

Chapter Fifteen: Dream Sequences and Death Scenes

"Look always to the eternal flow of time which is far greater than the span of a human life." - *Elder Bugenhagen*

"Reeve!"

A black, colorless void stretched across an unknown location. There was no floor, no ceiling, no walls. No skyline kissed the earth at the point on the horizon. Nothing but dark emptiness in vacant space, devoid of stars.

"Reeve!"

A well-dressed man in a royal blue pinstripe suit was hunched forward, his knees suspended by an unseen surface. The man had lengthy black hair, combed back, and rested his head on his hands, his face covered.

"Reeve, snap out of it!"

Reeve lifted his head from his hands and looked to the voice. Above him in the void, standing on an unseen upper-level, a small black and white cat wearing a sparkling golden crown, a red cape and bright red shoes bellowed to him through a megaphone.

"That's it," The cat grinned, "Welcome back to the land o' the living!"

"Cait?" Reeve furrowed his brow and spoke in a distressed tone, "What's going on? I thought you were torn apart by those Mako- insects at the Nibel Reactor...."

"Well, sunshine," Cait hopped down to Reeve's level, "The thing about that is, I wasn't." Cait walked over to Reeve and smiled.

"I don't understand." A quizzical look adorned the Nibelheim Mayor's face.

"The truth is, those robots are just a way for me to get from point A to point B. They're whataya callit..." The little cat snapped his white-gloved fingers as he trailed off.

"They're vessels?" Reeve piped up in wonder.

"Bingo!" Cait tapped his little pink nose with a finger. "You see Reeve, just because my handsome robots get trashed now and then, I'm safe and sound in my own little place."

"Where's that?"

"Right here," Cait tapped Reeve's forehead with a finger as he answered. "You see, you have your little personnel reports and boardroom meetings, but me - I like to have fun!" Cait turned away from Reeve and launched into a somersault. "You sit at your oak desk and worry about the safety and well- being of the good people of Nibel, but I'd rather go blow some gil at the Gold Saucer any day!"

"But without your robot, how are you supposed to have any fun?" Reeve strained to his feet and walked beside the little cat. The two walked along the through the darkness.

"Good question!" Cait adjusted his crown as he walked. "I was hoping you'd have some ideas for that one."

"Well," Reeve scratched his chin in thought, "I suppose I could try to build you another robot."

"Sounds good ta me, Reeve!" The two walked into the distance and faded from sight.

In the Shildra Inn at Cosmo Canyon, only the sound of the wind disturbed the peace of night. Several guests of the inn slept in feather beds in their rooms, the night air soothing their tired nerves. Reeve lay on his mattress, submerged in deep unconsciousness, turned slightly, and continued his slumber.

Three other beds accompanied his in the inn room. On one of these beds, Cid Highwind snored heavily.

Cid.....

A barren desert landscape stretched across the distance as far as the eye could see. Nothing but the endless grains of sand marred this bleak environment. Only the whistling of the light westerly winds disturbed the echoed silence. The blinding sun burned into the rolling sands like a child torturing ants.

Cid weakly opened his eyes in the searing sunlight, holding an arm against his forehead to shelter his gaze.

Cid...

"Who the f*^#@?!s there?!!" The pilot shouted above the desert winds, his voice nothing more than a weak echo. "Show yourself!"

"Right behind you, Cid."

The old pilot jumped around in response to the sudden voice directly behind him. Cloud Strife and Tifa Lockhart stood arm-in-arm and smiled warmly at their startled friend.

"&^%\$#@!!!, Cloud! You scared the piss outta me!" Cid extended a hand to Cloud and exchanged a firm handshake. "Are you guys alright? The last I saw, you were both about to be stomped by that Weapon!"

How did you survive?!"

"Well Cid, we didn't." Cloud smiled weakly at Cid.

"Huh?" A puzzled look colored the pilot's face which was quickly replaced with a look of horror! There, in front of him, the skeletal remains of Tifa and Cloud were strewn about the cruel earth. Their clothes hung loose off of bleached white bones, a look of disappointment eternally etched on their skulls. Cid Highwind had failed, and his comrades had paid with their lives.

"NOOOOOOOOOO....." Cid's voice trailed into silence as the echo of his outburst ricocheted around the desert sky, and the pilot fell to his knees.

"Cid."

He slowly looked up to see the new visitor to his misery. Shera stood nervously in front of him, her hands folded together in front of her. She smiled down at the pilot. Cid slowly struggled to his feet and looked shamefully into her eyes. He failed them. She had to know.

"I know what happened, Captain." She spoke in a calm, collected tone. "You couldn't save them. They knew that. You have to go on. Like you did after the meaningless war. You fought against innocent townspeople for a corporation you knew was dirty all along. You left the air force and entered the space program to save your soul. Then destroyed the hopes and dreams of everyone in Rocket Town."

Each word cut into Cid like a buster sword. The shame he felt at what he'd done during his lifetime was too much to bear. No one knew what he carried around with him. No one that is, except her. She knew. She knew everything and still she smiled. Still she stood by him and supported whatever he did. She was his anchor. Without her, there was nothing. Without her, he would have died at the bottom of a bottle a long time ago. He was healthy; he was happy; his head was screwed on straight - but only because of her.

"Cid, I forgive you."

She knew. She knew how he had used the rusted husk of the ShinRa 26 like a crutch for his sanity. She knew how close he had come to a nervous breakdown. She knew how much he needed the support of the citizens of Rocket Town to get himself out of the bed every morning. She knew everything that he hid from the rest of the world. And she forgave him.

"But Shera, I let them all down." Cid turned away from her pleasant smile, unable to stand it anymore. "Cloud and Tifa, Wutai, the people of Rocket Town. They're all toast!"

Shera placed a hand on Cid's shoulder. He turned back to face her. She said nothing. She forgave him, he knew that. And somehow, it made it all seem okay.

In the darkened room of the Shildra Inn, Cid Highwind stirred and resumed his snoring.

Cosmo Canyon. The stars in the sky made the nights here seem like a dream. The tranquility knew no bounds. One such shadow, however, knew nothing of tranquility.

A darkened figure stole through the night, its footsteps inaudible to the human ear. Slowly, the shape made its way through the center of the habitat and towards the entrance to the canyon.

"Where are you going in such a hurry, Yuffie?" Vincent Valentine calmly stepped out of the shadows into the moonlight near the entrance of Cosmo Canyon.

"Jeez, Vincent!!" Yuffie nearly jumped out of her skin at the sudden words. "You almost gave me a heart-attack, dude!!"

"The question I posed still stands." Vincent folded his arms across his chest in anticipation for a prompt answer.

"Let me guess," Yuffie sneered, "You think I'm sneakin' around because I just stole somethin' from somebody, right?" A look of hurt clearly hid beneath her rude demeanor. "You guys are almost as bad as Barret. After all we've been through, you still think I ain't nuthin' more than a common thief!"

Vincent raised an eyebrow, his other features remaining still. "More likely you are planning to retrieve that tattered, stuffed teddy-bear from the left saddlebag of your golden chocobo, Cloud."

"What?!" Yuffie choked in shock, "You been goin' through my stuff?!! That's none of your business!!"

"Not at all," Vincent raised his iron claw in protest of his innocence. "I noticed it when you first arrived to the canyon. The fabric smelled of age and Wutai flora. The feather stuffing and plastic button eyes gave off a unique scent. The shape could be clearly made out through the material of the leather saddlebag. What else would you be sneaking out into the night for but your confident?"

"Wow." Yuffie made a mental note not to underestimate Vincent's heightened senses in the near future. "A girl can't keep any secrets from you, huh?" Vincent nodded warmly.

Vincent and Yuffie turned and began down the steps to where Yuffie had tied up her golden chocobo. The young ninja was first to break the silence of the night.

"So how do you know what Wutai smells like?" She looked down to prevent tripping as she spoke.

"Did you not know?" Vincent easily descended the stairs, his heightened senses telling him where each step was at any given time. "I grew up in Wutai."

"Really? No way!"

"It is true." Vincent reflected for a moment and then continued, "In fact, I knew your father a long time ago. I can see where you get your temper."

"I don't have a temper, jerk-face!" The young ninja fumed and then blushed. "So you knew my dad, huh? I keep forgetting how old you actually are. Or are you?"

"I did not age during my sleep between the centuries. I awoke still the man of 27 I was when Hojo robbed me of everything."

They reached the sleeping chocobo, which stood near the bottom of the stone stairs, its reins tied to an old wooden post. Yuffie opened her saddlebag and removed the teddy-bear she had come out to get.

"And you better not tell anyone about this!" The young girl shook a fist before bounding up the stone staircase.

Vincent simply shrugged and walked slowly into the night, resuming his night watch.

Steam rose through the morning rays of sunlight from a hot, cup of black coffee. The white porcelain mug sat snuggled into its matching saucer on the bar of the Starlet Pub in the crimson tranquility of Cosmo Canyon. Barret Wallace rubbed his eyes and grumbled, his head hanging down from his massive shoulders. The strands of steam danced in his face and filled his nostrils with a caffeinated enticement. The large miner simply groaned and grumbled again. Mornings. His least favorite part of the day. Especially when everyone else had gotten up ahead of him and were already hard at work at the tasks at hand.

"Barret!!" A grisly voice bellowed from outside the pub, "Get your lazy ass in gear! The airship ain't gonna fix itself!!"

Highwind. That pilot was even more insufferable the earlier he had to be dealt with. But such aches would have to wait. The Captain was right, in his own obnoxious way. Barret downed his coffee in one gulp and winced in pain. The beverage of necessity had no doubt burned the insides of his mouth.

He walked through the curtain door to the outside world to see it abuzz with activity. Shera directed some mechanics carrying large, metal parts through the canyon toward the awaiting airship. Some warriors helped elders sift through the rubble that was formerly Bugenhagen's lab for technological components. Cid Highwind strained and hollered as he and Vincent attempted to move a very large metal beam to the ship. Barret mused that the iron piece probably weighed the same as Cloud's old motorcycle. Barret cursed and approached his friends.

"Well it's about time, sleeping beauty!" Cid clenched his teeth on the filter of his latest cigarette. "\$*&^%!!, Vince this ain't goin' nowhere..."

A sly grin crossed Barret's lips. The large miner bent down and easily hoisted the metal object over one shoulder.

"Awright showoff," Cid growled at the smiling man, "Just take that over to the Highwind before you strain your ego." Barret chuckled and walked away from the two adventurers. "Maybe I should go look in on Reeve. The elder said his injuries weren't too bad but I'd better see if he's still asleep."

"He is not," Vincent picked a metal shard from the debris scattered around the ground. "He awoke early this morning and locked himself in the lab below the former observatory. It sounds like he is working on something."

"Damn," Cid tossed the butt of his cigarette onto the ground and stomped it out with his toe. "Well, I ain't got time to play wet-nurse right now. I'll check up on 'im later." Vincent followed the pilot as the two walked toward the massive airship. "And where the hell's Yuffie when we got all this work to do?!"

"Tifa, wake up."

The searing sun bore down cruelly on the hot sands of the Corel Desert. A single trail of footsteps disturbed the continuous ripples in the endless landscape. At the end of this trail, a single pair of black boots walked through the barren desert.

Tifa Lockhart slowly opened her eyes in the blinding light of the early morning. She yawned heavily in an attempt to clear the heavy cobwebs that resided in her head. It was then she realized where she was, and smiled - in the arms of her true love. Cloud Strife walked steadily through the desolate environment carrying his fianc, in his arms. He smiled down at her as she gazed deeply into his eyes. The fighter stopped for a moment and helped Tifa to her feet. She shakily took her first steps and stretched.

"Why were you carrying me in this heat?"

Cloud grinned weakly, "No sense wasting any time. I got up with the sun and didn't have the heart to wake you. You were so peaceful," He looked over at his love and amended, "-For a change."

Tifa playfully punched Cloud's arm as the two walked through the soft, bright sands. "You must be exhausted! We've been wandering through this wasteland for two days. And here you are pampering me."

"What can I say?" Cloud ran a hand through his spiked hair in his trademark, cocky way. "I'm a hopeless romantic!"

The two shared a laugh as they continued through the desert, unaware of the sands that began to shift behind them.

Reno shifted in his seat as he watched the landscape race beneath him. He was strapped into the passenger compartment of a sleek Junon chopper with his comrades, Rude and Elena. He checked his watch for the hundredth time since they had departed the newly-seized Rocket Town by Junon Inc. The company's reigning CEO, Rufus Shinra, had addressed them earlier this morning on their current assignment. The Turks were headed for Cosmo Canyon to eliminate Barret Wallace as a threat to Junon security. The young ninja girl that was spotted with him was a bonus Reno was happy to give.

The only thing about this mission that had bothered the corporate officer was the new member of their team. Rufus assigned a somewhat unexpected warrior to the Turks during his speech at the launch pad area. There in the cargo hold of the black Junon chopper, a dangerous creature growled deeply. Reno raised an eyebrow and glanced towards the back of the vehicle where the low sound was coming from.

Red Nation, the mindless crimson beast that had newly become part of the Turks, was once one of their greatest enemies - Red XIII. As an integral part of Cloud's team, Red XIII was one of the biggest thorns in the side of the Turks and the Shinra Corporation in general. But now all that had changed. An experiment started over two years ago in Hojo's lab in Midgar had successfully stripped the fiery cat of its own free will. It was now an automaton, heeding nothing but the commands of its new master, Rufus Shinra.

Reno wondered if a similar process had been taken to create Dark Nation, the Shinra President's deceased bodyguard. Since the Strife boy had effectively ended the black panther's career, there arose a need for new protection. And the newly-dubbed Red Nation had filled that need. But Reno wasn't sure if he could completely trust a former enemy to the esteemed rank of the Junon special police. This mission would prove where the beast's loyalties sat. And if Reno felt for one moment that betrayal was imminent, he would waste not a breath in terminating the career of Rufus' second bodyguard.

Behind the three Turks, a bright yellow eye peered through a tiny air hole, and glowered with hatred. Red Nation let out a low rumble.

"Sir," The pilot turned his head back to the passenger bay, "We're approaching Cosmo Canyon! You might want to take a look at this!"

Reno, Rude and Elena craned their heads to the windows and looked out to the approaching scenery. There they saw the enormous airship Highwind, nestled in the narrow canyon like a giant iron egg. The ship was clearly damaged, scorch marks dancing up and down the length of the ship like wounds. Panels were missing from the ship as many crew members, warriors and elders toiled on the fallen angel.

"Well," A sly smile formed on Reno's face as he un-holstered his steel nightstick, "Looks like we're going to earn our pay, Turks." The black chopper raced through the noon sunshine towards its destination, with three more carrying troops in pursuit.

Cid Highwind muttered a curse as he unrolled a large, yellowed blueprint on an oak table outside in front of the airship. Vincent and Barret stood over the rotted table and watched as the pilot glanced from the plans to the ship and back again. The Captain scratched his head and then cleared his throat to speak.

"Wait!" Vincent put his hand up to halt the impending instruction. "I hear helicopters approaching from the north. Are we expecting any visitors?"

Barret and Cid jolted alert and watched the sky in the direction of the approaching sound. Sure enough, they began to hear hushed chopper engines.

"\$#@&*!" Cid puffed harshly on his cigarette, "That's the direction of Rocket Town." The Captain turned to Barret and sneered, "I'll give you three guesses who sent them here and the first two don't count!"

"Shinra." Venom dripped from Barret's words, "That rat ain't wastin' any time. He prob'ly heard where we are from that fat bastard Palmer."

The three men hurried back to the dwellings to warn the villagers of the impending assault. If Rufus wanted a fight, he was going to get one!

Cloud swung his Ultima Sword high into the air and sliced down hard! An ear-splitting roar told him he had hit his target. The giant sand worm lunged towards the young fighter with its jaws wide, ready to tear into whatever it made contact with! Cloud leapt quickly to one side, avoiding the grisly attack! Tifa swung with all of her strength, air whooshing past her knuckles, and struck the great beast with a thunderous force! The creature reared its evil maw and roared at the daring damsel! She leapt back to avoid damage, but was barely caught by the monster's head! She tumbled backwards over the sand in a world of pain!

Cloud wasted no time in taking advantage of the giant worm's divided attention and turned his massive sword in his grip. With a mighty roar, he speared the great beast, spewing forth a dark red and brown gush which covered sand and sword in its thick, syrupy texture!

The monster raised its head in anguish and let loose a bloodcurdling howl! It flailed its entire body wildly, knocking aside the Ex-Soldier like a ragdoll! The segmented serpent gradually slowed its tirade, losing consciousness in the arms of impending oblivion!

And finally, it was over.

Cloud struggled to roll over onto his belly and clenched his teeth in pain. His shoulder was most likely dislocated in the fight, every nerve cried out in agony. He grunted as he slowly crawled across the hot, now tarnished sands to the unmoving form of Tifa Lockhart.

"Tifa?" Cloud grunted as he made his way across the sand. "Tifa, are you alright?" The warrior's voice was hoarse and hushed. He finally made it to his fiancé, and touched her arm. Slowly, she opened her eyes and smiled weakly.

"Cloud?" She rasped as she attempted to move. "I'm hurt. That worm hit me pretty hard. Are you okay?"

"I'll live." His heart was heavy with fear. "Do we have any cure spells left?"

"No," She furrowed her brow apologetically. "We used the last one yesterday." Cloud smiled weakly at Tifa and took her hand. "Cloud?"

"Mmm?"

"I'm not sure we're going to make it out of here."

Cloud mustered all of his strength and got to his knees. "Don't say that. We've been through a lot worse than this." With great difficulty, the young fighter strained to pick up his love and carry her off into the endless horizon.

The relentless desert sun bore down on the barren desert as the weary travelers struggled onward for their very lives.

Four Junon Inc. helicopters gently touched down on the red earth in the center of Cosmo Canyon. Three of the vessels opened and spilled heavily armed soldiers into the formerly peaceful settlement. The soldiers were clad from head to toe in full royal blue Junon army uniforms, complete with rifles, fully-concealing masks and backpacks. The company sergeants wore similar red uniforms, their faces open and shouting orders to each unit. The soldiers quickly rushed from the security of their choppers to perfect militant formation and stood at the ready.

It was then that the fourth helicopter opened its bay door. An expensive shoe slowly touched the earth bringing with it a perfectly-creased royal blue pant leg. Reno eyed the entire situation in one sweeping gaze, and scowled. Rude was the next to emerge from the sleek, black chopper, his lifeless demeanor not unlike that of a statue. Elena was the last to descend into the action, her face twisted in a spiteful glare.

"I don't get it," Rude spoke carefully as he surveyed his surroundings, "We the hell is everybody?"

"Avalanche probably detected our approach and slithered under some of these rocks." Reno charged up his nightstick at the push of a button. The iron weapon crackled with electricity.

And the battle was joined!

The surrounding canyon suddenly erupted with a colossal ambush! Every warrior in Cosmo Canyon, young and old, leapt from the surrounding canyon ledges, caves and dwellings, armed for combat. With them - Avalanche. Barret fired on the lead helicopter with his gun-arm, spattering the side of the vehicle with bullet holes. Yuffie cast spell after spell at the unsuspecting troops, the skies becoming alive with fire and lightning! Cid charged into the fray, swinging his massive Venus Gospel at any soldier unlucky enough to be near him! Vincent carefully walked into the carnage, his Death Penalty systematically finding its targets and eliminating them from the battlefield.

The Turks themselves were far from helpless, Elena kicking and shooting anything that came anywhere near her. Rude set the battle ablaze with his fire attacks. The warriors screamed in agony as their world became that of fire and brimstone, all the while Rude remained cold and emotionless. Reno wore a confident grin while he cleared a path through the fight with his nightstick, its electricity searing all unfortunate to get in its way.

Then they heard it. Cid turned his head slightly as a terrible roar echoed above the shouts and screams of the battle. Barret knocked a soldier unconscious and raised his head. Yuffie slashed hard with her conformer and glanced up. Vincent narrowed his gaze as he reloaded his weapon. Both sides paused ever so slightly as the outburst had seized everyone's attention. A sly grin formed on Reno's face, his heart relishing in the sight that was about to rock the very foundation of Avalanche's world.

The cargo hatch on the lead helicopter exploded from the side of the vessel and skidded across the ground. Thick smoke flowed into the air from where it came. Suddenly, a crimson beast leapt from the hatch and into the fray!

Red XIII glowered at the surrounding masses and roared, its head sweeping into the air! The red creature pulsed with strength, its mighty limbs flexing as it stood proudly before them. The beast's mane had been cut short, and was stripped of all jewelry and trinkets it had once worn in its former life. The Red XIII that was once a proud member of Avalanche was no more. This soulless monster that stood before them was a being of pure evil. The product of scientific conditioning that had made it loyal to Rufus Shinra alone. The angry beast eyed the crowd with a hollow, yellow eye.

Cid's mouth hung open until he found his voice, "What the f--"

"Red?!!!" Yuffie screamed in confusion, terror washing over her.

Barret gritted his teeth and growled, "Goddamn Rufus Shinra did this, ain't no mistake."

Without warning, Red Nation leapt high into the gathered mass, clawing and maiming all who crossed his path! The warriors around him howled in pain, most of whom were unable to counter-attack their protector! Red Nation opened his jaws wide and lunged at a fallen warrior, his throat exposed for the kill. The beast's teeth bit down hard! But they didn't bite down on a jugular, they connected with metal. Barret held his gun-arm between the fallen fighter and the attacking fiery-red demon, his metal appendage intercepting the assault that would have meant certain oblivion for the Cosmo Canyon warrior.

Barret thrust the red monster back into the fight, its entire body somersaulted backwards through the air until its feet had found the earth. And it rumbled.

The Junon soldiers clearly had the upper hand, their rifles and tear gas outweighing the crude knives and wooden weapons used by the Cosmo Canyon natives. Rude calmly stepped forward as he unleashed a searing fire attack against Yuffie Kisaragi. The young ninja girl raised her hand in defense as a green Reflect bubble narrowly shielded her from serious harm. But her magic force field did not protect her from the intense heat. She gasped and choked as her consciousness began to slip away.

Cid and Barret attempted to surround Red Nation, the fiery beast growling and watching their every move. Suddenly both members of Avalanche leapt forth and pounced on the fiery creature! Barret struggled to get a hold on the beast, using his weight as much as possible to his advantage! Cid grappled with Red's head, holding the shaft of his spear against its ferocious jaws. The animal chomped and gnawed at the steel weapon, its fangs putting small divots in the polished metal.

Suddenly, in a fit of rage, Red Nation bucked and erupted, sending Barret and Cid off of the mighty creature! The creature wasted not a second in leaping onto the unprepared pilot! The two struggled intensely as Barret clamored to his feet. Just then, Red Nation sunk his jaws deeply into Cid's arm!

"Arrrgh!" The Captain wailed in pain, "Jeezus, Barret, get him offa me!!" Barret raised his fist and dropped a mighty blow onto Red's back! The fiery beast opened its mouth and let out an ear-splitting howl!

Reno and Vincent squared off outside the battleground, walking in circles facing each other. The rest of the fighting seemed so distant as each fighter narrowed the scope of his attention to his opponent. The two enemies were the closer to the canyon walls than the war being waged in the center of the settlement.

"Hard to believe you were once a Turk," Reno sneered with an evil grin.

"It is hard to believe you are one now." Vincent spoke carefully, no emotion showing through his cold demeanor.

"Rarrgh!!!" Reno leapt into the air towards his enemy, his electric weapon held high and alive with energy! Vincent raised his metal arm and caught the weapon, a clang echoing through the sky! But a current of electricity ran the length of the highly-conductive appendage and electrocuted the flesh Vincent Valentine! The former Turk growled in pain but struggled on!

Cid held his wounded arm and began to assess the situation. The soldiers had them outnumbered and outgunned. Barret

stood in front of him and faced the Red Nation, who was about to pounce at any moment. Elena and Rude were swiftly making their way through what was left of their forces. Yuffie fought valiantly amidst the fray, switching from Conformer to magic at each step. From where the Captain was standing, he could not see what had happened to Vincent and Reno. If Avalanche was to win this battle, they would need nothing short of a miracle.

And they got it.

On the ledge above Cid, the oak door that led to the staircase to Bugenhagen's lab exploded off of its hinges! Dirt and rocks accompanied the wooden plank in its flight to the earth below! And Cid strained his gaze upwards, against the orange sunlight, and saw a shiny metal - something - leap from the ledge above them, sail through the air and land on the other side of the battlefield with a thunderous boom!

And Cait Sith stood before them. But it was not the Cait Sith they had remembered, this one was quite different. The white stuffing that had adorned the giant cave moogles was no more. The larger component of Cait was now pure metal, its iron hide shining like polished chrome in the sunlight. It was covered in metal seams and rivets, with a large Roman Numeral three on its chest plate. Its two eyes looked like polished rubies, and glimmered with life. The little cat looked similar to its last form, obviously the stitched up previous model, a royal blue cape replacing the red one that had been torn to shreds. Its crown was now a polished silver, matching the shiny surface of the moogles. Cait version 3.0 was here!

"[Hey guys! Didja miss me?]" The cat sounded hollow and robotic, obviously Reeve had been unable to completely repair its voice module with the materials at hand. Cait wasted no time in using the seconds he had gained in his surprise entrance to the battle, his cave moogles strode across the sand and grabbed the nearest Junon helicopter. The moogles component was clearly stronger now, apparent by the way it lifted the vessel and slammed it into the earth! But then, the fighting resumed.

The Junon soldiers desperately fired on the new opponent with their rifles, bullets deflected off of its steel hide while the little cat hid safely behind the advancing metal moogles! Barret and Cid likewise turned their attentions back to Red Nation, who growled and bared its fangs.

Cloud could go no further. The young warrior fell to his knees, spilling Tifa Lockhart to the hot desert sand. The heat and exhaustion had finally gotten to him. He was weak with pain and hunger, his throat was dry and raspy. Tifa was in no better shape. As the two lay on the unforgiving earth, she reached over and took his hand.

"Cloud?" Her voice was small and weak. "Cloud, can you hear me?"

"Yes." Cloud could barely open his eyes as he spoke.

"I can't believe after all we've been through," She swallowed hard and attempted to catch her breath, "That this is where we're going to die." This time Cloud was unable to offer up any false hope, his body too weak to act out any gestures of optimism. He merely shifted position to be nearer to her, his eyes heavy with apology.

"Tifa - I'm sorry."

"No, Cloud," She weakly squeezed his hand, "This is not your fault. Don't blame yourself."

"No," He licked his dry lips in a futile attempt to regain more of his voice. "I'm sorry I haven't been there for you. I'm sorry we didn't get married sooner. I'm sorry I had feelings for Aeris."

"Cloud," Tifa furrowed her brow and smiled weakly, "None of matters now. I love you."

Cloud looked deeply into her eyes, "I'm glad the last thing I'll ever see is you...."

In the hot desert sun, the distant sands glistened with tranquility. The only things to disrupt the endless patterns in the earth, two still forms.

Reno and Vincent faced off against each other, each cold gaze attempting to pierce the will of the other. Each was careful, still, unwilling to give the other a chance to strike.

Suddenly, the earth trembled! The entire canyon began to quake and rumble anew! The fighting paused as the world itself felt as if it were about to rip apart! Then it did.

A crack formed beneath the feet of Vincent and ran across the ground to where Reno stood. Without warning, the crack opened wide, parting the earth! Vincent struggled to regain his balance to no avail! He plummeted into the dark chasm with not a sound! Reno watched helplessly as the crack that stretched beneath his feet continued to widen, and he as well fell into what would surely be his own oblivion! Before anyone could act, the crack began to fill with a bright green liquid, Lifestream.

And they were gone.

Cid watched in awe at the events that had just transpired, "What the hell was THAT?!" The fighting around the rest of the canyon resumed as the pilot eyed the newly-formed stream of bright green liquid. "Vincent just took a major powder!" Barret deflected the attack of Red Nation with the side of his gun arm. The beast rolled back into a ready stance. Cid looked skyward, "What the hell else could go wrong this week?!"

First rule of fighting - never ask what the hell else could go wrong.

A dark shadow descended over the entire canyon. This sudden, unnatural eclipse caused everyone on the battleground to pause and look up.

Weapon had come.

Vincent Valentine opened his eyes and surveyed his surroundings. Where ever he was, the surround space was pitch black. Even with his enhanced vision, it took the warrior several seconds to adjust to the darkness. It was some sort of cave. But where?

Only moments ago he had been fighting Reno during a tremendous battle at Cosmo Canyon. How was it that he has been torn from his struggle and brought to this place? It was then that he saw the unconscious Reno in a heap on the cave floor several feet away.

A cold chill shot up and down Vincent's spine as a wave of uneasiness washed over him. Something was wrong. Very wrong.

"Reno," Vincent whispered to the fallen Turk, "Open your eyes. We are in danger here."

"Ha ha ha ha ha!" An inhuman laughter echoed through the cave. Even with his heightened senses, Vincent could not determine where it was coming from. "He can't hear you!" Suddenly, a torch mounted on the cave wall sparked to life, its unsteady light illuminating the cave. It was then that Vincent saw someone standing over Reno's motionless body. A man in

a suit. The man reached down and picked up the unconscious fighter by the collar. He hoisted Reno easily into the air with one hand.

"If this is what passes for a Turk these days, Malcom must be spinning in his grave."

Vincent choked. It couldn't be. After all these decades, it just could NOT be. There was no way. This was impossible. It defied every law in the universe.

"Reece?"

The man reached over to the torch with his free hand and brought it near him. It was Reece, Vincent's old comrade when he had been a part of the Turks.

"Turks forever." Reece let an evil smile form on his lips. But this was not the Reece Vincent had fought alongside as a Turk. His skin was tinted with an unholy greenish-blue, his blond hair now bore a blue hue.

"Reece," Vincent struggled to speak, "How is this possible? The last time I saw you was - "

"At Hojo's house of horrors in Nibelheim. That's right, I remember. Obviously you didn't make out much better. Looks like Hojo really did a job on you, too."

"What has happened to you?"

"Well, when Hojo brought me upstairs to 'help' me with my wounds, he granted me the ultimate gift. Jenova. I was injected with the cells from the creature and sealed up into a crate. When he brought me back to Midgar, I was his prize specimen."

"No," Vincent's voice was small, "No..."

"Oh yes." Reece continued to grin, "I was fused with part of Jenova, and left to thrive. And thrive I did. It was then that Jenova - I mean we - decided to leave the lab. It was nothing to escape the primitive security of Midgar, especially with the knowledge of a Turk."

"This cannot be happening..."

"Then we went to the Northern cave, and found the Weapons. It was then that we burrowed into the earth and took our prize - the Onyx Weapon. It was joined with us. Jenova's new conqueror. But the process took years. We slumbered beneath the earth. While another acted for us - Sephiroth. Our son."

"I cannot accept this..."

"Silence!! Our son was not strong enough to accept our gifts with grace. He died with the others. Those black-robed fools. But now that we are at full strength, the time has come for Jenova to rule."

"Reece, I can help you," Vincent struggled to his feet. "I can find some way to at least partially restore you to - "

"Silence!!! There is no Reece. We are Jenova! How was it our son put it? Oh yes: 'the ability to change one's looks - that is the power of Jenova.' A crude but accurate description."

Reece stopped speaking. He eyed Vincent with a look of sheer insanity. Vincent had wondered how the long years of isolation and torture from within had torn this man from reality and into madness. It was beyond comprehension as to what was going through his shattered semblance of a mind.

"There was something I wanted to give you for all your help those many years ago when we went to Nibel, Vincent."

"Reece," Vincent stepped forward cautiously, holding his hands up in a gesture of peace, "Please let me help y--"

Vincent was unable to finish. His sentence was interrupted suddenly when Reece let go of the torch, thrust his hand forward and morphed it into a sharp pike which he drove through Vincent's chest and into the cave wall behind him. He then retracted his shape-shifting limb and reformed it into an arm and caught the torch that hung in mid-air during his split-second attack.

Vincent lowered his head in shock and looked at the sucking chest wound he had just been given. His throat became thick with blood and he coughed up more as he attempted to take his next breath. Vincent's arms remained out in front of him, his brain unable to send them the signals to move. He was paralyzed with shock. He slowly lifted his head and looked to his former ally.

Reece smiled briefly and shifted his form for just a second into something much larger and then reverted to his humanoid standard. He then casually turned, and strolled out of the cave, slinging Reno over his shoulder like a sack.

And Vincent was alone. The silence of the dark cave was only interrupted by an occasional dripping of groundwater, and the weak gargling of a dying man. The ex-Turk slid down the wall and fell to a sitting position, his head tilted to one side, facing upwards. Vincent's enhanced vision gradually faded to black, and the world around him became silent. His thoughts drifted to the others, his friends, and how he would never see them again. He would miss them as he hoped they would miss him. The last thing he saw was the vision of his long lost Lucrecia, welcoming him into her astral arms. A smile slowly formed on his lips as his heart steadily slowed to a stop.

Vincent Valentine was dead.

Author's Eulogy: That's right. Vincent's dead. Now before you Vincent fans go after me with torches and pitchforks, remember the saying "it's always darkest before the dawn". And it better get pretty damn dark around here soon, 'cause things look bleak for everyone right now!

Cloud and Tifa - stranded in the desert. Red XIII - brainwashed, stripped of his soul! Cid and the others - under the heel of the titanic Onyx Weapon, as if under attack from Junon Inc. wasn't enough! And Reeve - what the hell's up with him you might ask?

Well, the characters in my story all have one thing in common: humanity. We all have our flaws and troubles, why should the people of FF7 be any different? Reeve like most of us has different aspects of his personality that make him who he is. Cait Sith is his outlet to release his personality in some high tech role-playing. Who here hasn't done any roleplaying? FF7 isn't called a role-playing game for nothing.

Next chapter, the launch of the Junon-1, and Rufus makes an unexpected offer to one of our heroes. Plus the last character from the past you'd ever expect to see makes a startling return!