

Chapter Seventeen: Born Again

"Take your time and enjoy a slow, painful death." - *Scarlet*

Vincent Valentine's lifeless body lay still in a darkened cave. The remnants of a great man. The lonely corpse had once belonged to one of the Planet's greatest champions - now it was nothing but biological debris. No sound of trumpets blared to hail his passing, no ceremony honored his destruction, no mourners gathered to pay their last respects. There was nothing. The dripping of groundwater was the only disturbance in this vacant cave.

Make no mistake, Vincent Valentine was dead.

And then he wasn't. A soft light shone from inside him, and made its way outward. The eerie glow washed over the body of the fallen hero and enveloped it. The glow gradually turned red and shimmered. From the rocky ceiling of the cave, a golden droplet dripped to the floor and rippled. A bright ray of light erupted from the spot and grew! Several beams surrounded the first and spun, revealing a great bird in the center of all this activity. The fiery red bird spread its massive wings and called to the heavens! Waves of light beamed from the great fowl and washed over the body of Vincent! The fiery Phoenix sparkled and released its energy into the fallen one, his body beginning to lift from the ground like the legendary phoenix of old, rising from the ashes! Stars and sparkles filled the air as Vincent's eyes slowly opened. And the phoenix vanished in one last blast of blinding light, leaving the cave quiet and empty once more.

Vincent stood motionless for a few minutes, unable to process what had just happened. Finally his eyes adjusted to the darkness and he realized where he was - the cave where he died. He examined his armor, the Aegis Armlet, and took particular notice of the two Materia baubles in the linked slots. One was a red Phoenix summon and the one it was linked to was a blue Final Attack support.

The final, desperate measure had saved him. The great Phoenix had given him a second chance at life, and he did not intend to waste it. Where had he been? Was his experience with Lucrecia and Lions all a dream, or something more? Had Vincent crossed the great beyond only to be ripped back by the magic of the Ancients?

Such thoughts would have to wait. Vincent stabbed his claw into the cave wall and raged. Jenova. Once again the demon had cost him more than he could fathom. His former comrade, Reece the Turk, had been consumed and transformed by the alien virus. Now there was only Jenova. The monster had also infected the last of the Weapons, originally intended to be a protector of the Planet.

Now, it was a destroyer.

It was time at long last for Vincent to put an end to Jenova's madness once and for all, no matter the cost.

"Yuffie!"

Yuffie Kisaragi slowly opened her eyes and surveyed her surroundings. Dark edges surrounded her like unwanted guests, occasionally disrupted by piercing beams of sunlight. Above her, an iron cage filtered the rays of the morning sun, an unwelcome sight. It was clear she had been thrown in some sort of pit, obviously dug to serve as a makeshift prison.

"Snap out of it," Barret Wallace spat, her only accompaniment in this horrid environment. "Damn I thought you'd never wake up."

It was then she recalled the events that led her here, "How long have I been out?"

"You fell asleep just before sunrise, about two or three hours ago." A hint of compassion marred Barret's normally gruff exterior. The large miner usually made no attempt to hide his feelings of mistrust and contempt for the young ninja - but the circumstances had warranted some human kindness.

"Where's Cid?" Yuffie examined the shadowed pit.

"They didn't throw him in here with us." Barret lowered his head and examined his gunarm, "Stupid Junon guards couldn't figure out how to take this off so they just emptied 'er bullets. I can still use it to crack heads."

"What do you mean they didn't throw him in here with us?!" Yuffie raised her voice in anger, "Where the hell's Cid?!"

"Look!" Barret glared over at her, "Screaming about it won't change nuthin'! Cid can take care of himself. We gotta worry about getting outta this hole and fast!"

"I can get us out of here no problem," Yuffie grinned wickedly.

Barret did not seem to share her confidence. He simply turned and examined the pit wall. It was obvious to Yuffie that the large rebel still held no trust for her.

Yuffie furrowed her brow and looked up to the rusty bars crossing the open face of the pit. As she pondered her escape, she couldn't help but wonder what had happened to Cid.

Cid Highwind sat in a metal folding chair with his arms folded. His knee twitched nervously as he craved for a cigarette. He silently cursed the soldiers that had stripped him of his belongings. He glared over a wooden table to two heavily-armed guards standing at attention. In a chair in front of the guards sat Rufus Shinra. The evil executive smiled peacefully at some blueprints on the oak table, studying them with some hidden delight.

Cid looked around the lavish tent in which he was dragged. For some reason the soldiers that brought him here had blindfolded him as they moved through the town to Rufus' tent. What exactly they were hiding from the pilot worried him. What was it that Rufus didn't want him to see? The three members of Avalanche hadn't seen anything out of the ordinary under the cover of darkness last night. What would Cid have seen in the light of day? Even though he was curious, Cid decided not to give Rufus the satisfaction of asking him what was going on.

"I suppose you're wondering what is going on," Rufus looked up from the blueprints, a cocky smile still decorating his face. "Like why I have seized your precious little hamlet."

"Go to hell." Cid gritted his teeth and stared knives at the suited villain.

"Now, is that any way to speak to an old acquaintance?" Rufus was undeterred by Cid's harsh manner. "Especially when I have such an intriguing proposition for you."

"How is it that a cockroach like you is still kickin'? I thought you were blasted to shit by the Diamond Weapon."

Rufus raised an eyebrow, "I won't bore you with the details of my brilliant escape, but suffice it to say, I plan for EVERY eventuality." Rufus' words dripped with venom. "And now back to why I have brought you here, and why I have taken over Rocket Town." Rufus turned his head to the guard standing to his left and nodded. The guard walked to the tent wall behind Rufus and pulled back a massive flap. Cid's eyes widened with shock.

On the launch platform behind the town, a brand new rocket. It looked similar to the Shinra-26 in design, but its hide was a

shiny silver, instead of a rusted greenish-grey. In large black letters on its side: the phrase 'Junon-1'. Cid was speechless. He hadn't seen anything so beautiful in years.

"Allow me to present - The Junon-1," Rufus was pleased by Cid's reaction, "The future of the Planet." The Junon CEO stood up from his chair and walked to the opening in the tent. He gazed upon the large rocket with a wide smile on his face. "The product of a year of secret construction. Now that it is complete, I have emerged from the shadows to take my rightful place." Cid regained his composure and scowled at Rufus. "But there is one final piece of the puzzle. We need a pilot." Cid's mouth hung open. For the second time today, the Captain was without words.

The soothing smell of tea filled his nostrils. Slowly, he opened his eyes to the warm haze that blanketed the tiny room he had found himself in. He slowly turned his head and saw that he was not alone. Tifa Lockhart lay in the bed next to his, and Cloud Strife's heart soared at the sight of his fiancée.

"Tifa," He whispered in a raspy, dry voice. His throat felt parched and sore from his time spent under the searing desert sun. "Tifa, wake up. Are you alright?"

"Cloud?" The young girl opened her eyes and yawned weakly. "Cloud what happened?"

"Thank the Planet, I thought you'd never wake up!" A voice boomed from the next room. The curtain door was swept open and in stepped a large, husky man with a long white beard. His snowy white hair was tied in a ponytail at the back of his head. His eyes were wide and full of life.

"Z- Zangan?" Tifa was clearly surprised to see her old mentor, even in her weakened state. "My god... it's been awhile..." She smiled up weakly at her former teacher.

Cloud examined his surroundings as best as he could in his weakened state. Zangan's modest dwelling was cozy, soft candles and torch lamps strategically placed around the room provided the only sources of light. Hand-made furniture adorned the flat, completing the comfortable atmosphere.

"What are you doing here in the desert?" Tifa's voice was raspy and dry. Zangan walked over to the night table between the two cots and set down a large jug of water with some cups.

"I got a job protecting the chocobo stage a few months back. They had a lot of trouble with bandits from the prison attacking the stage." Zangan smiled warmly as he poured cups of water for both Cloud and Tifa. "Just a resting spot until I continue my wandering." A gust of desert wind whistled past the tiny cabin.

"I haven't seen you since..." Tifa's voice trailed off as she began to recall the tragedy that occurred six years ago in her hometown, Nibelheim.

"Yes." Zangan's mood became distressed. "The horrors of Nibelheim." Tifa bit her lower lip and furrowed her brow apologetically. "Sometimes at night I can still hear the screams.

That awful place."

"Zangan," Tifa softly spoke, "I'm sorry, I didn't mean-"

"No, no," The old fighter raised his hand to silence her, "It is alright, Tifa."

"So how did you find us?" Cloud struggled to sit up on his cot.

"I spotted you both when the chocobo stage passed near where you had passed out. It was lucky that you had made it as far as you did." Zangan turned to the doorway into the other room, "You were both asleep for almost two days. Luckily, I had some elixirs, you kids were in really bad shape when I found you."

"That's ... two lives I owe you," Tifa smiled weakly.

Zangan smiled back at her and stood in the doorway, "You two should get some more rest, you'll need your strength if you want to get back to your friends..." Zangan's face became distressed.

"What is it?" Cloud sensed his worry almost immediately.

"Do you hear something?"

"Reno!" Elena looked up from her clipboard of field reports in surprise. Her fellow red-haired Turk carefully limped into the Rocket Town campsite. "How did you get back?"

Reno approached her makeshift workstation on the street overlooking the rocket launchpad and sat heavily on the console. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with his sleeve before he began.

"That damn hole I fell into led to an underground cave. I was knocked unconscious when I hit the ground." He helped himself to some of Elena's lunch - an assortment of military rations. "When I came to, I was alone. That coward Valentine must've run off. I found a cave that led to the surface and caught a chocobo."

"Jeez, Reno," Elena looked down at her clipboard and resumed reading the report, "You gave us all a scare."

"Yeah, I'll bet," The Turk sneered, "So where's the boss? Rufus."

Elena looked up again quizzically, "He's in his tent, where he usually is." She nodded in the direction of the CEO's lavish dwelling. Reno simply turned and proceeded in the direction of the tent. Elena simply shrugged and resumed her reading.

"I take it by your silence that my proposition intrigues you." Rufus smiled slyly at the old pilot. "We need someone to be the second man in space. Someone to take the helm of this magnificent piece of machinery and travel to the stars. That someone could be you, Cid Highwind. The ruler of the cosmos."

While Rufus spoke, dozens of thoughts flooded Cid's brain. His hatred for the Junon CEO, his love of space travel. His hopes, his dreams. It could happen for real this time. He could go farther than simply the upper atmosphere of the Planet. He could discover new worlds.

But this was Rufus Shinra; one of the most villainous men of his time. A man responsible for more of the Planet's misery than anyone else. But this same man could make all of Cid's dreams come true. The Captain could finally send his dreams out into the universe, like he had sought to do all those years ago. Did it really matter how Cid got into space? How much harm would come of him fulfilling his destiny?

"Alright, Rufus." Cid lowered his head, reconsidering even then, "I'll do it."

"Excellent." Rufus Shinra smiled widely.

Vincent made his way through the dark cave carefully, in utter silence. His enhanced vision allowed him to see even in the total blackness of the subterranean passage. Even without his heightened senses, he easily followed the scent of evil left by the alien Jenova. His footsteps were completely inaudible to any other ears that would happen to be in the vicinity. That had nothing to do with anything done to him in Hojo's lab. Vincent had a natural ability for stealth, a trait that served him well during his service with the Turks.

Suddenly, he detected motion in the cave ahead. His enhanced eyesight scanned the entire opening in front of him. A shape, near to ground, trembled and shook. Without a sound, Vincent had his massive shotgun, the Death Penalty, out and ready, aimed at the moving shape ahead. He carefully approached the moving form and realized what it was.

A humanoid shape. More specifically, a man. Reno the Turk. Reno was huddled on the cave floor, bloodied and bruised, his injuries clearly a product of intense torture. Vincent knelt near his shaky form and placed his human hand on his shoulder. "Reno." Vincent spoke in a hushed tone, "Reno, are you alright? It is Vincent. You must tell me what has happened? Where is Jenova?"

A gargled murmur was all the response Reno could muster. Vincent reached into a pack on his belt and produced a tiny green bauble.

"Cure2."

The air above Reno became filled with green sparkles, which gently rained down on the huddled Turk, restoring his health and healing some of his injuries.

Reno coughed and sputtered before he managed to speak, "Who's there?" Vincent carefully helped the Turk sit up against the cave wall.

"Vincent Valentine. Quickly, what has happened?"

"That, that alien freak strung me up against the wall and used me for a pin cushion," Reno wheezed before resuming, "He was askin' a lot of questions about Junon and Rufus in particular." Reno coughed weakly.

"Come," Vincent helped Reno to his feet and supported him under his arm, "We have not a moment to lose." The two former adversaries hurried down through the cave.

Yuffie looked up at the iron bars crossing above her. Her face became forlorn as she pondered what Rufus had in store for them, and what he done with Cid. Barret muttered some curses under his breath and hit the pit wall with his gunarm in a fit of rage.

"Dammit, I hate this waitin' around!" Barret spat with hatred.

"The wait is over!" Rude peered down through the rusty metal bars with a smile on his normally emotionless face. About two dozen soldiers gathered around the edge of the pit, equally jubilant. Rude turned to the gathered soldiers, "Who's taking odds on either one of these survivin' the match?!"

"The match?" Barret roared up at the gathered crowd, "What the hell are you rats squeakin' about up there?!"

Several shouts of money and odds erupted from the soldiers, and Rude gratefully accepted gil after gil from the excited mob.

"Okay!" The Turk bellowed over the soldiers' shouting, "Put it in the hole!"

Barret and Yuffie looked at each other in both anger and worry. Several Junon soldiers pushed a heavy metal crate up to the edge of the pit. Rude reached down and opened up the rusted gate on top of the cage. The soldiers slid the crate over the opening and stood back. The gathered mass became more frenzied and excited, cheering and applauding.

Rude lifted his hand and stabbed down, "Now!" In direct response, a soldier reached down to a chain attached to the crate and pulled hard! The bottom of the crate erupted open, dropping its contents into the pit with Barret and Yuffie!

Red Nation glared at the two prisoners and growled deeply.

Cid gazed upward at the Junon-1 rocket from the platform next to it. Without any doubt, it was the most beautiful thing he had ever seen since the first time he saw the completed Shinra-26 many years ago. He slowly reached out and touched the side of the hull. Yes, it was real. Cid had almost expected the entire ship to disappear in a swirling haze. But it did not.

"Beautiful, is it not?" Rufus confidently stood behind Cid with his hands folded behind his back.

"Yeah, whatever," Cid let go of the ship and began up the ladder to the first chamber of the ship, the engine compartment. "So when do I launch?"

"Well," Rufus raised an eyebrow as he called up the ladder after the eager pilot, "We are currently having some trouble with the fuel mixture. Our tests have indicated a breakdown in chemical cohesion during engine startup. As of yet, my people have been unable to correct the problem."

Cid lit a cigarette and looked into the mechanical guts of the engine with quiet awe, as Rufus followed up the ladder. "Yeah, we had the same problem with the Shinra-26." The pilot took a long drag of the cigarette and continued, "Shera was the one who fixed it. You just need to add enough coolant to counter the heat generated during launch."

"Of course," Rufus smiled broadly, "It is so simple."

"Did you release Barret and Yuffie yet," Cid glanced back at Rufus, "Like we agreed?"

"Yes, yes," The CEO turned to the door of the engine room, "They're being released right now."

"Good." Cid turned his eyes back to the complicated machinery. As he gazed in wonder at the Junon-1's engine, it never once occurred to him that Rufus might be lying. His mind was in the stars.

"Well, Cid," Rufus put his hand on the door handle, "You have just given me what I needed - so this is where we part ways." "Huh?" Cid took his cigarette out of his mouth and looked to the door.

"You see, this rocket is entirely automated. We just needed your know-how to get it off the ground." Rufus slammed the door shut and turned the handle, sealing the pilot within the engine room. Cid rushed to the tiny circular porthole on the door and looked out in shock.

"Rufus! You double-crossin' &*^\$%#@!!! I'll kill you!!"

Rufus simply smiled in at the frantic pilot, "I understand it gets quite hot in there. But look at it this way, at least you'll get your wish. You *will* make it into space - the only thing is, you'll be dead when you get there."

"I swear you sonovabitch," Cid's roar was muffled through the thick glass window, "I'll get you for this!!!"

"Oh, and Cid," Rufus held his smiling face near the round opening, "Just between you and I, it is not a rocket." Cid's eyes grew wide, his rage increasing exponentially. "It is actually a weapons satellite. The people of this planet will bow down to me or be destroyed. So glad you could be a part of all this."

Rufus cackled heavily as he made his way down the ladder, the muffled shouts of Cid Highwind becoming harder and harder to hear. He made his way to the ground and sauntered casually to the control station set up near the launch area. "Add ample coolant to the fuel mixture," Rufus commanded the head of the launch operation in a matter-of-fact tone, "And then launch the Junon-1."

"But, sir," The Junon employee flashed a look of puzzlement, "Wouldn't that endanger the composition of the-"

"You have your orders!" Rufus raised his voice in frustration at the sheer ignorance of the supposed 'expert'.

His orders were carried out immediately, and Rufus could not help but chuckle softly as the rocket's engines roared to life. He could barely make out the set of fists frantically pounding on the porthole on the side of the Junon-1, as it lifted off into the atmosphere.

His weapons satellite would be the greatest crisis from the sky the Planet would ever know. One again he would control the world with fear. And Rufus Shinra smiled.

Author's Notes: Well! Worth the wait? I hope so! Another dark chapter! But then again, how eagerly would anyone read this story if it was all peaches and cream?

Yes, my Turks are evil. I just can't agree with 95% of the fanfics out there where Reno and the others become cuddly teddybears just because Shinra gets flushed down the tubes. They were evil for a long time, why would the leopards suddenly change their spots? But it is possible to change, so I couldn't say their defection is out of the realm of reality.

And Vincent, was he dead? Was he just dreaming?

As you may have guessed by now, the title 'Crisis from the Sky' has many different meanings. One, that's what the Ancient Cetra called Jenova. Two, the Onyx Weapon lives in the skies, attacking from above. Three, and just revealed now, Rufus' weapons satellite is what he will use to once again control the world with fear.

Oh, before I forget, I have to give credit to my old pal Louie, (Snakeyex7@aol.com) who gave me the idea for having Zangan in this chapter! I originally had something slightly different in mind, but I liked his idea much better!

So! Cid, Yuffie and Barret, in danger?! Be here next time for "Chapter 18: Assault on Rocket Town"! Oh yeah!