

Chapter Twenty-Four: The End of the Line

"I know you got problems... hell, we all do. But, you don't even understand yourself. But you gotta understand that there ain't no gettin' offa this train we're on, till get to the end of the line." — *Barret Wallace*

The Onyx Weapon.

A creature of immeasurable malevolence. Like the other Weapons of the Planet, this goliath possessed incredible size and strength. It towered over all unfortunate enough to cross its path. The power at the command of such a creature was unparalleled. But that was the idea. Weapon: It appears when the Planet is in danger; reducing everything to nothingness. Not much else was known about these so-called monsters, other than the fact that they were created by the Planet. What little facts mankind has gathered on these almost mystical creatures was obtained through the writings of the ancient Cetra. They foretold of the Weapons' return to the Planet if and when the day comes that they are needed.

It is not even known whether or not any of the Weapons posses sentience, whether they are self-aware. They may only be mindless beasts, acting on instinct and inborn impulses. Even Professor Gast, an expert in the field of ancient research, could not determine what manner of conscience drives these great specimens.

But this Weapon was not like the rest. It possessed a driving force, a direct and specific purpose. It was also larger than the others, and it had not been wakened by the Planet. It had been summoned by Jenova. The alien devil usurped the will of the Planet by infecting the Onyx Weapon with its evil. Now this denizen of the skies served a different purpose - it no longer protected the Planet, it strove to destroy it.

The colossal Onyx Weapon spread its massive wings in a world of complete blackness. Its glimmering onyx claws stabbed forth at the cold oblivion that had encompassed it. The armor-like shell that covered its entire body sparkled against the black backdrop, its crimson eyes glowed with hatred. The savage roared at the ebony space surrounding him. It or Jenova were not to be trifled with. It was almost as if the void were mocking it by ignoring its outburst.

Finally, its cries were answered. A swirling rosy mist appeared from nowhere and entangled the howling beast. The Onyx Weapon stabbed at the approaching fog violently, to no avail. Even though the vapors were clearly immune to the Weapon's attacks, it struggled madly to exact its vengeance.

That was when they came. The beast turned its head just in time to see the blade of a giant sword strike down upon it with bewildering force. Sir Galahad - first of the attackers - honored member of the noble Knights of the Round. Next came Sir Gawain, who dealt the creature a mortal blow. The Onyx Weapon roared in pain and anger. The attacks continued. One after another, they came, each assault more brutal than the last. Lancelot, Tor, Bedivere, Kei - all Sirs in the legendary band of warriors. The Onyx Weapon let loose another reverberating wail as the giant mallet of Sir Marhaus thundered down upon it. Sir Uwayne was next, summoning forth a storm of meteors upon the reeling giant. Sir Lionel struck the beast with his staff - a blow which would have shattered any lesser a monster. Sir Sagramour followed the onslaught of his brethren with an attack of his own. The gallant Sir Robbin summoned a holy storm of lightning to smite the great creature. Then it was the turn of the mystical Merlin, noblest of sages. The wizard called forth the magics of the ancients and charged his staff with measureless power, bringing the full force down upon the staggering monster. Then all grew quiet. The mists, the noble knights, everything had once again become a void. But the fight was by no means over. A flicker of light in the distance caught the eye of the brute. The light grew in intensity and momentarily blinded the Onyx Weapon. But this was not simply light - this was he. Arthur Pendragon, lord of the Knights of the Round - ruler of this mystical realm of Avalon. Even the enormous Weapon was dwarfed by this towering warrior. A gleam of courage flashed in the eyes of the knight as he lifted high the sword of Excalibur. With unfathomable force, he landed the famous blade hard on the disoriented behemoth, knocking him asunder. It roared in agony, finding no place for solace in the surrounding void. And with the pain, its anger exceedingly amplified.

The beast hunkered low, folding its wings tightly against its body, using them like a shield against the hostile surroundings.

White cracks appeared in the surrounding void, growing in size and joining together, until finally the abyss itself shattered, and the Weapon found itself back in Midgar - or more specifically, back in the massive crater it had created with its blast.

Barret Wallace faded into our reality next to Cid Highwind, completely drained of his strength. The ex-miner clenched his jaw as the steady raindrops felt like bowling balls as they pelted his heaving body. He managed to stand on crutches of hate alone, his body refusing to give in to fatigue if only to spite the towering monster.

Slowly, the gigantic juggernaut lifted its massive head and growled. A boiling rage flowed through its body. The blood of anger coursed through its ancient veins. Weapon was not amused. Jenova was even less elated. Gradually, the beast's eyes met the source of its current irritation - the humans. Like a cancer, they spread their infectious reach across this planet, sucking it's life force for their own petty conveniences. But Jenova was of higher purpose. Jenova would use the resources of this world to increase its own power. All that stood in its path were these insignificant mortals. The Onyx Weapon glowered down at Barret and Cid, and began to summon its inner energies. A small flicker of energy formed in front of the creature, a growing hum echoed as it collected itself for a deadly barrage.

The streaming downpour of rainwater glistened on the hard shell of the Weapon's exterior as it gathered its destructive force. Suddenly, a boulder of ice spontaneously formed above it and struck the massive monster hard against its back, causing it to cease its preparation. With unimaginable speed, the colossus reared its head to the source of this further indignation. Cait Sith version 3.0 stood bravely facing the overwhelming behemoth, the torrential rain sparkling around it like some ceremonious display.

"You know, this holding on to your life is really starting to annoy me."

Vincent Valentine peered into space through blurred, darkening vision. The brave ex-Turk could feel his heart rate slowing. Soon, he would caress the other side of oblivion again. But this time, there would be no return. This time, there would be no deus ex machina, there would be nothing to save him at the last possible moment. There would be no Phoenix to pull him from the hereafter and return him to rejoin the battle for the sake of the Planet.

The Phoenix summon spell had been used all too recently for it to be available again. The magic of the ancients was a complicated matter. There was no unlimited source - one must wait for the mystical orbs of materia to restore its energies so that such mystical creatures could once again be called forth from the astral plane to assist those in the material realm. And since Vincent had so recently used the summon orb to save the life of Shera in the sunken bridge of the Highwind, he hadn't bothered to bring the powerless crystal with him. Yes, this time there would be no glorious rebirth; of that there could be no debate. This time, when the life within him drained from his weary body, that would be it.

But that wasn't entirely cause for panic in the befuddled mind of Vincent Valentine. He had lived a long life - much longer than the span of any normal man - and this would be a good death. Dying while protecting the Planet. Yes, his father would be proud. What else would the paternal member of the Valentine house think of his only son: far off in the future, fighting an alien of unimaginable strength. Vincent almost missed his bygone relation - if he were in fact capable of such sentiment. But now he cared for Lucrecia alone. The woman with whom he hoped to meet with in the hereafter. Even without feeling or emotion, Vincent would relish the chance to see her angelic face again. Perhaps soon, he would get his chance.

A chance for which he could thank no one else but this - this creature before him. Jenova. Bloody, greenish tendrils ran from the fatal wounds where they had pierced the chest of Vincent Valentine and stabbed into the filthy, now blood-stained walls of the abandoned lab to their owner: a creature of unspeakable horror. Jenova had taken many forms during its time on the Planet, the latest of which was this humanoid of unnatural hue and proportions, a nest of tentacles stemmed from its back and filled the room like the roots of a cursed weed. Vincent could almost make out the face of his former comrade - Reece the Turk - in the inhuman monstrosity. His old friend has been poisoned by Jenova, his body reformed into its beastly image. There was no Reece left within this vessel. Vincent knew the Turk he had once fought alongside was no more.

"At first it was mildly amusing," the green-eyed demon hissed, "That one so hopelessly outmatched would hold his pathetic grip on life." The vile creature neared its head and hissed in Vincent's face. "But enough is -" Without warning, Jenova pulled its tentacles from the wall behind him and hurled the barely-conscious warrior across the room like a rag doll. Vincent's limp body was wrenched free of the tendrils which were embedded into it revealing heaving torso wounds on his chest and stomach. The ex-Turk hit the opposite wall with a resounding thud and tumbled helplessly to the floor.

Jenova approached the fallen hero with the taste of victory on its heathen lips. It glided across the room carried by the network of tentacles which entangled the lab. But the taste in its inhuman mouth suddenly grew abhorrent.

"You still live?!" the devil growled, "Why do you cling to this fragile existence?! I've won. This Planet, and the life force within, is mine by right of conquest! My Weapon is even now putting the final nail in the coffin of your piteous friends outside!" Jenova lashed out at Vincent's crumpled form, striking him with its alien tendrils. "Die! Die! Die!" the howls of the demon echoed throughout the abandoned Shinra building.

But there was no one to answer these injustices. No one to step in and right the wrongs being carried out. No one to rush in to Hojo's darkened lab and demand that the monster fight someone who had the ability to stand on his own two feet.

Jenova coiled its tentacles around the crumpled figure and lifted him into the air. The beast hissed as it tightened its grasp gradually, far beyond the threshold of a healthy, uninjured fighter. The demon sneered as it increased the pressure, finally beginning to feel the snapping of ribs. Bone and sinew began to snap under the cruel strain being applied to it.

"Still you maintain this delicate grasp on your life?" Jenova snarled, "If I had known this, I would've taken more drastic steps sooner in our relationship." At this remark, Vincent weakly moved his eyes and stared at the fiend. "What's that? You didn't know?" Jenova howled with laughter before continuing. "When I took control of your precious Lucrecia, I used her body to give birth to my Sephiroth. Crushing your feeble emotions was simply a fringe. I enjoyed your suffering so much I made that puppet Hojo allow you to live." Jenova glared into the eyes of the half-conscious fighter. "But now, I will correct that oversight, just as I dealt with that useless human, Lucrecia."

Vincent's head lifted suddenly, his eyes bore into the beast with the rage of a thousand suns. Even though it had the upper hand, Jenova flinched backwards at the sudden movement. The creature regained itself and grinned at its outraged hostage. But Jenova's grin would not last. The hate-filled eyes of Vincent Valentine began to glow a low red, and they grew brighter at each passing second. Jenova slowly uncoiled its tendrils, releasing the formerly helpless ex-Turk.

But Vincent did not fall to the cold steel floor. His body remained suspended in air, his glowing eyes fixed upon the cancerous beast. He hovered there, saying nothing, as Jenova continued to back away slowly. The realization of what was about to happen became clear to the alien abomination.

"No...", its inhuman, hollow voice was distant, "This cannot be."

"Oh yes," Vincent answered slowly, "The rules have changed, and now the battle will begin in earnest." The floating protagonist began to fade out of existence, and in his place: something else.

Before Jenova, on the floor of the lab, knelt a large, grey demon. Its massive crimson wings were folded against its body. Slowly, the beast lifted its head and glared at the alien. Its hollow yellow eyes narrowed with contempt at the sight of this intruder to its world. Without waning, the Chaos demon spread its impressive wings and roared, summoning its vast strength for the battle ahead.

And Jenova trembled.

Barret Wallace scowled up at the giant towering over them. Nothing short of a miracle would be necessary to save them this time. He peered upwards through the rain filled skies for evidence of some divine intervention, but found none. The Onyx Weapon growled as it prepared to once and for all finish these insects that persisted to interfere with its task. Jenova would not be hindered. Jenova?

The enormous beast turned its head in the direction of the abandoned Shinra building. Thunder rumbled in the distance - or was it judgment? The Weapon seemed completely distracted by something taking place in the ravaged former headquarters of the Shinra Inc. What was taking place - Barret Wallace could not imagine.

"Barret!"

The large miner turned away from the giant in the direction of the shout. There, approaching fast on the horizon, Cloud Strife ran toward the battleground with unimaginable speed. His enhanced muscles carried the young warrior across the rusted, rainy streets of Midgar like a hawk in flight. As the unofficial leader of their band grew near, Barret lowered his massive hand palm up, in preparation for his arrival on the scene. Mere seconds later, Cloud's boot touched down on Barret's outstretched hand, and was instantly catapulted high into the air toward the towering goliath. Barret launched his young friend upwards with the bulk of his astounding strength, just as Cloud himself pushed away from his comrade in order to gain the greatest possible height.

Cloud soared upwards toward the Onyx Weapon on an intersecting arc, leaving the solid Planet far behind him. He drifted, through the sky, through the relentless rain, soaring like an eagle. Time itself seemed to melt away, as the drops of water in the sky all around him seemed to slow to a crawl to the ground far below. The youthful combatant narrowed his eyes as even he began to decelerate in sync with the rest of the world. His heart and breathing slowed. Carefully, he reached back and closed his fingers around the handle of his mighty sword.

The ivory blade of the Ultima Sword glistened with the raindrops that slowly traced its deadly surface, to finally drip from their dangerous perch. Cloud brought the sword gradually upwards, raising it to the heavens at almost the same instant a resonant clap of thunder boomed in the distance. The Onyx Weapon sluggishly turned its massive head back to the battle at hand, his hollow, red gaze met with the young warrior suspended in the sky before him. But it had no time to counter the impending strike, there was no chance to react - only to recoil.

Cloud Strife pulled the sword down hard, its pearly blade striking the giant with incredible force. No sooner had the edge connected with the Weapon, than it was almost instantly brought back up for a second assault. Then another. Over and over again. Cloud squinted at the flying sparks erupting from each slow motion attack. His teeth were clenched with rage. Jenova's evil, and the danger brought by this Weapon, would end here. Now. No mistake.

Barret, Cid, Yuffie and Cait watched with awe as Cloud's Ultima Sword moved faster than their eyes could perceive it. The Omnislash was truly an attack to be reckoned with. They gazed heavenward in utter amazement as the young hero seemed to drift through the air, unleashing strike after thunderous strike upon the reeling goliath. The Onyx Weapon staggered back, destroyed several remaining buildings, as the indomitable blade wreaked cold vengeance upon it.

In the slow moving world of Cloud Strife, the young man could feel something aside from his personal rage as he watched his sword smite the retreating beast. It was the same alien feeling he had felt when he was fighting the hordes of attacking convicts in the Corel Desert. The Ultima Sword seemed to shudder with life. Dark hatred forged on the holy white blade and ran the length of the weapon, touching Cloud's hand and racing up his arm, finally collecting at his spine. This - presence - for lack of a better term, seemed to dwell within his mighty sword, and it was by no means a peaceful force. Even marginally disturbed by this unexpected spiritual experience, Cloud pressed on, continuing his incursion against the mighty creature.

Barret counted approximately fifteen strikes in all, which took place in the window of about six seconds, before Cloud lifted his mighty edge above his head for the penultimate blow. A bright light flared from the blade of his sword as the young

paladin held the weapon still, carefully eyeing his quarry. At length, he brought the Ultima Sword down hard, push the blade downward, running it the entire length of the beast before touching its ivory point softly against the Planet below.

With an ear-splitting roar, the Onyx Weapon lost its footing and plummeted to the sector below, completely crushing every building and structure beneath its massive bulk. Midgar rumbled in the aftershock of the fall, and the Sector Four plate collapsed under the incredible strain of the giant's weight. With a reverberating thunder, the entire sector crashed against the abandoned slums below it, filling the rainy sky with smoke and debris.

Cloud dropped to his knees in exhaustion, Yuffie and Barret hurried up to him to assist. The Ultima Sword felt as if it weighed a thousand pounds in the shaky grasp of the blonde warrior. He rested against it like a crutch, to prevent from completely collapsing on the smolder crater before him. The three stood there, at the edge of Sector Three, and watched the now silent fallen plate before them. Cait carefully scanned the entire area for any further sign of danger.

Cid Highwind shakily placed a cigarette in his mouth and lit it, allowing the soothing drug to calm his system. His eyes happened to fall on the approaching form of Tifa Lockhart, the final member of their party. The young woman sprinted past the pilot to the side of her fiancé, Cloud, to see if he was alright. Slowly, Cloud lifted his head to her and smiled. The worst, it seemed, was over.

However, a gathering roar erupting from the massive hole that was once Sector Four told the ex-mercenary that his assumption was in error. Slowly, the Onyx Weapon ascended from the smoky pit and into the air before them, carried by its massive wings. The beast roared with rage and damnation at the interference of these pitiful wretches. A long scar ran the length of its torso from its chest to its abdomen, right where the final blow struck. Barret gazed in abhorrence at the monumental nemesis floating above them.

"Damn," the large miner growled, "What the hell does it take to kill that sonuvabitch?"

"More than we've done." Cloud weakly answered.

A shrill, ear-splitting squeal echoed through the remains of the upper floors of the Shinra Building. The very dust and grime of the decrepit offices seemed to leap at the force of this outburst. In Hojo's lab, a battle was being waged for the fate of the Planet itself. But there were no cut and clear lines between good and evil in this unfathomable contest. There was no 'side of angels' for the denizens of goodness to cheer on. This, was a contention of anger. The struggle would be won by nothing short of blinding rage.

The imposing Chaos Demon lifted the latest incarnation of Jenova high above its head as the alien roared with blood lust. The grey dervish ignored the laments of its foe, it was not here to argue its own purpose. Chaos was summoned by its anchor to this realm - Vincent Valentine - for the purpose of action alone.

The mighty demon rose from the filthy, battle-worn floor of the lab on wings of unearthly might. Jenova lashed its countless tendrils wildly in every direction, hoping at least to secure an avenue to use to its advantage. But the alien cancer would not get its chance. Chaos thrust the creature's body downward with the sum of its strength, its patented Satan Slam, hard against the reinforced floor. The reverberating boom echoed throughout the entire abandoned building, but that was far from the attack's conclusion. Jenova's flailing body hit the floor with such force, that even the double-enforced construction was by far no match for the force of the grey devil's pitch. Jenova broke through the floor as if it were made of matchsticks, colliding with the prison level below them, and continued on. One after another, the helpless wraith crashed hard against each level only to break through, its tentacles following in its wake like some ceremonial parade ribbon.

The Chaos Demon wasted not a moment in pursuing its prey - the hellish gargoyle dove into the pit it had created in its assault and soared after the falling monster. It folded its wings tightly against its back in an incredible dive as the air screeched passed it. Gradually, the flying demon began to overtake its target.

But Jenova was not without its own power. The fiend coiled its flailing tendrils around the throat of Chaos as soon as it was near enough, and began to squeeze and crush with all its might. Chaos narrowed its inhuman, soulless yellow eyes as it reached out and grasped its enemy with all its might, pushing downward with the impressive momentum it had gained in the drop. The locked combatants plummeted faster still, passing through the floors of the Shinra Building now as if they were made of paper, each bone-shattering blow being felt squarely on the back of Jenova. Chaos had no other motive here than the complete obliteration of its quarry. Any other consequences were categorically disregarded.

Tifa Lockhart summoned forth the magic of the ancients as the rainy sky erupted with fire and brimstone, striking the floating goliath with as much force as the glowing gems mounted on her gloves could gather. Yuffie Kisaragi bolstered her comrade's assault with ice and lightning together, the capable mage astounding all those at present with her mystical prowess. Cait Sith likewise took the initiative against the hovering Weapon, conjuring a storm of meteoric rock upon the great beast.

"Agh!" Cloud Strife grasped his forehead as he stood by for his chance to attack, overcome by a sudden assault from within. "Cloud!" Barret Wallace prevented the younger man from collapsing at his feet just as Cid Highwind neared the two to investigate. "What's the problem?"

"Jenova," the blonde soldier of fortune whispered, "I can hear it, feel its presence."

"Shit," growled the larger man, "This ain't no time for you to derail on us now, Strife! Suck it up!"

"No, no," Cloud weakly shook his muddled head, "It's not trying to control me, it's calling out in pain. My Jenova cells must be letting me hear it..."

"Just as long as your space cooties don't cause you to drop the ball here and now," Cid barked, "I don't give a rat's ass how hurt that thing is gettin'."

"It's not the Weapon, it's Jenova." Cloud removed his hand from his head and eyed his foul-mouthed friends. "It's Vincent, or rather Chaos, he's fighting Jenova herself."

"What?" Cid looked up toward the Weapon still being pounded by the trio's barrage of attacks, "Where?"

"Nearby, the Shinra Building," answered the young hero. "But we can't let up on Weapon. We have to hope Vincent can stay alive long enough for us to help him."

"Speaking of which," Cid offered, "Did you notice how that thing got hurt by your sword, but not by anyone else's attacks?" "Yes," said Cloud, "I think it has something to do with the fact that the Ultima Sword was a part of the Ultima Weapon. I could feel a - presence in it when I used it on the Onyx Weapon. It's almost like the Ultima Weapon is using its power against Jenova. That might be the only thing we have that can win this one." The three turned back to the battle at hand taking place in the driving rain of Midgar's blackened skies.

"In that case," Cid announced, "We'll be puttin' you back in the game."

"You cretin!" growled the alien, hollow voice of Jenova as they struggled in a sub-basement floor of the Shinra building, "You dare presume to thwart that which has been in motion for countless ages? I have sent more formidable foes than you to their demise."

The Chaos Demon ignored the meaningless prattle of Jenova, pressing onward against it. Whether the creature understood Jenova's words or not was immaterial. It was not here to be threatened or bartered with. Chaos was here to put an end to the cancerous plague that has infested the very Planet for far too long.

With a ground shaking roar, the winged creature cast its arms upward, calling to the plane of its birth, calling for the strength enough to split the world in two, if only to seal it together upon the mashed remains of Jenova. The off-world conqueror scowled at the events before it, the gathering of some immeasurable force to be used against its will. One way or another, this battle simply had to end - and soon.

"What the hell are you smokin' now, Highwind?!" Barret Wallace growled at the blonde pilot glaring back at him, trying without success to understand the strange request.

"I'm serious, Wallace!" the beleaguered Captain argued, "Knock my &*##?#!in' block off! Just hit me!" The two men stared at each other through the rain-soaked battleground before Barret held up his fist and examined it. At length, the large miner slugged the awaiting fighter, sending him sprawling to the ground behind him.

Barret simply watched the frazzled man slowly sit up, holding his jaw. Cloud watched in utter disbelief as to why Cid would want Barret to strike him down. But they got their answer soon enough.

A red haze enshrouded the fallen form of Cid Highwind, swirling around him like a comforting mist. Slowly, the pilot dug the haft of his Venus Gospel spear into the ground and rose to his feet. Tifa, Cait and Yuffie stood aside as they watched Cid walk toward the floating Weapon, his walk becoming a stride, his stride becoming a sprint. Cid raced faster toward the edge of the pit created by the fall of the Sector Four plate, toward the awaiting crisis from the sky, toward what would no doubt be an impressive display. As soon as his foot touched the lip of the steel chasm, the foul-mouthed crusader launched himself high into the air toward the Onyx Weapon.

The imposing gargantuan watched in awe as this puny creature climbed through the rainy heavens on some unseen wings of gallantry to intercept it. As soon as Cid was in the wake of the towering beast, he lifted high his mighty spear and began to strike out against this dauntless foe with blinding speed. The trademark "Big Brawl", a formidable technique at the command of a formidable champion. Again and again the spear struck the creature, as Cid seemed to circle the monster like an angry hornet. Blue and white sparks shot from the areas where beast and lance intersected with incredible force, a storm of rage and power that would put the most elaborate display of fireworks to shame.

As the pilot's attack surged on in the sky away from them, the rest of Avalanche combined their efforts on the ground to heal the strength of their beloved leader. Cure spells, potions of varied effects, all focused on the restoration of Cloud Strife for his second attempt at victory. This would be the final fantasy - the last hope for a new and promising future.

And just as the exhibition of might and magic ceased above, Cid sailed downward to the awaiting Planet, snagged from a deadly plummet by a leaping android cat and moogle. Once the rest saw that Cid and Cait were safely away from the Weapon on the opposite side of the abyss, Cloud rose to his feet and approached the onyx giant.

He lifted his ivory blade up in the air, holding it aloft in front of him, summoning the strength granted to him by the departed Weapons, pleading for the forces of the Planet itself to empower his spirit with the ability to end this grievous threat. The familiar white light encompassed Cloud, first just from his sword, then encircling him. He leapt with the strength of ten men into the sky and once again faced the indomitable nemesis.

Too fast. It was all happening too fast. Or coming apart.

Jenova glowered at the towering demon that stood over its crumpled form. Almost all of the bones in the alien's body were broken, or crushed. It couldn't feel anything beyond what could be considered its neck. And things seemed to be getting worst for the off world warlord.

"Hear me demon," the hollow abomination hissed, "If I should die," the creature gasped and coughed, "I - shall take you with me."

But Chaos could not hear the empty threats of the soulless fiend, its vacant prophecies like dying sparks in some darkened corridor. There would be no debate - only destruction. The mighty gargoyle roared with the rage of a thousands suns and more, the force of which caused Jenova to flinch with dire apprehension. The Chaos Saber was a means of unspeakable force, an implement of unparalleled eradication. Chaos thrust its arms again to the heavens and brought them down hard in the direction of the weakened opponent. A vortex of flame and brimstone formed at the foci between its talons and shot forth at the alien. A tremendous explosion erupted just between the two mighty combatants, its full force directed against the reeling fiend. Jenova screamed in agony, tears of inhuman green exploded from its eyes as it let loose one final, primal scream.

After this conclusive, immeasurable act, neither Jenova nor Chaos would ever lay inhuman eyes upon this plane again.

The Onyx Weapon watched in amazement at this further transgression that was about to take place against it. The illuminated warrior soared upwards to meet the giant head on, like the legendary David, only this Goliath would be struck by far more than a simple stone and sling. But Weapon would have none of this, nor would its master, Jenova. The great behemoth lifted its arm to smite the insolent gnat from its superior presence without a second thought. Cloud watched as the mighty limb rushed before him like a runaway freight train, the noble warrior's heart sunk at the impending blow which would without a doubt liquify his bones when it made contact.

Cloud closed his eyes and made his peace with the Planet just as grim oblivion poised to welcome him into its cold embrace. But it was not to be. The Onyx Weapon ceased its attack suddenly, pausing its appendage in mid swing. Something was wrong. Jenova no longer beckoned it. No longer pulled its strings. Weapon was free of the treacherous servitude visited upon it by the ageless one. Now, it would fulfill its true destiny - to rise from the Planet. To emerge with its might, reducing everything to nothingness. The world would be freed of all disease, that of Jenova and of the humans.

But such lofty objectives were not yet to be. Cloud struck the formidable beast with all the might within his body and his sword. The Omnislash was unleashed upon the reeling titan - it roared in extreme agony as the searing blade cut through its supposedly impenetrable armor like never before. Both the spirits and wills of Cloud and the Ultima Weapon reigned their hate and life upon this anomalous chimera of Jenova and Planet without leniency. The mindless savage howled as pieces of its shell showered down to the watered metallic structures below.

Again the blade struck, and again. One time after another - an eternity of malice focused into six seconds of torture. White hot sparks shot from the creature, filling the dark, rainy skies with light and energy. The polluted droplets dissolved in the very vicinity of the incandescent embers. And it was over. Cloud touched down on the other side of the chasm, holding his sword behind him. A look of complacency in his eyes, the taste of victory upon his lips.

And once again, Weapon fell to the earth. The creature again landed with an impact that rattled all of Midgar, just as another disturbance boomed from the Shinra Building, causing the towering structure to topple like a house of cards before an angry wind. Smoke and ember covered the entire metropolis in a heavy blanket of darkness and gray nothing. And then silence. A light wind rushed over the surface of the Planet.

Cloud, Cid and Cait gathered themselves up from where the tremors had cast them down, and looked with wonder at the surrounding desolation. Tifa, Barret and Yuffie likewise watched them from the opposite side of the gorge, the sense of

triumph threatening to overtake them. Tifa waved with excitement at her beloved fiancé from across the sector's expanse as they made their way around it.

"We... did it?" Cid's voice was low and distant in contrast with the swelling of relief he could feel washing through his heart. "We did." That was all Cloud could muster as he wearily wiped his forehead on the back of his filthy glove. The Planet, it seemed, was safe at last.

But such overwhelming victories are often fleeting in the unendurable eyes of destiny. Once again a low rumble was heard from the ravine before them. A mighty talon clasped the edge of the pit, soon accompanied by the enormous head of the Onyx Weapon. It glared upon them again, slowly lifting itself from its premature grave again.

It stared down at them, its splintered frame a testament to how close they had come to defeating it. But there was no prize for an incomplete conquest. What they had accomplished here - was not enough. The great beast roared like an unrelenting thunder, spreading its abraded arms wide and shaking with power. Suddenly, a circle of energy formed before its maw, the two ravaged chest plates on the creature parted, opening again as wide as they could, just as the familiar sphere of electricity collected before it. And again, the bolt of energy discharged from the Weapon, blasting everything in its path.

"No..." Tifa's voice was small and unheard by those around her, as she watched Cloud, Cait and Cid turn from the deadly barrage just as it annihilated the street on which they stood. Then the beam passed quickly around the crater, launching the remaining three members of Avalanche to a painful end.

The blackened bodies of those who had once heard the cry of the Planet lay sprawled about the smoldering wreckage, motionless. A single, desperate plea filled the mind of Cloud Strife as he helplessly looked upon the colossus that hovered over them. A plea to the Planet itself. To the Lifestream, to the Ancients, even to Aeris herself - any such force that could intervene and change the outcome of this battle so that mankind may yet have the chance to thrive on this precious world. But his prayer would go unanswered. For not even the Planet itself would be capable of staying the hand of Weapon this time.

Author's Notes: The end...?

Not quite. One chapter to go, one Planet left to save. How can the team pull a final card from the deck this time? You wouldn't believe it if I told you.

The moment we've all been waiting for is here.

Next time: the Final Crisis.

Everything ends, all questions are answered. Stay tuned.