

Chapter Sixteen: Before the Dawn

"The end is right in front of us... But what can you do about it? Just go on living your life day in and day out."
- *Anonymous Wutai villager*

"Vincent."

"Hmmm?"

"Vincent, wake up."

Beams of sunlight poured in through translucent white lace curtains. Vincent slowly opened his eyes and rubbed their sockets. It was painfully bright. A soft silhouette gracefully moved to the other side of the room and opened a drawer. Vincent's eyesight focused on an oak dresser. He was in bed. The warm sheets were so soft they were almost untouchable. A haze hung over him like a heavy quilt.

Where am I?

He rubbed his eyes again in a futile attempt to rid himself of the blurriness that had enshrouded his world. It was then that he realized something was wrong. He was lying there, on the most comfortable bed he had ever slept in in years, rubbing his eyes - with both hands.

He frantically sat up in a bolt of shock! He examined his hands in terror and saw that it was true. Where once there had been an artificial claw, there was a human left hand. He experimentally squeezed his hand with his right, pinching and prodding. It seemed just as real as his other hand. He could feel, touch, move it anyway he wanted to. How was this possible?

He looked down at his clothes. He held his hands across his chest. Silk pajamas? Where in Planet was he?

"Are you alright, Vincent?"

Slowly, he lifted his head. It couldn't be. But it was. Lucrecia.

"Lucrecia!!" Vincent leapt from his soft bed and threw his arms around her. His lost love was here! She had somehow returned from the cold shadow of oblivion and was here in his arms. How was it possible?

Truthfully, Vincent cared not.

"Are you alright, Vincent?" She patted his arms as he hugged her with all his might. "Honey, you're hurting me."

"Oh sorry," Vincent quickly released her. He held her shoulders and closely examined every inch. "Lucrecia..."

"Vincent, are you alright? You looked as though you've seen a ghost." She furrowed her brow in worry as she spoke.

"No," A smile decorated Vincent's face. It was something he hadn't thought possible. Could it be that the man who felt nothing actually had some emotion left deep inside of himself? After this, it seemed, anything was possible. "The only thing I can see is a vision."

Lucrecia blushed and smiled as she turned away and left the room. "Don't forget about your meeting with the President this morning.

Lions should be here any moment."

Yes. His meeting with the President. Lions would not appreciate being kept waiting due to Vincent's tardiness. Vincent hurried into the bathroom to get dressed.

"Damn it hit the fan this time..."

Cid Highwind carefully pulled a cigarette from the small carton tucked into his flight goggles and held it to his mouth. With shaking hands, the pilot lifted a steel lighter to his cancer stick and lit it. He looked ever skywards, to the enormous goliath hovering above them. The Onyx Weapon was still in the orange atmosphere, looking down upon them like some divine judge. A small tear in his left sleeve was soaked in blood, a wound he had received only moments earlier in battle.

Behind him, Barret Wallace cursed. The young ninja girl Yuffie Kisaragi narrowed her gaze at the giant. The newly-built Cait Sith version 3.0 stood still, facing heavenward.

Around the rest of Cosmo Canyon, many of the resident warriors and elders each silently pleaded to the Planet to protect them in this, their hour of need. Soldiers from Junon Inc. stood frozen, their weapons lowered, gazing in awe at the terrible site before them.

Rude and Elena exchanged glances before returning their attention to the colossal entity above them. Red Nation, the brainwashed member of the Turks and former Avalanche member Red XIII, cautiously viewed this new threat with a narrow, hollow yellow eye.

"We're not paid for suicide missions," Elena the Turk spoke quickly to Rude and some surrounding soldiers. "Junon, out!" The female Turk shouted her coded order to the rest of the battleground with her hand raised in a closed fist. Obediently, every soldier in Junon carefully backed away from the Canyon, some soldiers carrying others, and headed to the three remaining Junon Inc. helicopters awaiting at the edge of the canyon. A fourth vessel smoked in ruin, having been damaged during the onslaught.

"Goddamn cowards!!" Barret raised his gun-arm and ran towards the retreating forces. He fired on the entire mass, bellowing at the top of his lungs! Most of the unwounded soldiers carefully raised their rifles and fired on the attacker. Barret continued his barrage as a hailstorm of bullets filled the air around him. One of the projectiles made their target, and Barret growled in pain! He gritted his teeth and held the blood-soaked spot on the side of his leg and littered the helicopters with bullets from his gun!

Elena narrowed her gaze as she attempted to board the attacked vessel, "Would somebody shoot that damn gorilla in the head already?!"

Several more soldiers raised their weapons and carefully took aim. When Barret's head intersected with their cross-hairs, their fingers squeezed the triggers. Cait's new steel moogle suddenly appeared in their sights and gratefully intercepted the projectiles! Sparks littered the robot's hide as the soldiers' bullets harmlessly bounced off its skin.

The cat component stood behind the giant moogle with Barret, "[Geez, Barret, you should be careful. They were about to give you a whole new set 'a speed holes.]" Cait sounded hollow and robotic, obviously an incomplete feature of this new model.

"Dammit, Reeve, I don't need combat advice from a suit!" Barret gritted his teeth as a wave of pain erupted from his wounded leg. "How the hell'd you finish makin' that so quick?"

"[Shera and the mechanics helped me finish it when you hurried everyone inside away from the battle. I hope Cid doesn't find out I used some parts from the Highwind on this model.]"

Yuffie and Cid joined the attack with a vengeance! The young ninja cast a Barrier spell to shield them as they took up flanking position next to Barret and Cait, while the pilot cast some Bolt and Fire spells.

The first two helicopters slid their doors shut and ascended into the sky, while the third waited for its final passenger. Red Nation ran through the sea of bullets and magic attacks as it sprinted to the awaiting vessel.

"Red! Stop!" Yuffie pleaded at the top of her lungs at the retreating crimson beast. If Nanaki could hear her, he did not show it.

Red Nation leapt into the helicopter just as it began to rise into the sky. Nanaki's friends exchanged weary glances. They ceased their attacks as the helicopters soared out of range.

The Onyx Weapon remained hovering in the sky, ignoring the retreat of the Junon vessels. It simply stared down at the canyon in judgement.

Cid held his aching, bloody arm and scowled at the tiny specks on the orange horizon. The battle had ended, for now.

Rufus Shinra sat and brooded in his lavish tent in the center of Rocket Town. The Junon CEO touched his fingertips together in front of him, deep in thought. The world was about to be his. Nothing existed to stand in his way. Soon the Planet would revert to the way it was before that unfortunate Meteor business. That was what it was all about. Rufus would rule this pitiful globe much in the same way he had after his father's unfortunate accident. How loyal would the Shinra employees be if they knew of their prince's role in the king's assassination? A sly grin curled Rufus' lips. No one had ever suspected the Sephiroth clone was given inside information. But that particular wild card was all that Rufus had needed to claim that which was rightfully his.

But such mirthful thoughts would avail nothing. Rufus had something more important on his mind - the present. More specifically, the launch of the Junon-1 rocket in two days. It towered above the town like a silver giant, watching all that trembled in its shadow. It was this alone that would hand Rufus the Planet on a silver platter, so to speak. All that was necessary was one more piece of his grandiose puzzle.

One more life to ruin. And Rufus Shinra smiled.

Vincent Valentine carefully tied his dark crimson tie as he hurried down the carpeted staircase. He entered the bright kitchen of his house to see an awaiting Lions Kain, sitting at the table with a steaming cup of coffee in front of him.

"Well look who rose from the dead," Lions smiled mockingly at his sleepy-eyed associate. "I hope I'm not here too early."

Lucrecia brought a second mug to the table and poured a coffee for her Vincent. "Now, Lions, you know Vincent's had a great deal on his mind lately, especially since you too have that big meeting with the President."

"Yeah," Lions nimbly sipped at the steaming mug, "What do you suppose that's about, Vincent?"

"I believe it concern's Professor Gast's new Soldier program, we-"

Wait. This is not right.

"... are no doubt going to head a campaign to conscript participants-"

Not how it is supposed to be.

"Vincent?" Lucrecia replaced the coffee pot on the stove and rushed to her love's side. "Are you alright?"

Lions put down his mug and eyed his fellow Turk. "What's the matter, Vince?"

Vince.... that is what Barret calls me... Barret?

"I..." Vincent shut his eyes in an attempt to clear his head. "I do not know," The Turk rubbed his eyes and lifted his head. "I will be fine." Lucrecia and Lions were clearly unconvinced by his assurance. They simply stared at him for a small eternity.

"Well," Lions gulped down the last of his coffee and got up from the table, "You can put in for some leave after we see what Old Man Shinra wants." Lions made his way to the door and waited on his associate.

"Yes," Vincent moved past Lucrecia, who still stared in worry at her love. "Let us not keep the President waiting."

Wrong, all wrong...

"Alright," Cid crunched on the end of his cigarette as he hunched over a stone table in the Cosmo Canyon Inn, "Here's what we're gonna do now."

Shera, Reeve, Cait, Barret, Yuffie and others such as the mechanics from Rocket Town, the crew of the Highwind and several of the canyon elders, gathered around the inn to discuss their next course of action. The sun had almost set over the peaks surrounding the civilization, the large Weapon still hovering motionless in the dark orange sky like a god.

"First," Cid continued, "Shera, how long until the Highwind's back into the air?"

"About two days, Captain."

"Awright," Cid gritted his teeth and winced, "That means we're gonna hafta find some other means of flying into the desert. Cloud and Tifa are probably a pair o' baked potatoes by now." Cid caught himself too late. Even he knew that joke was in poor taste. He glanced up to see a wave of trepidation wash over the faces of just about everyone in the room. But this was no time to worry about people's feelings. "Sorry. So we'll need to sneak into Rocket Town and steal the Tiny Bronco. Again." This comment was received a little warmer than the last one.

"That's my specialty!" Yuffie spoke up to the astonishment of everyone around her. Could the little ninja actually be offering to help without any pleading? "I can sneak past those morons before they know I'm even there!"

"The hell you will!" Barret growled down at her, "You jes prob'ly want to steal the plane for yourself and then leave the rest of us hangin'!"

A look of hurt appeared on Yuffie's face, "Look, Barret, I know you don't trust me, you never did! But I got a way better chance of sneakin' past those Junon soldiers than a big gorilla like you!" The ninja girl leered at Barret, her eyes narrowed with hate.

Barret scowled down at her, "Well since you're so goddamn hot about showin' off your ninja skills, I'm comin' with you!" The two fighters stood face-to-face, glaring into each others eyes.

"Unless you two are hidin' your pilot wings up your asses and I don't know about it, you ain't goin' nowhere!" Cid smirked at them, his arms folded across his chest. "Looks like we just formed our party of three." Cid turned to the others with a serious expression. "The rest of you help Shera and Reeve work on the Highwind's repairs and look for Vincent. That guy's got more lives than a cat, he's still out there somewhere!" Cid puffed on his cigarette as everyone stared blankly at him. "Oh yeah, move out!"

Vincent stared out over Midgar in the bright morning sunlight. He watched the buildings get smaller and smaller through the glass elevator on his way to the top of the Shinra Building. Lions stood beside him in silence, his arms folded across his chest. Vincent sensed that even the usually-smug Lions was nervous about meeting with the head of the Shinra Electric Corporation. This slightly amused the Turk, even though he did not show it.

Wrong and you know it...

That voice again, in the back of his head. Why did it sound so familiar? And why was it so intent on disturbing the peace he had sought for so long?

The elevator rapidly came to a gentle stop at the top floor of the Shinra Building. The lavish doors opened to reveal the luxurious lobby of the President's office. The two Turks militarily disembarked from the elevator and briskly walked up to the receptionists' counter.

"The President will see you now," The beautiful receptionist gave them a forced smile and returned to her paperwork.

Vincent walked just behind Lions on the staircase leading to the President's upper-office. He stared down at each step trying to figure out why he felt so uneasy about everything. There were so many reasons for him to be happy here. He rhymed each point off in his head - he had his job, his home, his Lucrecia, his friends; there was nothing missing. Nothing. But that was it. It was all too perfect. It was like he was living in some paradise. Some sort of 'heaven on earth'.

"Vincent!" The President leered across his desk at the two Turks standing before him.

Vincent snapped to attention, "Oh, sorry, sir. My mind had wandered for a moment."

The President gave a puzzled look at the Turk before resuming his train of thought. "Professor Gast's new Soldier project is near completion. The time has come to start looking for possible candidates to take part in the procedure. Here." The CEO tossed a file on the edge of his desk. Lions picked it up and opened it. Inside were a few papers and a black and white photograph of a young man. "That's Godo Kisaragi. Last week he laid waste to an entire drilling operation in less than twenty minutes. We believe he may have what it takes to be the first Shinra Soldier."

Wrong. This isn't how it happened.

"I want you two to take some soldiers to Wutai and get"

What is happening?

“-to the lab here in Midgar where Gast can begin his process. Is that clear?”

“Yes, sir!” Lions obediently answered the powerful executive and turned to leave.

“Yes.” Vincent trailed off and followed his fellow Turk.

Lions hurried down the stairs and headed for the elevator. Vincent carefully walked down the steps, deep in thought. He decided it would be best to say nothing about his uneasiness until he got home to his lovely wife, Lucrecia. His wife? When did he marry Lucrecia? This entire situation was not right. The house, the job, the marriage - all were suspicious. Even his trusted comrade, Lions, seemed wrong somehow. Vincent and Lions boarded the elevator and Lions pressed the button. The elevator doors closed and the elevator began to move.

“Did you hear where they sent Malcom and Reece the other day?” Lions glanced over at Vincent while he flipped through the file on Godo.

“Yes, they were stationed-”

Malcom? Reece? They were also Turks, but-

“Vincent?”

Reece.

He remembered the last time he saw Reece. He had been consumed by the demon Jenova and twisted into an alien creature. That was when Vincent was

“Vincent, are you okay, man?”

.... killed.

Vincent collapsed on the elevator floor, holding his hands over his head, allowing the darkness to overtake him.

Cid gritted his teeth and narrowed his gaze at the approaching coastline. The stars twinkled above him in the night sky, and he would have thought them beautiful had he not other, more important, things on his mind. He tugged on the reigns of the golden chocobo as he raced faster across the ocean surface, with Yuffie squeezing the life out of him. The young ninja was still unaccustomed to traveling at high speeds, even riding on the back of her gold chocobo, Cloud.

The riders were pursued by a second chocobo, bright blue in color and certainly not traveling as fast. Even though ocean chocobos such as it were born to race across the water, this one was carrying a much heavier load than Cid and Yuffie combined: Barret Wallace. The large miner grumbled and fussed at the feathery beast. He hated riding on chocobos almost as much as he hated early mornings. But this was the fastest way to get to Rocket Town without being detected. There were no mountains to climb, no forests to fight through, just open sea as far as the eye could see. It was just luck that the villagers of Cosmo Canyon happened to have a blue chocobo to lend them, or Yuffie’s golden chocobo would really be sluggish on this trip. And then Barret saw it, too - the lights of Rocket Town.

The two chocobos turned slightly to the beach at the launchpad area and slowed. Cid and Yuffie hopped off their chocobo and carefully led it up the beachfront. Rocket Town was swarming with soldiers on night patrol, guarding every possible inch surrounding the little town. Barret reached the shore and got off his blue chocobo. He led it up next to the first where Cid had tied it to a large piece of driftwood. Carefully, he joined his two friends, who were hunched behind some large boulders.

"Damn they got half the Junon army almost." Barret whispered to Cid.

"Yeah, it'll be tough to get past them to my backyard." Cid chewed on a piece of grass, not willing to light a cigarette to let anyone know they were here.

Yuffie grinned over at the two, "Piece of cake you guys. Why do ya think I'm here? Duh!"

Cid clasped a hand over Yuffie's grinning mouth, "Would you keep it down, godammit?" He harshly whispered while eyeballing the closest guards.

"Super ninja my ass," Barret spat quietly.

Yuffie sighed and rolled her eyes, "Follow me..."

Cid's house was peaceful and vacant, not used for anything at night. During the day it served as Heidegger's base of operations but the Colonel preferred the luxury of his own quarters back at Junon over the quaint simplicity of the little house. The backyard was equally peaceful, the chirping of crickets in the un-mowed grass the only sounds heard here. Cid's backyard was empty, except for the Tiny Bronco. Cid felt his eyes well up as he stared at the metal beauty, glimmering in the moonlight. He was afraid that rat Rufus would turn her into scrap just for spite. He was glad his fears were incorrect.

The three carefully emerged from the bushes behind Cid's house and entered the backyard. Yuffie and Barret watched their surroundings carefully as Cid climbed into the pilot seat. He examined the control panel. Everything seemed to be undamaged. Looks like they would get a break this week after all.

"I think she's okay," the Captain whispered down to the others, "Get ready to lay down some cover, I'm startin' her up." Barret and Yuffie nodded gravely and prepared for the worst. Slowly, Cid inserted his key and started the engine.

Sparks shot out of the ignition as several bolts of electricity washed over the Tiny Bronco! Cid wailed in pain as the searing electricity washed through him, rendering him unconscious! Barret turned his head quickly and realized what had happened!

"Shit! It's a trap!"

Several large floodlights beamed to life, blinding them with pure white light. Barret and Yuffie held their arms over their faces in a futile attempt to see.

"Barret Wallace, Cid Highwind, and the little ninja girl." Rufus Shinra echoed over the humming spotlights.

"I have a name, ya know!" Yuffie growled.

It was then that Barret heard the chocking of dozens of rifles and made out the dark silhouettes of dozens of soldiers surrounding them.

“I’ll be sure to put it on your tombstone,” the CEO sneered, “Take them away.”

Author’s notes: Certainly an interesting chapter, no? What the hell is going on with Vincent? First he’s dead, then he’s who knows where with Lucrecia. Don’t even try to figure it out yet, when you see what it is, you’ll bust! (And it ain’t the Lifestream)

Cid, Barret and Yuffie - captured! Rufus has plans for them, too. Evil, EVIL plans!

Cloud and Tifa - dead or alive? Find out next time!

Be here for chapter 17: “Born Again”

Comments, as always, very welcome!