned on a steel railing and looked deep into the glowing green chasm below. The Lifestream. Minutes ago his friend Red XIII had plunged into the mysterious liquid that would most likely be his watery grave. The old pilot cursed over and over again at the cruel circumstances that had brought him and the others to this grave moment.

Reeve stood behind the pilot, on the inner platform of the Nibelheim reactor, in front of the entrance to the Soldier chambers. The younger man frowned in disgust at the shimmering lake below them. A woman in a clean white lab coat came out of the inner chamber to see what had happened.

"Captain?" Shera nervously tapped Cid on the back of his shoulder, "I heard you hollering. Did something happen?"

"Shera," Cid paused, "It's Red. He ... he fell into the Lifestream. He hasn't come up for air yet." The old pilot turned back to the chasm and resumed his private tantrum.

Reeve turned back to Shera, "Shera, you and the mechanics keep working on the coal reactor. Cloud and Tifa went to check on those bugs outside. If the coast is clear, we'll have to make a break for it."

Shera took one more look at the fuming pilot and returned to her workplace.

Tifa Lockhart stood on a narrow ledge high above the festivities below. She leaned against her fiance, Cloud Strife, who strained to look through a narrow ventilation duct at the surrounding landscape. He narrowed his gaze and remained still, straining to see any trace of the horde of giant insects that had trapped them within the old reactor. He secretly cursed himself for his hasty departure from the edge of the Lifestream opening. He had left Cid and Reeve to watch for any sign of their fallen comrade while he and Tifa wasted not a moment in securing their escape. Red would come back to them. He had to.

Barret Wallace wondered whether his eyes were opened or closed. He couldn't tell. His world was that of pure darkness. In his mind, he pictured the crazed look on Vincent's face before the cave collapsed in on them. It reminded him so much of his dead friend Dyne. A man who let the weight of the world crush his spirit, and drive him beyond the brink of sanity. Had the same thing happened to Vincent? Barret secretly hoped not. But he wondered if any of that mattered, for he himself could be dead right now.

Barret's thoughts were interrupted by the shifting of rubble. The rocks above and below him felt as if they were moving. Impossible. Even if Cid Highwind had attached a shovel to the airship, the mountain above him would not be moved. Then Barret felt something else. A breeze above him. But he realized it was not just a breeze. It felt like someone was breathing.

"Vince?" The large man struggled to move beneath the mountain of debris, "S'at you?" Barret winced and groaned as the mass above him showed no signs of movement.

The strange breeze remained. Someone else was down here with him. He thought about firing some rounds from his gun-arm, but he had no way of knowing where exactly Vincent was. Until that is, he heard him. A loud crackle of energy accompanied by an ear-splitting roar nearly gave Barret Wallace a heart attack! It was then he realized where the breathing was coming from. Right above him. Rocks shifted and crumbled as light from above flickered from an unidentified source. The roar grew louder and louder until Barret saw what exactly was above him, holding up the

mountainous debris: the Death Gigas. Vincent's second Limit Break. The patchwork creature strained with unbelievable force as it lifted the boulders above them. The giant bolts in its shoulders seemed to buckle as beams of moonlight began to find their way in. The Gigas' body crackled with electricity as it hurled the stone mass from above them out of their way! The towering juggernaut let out a final roar as its body began to shimmer and fade, making way for the man it had replaced. Vincent Valentine crouched on one knee, in the crater his other self had formed, with Barret watching in amazement. He leaned forward, exhausted from the transformation, holding himself up with his metal arm.

Barret helped his friend out of the crater to the welcoming freedom above.

"You okay, Vince?" Barret placed his massive hand on the red cloak in front of him. Vincent took several more minutes before he turned to the large miner.

"Yes," He smiled weakly, "Thank you. I am fine now."

A sleek black helicopter screamed across the night sky toward the southern continent. It ripped through the clouds as its advanced engines quietly whispered its presence. The pilot inside turned his head to speak to the passengers inside.

"Mr. Shinra," He raised his voice above the hum of the machine, "We are approaching the southern continent. Shall I prepare to land?"

The new CEO of Junon Inc. sat with his arms folded and his eyes closed. He opened one eye and spoke in his trademark arrogant tone, "No. We're not going to the southern continent. Continue south." Rufus Shinra allowed a deviant smile form on his lips as he closed his eye and continued to plot. One of the three soldiers in the passenger bay with him looked over to his fellow fighters nervously as a drop of sweat rolled down his forehead.

The sun slowly rose over the Da-Chao mountains on the Wutai continent. The indigenous thunder birds that flocked the large island made their nests and fed their young, ignorant of a trespasser to their natural surroundings.

Yuffie Kisaragi climbed the face of the mountains with relative ease. She used her Conformer weapon as a pick to climb to the top of the peak. Once there, she stood tall and looked about the scenery below. The Wutai village looked like a tiny model from this altitude, its citizens starting their daily routines like tiny ants in a colony. It was then that she saw it.

On the tip of the Da-Chao mountains, three large trenches defaced the meticulously carved stone. The center trench was longer than the outer two, and Yuffie couldn't help but notice how it looked like a giant claw mark. She quickly laughed off such a ridiculous notion as she jumped into the center trench to closely investigate. The center trench was roughly the size of half of Cloud's submarine, and Yuffie wondered what sort of phenomenon could have created it. The stress marks running between the three trenches worried the young ninja. For once, she decided, she would actually seek her father's input.

"First time for everythin'."

The young ninja began to make her way back down the mountain.

"Awright, we waited long enough!" Cid Highwind was never one to wait. Patience was never one of his strong suits. The old pilot had paced around the edge of the mako pit in the Nibel Reactor as long as he could. The time to act was now. Reeve watched as Cid walked over to a winch and chain and began to turn the crank. The heavy iron chain clanked and clattered as each link hit the steel floor panels.

"Cid, what are you doing?" Cloud and Tifa climbed down the ladder from the upper platform to rejoin their friends. "Any sign of Red?" His face wore a badge of worry.

"No, damn it," Cid finished his last cigarette and stomped out the butt. "Red hasn't come up yet, so I'm goin' in after him!" Cloud's expression of worry instantly turned to that of shock. "Cid! You can't be serious! You don't know what's down there!"

Tifa moved in between the two, "Cid, have you thought this through?"

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?!" Cid's face began to turn red.

"Cid," Cloud broke back in, "I've been in the Lifestream before, if anyone should go in after Red, it should be me."

"Damn it, Cloud," Cid grew impatient as he began wrapping the chain around his waist, "That's exactly why I should go! You've been in there once, who the hell knows what a return trip would do!"

Cloud opened his mouth to argue but realized the pilot had a point. None of them knew for sure what would happen if someone made a second trip into the Lifestream. They did, however, know that a person could survive one encounter.

Cid knew by Cloud's silence he had won the argument, "Reeve, you think you can get that winch to work in case I can't come up on my own?" Cid respected Reeve as a fellow inventor. Anyone who could design an android cat with a telepresence control device certainly knew his way around more common machinery.

"I can guarantee it." Reeve scratched the goatee on his chin and knelt at the mechanism in question.

With that, Cid locked the chains into place with the hook on the end and prepared to dive in, "Wish me luck!"

Tifa hugged the surly pilot but said nothing. Cid was taken off guard to say the least.

Cloud looked seriously at his older friend, "Be careful, Cid. Come back to us."

Cid grinned broadly, "Damn! You kids worry too much!" And with that remark, Cid picked up his spear with one hand, and his end of the chain with the other. He spoke not a word, and leapt into the glowing water below!

Vincent Valentine sat on the front of the roaring buggy rumbling across the countryside. The former Turk immersed himself in thought as Barret drove the buggy in the cockpit behind him. He looked like a large hood ornament, perched on the craft looking forward at the approaching mountainous terrain. Their current destination: Cosmo Canyon. If anyone on the Planet could tell them what exactly is happening, the elders there could. The tremors had seemed to be over since the last and most violent one. And Vincent himself sensed something was very wrong. Barret had learned long ago to trust his friend's hunches, even if his mental health was in question.

They hadn't discussed what exactly had happened to Vincent before the cave collapsed on them, but that was all they thought about. Barret didn't want to pressure Vincent into talking about it before he was ready, but he would watch him closely, all the same.

This trip reminded Barret of how little he actually knew about Vincent. "Formerly of the Department of Administrative Research" was about all the information Vincent ever shared with the group. Any more knowledge beyond that

surrounded Lucrecia and Hojo, and the incident in Nibelheim almost thirty years ago. He was always distant from the group, rarely accompanying him and Cid to the bars, or Cloud on exploration hikes. Even Yuffie seemed to more closely interact with the group, and no one really trusted her.

“Barret! Stop the vehicle!!” Vincent leapt off the front of the land cruiser well before it came to a complete stop. The dark stranger ran towards the canyon walls ahead of them and suddenly froze in his tracks, gazing heavenward. Barret once again became worried. This statue-like state was very similar to the one Vincent had assumed before Lucrecia’s Cave toppled in on them. The large man tromped up to his comrade.

“Vince, not again!” He passed his massive hand in front of his face to wake Vincent from his apparent trance. “Snap outta it, man!”

Vincent caught Barret’s hand with his iron claw and stopped it instantly. The large miner was surprised by Vincent’s strength. The former Turk narrowed his gaze upward and stood silent for what seemed like an eternity before he finally spoke.

“I saw something.”

Barret followed Vincent’s gaze to the sky above. He saw nothing. Had his friend completely lost his mind?

“I don’t see nothin’.”

“My vision has been medically enhanced. I saw something a mile and a half up.” Vincent squinted hard at the grey clouds above them. “Nothing. But I was sure I had seen something.”

Barret carefully approached the former Turk, “Vince... uh...” Barret struggled to find the words to put his thoughts as pleasantly as possible. He found none. “You gone nuts?”

Vincent lowered his head and smiled. He thought for a few minutes and then turned his head to face Barret. “No, my friend, I have not.”

Barret was not completely convinced. “You sure? I mean, what the hell happened back there in the cave? You flipped out before we got buried.”

“I am sorry, I am not myself these days. That is all I can tell you.”

“Damn.” Barret began to wonder about what exactly Vincent meant by that. He couldn’t tell Barret what was wrong, or he wouldn’t? Vincent had always seemed distant from the group, but this was something else entirely.

“Awright.” Barret climbed back into the buggy, “Let’s get back on our way!” Vincent turned and walked toward the land vehicle when Barret’s PHS suddenly started ringing. “Who the hell?” Barret sat in the driver’s seat and took out his PHS phone. He pressed the answer button and held it to his ear. “Yeah.”

“BARRET!!”

The large man held the phone away from his head at arm’s length and cursed at the burst of static on the other end. He returned it to his ear and bellowed in return, “Who is this?!!”

"HUGE!! I CAN'T BELIEVE - -HUGE!!!"

"Yuffie? The hell's wrong with you, girl?"

"IT FLEW OVER DA-CHAO MOUNTAINS..... HUGE!!!"

"Don't you know any other words?"

"IT WAS - -HUGE!!!"

Barret pressed the hold button on his phone and turned to Vincent. "What was it you think you saw up there, Vince?"

Vincent thought for a moment, "Well, it looked like a Weapon. I thought it was the Ultima, but, we destroyed it, did we not?"

Barret closed his eyes and grumbled. He looked down at the tiny flashing red light on his phone and sighed. He slowly lifted the PHS to his ear and pressed a button.

"Okay, Yuffie, you need to calm down. It ain't gonna do us any good to have you flaking out. What the hell did you see?"
"HUGE!!!"

Barret snapped, "GRRR!! If you don't drop the hysterics, I'm gonna reach through this phone and kick your skinny little ninja ass!!"

"Geez, Barret, you should really mellow out ya know."

"%\$#@&*%!!!" Barret took a few minutes to collect himself while Vincent struggled to keep a straight face. "Okay, I know you think you saw a Weapon. But that ain't possible! We destroyed them all, and that's it!"

"THEN WHAT THE CRAP WAS THAT?!!!"

"S'probably some kinda new airship from Heidegger's Junon base! I knew that fat bastard would pull something sooner or later!" Barret turned back to Vincent for confirmation of his theory.

"I do not know, Barret," Vincent slowly shook his head, "It looked like a Weapon to me."

Barret huffed, "Okay, Yuffie, you still got that golden chocobo we gave you? Or did you sell it?" Barret listened for a few seconds, "Okay, yeah, well I woulda lost that bet. Anyways, me and Vincent are on our way to Cosmo Canyon. Hop on your chocobo and meet us there. Later."

Barret turned off his PHS phone and returned it to his jacket. Vincent climbed into the passenger seat of the buggy and they were on their way.

All was quiet on Mount Nibel. Grey clouds gathering in the sky above provided the only apparent movement in the natural environment. The reactor that sat on the mountain also remained still, and silent. The surrounding ground was littered

with tracks made by the attacking insects from the day before. The shattered husk of the Cait Sith robot adorned the reactor platform like a festering wound. Wires and parts were scattered about the broken hero like discarded rubbish.

Inside the reactor, Reeve fumed and kicked the mechanized winch attached to an iron chain immersed in the mako pit below. Cloud and Tifa watched helplessly as the inventor feverishly worked.

“What’s wrong with it, Reeve?” Cloud watched anxiously as Reeve wiped sweat from his forehead.

“It’s the main drive gear. It’s rusted to hell.” Reeve picked up a screwdriver out of the toolbox Shera loaned him and stabbed at the rusted cylinder. Flakes of rotted metal dropped off the part and Reeve cursed under his breath. “Me and Cid didn’t see this before. Now, I’m not sure I’ll be able to get this thing working if he calls on the PHS.”

Cloud thought for a minute. Technical maintenance was not his strong suit, “Can you get a spare drive-thing from any of the equipment in here?”

Reeve closed his eyes and lowered his head in thought. A few seconds passed before he suddenly raised his head and opened his eyes.

“Nothing here would do it, but I know where we can get the right part. Cloud, are the insects still waiting for us outside?”

“No, I think the tremors scared them off. Why do you ask?”

“Cait’s cave moogles’ shoulders use drive gears. Hopefully they left at least one of the two intact.”

Reeve walked carefully across the staging over the mako pit. Cloud and Tifa followed him to the main door of the reactor. Reeve reached into the junction box beside the door and tapped two wires together. A few sparks jumped up from the wires and the door began to slide open. The iron door squeaked against the floor plates causing Tifa to plug her ears while Cloud and Reeve winced in pain.

Cloud walked out carefully with his sword drawn, watching the surrounding landscape for any signs of movement. Tifa came out next in a similar fashion and the two stood fast at the ramp leading to the ground below.

Reeve swallowed as he knelt to the mess of wires and stuffing that was once Cait Sith. He looked deeply into the dead eye sockets of the little cat and sighed. Cloud and Tifa tried their best not to notice how this was affecting Reeve, but it was hard to miss. Reeve suddenly realized he was getting noticeably upset over a busted furry toaster and snapped to.

He pulled back some of the stuffing from the cave moogles’ right shoulder and saw the part he needed. The part-time inventor took Shera’s screwdriver out of his pocket and set to work.

“This’s going to hurt me more than it’ll hurt you,” He spoke under his breath. Cait meant a lot to Reeve. The dynamic cat was Reeve’s inner self, given form. The part of Reeve that didn’t worry about board meetings or urban quotas, Cait never worried about wearing a tie or what to say when Rufus or the President came into his office. Cait Sith said what he wanted to when he wanted. The cat had nothing but fun. Reeve was able to live at last, through the eyes of the fortune-telling enigma in a little red cape. He could breathe the air of freedom when Cait crossed the globe with Cloud and the others. But now that was gone.

When Shinra Inc. fell, Reeve realized the need for shelters for the people of Mideel or the Midgar Slums. He snuck back into the damaged Shinra building and ‘claimed’ all the property deeds to the fake Nibelheim, and set about starting his new town. Cloud and Tifa moved in to help him, taking up residence in the replica of Tifa’s house. The new townspeople elected

Reeve as their mayor, which he graciously accepted. His life became complete. He liked what he was doing, he liked the people, he liked the town. He had a home and a purpose and was surrounded by his friends. So the escape Cait Sith had provided him was no longer needed. Reeve had nothing he wanted to get away from. As a result, he sealed his robot cat up in his cellar until he would someday be needed again. That time came when Cid and the others arrived to reconstruct the Nibel reactor. Cait's cave moogles were a tremendous asset to them, and fought valiantly against the attacking Kyuvilduns, paying with his life.

That thought made Reeve chuckle to himself. Life. The robot cat had no more sentience than Shera's screwdriver, but he thought of Cait as a longtime friend all the same.

"Okay," Reeve stood up holding the precious part, "I got what we came for. Let's get this thing inside." As he walked into the reactor, Reeve looked back at the shattered remains of Cait Sith, and sighed.

Shera looked down at the rusty iron machine on the end of the chain. The access panel had been removed from the winch device and it looked like Reeve was in the middle of fixing it. Next to the machine, Reeve's PHS lay on the iron floor, turned on, in case Cid attempted to contact them from beyond.

Cid. Shera followed the chain with her eyes down into the mako pit glowing several yards below. The chain was completely still, and Shera wondered whether Cid was having any success in finding Red. She had assumed that the laws of physics probably didn't apply in such an astral place, but she hoped against hope that they would be able to pull Cid out if they felt he was in danger. But the chain remained inert. Was Cid traversing the great unknown while his line to reality dangled behind him? Or was he... ..

No. She couldn't start thinking like that. This was Cid Highwind she was thinking about. What was it he used to say? 'I'm Cid - that's who the hell I am! Now just let me handle it!' She smiled to herself and realized how much Cid would be hollering at her if he saw this display. But her smile faded as she stared at the glowing emerald pit below. No sign of Cid - yet.

"Shera, any word from the Captain?" Reeve carefully crossed the staging suspended over the chasm and stepped onto the platform. Cloud and Tifa followed right behind him.

"No, not yet." She tried not to look worried, for Cid's sake. "I see you found a replacement for that rusted drive gear. Where did you get one in such good condition?" Cloud and Tifa looked at Reeve in sympathy.

"I found it outside." Reeve knelt at the mechanism and resumed working.

Shera looked at Cloud and Tifa and then down at Reeve and made the connection. She bit her upper lip as she searched for the words to express her condolences. She decided it best to say nothing, and crouched down to help him.

"Cloud," Tifa spoke carefully, "How long were we in the Lifestream? Do you remember?"

Cloud thought for a minute, "No, I don't. I wasn't exactly in my right state of mind then."

"Three hours, seventeen minutes." Reeve spoke up as he and Shera worked on the winch. "Cait's internal clock recorded the time between you going in the Lifestream at Mideel and washing up in the wreckage."

"So, how long has Red and Cid been in there?"

Everyone stopped. Time itself seemed to freeze. They hadn't thought of that. No one even for a second doubted that Red and Cid would both eventually return to them. Red had fallen into the Lifestream almost a full day ago, and Cid had followed only a few hours later.

"Reeve," Cloud spoke quickly, "Get that machine working. We're pulling Cid out of there as soon as we can. If he doesn't have Red, I'll go back in myself."

"Right!" Reeve and Shera quickened their pace.

The red buggy rolled to a stop just in front of the stone steps that led to Cosmo Canyon. Barret and Vincent climbed out from the cockpit to survey their surroundings. In the distance, they saw a tiny beacon approaching them on the sea's

horizon. It was Yuffie, racing at them on her gold chocobo. The young ninja held on for dear life while the golden fowl screeched over the surface of the ocean. The chocobo quickened its pace as it reached land, its sharp talons digging into the sand and dirt for increased traction.

“Stop, Cloud! Stop!” Yuffie screamed at the top of her lungs as Barret and Vincent moved behind the buggy and braced for impact. The golden bird jolted to an immediate stop sending Yuffie soaring over the large red vehicle into Barret’s arms. Yuffie mockingly batted her eyelashes and swooned at the large man, who simply dropped her on her tailbone.

Vincent began to ascend the staircase and paused, “Cloud?”

Yuffie frowned and pushed past the mysterious man and up the steps to the civilization above. Barret guffawed as he followed the two towards the warriors posted at the Cosmo Canyon entrance.

“What the hell?” Barret raised his head and dropped his smile as he saw what was left of the observatory on top of the Canyon. Bugenhagen’s laboratory, his home and Red’s, was gone. In its place, smoking embers and shattered iron plates. Several elders and warriors sifted through the rubble as the three approached them.

Vincent surveyed the entire Canyon settlement. Nothing else seemed damaged. Yet the observatory was damaged beyond repair. What was so special about that particular structure? Sure, it housed Bugenhagen’s machine, which allowed Red XIII to watch the Lifestream and study the Planet. But that machine alone couldn’t have been so important as to wipe the entire building from its place. The machine could be rebuilt. When Professor Gast made the machine for Bugenhagen, he was careful to leave the plans and blueprints. And the entire village was a place where one could study the Planet. Destroying that one observatory would accomplish nothing. What was it about Bugenhagen’s home that made it a one and only target?

Then it dawned on him. That structure was the highest point in the Canyon. It was the most vulnerable to an aerial attack. One of the elders approached the three, “Welcome, friends of Nanaki. I wish we could greet you under happier circumstances.”

Barret stepped forward, “What the hell happened here?”

The old man looked away from him, up towards the observatory.

“Weapon.”

Reeve kicked the rusted housing of the mechanized winch. Shera looked up sadly at him while she knelt near the other side. Cloud and Tifa were equally upset over the lack of success they had in repairing the antique device.

Cloud took out his PHS phone and slowly dialed a number. “Cid? Can you hear me? Cid? Damn it!” Cloud closed his phone and returned it to his pocket. “Nothing. I started to get a dial, but then there was nothing but static.” Cloud walked over to the winch and placed his hand on Shera’s shoulder, “I’m sorry, Shera.”

“No, that’s ... that’s all right, Cloud.” She pretended to clean her glasses while she rubbed her eyes.

Reeve crouched near the device again, “All this work for nothing. I cannibalized that part from Cait, installed it, nothing.” He struck the rusty insides with the screwdriver once again.

The machine roared to life!

"What the - ?" Reeve jumped back at the sudden eruption of noise.

Shera smiled proudly at the rusted antique.

Tifa's look of shock slowly became a look of joy, "All right, Reeve!"

And Cloud simply nodded.

"Okay, Reeve," The young warrior spoke seriously, "Get that thing going. Let's pull our people out of there!"

"Right!" Reeve moved around the machine to the control panel and slapped the palm of his hand down on a large, round, red button. The spool of chain began to wind itself as the motor coughed and strained. Cloud and Shera moved over to the railing and watched the chain steadily surface, link by link. Reeve carefully monitored the winch for any problems or malfunctions.

One of the mechanics came out of the inner chamber, "Hey, Shera? We finished the work on the reactor. You can fire it up whenever you're ready." The mechanic waited for Shera, or anyone, to turn their head and congratulate him. Tifa nodded at him, and he returned to the inner chamber to collect his tools.

Cloud and Shera stared at the chain being pulled out of the Lifestream, not hearing or seeing anything else. The taut chain suddenly became very limp. Cloud sensed something was wrong. Shera gasped in horror. Tifa covered her mouth with her hand.

Reeve looked up from the winch and saw their reactions, "What? What is it?" Nothing. No one answered. Reeve swallowed hard and leapt up from the machine. He bolted to the railing and choked.

The rusty iron chain hung limp from the ledge they were on. Transparent green liquid dripped into the mako put below. On the end of the chain:

Nothing.

And the Planet screamed.

Author's Notes: Whoa! Red and Cid are gone?! Or are they? And what the hell is Rufus Shinra up to? Does he and Junon Inc. really have anything to do with the mysterious flying creature? Or is Yuffie and the Cosmo Canyon elder right? Is it Weapon?

The answers to these, and many more questions are just ahead!

Keep reading, you two!