

Chapter Eleven: Day of the Dead

"The brave do not fear the grave." - *Gold Saucer Battle Arena*

Cid Highwind slept, face down, on an unseen surface. The pilot startled conscious, and surveyed his surroundings.

"What the hell?"

He feverishly looked around at the pure blackness encasing him. There was nothing. No sky above him. No earth beneath his feet. Nothing but complete and utter darkness. But he himself was illuminated by a green light from an unseen source. He looked down at the Venous Gospel spear he still clenched tightly; and at the chain wrapped around his waist. He held the iron failsafe and followed it with his eyes, upwards toward nothing. It was then he heard it.

"Huh?"

A low rumbling. Then a screeching sound.

"Who the &^%#@'s there?!!"

His only answer came in the form of an increase in volume. The screeching became louder and erupted from more sources around him in the darkness. The rumbling increased in intensity.

"Shit!"

Cid clenched tightly on his Venous Gospel in preparation for the onslaught ahead. Whatever demons, whatever dangers were approaching, they would all wish they'd stayed in the safety of the shadows. The screams became so loud that even Cid held his hands to his ears in pain. It was then he decided to exercise the better part of valor. The pilot turned and began to run toward the other end of the chain.

Suddenly a point of light appeared in front of Cid, in the distance. He quickened his pace toward the glimmer. It would either be his salvation or his damnation. As long as it took him from this torturous place, Cid would take the chance.

The old pilot wheezed and puffed as his legs began to burn under the strain of his sprinting, and he secretly cursed himself for being so weak and useless. The nicotine habits he held so dearly would surely be his undoing. But he could not let Red and Cloud and the others down. They were all counting on him, and Cid Highwind wasn't a man to let his friends down. The chain remained slack in front of him, suspended by an unseen source, and Cid wondered where exactly the chain intersected with the reality of the Nibel reactor and this dark limbo.

The light grew closer and closer and Cid leapt into it, blinded by the sudden flash of pure whiteness. And silence.

Cactus Island. The tiny landmass was all but deserted to the human eye. But beneath this tiny landmass lurked a grave secret. A black helicopter glistened in the morning sun away from the gathered soldiers near the center of the island. On the other side, a Junon freighter ship anchored onshore, its back end still immersed in the ocean while its starboard bow teetered on the frail shore like a beached whale. Work crews poured out of the ship with toolboxes and heavy duffle bags, walking in single file toward the gathered soldiers.

In the center of all this activity stood Rufus Shinra, the new head of Junon Inc. The arrogant young man brushed dust off of his blinding clean white suit and prepared to speak.

"Employees of Junon Inc.," Rufus held his hand to the air to get everyone's attention. He had it, "Below us is a secret Shinra installation which is now a holding of Junon Inc.! We are here today to reclaim the secret project I have been overseeing for the past year. It is the product of years of research and design from top Shinra scientists and engineers. We are here today to put it to work for us. Now that it is complete, the sky is the limit for Junon."

The gathered workers and soldiers erupted into nervous applause while Rufus produced a remote from his suit and pressed a button. The very ground beneath them began to part and those standing closest to this man-made chasm quickly stepped back to safer ground. A the crowd gasped at what they saw.

Rufus simply smiled.

Cid squinted and rubbed his eyes before accepting what he saw. He was standing on a strange green platform that looked like a giant mushroom with a design on it. Three stone paths in opposite directions were connected to this platform. At the end of each path: Red XIII.

The air around him was thick and green. But it was not so much like a green fog. It was more like a breathable green liquid. "Lifestream."

The old pilot carefully examined each Red XIII, trying to determine which was the real one and which was the impostor. Maybe all of them were an impostor; but maybe all of them were real. Then he looked upwards and saw something suspended in the atmosphere. A transparent Red XIII floated above him, still and lifeless.

"Red! What the *&^%\$'s going on?!!"

No answer. Each of the three Reds simply sat with their heads down, facing away from Cid. The pilot strained his eyes to see what they were looking at, but there was nothing. As far as he could see, empty green space occupied the distance, with an occasional rock or foreign object suspended in the green liquid.

"It's like the f*&^%in' twilight zone in here."

It was then that he noticed it. His chain - gone. His safety precaution hadn't made it to this strange place along with him. He was on his own.

Cid cautiously walked toward one of the three Reds. As he got closer, he realized that the stone paths actually did lead somewhere. This one seemed to travel through the green haze into what looked like Cosmo Canyon. But there was something different about this Cosmo Canyon. It wasn't the same one he had visited many times before. The rocks were brighter, there were no machines of any kind. There was no observatory. It was as if all of the technical accommodations of the Canyon had never existed. The shadows that adorned the canyon walls also seemed to be missing. It was then that the first Red XIII spoke.

"Specters of the past. Tearing my future asunder."

"What the hell...?"

Red got up and walked into this new Cosmo Canyon. Cid held his spear tightly and followed. He saw Bugenhagen, and a red puma-like creature. Another Red XIII? The beast turned to face the two travelers. It was then Cid realized that it was not Red XIII. This creature had both eyes, and was larger than his friend. His gaze was like steel as he surveyed the distance.

Cid looked down at Red, standing next to him, "Red? Is that your dad? The one who was turned to stone?" Cid waited for a response.

Red didn't turn his head from the two standing ahead of them, "Seto. The great warrior." He spoke in hushed tones.

"Bugenhagen," Seto spoke as he looked through Cid and Red to the distant horizon, "The Gi tribe are approaching. We must secure the canyon."

"Hoo hoo hoo." Bugenhagen raised his arms in his trademark way, "The warring tribe knows of our secret entrance. Surely they will try to take the canyon from within. Ho ho hoo."

"That is why we must fortify our defenses." Seto continued to look through Cid and Red. It became clear to Cid that he and his friend were unseen in this recreation of the past. "And if we cannot, we should leave this canyon."

Red choked at these words.

Bugenhagen lowered his arms slowly, "Seto, it is true we are a peaceful people. We have little to no hope of defeating the warriors who will come to ravage our homes." Bugenhagen turned away from Seto. "But we cannot leave. This is our home. Our people know of nothing else on this Planet."

"Bugenhagen, you old fool!" Seto growled in anger, "Who cares about a canyon when the very lives of our people are at stake! I cannot protect everyone if we stay where we are vulnerable!"

Cid noticed a small red cub sneaking up on the two villagers. He was hiding behind some baskets, a smile decorating its little face.

"We must flee this place, Bugenhagen. That is the only way we will be safe."

The little cub's smile quickly faded at these words. He turned and ran. The scenery began to move, in pursuit of the little cub. Cid watched as the young beast began to cry, and he realized who it was: Red XIII, as a child. The cub was stopped by another red creature - his mother.

"Nanaki, what is the matter?" The female puma smiled maternally at her cub.

"Mama, father wants to flee our village!"

"Sshh. Now I'm sure your father doesn't mean to leave us. Go and play with the other children. I must speak with him and your grandfather." The little cub sniffled and galloped away, and the scenery once again shifted to follow Red's mother back to Bugenhagen and Seto.

"Husband," The female called to Seto, "What have you decided about the approaching Gi?" Bugenhagen lowered his head and turned away from the two creatures. Red's mother became worried by his silence, and Seto spoke up.

"My wife, there is but one way to prevent the attacking tribe from taking the canyon from within." Seto looked solemnly at his wife as she began to realize his plan.

"No!" She cried, "There must be another way! I cannot accept this!"

"No, dear one," Bugenhagen returned to the conversation, "This is the only way. The passage must be protected. That is where their main forces will be focused. We will defend the canyon from a frontal assault, and Seto will prevent a sneak attack from the rear."

"I refuse to accept this," She cried, "If we leave the canyon like my husband suggests, we can protect everyone in the caves!"

"Wife," Seto spoke calmly, "This canyon is our home. We cannot give it up."

"What will I tell the others? Surely they will not allow you to make this sacrifice on your own!"

"Nothing," Seto turned away, "Tell them I have fled the village. You will need everyone here. I can do this myself. I must!"

Cid watched as the scenery before him faded and returned, changing to another part of the canyon. The cub Red XIII and his mother sat near the fire.

"I hate him!" The little cub wept into his mother's mane. "He has left our village to be destroyed, mama!"

"Hush, little one. Hush." And the female beast shed a tear.

Cid looked down at Red who simply turned away from this sight and walked back to the center platform. Cid followed as the scene behind him faded completely.

"Tearing my future asunder." Red repeated in a hushed tone.

Cid walked over to the second Red who got up and followed his path. The scene that formed before this path was another Cosmo Canyon, this one quite similar to the one he had visited.

"The point where two parts meet." The second Red whispered, "Where what was meets what will be."

Cid watched the peace of this Cosmo Canyon. He saw a full-grown Red XIII patrolling the village and then he heard something else. A helicopter descended into the canyon. Cid's blood boiled when he saw the Shinra logo on its side. When the vehicle landed, the bay doors slid open to reveal a man in a white lab coat.

"Hojo! You rat bastard!" Cid gripped his spear and charged at the evil scientist, swinging for all he was worth! The pilot fell on his face when the Venous Gospel passed harmlessly through Hojo. Cid slowly got his feet and returned to the second Red's side, cursing under his breath.

Hojo walked to the Canyon gates and approached the younger Red XIII.

"There you are," He sneered, "What a perfect specimen you are..." The younger Red growled at the evil man before him, saying not a word. "Very well," He turned back to the helicopter, "Dark Nation!"

A sleek black panther leapt out of the Shinra helicopter and strode proudly to Hojo's side. The two cats glared into each others' eyes and growled deeply.

Hojo turned and walked back towards the helicopter, "Play nice, now." He cackled madly.

The second Red stood up beside Cid and walked over to the two beasts squaring off. He walked "into" the younger Red and the two became one. Without warning, Dark Nation lunged at Red! The panther's jaws clasped down on Red's neck and the fiery beast howled! Red lifted his mighty paws and knocked the dark cat away! Dark Nation rolled to his feet and jumped into the air! Red caught his enemy and flipped the panther into the fire!

The evil creature roared in pain and renewed his assault! The two creatures locked in combat, clawing and biting, roaring and screeching like banshees! The canyon floor became splattered with crimson drops as the ferocious battle raged!

Cid cursed and hollered above the battle, cheering on his ally! He held his spear tightly and wished he could do something to help.

Red was on his back holding Dark Nation by his neck with his paws as the evil beast pushed his jaws toward his head on top of Red attempting to get another taste of Red's throat! Nation's jaws dripped with saliva as Red struggled to free himself. The red beast raised his feet and kicked the panther into the air! Dark Nation landed on his back with a violent thud against the ground and Red was already in the air descending upon him! His flaming tail streaked through the air behind him like a miniature comet!

Dark Nation raised his claw and slashed hard! Red recoiled in pain as blood splattered from his right eye! The crimson beast howled in rage and anguish as it hit the ground hard!

Dark Nation moved to his feet and launched himself into the air at the wounded Red XIII! Red dodged his enemy's attack and swung wildly! Dark Nation easily avoided the visually-impaired beast and struck again! The black panther slashed Red's left shoulder spraying blood on the canyon ground.

Bugenhagen and some of the other villagers had gathered around during the excitement, watching helplessly as their protector fought for their very lives.

Red became surrounded by a deep red light and he charged!

"Sled Fang!"

The crimson cat galloped at an incredible speed at his enemy, surrounded by a swirling white light! He ran the dark beast through with his energy, ending the battle as quickly as it had started! Dark Nation lay unconscious on the canyon floor as Red prepared to finish him off.

"Hold it!" Hojo held an arm around Bugenhagen's neck and a gun to his head. "One more move, and the crazy old geezer gets it." Red XIII growled deeply as he stepped away from the beaten panther. "Now, into the chopper." Red split into his two components, the older version rejoined Cid's side and the younger climbed aboard the helicopter.

"That evil sonuva..." Cid raged, "If he wasn't dead, I'd kick his twisted ass."

Hojo released Bugenhagen and slowly walked to the helicopter. Without warning, he injected Red with a syringe and the beast lost consciousness. Two soldiers carried Dark Nation into the helicopter and they departed into the air.

The scene before them faded, and Cid and Red returned to the center platform.

"Where what was meets what will be." Red repeated.

"Well, one more to go," Cid spoke up, "We're almost outta this, Red." Cid approached the third puma as it got up and followed its path.

"The reality I cannot accept." Red spoke quietly as he walked, "Recreated in the devil's image."

Cid did not like the sound of that. The scene that formed in front of him sent a chill down his spine. It was Hojo's lab. In the Shinra building. He choked when he saw Red, strapped to a metal table. Tubes ran into him, sending and receiving strange liquids. Devices and complicated machinery hummed around him, giving readouts and flashing lights. The sterile smell of the lab made the pilot sick.

"Red, what the hell did they do to you?" Cid spoke gravely.

Red simply walked away from Cid and stepped into the lab. Red passed through the equipment and wires and merged with his past self. A fresh white bandage covered his right eye, only recently taken from him.

Hojo himself walked into the lab accompanied by an assistant. The evil man walked over to a machine spitting out a continuous roll of paper with readings and measurements on it.

"Blast it!" The twisted scientist spat. His assistant looked ashamed. "No reaction to Jenova. Just like the SOLDIER from the reactor and the Turk from Nibelheim."

"Vincent..." Cid whispered.

Hojo turned toward Red, "After we had such promising results from that fellow we found in the Nibel reactor five years ago. It's too bad he escaped. He would have made an excellent part of my 'Reunion' theory. Shame he turned out be a failure."

"Sir, what about this one, the..." The assistant consulted his clipboard, "The Red XIII. What shall we do with it?"

"Put it in one of the glass canisters. I'll think of something use it for."

Cid gritted his teeth as the scenery changed again, to the glass container in question. Cid watched as Hojo entered the lab alone one night.

"Wake up, Red XIII." Hojo turned on a bright light inside the glass cage. Red slowly opened his eye and lifted his head. He glowered at the visitor with all the hate he could muster. "I have thought of the perfect use for you. You will be medically conditioned to be Rufus' second bodyguard. Then you can assist Dark Nation as a fellow mindless assassin. Mwah hah hah!!"

Hojo's laugh cut through Cid like a Buster Sword.

"First, we must wipe away your will. Your compassion. Your soul." Hojo activated a device next to the cage. A strange orb suspended by a metal rod and wires descended into the glass container. Hojo pressed more buttons and the orb began to flash. It changed colors as it blinked on and off. The blinking started slowly and became faster as each second passed. Red looked up at the orb and howled. Then his howling ceased. He simply stared upwards, blankly and emotionless. But

suddenly the orb stopped. Some of the instruments around the lab went dead. "What is going on?" Red continued to stare upwards.

Hojo's PHS suddenly rang. He took it out of his pocket and answered.

"What is it? What's going on?"

"Hojo, this is Scarlet. Sephiroth has been spotted in the building. The executives are being evacuated. I suggest you do the same." Hojo turned his phone off without answering.

"My son.... Yes, Scarlet, I must evacuate." And Hojo walked calmly out of the lab. Red simply stared upwards.

Suddenly he snapped out of his trance and looked around. He was alone.

Cid watched speechless for a few minutes, then the scene began to change as time passed in the lab. Then he saw a familiar sight. Cloud, Aeris, Barret and Tifa ran into the lab. Then Red's two selves split again, the astral version returning to Cid's side as the lab faded away.

"Recreated in the devil's image," Red repeated slowly.

Cid looked down at Red as they walked toward the center platform. "What the hell happened to you in there? You didn't get brainwashed, did you? Damn Shinra!"

Red continued past the center platform and plodded over to the second stone path. The image of Cosmo Canyon returned in the haze ahead as Red approached it. Cid followed carefully, still holding his spear. Red stopped short and turned to the pilot.

"This is something," He turned away, "I must do alone."

Red continued toward the misty canyon, "The reality I cannot accept." The image shifted into the interior of Bugenhagen's lab. Cid looked on as Red walked into this scene, and he saw someone else. Bugenhagen lay still on the green sofa, weakly looking up. A second Red walked in through the entrance, and the first one walked "into" him. Red approached his motionless grandfather, who slowly turned his head to the young warrior.

"Grandfather!" Red spoke rashly.

Bugenhagen swallowed and sputtered, struggling to speak, "... Nanaki....? you're still here?"

Red's face knotted, "I can't leave you like this, grandfather...!" He swallowed hard, "It's the duty of my.... Seto's son, to guard this canyon and her people...."

Bugenhagen turned his head and gazed upward, ".....listen, Nanaki, I think you may already know." The old man wheezed and continued, "If you have any mission in life it is not to defend this valley. Look at the withering mountain grass. Listen to the warble of the newborn chocobo's. Look always to the eternal flow of time which is far greater than the span of a human life." Bugenhagen cleared his dry throat and coughed. "It will teach you more than staying here in the valley...." His voice trailed off as he turned his head back to Red XIII, a tear forming on his eye. "What you will see will eventually become a part of life's dream. For my children... And your children...." The elder raised his hand and rested it on the top of the green sofa. "So please, Nanaki.... Go with Cloud... And with your eyes.... your ears...."

Red lowered his head and clenched his fangs. "....."

"Ho ho Hoooo." Bugenhagen rested his hand once again on his chest and looked upwards. "Now, now. Don't look like that. I'm all right." Red looked sadly up at his grandfather. "It's a wide world and you must go out and see it.... You may even find your life's mate. You never know." The elder rasped and closed his eyes. Red XIII darted up and put his two front paws on the sofa next to Bugenhagen.

"Grandfather....."

"Oh yes..." The elder continued, "... take this along. I think it will look good on you now." Bugenhagen reached behind the sofa and handed Red a shiny silver hair clip, the Limited Moon. Red took the weapon in his teeth and the elder's arm fell weakly to the sofa. "Ho Hoo"

Red XIII looked deeply into the dead eyes of his Grandfather and wept. He stared for what seemed to be an eternity before stepping down from the sofa. It was then that the two Red's split. The past version plodded out of Bugenhagen's lab to rejoin Cloud at the fire. But the present version remained still. He continued to look into the elder's eyes before he spoke.

"I want you to know something," He began in a strong voice but started to waver, " I have been given a second chance to say what should have been said. I will never forget you. For all that you have done for me and my family, Grandfather, I will always cherish your memory." Red took a blanket at the bottom of the sofa and pulled it over the elder in his teeth. "For as long as I walk this Planet, I will always keep you alive inside of me. You are a part of my soul. When I someday return to the Planet from whence I came, I hope we will meet again." Red stared into Bugenhagen's face for a time before he stepped down from the sofa edge and turned to the door.

"Goodbye, Grandfather."

Red XIII slowly trotted out of the mists to the center platform where Cid and the other two Red's stood.

All three Red's met in the middle. Cid watched in awe as the three became one. Merging. Their transparent forms becoming clear and real.

"Specters of the past." The first Red entered the center.

"The point where two parts meet." The second red merged with the first.

"The reality I cannot accept." The third walked 'into' the first two and a rush of energy burst from Red's form.

Then the Red floating above them descended and merged, completing the whole. Red XIII lived.

Cid put his hand on Red's shoulder, "&*^%, Red! You did it!"

Red smiled back at the pilot.

"Now let's get the hell outta this place before my third grade algebra teacher shows up!" The two began to float upwards into the Lifestream. The green water became thicker as they ascended to the surface, bubbles forming and flowing all around them. Cid held his breath as they swam to the surface. Red began to struggle as he was not the best swimmer. Cid grabbed onto him with his free hand and continued upwards.

It was then he saw it. Something in the water above him.

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.

Suddenly a hand broke from the surface and grabbed the chain!! Cid held on for dear life, clinging to the chain with Red and his spear under his other arm! The winch continued pulling the chain out of the pit and Cloud reached down and grabbed the pilot by his soaked flight jacket. Tifa and Reeve helped pull the two water-logged travelers onto the ledge.

"Cid! You did it!!" Cloud helped Cid to his feet while Tifa and Reeve tended to Red. Shera wrapped her arms around Cid and hugged the life out of him! She quickly broke away and blushed.

"Sorry, Captain," She spoke bashfully, "I didn't mean- -"

Cid raised his hand to her, "It's okay. I missed you too, woman."

"Okay," Cloud began, "As soon as we can get everyone together, we're heading out. Take what you can carry only. Reeve, start looking for something we can make a stretcher out of. We'll carry Red back to Nibelheim where the doctors can have a look at him."

Cid looked up, dripping, "I'm taking a smoke break!"

Vincent Valentine tapped his glass of Sylkis juice at the bar in the Starlet Pub in Cosmo Canyon. Barret sat on the stool next to him while Yuffie haggled with the bartender for the price of her drink at the other end of the bar. The cloth curtains that passed for a door swung open letting in beams of sunlight. Vincent turned his head and saw the Elder Hargo approach a table and sit. Vincent got up and signaled for Barret to follow. Yuffie eyed the sudden movement, paid for her drink and joined them.

"They tell me you wish to speak of the Planet," The elder looked gravely across the table at the three travelers. "They tell me you wish to speak of – Weapon."

Chills danced up and down Yuffie's spine at the mention of that name. The image of the gargantuan creature that had passed over the Da-Chao mountains flashed in her mind and she shuddered.

Barret looked suspiciously at the old man before speaking up, "Hold it, gramps! We personally kicked those monsters' asses offa this rock! There ain't no way it was a Weapon that attacked the canyon."

"Oh yeah, Barret?" Yuffie sneered, "What was it that flew down and carried off Red's lab then, huh, Mr-Smart-Guy?"

Vincent sat still, giving his undivided attention to the elder while his two comrades bickered and argued next to him. He was about to shush them when he heard something.

Vincent....

The former Turk lifted his head and swept his gaze across the pub.

.....Vincent.....

His eyes widened and he stood up. Barret and Yuffie noticed his sudden motion and halted their squabble. They looked up their crimson cloaked friend in surprise.

"Aww shit, Vince..." Barret stood up to restrain any outburst that might suddenly erupt.

Yuffie moved around the table and stood next to him, "Uh, Vincent? Are you, like, okay?" The young ninja looked into Vincent's eyes and saw a blank stare.

Vincent the man had vanished once again.

Rocket Town. A quiet little hamlet. The citizens of the makeshift town go about their daily business as the evening sun set beyond the nearby Nibel mountains. Evenings in Rocket Town were normally peaceful. This evening, however, was not destined to be normal.

A squadron of dark helicopters glistened in the orange sunlight, their engines quietly announcing their presence. The metal birds swooped around the village in before they landed in a perfect semi-circular pattern around the entrance to the village. As the helicopter rotors slowed, soldiers and scientists began to file out in an organized fashion. Among the new visitors, Rufus Shinra calmly stepped off the lead helicopter and walked towards the town.

The bewildered townspeople came out of their homes to investigate the commotion. Their stomachs sank at the sight of the former Shinra CEO.

"Rufus?" Gramps spoke in a sour tone, "What is he doin' not dead? And what's he doin' not dead here in Rocket Town?" Many similar questions and speculations flooded through the crowd of gathered townsfolk before Rufus raised his hand to hush them in his trademark arrogant way.

The young executive lifted a small pair of binoculars to his eyes and looked out past the coast of Rocket Town Beach. He smiled when he saw the Junon freighter on its way, a large tarp strapped over its enormous cargo. He turned back to the crowd.

"People of Rocket Town," He strained his voice over the gossiping mass and helicopter engines. "As a former holding of Shinra Inc., the Rocket Town launch pad and surrounding property area are now the legal holdings of Junon Inc.!"

A collective gasp rolled over the crowd. Several people held their hands to their mouths in utter shock at what was coming. "You are hereby ordered to vacate your homes by order of the executive council and must do so by the end of business day tomorrow. Junon Inc. thanks you for your patience."

The crowd wailed and sobbed, some women fainted and children cried. Rufus Shinra simply turned back to his helicopters and smiled.

Author's Notes: Whoa! Die Rufus Shinra die! What the hell does that scumbag want with Rocket Town??? You can bet there'll be one unhappy old pilot when word gets around!

And what the hell's wrong with Vincent? More importantly, what does his condition have to do with the aerial sightings around the Planet? And what the hell happened to Red in Hojo's lab? Now that he has finally said goodbye to Bugenhagen, can he come to terms with Hojo's secret experiment?

The answers, as always, are just ahead!