

Chapter Twenty-Two: Calamity From the Skies

"Jenova will be at the Reunion. Jenova will rejoin the Reunion becoming a calamity from the skies." — *Sephiroth*

"[Listen to me! If you do not get to Midgar now, the Planet will die!]"

Cloud Strife clenched his teeth in agony as he poured a crystalline liquid over his wounded shoulder with shaky hands. The electronic warble that emitted from the PHS phone he held to his ear only worsened the pain. But, as he emptied the potion onto his wound, a green, comforting mist washed over him, soothing his pain and healing his injury.

"Hargo, you're not making sense," a low grunt escaped Cloud's lips as he got to his feet. "Weapon is going to destroy the Planet? How could it do that?"

"[Come to Cosmo Canyon and I will show you. Hurry, please!]"

"Alright," Cloud sighed and took the phone he had balanced on his non-wounded shoulder, closed it and returned it to his pocket. The battle around him had died down. It was still taking place on other parts of Wutai, however, for Cloud could still hear the gunfire and shouts in the distance. Barret Wallace and Cait Sith made their way through the ravaged clearing toward the blonde mercenary.

"Who the hell was that?" snapped Barret in an indignant tone.

"That," Cloud drew in a short breath as he took Cait's iron moogles' hand and pulled himself to his feet, "Was Elder Hargo from Cosmo Canyon."

"[Was it about Red?]" Cait asked with hopeful inflection.

"No," Cloud and the others walked toward the damaged submarine beached nearby. "He said that Weapon was about to destroy the Planet, and we have to get to Midgar. First, we have to get to Cosmo Canyon so he can tell us what in Bahamut's name he's talking about."

"Well," called a voice from the other side of the ravaged craft that lay dormant upon the grey shoreline, "This heap ain't gonna get us there anytime soon!" Cid Highwind tapped the side of the sub with the end of his massive spear, a clang echoed through the air above them. "What's the plan, son?"

"Holy...."

Sergeant Kretz's voice was distant as his eyes stared wide at the approaching desolation before him. He sat in the passenger seat in a high-tech Junon helicopter that raced through the orange sky toward Wutai. He had come here to give his commander the grim news of Weapon's attack on Junon base. He expected to see Colonel Heidegger's armada finishing up their effortless campaign to wipe the rebel force Avalanche from the face of the Planet. What he saw was something far different.

Pieces of ships and submarines floated dead in the waters surrounding Wutai. Smoke and flame poured from some of the haggard metal debris that was scattered about the coastline. He saw signs of combat further inland, but the old veteran ordered the pilot to land immediately to investigate this grievous turn of events.

The sleek, black helicopter gently touched down near a small group of people that were gathered around an antique Shinra sub, or at least, what was left of it. As soon as the helicopter was firmly set in the gray soil, Kreetz and the two young cadets disembarked through the bay door on the side of the craft. The two cadets carried rifles and stayed close to their commander to ensure his safety.

"What in the &*\$#?in' four hells is going on here?!" Kreetz was never a man of many words.

"Sarge!" Cid bellowed from the side of the grounded submarine with wide eyes.

"Oh damn," Kreetz clenched his teeth, his stomach turning at the mere sight of his former officer. "Highwind? Is that you? I woulda thought someone'd put a bullet in your head by now!"

"Same here," grinned Cid as he walked over to his old commander and extended a hand. The two cadets stepped forward and took aim at the grizzled pilot. Cid stopped and regarded the young officers in amusement.

"Are you with these here terrorists, boy?" growled Kreetz. "I always knew you'd end up causin' the Shinra more trouble than anything else."

Cid lowered his hand, still smiling, "We're going to need to borrow your helicopter, 'sir'." At the last word, Cid emphasized the mirthful, saccharine tone in his voice.

"Are you wrong in the head?!" barked Kreetz. It was then that he heard a loud click directly behind him. The two soldiers on either side of the old warhorse turned slightly and choked at the sight of a man, dressed all in black with a red cape, with long black hair, holding a large shotgun against the back of the head of their beloved Sargent.

"I'm afraid we'll have to insist," Cid beamed. Barret walked over to the two cadets and relieved them of their weapons.

"Reeve," Cloud turned to Cait Sith, "Tell Tifa we'll swing by to pick them up in the Junon chopper. Make sure Godo knows not to attack us. We have to save the Planet one more time."

"The time of your final battle is close at hand."

Vincent Valentine slowly opened his crimson eyes and raised his head in the direction of the speaker. It was an angel, he was sure. Her delicate features gave off a soft, but bright, glow. His eyes almost watered at the strength of the white, white light. He hadn't seen such a pure illumination since their descent into Holy, to do battle with Sephiroth at the Northern Crater. He remembered how the brightness hurt his eyes, as it did now. But he couldn't look away. Even to save himself the pain created between war and denial, he would never turn away from Lucrecia.

Her features were perfect; her eyes, her nose, her mouth - they seemed to be created by the heavens themselves. That was why it was so hard to hear her speak of matters of the Planet, of mortal life.

"Lucrecia," Vincent's voice was barely a whisper, "Why have you come to me again?"

"You must defeat it, my love," Lucrecia's perfect eyes reflected a saddened sentiment. "You must drive the cancer from the Planet. All of the here and now and that which has yet to be depends on the battle in which you are about to join."

"But," Vincent slowly stepped toward the white, angelic shape, "I only wish you to be free. This Planet, the people, the countless hopes and dreams of everyone," he sighed, "None of that can compare to you."

"No, Vincent," Lucrecia gently lifted a delicate hand and touched the side of his face, "It is only by protecting all that will you free me."

"But it is for you that I fight," Vincent closed his eyes as he spoke, "I would gladly lay down my life a hundred times over to spare you a second of this torture. For the Planet, I will fight on." At this declaration a slight smile formed on her lips. "But for you, Lucrecia," Vincent opened his eyes and gazed deeply into hers, "I will succeed."

"Hey! Sleeping beauty!"

A shrill holler from inside the small helicopter shattered Vincent's wakeful slumber and brought him back to reality. The scowling eye of Yuffie Kisaragi rested upon him as he tried to recall where he was. They were in the Junon craft, headed for Cosmo Canyon. Yuffie, Barret, Tifa and Cait were crammed into the passenger bay with him, while Cid and Cloud sat in the front.

"Cosmo Canyon, dead ahead!" Cid announced from the pilot's seat. "Fasten your seatbelts and return your dinner trays to their upright position!" The Captain barked in a playfully sarcastic tone.

The advanced vessel gently touched down on the red sands that surrounded Cosmo Canyon, and the group quickly disembarked without waiting for the engines to fully power down. A small group of elders and warriors from the settlement were anxiously waiting at the top of the steps at the entrance to the canyon. As soon as Cloud's foot touched the top step of the staircase, Elder Hargo signaled for them to quickly follow him.

They followed the old master up a familiar set of steps that had at one time led to a familiar dwelling - Bugenhagen's. But since the early attack of the Onyx Weapon, the steps led to nothing but rubble. However, the elder seemed to have more of a purpose in mind than simply leading them to revisit the evidence of Weapon's threat.

The old man approached a corner of the debris and moved aside a splintered board, revealing a small lever. Without hesitation, he pulled the lever and stood back. A rumbling from beneath their feet gave way to a sudden emergence from the damaged remains. A familiar platform rose from beneath the debris, with Cloud, Tifa, Cid, Cait and Vincent standing on it. Barret and Yuffie looked at each other in bewilderment as the debris itself seemed to lift their friends into the air. It was then that another familiar sight greeted them. The holographic representation of their solar system surrounded Cloud and the others. Barret hoisted Yuffie up to the platform before pulling himself up with the others. The large miner whistled in amazement at the stars all around him.

"Amazing," Cid chirped, "Gast's machine still works, even after Weapon stomped the place!"

"Yes," Vincent nodded solemnly, "Professor Gast was a brilliant man."

"That was most likely Weapon's intent when he attacked us," said Hargo, "To prevent us from discovering what Jenova was planning all along."

"And that IS?" snapped Yuffie.

"Look here," Hargo approached the holographic image of the Planet at the center of the model, "These stress fractures

signify all the places where the Onyx Weapon struck.” The elder traced his hand over the bright green cracks that adorned the Planet’s image. “Here, at Nibel. That was where it first worked, digging underground.”

Cloud felt his throat dry up as his mind started to race ahead of the man, drawing his own conclusions.

“And here,” Hargo continued, “Corel desert. Then he attacked Kalm,” the old man ran his finger across the model Planet, “Then over here at Junon.”

“So what?” Cid shoved a cigarette into his mouth and lit it, “So, it’s a Weapon. Isn’t that what it does?”

“Yes, but look at the pattern!” Hargo raised his voice in exasperation. There was no time for long, drawn out explanations. “Weapon was spotted near Wutai a while ago, am I right?” Yuffie nodded at this. “All those areas would not be significant unless you take into consideration the destruction at Mideel and the Northern Crater last year.”

“He’s gonna split the goddam Planet like a chunk of coal.” Barret’s voice was strained and low at this horrendous realization. All eyes whirled around and stared in shock at the ex-miner. When they slowly turned back to Hargo, the elder bowed his head and nodded. Cid was the only one who was able to muster up something to break the silence.

“Shit.”

Yuffie Kisaragi hopped down the stone staircase directly behind a bouncing iron moogle with a cat riding on its head. The young ninja had opted to take one last peruse through the Cosmo Canyon materia selection, and Cait Sith was conscripted into service to help her carry her wares. The rest of the group were loading what supplies they could take with them into the Junon helicopter. Cid had decided to check the engine and systems to make sure they’d get to Midgar and back in one piece. Cait’s metal transportation made a piercing clanging noise as its feet touched down on the solid granite steps. Yuffie was secretly wishing Reeve had included foot padding on his rebuilt robot when something familiar caught her eye.

Two elders from Cosmo Canyon proudly strode from the direction of the Inn toward the steps that led to the remains of Bugenhagen’s lab. But in between the two, a fiery red creature paced on all fours. The two elders seemed to be acting as escorts to this dignified beast. Red XIII held his head high in the air like a regal lion patrolling his kingdom with a watchful eye. His mane was still short, after being cut for his brief service to Junon, his jewelry and headdress were still absent. However, the hollow gaze and soulless glare that Red Nation assumed at all times was removed. This was a peaceful creature. A soul that could do no harm.

Yuffie and Cait stopped in their tracks and watched this entourage approach them. Red and his escorts walked right past them without even glancing in his friends’ direction. Yuffie and Cait looked at each other for a second, but turned back when Red suddenly froze in place. The crimson beast turned his head slowly and eyed the two visitors, searching for something. He looked up at one of the elders with a questioning gaze. The elder simply nodded, and Red faced the two again.

“They tell me,” Red’s voice was distant, his words slow and carefully spoken, “They tell me you are my friends.” Yuffie’s eyes began to well up and she nodded slowly, a smile beginning to form on her little face. Red simply looked back to the elder, and then nodded at the ninja and cat. Without another word, he turned and continued on his way, his escorts following close behind. The horrors bestowed upon their crimson comrade by Junon Inc. had no doubt done serious damage, far more serious than a simple physical wound.

Yuffie wiped her eyes and turned to continue on her way, with Cait bounding close behind. When they reached the Junon helicopter just outside the entrance to the Canyon, they saw their friends making ready to depart. Cid stood at the front of the craft, its nose panel removed and the pilot up to his elbows in engine grease. He was most likely tuning the engine for

their important task ahead. Cloud, Tifa, Barret and Vincent worked to load supplies into the cargo section, walking back and forth between the stone steps and the craft. Cait walked up behind Cid and peered into the exposed machinery.

"Reeve," Cid spoke calmly, never turning his head from the job at hand, "How's Shera?"

"I'm with her now," the little cat paused for a moment while its operator surveyed the situation on his end, "The doctor here says she'll be fine after she gets a few hours' rest. I'll stay with her until she wakes up. We're still at Godo's."

"Alright," Cid turned his head for a second, "Thanks, Reeve." The pilot returned to his work and Cait skipped over to help the others.

Vincent watched the ocean race below him through the window on the side of the Junon helicopter. They left Cosmo Canyon nearly a day ago and were just reaching the eastern continent. He saw the approaching coastline in the distance, his eyes immediately drawn to the trail of smoke rising from the remains of what was once Junon base.

The helicopter raced over the shattered structure and over the Mithril Mountains, and the sky began to darken. The thick atmosphere of pollution that had always blanketed the steel metropolis of Midgar seemed to have outlived the architects of its design. Some feared the greyed skies and foul-smelling air might be a permanent scar on the Planet. It was a symbol of the tyranny that is man against the environment. How fitting then, that it would all end here: at Midgar.

The dark craft circled toward the iron juggernaut that sat upon the ravaged land like a vengeful titan. Its dead streets and darkened buildings only worsened the already foreboding mood that had overtaken the group. Eight dormant reactors surrounded the cold, metal ghost town. The damage caused by Meteor had rendered the entire place inhospitable, nothing more than a painful monument erected to attest man's undying ignorance. Midgar served no valuable purpose, but it was here that the fate of the human race would be decided.

Cid clenched his teeth on the filter of his cigarette as he gently ascended into the shell. He almost haphazardly picked a main roadway where the group would make their last stand. Cloud watched as the cracked concrete of this vile place grew closer and closer, a feeling of bitterness cultivating within him. Barret glared out into the shadows created by the jungle of deserted buildings and fought the urge to spit in disgust.

No one in the helicopter could say anything. Nothing could be put forth to break the silence that had ensnared them. They were going into one of the most dire situations they had ever faced since their battle at Northern Crater. The possibility was very real that they may not all be returning to fight again. This could be the last time Avalanche fought together. The fates were often cruel and mysterious. How could they know what was ahead - what victories, what casualties - you roll the die and you take your chances.

"Okay," Cloud finally spoke up as they were disembarking from the Junon helicopter, its advanced engines powering down. "We're going to have to split up." Tifa looked up at her fiancé with a look of restrained terror. "There's no way we can predict where the Onyx Weapon is going to attack. If we spread out in pairs, we can delay it long enough for everyone to arrive." Cid nodded slowly, with hesitation. He knew this was the right thing to do, but why did it gnaw at his insides?

"Tifa," Cloud started, "You're with me." As the young leader looked out at the crowd of faces before him, he could not help but imagine two more. One, a fiery beast with a look of pride and understanding. The other, a beautiful girl with sparkling emerald eyes, her face alight with hope and encouragement. They were still here, helping in their own way. "Yuffie," he finally continued, "You and Cait head toward the number three reactor. Vincent," Cloud looked up to see the man in question had vanished.

"Where's Vincent?" Tifa swept her gaze over the surrounding neighborhood.

"What the #@&*?!?" snapped Cid.

"Oh great," Barret growled, "He picks now of all times to head off on his own. Jus' perfect." The ex-miner's voice was thick with sarcasm.

"Well," Cloud shrugged and continued, "Not much we can do about that. Barret, you and Cid head in the direction of the number six reactor. Tifa and I'll head to what's left of the number one." With an exchange of silent nods, the team split up and headed their separate ways.

Tifa and Cloud walked slowly through the burned out street with apprehension. Vermin and worse scurried into the shadows at their approach. Even the Planet's lowest forms of life could tell the power at the command of these two. Tifa nervously reached out and took Cloud's hand as they walked through the darkened district.

"Heh." A smile formed on Cloud's face as he looked up into the darkness.

"What," Tifa turned her head and smiled, "What is it?"

"I was just thinking," the young hero reflected, "This is the second time we had to defend Midgar from Weapon. Although the Diamond Weapon's slow march on Midgar was easier to follow than the Onyx Weapon's attack from above."

"Yeah," Tifa laughed, "Those were the good old days. I guess."

A light laughter rose into the sky above the sprawling steel city, just as dark clouds began to gather and thicken.

"Well this is just goddamn priceless." An agitated Cid Highwind scowled at the minute droplets of water that began to fall from above. "We get to fight for our lives in the dirty Midgar rain."

"Ya get used to it," Barret grumbled from beside him, "Rains in Midgar all the time. The whole sky's so full of pollution it all gathers and gets dumped back in your face." The large man adjusted the collar on his sleeveless jacket.

"If I catch a flu, Shera's gonna make me sleep in the garage for a week." Cid bit his lower lip in the pain of accidentally reminding himself of the badly injured engineer two continents away.

"So you think we can win this one?" Barret spat, "I mean, stop that big ass Weapon from drillin' into Midgar?"

"Of course," Cid answered indignantly, "We kicked bigger tail before."

"That's just it," Barret wiped his forehead as the raindrops began to drop more steadily, "We ain't beat something that big before. Sephiroth was the main event, yeah," the ex-miner turned to Cid as they walked, "But he was just a man being used by Jenova. This is the granddaddy of all Weapons, and it's on Jenova's payroll."

"Heh," Cid took the cigarette out of his mouth and grinned, "You almost sound like you're afraid of that thing."

"Afraid my ass," Barret growled in mock anger, "How about I stick that spear where the sun don't shine and we see what you feel like?"

"Yeah, that's what -" Cid's stopped short and lifted his head. "There it is."

"What was Cloud thinkin'?" the young ninja Yuffie scowled as she walked through the darkened street. "Stick me with the tin monkey and its cat?"

"[Shove it.]" Cait announced in its hollow voice.

"I mean, he shoulda stuck me with him," she grinned, "and Tifa with you!"

"[Really?]" the little cat smiled and snapped its fingers, "[I can see it now - oh Cloud, you're so handsome, you should dump Tifa and marry *me*....]"

"Would you shut up?!" Yuffie barked, "I didn't mean it like that!"

"[Ha ha! I may have skimped on this model, but I can still see you blushing...]"

"Oh yeah?" Yuffie stopped and looked up, "Looks like you'll be too rusted to worry about me!" Cait looked up at the sudden fall of raindrops all around them.

"[Don't worry, this version was built from waterproof parts,]" the cat suspiciously coughed, "[- from the Highwind, no less.]"

"Yeah, well if you don't want Cid to find out, you better zip your furry little lips about what I said earlier!"

Cait was about to retort with an even wittier response when his sensors picked up something else. Yuffie noted her comrade's sudden silence and a wave of trepidation washed over her. She followed his gaze to the dark skies above them and saw it. Weapon.

The winged beast broke through the discolored clouds and descended toward them. It paid no attention to the storm building all around, its eyes focused on the husk of Midgar. It slowed its approach as it neared the deserted metropolis, its wings were spread wide like the sails on the mast of a great ship. Suddenly, it let out a thunderous roar that shook the very foundation of Midgar, causing some pieces of metal to fall from structures around the sector in which Yuffie and Cait trembled. When only the echo remained in the distance, Weapon lowered its hollow gaze further, and stopped its descent. It hovered there, in mid-air, and looked upon the ravaged streets like a divine judge.

Yuffie was sure Weapon was looking directly at them. But why? The towering beast had taken a similar vigil before, in the orange sky above Cosmo Canyon. Maybe, the young girl silently prayed, maybe Weapon would again just be content to watch, and then leave.

This time, however, the fates had something else in mind. The Weapon spread its massive arms wide as tiny glow formed in front of it and grew. Two chest plates on the creature parted, and opened wide, all the while the ball of energy collected in front of it. The massive monster began to tremble as it summoned some incredible force from within. With a mighty roar, a burst of energy blasted down upon the ravaged sector, incinerating everything. The bolt of energy continued for a few seconds more and ceased. The Weapon's chest plate closed evenly, just as it lowered its arms and surveyed the smoldering

crater where Yuffie and Cait once stood. A clap of thunder boomed overhead, and the skies opened up with cold, hard rain. The unforgiving storm washed the stench of death from the charred metal beams and concrete wreckage that was once just another street in Midgar.

You cast your die, and you take your chances.

Author's Notes: Well! Weapon has just rung the bell, and the battle for the fate of the Planet begins! Special thanks to Owen Humphreys for pointing out that 'Dogs of War' was a quote from Shakespeare's Henry V. It went something like: "Cry havoc and let slip the dogs of war". I believe I saw or heard someone mention 'dogs of war' on television or something, because I've never read Henry V. What I meant when I said I made up the quote was that even though I use quotes from FFVII, that wasn't one of them.

Someone else emailed me asking how Tifa suddenly appeared on the submarine in chapter 20. I apologize, I guess I could've made that part clearer. When we last saw Tifa, she was standing on the beach, then something in the water caught her eye. That was Cloud's sub. So when we next saw her, Tifa had been picked up and was on board, along with Cait who had been presumably lifted in by any number of Shinra sub winching and/or loading mechanisms.

Next time - the fight to end all fights, and not everybody gets out alive! With three chapters left, let's get ready to rumble!! Comments, always welcome!