

Chapter Nineteen: The Morning After

"No matter what happens, I'm not going to forget this. This journey, you folks -- none of it!" — *Cait Sith*

"Why are you always wastin' your time on these model planes?!"

"You know you're workin' on the railroad like your old man!"

An eight-year old Cid Highwind looked up with hurt in his eyes at the towering behemoth standing over him. His father. Spent his life on the railroad, and his boy would do no less. Just like his father and his father before him. The Highwind legacy. But while Cid senior kept his eyes on the ground, his son couldn't help but look to the skies. Every night he sat outside on the roof and gazed at the stars, dreaming. Someday, he'd be up there. He would rise through the ranks of the Shinra air corps and make his father proud. Whether the old fart liked it or not.

Cid's nose crinkled in the sun-soaked bedroom in his house at Rocket Town. He opened his eyes and blinked hard at the blinding light pouring over his face. Damn. Morning already. The curtains were opened just enough to let a few sharp rays of light in, but one was right in his face. He squinted at the surrounding room, unkempt as ever. He was still in his clothes, his bed sheets were on the floor in a small pile.

The smell of bacon and eggs filled his nostrils, no doubt the enticement that had pulled him from his deep slumber. He heard Shera clanging pots and pans in the kitchen, already with breakfast underway. He smiled slightly, and coughed.

At length, he finally sat up. His feet found the cold hardwood floor as he struggled upright. Wiping the sleep from his eyes, he shuffled out of his room and into the hall. He heard the faint drone of a radio in the kitchen, just above the faint humming of a woman's voice.

"Morning, Shera." Cid slumped in his chair and took the pot of coffee in his hand. With half-closed eyes, he carefully poured some into the mug at his place.

"Morning Cid," Tifa bubbled.

Tifa. Wait. Shera, she-

"Tifa!!" Cid jumped up from his chair, "What the hell happened?! Where's Shera?!!" Cid rushed over to the front door, Tifa grabbed his arm.

"Wait, Cid! You've been out for hours!" Cid slowly collected himself and turned back to her. "You hit your head when the escape pod hit the water. We found it washed up on the beach."

Cid's blood ran cold, "And Shera? The Highwind?" Tifa lowered her head. "%^\$#@*."

"They were hit by something from the satellite. The Highwind went down." Cid felt his legs start to give out on him. "They hit the water pretty hard, and went under." Cid slowly turned and looked out the small window on the door.

"Oh my God...."

The Tiny Bronco rattled in protest against the strain she was being put through. The little plane raced through the clouds without uncertainty, its course ever direct. Barret Wallace grumbled and narrowed his gaze at the approaching horizon. He hated flying, especially when he had to do it alone. It was a miracle he had been able to keep the Tiny Bronco in the air, Cloud and Cid always tried to teach him the basics of operating the Highwind and the Tiny Bronco. But the large miner had no interest whatsoever in the heavens above. His was a destiny meant to be lived out on solid ground. He often, very vocally, expressed this point when the kid or the old man told him he might one day need to know how to operate these infernal machines. He never thought it would come to this. But here he was.

He and Cloud raced off to Cosmo Canyon with what was left of their friend Red XIII just after they'd pulled Cid's soaked body from the escape pod. There wasn't a great deal of time to consider their actions. No sooner had they saved Cid, they had to take their dying friend to Cosmo Canyon. Hopefully the elders would be able to somehow treat the ravages Red went through over the past few days.

Then there was Reeve, Shera and the others. The airship hit the water yesterday, and Avalanche had been unable to communicate with anyone inside, if there were any survivors.

Reeve's android cat, Cait Sith, had remained dormant since the ship had gone down. The others hoped it was simply a case of Reeve having lost contact with his automaton, but there was always that one dark possibility that marred the light of hope. The iron moogles and its cat had remained exactly where it froze, too massive to be moved without the aid of heavy machinery.

Cloud had insisted to be dropped off at Nibelheim on the way back from Cosmo Canyon, claiming he 'had to get something'. Barret argued that this was not the time to sit at home collecting stamps. But Cloud had made up his mind, and here Barret was, flying this stupid little plane back to Cid's house.

Barret grumbled again as Rocket Town came into view, already anticipating the woes ahead.

"Cid!" Tifa called after the shaken pilot, who had not said a word since he learned of the fate of his beloved airship and the people inside. He marched over to his hall closet, almost ripping the door from its rickety hinges, and retrieved the Mast Ax from inside. Not one of Cid's most powerful weapons, but it would serve its purpose all the same.

Cid stormed out of the house and up the street through the abandoned town square, pieces of Junon Inc. equipment littered the otherwise empty streets. Tifa hurried after her silent comrade, pleading with him for some explanation or at least some sign of humanity that still lurked within. Her cries went unanswered, as the Captain plowed forward, kicking away anything unfortunate enough to be in his path.

Cid stomped up the steps to the item shop, now abandoned since the exodus of citizens from Rocket Town. Heavy boards were nailed across the doorway and windows, a last measure taken by its previous owner. Cid, however, was not interested in measures or precautions. Without hesitation, he lifted the mighty ax over his head and obliterated the planks of wood that stayed his progress. Splinters and debris filled the air around him as he swung the ax a few more times. The door itself shared a similar fate, as Cid didn't even pause to check if it was unlocked. His ax went through the door just as it went through the wooden boards. Cid kicked away what was left of the entrance and clamored inside.

"Cid! What are you doing?!" Tifa ran up the steps to the item shop, which were now littered with wood chips and pieces of door. Aside from dust and neglect, the shop was empty. An open safe sat in the corner, its steel door revealed the absence of contents to assure any Junon looters it was unnecessary to pry it open. Tifa saw Cid, down on his knees in the center of the shop, pull up a large rug and throw it aside. He then took his weapon to the floorboards beneath it without pause.

Tifa saw a glimmering collection of materia orbs, piled in a small crawlspace beneath the humble shop. Cid sifted through the varied colors and finally retrieved that which he had come for.

"Underwater Breathe." Cid confidently announced.

"Cid," Tifa knelt beside the frazzled pilot, "What in Planet's name are you going to do with that? It only works on three people at a time, how are we supposed to save the entire crew?"

"Damn it, Tifa!" Cid snapped, "I got it all figured out! We're not just savin' the crew, the whole damn airship's comin'!"

"But, Cid," Tifa questioned, "The Highwind's underwater, how can we--"

"Perhaps," a voice called from behind them, "You could use some help."

Tifa and Cid turned to the doorway, their eyes fell upon a metal claw resting on the frame, supporting its wearer.

Kalm Town.

Normally, this town was known for its peace. Often, the tourist industry would spout such inane catch phrases as: "Kalm Town, come enjoy the calm." But today, the word calm had little to do with this particular section of the Planet.

A massive heel pounded into the earth on the outskirts of town, causing tremors throughout the normally quiet place. A thunderous roar echoed through the streets and alleys, buildings began to crack crumble under this destructive onslaught.

The Onyx Weapon spread its gigantic wings as it called to the heavens, and many of the townsfolk had collapsed in pain, their shaking hands clenched over their ears. Those that had the strength to endure the ground-shaking noise scrambled away from the source. Carts were kicked over, people were pushed, children were left bawling in the streets as this titan marched ever closer to the town. The former protector of the Planet towered over the small town, but looked upon it with anger. The creature bent down and swiped its massive claw across the first few buildings it had come across. The inn on the edge of town was ripped from its foundation and hurtled through the air into the distance. The Weapon roared again, bringing its claw back through the town and carving a huge chasm in the street.

The giant beast whirled about, bringing the back of its claw down upon the wreckage, sweeping clear what was once the town square. The monster stabbed both claws into the earth and let out a bone chilling wail! The land around it suddenly began to crack and groan under the incredible force being applied by the talons!

The earth around the savage creature buckled and began to lift from its foundation, all buildings and houses upon it toppled and collapsed! The great beast hurled the mass of earth and structure into the remaining portions of Kalm.

With one final roar, the enormous Onyx Weapon soared upward into the heavens and out of sight, leaving behind the smoke embers of destruction.

Barret brought the Tiny Bronco down for a somewhat soft landing just behind Rocket Town. Painfully, the large man pried himself from the tiny cockpit of the plane. His massive feet pounded into the grass next to the small metal bird just as he heard voices coming from Cid's front yard.

"Where the hell have you been?!" boomed Cid.

Vincent Valentine lowered his head slightly and regarded the large, blood-soaked hole in the front of his shirt that once

adorned the outer edge of a fatal wound. How does one tell his friends he's been dead, only to be sent back to resume the fight?

Reno the Turk stood just behind Vincent, still weak from his ordeal at the hands of the new embodiment of Jenova, and scowled at the hated members of Avalanche.

"And where the hell do you get off consortin' with the enemy?" Cid snarled and tipped his Mast Ax in Reno's direction.

"I followed Jenova's latest incarnation here, yet I see only evidence of a different threat." Vincent's words were calm and monotone, no flicker of emotion was betrayed by them.

"WELL, mister fancy-pants," snapped Cid, "Excuse the mess, but we just had to chase that pansy Rufus outta here while survivin' by the skin of our teeth!" Deep down, Cid wasn't angry at Vincent; his anger, however misdirected, was at himself. It was his foolish dreaming that successfully launched the Junon - 1. But Cid wasn't one to blame himself openly. "It's your goddamn fault we're in this mess!!"

"What?" Vincent raised an eyebrow.

"Cid," Tifa finally spoke up from behind the frayed pilot, "What are you talking about now?"

"Nevermind," growled Cid, "We gotta get movin' and we gotta move now!"

"You bet your ass!" Barret thundered from behind the group. The large man stomped toward the gathered party in due haste. "First, we get Shera and the others. Then we take that rocket and stick it up Rufus'-" Barret froze in mid-sentence as his eyes fell upon Reno. The smug, red-haired Turk simply grinned into the shocked expression forming on Barret's face. "You!!" The ex-miner lunged forward, barely caught by Cid, Vincent and Tifa. The three put all of their strength into holding back their large comrade.

"Barret!" Cid hollered, "Get a %\$^&#in' hold of yourself!!"

"Barret!" added Tifa.

"Let me go! I'll kill him!!" Barret struggled against them, "Rarghh!!"

"Settle down, goddamnit!!" Cid roared above the large man's inhuman outbursts!

"Alright, alright, I'm okay. I'm okay!" Barret shouted at the three people hanging from his massive frame. With hesitation, the three released their hold, watching carefully for any further eruptions. "It's just that when I saw the Turk after what happened to Red and Yuffie..."

"Yuffie." Vincent repeated in a dire tone, "Where is Yuffie?"

All eyes turned to Tifa, the only one who could provide that particular piece of information.

"We... I don't know," Tifa lowered her head, "When the Highwind went down, she was gone. We haven't heard from her since."

"We can't worry about that now," Cid announced, "Barret, Vincent, you're with me. We gotta get to the Highwind!"

“People of Costa Del Sol!”

All eyes of the Costa Del Bar turned to the well-groomed stranger standing in the doorway. The bartender dropped the mug he was cleaning on the floor, the color in his face drained. A symphony of shards danced across the floor behind the bar. The very sight of this unwelcome guest sent a wave of trepidation over the normally carefree inhabitants.

“My name is Rufus Shinra,” The callous CEO smiled, “I’m here to inform you that this coastal settlement is now under jurisdiction of Junon Inc., all financial settlements therein will be submitted to the Junon financial services branch within three business days.”

“Wait a minute!!” The ‘mayor’ of Costa Del Sol rose from his bar stool in a more than agitated mood. “You can’t pull this kinda stuff anymore,” the older man spat, “There ain’t no Shinra anymore, so we don’t gotta pay you your tribute!”

“Oh,” Rufus raised his eyebrows in a mock half-surprised fashion, “I see.” The smug industrialist calmly turned and strolled slowly outside. As he contentedly sauntered toward the beach, Rufus produced a cellular phone from his jacket and dialed a number.

“Do it.”

The Costa Del Bar was struck from above by a bolt of injustice from the very heavens. The structure erupted in fire and wreckage, debris filled the air all around it.

Rufus calmly returned his phone into his pocket and ambled down the beach, whistling a merry tune.

“Alright,” Barret turned away from the approaching tide for one last instruction, “If the snake gives you any trouble, shoot ‘im.” The large miner handed Tifa a small caliber handgun he had borrowed from Vincent, all the while scowling in the direction of the red-haired Turk in their company.

The beach near Rocket Town had recently become a haven of activity. It was here that Cid, Barret and Yuffie first arrived to steal the Tiny Bronco from Rufus one more time. Then, it was the location of a battle that drove Junon Inc. out of Cid’s beloved homeland. Now, it served as the location of a rescue attempt being launched on behalf of Shera, Reeve, and the rest of the Highwind’s crew. Cait Sith’s inert form stood near them facing the sea, like some sentinel of old guarding the coastline against impending danger.

“Hey,” snapped Reno, “I hate Rufus as much as you do! Anyways, I owe your ex-Turk for saving my life.” At this he nodded toward Vincent, “And I don’t leave any debts unpaid.” Barret regarded his enemy with due suspicion before finally turning back to Cid and Vincent, who were waiting near the water.

“Everybody ready?” Cid was anxious to get this particular mission underway, as the lives of his crew, and Shera in particular, hung in the balance. “Tifa, if anything happens, we’ll communicate via the PHS’s.” As soon as the three stood near Cid, he lifted the Underwater Breathe materia into the air, and the orb in question began to glow. Barret, Cid and Vincent were encompassed in an emerald bubble of energy, and the three started into the ocean depths.

“Can’t believe we left Tifa up there with that rat,” Barret growled as they began to descend deeper underwater. Small aquatic life swam near these highly unusual visitors before hastily retreating to the ocean expanse. Imagine seeing three full-grown men walking along the ocean floor encased in a green bubble of energy. It’s not a common sight of the sea.

"Don't worry about her," Cid said, "Tifa's a big girl, she can take care 'a herself." The three continued to walk in silence.

"What about you?!" Barret glowered at the silent member of the trio, Vincent. "We coulda used your help during the fight. Then you show up late with an uninvited guest." Vincent looked over at Barret and turned back to the surrounding scenery. That, of course, only made Barret madder.

"Quiet!" Cid snapped, "There she is."

Before them, barely visible through the murky depths, the giant airship sprawled before them. Like a sunken ship, the behemoth cast a large shadow over the surrounding ocean floor, the ominousness of which surpassed only by its impressive size. Like a fallen titan, she lay on her side, severely damaged by the immeasurable punishment unleashed upon it by recent events. Air bubbles trickled out of countless cracks and seams all around its surface.

"She's holding air," Cid rasped, "I knew she would." Cid was one of the main designers of the airship Highwind. He had built his pride and joy to withstand all sorts of catastrophes. That included maintaining an oxygen supply at great altitudes, even if some dumbass pilot was stupid enough to take her too high. But here, its airtight seams served to keep a breathable atmosphere even in the depths of the sea. The question now was, had the crew survived the crash?

"I don't know what you ever saw in that spikey-headed weirdo," Reno curled his lips in a cocky smirk, "Why don't you let a real man show you a good time?"

Tifa smiled widely, "If he was here he'd rip your arms out of their sockets." This sentence was ended in a light chuckle.

"Yeah," Reno turned away, still grinning, "Maybe."

"So what's the deal with you, anyway, Reno?" Tifa turned to the red-headed former enemy. "Why do you want to help us?" "Let's just say," Reno cleared his throat, "I didn't rejoin Heidegger voluntarily." His thoughts drifted to the threat that had been posed to conscript himself and the other Turks into service for Junon Inc.

"Maybe so, but-" Tifa's next words were cut off as something on the horizon caught her eye.

"Maybe so but what?" Reno repeated.

"What's that out there?" She pointed a finger out to sea, "On the water?"

Reno carefully reached into his blue jacket and produced a small pair of binoculars. He lifted them to his eyes and lost his tongue.

"What is it?" Tifa pled, "What can you see?"

Without answering, he handed her the binoculars. She too lifted them to her eyes and became speechless.

Heidegger narrowed his eyes at the approaching coastline in the orange sky before him. The sun had begun to set just beyond the mountains behind Rocket Town, but the day was far from over. Years ago, the Shinra picked the site of the launch pad area for a multitude reasons, both geographic and economic. Now Junon wants it back. No matter what the cost.

The husky Colonel drew a full breath at the great victory before him. He would retake Rocket Town once and for all. He stood proud on the deck the Junon freighter, its hull packed with soldiers and artillery.

Sprawling behind it, an entire fleet of warships, gunboats and submarines pursued their lead vessel toward the epic battle ahead.

May the Planet protect us all.

Author's notes: Hopefully you enjoyed this latest chapter!

I really felt bad for Vincent near the end. Imagine being trapped underwater in a tiny bubble with Barret and Cid growling at each other!

What was it Cloud went to Nibelheim to get? Where did Yuffie go? What of the Highwind's crew? What's going on with the Onyx Weapon? What will happen to Avalanche when Heidegger returns to Rocket Town?

What about Red XIII?

The answers to these, and more, next time!