

Chapter Twenty-Three: Dark Skies

"That's why I say this planet's still a kid. A little kid sick and trembling in the middle of this huge universe. Someone's gotta protect it. ... That someone is us." — *Cid Highwind*

A merciless torrent rained down upon the corroded ruins of the once bustling metropolis known as Midgar. The steely husk was at one time the center of the Planet's financial and technological triumphs. Now, it would serve an even greater purpose. For the location of Midgar would now be the place where the future of the Planet is decided - the place where millions of innocent lives would be destroyed, or saved.

This and more raced through the befuddled mind of Cloud Strife as he sprinted through the rain-soaked streets of the broken city. His fiancée, Tifa Lockhart, felt her legs begin to burn as she tried her best to keep up with him. His almost superhuman abilities carried him across the man made terrain at an incredible speed toward his goal – Weapon.

The onyx giant hovered above the sector just ahead, the teeming rainfall deflecting off of it as it would a mountain of stone. It remained motionless, staring down at the smoldering crater that was once a piece of Midgar. Thick smoke ascended into the sky from it, ash and dust littered the air surrounding the newly-made wound.

As the steady rainfall poured down into the crater, the ash and filth that became disturbed by the Weapon's attack began to settle to the charred earth. As the smoke evenly cleared, a glimmering emerald bubble was revealed near the cavity's center. The large, concave energy formation glistened with the rain and mud which ran down its perimeters. At length, the force field shattered, revealing a slightly scorched cat-and-moogle duo and a frazzled little ninja girl.

Cait Sith had always been entrusted with the bulk of the defense materia, the magic whose sole purpose it was to protect the bearer and those around him. Yuffie Kisaragi had also managed to cast a barrier spell of her own, which acted as a second layer to protect the adventurers. It was lucky she had, as the two would have been vaporized by the Weapon's blast.

"Jeez!" the young ninja barked, "Cait, get Cloud and the others over here! Just our luck to have to fight this thing first!"

"[They're on the way!]" the robotic cat answered in a confident, if hollow, tone. Without another word, Yuffie and Cait stood ready for battle.

Darkness. A faint, almost inaudible hum emanated from a nearby machine. The smell of chemicals and iron polish filled his nostrils, along with the dust and decay of Hojo's lab. The Shinra building. Once the center of power for city that was the center of power for the Planet. Here, in this dreaded chamber of science and madness, many an abomination was forced to see the light of day through a set of inhuman senses. But that was again another time, another age, another era - another world.

The neglected ruins of the Shinra building stood as a testament to the consequences man suffered when greed dominated compassion. The Shinra once drained the life from the very mother of humanity, the Planet, in the name of financial gain. But the Planet, it would seem, would eventually outlast the unscrupulous empire. The question, however, would be for how long?

Vincent Valentine carefully stepped through the debris of Hojo's lab. Most of the upper floors of the Shinra building were completely destroyed by the Diamond Weapon over a year ago. But like a monster that refuses to die, Hojo's chamber of horrors remained almost intact. The ex-Turk clenched his teeth and scowled at the dust-laden pieces of machinery that surrounded them. This was the stuff that nightmares were made of. Some of the hated devices still functioned, no doubt running on reserved power, even though Midgar as a whole was dead. This only added to the eeriness of the darkened lab. But fear was another of many emotions Vincent was incapable of feeling.

/ ... This waymy love.... /

Vincent's head turned at the sound of the disembodied voice. It was hers. Lucrecia. He first heard it calling him away when he and the rest of Avalanche touched down in the steel city. It was leading him here, to the Shinra building, and more specifically - Hojo's lab. How fitting that the place where so many horrors began would be the same place where Vincent would end the largest one.

"I wouldn't be so confident, if I were you."

Vincent slowly turned around and glared in the direction of the speaker: Professor Hojo himself. The mad scientist had always been pale for as long as Vincent remembered, but this was something different. His crooked brow glistened a dull white from some unseen source of light. There was no color in his face, his hands or his hair. They were all as white as his worn out lab coat. And Vincent could see through him. A ghost from his past?

"Perhaps," Hojo sneered. "Perhaps something more." The evil man adjusted the glasses which sat atop his nose. "You have no idea with what you trifle. This, all of this, has been ordained since well before you or I walked the Planet."

"Quiet." Vincent's tone was calm and even. "You are dead."

"Yes," Hojo nodded, "But so are you." Vincent slowly continued to make his way through the darkened laboratory toward the shattered chamber marked 'Jenova'. "This has been in motion since the dawn of time. What goes on here can't be stopped." Vincent rested his iron claw on the doorway. The year of neglect had left a light layer of dust on everything.

"This ends here," he answered carefully.

"Many have said the same," Hojo walked up behind him, "But only she remains. My love cannot be defeated. Jenova, or 'Crisis from the Sky', she has been known as many things on many worlds. This is just another such."

"Silence." Vincent announced.

"You weren't able to save me."

Vincent's eyes grew wide as the voice spoke. Not Hojo's. This was someone else from Vincent's past. A friend, an ally. Carefully, Vincent lifted his gaze from the floor in front of him and faced the new visitor.

"Lions?"

"Yes." The second phantom had seemingly replaced Hojo, and the monotone Turk stared at Vincent with pain and suffering in his eyes. "It's me. The last time I saw you was the Wutai mission."

"Yes!" Vincent's tone intensified, "I don't know what happened to you. The Shinra never uncovered the truth." Lions smiled at this statement. His normally royal blue suit and blonde hair were replaced by the same dull white hue that enshrouded Hojo.

"Not surprising," he finally said, "Since the Shinra ordered my death."

"What?!" Vincent was taken aback.

"Heh. You can't fool me, Vince." The specter smiled, "You've known it all along, deep down." The image of Lions rapidly faded from sight before Vincent could pose any further questions.

How could this be? The Shinra sent his two fellow Turks, Malcom and Reece to solve the mystery of Lions' inexplicable disappearance. Why would they do so - unless it had all been a cover up?

"Well, it was, and it wasn't."

Vincent was again pulled from his subconscious by a visitor. "Malcom?"

"They sent us there to find out what happened to Lions, knowing we would never find him, and grow frustrated in the attempt. That frustration would cause us to act out against the people of Wutai, just as it did." The spirit adjusted his sunglasses. "And maybe the savages of Wutai would be a little more cooperative with the Shinra in the future."

Vincent was appalled. He knew the Shinra was capable of evil, but this was something else. They killed one of their operatives just to stir up an already volatile situation? Truly, the evil of man knew no bounds.

"Come on, Vincent! Think!" Malcom raised his voice in the realization, "You knew this all along! You were just too loyal to let yourself put it all together."

"But then again, you always were a slow learner." Vincent looked up at Malcom to see that it was no longer the tall comrade he had come to respect during his service with the Turks, it was Reece. The hateful mercenary sneered wickedly at the ex-Turk. "You just HAD to be the corporate sensation." Vincent was speechless. Nothing he could say could excuse his ignorance. What Reece said was true. "You were too busy with your head in the clouds, still ringing with words like 'duty' and 'honor', your only wish was to do right by your superiors."

Vincent leaned forward on a cracked and dusty counter top. His head hung low, his eyes shut tight, searching the inner depths of his soul for some contradiction to these harsh revelations. His teeth involuntarily clenched as his mind raced with wretched thoughts.

"Well," Reece grinned as he casually approached his former ally, "This is a first. No poetic responses, no words of wisdom?" Reece stood before the tortured ex-Turk and basked in his suffering. "I finally get the last word." Vincent slowly lifted his head and gazed into the smiling, colorless face of his former comrade, scrutinizing every detail. There had to be some trace of humanity left in this phantom from the past. Some compassionate part that would offer up a forgiveness Vincent knew he did not deserve.

Before he could examine his friend further, Reece reached out and grasped Vincent tightly by the throat, almost crushing his windpipe. This was no ghost from Vincent's mind. The stink of the alien cancer called Jenova filled the senses of the crimson garbed warrior, choking him further.

"The ability to change one's looks, voice, and words," Reece sneered, "You know the rest."

The darkened clouds above the rainy skies over Midgar began to swirl and shift as if alive with purpose. A maelstrom of intense wind and rain continued to build until a circular opening formed in the thick stratus. From the parting in the clouds a giant dragon broke through and swooped down toward the steel city. The Bahamut eased its descent as it reached a second monster hovering in the sky between it and Midgar.

With an outraged roar at this invader of its skies, Bahamut opened wide its tremendous maw and struck the Onyx Weapon

with an incredible blast of white hot plasma. The gray dragon's burst continued to pound on the larger foe without break or pause until the Weapon began to lose ground. The colossal monster created by the Planet began to sink toward the rain-soaked sector of the abandoned metropolis.

The Onyx Weapon stared up at his attacker in utter astonishment that such a mystical creature would dare move against it. The white burst continued to force the Weapon downward, its arm slowly raised in defense of this onslaught, until it finally touched ground with its massive feet. It was then that Bahamut ceased its blast, and prepared for a second volley.

However, the time for inaction had passed, and the Weapon retaliated. With a deafening roar, the Onyx Weapon spread its massive arms wide as a 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. Without another second, a larger blast erupted from the Onyx Weapon and struck the hovering dragon with an earth-shaking boom, sending the smaller creature spiraling into the dark clouds above and out of sight. The Weapon's beam ended, and the gigantic creature seemed to stop and gather its strength for a moment, before turning to the source of its woes.

Yuffie Kisaragi clenched her teeth as a series of gem stones glimmered and glowed in their slots on her Conformer ninja star. The jewel-encrusted weapon trembled in the young girl's shaking hands as she took a deep, exhausted breath to renew the fight. The dense rain fell all around her like a blanketing mist between different worlds. The cold water pelted the two with the merciless of the driving elements.

Cait Sith watched in amazement as the young ninja held her Conformer above her head in preparation for another feat of unbelievable magic. Cait hadn't really thought about it before, none of them had, but Yuffie was arguably their most powerful magic user. The entire group simply regarded the little ninja as a materia-hungry thief, an instigator, nothing more. But what they never considered was that Yuffie spent a lot of her time training with the very materia she so zealously cherished. With the obvious exception of their dearly departed friend Aeris, Yuffie had far more practice and experience with the ancient magic.

Cait Sith abruptly halted his musings and rejoined the fight, casting a long range spell of his own, Fire3, on the hovering giant. The robotic cat prayed there would be some way to bring the Onyx Weapon down from its lofty perch so that he and the others may take a more personal role in the battle. Their magic was an important tool in the struggle to save the Planet, but it was by no means unlimited.

Like a clap of thunder, a loud boom erupted in the deserted laboratory on one of the upper floors of the ravaged Shinra Building. Vincent Valentine held his massive shotgun, the Death Penalty, pointed at the dreaded monster before him. The barrel of the weapon trembled slightly as a thin trail of smoke wafted upwards from it.

Before him was no more a specter than he. Jenova, once the body of a Turk named Reece, now possessed the shape-shifting form that stood there in the lab and glowered at Vincent with a hatred tempered by the ages. It stood there, in the shape of a man, its skin an unholy purplish tint with soulless green eyes.

Jenova looked down at the large wound on its chest, and slowly raised its head in outrage at the damage caused by this lesser creature. Vincent evenly eyed the alien with his usual cold indifference. His heightened senses immediately warned him of the creature's intentions, as his keen eyesight focused on the faint movement in its left foot. The tiny particles of dust scraping beneath the appendage were massive bowling balls to Vincent's incredible hearing. Instantly, Jenova lunged forth into the air at the hapless paladin in less than the blink of an eye. But to Vincent, the blink of an eye could have been an eternity, as his weapon was raised and ready before the creature advanced in even the slightest measurement. Time seemed to slow to a crawl as the Death Penalty unleashed white hot fury upon the alien conqueror, sending it flying backwards into the shelves of neglected test tubes and other pieces of lab equipment.

The frozen moment seemed to extend as Vincent nimbly placed a foot atop the counter separating the combatants and

launched himself into the air on an intercepting arc. Still in mid-air, the warrior seemed to defy the laws of gravity itself as his mighty cannon echoed like the wrath of God, erupting with righteous justice upon the living cancer that was Jenova. The creature reeled helplessly against the broken steel shelves and pieces of glass as the payload mercilessly struck its unearthly form. As soon as Vincent's feet touched down in front of the monster, several empty clicks from the Death Penalty assured him he needed to reload, but he followed through the previous onslaught with a devastating blow with the iron gauntlet that had become a prison for the tortured hero. The former assassin put all of his weight into the punch, and brought the butt of his shotgun back up for one extra assault as he quickly righted himself.

Jenova, however, was not without its own defenses, as the beast let out a blood-curdling cry and lashed out at the brave fighter with lengthened tendril arms, swiping madly at anything it could get near.

Vincent performed a perfect back flip into the air and soared away from the enraged creature and out of harm's way. When the ex-Turk rolled to his feet, in one sweeping motion he tossed his shotgun into the air and retrieved a second firearm from a strap under his cape. Jenova roared in anger as it watched the Death Penalty ascend toward the ceiling, not noticing the Quicksilver handgun, raised and aimed. Vincent discharged round after round as brassy, hot shells showered the floor around his boots with an almost musical jangle.

Jenova howled in fury and struggled to its clawed feet. Its evil eyes seemed to glow with rage as it summoned up some inner strength. The creature's entire body trembled as its form began to change again. Its legs and arms grew larger, its muscles expanded, a large rupture split along the beast's back and several tendrils broke out and lashed around the room. Jenova sneered at Vincent, bearing its jagged green teeth in a hiss of anger.

Vincent carefully stepped back, his firearm never moving from the aimed position, and realized the door behind him was blocked with debris from the struggle.

On the other end of Cait Sith's control unit, Reeve sat in vigil in Wutai at the bedside of Shera, still unconscious from her fatal experience with Junon Inc. Reeve looked down at the peaceful, sleeping face of his friend with eyes full of hope and despair. Shera would recover from this, she had to. There was a certain foul-mouthed pilot that needed her more than he would allow himself to believe, out there, fighting with all his strength. The belief that she would recover from her injuries and one day help him salvage the wreckage of his beloved airship Highwind, now sitting at the bottom of the ocean, was a driving source of energy in the old pilot's spirit.

"[Cait!!]"

A shrill voice echoed through the earpiece Reeve wore as part of his control device for his mechanical counterpart.

"Cait," Yuffie screamed at the artificial cat, "This ain't no time to daydream! I need an ether!" The battle worn ninja girl leapt over to her comrade and stood ready to receive the crucial item. Harsh raindrops pummeled the two warriors, a thick layer of water flowed the length of Yuffie's face.

"[Right,]" the small cat answered in a hollow, mechanical voice, "[Sorry. One ether coming up!]"

Just as Cait retrieved an ether from a storage compartment within the iron moogle he sat atop, he looked up suddenly and choked in horror. Yuffie's eyes grew wide as she slowly followed his gaze, her heart racing at what she saw.

A giant black heel hovered over them, and descended toward what would surely be a grizzly death. But the fates, it seemed, had still more in store for the hapless duo.

A reverberating clang echoed above the rainstorm surrounding them. The source? A brightly-colored spear of massive

proportions collided with what could be considered the knee of the gigantic Weapon's outstretched leg. The large javelin spun from its target and soared to the ground, almost on a set of invisible wings. The spear dug hard into the concrete street near the edge of the large crater the monster of the Planet now hovered over.

Yuffie and Cait turned their rain-soaked heads in the direction of the spear and saw something they'd never thought possible. Cid Highwind, foul-mouthed pilot turned savior of the Planet, diving through the air toward his precious Venus Gospel spear, the rainwater glistening off his heavy flight jacket, and a lit cigarette clenched firmly in his teeth. The pilot's gloved hands closed around the impressive lance and pulled it from the concrete scabbard while he rolled forward, stopping on his feet. Most remarkable was the fact that his cigarette remained intact and in his mouth for the entire display. Yuffie wasn't sure whether she'd cheer or just start laughing.

A series of gems studded on the haft of Cid's weapon flickered to life in a colorfully random pattern. The swirling clouds above Midgar again broke to reveal a circular vortex. A tremendous bolt of lightning struck the ravaged, rain-washed streets with so great an impact all of Midgar trembled. The exact spot where the bolt struck suddenly cracked and shifted; a tier of stone and debris broke from the surrounding surface and soared toward the heavens. At the peak of the newly-made summit stood a giant harbinger of doom. Ramuh, the lightning god, thrust his staff into the sky and summoned the very might of all creation. A series of electric bolts danced upon the head of the mystical elder's cane and leapt to the Planet far below. Thunder echoed through the sky as each charged lance assaulted the staggering behemoth with more force than the last. Finally, the Onyx Weapon roared in anger, digging its heels into the massive crater, and blasted the summon creature with all its might. Ramuh gradually faded from sight just as the white hot barrage passed through the area where this new mountain once towered. As soon as the lightning god had left them, Cid Highwind was returned to the location where he had originally knelt, breathing heavily as the rain pounded his tired body.

The Onyx Weapon looked down upon this - this gnat - with immeasurable hatred. Here this puny insect presumed to usurp the will of Jenova. His would be an insignificant death. But as the Weapon glowered down, his view of the weary pilot was suddenly obstructed, first by a massive boot, then by its wearer - a towering, beast of a man. Barret Wallace stared right back at the gigantic behemoth; and if hate were the measure of a man, the ex-miner would have dwarfed the imposing goliath.

Cuts and bruises of various size and shape decorated the face of Vincent Valentine as one of Jenova's tendrils squeezed tighter around his throat. The ex-Turk glared at the monster's face with narrow eyes; his was a will that could not be broken, by any means of force.

"It is remarkable," the alien beast hissed, "That one so insignificant could be so much a thorn in my side." The twisted creature neared its hateful head closer to Vincent. "What makes you different from the rest?" The demon sneered, "The Cetra, the Shinra, mankind? Why must you presume to stand alone? Countless worlds of countless species have fallen under my heel. Yet here you are. You've outlived the span of your own life, but you are by no means invulnerable."

Vincent clenched his teeth and tightened his grip on the beast's appendage as it grew ever tighter around his neck. The room around him grew dim and distant under the strain. Jenova suddenly released its grasp as it hurled the helpless body across the room. Vincent hit the far wall with a reverberating thud. He fell to the floor like a broken rag doll, barely conscious of his current peril.

"The wound that will be created by my Weapon will be far greater than that created by the fall of Meteor. The life force energy that will be gathered here at Midgar will completely drain the Planet, and I will be here to devour every drop!" Jenova's now countless tentacles stretched the length of the ravaged lab like the roots of evil itself, and extended up the walls almost consuming the entire room. "Where my offspring failed, I will succeed. Your comrades will be destroyed by my Weapon, and the shattered pieces of the Planet will be all that remains in my wake. Then will I move on, and start the process anew." The alien monstrosity snarled as it moved to Vincent, glaring down at him. It was then that Vincent's half-open eyes rested upon a familiar object on the floor near his crumpled form. The Death Penalty shotgun, out of ammunition but by no means useless.

“Man will not succumb to your evil, Jenova,” he rasped, “We have strength in numbers; strong are the ties that bind us.” And without another moment, the ex-Turk summoned some inner force and lunged forward, closing his hand around the empty shotgun, called out, “From hell’s heart, I stab at thee!” He gallantly thrust the iron weapon into the throat of the beast, causing it to sputter in and choke, falling backwards away from the fighter. An errant tendril lashed up and knocked Vincent against the wall once more as Jenova gurgled in astonishment. The cancerous demon fixed its bloodshot, green eyes on the kneeling warrior, and angrily pulled the firearm from its inhuman throat. It growled with the animosity of a thousand suns, preparing to pluck this thorn from its scaly hide.

Without warning, three tendrils lunged forth and impaled Vincent, pinning him hard against the wall. The spattered pattern of dark crimson liquid adorned the wall against his back as he slowly raised his head and watched the demon charge at him, to end his torment once and for all.

Author’s Notes: Sorry for the delay on this one, everybody. It was a combination of writer’s block, lazy-itis and other factors that caused the delay.

Two chapters left! I’ve already written up the guideline for them, so they shouldn’t be too long coming.

Cloud and Tifa finally join the fight against Weapon next time, and the fate of Vincent draws ever closer to its conclusion. Watch for it! Please feel free to email any comments or concerns.