

Chapter Eight: Distant Rumbings

"Weapon cannot vanish. ...it remains asleep somewhere on the Planet." - *Ifalna Gast*

The calm seas rippled under the orange haze of the setting sun. Nothing but the ocean surface extended as far as the eye could see. Calm sea breeze caressed the crests of the tiny ripples on the water as cool air met cool ocean. Time itself seemed to slow down almost to a halt as this breathtaking testament to serenity colored the evening atmosphere.

Suddenly the serenity was shattered by a large structure tearing through the peaceful sky! The roar of jet engines drowned out the low sounds of the sea air. A grey metal surface passed before the setting sun like a runaway locomotive, which sported a tasteless pictorial depiction of a girl in a skimpy red bikini. Past the posing seductress, the word "Highwind" was scribbled in bright red letters across the structure. Rotors turned in sequence carrying the behemoth across the sky like a soaring hawk in pursuit of its prey. Inside the craft, gears turned at a fast pace, pistons fired in exact patterns, and steam blanketed the machinery like a light fog.

"Nibelheim dead ahead, Captain!"

Cid Highwind sat, slouched over and half-asleep, in the middle of the bridge of his airship with a lit cigarette hanging out of his mouth. He groaned and struggled to his feet and looked out of the observation windshield towards the scenery racing below them.

"Alright," The surly pilot puffed on his nicotine stick, "I'll go tell Shera and the others to get ready to land." Cid started towards the exit and paused, looking back, "Do you think you pinheads could keep us flying straight until I get back?" Not really expecting an answer, Cid slammed the door behind him, and the bridge crew all smiled at each other and continued their duties.

Cid made his way through the engine room of his massive airship to the operations room. A long metal table completed the boardroom-like setting of this crucial area. Seated at the table, two men in oily coveralls and a woman in a white lab coat. On the floor next to the table sat a red puma-like creature with one bright yellow eye and a tail of fire.

"We're almost at Nibelheim, people!" The old pilot let out a puff of smoke. "Shera, did you get those schematics like I asked you?"

The woman in the lab coat adjusted her glasses, "Yes, Cap - er, Cid."

The red beast raised his head, "Cid, you have only been hollering at her to get them since we left Rocket Town. She knows what she is to accomplish here today." The woman blushed at this comment.

"Dammit, Red!" Cid stomped out the butt of his cigarette. "You ain't worked with her as long as I did!" He lit up another smoke and turned to the two men in greasy coveralls. "And you two brain surgeons think you can handle working on a reactor instead of a rusty old rocket?"

"Sure thing, Captain!" The two men nodded in agreement. "We're just happy to get outta that boring town and have something exciting to do!"

Cid coughed at this comment, "Exciting?! If you think converting the Nibelheim reactor to run on North Corel coal instead of Mako is exciting, I got a few stories to turn your hair white!"

"It is a shame Vincent declined to accompany us," Red XIII looked up at the map posted on the far end wall, "Sometimes I worry about him; the way he seems to distance himself."

"Hell, Red," Cid sat at the long table, "You know what he thinks o' Nibelheim! That place still gives him the creeps. I'd have bad memories of anyplace where some quack did crazy experiments on me!" He took a deep puff and then amended, "Plus, he said he'd feed Shera's cat."

Suddenly, a speaker mounted near the ceiling of the operations room crackled to life, "Captain! We are about to land!" Cid looked up at the box as it spoke and then turned back to the others. "Okay, people, lets get our gear together and get ready to move out!"

The peaceful town of Nibelheim was quiet to say the least. Its new citizens had almost completely settled in and still found their new surroundings strange and uncomfortable. But given the time to get used to their new homes, they would surely grow to love their little peace of the Planet. The normally gentle breeze that caressed the town suddenly began to increase in intensity. Then it was accompanied by a dull roar which grew louder at the passage of each second. And a huge shadow descending on the village heralded the appearance of the airship Highwind. Dust and smoke blew through the streets of Nibelheim as the ship's crew set her safely down on the outskirts of the town. When it touched the ground, the Highwind's propellers slowed as her engines powered down. A rope ladder rolled down the side of the deck and several figures began to descend on the little town.

"Cid Highwind, as I live and breath!" A young girl in her early twenties wearing a white top with a short black skirt walked towards the landed vessel. Tifa Lockhart's long, black hair swayed in the breeze generated by the slowly-turning rotors at the top of the airship. She shook hands with the surly pilot and patted the bright red beast on its head.

"Hey, Tifa", Cid let a wry smile form on his lips, "Where's that spikey- headed fiancee of yours?"

Tifa smiled, "Cloud's at the mayor's house, planning our hike up Mount Nibel tomorrow."

"And how is Reeve?" Red XIII spoke in a rumbling voice.

"He's taking the adjustment from Head of Urban Development for the Shinra Corporation to mayor of a small town pretty well. I think he's going to make a good mayor."

Cid took a drag of his cancer stick, "Well, hell, it was his idea to move the people who couldn't afford to live in Kalm or used to live in Mideel or the Midgar slums and invite them to move here." Cid and the others began to walk towards the town square.

Tifa surveyed the group, "Vincent decided not to come along?" Red and Cid both lowered their heads, and Tifa nodded in silence.

Cloud leaned on a large oak table and surveyed the map in front of him. A cup of coffee steamed off to the side. The mayor's house was neat and tidy, with a simple elegance. The furniture was in good condition, but not that of blue-blood royalty. Mayor Reeve entered the main room from the kitchen, a cup of coffee in his hand.

"Okay, Cloud," Reeve attempted to sip his beverage and pulled it away from his face when he burned his upper lip. "Where did we leave off?"

"Right here," Cloud rested his finger on a point of the map, "The rope bridge we built here will take us across this ridge to

the reactor. There we can finish the reconstruction of Cid and Shera's prototype coal reactor. I just hope it works, we could really use the power."

"I have every confidence in Shera's work," Reeve managed to take a sip of his coffee. "If she can live with Cid all these years, she can do anything!" And with that the two shared a chuckle.

"Cid said he was stopping by Cosmo Canyon to pick up Red. He'll be able to tell us whether our reactor will safely generate power without harming the Planet." Cloud looked towards the window at the setting sun. "Mog knows it's suffered enough."

"Damn it, Cloud! You are one strange spikey-haired dude!" The door of the mayor's house swung open to reveal Cid and the others. Cid dropped his duffle bag near the wall and leaned his spear in the corner. Red and Tifa entered right behind him with Shera and the mechanics taking up the rear.

"Cid, how are you?" Cloud shook hands with the old pilot, "What did you bring that for?" He nodded towards the Venus Gospel leaning in the corner.

"Well, hell," Cid grinned at the young man, "We're goin' up Mount Nibel and I don't want to be caught off guard by any overgrown mako lizards!"

Red XIII dropped the satchel he carried in his teeth and spoke, "Cloud, it is good to see you." Reeve and Tifa began talking with Shera and the others in the background while Cid and Red followed Cloud into the kitchen.

"I'm glad you came, Red." Cloud smiled down at the beast as Cid began pouring himself a cup of coffee. "We got our work cut out for us in the morning. Tifa's going to lead us up to the reactor where we'll finish the reconstruction work. Hopefully this new coal reactor will give us as much power as the one that ran on Lifestream."

"Damn, Cloud you worry too much!" Cid sipped on his mug and took out a cigarette. "I helped Shera design it, so you can be damn sure it's gonna work!"

Red looked up seriously at Cloud, "So have you and Tifa set a wedding date yet?" Cloud looked nervously down at the gentle beast.

"Yeah," Cid broke in, "When are you gonna get the stones to take the big leap?!" At this comment the pilot broke out into boisterous laughter.

Cloud turned slightly red, "Hold it, hold it." Cid and Red quieted to hear out their friend. "What do you care about me when you still haven't told Shera how you really feel?" Cid abruptly stopped his laughter as Red and Cloud began their own chuckle. He was about to holler his rebuttal when Tifa walked in.

"What's so funny in here?" She said as she smiled at the three.

Cloud spoke as she put her arms around him, "Oh uh nothing, Tifa."

She grinned at her fiancée, "Yeah I'm surrrre."

Cid finished his coffee and dropped the mug in the sink, "Well before I gag on this lovey-dovey crap, why don't you tell us where we'll be stayin' the night?"

Vincent slouched on the couch of Cid's house and stared blindly at the television. The color-pattern show. How many times had he seen it? Shera's cat, Palmer, was curled up on his stomach asleep. He scratched its ears with his normal hand and rested his mechanical claw on the arm rest next to him. His long crimson cape and cowl were hung up on the hanger on the wall, leaving him wearing only his black outfit. He was ashamed that he had refused to accompany Cid and Shera to Nibelheim to help with the new reactor. They had opened their home to him after the METEOR crisis passed. He had nowhere to go. When Cid stopped at the waterfall cave, Vincent found Lucrecia had vanished, most likely since Jenova had been defeated in the northern crater. So he had nothing. No home. No friends. Nowhere to turn. He couldn't go back to Shinra - it didn't exist anymore. He couldn't even stay at Midgar. The close proximity of the meteor had severely damaged its structural integrity and so it had been condemned.

So Cid and Shera had opened up their home to him. Cid turned his tool shed into a room for Vincent. Shera cooked his meals. And they had asked nothing in return. Until now. But he couldn't go through with it. Those streets. That mansion. It was all too painful yet. If Vincent never saw Nibelheim again, he would die a happy man. So here Vincent sat. A cat his only company. The hum of the television his only conversation.

Vincent's eyelids began to lower as he slowly lost consciousness. The night crickets in Rocket Town resembled a peaceful lullaby that soothed him towards slumber. There were no lights on in Cid's house, since Vincent could see just as well in pure darkness. The only flicker of light emanated from the glare of Cid's television set. And Vincent fell asleep.

Vincent....

Vincent jolted awake and sat right up, causing Palmer to leap onto the floor and gallop into the kitchen. The former Turk frantically looked around the room.

"Who's there?! Who said that?! I demand to be answered!"

Nothing. The low-pitched hum of the television his only reply. Had he dreamt it? Was it the voice he thought he had heard? He got up and walked over to the television. He turned it off and looked around the room again. Silence. Aside from the crickets chirping outside, Rocket Town nights were generally quiet and peaceful. Especially when the unofficial Mayor was out of town. But he was sure he had heard it. A voice. Her voice.

Lucrecia.

Vincent would not rest easy tonight.

Cid tossed and turned in his bed at the Nibelheim Inn. For some reason, he was having trouble getting to sleep. He'd told himself it was that cup of coffee he had at Reeve's house, but he knew that wasn't it. He kept hearing Cloud's words in his head.

What do you care about me when you still haven't told Shera how you really feel?

It was stupid, he told himself. Cloud didn't know &\$@!*&!! about nothin'. He had no feelings for Shera. None. Well, that wasn't itself true. She bugged the piss out of him. She got on his nerves all the time. He hollered at her constantly.

But he couldn't imagine life without her.

He shook that last thought out of his head. He'd been hanging around Vincent too long; he was starting to get mushy. Cid's

train of thought was abruptly interrupted by a severe shaking. He sat up and realized this sudden motion extended far beyond his bed. The entire inn began to vibrate and he heard a loud rumbling all around him.

"&#@^!?! What the \$*^%#'s up?!!"

The tremors seemed to increase in intensity as if in answer to the old pilot's outburst! Nibelheim itself trembled violently as Cid wondered if the entire Planet had begun to rumble and quake. Cid frantically put on his pants and boots and kicked open the door to his room. The two mechanics from Rocket Town were staying in the room next to his and Shera and Red were staying with Cloud and Tifa. He pounded on the door and the two mechanics came out and followed him downstairs and out into the street. Cid made sure to take his Venus Gospel with him just in case he needed it.

The ground shook and trembled as the intensity of the quaking continued to increase. Cid and the mechanics carefully made their way toward Cloud's house as the ground beneath them began to crack. Cloud and Red were making their way towards Cid as they passed the well in the center of town.

"Cid! Are you alright?!" Cloud bellowed above the thunderous rumbling of their surroundings. Cid noticed the Ultima Weapon strapped to his back, and wondered if their precautions would be justified. "Tifa stayed with Shera in the house while we came out to see what's causing this earthquake!"

"Well it ain't the chili I had for supper!" Cid looked back at the two mechanics trembling behind him. They wanted excitement - it looked like they should've been more careful about what they wished for.

Red looked up gravely, "This is the third tremor I have witnessed this week! I Have been monitoring them with grandfather's machine!" Red looked around slowly at the shaking scenery. "But this one is the most intense yet!"

Cloud looked down gravely at his friend, "The Lifestream?"

"I am not certain!" Red roared above the rumbling. "I would have to consult my grandfather's machine back at the Canyon! But if this were Lifestream activity, we would have observed some geyser activity!"

Cid balanced himself with his Venus Gospel, "So what you're saying is it ain't the Lifestream?!"

"I do not think so, but I cannot be sure!"

And just as suddenly as it started, the rumbling ceased. The three adventurers stood silent, looking at one another, until Cloud spoke up.

"Okay, I'd say the crisis is over, for now." The young warrior reached into his pocket and produced his PHS phone. "Our first duty is to make sure everyone in town is okay." He held the phone device to his ear, "Reeve? You awake? Okay, okay, stupid question. Me and Red and Cid are going to start knocking on doors to make sure no one got hurt. Can you start on your end of town? Great. We'll see you soon."

On a quiet, peaceful night, a gentle breeze accompanied the rhythmic chirping of night crickets. A glimmering red orb adorned the center of a darkened room. The orb glowed atop its stand like the precious jewel it was. No movement disturbed the calmness of the blackened room. Until now. As if from nowhere, a small human hand carefully grasped the shimmering orb and lifted it from its rightful place.

Yuffie Kisaragi hung, suspended by a thin black cord, from the ceiling of this darkened room. She carefully pulled herself up

with one hand to make her escape. She gently placed the stolen item in her satchel and closed it. The young ninja began to climb upwards toward freedom when a white streak of light, from presumably nowhere, severed her cord sending her crashing to the cruel earth below!

"Ow!" Yuffie rubbed the sore spot on her hind quarters as her assailant gracefully landed in front of her. "Dad! What kind of test is this?!"

Godo Kisaragi smiled as he sheathed his gleaming sword. He reached down to help his daughter to her feet.

"Yuffie, you must be at peak physical prowess if you are to help me lead our new clan of Wutai warriors. These tests will help me determine what techniques and skills of yours need to be sharpened."

Yuffie frowned at her proud father, "What is the big deal, dad? Cloud and the others helped me put the Shinra permanently out of business over a year ago! There's no need of training a whole new clan of warriors for nothing."

Godo's proud fatherly smile turned into a look of disappointment, "Yuffie, I am surprised at you. You more than anyone should know of the dangers that can lurk in the shadows, waiting to strike. To say nothing of the dangers that hide in plain sight."

"Huh?" The female ninja looked puzzled at her father.

"Did you forget that Colonel Heidegger seized control of the Junon military base shortly after the METEOR crisis had passed? He asserted martial law and retained the loyalty of his troops. Even now he is building his forces to turn Junon into a military super power."

"Well, DUH!" Yuffie sneered at the proud warrior, "I knew that, Dad!"

"Sometimes you seem to forget, little one." Godo turned to leave and Yuffie began to follow when he stopped short. "Oh and Yuffie?"

"Yeah, Dad?"

"Hand over the Leviathan Summon materia. I have mastered that piece."

Yuffie blushed and fished into her satchel, "Oh, right. Gomennasai."

Morning in Nibelheim was not unlike a postcard scene. The sun began to rise just beyond Mount Nibel creating a serene haze as the sunlight passed through the morning fog. These picturesque surroundings were lost in the dreary eyes of Cid Highwind. He walked drearily down the steps of the Nibelheim Inn, rubbing his eyes and yawning widely.

"Did you have a pleasant rest, Mr. Highwind?" The receptionist smiled warmly at the sleepy pilot.

"Hell, no!" Cid growled at her, "That was the worst damn sleep I ever had! I'd get a better rest in the chocobo stable on my airship!" Cid staggered out of the Inn and up the street towards Cloud's house.

"Jerk."

"Did you sleep well, Shera? After the quake stopped, I mean." Tifa poured a steaming cup of coffee in front of the female engineer.

"Yes, thank you, Tifa." Shera took off her glasses and cleaned them with a napkin, "Thank you for asking. You should let me get that."

Tifa laughed, "Nonsense! You wait on Cid too much as it is! Save your energy for our hike this morning."

"You're right. I hope Cid got some rest last night. He gets really cranky when he doesn't get enough sleep." Tifa almost dropped the coffee pot at this comment.

"How can you tell?" The two shared a chuckle. "Seriously, though, how are you two getting along these days?"

Shera blushed, "Um, fine. Why would you ask?"

"No reason."

Cloud entered the dining area and kissed Tifa on the cheek, "Morning, beautiful. Shera. What's for breakfast, ladies?"

"Damn there better be bacon!" Cid bellowed from the front door. The pilot wasted no time in taking his seat at the table and tucking a napkin in his shirt collar. Tifa placed two more mugs on the table and emptied the coffee pot.

Red XIII gently padded into the house and sat near the table, Cid was already gulping down some breakfast and Cloud began to eat in a more civilized manner.

Tifa stood up, "Red, can I pour you some coffee?"

"No, no, sit down Tifa. I have already had my breakfast. I went out hunting early this morning. Besides, I would never abuse my body the way you humans do with that caffeinated poison."

"Suit yourself," Cid spoke with a mouthful of food, "More for the rest of us!"

Cloud wiped his mouth with a napkin, "Okay, people. Lets finish up here and head over to Reeve's. Then we'll get the mechanics and begin our hike."

Heidegger was on top of the world. Or he had it in the palm of his hand. Either way he was happy to be where he was. Junon stood like a sentinel on the shores of the Junon area continent. The reconstruction of the new Junon cannon was proceeding ahead of schedule and his control of the military base was absolute. With the Shinra corporation no longer in existence, he could rule this planet with an iron fist. The officers and soldiers from the Shinra army had remained loyal to him after the company fell. But what choice did they have. They would be fools to throw away all their training and experience and turn their backs on him. It was no difficult task asserting martial law in Junon. He was quick to reinforce his control here by shipping every remaining soldier and piece of military equipment back to Junon for reassignment. The vast armies that were once at Shinra's beck and call were now his to command.

He reclined in his chair on the top floor of the Junon base and looked through the large window at the ocean scenery stretching out before him. The rising sun looked like a jewel within his grasp. He remembered the last time he'd looked at this scenery. During the Sapphire Weapon's attack on Junon. How much had changed since then. No more Rufus Shinra ordering him around. No more Shinra. No he was in charge.

And he liked it.

Cloud and the others stood outside Reeve's house packed and ready to go. Mayor Reeve walked out of his front door and joined the group.

"About &\$#@*in' time!" Cid puffed impatiently on his cigarette. Cloud and Tifa stood ready, each with a knapsack on their backs with all the hiking gear. Cloud had his Ultima Weapon strapped to his back and Tifa wore her God's Hand gloves. Cid had his spear and Red was ready with his hairpin. Shera and the mechanics were likewise prepared with tools and hiking gear of their own.

"Okay, I understand we're short-handed on this one without Vincent." Reeve motioned for Cloud and Cid to follow as he headed for his backyard. They came to a cellar door which Reeve swung open. He descended into the cellar while Cid and Cloud waited patiently outside. "Alright, I got us our extra pair of hands." Reeve walked up the stairs out of the cellar door wearing some strange headgear. It looked like a headpiece for a hands-free PHS phone.

"Reeve, what's with the headgear? You got an over-bite or somethin'?"

Following Reeve out of the cellar was a large white cave moogles carrying a black cat in a red cape on its head. The pair that made Cait Sith.

Cloud smiled at his old fighting partner, "You got us two pairs of extra hands!" The three shared a laugh and Cloud finally said, "Okay, let's start up the mountain, people."

The team made their way up Mount Nibel to the rope bridge, with Tifa leading the way. No one knew these mountains better than Tifa Lockhart. She grew up as a guide for travelers who happened to tackle this arduous terrain. Tifa often went on long hikes with her father when she was a young girl. She always thought of him when she climbed. Being here made it seem like he was still around, and that gave Tifa a sense of comfort.

Tifa led the group, with Cloud, Red and Cid right behind her on alert for any attacking creatures, while Cait Sith helped Reeve, Shera and the two mechanics make their way up the mountain. Finally the group made it to the old reactor.

"Okay group," Cloud began to place his equipment on the ground next to him, "Let's get down to business. The sooner we get this reactor working, the sooner we can head back."

Cid slapped his young friend on the back, "Damn, Cloud! Take that coat hanger outta your shirt before you get dressed in the morning!"

Heidegger busily shuffled papers across his desk and sighed in disgust. Being the head of a global power had its down side: Paperwork. He made a mental note to hire a few assistants to help with this part of the workload so he could spend more time hollering at the grunts. The mountain of paper before him seemed to be endless. Parts invoice for new tanks. Materials request forms for the new cannon. Where would it end? He was a soldier, not a secretary.

Suddenly his train of thought was interrupted by the buzz of his intercom. He held down the button and answered.

"Yes?"

"Colonel, there's someone here to see you. He says it's urgent."

Heidegger sighed and put down his pen, "Very well, send him in."

The door to Heidegger's office slowly opened. The Colonel's pen rolled off his desk and bounced off the floor. A gust of wind from the doorway blew some of the papers off his desk. Heidegger made no attempt to stop them. He simply sat there, staring. His jaw hung dead, threatening to drop from his face. A faint gargling sound emitted from his throat as he struggled to speak, to no avail. The Colonel was still, his eyes wide, like a statue. If there was any brain activity within him at this moment, one would not be able to see it. For the person standing in the doorway was the last man Colonel Heidegger ever expected to see again.

Rufus Shinra smiled.

Author's Notes: Oh baby! Rufus Shinra! Was anyone out there expecting it? Show of hands, please! You may have noticed I went out of my way to make this Post-FF7 story as different as possible from every other fanfic out there. Reeve is the mayor of the new Nibelheim, and we'll be hearing more about how it was formed next chapter. Vincent's troubles are far from over! And what exactly is causing those tremors? Are Cloud and the others being overly cautious by going up Mount Nibel armed? And how does everything happening tie in all together? We'll see soon enough!

Barret and some other familiar faces will be arriving next chapter, so stay tuned, you two!