

Chapter Twelve: Higher Ground

"The most action-packed chapter yet!" - some Guy.

"...Weapon. Monsters created by the Planet. It appears when the Planet is in danger, reducing everything to nothingness."
- *Professor Hojo*

Harsh and heavy raindrops spattered on the rooftops of Nibelheim. The crackle of thunder could be heard in the distance. The grey skies above the little village offered no comfort from the rainstorm. Droplets danced on windows as the people of Nibelheim sealed themselves away from the downpour in the comfort and security of their homes.

Puddles and showers offered the only disturbance to this unsettling climate. But that was about to change. In the distance, a small group of travelers descended on the thoroughly soaked town. The black figures began to become more clear, revealing detail and shape. Two men carried a blanket-covered lump on a makeshift stretcher. Two women and three more men carried an assortment of equipment and backpacks. The entire group was soaked from head to toe, but they walked on. The lump under the blanket shifted slightly.

"Tifa, see how Red's doin'." Cid rasped under the towel he wore over his head like a hood. "This damn rain can't be doin' him any good."

Tifa walked alongside the two Rocket Town mechanics carrying the makeshift stretcher Reeve and Cid pieced together from old stove pipe. She carefully lifted a corner of the blanket and looked inside, "You okay, Red?"

A matted fur head shifted slightly. "Yes.... Tifa, thank... you," He whispered. Tifa carefully replaced the corner and proceeded on.

Cloud looked up into the grey, dripping sky. "The first thing we should do is get Red to the doctor. Cid, you and Reeve get to the Highwind and see if you can reach Cosmo Canyon on the airship's radio. Once Red's well enough to travel, we'll take him home to the elders."

"Right." Cid rasped and turned off towards the outskirts of town with Reeve in tow.

"Tifa, you go with the mechanics to the doctor," Cloud turned back to the group as he walked. "Shera and I'll take some of this gear home and meet you there."

"Okay, Cloud." Tifa and the two mechanics turned off toward the doctor's house.

"Cloud?" Shera spoke up above the constant downpour all around them. "Do you think Red will be okay?"

Cloud looked down at the puddles as they walked, "I'm sure he will be, Shera." Cloud looked back up to the road ahead. "I mean, I've been in the Planet twice myself, and I recovered."

Shera was slightly comforted by this, "But," Only slightly. "He looked like he almost drowned." Shera bit her upper lip. These weren't the questions she really wanted to ask. "And why..." She struggled to find the right words. Cloud found them for her.

"And why didn't anything happen to Cid?" Cloud looked at her as he walked. "Well, you know better than anyone, Cid's a tough old bird." The two chuckled at this. "The Lifestream is an outlet for people who have lost themselves. For people who have all kinds of pent up memories and emotions and are unable to deal with them." He carefully stepped over a large

puddle on the road and helped Shera across it. "Cid doesn't need any outlets. The whole Planet is his outlet. He vents everything inside of him well before it has a chance to fester. Maybe if we were all like Cid, the world would be a better place."

And above the rainstorm of Nibelheim, raucous laughter filled the streets.

Cid and Reeve trotted up to the Highwind through the muck and puddles forming all around Nibelheim. Reeve held a small, metal plank over his head like an umbrella. Cid cursed and sputtered as he tried to unsuccessfully keep his smoke dry in the rain, cupping his hands above the tiny white ember. As the two weary travelers approached the iron behemoth, the side hatch opened.

One of the bridge crew was waiting at the hatch as the two ran inside out of the rain. He quickly closed the hatch as Cid and Reeve brushed the water from their clothing.

"Captain," He spoke quickly, "There's something you should hear!"

Cid stopped his brushing and shaking and turned to his crewman. "What?"

"It's Rocket Town, sir! It's been seized!"

Reeve grabbed Cid by the soaked flight jacket as he coughed, shooting his cigarette to the floor!

"WHAT?!!!" The pilot staggered to regain his balance and glared at the young cadet. "What the hell are you talkin' about?!"

"OPS received a transmission this morning from Rocket Town." The three began to briskly walk to the bridge. "Rufus Shinra is alive. He showed up waving the property deeds to the launch site around and told everyone to pack up and leave."

"It was Reeve's turn to cough and sputter, "Rufus – alive??!!!"

"How?!" Cid was just about beyond words. "We saw that pretty little scumbag get his ticket punched by the Diamond Weapon!!"

It was then that they reached the bridge. Cid stormed over to the operations console with Reeve and the young cadet behind him. The OPS crewman nervously spoke up at his red-faced captain.

"We-uh-recorded this transmission this morning." He rewound the taped message. "There's some static interference from Mount Nibel but we-"

"Just play it!!! &%^#@&*!!!"

The crew member quickly obliged:

"SKKRT... Captain.... calling Captain Highwind... SZXRT this is Gramps.... SXKRTTT Rocket Town's taken SXXRT by Rufus Shinra SKXRZZT he's told us all to leave... SZZZRT hurry, Captain..... SSSHRRRXTT -nd help.....SXXXXRRTTTzzzTTT!!!"

Cid watched the radio speaker as it spat out its garbled message in disbelief. This was not happening. Rufus Shinra was alive. Rocket

Town had been taken over. Not in his life!

He turned to Reeve and spoke carefully, "Reeve, get on the PHS to Cloud and the others." Reeve nodded as he took out his phone. "Tell em we'll be swinging through town to pick 'em all up. We got some business to take care of in Rocket Town."

As the torrential rain battered the Highwind's hull, a retribution was being prepared inside.

Vincent Valentine sat on the ledge of a stone dwelling carved in the side of Cosmo Canyon. The trademark orange sunset that seemed to be a permanent feature of this peaceful place soothed the man who stared into it. He glared into the intense globe of light, lost in thought. His iron claw dug deep into the earth, unintentionally, scraping hard. The metal fist closed tightly on a clump of dirt, soil poured out through the razor-sharp talons.

The man attached to this deadly mechanical device was leagues away from this mild destruction. Lucrecia. He had heard her voice. Twice. What was she trying to tell him? Was she trying to warn him? How could he reach out to her? He had accepted the fact that he would be tortured by the crimes against her and her son Sephiroth for the rest of his days. But how many days had he left? He was supposed to be decades older than he physically appeared. An act of genetic lunacy had ripped him from his own time and left him here. A monster - trying to unearth the man inside.

But this he had also accepted. He had learned to accept quite a bit. It was almost as if he was empty inside. A hollow shell: no spirit, no soul. He was distant from his feelings, but he knew they were all bad. Perhaps he HAD aged during his thirty-year slumber. Perhaps he had decomposed as if he was a rotting corpse. Perhaps his youth, his life, was only skin deep. But speculation such as this would have to wait. Lucrecia was calling him, and he could not ignore her.

A large man pulled back a curtain within the dwelling behind him, and stomped in. Vincent made no effort to greet his guest. He simply stared into the sunset, motionless.

"Barret." He rasped, "What have you learned from the other elders?"

Barret stood behind Vincent, carefully eyeing him, "Hold it. Before we go off chasin' down some big metal wild goose, I wanna know right here and now what the hell's up!"

Vincent turned to face him, "Yes. I suppose you have a right to know."

"Damn straight."

Vincent stood up and walked into the dwelling, "It started the night before I contacted you." He looked over some crude cave art on the nearest wall. "I was sitting in Cid's living room. I heard a voice."

Barret looked closely into Vincent's eyes, "Who's voice?"

"Hers." Vincent lowered his head and closed his eyes. "She is calling me. Trying to warn me. About what - I do not know." "And you heard her again in the cave?"

"Yes. The next time I heard it was last night in the Starlet Pub." Vincent opened his ruby eyes and looked up at the large miner. "I know I heard her. There is no mistake."

"I'm not callin' you a liar, Vince," Barret cleared his throat, "But I thought she vanished when we beat the Jenova thing."

"I thought so as well. But there it is. I heard her voice. I know I did." Vincent lifted his head and looked out of the dwelling at the sunset. "A rainstorm. I hear it approaching from the north. Perhaps we should inform the villagers to seek shelter."

Barret listened hard. Nothing. "Damn! You'd be great at parties!"

Rufus Shinra smiled. He sat in the warm shelter of the large tent set up on the outer edge of Rocket Town. Electric heaters, ovens, radios and other comforts hummed the praises of modern technology that made Rufus' life livable. He looked out through the heavy rainfall at the workers and civilians scurrying about their business. Junon trucks circled the town, carrying equipment and supplies, and a massive freighter ship perched on the nearby shores like a beach whale.

Townpeople frantically attached chocobos to wagons, loaded up with their meager personal possessions. On his say-so, the citizens of Rocket Town had been uprooted from their homes, their lives, just to accommodate his plans. All was proceeding on schedule. He turned to the clear plastic window at the back of the tent to marvel at his work. There, in the rain and muck, cranes and other heavy machinery were surrounded by Junon employees, frantically toiling to complete their immediate task. He gazed upon the launchpad, a smile still brimming on his face. Everything was moving along perfectly. The launch site that had once housed the infamous Shin-Ra No. 26 was once again poised to become the focal point of mankind's attention. But this time, Junon Inc. would be the company to sponsor this event.

On the platform, several huge cranes hoisted a large metal rocket into position. Raindrops spattered its gleaming, polished surface. Large black letters adorned the side of this steel behemoth reading: "Junon - 1." The shiny surface of the rocket greatly contrasted the rusted grime of the launchpad, but Rufus was always ready to cut costs. Why spend billions of Gil on a new launch site when a perfectly good location sat unused. All he had to do is evict an entire town. Nothing big.

But this was no ordinary rocket. It was nothing like the previous ship that had resided within the launch site. This rocket had a far different purpose than the Shin-Ra No. 26. A far more profitable purpose.

The Highwind lifted into the watery sky above Nibelheim, its engines roaring at full capacity. On the bridge, the crew frantically worked at their controls while their captain shouted and cursed their orders, some more incoherent than others. In the operations room, Cloud sat at the end of the long metal table and face the group seated before him. Reeve sat on his left, tinkering with his PHS phone and a small screwdriver. Tifa sat on his right, speaking with the female engineer sitting next to her. Shera frowned nervously as she and Tifa discussed the ramifications of the news they had received earlier that afternoon concerning the seizing of Rocket Town by a presumed- dead Rufus Shinra.

"Tifa," Cloud spoke in a serious tone, "How much materia do we have with us? How much of it is summon?"

Tifa looked upwards in recollection, "We have four Restores, two Fires, one Ice and two Quakes. I'm not sure what we have in the realm of support materia, but I could check." She collected her breath and continued. "And as far as I know, we have Bahamut ZERO, Shiva, Odin and Cid has Ramuh. I think Vincent has Hades and Yuffie has several. Barret might even have one."

"Okay, we'll have to make do with what we got." Cloud ran a hand through his hair. "We don't know how many soldiers Rufus has with him, but if he HAS taken over Junon Inc., he'll have us outnumbered to say the least."

"Too #@%^&*!!in' bad for them!!" Cid kicked open the door and stormed into the room. He angrily took his seat at the table and lit up another cigarette. "When we get there, I will PERSONALLY kick that pretty boy's ass all over Rocket Town!" "You'll get your chance, Cid." Cloud looked over at the map on the wall behind him. "But what I don't understand is, what does Rufus want with Rocket Town? There's no more rocket, no Highwind there, and I can't see him taking over the town just to get his hands on the Tiny Bronco."

"I don't care if he came back from the dead to get that whiskey bottle I hide under the back step!!!"

Shera looked up accusingly at the flustered pilot and dismissed this little piece of knowledge - for now. "Cid, what about Vincent?"

"#\$%^@!! That's right!" Cid bit down on the filter of his smoke. "Vincent's staying at our house! And there ain't no way he woulda let Rufus take over without a scuffle!"

Tifa looked at the pilot, "I'm sure he's okay, Cid. Vincent can take care of himself." Cid took a heavy drag of his cigarette and continued his cursing fit.

Cloud re-entered the conversation, "We should probably have some sort of plan before we charge in there with both barrels. We'll need to get some advanced information somehow about the position of Rufus' troops."

Cid stood up, "^&*%\$# plan my ass!" The pilot inhaled deeply on his cigarette and let out a thick cloud of smoke. "We need to-"

Cid's words were cut off by a sudden thunderous boom as the airship lurched hard to one side! The entire group in the operations room was thrown against the wall, bodies and limbs flailing in the violent turbulence!

"What the f*^%\$#\$'s up?!!!" Cid grabbed a pipe near the wall and caught Shera's hand. He held on tight as the Highwind struggled on its side to right itself. Alarms and buzzers screamed throughout the ship as outside forces rocked the iron behemoth around the sky! Thunder boomed and lightning crackled in the rainstorm that battered the spinning Highwind.

Cid helped Shera to hold onto the pipe that he had grasped, while Cloud, Reeve, and Tifa held onto various instruments around the operations room as the tremendous ship sputtered through the air on its side! The old pilot reached over to an intercom with his foot and kicked the speak button. Shouts and screams poured out of the small metal box before Cid could shout into it.

"What the hell's goin' on up there?!!" No answer, save more shouts from the crew. He kicked the button again to silence the device. He turned to Shera and the others and shouted above the roaring chaos, "I'm headin' to the bridge! Everyone hold tight!"

Cid climbed across the room on the pipes and beams littering the ceiling. The Highwind shook and trembled violently. A second impact and thunderous boom rocked his entire world. The pilot strained to hang on as the ship vibrated sporadically. He reached the door and kicked it open. Cid leapt through the doorway and landed onto the staging above the engine room. He used the walkway as a ladder and made his way to the bridge.

Once on the bridge, Cid was greeted by sheer and utter chaos. The bridge crew hollered reports back and forth as heavy rain pelted the front windows. Lightning bolts streaked through the sky in front of them. Thunder pounded all around.

"Report!!!" Cid hollered at the top of his lungs.

"Captain!" The nearest crewman yelled, "We're under attack!"

"I'm figured that out myself, you stupid &%^#\$@!!!" Cid held on for dear life as the entire airship rolled completely around! "What's doing the attacking?!"

He leaped from his spot to the wheel, where another crewman was holding on. The old pilot grabbed the large wheel and pulled for all he was worth!

"Aaarrrgh!!!"

"Cloud, what is it?" Tifa held onto a pipe running along the ceiling like a trapeze artist, and beckoned to her fiancé, "What's the matter?!"

"Grrgghhh..." Cloud Strife likewise held onto a pipe, his eyes shut tight, his teeth gritted. He heard it. The voice.

.....a puppet.....Cloud, you are a.....

The blonde hero violently shook his head in an attempt to empty out the demons inside!

"Reeve," Tifa's face was wrought with worry, "There's something wrong with Cloud!" She looked back to her love, "Hang on, Cloud! Please!"

Reeve clenched his teeth and climbed across the room to Cloud, hanging on to whatever was bolted down. He reached the warrior and grabbed his shoulder.

"Cloud! It's Reeve! Can you hear me?!" Reeve, Tifa and Shera carefully watched for some signs of humanity. It was then that Cloud ceased his display and turned to Reeve.

"Yeah," He began slowly, "Yeah, I'm okay; I'm alright."

Reeve and the others were noticeably relieved, but then the tremors that were shaking the ship intensified!

"Evasive maneuvers!!!" Cid yanked the wheel hard in the opposite direction! The Highwind's engines roared and the hull buckled in protest! He grabbed the microphone on the control panel and lifted it to his face, "Engine room! I need full power!! Engines to full power!"

Cid heard several shouts in response to his call and the engines roared harder! Steam and smoke began to fill the bridge! Lights and alarms crackled to life!

Then he saw it, out of the corner of his eye. It looked like a giant hand. But it was not just a hand, the sharp talons and gnarled features made it look more like a claw. In the distance beyond the claw, the end of a massive wing. The claw passed the front window and dug into the side of the ship.

And then came the terrible roar. It echoed through the ship, drowning out all other sounds. The thunder, the alarms, the shouts - all were unheard. A blood-curdling wail filled the eardrums of everyone on board the Highwind.

Cid was speechless. He gasped and wheezed, sure he was having a heart attack. They were not being attacked at all. They were being – carried.

“Engines full reverse!!” Cid hollered into the tiny radio. The Highwind shook and buckled. Sparks shot past the window outside as the massive ship struggled to escape the creature’s grasp. The airship waved from side to side, but remained caught in the claws of the enormous beast. The rainstorm outside continued on as a bolt of lightning shrieked in front of them. The Highwind continued to fish-tail within the clutches of the enormous monster!

Cid held tight as the ship rocked from side to side. The beast growled loudly. The Captain had one trick left up his sleeve. He flipped open a metal guard revealing a red button.

“Everybody hold on!” He bellowed into the mic, his voice echoing throughout the ship. He carefully pressed the button and held the wheel as hard as he could!

Gears grinded, metal parts shifted and moved. Panels opened. Two thrusters emerged from the sides of the ship and a third came out of the rear of the ship. The rotors and their components were released from the body of the airship and they descended to the Planet below. A sudden blast shot from the thrusters and the Highwind tore out of the beast’s clutches!

The massive ship hurtled toward the Planet, threatening to impact severely! The crew screamed and hollered as the iron behemoth raced towards the cruel earth! A bolt of lightning struck the vessel with unbelievable force! The Highwind rattled and roared! Electricity danced across the outer hull, sparks jumping all around!

And the engines went dead.

The airship Highwind plummeted toward the Planet below, a massive coffin for its guests and crew.

Author’s Notes: It all hit the fan this time! Rufus’ plan is beginning to come to light, but what, exactly, is the purpose of the Junon - 1? Cloud had another Jenova attack, but why?! (I think this is a record, twelve chapters of a FF7 fanfic have passed, and this is Cloud’s first Jenova episode!)

And the Highwind - attacked! But the gigantic attacker is not through with its new toy yet! Will the airship’s crew survive? I’m not telling! Nyaah!

All this and Vincent’s discovery of the truth, next time!

Keep reading, all three of you!