

Chapter Fourteen: Standing Orders

"I'll control the world with fear. It takes too much to do it like my old man." - *Rufus Shinra*

The Corel Desert trembled as a gigantic heel crashed to the earth. The glimmering onyx appendage remained fixed while its owner passed over it over fifty yards above. The towering behemoth marched toward the distant crash site of the airship Highwind. Each step took the beast acres closer to its prey.

The Highwind lay dead in the desert night, helpless to prevent the onslaught ahead. The massive airship sat at the end of a long trench carved into the rough terrain, slightly tilted to one side.

Cid Highwind reached up with a shaky hand and removed a cigarette from his flight goggles. He never took his gaze off the creature approaching in the distance. Cloud Strife and Tifa Lockhart likewise stared in silence at the grim sight before them. "Cloud..." Tifa spoke in a small voice, "Cid..."

"I see it woman," Cid lit his cigarette, his hand still shaking, "Damn that thing's f%\$@#&* big."

"What Weapon is that?" Cloud narrowed his gaze at the towering giant lumbering towards them.

"Looks like some kinda black gem," Cid puffed a smoke circle. "Obsidian, or onyx, maybe..."

"Why didn't this one awaken with the others?" Tifa's voice cracked, "Why would it wait until now to come out?"

"I can't think of a reason why," Cloud spoke carefully, "But it's here now. We're lucky this one didn't come up with the others."

::BOOM::

"Shit! It's gettin' closer!" Cid turned away from the Weapon. "The Highwind's a sittin' duck!!"

"We fought some of the other Weapons," Tifa looked to Cloud, "Like the Ultima and Diamond. Can't we just fight this one?"

"Tifa," Cid turned to his friends, "I love you like a sister, but there ain't no Goddamn way the three of us are going to dent that thing!"

"Cid's right," Cloud put his arm on Tifa's shoulder, "That is by far the largest of all the Weapons. This is one battle we can't win."

"That sonuvabitch looks like it could put all five of the others in a damn headlock!"

Tifa turned away from the beast, "We've got to do something! We can't just sit here on our hands!"

"Any ideas you got I'm all ears," Cid looked skywards to the giant.

::BOOM::

Suddenly the floodlights on the Highwind beamed to life! Cid raised his arm over his eyes to shield the intense light! A dull roar emanated from within the airship, and gradually grew in intensity and volume!

"Jeezus!!" Cid beamed, "God bless you, Shera! I love you!!"

The towering iron ship shuddered and moved. The land around it crumbled as it began to rise out of its makeshift nest! The Weapon became alert to this sudden movement and let out an ear-splitting roar!

"Let's get our asses back to the ship!" Cid called back as he hurried towards the vessel. Cloud and Tifa quickly pursued.

Cid felt his sides burning as he reached the hovering vessel. The Highwind was several yards off the ground but Cid managed to grab onto a mooring rope hanging from the ship. The pilot climbed up the rope then turned to his friends running toward the rope.

"Grab my hand!" Cid reached down as far as he could and pulled Tifa up to safety. Then he and Tifa reached for Cloud, and helped him onto the rope. They had made it, and the Weapon was drawing near.

"Urgh!!" Cloud closed his eyes tight and gritted his teeth. And let go of the rope. His limp form plummeted to the awaiting earth below.

"Cloud!!!" Tifa reached out in panic as her fiance convulsed on the desert floor. It looked as though he was being attacked from within!

"What the hell?!" Cid strained to hang onto the rope while he turned to see his friend below.

"Cloud!!!" Tifa shouted in terror. She could do no less but go to her lover, and let go of the rope. Tifa hit the ground hard as the Highwind continued to climb into the sky. The footsteps of the Weapon drowned out all noise save its own roar.

"TIFA!!!" Cid bellowed at the top of his lungs, reaching toward the earth, desperately trying to cross the impossible distance between his friends and the safety of the airship. The last thing he saw before the airship broke the clouds was the enormous Weapon about to destroy his friends.

Reno dusted his pants and sighed. Rocket Town. What a dump. He could hardly believe that after all this time he was back in this town staring up and yet another rocket on the launchpad. He stood outside Rufus' extravagant tent in the center of town and wondered how it was he had ended up here.

He, Rude and Elena had gotten into the mercenary business after Meteor effectively ended the Shinra Corporation, or so he had thought. For over a year, the three Turks had hired themselves out to the highest bidder to take care of whatever jobs needed to be done. They made a good living in the merc business, but that had not lasted. Several days ago, they were approached by none other than Colonel Heidegger, their old boss. He made them an offer they couldn't refuse - quite literally. It was either rejoin him as the Turks or be shot in front of a Junon firing squad. The choice was simple. Plus it meant a raise in pay.

"So, Rufus," Reno whirled around to the group of people sitting at a table inside the tent, "What exactly do you plan on doing with that thing?" He jerked a thumb towards the Junon-1 rocket behind him.

"That, Reno," Rufus flashed a trademark arrogant smile, "Is the key to this Planet."

"Whatever, boss." Reno walked into the tent and joined the others. Rufus sat in the center of a large oak table, with Heidegger at his right and Rude and Elena to his left. Reno pulled up a chair and took a seat. "So what do you need the Turks again for? Colonel Klink there got himself enough soldiers and weapons to handle any kinda interference." Reno shot Heidegger a mocking glance as he spoke.

"Reno," Rufus never took his gaze off the blueprints on the table in front of him, "I'm working to restore the order of things. There was a certain scientific balance to the world when the Shinra ruled. The Turks were part of that balance." The Junon president looked up at the cocky Turk. "As soon as your fourth member gets here, I'll have an assignment ready."

"Fourth?!" Reno suddenly became incensed. "Where do you get off sticking us with some new loser just because you want to pretend things are the way they were over a year ago?"

"Enough!" Heidegger glared at Reno. "The president has no reason to explain himself to his employees! Do not forget your place, Reno."

Rude and Elena looked up at Reno who stood up from the table and walked away. Rufus simply smiled and resumed the meeting.

Deep below Cosmo Canyon, an emerald cave was usually devoid of human contact. Except that is, for today. Voices echoed through the cave along with the sound of groundwater dripping off the tips of subterranean stalactites. Barret helped Vincent Valentine to his feet. The Cosmo Canyon elder Hargo approached the two men with a glass of water. Vincent gratefully accepted it a gulped it down heavily.

"Now," Barret looked sternly at his weakened comrade, "Maybe you oughta tell us what the hell you found out in your dream-quest thing.

Start from the beginning, real slow..."

"Yes," Vincent shakily returned the empty glass to the elder Hargo, "There is much to tell you." Vincent cleared his throat and wiped sweat from his forehead. "The Planet is in danger. Grave danger. Jenova still plagues this world. There exists another who has been consumed by the alien demon."

Barret glanced warily at Yuffie and interrupted, "You don't mean Cloud, do ya?"

"No," Vincent raised his human hand, "I am sure it is not Cloud. The person in question has completely become one with Jenova. This is far beyond merely being injected with the cancer." Vincent turned away from his friends and faced the emerald cave wall. "There is someone out there more alien than human. And we must find it."

Barret uneasily looked at the former Turk, "Vince, before we pulled you oughta that screaming fit, you were mumblin' somethin' really upsettin'..." Vincent turned to Barret and raised an eyebrow.

"And that was?"

"You kept sayin'," Barret paused, "Jenova is Weapon."

The repeat of that dreaded phrase sent chills up and down Yuffie's small spine.

Vincent frowned. "I cannot clearly remember my dream. Whatever it was, it was terrible enough to force me to bury it into my subconscious. But that does give us a clue to the whereabouts of this new threat. Perhaps Jenova has somehow taken control of this new Weapon. That would explain why it did not awaken with the others."

"How can you say that so calmly?!!" Yuffie was beside herself. She felt tears forming in her eyes. There could be no doubt, the great Wutai ninja was actually afraid. "That would mean the end of everythin' on this Planet!" She looked to Barret and back to Vincent. "And all the materia on it!"

Vincent let a small smile form on his lips. A meaningless gesture for a man who felt nothing. "Worrying about what may or may not be will avail us nothing. Let us head to the surface and plan our next course of action."

"Turn this bucket around NOW!!"

Cid Highwind kicked open the steel door that led to the main bridge of the airship Highwind. The crew was shaken up enough by the sudden appearance of Weapon in the Corel desert. Their captain's outburst further frazzled the already anxious hearts.

Shera stood at the wheel next to the Level 12 pilot and turned to Cid as he stormed over to them, "Cid you can't be serious!"

"Don't argue with me, woman!" Cid erupted into her face, "Cloud and Tifa are still down there, we gotta go back!" A look of shock and dismay washed over the faces of Shera and the crew.

"But Cid," Shera spoke carefully, "Once we land again, we won't be able to get back into the air. We have to take the Highwind somewhere for repairs." Cid was alarmed at the value Shera placed on the lives of their friends. "Cloud and Tifa will have a better chance hiding from the Weapon without this big metal airship hovering over them. The best thing we can do is repair the ship so that we have the means to rescue them in earnest. If we go back now, we'll all be stranded, and that monster will know where we are!"

Cid thought for a second. "Ta hell with that!!" But only for a second. "Cid Highwind doesn't let his friends down! Ever!" Cid pushed passed Shera and the pilot and grabbed the wheel!

"Cid!" Shera pounded on his back! "Think about what you're doing!! We can't save them if we get killed!!"

Cid fumed. Shera was right. He really hated that.

"Okay," The pilot lit up a cigarette in thought, "The question is where do we go. Rocket Town's out of the question. Wutai's too damn far away for this heap. That leaves Cosmo Canyon. I might be able to borrow some parts from some of Red's Planet- watching gizmos."

In the night sky above the Corel area, the large metal vessel turned towards its new destination.

"Cloud, you are a puppet."

Cloud Strife raised his sword high and brought it down hard on an unsuspecting Cid Highwind! The old pilot cried in agony as a wave of crimson death splashed into the dark sky!

Cloud reared his enraged head and glared into Barret Wallace's eyes. He leapt into the air and brought the massive Ultima Sword down towards the large miner! Barret raised his gun-arm to block the assault but was alarmed when said gun was sent rolling across the cruel earth. The miner gripped his wounded arm and fell to his knees. He looked up and saw the gleaming white blade of Cloud's sword fast approaching. It was the last thing he ever saw!

"Cloud! No!" Tifa screamed at the top of her lungs and reached out to her beloved. She watched in horror as he tore through Yuffie and Cait Sith like they were phantoms. "Please, Cloud! Stop!!" She bellowed, but was unheard by her protector.

Then Cloud stopped. He stood up straight as he faced Vincent Valentine. Vincent remained motionless, his gaze piercing into the young warrior. Cloud leapt into the air toward the crimson fighter! In the blink of an eye, Vincent raised his Death Penalty shotgun and fired! Cloud Strife flew backwards in the air and hit the ground with a sharp thud!

"NOOO!!!" Tears streamed down Tifa's face as she ran to him. Vincent slowly replaced his weapon to its holster and turned away. Tifa knelt next to Cloud's lifeless form, sobbing uncontrollably. His eyes suddenly opened! But they were not the sparkling blue eyes Tifa had grown to love, no, these eyes had no pupils. The windows to Cloud's soul were empty.

Cloud leapt to his feet and drove his giant sword into the back of Vincent's cape! He snarled with rage as Vincent fell lifeless to the ground. It was then he turned his head and saw her. Aeris.

Aeris Gainsborough let a soft smile escape her lips. Cloud slowly lowered his weapon as he gazed heavily into her emerald eyes. He carefully walked to her and took her by the hand. Tifa gasped and sobbed heartily. Then, without warning, Cloud raised his sword and roared, taking the flower girl's life as quickly as she returned to them! Tifa fell to her hands and knees, wailing.

It was then that Cloud approached, and stood over her.

"Tifa!"

Slowly, Tifa opened her eyes. Cloud was still standing over her. She let loose a blood-curdling scream!

"Tifa! Wake up!" Cloud held her shoulder and shook her. "You must've hit your head on the ground!" Tifa carefully examined her surroundings. The Corel Desert. It was still night. How long had she been out? She threw her arms around Cloud as she let loose sobs and tears.

"Oh, Cloud!" She wailed, "I was so worried!"

"There, there," Cloud carefully patted her head, "It's okay now."

Tifa quickly whipped her head away from Cloud's shoulder and examined the desert night.

"What happened to the Weapon?!" Nothing but peaceful night air greeted them. "And the Highwind?!"

"I don't know," Cloud raised his head and studied the quiet night sky. "When I woke up, it was just the two of us. But look." Cloud pointed ahead of them to the ground. Tifa slowly followed his gaze and gasped. There, in the earth, two massive footprints. Each one could easily nest the Highwind. Weapon had been there, and had them both at its mercy. Why were they spared? Tifa couldn't guess.

"Why did it just leave like that?" She looked gravely into Cloud's eyes.

"I don't know, Tifa," Cloud furrowed his brow in thought. "Maybe it left to pursue the airship. They'll come back for us when they can. The best thing we can do now is to make our way out of this place before the morning sun rises." Cloud unsheathed his massive Ultima Sword and carved a large arrow into the dirt. "There. Now they'll know which way we're headed. Let's get moving."

Cloud and Tifa began walking through the desert night. Crickets and the moon were their only company. But this peace was not meant to last.

"Well, well, well! What do we got here?"

Cloud quickly whirled around and gritted his teeth. There, on the hill, a large crowd of shady characters sneered and chuckled. The convicts from Corel Prison. The prison had long become a society unto itself, situated in the center of the Corel Desert. The society had its own rules, its own leaders, and it thrived on hate and evil. The denizens had once lived under the rule of a man named Dyne, a former Corel villager, driven insane by the losses he had suffered at the hands of the Shinra. Barret's old friend had taken control of the Corel prison and ruled it with an iron fist. Barret had defeated Dyne when the team was thrown into the prison for crimes they didn't commit, and Dyne took his own life when he realized what he had become. Marlene never learned who her father really was, and that was the way Barret decided to keep it. Dyne's second, a man known only as Mr. Coates, had ruled beside the insane miner and was obviously the one running things now.

A large man wearing a puma's skin as a headdress moved towards them, "Looks like we got ourselves a couple a' lovebirds who flew too far from the nest..." The horde of convicts snickered and sneered.

"Cosmo Canyon dead ahead, Captain!"

Cid turned away from the OPS console and eyed the pilot sternly.

The pilot twitched nervously, "Where -uh- do you want me to set her down?"

Cid walked over to the wheel and shoved the pilot aside. "Better let me handle this one, kid. I'm takin' the old girl right into the canyon."

Shera was still on the bridge checking the readings on the fuel gauges. "Captain, you can't seriously be thinking of landing inside the canyon? I mean, I thought it was too narrow and the terrain was too rough to safely touch down?"

Cid took his cigarette out of his mouth while holding the wheel with his other hand. "Woman, I don't know what's gotten into you lately, but I know what I'm doin'! Usually we don't land in the canyon 'cause it's too damn dangerous. But there's no way I'm luggin' all my gear and heavy metal parts back and forth across the whole damn continent! Now hush up and let me do the drivin'!" Cid made a mental note to have a talk to Shera about all the arguing she had been doing the past few days.

The Highwind slowly descended towards the narrow canyon. The airship shuddered slightly as Cid adjusted intake manifolds and main rudders. This was going to be close.

"This is gonna be close." Cid closed one eye and peered through the main window on the bridge and bit down hard on his cigarette. The Highwind slowly inched closer to the canyon.

::BOOM::

"Shit! It's okay, I'm in control!" Cid hollered above the racket the metal airship made as it scraped along one side of the canyon. Shera and the other crew members eyed each other in fear as they each held onto something bolted down.

"Landing struts down!" Cid bellowed at the crew. Someone repeated the order as the Highwind's landing struts emerged from the base of ship.

::BOOM::

The airship was rocked, sending everyone but Cid crashing to the floor of the bridge!

"Brace for impact!" The old pilot shouted in a mocking tone as he puffed on his cigarette.

"We came all this way to find out what all the noise was about, and this is what we find - a couple a daisies in our little desert." The large group of Corel Prison inmates grunted and snorted as their leader shouted in the direction of Cloud and Tifa. The brave couple began to slowly back away. "Hold it! You two are gonna hafta pay a tribute to be walkin' around on our sand. And it'll cost you a little somethin' extra, missy." The one-toothed bandit grinned at Tifa. "We certainly hope your little boyfriend don't mind."

"You'd better not try anything!" Tifa moved in front of Cloud. "The last thing you want to do is get him mad!" She jerked a thumb back towards Cloud.

The convict mob erupted with gales of laughter, and several of the surly characters in front leapt of the cliff and ran to Tifa. She promptly kicked the first one sharply in the groin, knocked out the few remaining teeth of the second, and side-kicked the third and fourth through the air and into the dirt. The laughter stopped.

At once, the entire group rushed to them! Tifa prepared herself in a battle stance but looked up suddenly as she saw Cloud flying overhead, his massive sword held into the heavens! He landed in a streak, his blade flowing in a crosswise motion, hacking through bandit after bandit, making his way through the crowd! He worked his way to the other side of the mob and looked back to the sea of enemies, a path of wounded leading back to him.

"Cloud!" Tifa waded through her own river of rogues, kicking and punching at every possible target! But the swarm became too much for even an experienced fighter like her! Cloud leapt into the fray once again, swinging and clashing, wounding and maiming! For the love of his life, he would fight to the very heart of hell and back!

"Tifa! I'm coming!!" Cloud roared above the mass of thieves and murders, pressing on through the battle. He felt the energies in his sword crackle and build. The Ultima Sword was alive with hatred! Cloud became momentarily distracted by this sudden disturbance within his weapon and was struck on the head from behind! The battle around him became blurred and slow.

"Steel bladed sword!"

Tifa clutched a small, red orb in her raised arm and shouted to the heavens. A cold wind suddenly blew across the battlefield. In the dark sky, an ivory moon stretched over the horizon and beamed to the Planet below. On a distant peak, a lone warrior sat atop a gallant steed. As the moonlight washed over this new visitor, the eternal form of Odin graced the battlefield.

Odin's six-legged stallion descended into the fight from atop its lofty cliff and carried the champion to the awaiting hordes. The criminals howled in fear and agony as the dauntless conqueror swung his mighty blade. One after one, the villains fell to the cruel earth, near death or beyond. Odin charged through the sea of enemies, doling out his merciless justice. When no opponent remained standing, his mighty stallion turned and galloped into the distance, vanishing as quickly as they had appeared.

And it was over. Cloud slowly limped towards his love and helped her to her feet. They turned to face the ocean of wounded and dead, gaging at the atrocity that had been unleashed. Several of the villains began to stir, so they took their leave, heading west into the dark desert.

Cid Highwind turned to the gathered group at the access hatch of the Highwind. Shera, the two mechanics from Rocket Town, the entire airship crew, and Reeve, being held up by two crewmen, stood before him.

"Alright," The old pilot grunted, "We get Reeve to a doctor, then we get some shut-eye. 'Cause tomorrow we get to work at the crack o' dawn! We got people to rescue, dammit!" Cid turned back to the hatch and raised his leg high. He kicked forward, but at the exact same instant, the door flew open, sending Cid hurtling into the night!

A string of curses emitted from the outdoors. Followed by shouts and more curses. Shera carefully stuck her head out to investigate the commotion. She saw Cid, on all fours being helped up by Yuffie Kisaragi, while Barret Wallace stood with his hand on the open door in a fit of laughter, and Vincent Valentine quietly stood his distance watching the beleaguered pilot blow his top.

"What the hell gave you the idea of poppin' that hatch before you realized who was inside?!" Cid got to his feet and began dusting himself off.

"Geez, Cid, you should be careful," A rare look of concern decorated Yuffie's face, "An old guy like you could break a hip or somethin' pullin' stunts like that...." Shera covered her ears while Cid argued his case to the young ninja, using mostly four-letter-words.

"What the hell are you doin' here, Highwind?" Barret helped Shera down from the airship hatch.

"We got trouble, people." Cid lit another cigarette having lost his last one in the fall. "Cloud and Tifa are stranded in the desert, Rufus took over Rocket Town, and we got us the biggest damn Weapon I ever saw kicking up a ruckus all over the sky!"

Barret swore, Yuffie started an 'I told-you-so' speech to the miner, and Vincent was instantly alert!

"I am afraid we also have disheartening news, Cid," Vincent spoke in a calm tone, "Jenova lives and we believe it has taken control of this new Weapon."

"F%\$#@*&!!!" Cid stomped on the ground, "How many damn times do we hafta kill that thing?!!"

"So long as a piece of it exists, Jenova lives." Vincent folded his arms across his chest.

"Alright," Cid helped Barret help the others out of the airship. "Lets head over to the Inn an get some shut-eye. We got a lot to talk about."

The sun broke over the horizon in Rocket Town. Soldiers and technicians scurried about their business like tiny ants in a colony. A sleek, black helicopter raced through the sky towards the town, its engines whispering its approach. Rufus Shinra emerged from his tent to greet the new day. A day of reckoning.

The aircraft hovered above the center of the town square and lowered a fairly-sized black crate on the end of a hook and cable. The metal box was devoid of markings and only sported small openings near the top of the front and back ends. The small openings were covered by thick, iron bars and were touched by nothing but shadow.

Colonel Heidegger emerged from Cid's house, his temporary base of operations, followed by the three Turks - Reno, Rude and Elena. They stood next to Rufus and watched as the helicopter released its cargo and landed. The door to the vessel slid open and Palmer emerged. The portly executive kept his head down as he bounced towards the gathered group.

"Report." Rufus spoke in a spiteful tone.

"I got news, mister Rufus," Palmer attempted to catch his breath after the short jog, "AVALANCHE is at Cosmo Canyon! They, they, uh- tricked me into tellin' them you were back and I don't think they were too happy!"

"What?!!" Rufus grabbed Palmer by the collar and shook him as he hollered, "Who EXACTLY did you tell?!"

"B-barret, and uh- the little ninja girl...." Sweat rolled in streams down Palmer's face.

"Barret. That's enough. It won't be long before the entire Avalanche team comes this way." He unhanded Palmer and turned to the group. "But he won't get the chance. Turks, your new assignment: go to Cosmo Canyon and silence Barret and the girl. Permanently."

Rufus' words dripped with hatred.

"Hold on," Reno stepped forward, "Not that we need it, but you said you had a fourth member to introduce to us."

Rufus raised an eyebrow, "Indeed. And this would be a PERFECT assignment to test him out." Rufus turned away from the group and produced a remote from his jacket. His gaze fell upon the mysterious cargo in the center of the square. He pressed a button, and the bolts on the ends of the crate shot off. Then the two end panels fell open.

The gathered employees watched to motionless container. Nothing. Reno turned to the president and chuckled. Then he stopped. A low rumbling erupted from the box. The rumbling grew to a dull growling. And a red puma slowly padded out.

"Jeez! That's Red XIII!" Reno coughed and placed his hand on his holstered nightstick.

Rufus outstretched an arm across the shaken Turk, "No, not exactly. Look closely." Rufus was right. This was not the Red XIII the Turks had fought time and again. His mane had been cut short, the headdress and jewelry he had always worn were absent. And his eye was cold and lifeless, full of deep hatred. Red XIII was nowhere amidst this crimson beast.

"Gentlemen," Rufus stepped forward and placed a hand the creature's head, "May I present the culmination of training that had been started almost two years ago..." The beast let out a low growl. "The newest and by far the most loyal Turk..." Reno glowered at the smug president.

"May I present.... Red Nation....."

Author's Notes: Well damn!! If you don't hate Rufus by now, you must be related to him somehow! Red XIII has been brainwashed into service with the Turks! That was that strange experiment Hojo had started two years ago in his lab! A large part of the team has gathered at Cosmo Canyon, so you can bet the Turks are going to get a little more of fight then they're expecting! Ha, I can't wait! Cloud and Tifa's troubles in the Corel Desert are far from over, and things are really going to heat up for our favorite FF7 couple! My favorite part of this chapter was by far when Cid fell out of the airship and Yuffie had a comment ready! Next chapter, I finally reveal who the Jenova-person is, and we see more of the Onyx Weapon on its rampage!

Stay tuned!