

Chapter Nine: Specters of the Past

"Times... have changed. The Planet is probably watching this situation closely." - *Ifalna Gast*

Barret Wallace narrowed his gaze at the setting sun before him. The buggy given to him and his friends by Dio roared its engines as it carried him away from the mountains surrounding North Corel. The buggy was turned over to him after the METEOR crisis had passed. It would come in handy when carrying coal shipments to places not reachable using the Corel Railway. But that would soon change. The people of North Corel were in the process of laying more track to other parts of the Planet: to Rocket Town, Nibelheim, even Costa Del Sol. That was just part of how North Corel began to rebuild itself. Barret was chosen as the town's "representative", and it was not all that it was cracked up to be. Barret didn't know how Cid handled it. People constantly coming to him to make even the most inane decisions. Barret started to understand why Cid was so cranky all the time.

As a result, he was relieved to hear from Vincent this morning via the PHS system. His old fighting partner wanted some company to investigate the waterfall cave south of Nibelheim. The buggy could easily and quickly carry the two through the mountainous terrain ahead. But he wondered if that was Vincent's only reason. Could it be that the man who was so coldly inhuman actually needed a friend? Barret doubted that was the case, and just the same he was glad to get away from the trials of running North Corel. Marlene was in good hands with Elmyra, who had moved in with them after Midgar became condemned. Barret figured it would only be a matter of time before the upper plate fell on the slums blow.

He could now see Rocket Town in the distance. Soon he and Vincent would be well on their way to Lucrecia's cave.

Cloud surveyed the makeshift campsite. Two large tents were set up just outside of the old Nibel Reactor, the temporary sleeping quarters of the group of people here to finish construction of the new coal reactor. Soon Nibelheim would be swimming in electricity generated by the new reactor, and the Planet would remain undamaged by their gain. Shera supervised the two mechanics working inside on the steam converters, while Cid and Cait carried in pipes and iron parts. Tifa and Reeve surveyed the blueprints for their new power source while Red XIII carefully examined the entire operation to ensure the Planet would remain undisturbed in any way. Their operation went smoothly, a little too smoothly for Cloud's liking. He clearly remembered how much trouble he encountered when he first accompanied Zack and Sephiroth to the reactor over six years ago. It seemed like a lifetime had passed since then. He could still see their faces. Zack, his best friend. Sephiroth, his idol, his hero; his nemesis. But when they came here, there were a lot more monsters to deal with. Where had they gone? Did the eradication of mako simply allow them to die off? Did the destruction of Jenova, and the METEOR wipe them from the face of the Planet?

Yes, it was almost too easy.

"Hey! Cloud! Quit your damn daydreaming and give us a hand for a change, will ya?!" Cid lit up a cigarette as Cait Sith's cave moogles held up his end of a large steel girder, waiting to continue into the reactor.

"Alright, Cid, I guess you earned a short break." And with that, Cloud picked up the other end of the girder and proceeded into the reactor. Cid happily puffed away on his cancer stick.

"Cid, can you take a look at this?" Reeve held up the blueprints as Cid started over towards him.

"What?"

"This part here," Reeve put his finger on the center of the plans, "This was where the Lifestream was sucked out of. Are we going to get enough metal sheets from the Soldier cases to cover this up completely?"

"Oh yeah, Reeve, don't worry about it." Cid took a long drag of his smoke, "We'll get plenty of materials from the unused parts of the reactor to do that."

"What was that?" Tifa broke in.

Cid took his cigarette out of his mouth and looked up, "What?"

"That rumbling sound."

"What rumbling sound?"

Red padded over to them, "It is coming from over there, in the direction of the materia caves. It is getting louder."

"What the hell?" Cid stamped out his cigarette and picked up his spear. He walked down the cliff towards the faint sound. "Yeah, I hear it." He continued in the direction of the noise as it got louder and easier to hear. Reeve handed the map to Tifa and followed the old pilot. They both stopped at what looked like a small hill in the ground.

"That's where it's coming from," Reeve spoke gravely as he pointed at the anomaly.

"What the hell is that?" Cid lifted his spear and stabbed it into the hill.

"Cid! Do not-!" Red tried to warn them.

The ground trembled and cracked open right where Cid had driven the Venus Gospel. A bright green light shone from underneath.

"Lifestream...?" Reeve looked in awe at the emerald surface.

The green surface moved and a pair of ferocious jaws lunged at him! Reeve screamed and leapt backwards, hitting the ground!

"Shit!" Cid ran through the giant green insect with his mighty spear! The crack in the ground began to widen and grow to reveal hundreds more below the surface! Reeve scrambled to his feet and ran towards the reactor with Cid right behind him as a sea of giant bugs leapt out of their underground lair in pursuit of the two men! Cid and Reeve hollered ahead to Red and Tifa who gasped in horror at the grim site approaching.

"Kyuvilduns!" Red roared above the rumbling emerald sea pursuing Cid and Reeve. "We must have disturbed a nest of them! There seems to be hundreds! Tifa, they are weak against fire!"

"Right!" A beam of light encircled Tifa as she cast several Fire2 spells to cover her friends' escape! Cid frantically scrambled toward them with angry creatures snapping at his heels!

Cait Sith ran out of the reactor to his friends with Cloud right behind! The blonde hero choked at what he saw!

"Everybody into the reactor! There's too many for us to fight!" Tifa and Red ran up the stairs into the reactor, with Cid and Reeve close behind. Cloud stood fast, swinging his sword wildly at the first wave of monsters! He and Cait bolted at the

reactor and tried to hold off the creatures climbing up the platform. The entire reactor was surrounded by a green sea of legs and bodies, chirping and squealing for blood! "Cid! Get the automatic door closed! Hurry!"

"Right!" The old pilot tore open a junction box with his spear and went to work.

Reeve adjusted his headgear, "Cloud! Get in here! Cait will cover you!"

Cloud Strife leapt into the reactor and rolled into a battle-stance! Cait Sith moved his massive frame of the combined cat and cave moogles in front of the door and fought for all he was worth! Inside the reactor, Cid and Cloud feverishly scrambled with wires and buttons inside the junction box as Reeve mirrored the frantic fighting of his robot cat outside! He swung and grunted at phantom enemies only he saw through his creation's eyes, his arms flailing wildly at nothing! Cait became covered in giant, green insects biting and clawing at him, exposing gears and wires but he fought on! Suddenly a series of sparks erupted from the junction box!

"Bingo!" Cid stood back as the antique machinery hummed to life! The giant iron door began to slowly slide closed.

Cloud turned back to Reeve's furious movement, "Reeve! Can you save Cait Sith?"

Reeve grunted and struggled, "No! Not without letting any of those things in here!" And he continued his battle, sweat rolling down his face as the door slammed shut! The clicks and squeals continued outside and Reeve's headgear powered down. "Goodbye, Cait." The man slowly pulled the device off his head and dropped it on the ground. He wiped the sweat from his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt.

Tifa put her hand on his shoulder, "Reeve, I'm so sorry. I know how much Cait meant to you."

Reeve attempted to smile, "Don't worry, I'm sure I can fix it." His attempt failed.

Cid turned and looked around at the poorly lit reactor. The floor below them was newly built from the metal gleaned from the Soldier containers they had dismantled. It covered the gaping crevice that once led to the Lifestream beneath the ground. He walked towards the door to where the Soldier containers would have been and entered. He began up the steps toward the inner chamber where Shera and the mechanics worked, oblivious to what just transpired. The word "Jenova" was stenciled above the entrance to where the new furnaces were. Shera was hunched over at an access panel while the two mechanics strained to install a large pipe above her. Cid approached them.

"Shera?" Cid spoke in the calmest voice he had. "Are you alright?"

The female engineer turned in surprise, "Yes, Captain. Why wouldn't I be?" She looked up Cid with her bright green eyes.

"Well," He hesitated, "There's a bit of a problem." Her smile quickly turned to worry, and the two mechanics stopped what they were doing in nervous anticipation. "We might have to camp in here for awhile. We came across a nest of mako-enhanced insects, and they surrounded the place." Shera gasped in terror and the mechanics began to tremble. "Damn, woman! There's no need to panic! We sealed the door, and they can't get in here! We just have to wait 'em out!"

Shera seemed relieved by Cid's outburst, "Okay, Captain, I'm glad you have everything under control."

A group of soldiers clustered together in a blue-lit bar in Junon. The topic of gossip for the day? The unbelievable and sudden reappearance of Rufus Shinra. Theories and speculation filled every barrack and bar at Junon military as civilians and soldiers alike wondered at the explanation.

"I heard he's another Sephiroth clone!"

"That's the stupidest theory yet."

"I heard he spent the past year in a body cast."

"I doubt that."

"Then what the hell do you think?"

"I think it's time for us to go back on duty."

The upper offices of Junon military were abuzz with similar rumors, but there was only one man who could put all questions to rest. Rufus Shinra leaned on the window ledge of Heidegger's office and looked out at the setting sun before him. His face wore the trademark smile that many have known to show his brazen arrogance that came from being born with a silver spoon in his mouth. The young man turned away from the window and ran a hand through his perfect hair. He eyed the military warhorse sitting at the desk in utter and complete stupor.

"Heidegger," Rufus sneered in a cocky voice, "If you are going to say something, spit it out already."

"M-m-" The old soldier sputtered, "Mr. President?"

"Got it in one, huh?" Rufus sauntered across the room and took the seat in front of Heidegger's desk. "I guess you're wondering why I've come here; and more to the point, why I'm not dead."

"Y... yes."

"Well, as you know, I have never been one to go through life without planning for every eventuality. The attack on the Shinra building a year ago was no exception." The well-groomed man took a mint from the dish on Heidegger's desk and popped it into his mouth. "When Sephiroth invaded the Shinra building and killed my father, I realized there existed the possibility that he would return for me. So I had a escape planned for such an attack on the Shinra building. I had some work crews construct a mechanism into my office to enable me to make a hasty departure in case the rogue Soldier resumed his depopulation of the company."

Heidegger looked in awe at Rufus in continued silence.

"Let me put this in terms you will understand: my office had an escape pod." The young man got up and walked over to a bookshelf in the office. "When the Diamond Weapon counter-fired on us, I wasted no time in climbing into the chamber where I was jettisoned a safe distance away."

Heidegger finally found his voice, "So where have you been this past year, Mr. President?"

Rufus raised an eyebrow and turned back to the old soldier, "I am impressed, did you think of that question all by yourself?" The arrogant young man turned back to the bookshelf. "I decided to lay low until the METEOR incident had passed. I have been building my resources from the Shinra office on the Northern Continent. To maintain my anonymity, I worked through dummy corporations and employees, securing my holdings. Now that the name Shinra has begun to fade

from the memories of the insipid sheep populating the Planet along with the evil it inspires, it is once again time to take my place as ruler.”

Heidegger struggled to his feet, “But what about all that I have worked for?”

“Ah yes,” A smile formed on Rufus’ lips. “You have done well maintaining control of the Shinra military. I am impressed to say the least. But you and I both know who really controls this company. I will allow you the honor of taking your rightful place at my right hand.” The white suited man sauntered over to Heidegger’s office chair and took a seat. Heidegger looked in awe at him. “Together we will rule this Planet, under the thumb of Junon Inc.!”

And the corridor outside the office rattled with the boisterous laughter of an evil man. May the Planet help us all.

Barret gunned the buggy’s engines as he caught sight of the waterfall. Vincent sat in the terrain vehicle next to him, saying little if anything. The former Turk was never one to make small talk, but Barret couldn’t help but notice he seemed to have something on his mind. Barret knew not to force it out of him, for even he had his secrets. The buggy rolled over the last obstacles between them and the cave they sought. Barret turned the engines off and the two disembarked.

“Barret, I-” Vincent holstered his Death Penalty shotgun and struggled to find his words. “Thanks.”

Barret looked in surprise at his comrade, “Ain’t nothin’.”

The two men cautiously entered the cave behind the waterfall and surveyed their surroundings. Barret turned on a flashlight and passed the beam over the cave walls. Vincent could see perfectly in the dark and began his own study of the cave. He carefully approached the stone pillar where he once saw the haunting form of Lucrecia, his true love. She appeared before him when he and Cloud first discovered this cave over a year ago. After they had beaten Jenova, she had vanished. He returned to find nothing but his memories. He struggled to come to terms with the fact that their love would never be, for she was gone. But last night he heard her voice. Was it merely a dream? A trick played on him by his fatigued and battered mind? He had to know the truth.

“Vince! Over here!” Barret shined the light on a distinctive spot on the ground on the other side of the cave. Vincent hurried over to him to see what his friend had found. On the ground they found a dusty, tattered book bound in leather with gold-edged paper. Vincent carefully picked it up with his metal claw and blew the dust and dirt off of it. The name etched on the front made the hairs on Vincent’s neck stand up straight: “Lucrecia”. It was her diary. Vincent quickly turned to the last page and read:

I can resist the alien voice no longer. The things it has made me do. I am sickened and ashamed. Where has my Vincent gone? Hojo claims not to know but I suspect he is lying again. I found his cherished weapon, the Death Penalty, on the steps of the Nibelheim Mansion. His father gave him that gun. It is his prized possession. Tonight I will flee the town to find him. Hojo may try to stop me, so I am keeping the shotgun at my side. Will I be able to use it? Only time will tell. I have stolen one of Hojo’s newest journals to use as evidence against him. I cannot decipher what it means yet, it describes a winged beast called Chaos. But the voice protests. Hojo has taken our son to Midgar, along with the specimen. May the Planet forgive me, I cannot save him. The voice continues to torture me. I fear that it may drive me mad. Oh, Vincent, where are you?

The waterfall cave echoed with the anguished cry of a tortured soul. Bats flittered about the cave disturbed by this outburst. Barret approached the quivering mass that was once his friend, hunched over and beside himself. How far, Barret thought, can one man be pushed and still hold onto his humanity?

“Vince, pull it together,” Barret rested his massive hand on the former Turk’s shoulder. “You can’t go beatin’ yo’self up over what happened in the past. Believe me, I know. I learned the hard way. You don’t want to wind up like my old friend Dyne,

do ya? You gotta keep it together, man. That's what Lucrecia would want." Vincent paused at these words. He knew Barret was right. She didn't keep this journal to torture him. He closed the book and carefully tucked it into his pack.

"Yes. I will gather myself." Vincent stood up and dusted himself off. "For her."

The two resumed their investigation of the cave. The rocks that comprised the cave walls were smooth, probably from years of erosion from the waterfall. Vincent examined the stalactites above them and froze.

"Barret, do you hear that?"

Barret stopped and looked at him, "What?"

"She's calling me." Vincent seemed to go into a trance.

"Huh?" Barret began to worry. Vincent seemed to get the same crazed look Dyne had before he leapt off the cliff at the Prison Town. "Vincent, man, keep it together..."

"But I heard her again. Lucrecia!!! If you live, give me a sign!!!"

As if in direct answer to his request, the cave began to quake and rumble. The tremor started slow and weak but grew in intensity as each second passed. Rocks began to fall from the cave roof.

"Vincent!" Barret boomed over the rumbling, "We gotta get our asses outta this cave!" He ran to Vincent who stood like a statue, looking upwards at the rocks falling toward them. Barret picked him up with one hand to carry him to safety. But it was too late. The last thing Barret saw was the cave roof collapsing in on them.

The tremors reached Nibelheim again, and this time its citizens lost their composure. People began filing out of their homes to the streets in a feeble attempt to escape this disaster. This time their mayor was nowhere to be found. Cloud was also not there to protect them, and they were afraid.

The tremors also reached the Nibelheim mountains where the reactor sat, surrounded by giant mako bugs. The bugs were frightened by the intense vibrations and they sought shelter in their underground sanctum. The reactor was once again free of any creatures, the tattered remains of Cait Sith and the two tents the only traces of any visitors.

"Damn here we go again!" Cid struggled to maintain his balance as the floor shook beneath his feet. Tifa clung to Cloud for dear life and wondered if they'd see another day together. Red XIII maintained his balance with slightly more ease than the others, having an extra pair of feet. Reeve clung to a pipe suspended near the wall, making his way to the inner chamber of the reactor. Red looked at the floor beneath him and gasped in shock.

"The makeshift floor is starting to buckle! Everyone into the inner chambers!" Reeve was the first one to make it to the pod room, and he turned to reach out to the others. Cloud and Tifa quickly but carefully made their way towards the entrance with Red behind them. Cid had come out of the Jenova room and waited with Reeve to assist his friends. The seams began to break apart as the makeshift floor surrendered to the tectonic forces at work outside! The floor shattered just before Cloud and Tifa made it to the safe platform. Reeve and Cid both reached out and grabbed Cloud and Tifa's arms and pulled them to safety. A loud howl caused Cloud to turn his head in horror as Red's feral form plummeted to the Lifestream below. "RED!!!"

An old man stood with his dog in a field just outside Nibelhiem. He stumbled about as the tremors shook the land at its very foundation! The dog barked in terror as the old man fell to his knees. His herd of sheep had long since fled in all the commotion and he wondered if he would ever see his precious daughter again. It was then that he saw it.

The mountainous terrain that surrounded the waterfall south of Nibelheim erupted like a volcano! Water and rubble shot through the air as steam seared through the atmosphere. But this was no eruption. There was no lava. But there was something else. The old man narrowed his eyes and strained to see what he thought he saw. Above the dark clouds that blanketed the sky, a shape. Too large to be a plane. Too small to be... a meteor.

And the shape was gone. The tremors had stopped just as soon as the violent eruption had ended. And the mountainous terrain that once had surrounded the waterfall was no more. A pile of rubble and rocks replaced the natural settings he had become accustomed to. The old man struggled to his feet and followed his dog back to the village. The crisis had passed.

Author's Notes: Things couldn't more bleak for our heroes!! Barret and Vincent - buried alive! Red XIII - in the Lifestream! Cait Sith - kaput! And Cloud and the others are still trapped in the reactor! The Planet itself couldn't possibly be in any more danger! Not only has Rufus returned and taken over Junon Inc., but there's something else on the loose!

Stay tuned!